EFL Students' Perceptions and Use of 21st Century Learning Skills in Learning English at a Secondary School

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Abstract: *English is considered a crucial educational objective in secondary schools in Vietnam. Teaching and learning English are focused on incorporating the 21st-Century Learning Skills, commonly referred to as the 4Cs: communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking. These skills are deemed essential for students to apply in order to enhance their English proficiency. The purpose of this study was to investigate how 8th-grade students utilize the 21st-century learning skills when learning English. The research involved 230 students who were studying English at a secondary school. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected using interviews and questionnaires as research instruments. Descriptive statistics and content analysis were employed to analyze the gathered data. The study's findings revealed that the majority of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students recognized the significance of the 4Cs in their English learning. Additionally, the study discovered that the implementation of the 4Cs is prevalent in EFL classes. Furthermore, the study provided suggestions for both teachers and students to contribute to the teaching and learning of English. It is anticipated that this study will provide insights into the integration of the 4Cs in English education in secondary schools and similar contexts.*

Keywords: *EFL students, 21st century learning skills (4Cs), communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, secondary school*

1. INTRODUCTION

The demand for the study of English has been increasing in the twenty-first century due to the growing prevalence of technology. Harshbarger (2016) proposes three crucial components for achieving success in the 21st century. The first component is the curriculum, which enables students to enhance their 21st-century learning skills, specifically the 4Cs: communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking, in a globalized society. The second component is the provision of explicit teaching, where teachers require a comprehensive understanding of non-cognitive elements such as academic mindsets, behaviors, perseverance, social skills, and learning strategies, along with clear instructions on improving students' 4Cs. The third component, leadership, is essential for attaining success in 21st-century education. This involves school administrators or leaders supporting adaptable teaching and learning approaches. The 4Cs are recognized as an integral part of the present-day teaching-learning paradigm and one of the essential skills for establishing an effective learning environment. Integrating 21st-century learning skills into the curriculum is not only beneficial for students but also necessary to prepare them for their future lives (Alismail & McGuire, 2015).

In the era of Industry 4.0, educational tools are increasingly incorporated into learning environments in academic institutions to enhance student learning and motivation. The 4Cs are introduced as the core skills of the 21st century, providing detailed explanations of these skills' principles and describing the strategies, techniques, and challenges involved in integrating them into teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Therefore, the 4Cs serve as a bridge between secondary school students' technological competencies in education and their 21st-century learning skills.

In contemporary times, humanity has encountered diverse predicaments and hazards, such as climate change, calamities, illnesses, and financial downturns, among other issues. As a result, it is imperative that learners in the 21st century are equipped to tackle these consequential matters. In order to thrive in the highly competitive job market, upcoming professionals must possess a combination of critical thinking, creativity, and effective communication abilities. According to UNESCO (2014), there exist

four fundamental pillars of education, namely: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together. It is imperative for educators and practitioners to integrate 21st-century learning skills into the curriculum in order to facilitate the growth of individuals who possess a global perspective. As such, the present investigation sought to tackle the subsequent research inquiry: **To what Extent do the Students use the 4Cs in Learning English?**

It is anticipated that this study will contribute to the existing knowledge of learning strategies in English education and serve as a reference for students to adapt their learning approaches in secondary schools through the implementation of 4Cs methods. This, in turn, is expected to enhance student engagement in the learning process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Acquiring proficiency in the English language is imperative for the current generation, enabling them to adapt to global communication, literature, media, and work in both the present and future (Marzulina et al., 2021). The 4Cs, encompassing critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication, serve as versatile tools applicable across various domains to enhance individuals' thinking, learning, work, and daily lives. Kreber (2010) highlights that contemporary trends have redefined the formation of skill sets and development among high school students in the 21st century.

Communication skills play a pivotal role in the English language learning process for middle school students. Enhancing students' speaking abilities requires continuous improvement in communication skills. Teachers employ diverse activities such as presentations, homework questions, and interactive discussions to provide opportunities for students to practice conversation skills. Role-playing, oral presentations, group work, pair work, discussions, games, class circles, countdowns, and word association are some examples of communication activities that can be implemented (Patterson, 2013).

Collaboration is the process of working together towards a common goal, facilitated by effective communication. Triling and Fadel (2009) emphasize the importance of students' ability to express their thoughts and ideas successfully, listen attentively to understand perspectives, employ multimedia and technological tools, and communicate in various contexts. Teachers incorporate collaborative activities into the learning process, recognizing the enduring relevance of this skill. Lessons are designed to foster group, team, or pair activities, aiming to develop students' English language skills through collaboration.

Critical thinking skills not only offer advantages in language learning but also enhance individuals' capacity to think, reason, and analyze English. Teachers design appropriate lessons that promote students' reading comprehension and critical thinking abilities. Activities focus on developing persuasive arguments supported by evidence, utilizing idea-generation techniques like brainstorming or mind mapping, summarizing information, and generating interpretations of texts. Critical thinking involves analyzing, understanding, evaluating, and synthesizing information from multiple perspectives while foreseeing potential challenges (Triling & Fadel, 2009). Proactive critical thinking is immensely beneficial in problem-solving, analysis, and innovative solution development, providing a competitive edge. The ability to anticipate and take proactive action represents crucial skills for the 21st century.

Creativity holds significant importance for adolescent students. Teachers design activities that encourage students to think independently, devise their own solutions to problems or questions, and explore new ideas, aligning with the needs of their students. Individual abilities are recognized and utilized to design or produce unique outcomes. Creativity necessitates the exploration of innovative approaches to accomplish tasks. Wergetif and Loveless (2002) highlighted that creativity emerges from data-driven innovation, research, and collaboration. Employers increasingly value creative individuals over those who excel solely in leadership, as creative individuals excel in finding swift solutions and devising new revenue streams to support struggling businesses (Lewis & Elaver, 2014).

Integrated language teaching communication has gained prominence due to its numerous advantages, including enhancing real-life communication, relevance, novelty, and interest in the teaching and learning environment. It also fosters student-centered approaches, improves communication skills, and encourages collaborative planning activities (Stceddepart, 2018). These benefits contribute to the preference for integrated language teaching communication as the preferred method.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research site and Participants

The current study aims to investigate English students' perceptions using the 4Cs in learning English skills students at a secondary school. The sample of the study was 230 students because the population size with a particular set of characteristics was relatively small, and it was considered more reliable in terms of results. Students based on the 4Cs skills: communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity.

3.2. Research Instruments

In this study, two methods of data collection were utilized, namely questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire consisted of two main parts. Part 1 comprised five items aimed at gathering participant demographic information, such as gender, age, and duration and daily hours of studying English. Part 2 consisted of 26 items that explored students' perceptions regarding the significance and application of the 4Cs skills in English learning. A four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was employed in this section. The questionnaire exhibited high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values of .758 for 20 items on importance and .911 for 24 items on use.

The second data collection instrument employed was semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data that would complement the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire. Eight questions were included in the interview, focusing on students' perspectives regarding the importance and utilization of the 4Cs skills in learning English.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The activity was carried out by the researcher with English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students for the purpose of gathering data through the administration of questionnaires. The present study employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis techniques. A cohort of 230 students from a secondary educational institution located in Ho Chi Minh City was subjected to the research investigation. Two sequential procedures were executed. During the initial phase, participants were requested to complete a survey regarding their perspective on the significance of the 4Cs in the acquisition of English language skills. In the subsequent phase, the investigator proceeded to carry out the interviews. In the analysis of questionnaire data, the application of "descriptive statistics" was utilized, which involved the computation of mean scores and standard deviation using the SPSS Statistics version 20.0 software. The data was interpreted based on the criteria presented in the Likert-type scale. The scale used in the study ranges from 1.00 to 5.00, with the following corresponding values: 1.00-1.80 indicating a strong disagreement or never, 1.81-2.60 indicating a disagreement or rarely, 2.61-3.40 indicating a neutral stance or sometimes, 3.41-4.20 indicating an agreement or often, and 4.21-5.00 indicating a strong agreement or always. Thematic analysis was utilized for the purpose of analyzing interview data.

4. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

How the Students use 21st Century Learning Skills in Learning English

The aptitude for conveying ideas through diverse media, such as posters, videos, and blogs (item 1), was evaluated with an average score (M) of 2.01 and a standard deviation (SD) of 1.06. The act of presenting oral speeches to an audience, including the teacher or other individuals (as indicated by item 2), yielded a mean score of 2.51, accompanied by a SD of 1.23. The task of responding to inquiries while being observed by a group of people (item 3) was evaluated with an average score of 2.57 and a SD of 1.13. The evaluation of the manner in which to showcase one's work (item 4) yielded a mean score of 2.76, accompanied by a SD of 1.36. Collaborative efforts, specifically in pairs or groups, yielded a mean score of 3.36 with a SD of 0.91 for task completion (as per item 5).

Table4.1. *Descriptive Statistics of using of Communication.*

No	Items	N = 230	
	Communication	**Mean**	**SD**
1	I convey my ideas using media (e.g., posters, videos, blogs, etc.).	2.01	1.06
2	I deliver an oral presentation to the teacher or others.	2.51	1.23
3	I answer questions in front of the audience.	2.57	1.13
4	I decide how I will present my work.	2.76	1.36
5	I work in pairs or groups to complete a task.	3.36	.91

The communication items' scores ranged from neutral (2.01) to moderately positive (2.76), with mean scores above 1.06. Notably, when it comes to working in pairs or groups for communication tasks, more students preferred this approach, as indicated by a higher mean score of 3.36 and a smaller standard deviation of 0.91. These results demonstrate higher reliability. The findings from the interviews align with the data collected through the questionnaire. All interviewees emphasized the numerous benefits of employing the 4Cs skills for teaching speaking skills to young learners. Students commonly use communication skills to enhance their proficiency, particularly focusing on vocabulary and building confidence for presentations. One student stated, "I prefer to use oral presentation skills to convey my ideas to everyone because it's an effective way of communication" (ST3). Another student mentioned, "Communication skills are crucial in learning English. I frequently use them to improve my word usage. During presentations, we share our opinions and ideas within the group, fostering discussion and collaboration" (ST4).

In relation to the aptitude of collaboration, the act of collaborating with fellow peers to establish objectives for the team (as indicated by item 6) yielded a mean score (M) of 2.83, accompanied by a SD of 1.14. Collaborating with peers to devise a strategy for the group (category 7) yielded a mean score of 2.58, accompanied by an SD of 1.14. The collaborative production of joint products through the integration of individual contributions from students (as outlined in item 8) yielded an average score of 2.90, with a standard deviation of 1.30. The provision of aid to colleagues when required, as indicated by item 9, was found to have an average score of 3.40, with an SD of 1.10. The average score for incorporating feedback into group tasks/products (item 10) was 3.03, and the standard deviation was 1.15. The activity of providing feedback to peers or evaluating the work of other students, as indicated by item 11, yielded an average score of 2.61, with a corresponding standard deviation of 1.14. The task of completing a task without being reminded, as indicated by item 12, yielded an average score of 3.23, with a corresponding SD of 1.15. The SD of the scores for question 13, which asked about comparing information from several sources before finishing a job or assignment, was 1.15 points.

Table4.2. *Descriptive Statistics of using of Collaboration.*

No	Items	N = 230	
	Collaboration	**Mean**	**SD**
6	I work with other students to set goals for our team.	2.83	1.14
7	I work with other students to create a plan for our team.	2.58	1.14
8	I create joint products using contributions from each student.	2.90	1.30
9	I offer assistance to others in their work when needed.	3.40	1.10
10	We work as a team to incorporate feedback on group tasks/products	3.03	1.17
11	I give feedback to peers or assess other students' work.	2.61	1.14
12	I complete a task without having to be reminded.	3.23	1.15
13	I compare information from different sources before completing a task or assignment.	3.58	1.15

All the interviewees confirmed that the 4Cs skills have numerous benefits when applied to teaching speaking skills to young learners. Many students expressed their comfort in offering assistance to others when needed, working as a team to incorporate feedback on group tasks, completing tasks independently without reminders, and comparing information from various sources. One student stated, "For collaboration skills, I prefer working in pairs or groups to complete tasks because it allows for faster task completion compared to working alone" (ST1). Another student mentioned, "I enjoy using collaboration skills through pair or group work as it helps me improve by considering the

opinions of different individuals" (ST9). However, one student noted that collaboration skills are less frequently used in everyday life, mainly appearing during presentations and group activities (ST10). Additionally, completing tasks without reminders was perceived as a valuable skill for academic work (ST2).

The analysis of numerical data, factual evidence, or pertinent information to draw conclusions, as measured by item 14, yielded an M of 3.15 with a SD of 1.18 in terms of critical thinking ability. The task of summarizing or interpreting previously read or taught material, as indicated by item 15, yielded an average score of 3.07, with a standard deviation of 1.13. The evaluation of conflicting viewpoints, rationales, or resolutions to a particular issue (as indicated by item 16) yielded a mean score of 2.67, accompanied by a SD of 1.09. The mean score for the development of persuasive arguments through the use of supporting evidence or reasoning (items 17) was 2.66, with a standard deviation of 1.23. The task of resolving intricate issues or providing responses to inquiries that lack a definitive solution (as denoted by item 18) yielded a mean score of 2.62, accompanied by a SD of 1.13. The process of acquiring pertinent and adequate data from diverse sources, as denoted by item 19, yielded an average rating of 3.44, accompanied by a SD of 1.22. The utilization of idea generation methods, such as brainstorming or mind mapping, yielded an average rating of 3.01 with a SD of 1.16.

Table4.3. *Descriptive Statistics of using of Critical thinking.*

No	Items	N = 230	
	Critical thinking	**Mean**	**SD**
14	I draw my own conclusion based on analysis of numbers, facts, or relevant information.	3.15	1.18
15	I summarize or create my own interpretation of what I have read or been taught.	3.07	1.13
16	I analyze competing arguments, perspectives, or solutions to a problem.	2.67	1.09
17	I develop a persuasive argument based on supporting evidence or reasoning.	2.66	1.23
18	I try to solve complex problems or answer questions that have no correct answers.	2.62	1.13
19	I gather relevant and sufficient information from different sources.	3.44	1.22
20	I use idea creation techniques such as brainstorming or mind mapping	3.01	1.16

For critical thinking skills, I like to use my drawing skills based on the Analysis of numbers, data or related information Because it helps us get information objectively and clearly. According to: *"For critical thinking skills, you draw your conclusions based on analyzing numbers, facts or related information that summarize or create your interpretation of what you have read or learned." (ST1) ... "With critical thinking skills, I like gathering relevant and complete information from different sources Because this makes the lesson more straightforward and detailed." (ST3) ... "For this part, I prefer to use the skill of gathering relevant and complete information from different sources because it helps me get information wholly and objectively." (ST6)*

Regarding the creativity competency, the act of producing original ideas to tackle a predicament or inquiry (items 21) garnered an average mean (M) of 3.04, accompanied by a SD of 1.12. The experimentation of various concepts for enhancement (items 22) yielded an average rating of 3.04, accompanied by a SD of 1.22. The task of generating a novel concept for a multifaceted, unrestricted inquiry or predicament (referred to as "items 23") was evaluated with a mean score of 2.82 and a SD of 1.21. The task of devising a novel product for the purpose of conveying personal thoughts and concepts (referred to as item 24) yielded an average rating of 2.38, which came with a SD of 1.19.

Table4.4. *Descriptive Statistics of using of Creativity.*

No	Items	N = 230	
	Creativity	**Mean**	**SD**
21	I generate my own ideas about how to confront a problem or question	3.04	1.12
22	I test out different ideas to improve them.	3.04	1.22
23	I make up a new idea to a complex, open-ended question or problem.	2.82	1.21
24	I create an original product to express my ideas.	2.38	1.19

It is apparent that the information collected through the interviews aligns with the information gathered through the questionnaire. All the people who participated in the interviews stated that teaching young learners speaking skills using the 4Cs had several advantages. For creative skills, students often use the skill of experimenting with different ideas to improve them. Thanks to this skill, they can generate bold ideas to implement them. For example: *"I like to use the skill of creating an original product to express my ideas because it helps other students understand my ideas and contributes to the development of group activities." (ST3). "As for the creative skill, I like to use it with the use of imagination when my group performs a certain task." (ST8) ...*

Finally, creative skills are always the most important among young people today. They are creating more ideas, discovering new things, finding ways to get things done quickly, and breaking new things. The integrated approach to practice naturally displays potent components of critical thinking, creativity, communication, and teamwork. utilize a technique that enables students to gather and analyze information without being constrained by conventional constraints. Critical thinking abilities and creativity are necessary for problem-solving, while teamwork and communication abilities are crucial for effective interaction and collaboration with others.

5. DISCUSSION

The study findings provide insights into how students apply 21st-century learning skills in the context of learning English. The study examined four key skills: communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity.

In terms of communication skills, the results showed that students had a moderate level of proficiency in conveying ideas using various media formats such as posters, videos, and blogs. They also reported engaging in oral presentations and answering questions in front of an audience. However, the average scores for these communication items were relatively low, indicating room for improvement in this skill area. On the other hand, students demonstrated a stronger inclination towards working in pairs or groups to accomplish tasks, suggesting a higher comfort level with collaborative communication.

Regarding collaboration skills, students demonstrated a moderate level of proficiency. They reported working with peers to set goals, create plans, and develop joint products. Moreover, they expressed willingness to provide assistance to their peers when needed and to incorporate feedback into group tasks or projects. Students also exhibited a higher level of self-reliance, being able to complete tasks without reminders. They emphasized the importance of gathering relevant information from multiple sources before completing assignments.

The data related to critical thinking skills indicated a moderate level of proficiency among students. They reported drawing conclusions based on analysis, summarizing or interpreting information, and gathering relevant information from different sources. However, their scores were comparatively lower for skills such as analyzing competing arguments, developing persuasive arguments, and solving complex problems. Students acknowledged the benefits of critical thinking skills in terms of making objective decisions and obtaining comprehensive information.

In terms of creativity skills, students demonstrated a moderate level of proficiency. They reported generating their own ideas, testing different ideas for improvement, and coming up with new ideas for complex problems. However, when it came to creating original products to express their ideas, students scored relatively lower. They emphasized the importance of imagination and creativity in group activities.

The findings from the interviews supported the questionnaire data, highlighting the advantages of integrating the 4Cs in teaching speaking skills to young learners. Interviewees emphasized the benefits of communication skills in expressing ideas confidently and effectively. They also stressed the significance of collaboration skills in completing tasks more efficiently and incorporating diverse perspectives. Additionally, students recognized the value of critical thinking skills in making objective decisions and gathering comprehensive information. Finally, creativity skills were seen as essential in generating innovative ideas and expressing them through original products.

In conclusion, the study indicates that students are utilizing 21st-century learning skills in their English language learning, although there is room for improvement in certain areas. The integration of

the 4Cs appears to offer numerous benefits for teaching speaking skills to young learners, as it fosters effective communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. By strengthening these skills, students can enhance their ability to interact, solve problems, and express their ideas in English.

6.   CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the present study indicate that the majority of students recognized numerous benefits in utilizing 4Cs skills for learning English speaking skills. Additionally, students applied these skills during various activities conducted in their classroom. Consistent with previous findings, the participants had a positive perception of the 4Cs, with communication skills (such as oral communication) being the most frequently employed, followed by collaboration skills (appreciating individual contributions, attentive listening, and teamwork), critical thinking skills (including drawing conclusions and problem-solving), and finally, creativity skills (such as trying new approaches, utilizing imagination, and generating new ideas). It is recommended that students actively engage in classroom learning activities to foster critical abilities required in the twenty-first century. Moreover, students should participate in school groups or sponsored field trips to develop the 4Cs. Strong communication skills are also crucial for successful teamwork, and students should have opportunities to deliver presentations on various topics and develop strategies for answering questions after their presentations. However, students in remote areas may have lower knowledge levels and slower adaptation to new English learning methods. Therefore, teachers should provide a wide range of activities to facilitate interaction among students and encourage the use of technology to foster creativity. Unfortunately, many teachers only focus on traditional teaching methods such as reading, copying, completing exercises, and vocabulary learning. Vietnamese teachers tend to avoid innovative activities, rarely assign projects or use new materials, and Vietnamese students often have the mindset of merely finishing their studies. Implementing new teaching strategies, such as task-based and project-based learning, can offer students more opportunities to interact with their peers, locate resources independently, and communicate with classmates, friends, and more advanced students. This can enhance mutual understanding and boost critical thinking skills, even though many teachers may struggle to adopt these approaches.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The research was conducted at a secondary school with a sample size of 230 students, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Further research should be conducted with larger samples from similar bilingual contexts to provide a broader understanding of the topic.

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