

Make 21st Century Skills Development Possible in a Language Learning Classroom

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The term *21st century skills* is not new in educational settings. It encompasses a wide-ranging body of skills that is, in reality, difficult to define. In this year's TFLTA Conference, its importance once again caught my eyes. For the first time, I asked myself, "What does 21st century skills mean to me as a language teacher?" "How can I make my classroom a place where students can showcase these skills?"

From my perspective, 21st century skills in second or foreign language study include 1) communicative competence; 2) critical and creative thinking skills; 3) a good mastery of information and communication technology literacy; 4) team work spirit; 5) global awareness and the ability to interpret world issues. All of them are developmental skills. Some are teachable through more traditional approaches, while others challenge the teachers to adopt more innovative pedagogies.

The targets teachers set and strategies teachers use determine how students learn and what they will achieve. The two presenters contributed their class examples that shows showcasing 21st century skills in a language classroom is possible. Two tasks they introduced strongly excited my interest. One asks students to "travel in France". Students are given budgets and need to find hotels and restaurants, locate places of interest and write menus. They are not allowed to use translators, but English is accepted. The other requires students to create their dream houses using designing software. Student outcome on these two tasks is outstanding. Both use authentic resources and media, exposing students to real world issues. The teachers not only trained students' reading and writing a language, but also other skills such as calculation, reading digital literacy, using new technology and creative thinking. As a language teacher, I am

informed that bringing authentic texts and resources into classroom is conducive to the students' communicative competence. However, teachers can do more than that. Students are not merely subjects sitting at their seats and learning a language. They are doers and creators. As a teacher, my job is to give them right directions, leading them to *discover* the real world by incorporating authentic resources and media into task designs. It is essential for teachers to help their students ask the right questions and enable them to show what they can do with what they already know. When students finish the task, there is another good way to help both teachers and students improve their future performance. Students can write down reflections on their language learning process in these tasks. On one hand, when students look back, they might have a better idea of how they could learn better using metacognitive thinking; on the other, teachers can get effective tips from students' reflections. So they know which part works and which does not.

Despite its brilliant picture, I have some concerns. When I talked to a high school Spanish teacher, she told me there are no tests for her class. She can design her own assessment. However, in China's language classrooms, the situation is different. Pressed by standardized tests, students and teachers have to mainly focus on grammar and test-taking skills. It seems attempts to incorporate 21st century skills into curricular might water down academic courses. Then the problem becomes how teachers can ensure students hit the tests while at the same time get students ready for the 21st century challenges.