A Strategic Proposal for English Language Foundation Programs:

21st Century Learning

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Abstract

Many English language foundation programs around the world, particularly in the Gulf region, claim as part of their mission statements to develop competencies such as critical thinking, ICT literacy, global awareness, information literacy and self-direction. These competencies, among others, are now commonly referred to as *21st century learning* skills. The reality, however, is that curricular approaches and predominant teaching methodologies in many of these programs reflect a behavioristic view of teaching and learning, which means that these programs do not, in fact, foster the sort of competencies advertised in their mission statements. This paper argues that English language foundation programs can accomplish their stated learning missions if they fully embrace *21st century learning* approaches grounded in social constructivism, and make strategic adjustments in four areas: mission statement, curriculum, ICT and assessment.

*Keywords:* 21st century learning, project-based learning, curriculum, assessment
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English language programs in the Gulf are often characterized by traditional, behaviormistic models where instructors stand at the front of the classroom; students fill in worksheets and textbook questions, write formulaic essays and complete discrete vocabulary and grammar practice. Instructors provide the correct answers with students largely relying on rote memorization and basic comprehension to successfully pass multiple-choice exams (Blaik-Hourani, 2011). These approaches tap only the most basic cognitive processes conceptualized in Bloom’s taxonomy (Larson & Miller, 2011). This paper will argue that if English language foundation programs, particularly in the Gulf region, are to meet their stated educational missions, they must fully embrace 21st century learning approaches grounded in social constructivism and make strategic adjustments in four areas: mission statement, curriculum, ICT and assessment.

21st Century Learning: A Call for Change

Educational news today abounds with stories centering on the perceived failure of US and UK public education systems that place too much emphasis on high-stakes exams, which has been shown to be ineffective in nurturing true learning and has contributed to a severe decrease in student motivation along with a shocking increase in teacher burnout: “Around the world, there are foundations, public-private partnerships, government initiatives and commercial entities leading calls for a redesign of 21st century education” (Facer & Sandford, 2010, p. 75); there is a growing consensus that “digital literacy has become less a luxury and more an imperative for many countries,
gaining significant momentum in the past decade among government officials, business leaders, and educators” (Knox, 2006, p. 32).

While 21st century learning has recently received a lot of media attention, the concept is not new (Silva, 2009). Current definitions of 21st century learning are reflected in numerous frameworks and educational initiatives. For example, The Partnership for 21st Century Learning program (P21), founded in 2002, defines 21st century skills as the knowledge and skills students need to succeed in today’s world. The P21 framework is comprised of four major themes: core and 21st century subjects; learning and innovation skills; information and communication technology (ICT) skills; and life/career skills (Oxford, 2010). Broadly cited by teacher unions, higher education organizations, national education groups, workforce development groups and policymakers, 21st century skills are being hailed as imperative for today's students if they are to succeed in a rapidly changing, interconnected and technology-based world (McLoughlin, 2011). The central premise of P21 is an emphasis on “what students can do with knowledge and how they apply what they learn in an authentic context” (Larson & Miller, 2011, p. 121). Oxford (2010) urges: “Nothing less is necessary in preparing society for the changed world arising from the widespread and deep economic global recession and resultant societal paradigm shifts” (p. 68).

An exemplary model of a research-based, 21st century learning framework is the Enquiring Minds project, which attempts to address fundamental education questions:

[c]lassrooms of today would be easily recognisable to the pioneers of public education of the 1860s: the ways in which teaching and learning are organised, the kinds of skills and knowledge
that are valued in assessment, and a good deal of the actual curriculum content, have changed only superficially since that time. (Morgan, Williamson, & Facer, 2007, p. 14)

Enquiring Minds draws on social constructivism, in that, “knowledge is the product of human activity” (Morgan, Williamson, & Facer, 2007, p. 19). While there is no single definition of social constructivism, common themes emerge: “active, collaborative, nondirective, project-based learning,” in which “competencies are addressed holistically, rather than by cutting them into smaller goals” (Warin, Kolski, & Sagar, 2011). There is a focus on learning that sees learners as active co-constructors of meaning, initiative and leadership, and great emphasis on engaging learners “…in tasks seen as ends in themselves …having implicit worth…, [with] …assessment as an active process of uncovering and acknowledging shared understanding” (Adams, 2006, p. 247). Enquiring Minds takes social constructivism a step further in its high valuation of what learners can bring to the table: “students’ interests, experiences and ideas are important ‘living curricula’ worth exploring in depth and which yield powerful and important activities for both students and teachers” (Morgan, Williamson, & Facer, 2007, p. 19).

Unfortunately, as Ba (2011) recognizes, the reality is that despite calls by governments, the private sector and research-based evidence as described above, “[T]here is little evidence to suggest that educational practices are undergoing real transformational change mediated by Web 2.0 opportunities” (Crook et al., 2008; Schroeder et al., 2010, cited in Crook, 2012). This is certainly the case with the behavioristic approach of some English language foundation programs in the Gulf region.
The English Language Learning Context

English language foundation programs have the primary aim of developing students’ language skills. Therefore, instructors, curriculum developers and leaders of these programs are faced with the thorny question of how does one best acquire another language? Acknowledging the shortcomings of research and theory to adequately explain any single best method of language learning, Ellis (2005), nevertheless draws on a number of theoretical perspectives to formulate the following set of 10 general principles for instructed language acquisition. Instruction needs to ensure that:

1. learners develop a repertoire of formulaic expressions and rule-based competence.
2. learners focus primarily on meaning.
3. there is focus on form.
4. there is development of explicit and implicit knowledge of the language.
5. it takes into account the learner’s “built-in syllabus”.
6. learning requires extensive second language input.
7. there are opportunities for output.
8. there is opportunity for negotiation of meaning.
9. there is consideration for individual differences.
10. assessment evaluates both controlled and free production.

It is a reasonable assumption that most trained and experienced language instructors are familiar with Ellis’ (2005) 10 principles stressing, among other things, the importance of individual differences, acquisition of lexicon, syntax and a balance between rehearsed and free speech. What is not apparent, however, inclusion of 21st century
skills development in the repertoire of many language instructors and the curricula of English language foundation programs in the Gulf. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many instructors and decision-makers in these programs do not see a correlation between language development and the development of 21st century learning skills.

We agree that it is imperative to keep in mind that the primary objective of English language foundation programs is to develop successful language learners. However, we argue that it is equally important is to realize that developing language skills can be accomplished whilst also cultivating 21st century learning skills, which is where many programs fall short despite pronouncements to the contrary. Therefore, with these principles of second language acquisition and conceptions of 21st century learning in mind, what follows are recommendations for strategic changes English language foundation programs should make if they are to achieve their stated learning mission statements.

Proposal A: Revise Mission Statements

English language foundation programs should start by developing more concise and focused mission statements. For example, rather than long and abstract sentences such as: “[this program] lays the foundation for students to become successful, independent, lifelong learners with the ability to perform in a bilingual environment and as leading members of the UAE society,” single headings such as leadership, self-direction, global awareness, critical thinking, and so on, would make these concepts easier to understand and recall. Anecdotal evidence shows that few, if any, instructors or students, when asked, can recite their program mission statements. Revised mission
statements should also include *innovation* or *creativity*, which are fundamental aspects of a 21st century learning frameworks (Lee Yuen, 2010).

These new education mission statements should serve as the umbrella under which all decisions are made concerning curriculum, assessment and learning environments. As Kay (2009) notes, education should look towards 21st century skills frameworks that “provide a powerful organizing framework for leadership and professional development and for teaching and learning that motivates and engages students and builds their confidence as learners” (p. 44). A 21st century learning framework has the advantage of establishing clear learning outcomes and goals for students and “will give students clear and compelling aspirations. Around these skills, they can develop their own strategies and share evidence of success” (Kay, 2009, p. 43). A more concise and memorable mission statement grounded in current definitions of 21st century learning will provide a clear direction for the development of a robust curriculum, assessment and learning environment aligned with progressive educational theory.

**Proposal B: Revitalize Curriculum with Project-based Learning**

A revitalization of the curriculum is needed to achieve the desired goals as well as engage the students by developing the skills they need outside the walls of the classroom. The curriculum strategy for this revitalization should be largely project-based learning (PBL) – a central methodology of 21st century learning.

**Project-based learning.** Moylan (2008) reasons that PBL is the key to closing the gap between traditional education practices and reality. PBL is:
A student-driven, teacher-facilitated approach to learning. Learners pursue knowledge by asking questions that pique their natural curiosity…Student choice is a key element of this approach. (Bell, 2010, p. 39)

Of course, PBL has been around for a long time and is based on constructivist learning principles emphasizing dynamic, contextualized and authentic learning (Land & Hannifin, 2000). An often stated mission goal is the development of critical-thinking skills; yet, this is not coming to fruition under the current approaches of many institutions. There is a serious disconnect between the higher-order thinking and constructivist ideals of the academic mission statements and actual classroom instruction:

Professors want the students to be able to be independent problem solvers and thinkers, but [these intentions] are contradicted by mediating artifacts, such as a content-oriented curriculum, lecture methods for knowledge transmission, and multiple-choice examinations that largely assess memorization. (Jonassen, 2000, p. 117-118)

Jonassen (2000) divides student-centered learning environments (SCLEs) into four categories: project-based, problem-based, case-based and question/issue-based: "all share the same assumptions about active, constructive, and authentic learning" (p. 91). For Jonassen (2000) the important point is that well-designed SCLEs environments will stimulate and engage more than traditional learning environments: “Learning actions in school are purposeless, whereas activities that give rise to learning in the real world are purposeful; they are motivated by intentions …Abstracted learning actions have no meaning” (p. 107).

Allowing English language foundation program students to develop their language skills via holistic and authentic project work would aid in developing other
skills such as collaboration, cooperation, leadership, problem-solving and creativity – 21st century learning competencies (Bell, 2010). This is not to say that project work is incompatible with discrete language practice, a necessary component of second language acquisition. Furthermore, well-designed projects can easily incorporate any of the second language learning principles as summarized by Ellis (2005) – for example, focus on meaning, the importance of individual differences, acquisition of lexicon, syntax, and a balance between rehearsed and free speech.

**Proposal C: Harness the Power of ICT to Transform Education**

[A strong, clear, articulated, and sustained vision is a crucial element that serves as a pivot point for all of technology enhanced instructional designs. (Anderson, 1999, p. 9)]

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) plays an important role in the development of 21st century learning environments. Today's students are often referred to as *digital natives*. According to Prensky (2010), today's youth want (1) to not be lectured to; (2) to be respected; (3) to follow their own interests and passions; (4) to be creative [especially using available technology]; (5) to work with their peers; and (6) an education that is not only relevant, but also real. Naturally, these desires reflect what students already experience every day through various social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and so on. However, research shows that it is a mistake to assume young students know how to exploit technology for educational purposes; the reality is that many do not (Bennett & Maton, 2010; Bayne & Ross, 2007; Crook, 2012). Therefore, the role of the instructor remains just as important in a 21st century learning environment as it does in traditional ones (Selwyn, 2012).

Technology enables students and teachers to break through the artificial and disconnected walls of the English as a Foreign Language classroom by providing the
opportunity to access information in real-time, communicate, create and share rather than as supplemental activity in order to temporarily distract students or simply replicate behavioristic, paper-based activities. Technology in this way can play a transformative role (Robinson & Sebba, 2010). The US Department of Education led the development of the National Educational Technology Plan (NETP) 2010, which envisions technology usage to create engaging, relevant, and personalized learning experiences “that mirror students’ daily lives and the reality of their futures” (p. x). According to the NETP, regardless of the content area, 21st century competencies should be part of the entire curricula, whereby students learn technology that professionals routinely use:

such as wikis, blogs, and digital content for the research, collaboration, and communication demanded in their jobs … these real-world tools create learning opportunities that allow them to grapple with real-world problems—opportunities that prepare them to be more productive members of a globally competitive workforce. (p. xi)

It is vital, however, that English language foundation programs deploy technology not for the sake of deploying technology, but rather as a tool and vehicle through which education is transformed (Honan, 2012). To this end, rather than traditional “desk-confined, textbook and whiteboard techniques… [technology offers a] …rich context for…social construction of outcomes, connections, cooperation and collaboration with others, and practical engagement and worthwhile real-world activities” (Snape & Fox-Turnbull, 2011, p. 156). A technology-rich, 21st century curricula enables learners to work effectively “within social networks for educational, social and civic purposes, and to develop strategies to establish and mobilize social networks for their own purposes” (Facer & Sandford, 2010, p. 86). Citing numerous
examples of project-based learning, such as ThinkQuest, which “inspires students to think, connect, create, and share,” Moylan (2008) provides many examples of how educational technology enables constructivist learning.

Technology enables differentiated and blended learning (Liu, Kalk, Kinney & Orr, 2010) – another stated aim of many English-language programs. For example, lessons can be off-loaded to self-access video tutorials packaged in mobile application software, which can be tracked in LMS systems like Blackboard. What’s more, these language programs could distinguish themselves by eliciting the help of interested instructors to create original video content as seen on the Khan Academy website, and in the UK, O2 – examples of the flipped classroom – which many US and UK K-12 schools are starting to embrace (Kronholz, 2012). These are just some examples of many possibilities for using technology to support a project-based, 21st century curriculum, all of which may “result in establishing an authentic learning environment that creates powerful connections, collaborations, and creativity that promotes learning and challenges thinking” (Johnson, 2010, p. 174).

Technology integration using devices such as computers, digital cameras, mobile devices like smart phones and tablets, combined with cutting-edge software applications such as iPad apps can be leveraged seamlessly to create engaging and interactive learning environments while at the same time support curricular goals. In addition to project-based learning, as outlined above, these technologies support numerous integration approaches such as online and blended learning, game-based learning, assessment analytics, student-generated multimedia creation, collaborative online learning through social media platforms, and much more (Edutopia, 2007).
Of course a shift to this type of 21st century educational paradigm will not occur without some challenges because:

it appears to go against some of the most deeply held beliefs about teaching and learning … it questions the ideas that students bring little to the educational encounter and that the role of the teacher is to pass on … the commonly accepted stock of knowledge valued by society. (Morgan, Williamson, & Facer, 2007, p. 27)

It is important to understand that “[t]he locus of control in a social-constructivist system shifts somewhat away from the teacher” (Anderson & Dron, 2011). The results of a three-year study indicate that there is a direct relationship between constructivist beliefs and a concern for student-centered instruction, whereby classroom technology use “may depend on teachers’ interests in facilitating a student-centered instructional environments, [more] than upon factors such as their level of experience or perception of their access to technology” (Overbay, Patterson, Vasu & Grable, 2010, p. 117).

Instructors will, of course, need training and support (Lane, 2011).

**Proposal D: Assess What Really Counts**

As a teacher or administrator, how many times have you had to take a multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank test? ... Worthy assessments should reflect the broader capabilities that students need to thrive in the 21st century.

(Sternberg, 2007, para. 1)

Silva (2009) acknowledges that “[a]ssessment is a serious driver in the 21st century skills debate” (p. 630). Harlen (2003) found that during the 1990s in the United States, the UK, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland there was an enormous increase in standardized testing. However, increased test scores are not the same as an increase in achievement. Research shows that increased scores are often due to “[the] greater familiarity of teachers and pupils with the test rather than [an] increase in real learning”
There is also an impact on teachers where “[t]eachers feel compelled to teach to the test, which leads to a focus on low-level knowledge and skills” (Jones, Vermette & Jones, 2009, p. 72). Teachers report that formulaic approaches constrain creativity and ability to meet learner needs (Jones, 2007). Trilling and Fadel (2009, cited in Chehayl, 2010) question assessment, in that, “[w]hat has been glaringly left out in recent assessment practice is the measurement of essential 21st century skills and the deeper understandings and applied knowledge that can come from rigorous learning projects” (p. 102). Likewise, Behrens, Mislevy, DiCerbo & Levy (2010) concur that “[u]nfortunately, traditional assessment models and methods are inadequate for evaluating or guiding learning in our digital world” (p. 5).

The point is that a 21st century learning environment requires non-traditional approaches to assessment. Technology can be leveraged to assist this process. The Khan Academy is a good example of how technology can be leveraged for teaching, learning and assessment. Kronholz (2012) comments that test results from schools piloting this approach indicate it is working. As the need for differentiation in education increases, this type of approach, with its advanced tracking analytics, “means learning how teachers can use their time differently, how to work with youngsters who have different abilities, and how to blend Khan into the curriculum, not substitute it” (p. 22). Kronholz (2012) adds that “[s]ome other Khan watchers gave a surprisingly strong endorsement to such measures as student engagement and self-confidence, and to soft skills like goal setting and teamwork” (p. 21).

By incorporating alternative forms of assessment such as rubrics, checklists, peer and self-assessment for projects, English language foundation programs can
effectively accommodate a shift in curriculum activity. Indeed, a recent survey shows parents, teachers and administrators now want multiple measures of student performance, a “360-degree perspective” (NWEA and Grunwald Associates, 2012, p. 1). To illustrate, a good rubric and/or checklist will enable assessment of well-designed projects, like a WebQuest, which requires higher-order Bloom’s taxonomy skills such as the ability to analyze, evaluate and create (Dunn & Mulvenon, 2009). Furthermore, English language foundation programs need to introduce proper formative assessment as opposed to current approaches, which are often simply a continuous form of summative assessment: students are always graded, results do not fundamentally change the curriculum, and students are not involved in this assessment process since they receive a grade after-the-fact (Garrison & Ehringhaus, 2007; Buhagiar, 2007). Formative assessment helps to shift the locus of control to the learner, leading to increased motivation, “confidence, awareness, and self-realization learners may gain in their collaborative engagement with tasks” (Ross, 2005, p. 319).

**Conclusion**

It has been argued that to achieve stated mission goals, English language foundation programs must move away from outdated and behavioristic practices, where instructors often eschew holistic project work for discrete exam practice, towards a learner-centered, project-based and ICT-rich learning environment. To accomplish this, strategic adjustments should be made in four areas: mission statement, curriculum, ICT and assessment. These changes require that program administrators, re-examine and re-envision current practices. Educational reform does not come easy, and it is often met with resistance. Decision-makers must be willing to let go of tradition and dogma. Until
this happens, English language foundation programs that continue to resist the incorporation of current best practices with second language acquisition principles will fall short of realizing even their current mission statements by not adequately preparing students for the realities of local and international job markets as well as life beyond the classroom walls.
References


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