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**AN OVERVIEW OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION
PROCESS IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

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Rezumat: *Întrucât metodologiile din trecut nu par să răspundă necesităților secolului XXI, atribuțiile profesorilor de limbi străine devin tot mai dificile. Ei sunt așteptați nu doar să proiecteze decurgerea procesului educațional în așa mod ca să dezvolte*

cele patru competențe de bază, dar și să contribuie la formarea abilităților dictate de secolul al XXI-lea. Astfel, articolul oferă o prezentare generală a metodelor actuale de educație a limbii engleze ca limbă străină. De asemenea, este evidențiată importanța dezvoltării abilităților de gândire de ordin superior la elevi, astfel încât să poată satisface cu succes cerințele societății actuale.

Cuvinte-cheie: *educația limbii, metode, competență culturală, competențele secolului XXI, abilități de gândire superioară.*

English has become the lingua franca of the 21st century. It has changed its status from a national language spoken in an English speaking country (e.g. in the UK or the USA) to an international language enhancing communication on a global scale. The number of both second language and foreign language speakers of English has considerably grown in the last few decades and is still in a continuous growth. In fact, for most of them English has become more than a second or a foreign language; it has become an international language, serving as the main means of communication in an international community. These changes have contributed to the revision of the existing principles and practices of the English language teaching and the elaboration of new methods meant to enhance the language education process taking into consideration the new demands of the 21st century.

The changes in the language education paradigm have contributed to a better understanding of what should be taken into consideration while designing the education process. First and foremost, the learners' needs should be considered. Then, the language educators are to choose among the varieties of methods that will help them scaffold the language education process. Traditional coursebooks can offer an overview of the existing methods. In her book *A Course in English Language Teaching*, Penny Ur (2012) describes the main methods that influenced the development of foreign language educational process through the history, and which are summarized below.

The grammar-translation method is based on studying grammar rules and translating sentences. It concentrates more on the written or passive form of the language, rather than on the oral or the active part of it. This method is totally teacher-centered, where students take no responsibility for their own learning.

The direct method appeared as a reaction to the grammar-translation method. It puts special emphasis on the development of speech. Moreover, it bans the use of the L1 in the process of teaching and learning. It is still actively used in some of the language schools, such as Berlitz.

The audio-lingual method follows the principles of behaviorism. It is based on the teaching-drilled activities, on learning by heart and constant repetition of the learned material. Although the method concentrates on speaking, it does not boost learners' fluency. Just like the grammar-translation method, audio-lingualism focusses more on accuracy than on fluency. The learners learn by heart dialogues and are given little chance to have genuine interactions.

PPP stands for "Presentation, Practice, Production" and suggests the stages that should be followed in a lesson. It is constructed on the skill-learning theory of the acquisition of a language, but like the previous methods, it is teacher-centered

and accentuates more the grammatical accuracy. The teacher still has the leading role in front of the class instructing the learners.

The communicative approach is based on the theory that language is communication and that communication is best acquired in the natural environment, similar to that implied in the acquisition of the native language. It is a method centered on the learner, where the conveyed meaning during the conversation is more important than the accuracy. This approach has led to various methods used by language educators nowadays. For example, task based instruction relies on the principle that learners can learn the language by doing certain tasks. They are going to interact, collaborate to accomplish the task. Thus, the focus has shifted from accuracy to fluency.

The post communicative approach is also built on the idea that communication is the primary function of the language. So students' learning is scaffolded through meaningful activities the purpose of which is to use the language appropriately in concrete situations. However, it involves the usage of the target language in the communicative tasks if needed. Grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling are explicitly taught through a larger spectrum of procedures centered on the learner, which include form-focused and meaningful exercises. This method also allows the usage of such techniques as translating and learning dialogues and texts by heart. [7, pp. 7-9]

Although, the post communicative approach is more appropriate than the previous ones for the demands and requirements of the 21st society, nowadays it is more important to choose the method and approach specific for the learner's needs. Moreover, it might be possible to combine two or more in order to achieve the desirable result. The main premise in the post communicative approach is that the teacher should be informed by the learners' actual needs and design the education process accordingly.

Students all over the world seem to have various priorities and necessities in the English language learning, as their cultural background and language needs are different from the native speaker's needs, but still the common goal remains the acquisition of the English language. In the book *A Course in English Language Teaching*, Penny Ur states that there have been varied language teaching priorities over the years to follow during the English language teaching process. Among the most important priorities have been and remain *fluency* and *accuracy*. It is rather essential for language learners to use the English language both fluently and correctly in order to transmit their messages effectively, with the usage of "the standard grammatical, lexical, phonological and spelling conventions". [7, p. 1]

Nevertheless, the native speaker's conventions are no longer necessary to be used entirely, as nowadays it is better to follow the conventions "used by the majority of fluent, educated speakers of the language in international communication" [7, p.1]. There could be also cases when the language accuracy does not influence the transmission of the intended message, however it can easily influence the fluency and the smoothness of the communication. This is one of the main reasons why language educators should pay attention to the balance between fluency and accuracy, and to make sure that learners follow them. Hence, language educators should apply various methods to their education process to realize this goal.

According to Douglas Brown, after decades of teaching English, it has been established that there are four essential skills to be developed in a language learner. These are listening, speaking, reading and writing. He accentuates the fact that for a long period of time each of these skills has been addressed separately from each other in different language curricula. Nowadays, there is a trend of promoting the skill integration in the language education process. In the integrated learning, one skill is not studied separately from the rest, but in the relation to two or more integrated skills. [1, p. 33-36]

According to Tomalin (1993), culture is the fifth language skill that should be developed in the language education process. The main reasons of considering culture a language skill, together with listening, speaking, reading and writing, is that English is an international language and has a great impact in the process of globalization. However, it is rather difficult to choose a certain culture for studying, as English is the official language of the United Kingdom, USA, Australia, Canada, etc., besides in several countries it is used as a second language (e.g. India). [6]

Additionally, as English is a language studied and used for different purposes in the majority of the countries all over the world, it is rather impossible to study it inside the boundaries of one or two countries and cultures. It is almost impossible, as every country has its own traditions, history and social environment, which makes English to be tackled cross-culturally. For example, a scientific conference from a non-English country could be organized in the English language. In this way, a certain problem could be approached from the perspective of a completely different culture, than of that one where English is a national or second language. This change that occurred in the last decades is because the learners first of all should be able to identify themselves as cultural beings in order to become aware of other cultures. [4, pp. 42-43]

The technological revolution is, undoubtedly, the most noticeable change in the present society, whereas education has also been entrusted with a more fundamental responsibility: educating personalities cross-culturally developed, aware of constant global changes and conflicts. The cultural aim of schools is to assist students in deepening their understanding of culture. Schools have a cultural goal of assisting students in deepening their comprehension of culture, the processes that form value systems, the way they have been raised to take those things for granted, the realization that this is not the case for everyone in the world, and the ability to consider and appreciate what is different from us. [3, p. 3]

The present and future education requires setting new priorities, concentrating on the creation of a responsible and successful national and global citizenship identity in students, with all the awareness, skills, and attitudes that requires. Contemporary education aims to develop a generation of human beings able to realize the sides of interdependence of the present society systems. In these circumstances, the 21st century contributed to the appearance of a new approach to the skills essential for students for academic and real life situations. There have been presented various skills and sub-skills, which meet the existing social and economic conditions. [3, p. 3] This are named 21st century skills, which correspond to the demand of nowadays society and

technological process. Their significance is dictated by the multicultural and heterogeneous societies, where various values and cultures are influenced by the diversity.

In the table below, the 21st century skills are represented. It could be seen that they are different from their nature, though each of them is important. Beginning with the creativity and critical thinking, continuing with acceptance and understanding diversity and others, and finishing with the physical well-being. We can notice that being a complex person and developed in varied fields is the main request of the contemporary world. We have to learn to accept our and other people's individuality and to use the opportunities that we could have daily through the interaction with different people.

Table 1. Compiled 21st Century Skills List

“creativity, divergent thinking, critical thinking, team working (especially in heterogeneous groups), work autonomy, developed cognitive and interpersonal skills, social and civic competences, responsible national and global citizenship, consciousness of interdependence, acceptance and understanding of diversity, recognition and development of personal attributes, interactive use of tools, communication in mother tongue and foreign languages, mathematical and science competence, digital competence, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, accountability, leadership, cultural awareness and expression, physical well-being.” [3, p. 6]

The 21st skills are related to Higher Order Thinking skills (HOTS), which are based on the complex process of rational thinking. As known, thinking is a cognitive process, which comprises “critical, logical, reflective, metacognitive and creative thinking” [2, p. 349]. Each of them is mostly activated when a person encounters unexperienced problems, indecisions by questions or dilemmas.

Newmann (1988) affirms that the stimulation of the mind and the extension of intellectual abilities could be achieved “through *interpreting, analyzing and manipulating*” In their article *Developing higher-order thinking skills with concept mapping: A case of pedagogic frailty*, Alberto et al (2017) provide the following HOTS:

Transfer – the ability to apply the acquired knowledge in new contexts and situations.

Reflective and critical thinking - the drill facilitating the learner's ability to create clear and logical connections between facts, evidences and conclusions.

Metacognitive skill - “evaluating one's thought process as self-guided and self-disciplined (Paul, 1988)”.

Argumentation and creative thinking - “the process of evaluating the evidence collected in problem solving or the results produced by thinking *creatively*.”

There are additional skills mentioned as higher-order thinking, such as: *problem solving, logical thinking, reasoning*. Additionally, Geertsen provides five micro-thinking skills by means of degree of abstraction:

Extrapolation: discovering the applicability of the known data to the unfamiliar situations;

Evaluation: determining the value of the situation, think, process or phenomenon;

Explanation: deducing the logically following of a process or event;

Synthesis: forming a coherent hole;

Analysis: dividing into several logical parts (compare and contrast). [2, pp. 350-351]

In the article *Helping Students Develop Higher Order Thinking Skills*, V. Condrat (2018) examines the importance of the higher order thinking skills (HOTS) during the 21st century language education process, throughout which learners should be able to question and judge the degree of credibility of the received information. Actually, the education can no longer be perceived as a passive, teacher-centered transmission mechanism in which there is no involvement and challenge. The development of HOTS should be promoted in the classroom as the fundamental skills for the development of abilities for the future.

For this reason, students in the twenty-first century should be equipped with the skills required to reason, challenge, and assess the importance of knowledge obtained. Moreover, the education process should be student-centered, with all learners participating in a meaningful conversation with equal speaking rights and the ability to articulate a concrete point of view. As a consequence, a critical thinker is open-minded, neutral, judging and challenges one's own convictions by the engagement of critical thinking skills. In this case, the teacher's job is to provide students with skills and build attitudes that will help them think more clearly. Students are required to make appropriate decisions, including judging the source's credibility, which is a critical skill to build in the information age of the twenty-first century. [4, p. 239]

The main objectives of the 21st century English language education are strongly connected with the technological and the socio-cultural changes in the world. These modifications influenced the necessity of the development of certain skills, alongside the basic ones. The 21st century skills and higher order thinking skills are of major importance not only for an English language learner, but also for each person whose life and activity is connected with the interaction with people from other countries or societies.

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