

# The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills and the Role of Literature at the English Department

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## Abstract

The current global changes pose enormous challenges for the new millennium and especially for the educational system. To be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, students become required more than ever to possess the combination of critical thinking, creativity, collaborative and communication skills, necessary to tackle the unexpected developments they will face. In imparting these skills, this, in return, requires teachers to apply different ways of teaching. For instance, as far as the subject of literature is concerned, teachers are required to open up huge opportunities for improving teaching and learning in the classroom. In light of this growing concern and urgency to equip our students with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, where and how does the subject of literature at the English Department fit in? This research paper aims to discuss the possible links between 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and the subject of literature and looks at the potential of literature as a vital course of study.

## Keywords

English Department, Literature, Teaching Strategies, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills

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## 1. Introduction

The current global changes, i.e. globalisation and the growing importance of modern information and communication technology (ICT), pose enormous challenges for the new millennium and especially in the field of education. To survive in this increasingly complex world and to be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, students become required more than ever to develop a wide range of competences related to information, media and technology with a range focus on skills such as intercultural skills, creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration. In imparting these skills, this in return requires teachers to apply different ways of teaching in their classrooms in order to help their learners realise such competencies and skills.

Practically speaking, teachers should act as source of information instead of being source of knowledge, teaching students how to learn instead of teaching them what to learn,

and being organizers of the learning process instead of being simply a lecturers.

Speaking about the context of teaching/learning English literature at the English department, this certainly means that literature teachers should implement several initiatives methods and techniques to equip their students with the characteristics and skills they need to live in this ever-changing technological world.

Therefore, in light of this growing concern and urgency to equip our English language students with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, where and how does the module of literature at the English department fit in? Can literature subject develop English learners' the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills?

Admittedly, some teachers of literature have already expressed their concerns about the subject matter. They share the feeling that literature will lose its place at the English Department. They claim that their already concerns about the new generation lack of motivation towards learning literature

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has exacerbated by the new century skills they have to equip to their students.

The aim of the present contribution is therefore to stand for teaching literature as an important 21<sup>st</sup> century skill, and to highlight the possible links between 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and the subject literature by sharing some concrete models and strategies.

## 2. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills

Like many other terms or concepts, a clear-cut definition or meaning to what 21<sup>st</sup> century learning/teaching is, is open to interpretation and controversy. In some sense, “21<sup>st</sup> century” has become an empty signifier (Barthes, 1977). However, authors (Carroll, 2007; Silva, 2009; Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Clark, 2009; Paige, 2009), and organisations (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning; National Science Foundation, Educational Testing Services, NCREL, Metiri Group, etc.) base their vision on the skills that learners need to succeed and participate effectively in today’s digital and global economy. Though each group of authors and organizations develop a frame work of a list of critical 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills, they all agree on *‘the abilities learners must master, such as communication, collaboration, problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, and digital literacy’*. The Assessment & Teaching of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills (2012)<sup>1</sup> have categorized the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills into four main categories:

- Ways of Thinking: Creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving
- Ways of Working: Communication and collaboration skills
- Tools for Working: ICT and technology literacies
- Skills for Living in the world: Personal responsibilities

(In Griffin et al., 2012)

As can be noticed, when we talk about 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, we are not just talking about computer and technology skills, but a range of othercompetencies that can only be realised through teachers’ innovation and creativity.

## 3. Literature Teaching at the English Department: Aims and Perspectives

Literature is traditionally understood as transmission of a set of authors and their works. In contrast, the expression

teaching literature refers to the teaching and learning of the skills and abilities necessary to competently read texts literary.

Generally speaking, literature at the English Department aims at encouraging students to read literature and develop stable habits of reading in their spare time. Extensive fictional reading is expected to lead to textual knowledge on a general scale. Moreover, literature can promote in students the literary experience, i.e. the discovery of the aesthetic of literature through understanding its characteristics, its place and its relationships with the time being written.

More specifically, literature has always been one of the main sources for teaching and learning language. Its benefits in teaching languages have been expressed by several educators and specialists. It is not possible to discuss all the benefits or even many of them in depth here. Yet, believing on the advantages of the literature and its importance in English classes, we consider that operated properly, it can be an appropriate tool to promote reading, writing, while allowing integrating cultural elements as well as linguistic and aesthetic aspects in the language classroom. The following are summary of them:

In term of language skills, literature is viewed as a rich resource for language learning. Brumfit and Carter (1986) believe that literature is a skill subject as it contains variety of linguistic components that provide learners many opportunities for increasing their language awareness such as enhancing their reading skills,

In context of cultural knowledge, the use of literature in teaching culture is seen advantageous. Byram et al., (2013, p. 26) argue that when we read in our spare time, ‘we learn about other people of diverse cultural affiliations with a variety of perspectives’.

In term of motivation, McKay (1982, 2001) sees literature as an important source to enhance learners’ motivation to interact with the text. Along the same thought, Lazar (1993) sees literature as a way to challenge and stimulate students to deal with topics and themes that encourage them to relate to their personal opinions and experiences.

Therefore, in terms of teaching methods, this may require a methodology based reading in the classroom and in activities that help to obtain the information necessary to understand better both the structure and the meaning of the text. And herein raises two important educational issues:

- What knowledge is considered necessary to improve students’ literary skills?
- What teaching methods are appropriate for literature teaching?

<sup>1</sup> A group of 250 researchers across 60 institutions worldwide started the Assessment & Teaching of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills (ATC21S) project, a collaborative international research project sponsored by Cisco, Intel and Microsoft, and led by the University of Melbourne.

Here comes the importance of the teacher-how and what? This requires from teachers to see themselves more than simply instructors whose duties are to deliver the course.

## 4. Literature at the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Crossroad

Within today's sphere of digital literacy and world knowledge economy, the critical question is what do we talk about when we talk about literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills? How can literature help students connect what they learn to current issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Some may argue who will even care about literature.

However, before questioning the importance of humanities subjects like literature, let us think deeply and thoughtfully. The following pages offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments and common sense.

It is true that today's societies are primarily characterised by the wide spread of technology, regardless of the form, and therefore, as teachers of literature, we are urgently called upon to equip our students with such literacy to help learners survive the current world. However, is not also true that surviving quite well in today's world cannot be possible without good reading and writing?

Is not it commonly acknowledged that literature has always been one of the most effective sources that give its learners the opportunity to analyze and appreciate good language use by highly regarded wordsmiths? Since literature is about good writing, is not then reading literature helping people not only how to appreciate various forms of writings, but also train them to write well?

In addition, does not reading literature gives people a clear insight into human nature? For example, readers can discover in Edgar Allan Poe's gothic short stories and Emily Dickenson's poems the dark side of human being.

Historically and culturally speaking, is not literature the production of its time? So does not literature help people gain a better knowledge about the recorded history of ideas and societies that produce the literature? For instance, people can find in Dickens' novels, like *Oliver's Twist and Hard Times*, the hard and cruel living of the British society at that specific time. Others, like *A Christmas Carol*, give insight on the British social manners and customs. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of being Ernest* are two good examples that treat the domestic issues of the marriage institution and hypocrisy of Britain 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Are not 21<sup>st</sup> century skills about fostering cultural awareness and building empathy? So is literature. For instance, Chinua Achebe, Leila Aboulela and the Indian R. K. Narayan's

works can foster learners' greater empathy for others as they teach them how to see the others from a positive angle.

Are not 21<sup>st</sup> century skills about building a way of thinking and understanding the philosophy of life? There are plenty of novels and short stories that deal with different philosophical point of views. For instance, *Dante and the Lobster* by Samuel Beckett is a great short story that asserts the futility and meaninglessness of life. What about *Three Questions* by Leo Tolstoy? Is not it a parable that offers a philosophy for living?

Is not true that when we talk about the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, we are talking about problem solving and critical thinking? Among many humanities subjects, has not literature long been one of the main appropriate subjects that used to help learners think clearly and critically. For instance, a literature-teaching subject like *Literary Criticisms* gives students a tool on how to see the text and its surroundings from different views. In such way, learners become critically independents on how to interpret the happening of their surroundings, within their society or within others.

In short, as much as can be said about the advantages of literature it will remain shortly enough. Yet, teachers must consider the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and find a way to make literature plays its 21<sup>st</sup> century role.

## 5. Some Possibilities for Incorporating 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills through Literature Subject<sup>2</sup>

In the following, we suggest some teaching strategies that are assumed to be related to 21<sup>st</sup> century skills:

1. *Be Able to Embrace Change*: As an effective teacher living the 21<sup>st</sup> century, teachers should have the ability to embrace changes that are essential characteristics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning.

2. *Using 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literature<sup>3</sup>*: Contemporary literature is not different from the ones written in the past. Contemporary authors always draw their inspiration and ideas from past authors. For instance, when we talk about the issue of identity, identity never changed. However, what is changed today is that in a world, that has become exchanging ideas more quickly via internet and other sources of technology, people from different cultures and philosophies the issue of

<sup>2</sup>Some suggestion published in my article 'Instructional Strategies to Enhance Learners' Motivation towards Learning Literature', Journal of Education and Practice, Vol.5, No.30, 2014

<sup>3</sup>We are not calling for the exclusion of works that are vital for the study of literature, i.e. Shakespeare, Dickens, Twain, etc. Still learners should have the opportunity to explore literature that deals with current issues and themes.

identity take other meanings. For instance, in *The Fault of Our Stars* by John Green, the main characters Hazel is an example of a young girl who attempts to discover her identity against those who still identify her by her illness, cancer. Using new literary works created within the last decade is also a good way to reflect learners' interest to the current themes and issues.

3. *Using World English Literature*: Being a global language, English literature cannot be reduced to the British and the American ones. Within the sphere of interculturality, world English literature is an effective resource to teach learners about others.

4. *Conflict Resolution*: like in real life, most fiction relies on conflict to develop the plot. Characters go through struggle with each other, sometimes succeeding in resolving difference and sometimes failing. In class, using sort stories is more applicable. Students volunteer to play characters of the story, and their task is to think themselves into their role and think how they can present their version of the events in most convincing way.

5. *Developing the Thinking Skills*: The teacher needs to develop their students thinking skills by developing classroom environments suitable for debate and inquiry.

6. *Encouraging Collaborative Works*: Whatever is called, literature circles, literature collaborative learning, or conversations surrounding texts, literature group discussion encourages participation of students, and engage them in interactive learning situation. It is a method in which the teacher and a group of students consider a topic, issue, or problem and exchange information, experiences, ideas, opinions, reactions, and conclusions with one another. The discussions can be about literary elements such as textual meaning, personal connections, character motives, and other open-ended topics. The role of the teacher is to initiate questions and give further information and interpretation from time to time. He should act as a facilitator rather than a controller of the learning process. In this case, students will be able to have different interpretations of the text rather than the only one used to be provided by the teacher.

7. *Encouraging Investigative Researches*: One of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills is to engage learners in investigating real world issues, solving problems and take responsibility. However, students should be assigned to challenging tasks to solve authentic problems and connect between the school and the society.

## 6. Conclusion

In short, with the enormous challenges for the new millennium and especially for the educational system,

educators must express more openness and willingness to embrace change and adapt to it. As an effective teacher living the 21<sup>st</sup> century, teachers should have the ability to embrace changes that are essential characteristics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. More specially, to be an effective living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, teachers of literature should find ways to develop wide range of strategies with a focus on 21<sup>st</sup> century skills such as creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration. In doing so, it then can be said that, as teachers of literature, we have done our job effectively.

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