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## **Fostering 21st Century Skills in the EFL Literature Classroom: A Catalyst for Global Solution**

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**Abstract** Today's graduates need skills to thrive in the globalized world. Higher education, including English departments, must adapt by equipping students with these "21st century skills." This paper explores how literature, a cornerstone for English majors, can be aligned with these demands. We examine specific skills fostered through literature and propose teaching methods used in an Algerian EFL classroom to develop them. This is particularly relevant as Algerian EFL departments have not fully embraced this approach.

**Keywords:** 21st Century Skills, Literature, EFL Classroom,

## Introduction

Traditionally, academic knowledge within a specific field held significant weight for career prospects. However, the 21st century presents a dramatically different landscape. Socioeconomic shifts driven by globalization, the information age, and technological advancements have redefined the skills needed for success. As the National Education Association (2012) points out, effective citizenship in this era requires "a level of information and technology literacy far beyond the basic knowledge that was sufficient in the past" (p. 5). This necessitates a focus on developing specific skillsets, often referred to as '21st century skills', 'soft skills', 'generic skills', 'transversal skills', 'non-technical skills' and 'employability skills' (Brewer, 2013; Burns, 2017; Joynes et al., 2019) that encompass a broad range of qualities and abilities such as:

*Thinking skills:* Critical thinking, problem-solving, analytical reasoning, and intellectual curiosity.

*Communication skills:* Effective communication, both written and verbal.

*Collaboration skills:* Teamwork and the ability to work effectively with others.

*Information literacy:* Identifying, accessing, and managing information effectively.

*Personal attributes:* Creativity, imagination, and intellectual rigor.

*Values:* Ethical practice, responsibility, perseverance, integrity, and tolerance (Hager & Holland, 2006).

These skills are increasingly crucial for success in today's world, and integrating them into higher education is no longer optional. It's essential to equip graduates with the tools they need to thrive in the knowledge economy.

## The Challenge: Integrating Skills in EFL Literature

Algerian university EFL teachers now face a unique challenge: incorporating these 21st century skills into their curriculum while maintaining student engagement. However, our observations suggest that Algerian EFL departments have not yet made significant progress in this area. For example, the literature module have not fully embraced this shift, still focusing on authors' backgrounds, historical periods, literary devices, and analysis of past works. Many EFL teachers, already faced with the challenge of engaging students in literature, likely have these pressing questions:

- ✓ How can the literature module be aligned with 21st century skills?
- ✓ What specific skills can be developed through the study of literature?
- ✓ How can we effectively incorporate these skills into the literature classroom?

In response to these concerns, in this paper, we explore how literature, with its focus on historical context, language analysis, and timeless themes, can be a springboard for developing these essential skills. This paper aims to inspire Algerian EFL instructors to consider the inherent potential of literature in fostering 21st century competencies.

## The Relationship between Literature and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills

Literature has long been a cornerstone of foreign language education, fostering reading, writing, and cultural understanding (Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Carter & Long, 1991). While it is essential to engage with the biographies of authors and their literary styles, literature also plays a crucial role in developing skills that are increasingly important in today's globalized world (Almeida & Puig, 2017).

Lewis C. S. (Evans & Dooley, 2014) aptly captures this by stating that literature "adds to reality," enriching life skills and "irrigates the deserts" of our daily lives. Literature is not a mere reflection of reality; it's a mirror that allows us to explore timeless human experiences like love, coming-of-age, conflict, and identity. These themes resonate across generations, making great literature enduring.

Think of 19th-century realism: these works captivated readers then and continue to do so today, offering valuable insights into the past. As Almeida and Puig (2017) point out, studying past literature isn't about going back in time. It's about understanding the human condition across eras, recognizing the enduring themes of identity, choices, prejudice, and communication that continue to shape our lives.

Engaging with these themes requires critical thinking. Readers delve into character motivations, analyze conflicts, and connect the story to their own lives. Literature fosters this critical analysis and self-reflection, encouraging readers to share their interpretations and learn from diverse perspectives.

Furthermore, literature is a gateway to history and culture. By exploring the historical context of a work, students learn research and information literacy skills, drawing upon resources like libraries and the internet. This not only deepens their understanding of the text but also equips them with valuable research tools.

Literature also fosters collaboration. Book clubs and group discussions encourage teamwork, communication, and the exchange of ideas. Students learn to articulate their thoughts, listen to others, and navigate group dynamics.

In conclusion, literature offers a powerful platform for developing 21st-century skills. By encouraging students to read and engage with these rich narratives, we can help them become critical thinkers, effective communicators, and well-rounded individuals. In the following section, I will outline the fundamental skills that literature develops and provide some practical strategies for teaching these skills.

### The 21st Century Skills that Literature Develops

Beyond fostering language proficiency, literature equips students with a valuable arsenal of 21st-century skills crucial for navigating today's interconnected world. Let's delve into six key areas where literature shines:

#### Communication: A Foundation for Expression

Communication, both oral and written, is central to every literary activity. For instance, when students engage in problem-solving, collaboration, or research, they must convey information, express agreement and disagreement, share ideas, and discuss their findings. These activities enhance their

communication skills. Additionally, presentations and discussions of visual data, such as figures, maps, charts, or graphs, further develop their ability to communicate effectively.

Written communication is also emphasized. At the end of each lesson, students write essays on specific topics. This practice helps them use their understanding of the text to communicate complex ideas and develop their interpretations accurately.

### **Problem-Solving and Critical Thinking**

Literature is a breeding ground for critical thinking and problem solving.. Readers are constantly challenged to analyze characters' motivations, dissect plot development, and grapple with complex themes. Open-ended questions about characters' motivation and problem often encourage students to justify their interpretations and consider multiple perspectives. This critical questions fosters independent analysis and informed decision-making. Questions can include, for example:

- ✓ Describe the conflict and its impact on the character's actions.
- ✓ Examine the reasons for the problem and whether it stems from moral or psychological concerns.
- ✓ Evaluate the character's decision-making process and the criteria he used to address his issue.
- ✓ Discuss the implications of human decisions and conflicts.

### **Collaboration and Teamwork**

Literature provides a rich platform for collaborative learning. Group projects centered on analyzing characters, conflicts, and thematic elements encourage teamwork and problem-solving. Students share ideas, learn to manage conflict constructively, and build consensus. Activities like literature circle exemplify this collaborative approach.

### **Research and Analysis Skills**

Research skills are integral to major literary activities, aligning with the 21st-century goal of engaging learners in investigating real-world problems. Project-based learning (PBL) is particularly effective, requiring students to gather data from various sources to understand the context of texts. PBL promotes group learning, encourages interaction, and focuses on real-world issues relevant to learning objectives (Roessingh & Chambers, 2011). This method also enhances students' collaboration skills.

To develop data analysis skills, teachers can ask students to use diverse technological and information resources (e.g., library books, articles, web-based sources, videos) to gather and synthesize information. Teaching students to cite sources in APA style and use data visualization where appropriate also strengthens their research and communication abilities. By the end of the year, most students will have learned how to collect and interpret information from various sources and cite references accurately.

### **Cultural Awareness: Embracing Diversity**

Literature broadens cultural horizons. By exploring characters from different backgrounds and historical periods, students develop empathy and sensitivity to diverse perspectives. Texts like "A

Christmas Carol," "Pride and Prejudice," and "The Importance of Being Earnest" provide a window into different social customs, while contemporary works like "Who Said We All Have to Talk Alike" by Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel, "A Horse and Two Goats" by R. K. Narayan, and "Maggie Meriwether's Rich Experience" by Jean Stafford highlight the richness of communication styles and cultural misunderstandings, enhancing students' awareness of cultural diversity.

### Empathy

Literature's power lies not just in imparting information but also in fostering empathy. By connecting with characters' struggles and triumphs, students develop a deeper understanding of human emotions and experiences. Writing assignments like the one given after reading "Who Said We All Have to Talk Alike" – where students write from a character's perspective – encourage students to step outside their own shoes and see the world through another's eyes. This cultivates compassion and fosters stronger social connections.

### Conclusion : The Interconnected Web of Skills

It is important to remember that the setskills, mentioned above, are intricately interwoven. Effective communication is vital for presenting research findings, critical thinking fuels creative problem-solving in collaborative projects, and cultural awareness enriches literary analysis.

The selection of timeless literary works with universal themes further strengthens this interconnectedness, allowing students to develop a robust skillset applicable to academic pursuits and real-world challenges.

By harnessing the power of literature, educators can empower students to become not only adept language users but also well-rounded individuals equipped to thrive in the 21st century.

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