**Ways to Prepare Your Students for the 21st Century**

I think we can all agree that the 21st Century is a very exciting time in education. The growing presence of the internet has changed our students more than ever for the last years. Today's students grow up with developing technology, anytime anywhere internet access. They have become familiar with mobile phones, computers, digital cameras, games etc. as soon as they were born. Our today's learners and our students at schools are "Digital Natives" (Marc Prensky) who are fluent in using computers, internet, mobile phones, messaging and gaming. They text each other every day, they send messages via mobile phones, they chat and they spend most of their lives online. Connectivity means a lot to them. Consequently, all English teachers of the 21st century need to be familiar with the growing technology because this is the only way to become a digital native. It's a long journey and there are a lot to be done not to lose anything on the way. First of all, we need to use and explore the technology personally, and as a result we will find the best ways to integrate it into our teaching to communicate, create and collaborate.

Let’s start by looking at 21st century skills more carefully. 21st Century skills can actually be listed as a group of words that begin with the letter “C”. These are the four skills that your students will need to be successful in the 21st Century: **C**ommunication, **C**reativity, **C**ritical Thinking,  **C**ollaboration.

Is your English language classroom actually the right place to build these 21st Century skills?

Typical English language classroom is to prepare students to communicate across cultures, across borders, across perspectives. The idea is to teach an individual’s ability to think outside the box, find future solutions to future problems, collaborate across cultural and national borders.

As a general guide, however, here are “essential strategies” recommended to encourage 21st Century thinking and learning.

**How to Let Your Students Lead The Learning**

Learning takes place best in environments where students feel safe and empowered to learn. Effective teachers are more like moderators, offering **inspiration** and **guiding** students to discover for themselves. Give students the opportunity to be self-learners, which guarantees lifelong learning. This brings us directly to the second point.

* **Community Build**. All Year Long. Routinely include strategies and activities in your lessons that allow students to express their thoughts and ideas.
* **Post Student Work.** When displays of essays, poems, projects, and exams dominate the walls, there is student ownership of the room. When they look around and see their own writing and thinking, they certainly experience a higher level of comfort than if they see store-bought posters.
* **Have Non-Negotiables.**  Along with classroom rules and procedures, students must know non-negotiables.
* **Admit When You Don't Know.**  Saying "I'm not really sure. Does anyone else know or might they like to look that up for us?" is powerful stuff.
* **Read with Your Students.** The message this sends: *I like to read. I don't just tell you this and grade you on how much you read, I read side-by-side with you. You see my facial expressions as I struggle to understand something difficult and you see when I feel emotion at a sad or funny part. I am a reader, too.*
* **Remain Calm at All Times.** Once a teacher loses it with a class or student, it takes a long time to rebuild that feeling of safety and trust within those four walls.
* **Take Every Opportunity to Model Kindness.** Your students will follow.
* **Circulate.** Mingling lets you monitor their work, yes, but it also gives you a close view of any tensions or negative energy brewing with groups or between students. Also, circulating gives you great opportunities to overhear a student sharing an idea or question that you can use with the whole class.
* **Write with Your Students.** The message this sends: *I like to write. I don't just tell you this and grade you on your writing, I write side-by-side with you.*
* **Smile Often.**  The more smiles we offer to students, the more we will receive.
* **Use Every Opportunity to Model Patience.** Students will notice.
* **Give Kids a Chance to Problem Solve on Their Own.** It's so much better when ideas and solutions come from the student.
* **Offer Options.** If we start an assignment with, "You will have three choices," kids may even get excited and are often much more willing than when we say, "The assignment is... ." By giving kids choices, we send a message that we respect their decisions.
* **Keep the Vibes Good.** Students, no matter how young, know when a teacher is not happy. Joy can be contagious, but so too can misery. Maybe a vacation, a massage, watching a [TED Talk](http://www.ted.com/talks/adora_svitak.html).
* **Join your students.** Sitting in a chair made for a child is not the most comfortable thing for an adult. But joining a group of children at their table takes us off stage and let's us, even just for a few moments, become a member of the group. We might ask a strategic question, inquire about the group's project, or simply listen.

**2. Create an Inquiry-Based Classroom Environment**

If students are to lead the way to learning, they need to be able to ask questions – and then find the means to answer them. Students and teachers need to “wonder out loud” as they encounter new information. A KWL chart (What do you **K**now? What do you **W**ant to know? What have you **L**earned?) can guide students toward true self-motivated learning.

* **Listen when students speak.** Listen. Try to understand what students’ real question is, not what their words say. Take the time to travel the distance to a solution.
* **Encourage questions.** When students understand a concept more thoroughly, they will transfer that knowledge to other lessons and those will go faster than expected.
* **Spend time on projects, not lecturing.** Inquiry is about doing, not observing, action not inaction.
* **Lessons are fluid.** Learning is a web that grows out from the central question. As such, your lesson plan may change dramatically based on student inquiry. Your challenge is to track what you did in each class and pick up from where you left off. It's part of the job of teaching an inquiry-based class.
* **Publish and share.** Inquiry-based classrooms share knowledge. This can be accomplished via a class wiki, blogs, and websites. Students understand how to embed articles and projects onto the internet or class network so its shared by everyone.
* **Reflection is included in every lesson plan.** What did students learn? Where can they transfer it? Teacher should do answer these questions after every teaching experience. Your students should do it also. This will help you understand if what students learned was what you planned, or something else.
* **You are a fellow learner.** Students learn they are valued in the classroom experience. In this way, they understand the importance of their participation in projects, reflections, and collaborative experiences. Encourage this.
* **Questions don't have yes-no answers.** Usemore 'how' and 'why', which requires investigation into multiple strands to answer well.
* **Summative assessments are less paper-and-pencil and more hands-on, creative, and student-centered.** They are less about answering teacher questions than sharing student learning.

**3. Encourage Collaboration**

Collaboration is one of the most important 21st century skills. Students are social beings, and even more so in a language class. Find every opportunity to allow students to form pairs and small groups. Not only does this encourage the development of speaking and listening skills, but it also teaches students how to effectively achieve goals together.

**Build strong collaborative learning.** Encourage classroom collaboration by assigning students to groups to review their homework, do daily class worksheets, participate in moderated discussions, and complete hands-on projects.

**Create an effective classroom geography.** In English classes, students sit around a table capable of seating the entire class, which allows every student to see the teacher and all the members of the class as they speak.

**Focus on the process, not right answers.** In English, the discussions are open-ended, allowing for multiple right answers.

**4. Develop Critical Thinking Skills**

Learning is more than memorizing and remembering. Critical thinking skills take students well beyond simple comprehension of information. Students use these skills to solve problems in new situations, make inferences and generalizations, combine information in new patterns, and make judgments based on evidence and criteria. Introduce activities in your lessons that build critical thinking skills along with language skills.

* **Critical thinking is aimed at achieving the best possible outcomes in any situation**. In order to achieve this it must involve gathering and evaluating information from as many different sources possible.
* **Critical thinking requires a clear, often uncomfortable, assessment** of your personal strengths, weaknesses and preferences and their possible impact on decisions you may make.
* **Critical thinking requires the development** and use of foresight as far as this is possible.
* **Critical thinking involves reviewing the results** of the application of decisions made and implementing change where possible.

**5. Encourage Creativity**

Encourage your students to be creative throughout each lesson. Creative activities allow students to express what they’ve learned in a new way. This synthesizing and personalizing of knowledge consolidates learning, and creates an experience that remains with students long after the class is over.

* Encourage the narrative voice in writing and oral presentations.
* Ask for multiple possible answers to questions or multiple possible solutions to problems.
* Give points for “design” on all assignments.
* Instead of simply telling a student his or her  response is “wrong,” ask for a reason why the answer was given.
* Use technologies that encourage creativity.
* Ask students to help formulate classroom rules, modify procedures, and solve issues.
* Honor students’ personal interests and unique talents when teaching skills.
* Add creativity spaces for display of student work in your classroom.

By keeping these strategies in mind as you plan each lesson, you will be encouraging the development of 21st Century skills. Of course, your students may also need time to adjust to this new way of learning. However, they will soon begin to feel empowered to think more critically, to ask questions and seek answers, and to express themselves creatively. Most importantly, their communication skills will become much stronger as a result, which always remains our main objective!

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