21st Century Skills and the "4Cs" in the English Language Classroom

by Andy Halvorsen

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For many language teachers around the world, the classrooms of today may look and feel very different to those that we remember from our own childhood. In teacher training workshops and professional development activities, you may have heard talk about 21st century skills and "new literacies." Many of us have realized that our students today need new sets of skills to prepare them to be successful participants in the globalized society of the future. But for many busy teachers, these new skills and concepts may be unclear or you may be struggling with how to implement them in the actual classroom. In this text, we'll be considering some of the fundamental changes that are currently taking place in 21st century education by looking at the 4Cs, and, importantly, we'll also consider how these changes can and should be impacting English language teaching and learning around the globe.

The 4Cs we'll be learning about here are communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. These skills were originally identified in 2002 by a non-profit organization in the United States now known as the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (Plucker, Kaufman, & Beghetto, 2016).

Often these are considered to be key skills for 21st century learners, and they have been reshaping education all across the world over the last 10-15 years. For language teachers, a primary challenge is thinking about how we can promote and work with these skills in our own classrooms.
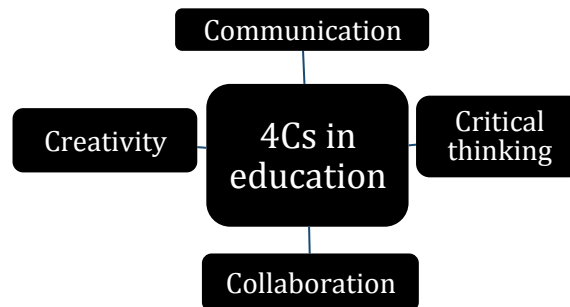
Learning to think differently: Critical and analytic thinking in the classroom
Critical thinking is one of the 4Cs, and it is one of the valuable thinking skills our students will need in the future. To think critically about an issue or problem means to analyze it from many viewpoints and perspectives with an open mind. The process requires that we analyze evidence to think through issues and challenges before coming to solutions. In truth, critical thinking is a skill built on our ability to conduct careful and thoughtful analyses of issues.

The good news for language teachers is that the development and practice of critical thinking fits wonderfully in most communicative language teaching curricula. All four language skills can easily be activated when students are asked to research a topic, discuss or debate that topic with peers, and write about what they find. And these activities don't require high levels of English proficiency. Students even at lower-intermediate levels can conduct basic research and have meaningful discussions with peers about real issues.

How can we encourage creativity in our students?
Creativity is another of the 4Cs, and creativity can mean many different things in the classroom. Many teachers have heard of different learning styles. Some students tend to be more visual learners (learning by seeing), while others are more hands on or kinesthetic (learning by doing). To develop creativity in students, teachers need to be aware of these differences and conduct a range of activity types in the classroom. Allowing students opportunities to be creative means that teachers need to be flexible and give students choices whenever possible. Finally, developing creativity works naturally with problem solving activities in the classroom. Whenever students are asked to find solutions to complex problems, they are given the chance to think about the problem in new and creative ways.

Classroom interaction
The last two Cs are collaboration and communication. These should be skills that English language teachers are well aware of. Many of the things that language teachers are already doing in the classroom, like pair and group work, peer review, and project-based learning (PBL), are excellent to support the development of collaboration and communication. Employers of today are increasingly looking to hire people who not only understand their field, but who also have developed skills in communicating and collaborating in teams. When students leave our English classes, we of course want them to have improved their language skills, but we also want them to have developed confidence in their ability to communicate and collaborate in the language.

Digital literacy and interactions outside the classroom
Classrooms today are expanding beyond the physical walls that many teachers are accustomed to. Some language programs are exploring online or blended learning experiences, where some of the instruction and interaction may take place through computers or smartphones. Digital literacy skills are of course essential to the future success of many students, but many teachers and administrators assume that students who are "digital natives" will pick up these skills on their own. This is not necessarily true. Young people will certainly learn on their own to play games online and share pictures on sites like Facebook. However, they will not learn the sophisticated skills they need to find and critically analyze information online, or to create and edit video and audio projects in a professional way. These skills and many others need to be taught and actively practiced in the classroom.

4Cs in action: Project-based learning in Mexico
Lety was in her seventh year teaching English to Spanish-speaking high school students in Mexico City. Her school's new English curriculum, which she had just received from her principal, required that all English classes be taught using "21st century learning skills." At first Lety didn't know what this meant, but after some research and reading about the various skills involved, she got excited about the possibility.

Lety had read about the 4Cs in education, and she immediately thought of some of the interesting projects she had students complete in the past. For example, last term her students had worked in small groups to come up with ways to help the school with a recycling program. Her students had made posters in English and put them around the school to explain what types of trash could be recycled. They also wrote a letter to the principal of a school in California to ask for more information about that school's recycling program. She knew her students enjoyed learning by working on projects, so she wanted to find a way to help her students to practice the 4Cs on something that was interesting to them.

The next day in class, she explained the four ideas of communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking to her students, and she let them work in groups to think about an interesting project they could all work on. She knew she was off to a good start, because just letting students choose a project by working in groups gave them a chance to communicate with one another and think creatively about possible projects. After lengthy discussions in both Spanish and English, Lety and the class decided they would take on the problem of graffiti in their city. The city was covered in graffiti of all types and colors, some beautiful and some less so, and the class was very divided about whether graffiti should be allowed in the city or not. Because the class had different opinions on the topic, Lety suspected that the discussions would encourage students to think critically about the issue.

Lety set up the project with a series of steps, and she tried to link each step to at least one of the 4Cs. Happily, she realized that most of her steps actually incorporated two or more of the 4Cs in an integrated way.

> **Step 1: Building background knowledge through a debate.** Students formed two teams and researched the issue of graffiti in detail. Each team chose to argue for or against allowing graffiti in the city. Lety supported them in their online research, and they also interviewed people in the city and some city officials as well. The online research developed students' critical thinking and digital literacy skills. The interviews helped them practice real-world communication, and the debate focused again on critical thinking and of course communication and collaboration.

> **Step 2: Coming to a conclusion.** After the debate the class worked together as a group to identify a plan of action. They agreed that graffiti should be allowed and encouraged as a type of free speech, but that the city should designate specific "graffiti zones" where graffiti could be practiced. They also decided that the city needed an educational plan to make citizens more aware of the issue. The process of coming to a conclusion forced students to communicate with one another and think critically and creatively about potential solutions.

> **Step 3: Creating final products.** Lety wanted the students to create real products from this project, so she gave students three options. They could create an informational video that would be shared online; they could write posters and flyers to present around the city, or they could create a presentation to give to the city mayor and other officials. Each student was able to choose which project to work on. This meant that they could be creative in ways that suited their learning styles. As each group worked collaboratively to create their products, Lety was happy to see that all of the 4Cs were being practiced.

> **Step 4: Presenting the final product.** Different groups presented their final products in different ways, but all groups got feedback from peers. The informational video went onto the Internet, and posters and flyers were presented around the city. One group went to city hall and gave their presentation to the mayor's office.

In the end, the students were able to practice each of the 4Cs in ways that suited their needs and interests. They also focused on digital literacy skills and created final products that they could be proud of. Lety knew there were improvements to be made, but she was extremely happy with the work her students had accomplished.

References

Plucker, J., Kaufman, J., & Beghetto, R. (2016). The 4Cs research series. *P21: Partnership for 21st Century Learning.* Retrieved from http://www.p21.org/our-work/4cs-research-series

About the Author

Andy Halvorsen is a faculty member in the American English Institute in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Oregon where he trains pre-service and in-service language teachers in both face-to-face and online contexts. He has a PhD in Education from the University of Illinois, with a focus on bilingualism and biliteracy development. He has been involved with ESL/EFL instruction, teacher training, and curriculum development for over 15 years; has worked and taught in the United States, China, Japan, Thailand, and Albania; has authored several peer-reviewed articles and book chapters; and has given numerous conference presentations around the world.