



The Relevance of 21st Century Skills Training in Pre-Service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Teacher Education

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Abstract

Rapid developments in digital technologies, growing economic competition, and increased mobility characterize the world today [9]. To prepare young people for life in the 21st century, teachers are expected to teach a range of skills in their regular lessons and provide opportunities for practice. The mastery of “global skills” [9] or “life competencies” [3] is taken for granted in many professions and generally expected of university students and job applicants today. The development of 21st century skills has hence become a central aim in education and, due to its natural suitability, particularly in foreign language instruction. The topic has also become an important issue in teacher education because teachers are expected to master and teach many competencies in addition to their specific areas of expertise. The competence requirements for teachers therefore grow alongside the growing skill requirements for young people. Consequently, the curricula of pre-service teacher education programmes have been adjusted and expanded to accommodate the new developments. After an introduction of the general concept of 21st century skills of teachers and learners, this paper discusses how 21st century skills training can be implemented in foreign language teacher education and demonstrates an example of a pre-service teacher education course, in which student teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) implicitly apply 21st century skills while explicitly learning about them.

Key words: 21st century skills, global skills, life skills, EFL teacher education, project-based learning

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to promote the integration of 21st century skills training in study programmes for pre-service foreign language teachers. 21st century skills are linked to global economic competition, advances in technology, and growing diversity and mobility, “which are all products of an increasingly globalised world” [9, p. 6]. Globally influential organisation like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, [14]), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, [10]), and Battelle for Kids [2], whose model “has gained particular traction in education” [9, p. 7], have been emphasising the fundamental principles that are necessary for reshaping education to make it relevant to today’s world and the future. 21st century skills, “global skills” [9], or “life competencies” [3] are essentially similar concepts that comprise interconnected sets of knowledge and abilities required for living in the 21st century. Learning to master these skills concerns virtually everyone who wishes to be successful in their lives, during different phases of education, in various workplaces, and society in general. This text presents an example of how five key areas of 21st century skills, identified by Mercer et al. [9], have been implemented in pre-service teacher education. These key areas are creativity and critical thinking, communication and collaboration skills, emotional self-regulation and well-being, digital literacies, and intercultural competence and citizenship.

2. 21st century skills training in pre-service teacher education

With rising demands regarding successful and content living in the 21st century, students are nowadays expected to possess a large array of skills in these five key areas. For instance, they need to be able to master written and verbal communication effectively and appropriately, think creatively and critically, act reliably and autonomously, take responsible decisions that affect themselves and others, demonstrate an awareness of sociocultural and linguistic differences, collaborate respectfully and efficiently in teams, and use modern technology effectively. Foreign language teaching seems to be naturally suitable for 21st century skills teaching [1, 9] because the abovementioned skills can be integrated in task-based and topic-based foreign language classes relatively easily in comparison to



other school subjects. Nevertheless, with rising expectations of students, the expectations of teachers have also increased. Pre-service teacher education must therefore prepare future foreign language teachers according to the high demands and expand their capabilities to become 21st century skills teachers alongside learning to become foreign language teachers. The added competences of a 21st century skills teacher include an overall understanding of 21st century skills and their relevance to living in today's society, the ability to model 21st century skills to learners, the desire to explore new approaches to teaching EFL and 21st century skills, the willingness to broaden the objectives of EFL teaching beyond linguistic competencies, the willingness to find appropriate resources to teach 21st century skills in EFL, the capability to integrate 21st century skills within a curriculum, and engagement in lifelong professional development [9]. The following section provides an example of how 21st century skills training has been implemented in a pre-service EFL teacher education course.

3. Practically integrating 21st century skills training in pre-service EFL teacher education

This paper presents a university course held online in the winter term 2020/21, which explicitly addressed 21st century skills as its core topic and simultaneously involved students in active 21st century skills training. The syllabus of the course combined three components: (1) input presentations given by the instructor, (2) project work conducted by students in small teams, and (3) additional information and inspiration from TED-presentations. The instructor's input was supported by visual presentation slides and covered the following topics: the evolution of education, the relevance of global skills, emotional well-being of foreign language learners, intercultural competence, digital literacies, and critical and creative thinking. Furthermore, the instructor provided information on how to conduct literature research, how to design questionnaires [5], how to analyse the gathered data, and how to generate findings [8] in foreign language research. During the semester, the students completed four projects in small teams, presented the outcomes of the group projects on self-designed websites, and presented the websites in class at the end of the course. At the beginning of the semester, to familiarise themselves with the topic of the course, the students gained some general knowledge about 21st century skills, described the overall concept and individual components on their websites, and explained what is special about learners and teachers who possess 21st century skills.

The first project was about the evolution of (EFL) education and guided by four central questions: What used to be common in schools in the past? What used to be the purpose of education? Which aspects of education have changed and how? What is it like to learn and teach English today? The second project was to conduct empirical research about the emotional wellbeing of students during the pandemic. The students designed an online questionnaire to collect data and presented the results on their websites. The third project was to plan a fictitious excursion for upper secondary school students (aged 15-19) to an English-speaking destination determined by the course instructor. The students had to identify some basic aims of the excursion, for instance, what they would like the participants to learn, practice, experience, and visit. Moreover, the excursion had to include a visit to the local university. To gather information about their designated destination, the students conducted internet research and an online interview with an education expert at the respective university. Finally, the planned excursion had to include some learning activities that integrated 21st century skills training, which the students briefly outlined on the websites as well. The task for the fourth project was to design five classroom activities that foster an understanding of intercultural competence and citizenship in secondary school EFL learners. The activities were related to the latest US-elections due to their up-to-dateness at the time the course was conducted. In addition to the input presentations by the course instructor and the project work in small teams, the following TED presentations were recommended to the students to watch in their free time during the semester: Creative ways to get kids to thrive in school [4], Grit: The power of passion and perseverance [6], The boost students need to overcome obstacles [7], Every kid needs a champion [11], Do schools kill creativity [12], and Bring on the learning revolution [13].

Due to restricted class time the TED-talks could not be discussed in class and were instead included as excellent inspiration for forward-thinking pre-service EFL teachers. The course assessment was cumulative, considering the students' engagement in the project work, as well as each group's website



and website presentation at the end of term. The outcomes of one team can be viewed with their consent on their website at <https://focus-on-language-and-the-learner-global-skills-3.jimdosite.com/>.

4. Discussion

The course described in this paper covered all areas of 21st century skills as identified by education experts in future-oriented position papers and corresponding websites [3, 9]. The instructor's input presentations addressed these topics, the TED-presentations complemented them by expert or practitioner experience, and the project work in teams provided opportunities to apply 21st century skills in practice. The group work engaged the students in purposeful communication and collaboration activities for which they individually prepared by researching online and printed media and critically evaluating the relevance and quality of their contents. Contemporary topics like emotional self-regulation and well-being during a pandemic and intercultural competence and citizenship during elections with a global impact involved the students in serious information gathering and deep, critical thinking. Moreover, the students practiced their digital literacy skills by participating in online class meetings, conducting empirical research, and presenting the outcomes of their projects on a website. Planning an excursion to an anglophone destination and interviewing a local education expert also fostered a range of skills beside linguistic competencies. Finally, as the course is part of the Bachelor curriculum for pre-service EFL teachers, planning and designing learning activities for secondary school students was a pivotal component.

5. Conclusions

21st century skills training in preservice teacher education is extremely important because teachers need to prepare learners for life in a fast-paced world with all the demands that it brings along. Teacher educators, specifically in foreign languages, are in a favourable position to integrate 21st century skills training in tertiary education in order to raise the awareness of future foreign language teachers of 21st century skills and to equip them with the necessary knowledge, competencies, and attitudes to become 21st century skills teachers [9]. This paper demonstrated an example of implementing 21st century skills explicitly and implicitly with much opportunity for practice. The course is currently repeated with another cohort of students for whom the syllabus and course materials have been revised and slightly adjusted to suit the increased number of participants and current events in the world.

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