

21st Century Skills in the **ELT** Classroom

Edited by Christopher Graham



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Foreword

by Christopher Graham

The teaching of English as a foreign language has changed very significantly over the years. Researching for a talk a year or so ago, I came across some activities and recordings from a course called *Access to English*, by Basil Coles and Michael Lord, published in 1974 by Oxford University Press. It was the first course book I ever used. Looking at it now, of course it seems dated, almost innocent. But it made me think a lot about how the world of English language teaching (ELT) has changed, and indeed how it hasn't.

Access to English is based around two characters called Arthur Newton and Mary Stephens, and their lives in a town called Middleford. There are many aspects of the course that now seem remarkable. The language is very stilted, the reading texts seem to be lengthy for the level and there is a lot of drilling that is only really structural manipulation. But then again, it was published nearly fifty years ago, and that being said, my admittedly rather hazy memories tell me that students loved the books and made progress by using them.

Looking at *Access to English* and at more recent course books in parallel, it seems remarkable how we have gone from Arthur and Mary's adventures in the local library to looking at the differences between correlation and causation and how to manage search engine results. Of course, most societies have changed immeasurably in the last fifty years, but working with 21st century skills is one way to future proof our classrooms, with new skills emerging as society develops.

The initial catalyst for this book was conversations and observations that I've had with teachers around the world in both secondary and tertiary institutions where 21st century skills have 'landed on their desks', either in a course book or in their core curriculum. The reaction from teachers when first confronted with a set of 21st century skills content tends to be a cautious welcome. After all, the idea makes perfect sense – we are aiming to prepare students for contemporary English-medium work and study settings. The problem is that many teachers are not sure what's involved – whether it's content or whether it's methodology, and they are also concerned about student anxiety. The degree of institutional support from supervisors, directors of studies and heads of department of course varies significantly, but it seemed to me that there was need for a book to look at the issues around the integration of 21st century skills work into ELT classrooms.

The book itself is underpinned by three important concepts.

Practicality

There is a large body of academic work and articles around the subject of 21st century skills, but what I think ELT teachers need is a book offering both practical advice and examples that they can take away, adapt slightly and use in their classes. Inevitably, there has to be a degree of theory to provide reference points and frameworks, but ‘out of the box’ practical activities and approaches are at the forefront.

Flexibility and relevance

This book can, of course, be read from cover to cover, but it will also work well as a book to dip into if you have concerns or issues about a particular aspect of 21st century skills teaching. You should be able to see from the chapter titles exactly where to go to for specific ideas. I would, if you’re using it as a dip-into book, certainly suggest making Chapter 2 compulsory, because here you will find a framework and the justification for 21st century skills work that you can use as a springboard from which to explore the work on specific individual skills and the issues around them.

The voices of the writers

The final concept this book was based on was the fact that we wanted to give the writers a great degree of autonomy to interpret the chapter headings as they wished, given their knowledge and expertise. I hope that you can feel the individuality of each writer through the chapters. There may be some disagreements and some contradictions. In one respect, I really hope there are, because this book should also be a stimulus for discussion. Equally, there may be some repetition and overlap, as it’s important to see the topics from different angles.

So, let’s have a very brief look at each chapter, without providing too many spoilers.

Chapter 1 21st Century Skills – an Overview

The chapter by **Helene Soulé** gives us an overview and analysis of the central theoretical and practical framework behind 21st century skills. Reading this chapter should give you some understanding of the thinking behind the 21st century skills movement – why it is such an important part the global training scene, and an understanding, I hope, that many of the things that ELT teachers have been doing in their classes for some years are actually 21st century skills. Helen's chapter is deliberately not written from an ELT perspective. It's from a perspective of general education and training, and I think this is important because ELT is increasingly becoming part of mainstream education. We as practitioners need to have an understanding of some of the global approaches being implemented outside of the ELT bubble, which may impact our work.

Chapter 2 Creativity and Innovation in ELT Classes

Nik Peachey has as his focus innovation and creativity. I suggest you have a laptop next to you while you read the chapter, as Nik gives us a large number of links to interesting examples of tools you can use in classroom activities. The chapter takes us through innovation and creativity, explaining how they are linked and how they matter in the modern workplace. Nik then goes on to look at how technology can be used to help develop these areas. This is a highly practical chapter, and the best way to understand how these various tools work is to click on the links and give them a try in class. To help with this, there are clear procedures for the activities in the chapter, which you can easily build into your lesson plans.

Chapter 3 Critical Thinking and Problem Solving in ELT

In this chapter, **JJ Wilson** gives us a history of critical thinking, from the cavemen to the present day. He also explores definitions of the terms 'critical thinking' and 'problem solving'. He looks at critical thinking in the classroom as part of the teaching content, and also at the importance of critical thinking in some of the international examination suites. Critical thinking can, after all, be one of most challenging aspects of some of the major exams. Throughout the chapter, JJ shows how critical thinking and problem solving can be embedded in today's ELT activities, with lots of examples of question types and task types to stimulate students to think critically and seek solutions to problems.

Chapter 4 Collaboration and Communication in ELT Classes

Looking at communication and collaboration, **Christina Lorimer** spends some time evaluating communication and collaboration as 21st century skills, and then puts everything into a real ELT context by using the case study of a course that she's recently been involved with in the United States. This experience-based personalization ensures that her observations ring very true. She continues by looking at how communication and collaboration can fit into an ELT curriculum and develops her ideas with a case study of another project that she has been involved in. Christina also discusses teaching strategies, making this a highly practical chapter and one from which readers should be able to extract ideas to incorporate into their own classrooms.

Chapter 5 Information, Media and Technology Skills

Gavin Dudeney looks at information, media and technology skills – in my view an area of 21st century skills that fills teachers with excitement and anxiety in equal measure. He starts with an overview of technology in ELT, then makes the key linkage between 21st century skills and technology. Gavin moves on to practical approaches to integrating technology into the classroom, with examples of activities that teachers can take and adapt for their lessons. He takes account of the fact that not all teachers feel able, or want, to use extensive technology in the classroom, and offers solutions and support to people who don't feel confident that they have the necessary skills. This chapter has a large number of real classroom practical activities that I'm certain teachers, as a result of what they read, will feel empowered to try out.

Chapter 6 Citizenship in ELT Classes

This chapter focuses on global citizenship, and **Julietta Schoenmann** puts us straight into action with an image-driven activity around some key global themes. She discusses how these activities can be integrated into our classes and brings everything to life by her use of case studies written by real teachers about real projects that they have been involved in. Global issues, including citizenship, can undeniably be controversial at times, and in one of her case studies Julietta discusses how the challenge of acceptability can be dealt with. The English language is one of the media that can help create globally-aware citizens, and this chapter will give teachers plenty of ideas that they can use in their own lessons, towards that goal.

Chapter 7 21st Century Skills and ELT Methodology

In this chapter, **Nicola Meldrum** leads us away from the skill-by-skill approach of the previous chapters and takes a look at the interface between ELT methodology and 21st century skills. She seeks to show us how a range of methodological approaches can be used to develop 21st century skills. The great reassurance for teachers from Nicola's chapter and elsewhere in the book is the we are already using a lot of 21st century skills in our teaching: the way we use groups, the way we use problem solving and the way we encourage learner autonomy are clear examples. The integration of 21st century skills into a ELT setting does require a certain type of classroom behaviour and a certain approach by the teacher, and in this chapter you will read about some ideas to help you make your classroom into an environment where 21st century skills can flourish.

Chapter 8 21st Century Skills in ELT – the Challenges

No change in education is ever straightforward. There can be resistance, uncertainty and sometimes even fear. Most of these phenomena are caused by lack of information and lack of clarity. In this chapter, I try to identify some of the main challenges involved in integrating 21st century skills into the ELT classroom, and come up with some outlines of approaches for managing these challenges. It goes without saying that every circumstance is different, and every classroom has its own issues, but I hope some of the general ideas can be taken and adapted to specific classes, to ease and facilitate the introduction of 21st century skills and help us prepare our students effectively for the world outside.

Chapter 9 Reflections on the Future

In this chapter I take a cautious and tentative look forward – not, as I stress at the beginning of the chapter, at the future of ELT, but more at some of the influences on the profession that also have an impact on 21st century skills work. If we work on the basis that 21st century skills map and follow workplace trends, technological trends and broader learning trends, then the whole field is necessarily going to be very dynamic. Indeed, a blog that I refer to in the chapter lists some new areas of training that will most likely soon become part of ELT work. Twenty years ago, I didn't know what emotional intelligence was, yet now I'm seeing how important it is to me as a teacher trainer, particularly as a lot of the work that I do is with traumatized teachers who work in war or post-war environments around the world. ELT has shown resilience and also flexibility to adapt itself to a changing world – long may this continue.

Foreword

“... I have no particular qualifications or knowledge that enables me or entitles me to prescribe methods of language instruction ... My own feeling, for what it is worth, is that at any level, from nursery to graduate school, teaching is largely a matter of encouraging natural development.”

From: An interview with Noam Chomsky, *The Reading Teacher*, 48(4): December. 1994/January 1995

The world inhabited by so many (but not all) ELT students today, often facilitated by technology, is one of curiosity, challenge and innovation. If these factors are now part of Chomsky’s “natural development” in 21st century students, as I think they are, then the ideas discussed in this book have real relevance.

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