

EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF 21ST CENTURY LEARNING SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract. Twenty-first century learning skills (4Cs) are considered as indispensable learning and innovation skills that students should enhance in the classroom as a preparation for their future life in the 21st century. This paper, therefore, aimed to scrutinise the extent to which the 4Cs are important perceived by the third-year English majors at Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance (UEF). The questionnaire which was employed as the main research instrument to collect the data was administered to the third-year English majors (n=204). The data were quantitatively analysed by means of the software SPSS 20.0 (i.e., Mean and Standard deviation). The findings indicated a high rate of agreement on the 4Cs. Statistically, the mean scores of communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity skills were high, which means that they mostly acknowledged the crucial role of these skills in their learning. In particular, they highly valued diversity in communication (e.g., verbal and non-verbal communication in diverse contexts, effective communication in cross-cultural environments), mutual respect and appreciation, a connection between the knowledge gained from the university and real-life experiences, and innovations. The preliminary findings probably not only practically contribute to the 4Cs development in the research context and similar EFL contexts, but they also bring theoretical contributions to the literature about the 4Cs in EFL teaching and learning.

Keywords: 4Cs, 21st century skills, English language education, higher education.

1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that there has been a significant shift in 21st century education all over the world. In other words, advanced teaching and learning approaches have been applied to optimise learners' performance. The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) [1] determined that global citizens in the 21st century are required to equip themselves with learning skills, information and communications technology (ICT) literacy skills, and life skills. While learning skills refer to critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication, ICT literacy skills include information literacy, media literacy, and technology literacy, and life skills are associated with flexibility and adaptability, leadership and responsibility, initiative and self-direction, productivity and accountability, and social and cross-cultural interaction. Within the scope of this study, the 21st century learning skills are under investigation. In the guide to the 21st century learning skills or 'Four Cs' (hereafter referred to as 4Cs), National Education Association (NEA) [2] claimed that '4Cs' is not a new term to educators as the components of 4Cs are interwoven in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, 21st century skills, especially learning skills should be integrated into the American education system because

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learners mostly gain benefits from these skills (Rotherham & Willingham) [3].

UNESCO [4] identified four pillars of education, namely learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together. Accordingly, educators and practitioners must integrate the 4Cs in the curriculum to train global citizens [2]. In the context of Vietnam, a few Ho Chi Minh City-based schools have recently provided learners with 21st century skills through the STEM approach including Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (Quynh Thi) [5]. At the research site, the UEF Faculty of English has organised a variety of events, seminars, extracurricular activities such as ‘UEF Talk Masters’, ‘How to give an effective presentation’, ‘Cool city hunt 2020’, ‘Autonomous learning strategies – A key to success, or ‘Vietnamese and American Business culture’ to raise the students’ awareness of the importance of the 4Cs and provide them with a great opportunity to develop their 4Cs.

This study aims to delve into the importance of the 4Cs perceived by third-year English majors at Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance (UEF), who are going to look for job opportunities with the following research question.

- What are the UEF third-year English majors’ perceptions of the importance of 21st century learning skills?

2. Content

2.1. Literature Review

With regard to the importance of 4Cs, CBSE (2020) defined the 4Cs as learning skills students need to possess to acquire new knowledge. The 4Cs is referred to as a preliminary step for academic and professional success in the future [2].

The first ‘C’ in the 4Cs is ‘communication’ which refers to one’s ability to articulate, receive and respond to the thoughts and ideas under oral or written transmission using technology or non-verbal communication in various forms and contexts [2]. Communication also means the ability to listen effectively through the process of making meaning in terms of knowledge, values, attitudes, and intentions. In addition, learners in the 21st century are supposed to be able to use communication for a wide range of purposes such as informing, instructing, motivating or persuading in diverse environments including multilingual and multicultural ones [2]. Germaine et al. [6] claimed that students with marvelous communication skills will obtain distinct benefits in both academic and non-academic settings. Likewise, it is stated that people who possess extraordinary communication skills are much more likely to be more successful in personal and professional aspects than those who do not [7].

‘Collaboration’ is the second ‘C’ of the 4Cs which is defined as the ability to “work effectively in diverse teams, make compromises to reach a common goal, and value each individual’s contribution” [8] (p. 19). These skills have become a crucial educational outcome since businesses and companies have a tendency to move to a collaborative working environment rather than individualised work as in the 20th century [9]. In the context of the classroom, collaboration means that students take part in authentic and purposeful collaborative learning chances and develop new knowledge with each other [10]. With respect to the benefits of collaboration, Trilling and Fadel [11] pinpointed that one can develop skills more efficiently, tackle problems faster, gain more productive outcomes, and enhance job satisfaction through collaboratively working with teammates.

The next ‘C’ is ‘critical thinking’ which is viewed as an evidence-based way of thinking prior to the assessment of a specific issue. In this sense, students are assumed to be able to “independently identify/recognize, analyse, collect, interpret, assess/evaluate and summarise information resulted from observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or interaction, to

establish or reinforce their beliefs and actions before taking a decision” [12] (p. 245). Paul and Elder [13] emphasised the necessity of critical thinking in promoting intellectual virtue and autonomy. Meanwhile, the National Research Council [14] claimed that critical thinking is vital for the improvement of transferable 21st century competencies in terms of knowledge and skills.

Creativity is the last ‘C’ of the 4Cs which is an essential skill in an individuals’ life span and closely related to knowledge and skill development [15]. Creativity is defined as the ability to generate new and interesting ideas [2], [8]. NEA [2] described a creative person as one who can use various techniques to create ideas such as brainstorming, mind-mapping, and diagrams. They are willing to experiment with original ideas, refine and work to enhance them. They are open and responsive to diverse perspectives when working with their peers. In addition, they are innovative, original, and know how to adopt lessons from their failures. Furthermore, being innovative and creative is extremely crucial in the current age of global competition, which to some extent influences one’s personal and professional success [2].

In respect of previous studies, Landon [16] conducted a survey to explore high school students’ perceptions of 21st century learning skills with the aspects of communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity (4Cs). The results indicated that the students held positive attitudes towards the importance of the 4Cs in high school education. Nevertheless, there was a significant gap in integrating 4Cs in teaching practices among the classes. In English language teaching and learning, Yulianti [17] investigated students’ perceptions of utilizing technology and implanting 4Cs in an essay writing course. It was found that students had positive perceptions towards incorporating 21st century learning skills in the essay writing course, which extremely motivated them to write essays. Although diverse aspects of 21st century skills, particularly 4Cs have been widely explored in the world, there have been only a few studies addressing this issue in Vietnam. Nguyen and Jongkonklang [18] scrutinizing 4Cs was conducted at high schools in Cao Bang province, Vietnam. The study involved 370 students who answered the questionnaire and took part in the interviews. The findings indicated the participants’ high level of 4Cs and significant differences among the programs. In a narrow sense, Le and Vu’s [19] research focused on critical thinking – a component of 4Cs. The aim of this study was to construct teaching and learning strategies based on teaching innovations and learners’ creativity with the participation of 1.000 university students and 130 lecturers from ten universities in Ho Chi Minh City. The results indicated that the lecturers were required to figure out teaching strategies as well as activities and encourage students to take part in these, whereas the learners were expected to be aware of the importance of their learning through setting their learning strategies and plans, being self-directed and holding a positive learning attitude. To conclude, both the teachers and the learners needed to show their enthusiasm and efforts to innovate the teaching and learning approaches.

2.2 Methods

2.2.1 Research site and participants

The study was conducted at the Faculty of English, Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance (UEF), Vietnam. This comprehensive university has offered twenty-nine undergraduate programs and three postgraduate programs. Within the scope of the study, all of the third-year students were selected as the participants; however, 204 out of 235 qualified sheets of the questionnaire were collected. There were 57 male students (27.9%) and 146 female students (71.6%). Most of them were 21 years old, approximately a quarter of them were 20 years old, and the remaining group included nine students aged 22 and six students aged over 22. It is noteworthy that more than two-thirds of the participants have experienced a part-time job.

Table 1. The demographic information of the participants

No.	Personal information		n=204	
			F	%
1	Gender	Male	57	27.9
		Female	146	71.6
2	Age	20 years old	48	23.5
		21 years old	141	69.1
		22 years old	9	4.4
		Other	6	2.9
3	Having a part-time job	Yes	155	76
		No	49	24

2.2.2 Research instrument

The main instrument employed in this study was the closed-ended questionnaire which was adapted from Landon's [16] and Boe's [20] studies. The questionnaire had three parts: (1) the demographic data, (2) the importance of 21st century learning skills, and (3) the employment of 21st century learning skills. The first part was divided into four sub-parts: Communication (5 items), collaboration (5 items), critical thinking (5 items), and creativity (5 items). The questionnaire was constructed based on a five-point Likert scale, including 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree. The five-point scale was calculated according to an interval range as follows:

1.00-1.80: Strongly disagree

1.81-2.60: Disagree

2.61-3.40: Neutral

3.41-4.20: Agree

4.21-5.00: Strongly agree

To ensure the trustworthiness of the instrument, the construct validity of the questionnaire was checked by a field expert who judged the purpose of the questionnaire, i.e., whether the questionnaire measured what it was supposed to measure. In addition, the questionnaire was translated into the Vietnamese language so that the participants did not encounter any language problems, and the translated version was double-checked by the researchers. Then, the Vietnamese version of the questionnaire was piloted with five third-year students at UEF who were excluded from the main study. Finally, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .72 indicated acceptable internal consistency.

2.2.3 Data collection and analysis procedures

The questionnaire was delivered to all the participants in the term 2A (i.e., four terms per year, namely 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B) with the following steps. First, one of the researchers asked the teachers-in-charge to enter their classes to collect the data. Second, the researcher gave a clear instruction on how to respond to the questionnaire and explained some items to the respondents when necessary. Third, each respondent completed the questionnaire and returned it to the researcher after around seven minutes. For the data analysis, the quantitative data were processed by means of the software SPSS 20.0. In detail, the descriptive statistic, i.e., Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) were analysed.

2.3 Results and discussion

2.3.1 Results

This section starts with the presentation of the average mean scores of four categories of the 21st century learning skills (4Cs) perceived by the participants, followed by the detailed mean scores of skills in each category. As indicated in Table 2, the average mean scores of these categories were quite high, and there were no significant differences among them. This means that most of the participants recognised the importance of 4Cs. More specifically, the first and the second on the list were communication skills (M=4.37, SD=.43) and collaboration (M=4.25, SD=.49). It can be interpreted that the majority of participants strongly believed that 4Cs were important to their learning. Next came critical thinking skills (M=4.17, SD=.52) and creativity skills (M=4.11, SD=.94).

Table 2. The average mean scores of 4Cs

No.	Skill	Interpretation	n=204	
			M	SD
1	Communication	Strongly agree	4.37	.43
2	Collaboration	Strongly agree	4.25	.49
3	Critical thinking	Agree	4.17	.52
4	Creativity	Agree	4.11	.94

Note: M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation

As observed in Table 3, the participants strongly agreed on the majority of communication skills with the high mean scores. The most significant communication skill was '[articulating] thoughts/ideas using oral communication skills in various contexts' (M=4.66, SD=.55). This was followed by the skill of '[communicating] effectively in diverse environments' (M=4.46, SD=.72). In addition, they apprehended the importance of '[using] communication skills for a range of purposes' (M=4.30, SD=.71), '[articulating] thoughts/ideas using non-verbal communication skills in various contexts' (M=4.21, SD=.88). Last on the list was '[articulating] thoughts/ideas using written communication skills in various contexts' (M=4.20, SD=.74). It can be concluded that the participants highly valued their communication skills.

Table 3. Communication skills

No.	It is important for me to ...	Interpretation	n=204	
			M	SD
1	articulate thoughts/ideas using oral communication skills in various contexts	Strongly agree	4.66	.55
2	communicate effectively in diverse environments (e.g., multilingual and multicultural)	Strongly agree	4.46	.72
3	use communication skills for a range of purposes (e.g., to inform, instruct, motivate, and persuade)	Strongly agree	4.30	.71
4	articulate thoughts/ideas using non-verbal communication skills in various contexts	Strongly agree	4.21	.88
5	articulate thoughts/ideas using written communication skills in various contexts	Agree	4.20	.74

Table 4 indicates that the participants reached their agreement on collaboration skills. The skills of '[valuing] the individual contributions made by each team member' and

‘[demonstrating] an ability to listen respectfully’ headed the list with very high mean scores at 4.60 and 4.47 respectively. This means that they highly appreciated each individual’s effort and respected mutual sharing and understanding. Besides, they realised the crucial role of collaborative working consisting of ‘[working] with others on projects/assignments’ (M=4.10, SD=.77), ‘[demonstrating] an ability to work effectively with diverse teams’ (M=4.04, SD=.86), and ‘[being] able to work with others to reach a goal’ (M=4.03, SD=.85).

Table 4. Collaboration skills

No.	It is important for me to ...	Interpretation	n=204	
			M	SD
1	value the individual contributions made by each team member	Strongly agree	4.60	.62
2	demonstrate an ability to listen respectfully	Strongly agree	4.47	.65
3	work with others on projects/assignments	Agree	4.10	.77
4	demonstrate an ability to work effectively with diverse teams	Agree	4.04	.86
5	be able to work with others to reach a goal	Agree	4.03	.85

As reported in Table 2, critical thinking skills were ranked in third place. In Table 5, more specifically, the most strongly agreed skill was ‘[connecting] the knowledge gained at university to the real world’ (M=4.35, SD=.77). The next skills which had the same mean scores showing a considerable level of agreement were ‘[drawing] conclusions based on the analysed results’ (M=4.18, SD=.76) and ‘[making] connections between information and arguments’ (M=4.18, SD=.75). The least agreed skills relating to problem-solving and reflection skills were composed of ‘[solving] different kinds of familiar problems in innovative ways’ (M=4.09, SD=.83) and ‘[reflecting] critically on learning experiences and processes’ (M=4.05, SD=.83).

Table 5. Critical thinking skills

No.	It is important for me to ...	Interpretation	n=204	
			M	SD
1	connect the knowledge gained at the university to the real world	Strongly agree	4.35	.77
2	draw conclusions based on the analysed results	Agree	4.18	.76
3	make connections between information and arguments	Agree	4.18	.75
4	solve different kinds of familiar problems in different ways	Agree	4.09	.83
5	reflect critically on learning experiences and processes	Agree	4.05	.83

Even though creativity skills were ranked in the last place on the list, Table 6 shows the high mean scores of these skills, i.e., the participants believed that the creativity skills played a pivotal role in their learning. A big number of the participants strongly agreed that it was important for them to ‘be able to be innovative’ (M=4.43, SD=.67). Following this, the importance of ‘[trying] a new approach when we are carrying out a task’ (M=4.14, SD=.68), ‘[using] a wide range of idea techniques’ (M=4.12, SD=.91), and ‘[using] my imagination when we are carrying out a task’ (M=4.08, SD=.89) were mostly realized by the participants. The skill

of '[being] responsive to new perspectives occupied the last position with the lowest mean score at 3.76; however, the participants also believed in its importance.

Table 6. Creativity skills

No.	It is important for me to ...	Interpretation	n=204	
			M	SD
1	be able to be innovative	Strongly agree	4.43	.67
2	try a new approach when we are carrying out a task	Agree	4.14	.68
3	use a wide range of idea techniques (e.g., brainstorming, mind-mapping, etc.)	Agree	4.12	.91
4	use my imagination when we are carrying out a task	Agree	4.08	.89
5	be responsive to new perspectives	Agree	3.76	.90

2.3.2 Discussion

The quantitative results demonstrated that the third-year English majors highly valued the significance of 4Cs consisting of communication skills, collaboration skills, critical thinking skills, and creativity skills. The positive results may be attributed to the high rate of part-time employment taken by the third-year students (76%). It can be interpreted that they can gain real-life experiences when doing part-time jobs. For example, a student working as a waiter will be able to learn how to communicate with customers well, how to work with co-workers effectively, how to solve a particular problem in a real context, how to create a new idea, etc. Moreover, the participants have participated in a useful series of activities at school; as a result, they probably achieve a better understanding of the necessary learning skills for both academic and non-academic purposes.

According to the reported results, of the four categories, the participants believed that communication skills were the most important to their learning. In fact, communications skills may be closely associated with their success inside and outside the classroom [6], [7], so they highly appreciated these skills. Remarkably, the participants reached strong agreement on the importance of the use of verbal and non-verbal communication in diverse contexts and effective communication for various purposes in cross-cultural environments. According to Bolstad et al. [21], effective communication skills are the key to success in global integration, and diversity in cultures and backgrounds in communication should be identified as a merit rather than a drawback for a future-oriented learning system in the 21st century.

Concerning collaboration skills, several researchers [10], [11], [22], [23], [24] have discovered the benefits of collaborative learning. In this study, respecting and valuing peers' contributions and ideas were the most fundamental factors perceived by the participants. According to Goodsell et al. [25], learning has "affective and subjective dimensions" (p. 12), i.e., collaborative activities including listening to peers' ideas, apprehending diverse perspectives, and working in a team cooperatively are associated with social and emotional dimensions. Through peer-based learning, student identity is established and developed. More specifically, students listen to various viewpoints respectfully, negotiate and deal with problems together, assist each other when necessary [22]. Additionally, the participants showed their appreciation of collaborative learning. Lord [23] concluded that "Although students say that they are at first uncomfortable with the expectations of a collaborative learning culture, they grow to appreciate, feel enlivened by, and thrive in this new context" collaborative learning may promote mutual responsibility for learning" (p. 339) .

Critical thinking skills are regarded as one of the most integral skills in the 21st century. In education, Karakoç [26] confirmed the role of critical thinking in educational approaches, so it should be developed and integrated into the programmes. Similarly, the results of this study showed the participants' beliefs in critical thinking skills such as reflecting, reasoning, summarising, interpreting, and analyzing. The positive results may arise from the academic and extracurricular activities held by the Faculty of English and their part-time employment. In other words, it was experienced and skills they achieved at school or at the workplace that raised their awareness of critical thinking skills. Therefore, critical thinking should be encouraged in both academic and non-academic environments. In this respect, Farim and Ghamari [27] postulated that critical thinking needs to be promoted in teaching practices through the employment of educational strategies as critical thinking can enable people to reason about issues well.

As far as the importance of creativity in education, some researchers [28], [29] affirmed that the distinct function of creativity is to equip learners with innovative and creative competencies apart from necessary knowledge. In the Vietnamese EFL context, innovations in teaching and learning approaches to optimize learners' creativity have been implemented in a range of universities [30], [31]. In this paper, most of them apprehended the vital role of creativity skills. It can be inferred that the third-year students in the research setting have had lots of chances to increase their creativity by virtue of the participation in the events and activities at school and the experiences obtained from the part-time jobs.

3. Conclusion and implications

It can be concluded that the third-year English majors at UEF admitted the importance of the 4Cs, namely communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity in descending order in terms of mean scores. Specifically, the majority of them reached complete agreement on most of the communication skills (e.g., the use of verbal and non-verbal communication in different contexts and the effective use of communication skills in diverse environments and for various purposes), collaboration skills (e.g., the appreciation of each team member and the respect for individuals' ideas), critical thinking skills (e.g., the link between what students have learned at the university and what they may deal with in a real context), and creativity skills (e.g., the ability to be innovative).

Based on the aforementioned results, some pedagogical implications are recommended as follows. Firstly, the administrators should take more consideration into the development of the 4Cs at UEF. It is recommended that the 4Cs should be integrated into the official training program as an obligatory subject or formally introduced to the students in seminars or workshops. Secondly, teachers need to employ innovative teaching approaches in which a teacher's role is defined as a facilitator, a guide, a counselor, or a resource. Instead of taking control over students' learning, teachers should design 4Cs-related learning activities to first raise students' awareness of the significance of the 4Cs in the digital era and then develop their 4Cs. For example, a teacher can let students deal with the activities in groups or pair and report their work to the class. The teacher's task is to give counseling for their performance and offer assistance where necessary rather than taking charge of most tasks occurring in a traditional classroom such as delivering a speech, providing and checking homework assignments, assessing learning performances, etc. Last but not least, it is vital for students to actively participate in classroom-based activities and events offered by the university and other prestigious organizations.

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