English for 21st Century Skills

SOPHIA MAVRIDI & DANIEL XERRI

Part 1

Fundamental
21st century skills

David Nunan

University of Hong Kong

Educating its citizens for 21st century skills has become the mantra of governments and ministries of education around the world. The purpose of this chapter is to unpack some of the key questions underlying this mantra: Why do we have to reinvent curricula that have served us well in the past? What knowledge, skills and dispositions are required for individuals in the first part of the 21st century, and how long will they be relevant? How do we go about planning, implementing and evaluating the curricular imperative for 21st century skills and competencies? What is the role of English in educating citizens for the 21st century? The chapter argues that second language in general, and English language in particular can make a significant contribution to the key competencies of communication, collaboration, autonomy/learning-how-to-learn, and creativity.

The purpose of education

Any contemplation of curriculum renewal must begin with the question of the purpose of education. This question has dogged philosophers for thousands of years. The great minds of Greek civilisation, Plato, Aristotle and Socrates had a lot to say on the subject. For Aristotle, it was the responsibility of the state to educate its citizens to serve the state. Socrates had a very different perspective, and the assertion that "Education is the lighting of a flame, not the filling of a vessel" points to individual enlightenment and personal autonomy. These two competing aims of education – to serve the state on the one hand, and to emancipate the individual to lead a rich and fulfilled life on the other, have framed debates on the purpose of education to this day. The philosopher John White takes a Socratic perspective, arguing that, the aim of education is to equip the individual to meet both physical needs and spiritual aspirations, although he hints that these are not antithetical to public service.

> We need to ask the fundamental questions. If education is about helping people to lead happy, flourishing lives, then schooling should be focused on enabling children to meet their basic needs of health and food, as well as equipping them to find interesting work and form lasting relationships. The curriculum should flow from this, rather than vice versa. (White, 2010, p. 128)

On the other side, Scott Walker, the then governor of the state of Wisconsin in the United States, caused uproar in that state and beyond when he proposed altering the mission of the venerable University of Wisconsin from one which was to search for truth and improve the human condition. In his Budget Repair Bill (2010-2011) he stipulated that future funding would be contingent upon the University changing its mission from a liberal arts to a utilitarian one. Henceforth, its role would be to prepare students to meet the needs of the state's workforce. Walker, a Republican and potential future presidential candidate, did not have a university education himself, and his announcement caused uproar, not only within the University community, but across the state (Talntor, 2015).

These two views on the purpose of education (there are others, but I will put these aside in the interests of economy) can be called the emancipatory and the utilitarian. In actuality, elements of both will feature in most governmental education policies, although, not surprisingly, politicians tend to privilege the latter on the grounds that, if the state is paying for the cost of education, it should call the shots. In addition, the individual whose intellectual, emotional, aesthetic and moral abilities and sensitivities have been developed through education will not only be empowered to enjoy the 'good life' but will also be equipped to serve the state: so these emancipatory and utilitarian imperatives need not necessarily be at

odds. It all depends on how educational ends are realized at the level of the curriculum. (They will also be equipped to critique the state and the politicians who run it, which is why politicians such as Scott Walker and other current politicians of his ilk are not enamoured of the emancipatory view!)

The eminent philosopher of education, Richard Pring (2010) pointed out that the emancipatory and the utilitarian imperatives could both be in harmony in the curriculum. One needs to argue for the kind of personal development and fulfilment which we believe to be worthwhile, and for the kind of society which, through educating young people, we think worth creating (Pring, 2010).

The call for curriculum renewal

Current calls for curriculum renewal have been stimulated by globalisation, the technological revolution, and the attendant explosion in knowledge. There is a belief that educational systems are failing to prepare individuals with the competencies required for them, and therefore society, to meet the challenges of the 21st century. There is nothing new here. Writing fifty years ago, Jerome Bruner, one of the preeminent educators of the previous century asserted that:

> Each generation must define afresh the nature, direction, and aims of education to assure such freedom and rationality as can be attained for a future generation. For there are changes both in circumstances and in knowledge that impose constraints on and give opportunities to the teacher in each succeeding generation. It is in this sense that education is in constant process of invention. (Bruner, 1966, p. 23)

Curriculum renewal was imperative, according to Bruner because of the post-war explosion in knowledge. A similar case is being made today. Business and government leaders are arguing that globalisation, technology, migration, international competition, and changing markets require a greater emphasis on outcomes driven educational systems. School systems are facing increasing pressure to produce graduates with a range of competencies, not only, or even primarily knowledge, but also skills, attitudes, and dispositions, a demand that is generating challenges in terms of pedagogy and assessment (Soland et al., 2013).

At a governmental level, ministries of education such as the Singapore Ministry of Education, also see globalisation, technology and the changing nature of the population as driving the need for reinventing education to prepare the next generation for the exigencies of the 21st century. Their comprehensive framework of competencies can be found on their website (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2014).

However, there is a dilemma for educators, one that is created by the volume of information and the pace of change. Children born today, will be entering the workforce or higher education in around eighteen years. We do not know what the world will be like next year. How can we create a curriculum that will prepare them to survive and thrive in a future world that is currently unknown? (Robinson, 2001).

Interestingly, over thirty years ago, the prescient British educator, Ted Wragg (1984) proposed a way out of the dilemma. He predicted that in the 21st century technology and multimedia resources would facilitate independent learning. He answered Robinson's (2001) question many years before it had been posed by suggesting that education should focus on process rather than product. Knowledge transmission would be irrelevant when that knowledge would quickly become redundant. The aim of education should be to produce creative individuals imbued with a spirit of inquiry who could work both independently and collaboratively.

21st century competencies

Since the beginning of the millennium, a great deal of work has been done in fleshing out Wragg's (1984) visionary statement. However, It is worth noting that almost at the 20 per cent mark of the century, we are still debating what kind of educational diet should be fed to our children.

Increasing awareness of the dilemma has forced educators to reevaluate the purpose of education. Proposals have come forth in various guises and with differing labels: '21st Century Competencies/Skills', 'New Learning', 'New Literacies', SMART learning', and so on. These are almost invariably couched in terms of competencies, a competency being a statement of attitudes, dispositions and behaviours that an individual displays/performs at the end of a course of instruction. (For an overview and critique of outcomes-driven education, including objectives-based, standards-based and competency-based approaches to curriculum development, see Nunan, 2007). The rationale for this development, as well as the various typologies of competencies are remarkably similar. In her editorial to an issue of *Learning Landscapes*, devoted to the topic of inclusive education and published thirty years after Wragg's (1984) chapter, Butler-Kisber (2014) argues that three interrelated themes dominate current thinking on education. The first is a focus on the kinds of skills that are required by individuals to cope with the complexities and uncertainties of the 21st century. They need to know how to access information that is fast changing and constantly morphing, and to develop inquiry skills to exploit this information to solve problems in a meaningful, adaptable and integrative way. Second is the importance of developing citizens who are creative, collaborative, and communicatively adept at solving problems in globally sensitive and ethically responsible ways. Third, is the need to develop digital literacy that enables individuals to exploit the explosion in online knowledge and resources responsibly. In summary, 21st century citizens need to be creative, collaborative, communicatively effective, ethical, globally sensitive, and digitally literate, autonomous problem solvers. The challenges facing educators and ministries of education in creating curricula that will produce such citizens are not to be underestimated.

Privileging behavioural competencies over knowledge reproduction has resulted in typologies such as the following, which segments competencies in the cognitive, the interpersonal, and the intrapersonal. *Cognitive competencies* involve mastery of core academic content, (mathematics, science, language arts, foreign languages, history, and geography), critical thinking, and creativity. *Interpersonal competencies* include communication and collaboration, leadership, global awareness, and intercultural empathy. *Intrapersonal competencies* consist of a growth mindset, intrinsic motivation, and learning how to learn, which is the ability to determine how to approach a problem or task, monitor own comprehension and evaluate progress toward completion (Soland et al., 2013).

To this point, I have provided some relatively brief philosophical and historical background to the push for reinventing educational systems for the 21st century as well as giving an indication of what is meant by the term 'competency'. In the rest of the chapter, I will suggest a role that language education might play within the larger curriculum.

A role for language in 21st century education

In the preceding section, I sketched out the kinds of competencies that educators have identified as being relevant for the 21st century citizen. In the rest of the chapter, I look more specifically at the competencies that can be developed through the study of a second language. It has been clear for some time now, that language cannot be seen as an area of academic study quarantined from other subjects and areas of study. Although, in schemes such as that proposed by Soland et al. (2013), language features in the cognitive subcategory of core academic content, it also fits into the interpersonal subcategory of communication and collaboration. In fact, language is fundamental to all competencies. Due to limitations of space, I discuss just four of these: communication, collaboration, autonomy/learning-how-to-learn, and creativity.

Communication

The ability to communicate effectively in a wide range of personal, educational and business contexts across a range of cultures is a core competence. The sociolinguist Dell Hymes (1972) coined the term "communicative competence" (pp. 269-293), which was taken up and applied to language teaching by Sandra Savignon (1972, 1991). In the 1980s, Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) identified four key elements as constituting communicative competence. There were linguistic, discourse, strategic and sociolinguistic competence. Since then there have been many developments and debates about the construct and its relationships between communicative competence, communicative performance, linguistic proficiency and so on. In 2015, TESOL International established a steering committee to develop an action on 'The future of TESOL as a profession'. The committee developed a conceptual framework, established a reference group, identified keynote speakers, and created and managed the website through which keynote speakers interacted with TESOL professionals to explore three key questions on the future of TESOL as a profession. These questions were as follows:

- How can we overcome the native speaker as the standard and address the changing realities of English language use around the world, both with regards to students' needs for English and to teachers' needs for proficiency in English?

- What new research-based models and goals for English competence can be developed to guide policy and practice?

- How can the multiple Englishes that arise in different contexts be incorporated in frameworks, standards, large-scale tests and rubrics?

At a symposium held in Athens in February 2017 to pull together work carried out by many people under the guidance of the steering committee, Mahboob (2017) directly addressed the issue of communication. He presented a dynamic model of language proficiency identifying three dimensions of language variation that need to be taken into consideration when accounting for how language varies around the world: *users*, *uses*, and *modes*. The *user* dimension accounts for variation resulting from the degree of social distance between interlocutors. *Use* differentiates between language used for everyday purposes as opposed to specialised, technical, professional or academic purposes. *Mode* accounts for variations occurring as a result of whether the integration is spoken, written or multimodal. These three variables more-or-less correspond with Halliday's (1985) register variables of tenor, field and mode.

Collaboration

In the first section of this chapter, I described an experiential, constructivist approach to learning. In the experiential mode, learners form partnerships to reach collaboratively a common goal. Through a process of discovery, guided by the teacher, they acquire knowledge and skills, not for their own sake, but to facilitate achieving the goal. In the process, they also become joint managers, with the teacher, of managing the learning process (Kohonen, 1992).

Autonomy / learning-how-to-learn

A focus on the development of autonomy through learner strategy training and learning-how-to-learn and lifelong learning is another competency that is fundamental to 21st century learning. Its importance flows from the insight that, with the information explosion, it is futile to focus the curriculum on inculcating content that is going to be irrelevant when a learner graduates from school. The focus thus shifts from content to process: the inculcation of skills for lifelong learning so that learners have the capacity to function autonomously once they have left formal education. Paradoxically, while educators have crafted compelling arguments for the centrality of autonomy within contemporary curricula (see, for example, Benson, 2001), politicians are less sanguine about this idea of an autonomously functioning workforce. People who have learned to think for themselves can access and critique information and propositions presented by politicians as facts. They can ask awkward questions and point out the flawed logic of political arguments. A thinking populace is excess to the requirements of a workplace devoted to the production of goods; however, it is fundamental to the knowledge economy.

Creativity

Robinson (2001) has gone so far as to argue that creativity is the single most important quality for education and the most important characteristic required for 21st century citizens. However, there are two problems when it comes to creativity in education. While most people have an intuitive notion of what it means, and have no trouble using the word when they see it, or think they see it, it is notoriously difficult to define. I also believe it is impossible to teach, except in a rather trivial sense. A typical exercise is to have students in groups brainstorm unusual uses for everyday objects such as a pencil or a ring. The groups share their lists and vote on the most 'creative' use. Another is to solve problems or conundrums which often have a linguistic basis; for example: "A woman in a small town marries twenty men, all of whom are still alive, without committing bigamy. How is this so?". It does not take too much creativity to come up with the solution. I have been unable to find evidence that the ability to solve such problems transfers to the ability to solve problems in real life. This has not stopped some people building their careers out of the concept and amassing considerable compensation in the process. Robinson even garnered a knighthood. Another name which is associated with creativity in education is Edward de Bono whose books and workshops on creativity were extremely popular in the 1970s and 1980s with schools around the world incorporating his 'thinking tools' into their curricula, and attendance at his workshops was mandatory for many corporate executives. No doubt he would take issue with my assertion that creativity defies instruction. The technique underlying de Bono's (1973) method for teaching creativity is lateral thinking. The essence of lateral thinking is to solve problems indirectly and creatively rather than following a traditional process of step-by-step logical reasoning. His technique involves bringing together two objects or concepts that would not normally be associated, but the procedure often results in solutions that are cute but often silly.

Interest in creativity in language learning and use has grown in recent years. In his discussion of creativity in language and discourse, Jones (2012) talks about the democratisation of creativity and draws a distinction between 'big C' creativity (e.g., composing symphonies) and 'little c' creativity (e.g., finding one's way out of a traffic jam). Jones (2012) goes on to point out that the problem with this big C/little c distinction is that there is an awful lot of creativity going on in human activity that interpolates itself between composing great symphonies and coming up with pick-up lines. He cites advertising, corporate and public relations writing and the "creative practices of young people using digital technologies" (Jones, 2012, p. 2). The minute one attempts a definition of creativity, it is bound to be seen as problematic by someone else.

In terms of language learning and use, inside the classroom, but more importantly outside the classroom, we are clearly talking about 'small c creativity'. Proceeding on my assertion that creativity cannot be taught in anything other than a trivial sense, the questions arise: How can we structure the learning environment to encourage creativity on the part of our learners?

Task- and project-based learning provide ideal frameworks for developing 21st century competencies such as those described in this section. Nunan (2017) describes an intensive summer course at the University of Hong Kong constructed around a single project. Students were final year business students from a university in Japan. Their task was to develop a website on the theme 'Contemporary life in Hong Kong'. Working in four groups, students identified four sub-themes: historic Hong Kong, entertainment, tourist attractions, and eating out. Students identified out-of-class tasks for collecting input on which the website was built. In the course of this work, they collaborated with group members, engaged in authentic communication in real-world encounters with locals and visitors to Hong Kong, displayed considerable creativity, and developed the ability to function autonomously.

Conclusion

If the ideals of 21st century learning are to be realised, there needs to be a radical reconceptualisation of the curriculum. Disciplinary areas of study such as mathematics, science and history have their own knowledge domains and 'rules of the game', and I am not suggesting that these be dismantled. However, we need to map onto these knowledge domains the process skills advocated by proponents of new learning such as Cope and Kalantzis (2015). Despite the best efforts of the brightest minds in education, some of whom feature in the first section of the chapter, the belief persists that the purpose of the history teacher is to link facts, events and people, and drum these into students, while the role of the science teacher is to help students memorize the periodic table of elements. While knowledge of facts never did anyone any harm, the real purpose of studying history is to learn to think like an historian; the real purpose of becoming a student of science is to think and perform like a scientist.

I will end this brief chapter not by arguing that disciplinary subject areas be overthrown, but that they be seen through the lens of 21st century competences. Developing communication and collaboration skills, autonomy, and creativity is as much a responsibility of the mathematician, the geographer and the biologist as it is that of linguists, musicians and artists. I like to think of the 21st century curriculum as a tapestry in which the content areas of the disciplinary domain are complemented by the processing skills of the competency domain.

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English for 21st Century Skills

The potential to generate innovative ideas, solve problems and implement solutions needs education systems that support people to develop the competencies, skills and values to live and work in a globalised, inclusive and interconnected world. While digital technologies can provide people with unparalleled opportunities to interact, learn and create, taking advantage of this potential requires individuals who will have the emotional and social skills to critically engage with the world around them. As language educators, we can actively contribute to this by applying *English for 21st Century Skills*.

This book showcases cutting-edge theory and practice in the development and integration of 21st century skills in the language classroom. Well-known ELT experts as well as teacher educators, practitioners and leaders from around the world explore how creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, inclusion, wellbeing, leadership and other key new literacies can be developed in both formal and informal learning contexts. The book brings seasoned and novice teachers, trainers, researchers and policy makers up to date with developments in this increasingly important field in language education.

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