Integrating the 4Cs of 21st Century Skills into EFL Project-Based Learning activities for beginner level college students

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Abstract
This paper focuses on the integration of the 4Cs of 21st Century Learning Skills (collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, communication) with EFL project-based learning (PBL) approaches to beginner proficiency level students in Japanese universities. The 4Cs are the essential skills for deeper levels of thinking and produces self-directed learners. American K-12 education reform advocates the importance of the 4Cs for 21st century success in college, life, and work. Although this is a U.S. based cross-curricular K-12 framework, through PBL, it will prepare Japanese students to successfully face English higher education coursework and help them to succeed beyond the classroom.

要旨
社会的適応能力の重要性は米国における教育改革の中心にある。その中で、21世紀型スキルの「4Cs」が特に教育改革で注目されている。4Csのスキルはクリティカルシンキング（批判的思考力）、クリエイティビティ（創造性）、コミュニケーション能力とコラボレーションの能力で構成されている。これらのスキルは全科目に亘り、一人一人の考える力と自発的に学ぶ力を高め、大学、日常生活、将来の仕事に大きく役立つと言われている。まだ4Csを本格的に取り入れているEFLプログラムが少なく、なじみが薄いことから、本稿では、大学一年生初級レベルの授業において4Csをプロジェクト・ベースド・ラーニングの学生中心型スタイルに上手く取り込む方法を紹介する。
ABOUT

Yuri Jody Yujobo joined the teaching staff at Tamagawa University in 2013. Prior to teaching university students, she focused on corporate English training while working as an HRD program coordinator at Fuji Xerox Learning Institute. She managed and taught intercultural communications, business English programs and study/work abroad programs. She later moved to California to teach literacy to ESL children and also lived in Sydney, Australia before returning to Japan to teach EFL. Her research interests include project-based learning, service-learning, studying abroad, and teaching the 4Cs.

INTRODUCTION

Integrating collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and communication, known as the 4Cs of 21st Century Learning (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2007) into Japanese higher education derives from the teacher’s mission to prepare students with transferable skills beyond the classroom. This comes timely as Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) made revisions to the English expression objectives in the Course of Study Guidelines for Senior High Schools which reads: “To further enhance students’ abilities to evaluate facts, opinions from multiple perspectives and communicate through reasoning and a range of expressions, while fostering a positive attitude toward communication through the English language” (MEXT, 2009). This is aligned with the 4Cs of 21st Century Learning framework as current U.S. senior high school graduates are by-products of the 2009 grassroots initiative designed to create a set of core education

In order to foster the 4Cs of 21st Century Learning skills into Japanese EFL higher learning, three key questions need to be addressed. First, what is the relevance of the K-12 focused standards of the CCSS and 21st Century Learning Skills to EFL classes in Japan? Second, what is an effective approach to teach the 4Cs in EFL classes? Third, what level of English proficiency would benefit most from the 4Cs?

CCSS and 21st Century Learning Skills

Research on CCSS and the 4Cs of 21st Century Learning Skills is still limited in Japan. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2011), a coalition of top businesses, education policy makers, NPO’s, and advocates for “student readiness in the high-skill and workforce-ready curricula, offers tools to support education leaders in implementing CCSS within P21’s comprehensive framework”.

Although CCSS is an American-based K-12 framework, it is relevant to Japanese higher education because the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2012) acknowledges English language learners (ELL) and sets the same high expectations in the areas of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, which are the foundation for any creative and purposeful expression in language. This in turn allows students to negotiate in situations outside of academic settings so they are able to participate on equal footing with native English speakers in all aspects of social, economic, and civic endeavors. EFL educators in Japan need to help their students develop the 4Cs skills in order to equip them with the tools needed in global higher education.

PBL Implementation

Project-based learning (PBL) and technology has transformed classroom learning style. “The landscape of American education in
the 21st century is rapidly changing from a traditional, fact-based curriculum to a project-based learning environment as students go through an extended process of inquiry in response to a complex question, problem, or challenge” (Holden, 2011). PBL functions as a “bridge between using English in class in real-life situations and support the framework that focus on a deep understanding of the Common Core”, (Buck Institute of Education, n.d).

An EFL textbook can be used as a springboard to identify topic areas, student interests, and issues. “The curriculum is not textbook-driven, but is thematic, project-based and integrated. Skills and content are not taught as an end in themselves, but students learn them through their research and application in their projects” (21st Century Schools, n.d). This is an example of a PBL for a chapter on “future energy sources” decided on by student input: Our team will invent a concept for a university-wide transportation system that runs on alternative energy sources. The class is divided into small teams and uses the Internet for research and then consolidates their individual findings to generate creativity and testing of ideas through problem-solving to deeper levels of critical thinking. Students “learn that they need skills to plan, organize, negotiate, make their points, and arrive at a consensus about issues…who will be responsible for each task, and how information will be researched and presented” (Moss & Van Duzer, 1998, p.1). Finally, each team prepares a final presentation and is assessed from several angles including teacher-evaluation, peer-evaluation, and self-reflection.

Starting PBL early

An EFL project of this caliber may seem too challenging for first year, lower proficiency levels and intentionally delayed until further development of language skills. However, these students actually benefit more due to their timely need for college readiness skills, motivation, and the col-
laborative nature of PBL, which leads to the “development of skills even among learners of low levels of language proficiency” (Moss & Van Duzer, 1998, p.2). This is because, as Wrigley (1998) points out, at “all proficiency levels, every aspect of project-based learning feeds into what Krashen has called the language acquisition device, the ability of the brain to acquire a second language through meaningful input and expression”. Finally, a study by Bagheri, Ali, Abdulla and Daud (2013) concluded that PBL, as opposed to traditional classroom style, naturally increases students’ motivation to learn and that the process of PBL paves the way for development of self-directed learning skills among learners in higher education contexts. Opportunities to transfer these essential learning skills should not be postponed any further.

**Conclusion**

Although MEXT made promising shifts toward implementing deeper thinking and radical reform to communicative approaches for senior high school, change will be slow. The “Ministry has attempted to implement communicative approaches over the last two decades. It appears to be difficult for the Ministry to change its policies promptly and implement them. There remains a big gap between the stated policies and what is actually done in the classroom” (Tahira, 2012, p.3). Therefore, university teachers should not wait until senior high school graduates are delivered to the university doorstep. In light of the research findings in CCSS, and the benefits of incorporating the 4Cs of 21st Century Learning into EFL curricula, teachers can make monumental differences preparing Japanese university students to successfully face rigorous higher education English coursework, life challenges and prepare them with 21st century skills to enter the globally competitive workforce.
References


