



*Original Contribution*

**21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY SKILLS IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM:  
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS**

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**ABSTRACT**

In recent years, the so-called „new literacies”, or 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication, have been increasingly developed in the foreign language classroom through the integration of language knowledge, cross-cultural skills and digital competences. These complex perspectives put greater demands on foreign language teachers and learners and raise their awareness of the fundamental changes in the educational setting.

**PURPOSE:** This study seeks to identify university students' perceptions of the challenges faced by 21<sup>st</sup> century foreign language teaching and learning. **METHODS:** A survey among 31 first- and third-year students in Primary School Pedagogy and Foreign Language at St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo was conducted through anonymous pen-to-paper questionnaire in 2022. **RESULTS:** The results shed light on students' beliefs, opinions and awareness of the high-order skills that have reshaped the English language classroom in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Though students have scarce knowledge on 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, they are positive about the implementation of these skills in foreign language teaching and learning. **CONCLUSION:** The paper concludes that there is a pronounced need to raise the students' awareness as to the potential of the „new literacies” in the foreign language classroom.

**Key words:** foreign language teaching and learning, foreign language skills, 4Cs, 21<sup>st</sup> century learning model

**INTRODUCTION**

In recent decades, it has been generally recognized that a person's success as a learner, a citizen and a professional depends on the possession and the continual use of a set of trans-disciplinary skills, known as 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. The complex ways in which these skills play a role in everyday life have made modern educators stress the importance of these „new literacies” for enabling learners to study and work effectively in a changing world. Within the context of foreign language instruction, arguably of highest importance is to ensure that teachers and university students across the educational spectrum are well aware what 21<sup>st</sup> century language learning and teaching should look like, so that they can make these skills teachable and accessible to everyone.

Technological and demographic development have greatly impacted foreign language education by shifting its focus from „grammar, memorization and learning from rote” to „using language and cultural knowledge as a means to communicate and connect to others around the globe” (1). In order to excel as global competitors, language learners should engage in a richer learning environment, designed to meet their global needs to succeed and perform effectively. To achieve these ends, the emphasis of foreign language instruction should go beyond mere content knowledge to encompass high-order twenty-first century skills, known as the 4G model, including critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication.

The present paper reflects on the topic of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in the context of foreign language education by reporting the results of a study conducted at the University of Veliko Turnovo among first- and third-year students of Primary School Pedagogy and Foreign Language. More

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specifically, it focuses on the perceptions and beliefs of future primary school teachers of English as a foreign language. The paper first offers a glimpse at the concept of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and the 4Cs model, then presents the research design, and finally reports and discusses the results and their implications for 21<sup>st</sup> century skills-oriented pedagogy.

### DEFINING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY SKILLS

The term *21<sup>st</sup> century skills* came into being at the turn of the century to acknowledge the challenges confronting all aspects of life, including education, in the era of „digital literacies, technological advances, multicultural societies, human mobility, global communication, social networking, innovation and creativity and inclusion” (2). Accordingly, it has been recently embraced by modern literature on education in its efforts to evolve and change to respond to these important changes in society (3-7). However, many varied terms of reference have been used for the phenomenon, underlying the set of skills that must be brought to bear in today’s fast-changing worlds of education and employment. The core of a generally accepted definition states that they are „a set of knowledge, skills or traits necessary to function effectively in today’s world” (8) The terminology that has circulated literature also includes terms such as *soft skills* or *interpersonal skills*, *applied* or *workforce skills*, *life and career skills*, or *non-cognitive skills* (3). Other labels emphasizing the flexibility and transferability of the skills across different fields are *generic skills* and *subject-independent* or *transversal competences* (9).

A prominent framework of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills was created by the US-based organization *Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning* (10). It promotes 21<sup>st</sup> century learning through the incorporation of skills into the teaching of key academic subjects. The framework is centred on three groups of skills: 1) life and career skills, 2) learning and innovation skills, and 3) information, media and technology skills. Of a particular interest for the present study are the four Cs which have been integrated into the concept of learning and innovation: creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem-solving, communication, and collaboration. They flesh out the essence of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning model necessary for the achievement of the learning goals of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### The Four Cs

Critical thinking is a trans-disciplinary concept, which has its origins in the mid-late 20<sup>th</sup> century. As defined by **the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking in 1987, it is** „the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analysing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action” (11). **In order to develop their critical thinking skills, students should systematically cultivate their ability to** „raise vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely; gather and assess relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively; think open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought; and communicate effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems” (12). Critical thinking is considered a major prerequisite for developing effective language learning. Therefore, its enhancement among learners should be one of the tasks of foreign language teachers (13) They can help their students acquire these high-order thinking skills by the implementation of appropriate self and peer assessment, content-based instruction, problem solving tasks, project work and debates (14, 15).

According to Ravitz (16), creativity and innovation skills entail the ability to „generate and refine solutions to complex problems or tasks based on synthesis, analysis and then combining or presenting what they have learned in new and original ways.” As Richards puts it, creative intelligence can enhance language learning because “it helps learners cope with novel and unpredictable experiences” (17). The role of the teacher is undoubtedly essential for integrating creativity into foreign language learning. Hence, the creative processes in the foreign language classroom highly correlate with the teachers’ own creativity, their openness to new methodologies and teaching materials (8). The concept of creativity is also related to the use of technology, rather than relying solely on traditional materials to foster the creative thinking and behaviour on the part of the learners (18).

Communication is identified as an essential component of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning model. Communication skills, as defined by Ravitz,

refer to the students' ability to „organize their thoughts, data and findings and share these effectively through a variety of media, as well as orally and in writing” (16). According to Scott (19), good communicators are able to relay ideas clearly, elucidate thoughts and spark the interests of others orally. Excellence in communication can be achieved through exposure to diverse situations and environments, both multilingual and multicultural (8). Essential though they are, communication skills receive insufficient attention in foreign language classrooms (14). Deficiencies in communication can be overcome by fostering the close interrelation between communication competences and collaborative work (20).

Collaboration, according to Ravitz, is the ability „to work together to solve problems or answer questions, to work effectively and respectfully in teams to accomplish a common goal and to assume shared responsibility for completing a task” (16). Collaboration is closely related to the other 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Collaborative forms of work involve communication and critical thinking and are carried out by means of creativity (21). On the other hand, cooperative learning is greatly influenced by technology, which facilitates the types of collaboration that were not possible prior to it.

This brief examination of the 4Cs indicates that the „new literacies” lie at the core of effective language learning and by fostering them in foreign language classes teachers tap the potential inherent in 21<sup>st</sup> century skills-oriented pedagogy.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The data were obtained from a paper-to-pen questionnaire, containing both close-ended and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was written in English, but the respondents could use both their L1 and L2 to complete it. Using the study conducted by Baran-Lucarz & Klimas (8) in the Polish educational context, a survey instrument was developed to answer two research questions: 1) How do students of Primary School Pedagogy perceive the role of key competences and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in foreign language teaching? and 2) What are their opinions about key competences in foreign language classes at three educational levels: primary, secondary and tertiary?

The questionnaire consisted of four parts. Part I contained demographic information concerning the respondents' year of study, age, gender, motivation for studying and teaching English. Part II consisted of eight open-ended questions, aiming to identify to what extent students are acquainted with the key competences (including 21<sup>st</sup> century skills) and their role in foreign language classrooms at the three educational levels. These questions were: 1) What skills, according to you, are developed in foreign language (FL) classes in primary school? 2) What skills, according to you, are developed in FL classes in high school? 3) What skills, according to you, are developed in FL classes at university? 4) Are any of the skills of greater importance than others? Why? 5) According to you, are any of the FL skills taught sporadically in primary school? 6) According to you, are any of the FL skills taught sporadically in high school? 7) According to you, are any of the FL skills taught sporadically at university? 8) In your opinion, what FL skills are developed through *Headway* coursebook?

Part III included three subsections, referring to the three educational levels, each of them containing 24 statements with a 6-point Likert scale (from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*) and an additional option „I don't know”. The statements in Part III were: „1) The FL teachers in primary school should develop their students' ability to/competence in... 2) The FL teachers in high school should develop their students' ability to/competence in... 3) The FL lecturers at university should develop their students' ability to/competence in...”. Each of these statements was followed by 24 endings, the first 8 of them referring to basic academic skills, such as: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, speaking, writing, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and intonation. The rest of the endings (16) referred to 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, without explicitly labelling them. Each skill was represented by four basic abilities:

Critical thinking: 1) think clearly and independently; 2) come to conclusions; 3) construct logical argumentations; 4) analyse and interpret facts;

Creativity: 1) generate ideas; 2) approach learning creatively, e.g. by designing original products; 3) use compensation strategies (methods used for making up for lack of language); 4) be imaginative;

Collaboration: 1) work in groups and pairs; 2) be cooperative; 3) take group responsibility; 4) respect the abilities and contributions of their peers;

Communication: 1) produce coherent and cohesive input in writing and speech; 2) make use of digital technology to convey thoughts and ideas; 3) communicate with people of other cultures; 4) use formal and informal language;

Research question 2 was addressed in Part III. Part IV contained two subsections. The first one contained two questions explicitly referring to 21<sup>st</sup> century skills: „Are you familiar with the term *21<sup>st</sup> century skills*? If so, can you explain what 21<sup>st</sup> century skills refer to and how teachers can promote them in a FL course?”. The next subsection contained five statements with a 6-point Likert scale (with an optional answer „*I don't know*”) providing additional information on the two research questions. The statements will be presented in the Results section of the paper.

The respondents were 31 students of St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo, mostly aged 19-22: 18 first-year students in Primary School Pedagogy and Foreign Language (English), 12 third-year students in Primary School Pedagogy and Foreign Language (English) and 1 third-year student in Preschool Pedagogy and Foreign Language (English). The questionnaire was administered during one of the classes in Practical English in May 2022. The participation was voluntary and anonymous. The respondents were not given any preliminary information as to the purposes of the study, nor any clarifications about the content of the instrument. The quantitative data were analysed statistically and turned into percentages, while the answers to the open-ended questions were coded and summarized in order to observe certain common themes and concepts referring to 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

## RESULTS

Most of the respondents answered the open-ended questions in Part I, stating that they were motivated to study English and pursue a degree in Primary School Pedagogy and English due to the extent to which English has spread globally. The answers to the questions in Part II indicated that 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are *terra incognita* to the respondents. The academic skills of reading (18, indicating the number of respondents providing

a particular response), writing (16) and listening (10) were given prominence as typical skills developed in primary school; speaking (13), writing (11) and reading (11) in secondary school; reading (6), writing (6) and speaking (6) at university.

The answers referring to 21<sup>st</sup> century skills were very rare. The respondents mentioned communication skills (4), imagination (1), thinking (1) and patience (1) as skills developed in primary school; communication skills (2), creative thinking (1), presentations skills (1), expressing thoughts, feelings (1) in secondary school; and communication skills (2), researching (1) and making presentations (1) at university.

When asked about the skills of the greatest importance, the respondents again gave prominence to the basic academic skills — reading (2), writing (2) and speaking (4). The only 21<sup>st</sup> century skill that was perceived as extremely important was communication (4).

As for the skills rarely taught in English classes, the respondents mentioned communication, writing and grammar in primary school, and listening, speaking and pronunciation in secondary school.

When asked about the skills developed through the *Headway* coursebook (used in Practical English classes at Veliko Turnovo University), the respondents again focused on the academic skills (grammar, vocabulary, writing and speaking). The only 21<sup>st</sup> century skill that was mentioned as being developed through *Headway* was communication.

The questions in Part III referred to the development of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in primary school, secondary school and university. The results were summarized in four tables, addressing each of the 4Cs: critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication.

As **Table 1** shows, 60% of the respondents strongly agreed that critical thinking should be developed at university; compared with 45% in secondary school and 18% in primary school. This clearly indicates that according to the respondents, the skill of critical thinking should be developed mainly in language classes at university.

**Table 1.** Frequencies of answers concerning the development of critical thinking at the three educational levels during foreign language classes.

CRITICAL THINKING	Primary School	Secondary School	University
Don't know	8%	2%	0%
Strongly disagree	2%	0%	0%
Disagree	6%	0%	0%
Rather disagree	3%	0%	3%
Rather agree	32%	17%	12%
Agree	30%	36%	25%
Strongly agree	18%	45%	60%

Less prominent results emerge in **Table 2** where 37% of the respondents strongly agreed that

creativity should be developed at university; 36% in secondary school; and 19% in primary school.

**Table 2.** Frequencies of answers concerning the development of creativity at the three educational levels during foreign language classes.

CREATIVITY	Primary School	Secondary School	University
Don't know	8%	6%	9%
Strongly disagree	2%	0%	0%
Disagree	3%	1%	0%
Rather disagree	3%	4%	6%
Rather agree	30%	19%	12%
Agree	35%	34%	36%
Strongly agree	19%	36%	37%

In the case of collaboration (**Table 3**) and communication (**Table 4**), the most frequent choice was *Agree* for the three educational levels. In the case of communication, the choice *Strongly Agree* received 13% in primary school, 36% in

secondary school; and 44% at university, which suggests that the respondents consider primary school as the less appropriate level for developing communication skills.

**Table 3.** Frequencies of answers concerning the development of collaboration at the three educational levels during foreign language classes.

COLLABORATION	Primary School	Secondary School	University
Don't know	3%	2%	5%
Strongly disagree	0%	0%	0%
Disagree	1%	1%	1%
Rather disagree	1%	1%	1%
Rather agree	23%	17%	14%
Agree	42%	41%	44%
Strongly agree	30%	38%	35%

**Table 4.** Frequencies of answers concerning the development of communication at the three educational levels during foreign language classes.

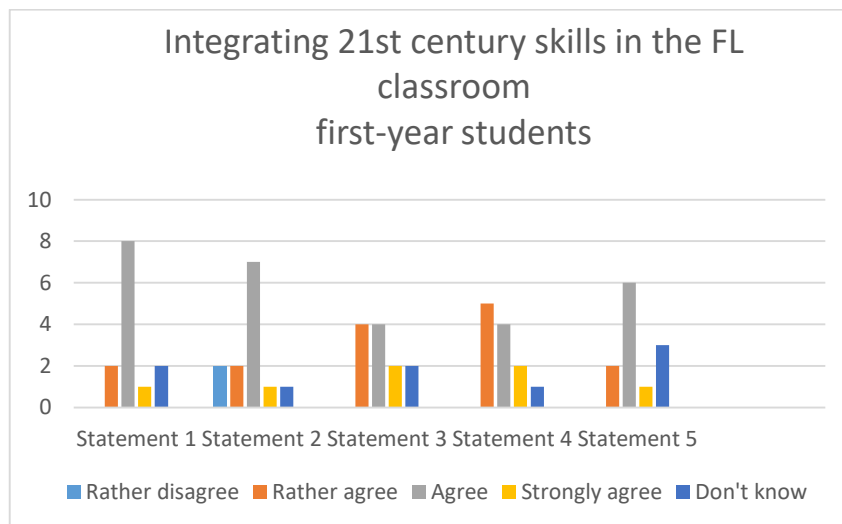
COMMUNICATION	Primary School	Secondary School	University
Don't know	7%	4%	8%
Strongly disagree	0%	0%	0%
Disagree	6%	1%	1%
Rather disagree	3%	1%	0%
Rather agree	25%	10%	7%
Agree	46%	48%	40%
Strongly agree	13%	36%	44%

Part IV of the instrument explicitly asked about 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. In the first section most of the respondents did not provide any answer, or answered negatively, stating that they were not familiar with the term *21<sup>st</sup> century skills*. Only two third-year students knew what the term referred to and were able to provide a definition: „They are abilities that today’s students need to succeed in their careers during the Information Age.“; „They are critical thinking; creativity; collaboration; communication; information literacy; media literacy; flexibility”.

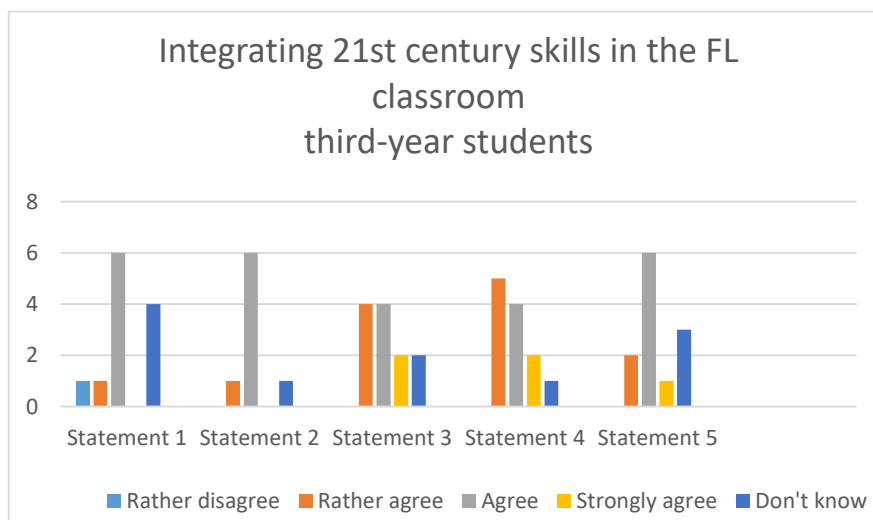
The final section of Part IV aimed at investigating the students’ attitudes towards the integration of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in foreign languages classes. The results have been summarised in **Figure 1** and **Figure 2** showing

the attitudes of first- and third-year students as to five statements:

- 1) A FL teacher’s repertoire should involve strategies for developing 21<sup>st</sup> century skills;
- 2) Both 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and typical FL skills and subskills should be taught in the FL classroom;
- 3) FL teachers need to be explicit about which skill or skills (of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills) are being addressed in the FL classroom;
- 4) Future FL teachers at all educational levels need a deeper understanding of the main components of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills;
- 5) Theoretical and training courses in 21<sup>st</sup> century skills should be an integral part of undergraduate programmes for FL teachers at all educational levels;



**Figure 1.** First-year students’ assessment of the importance of integrating 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in the foreign language classroom, by reporting the number of respondents who agreed with the five statements to a various extent.



**Figure 2.** Third-year students’ assessment of the importance of integrating 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in the foreign language classroom, by reporting the number of respondents who agreed with the five statements to a various extent.

The outcomes in the final section were consistent with the answers to the open-ended questions in the first section of Part IV. Since most of the respondents were not familiar with the term *21<sup>st</sup> century skills*, their responses in the second section were tentative. As **Figure 1 and Figure 2** display, a significant number of respondents found answering the five statements a challenge and chose the „I don't know" option. Yet the predominant response of the two groups was *Agree*. Both first- and third-year students seemed to believe that 21<sup>st</sup> century skills should be taught in the foreign language classroom at all educational levels alongside with the typical foreign language skills and subskills. The results also suggest that the respondents were convinced about the necessity to provide undergraduate students with theoretical and training courses in 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

## DISCUSSION

The research instrument was designed to enable the linking of sets of data related to the three educational levels, namely primary, secondary and tertiary. The outcomes obtained in this study clearly indicate that prior to the administration of the survey very few students of Primary School Pedagogy seemed to be aware of the term *21<sup>st</sup> century skills* or to have received guided instruction in developing these skills. Most of the students had a hard time distinguishing between typical academic skills and the „new literacies". The 21<sup>st</sup> century skill that was easiest to identify was communication. Critical thinking was definitely considered a higher-order skill that should be taught in secondary school and university. Though the respondents' knowledge on 21<sup>st</sup> century skills was scarce, they seemed to be positive about the implementation of the „new literacies" in foreign language classes.

The results of the study also suggest that 21<sup>st</sup> century skills-oriented pedagogy should become a central concern of language education at tertiary level. Future primary teachers need to receive sufficient theoretical background and professional development in order to adequately face the challenges of implementing the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning model in foreign language classrooms. Through the incorporation of courses in 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and the design of course materials, language educators at universities could further stimulate the interest of education students and make their study of

the 4Cs a meaningful life-long endeavour and a priority in their future work.

## CONCLUSION

The present study offers insights into primary education students' opinions and perceptions concerning the development of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in foreign language classes. The findings indicate that future language educators should be sensitized as to the role of the „new literacies" in the foreign language classroom. In order to compete favourably in the era of globalization and digitalization future primary teachers need to master the potential of the 4Cs so that they can make them teachable and accessible to their students.

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