University of Jos Journal of Arts Education

INCORPORATING THE 21ST CENTURY SKILLS IN THE NIGERIAN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This paper examine(12 1 st century skills and explored ways the teacher can *help incorporate these skills in the teaching and learning of the English lanWage in the Nigerian classroom. The materials used for this study were gathered from articles, books and websites. The descriptive research is em pl o Y e d as a methodfor the study. The paper argues that 21 st century skins are the necessary skills that students need in order to learn and develop mo ti v ation skillsl creativity, innovation, critical thinking, collaboration and p r oblem solving. The paper asserted that to meet this challenge, schools must be transformed in ways that will enable students acquire creative thinking1 p r oble m sotvingJ collaboration and motivation skills they need to be successful in work and life. Against this background the paper proposed that much success lies in the students being able to communicate, share and use information to solve complex problems in response to new demands and challenging circumstances. It then suggests, among others, that teachers must $rst redepne excellent instruction, teach students to be able to make appropriate decisions and development using what they have learnt or read. The paper concludes that it is time for a new and higher standard of rigor as defIned by the 2 1 st ceIIf&rry criteria.*

KEYWORDS: 21 st century skills, Critical thinking and problem solving, communication, Collaboration, Creativity, Innovation

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the teaching and learning of English language was characterized by acquisition and study of language through the traditional method, where information

and content were viewed as the sole prerogative of the teacher thereby making learning teacher centred. In today's world, interpreting and using information is becoming more important than memorising it. Thus emphasis on 2 1 st century skills needs to be greater beyond the shores of language such as numeracy, thinking skills, computer use and collaborative efforts. Learners should demonstrate competence in the language in which they are taught by exhibiting and making presentations on what they have been taught, given that the rnain goal of teaching and learning English language is to facilitate understanding and communication process in the language. Penny (2009) in Abilasha and Ihankwuaran (2009) noted that the goal is to produce fully competent English knowing bilinguals rather than imitators of native language speakers. The purpose is not to aspire to become native speakers of English but to focus on competent use of the English language as a medium of communication. English is not viewed as an end in itself but a means to learning content such as science and mathematics. This paradigm shift is to stimulate discussion, provoke

thought and generate reflective responses. This calls for the need to incorporate 2 1 st century skills in 21st century classrooms.

The common method employed in teaching English language has been teacher centred and coupled with other challenges which range from dearth of textbooks, poor teacher training, obsolete resource materials and curriculum, poor infrastructure, among other factors, the need to explore new ways of teaching and learning the language in Nigerian classrooms is obvious. The paper seeks to examine the teaching of 21 st century skills as well as explore areas of challenge and how the teacher can help incorporate these skills into teaching and learning in Nigerian English language classroom.

Concept of 21st Century Skills

The term “21st century skills” refers to certain core competencies such as collaboration, digital literacy, critical thinking and problem solving. The advocates of this concept believe that schools need to teach these skills in order to help students thrive in today's world. 21 st century skills can also be referred to as a broad set of knowledge skills, work habits and character traits that scholars, employers and the general public believe are critical to success in today's world particularly in collegiate programmes and contemporary careers and work places. 21st century skills are a set of abilities that students need to develop in order to succeed in this age of advanced technology. The proponents of 21st century skills list three types of skills which include:

1. Learning skills which involve critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration and communication.

2. Literacy skills which is information literacy, media literacy and technology literacy.
3. Life skills which is flexibility, initiative, social skills, productivity and leadership.

It should however, be noted that the concept of 21st century skills encompasses a wide range of amorphous body of knowledge and skills that are not easy to define and that have not been codified or categorized officially. While the term is widely used in education, it is not always defined consistently which can lead to confusion and divergent interpretation. This is in addition to a number of related terms which include applied skills, cross-curricular skills, cross disciplinary skills, interdisciplinary skills, transversal skills, non-cognitive skills and soft skills widely used in reference to the general forms of knowledge and skills commonly associated with 21st century skills. The diaerent terms may have divergent or specialized meanings in certain technical contexts; these diverse sets of skills are addressed for the purpose of practicality and usefulness. While specific skills deemed to be 21 st century skills may be defined, categorized and determined differently from person to person, place to place or school to school, the term does reflect a general, somewhat loose and shifting consensus. The list below shows a brief illustrative overview ofthe knowledge, skills, work, habits, and character traits commonly associated with 21 st century skills:

Critical thinking, problem solving, reasoning, analysis, interpretation, synthesizing information.

Research skills and practices, expression, interrogative questions

- Creativity, artistry, curiosity, imagination, innovation, personal expression
- Perseverance, self direction, planning, self discipline, adaptability, initiative.
- Oral and written communication, public speaking and presenting, listening.
- Leadership, team work, collaboration, cooperation, facility in using verbal work spaces.
- Information and communication technology (ICT) literacy media **and** internet literacy, data interpretation and analysis, computer programming. Civic, ethical and social justice literacy
- Economic and financial literacy entrepreneurialism
- Global awareness, multicultural literacy, humanitarianism
- Scientific literacy and reasoning the scientific method
- Environmental and conservation literacy, ecosystems understanding
- Health and wellness literacy including nutrition, diet, exercise and public health safety.

2Ist Century skills and teachers of English in Nigerian classrooms

What has been termed the Four C's: critical thinking, collaboration, communication and creativity, have become increasingly important skills for all students at all levels of education. However, teaching these skills effectively especially in Nigerian English language classrooms have been a topic of discussion among educators for Years. In the last decade, the discussion included teaching these skills effectively to English learners, who while learning the content being presented along with these important 2 1 st century skills, also have the challenge of learning English.

Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

Critical thinking is the process of deliberately and systematically processing information so that one can make better decisions and generally understand things better. It is also the process by which we dictate and analyze the assumptions that underpin actions, decisions and judgements. It is also used when we evaluate the intellectual work of others in terms of strengths and weaknesses. Critical thinking and problem solving 'skills include using knowledge, facts and data to solve problems. It is the ability of individuals to reason effectively, ask potential questions and solve problems, analyze and reflect critically on decision and process.

Therefore in applying critical thinking and problem solving skills, students must be able to make appropriate decisions and judgements using what they have learnt or read, use inductive and detective reasoning as appropriate to the situation in order to analyze coMplex systems and determine how parts of a whole interact with each other

The ability to think critically is not dictated by ability to speak any given language, while this is obvious, teaching students to think critically and articulate their thoughts in a language they do not speak well is a challenge in the Nigerian classroom

Most educators understand the importance of incorporating higher-order thinking skills into their teaching yet an analysis of the lesson observation in the Nigerian classrQom often shows that higher-order thinking skills are not often incorporated into the teaching and learning situation with major emphasis on content delivery and the quest to complete the syllabus thereby leaving the learners to only receive knowledge without any opportunity for them to think critically and solve problems. When we consider the diversity in schools, the challenge for educators is even more. It should be noted that higher-order thinking questions and activities take preplanning to incorporate into instruction. This preparation must take Into consideration the linguistic demand of the activity and how students are going to

communicate the information. Besides developing higher-order thinking and problem solving questions and activities, teachers must consider the language that will need to be explicitly taught and shared so that English learners can be successful on tasks.

It is clear that comprehension questions are important as we need to check for understanding while teaching. These questions are easily thought up and asked during the course of teaching and many teachers plan interesting and engaging questions as part of their checks for understanding. Teachers should understand that some adjustments to questions may need to be made on the basis of proficiency level of the students they are working with. In order to incorporate higher-order thinking questions and activities, preplanning is essential. Critical thinking is a tool that should be employed when important decisions are to be made or when solving difficult problems.

Other than cirtical thinking skills, there is collaboration skills which demonstrate the ability of students to work effectively and respectfully with diverse teams. It allows for the learner to perform independently and with groups in a highly technologically advanced atmosphere, to deliberate effectively and responsibly with diverse population and in the classroom for a common goal, sharing opinions, ideas either in pairs or groups. Collaboration demonstrates the ability to work effectively and responsibly with diverse teams, exercise flexibility and willingness to be helpful in making necessary compromises to accomplish a common goal, assumed shared responsibility for collaborative work and value individual contributions made by each team member (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Collaborative skills encourage direct and mediated communication, working with others in the classroom in pairs, groups and as a class to foster learning.

Further to these two is the ommunication skill which refers to the ability of individuals to communicate clearly using oral, written and non verbal communication and collaborate effectively and responsibly with diverse population. In the area of communication skills, the growing diversity of the student population in schools poses new communication challenges. Although communication and problem solving skills have always been important, society now demands that everyone is expected to have these skills not just as educated elite. While education has focused on the fundamentals of good communication, speech writing and reading call for a much more diverse set of communication and collaboration skills. Trilling and Fadel (2009) argue that today's student should be able to communicate clearly to be able to:

Articulate thoughts and ideas effectively using oral, written and non-verbal communication skills in a variety of forms and contexts.

- listen effectively to decipher meaning, including know'ledge, values, attitudes and intentions

Use communication for a variety of purpose e.g inform, instruct, motivate and persuade.

- Utilize multiple media and technologies and know how to judge their effectiveness, priority as well as asses their impact.

Communicate effectively in diverse environments including multilingual.

The objective of communication is to see how students will practice and develop academic language skills which may include general academic and domain specific vocabulary, specific reading and writing skills, clarifying complex grammatical structures, and more. When planning to increase critical thinking and problem solving, these skills can and should be built into lesson objectives to make students aware ofthe purpose ofthe lesson.

Creativity and innovative skills within a comprehensive framework is defined as follows: to think creatively, use a wide range of ideas, creative techniques such as brainstorming, create new and worthwhile ideas both incremental and radical concepts, elaborate, refine, analyze and evaluate their own ideas in order to improve and maximize creative efforts.

Creativity is often described as an essential skill that can and should be fostered. The lack of attention to develop, create, and innovate skill is based on the common misconception that creativity is something one is born with or without (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Creativity, the authors argue, can be nurtured by teachers and learning environments that encourage questioning, openness to new ideas and learning from mistakes and failures.

21 st Century Learning Environments

The Partnership of 21st Century Skills (2007) defines 21st century learning environments as 'the support systems that organise the condition in which humans learn best systems that accommodate the unique learning needs of every learner and support positive human relationship needed for effective learning'. 21st century learning environments are the physical spaces, tools and learning communities that encourage and enable students and educators to attain the skill sets that the 21st century requires. These include a number of important elements such as the physical environment, a school's daily operations including course schedules and available activities, technology infrastructure, school, culture, community involvements and school leadership.

The 2 1 st century learning environments are system of systems that:

Create learning practices, human support and physical environments that support the teaching and learning of 2 1 st century skills.

Support professional learning communities that enable educators to collaborate/ share best practices and integrate 21st century skills into classroom practice.

Enable students to learn in relevant real world 21st century contexts (e.g through project based or other applied work)

Allow equitable access to quality learning tools, technologies and resources.

Provide 21 st century architectural and interior designs for group, team and individual learning.

Support expanded community and international involvement in learning both face to face and on line.

Cornell (2002) argues that 2 1 st century learning needs to take place in contexts that promote interaction and sense of learning. Similarly Sack-Min (2007) argues that the quality of where we learn affects the quality of how we learn. Konings, Mario, Saskiaand Fereom (2007) surveyed tenth-grade students and teachers on their desired learning environments. In their findings, they noted that educators' perceptions of what learning environment should be like were vastly different from
students' preferences. He concludes that when students have input into the design of their environments they feel more successful and invest in learning. Similarly, when a first year high school teacher asked students to list factors that would make them more successfhl in learning, the students did not ask for more time to complete the assignments and similar supports; students stated that they could pursue their personal interest in addition to their school work

Incorporating 21st Century Skills in the Nigerian English Language Classroom To teach and test skills that students need, we must first redefine excellent instructions; the teacher needs to use academic content to teach the seven survival skills everyday at every grade level and in every class. For students' proficiency in the 2 1 st century, the skills, knowledge and expertise students must master to succeed in school, work and life should be the result of 21 st century education. In applying critical thinking and problem solving skills, we must teach students to be able to make appropriate decisions and judgements using what they have learnt or read, use inductive and deductive reasoning as appropriate to the situation and analyse complex systems and determine how parts of a whole interact with each other.

The teacher must understand that high-order thinking questions and activities take preplanning to incolporate into instlrlction. This preparation must take into

consideration *the* linguistic demand of *the* activity *and* how students *are going* to communicate the information. Teachers must consider the language that will need tQ be explicitly taught and shared so that English language learners can be successful.

Students should be made to collaborate in groups as well as create a survey to assess classroom interest. Students should perform tasks independently and with groups and compare their answers with other groups. The differences and consistency in their report with other teams should be looked at, then ask the groups to create a short writing or spoken piece to explain how their results differ from others using the information collected from the class. After analyzing data. from other students' report, the groups then work together.

For communication skill to be clear and concise, the teacher should create focus, energy and passion around the points to be made, what the students are expected to do, were instructions clear enough? The objectives of communication include how the students will practice and develop language skills, which may include developing students' recognition and use of general academic and domain specific reading and writing skills, clarify complex grammatical structures and more. When planning to increase critical thinking and problem solving, these skills can and should be built into lesson objectives to make students aware of the purpose of the lesson

Emerging research encourages teachers and other educational stakeholders to focus on real world problems and processes in teaching and learning support inquiry based learning experiences, provide opportunities for collaborative project approaches to learning and focus on teaching students how to learn about what they should learn. 21st century skills should be integrated into teaching-learning standards to ensure that teachers are able to teach and assess critical thinking and problem solving skills, collaboration, communication and creativity skills. Research indicates that many teachers do not use technology at all or use it ineffectively. ICT tools in schools are locked in storage Closets because only a few teachers know how to operate and incorporate them in their instructional programmes. The capacity building of teachers is very low, especially teachers at the primary and secondary school levels most of whom have a lukewarm attitude to becoming computer literate (Eze & Aj a, 2014). Graduates of teacher education programmes frequently possess basic technology skills but may not understand how to apply or integrate technology Into classroom practice in meaningful ways. Teachers should understand that the 21sr century is an era of computer devices and they are bound to play a dominant role in all aspects of modern society including undoubtedly education. They should brace up to the challenges ofusing technology in their classroonrs.

CONCLUSION

The main goal of teaching English language is to facilitate understanding and effective communication in the language; the purpose has however, changed over the years with the focus being that of using English language as a means of communication. The paradigm shift is to stimulate discussion, provoke thought and generate reflective responses. In the 2 1 st century, certain essential skills are required to face the challenges of life which are beyond the shores of language such as numeracy, thinking skills, computer use and collaborative efforts. Students are expected to demonstrate what they have learnt through showcasing and making presentations to exhibit how much they learnt. To be educated today requires mastery of core subjects, 21st century themes and 21st century skills. To help students achieve proficiency in 21st century skills, teachers and administrators need education support systems that strengthen their instructional leadership and management capacity; both students and educators also need learning environments that are conducive to results.

In Nigeria there is the need to recognise that 2 1 st century education is the engine, not simply an input of the economy. There is need to act accordingly in every aspect of the nation's education system from primary to secondary to post secondary and adult education, after school and youth development. Workforce development and training and teacher development must be aligned to ensure citizens have 21st century skills. It is time for teachers and students to be held to a new and higher standard of rigor, as defined by the 2 1 st century criteria. It is time for professions to advocate for accountable systems that will enable teachers teach and test skills that matter most. Ifthis is neglected, the nation's students' future will be at stake.

RECOMMENDATIONS

21st century skills should be integrated into teacher learning standards to ensure that teachers are able to teach and assess critical thinking and problem solving skills such collaboration, communication and creativity skills.

21st century skills should be incorporated into all levels of educationprimary, secondary, tertiary and adult education, after school, youth development and training as well as teacher development.

To help students achieve proficiency in 21st century skills, teachers need education support systems that would strengthen their instructional, leadership and Management capacity.

The learning environment should be made conducive to enable both teachers and students achieve desired results

Teachers should understand that the 21st century is an era of computer devices and should brace up to the challenges of using technology in their classrooms

- In Nigerian classrooms, the teaching and learning process should be focused on real life problems and provide inquiry learning experience as well as opportunities for collaborative project-approaches to learning.
- Educators should understand the importance of incorporating higher-order thinking skills in the classrooms.

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