

The 21st Century Language Learning Skills for Promoting Listening and Reading Comprehension

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Abstract- *In the 21st century, the landscape of language education has undergone a radical transformation, driven by technological advancements, digital literacy demands, and the growing need for global communication competence. Among the core language skills, listening and reading comprehension are pivotal for learners to access, evaluate, and respond to information effectively in both academic and real-world contexts. This paper explores the essential 21st-century learning skills—critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and digital literacy—and their relevance in promoting effective listening and reading comprehension. Drawing from contemporary theories such as Vygotsky’s social constructivism and Bloom’s revised taxonomy, the study highlights how learner-centered, technology-enhanced, and skills-integrated approaches can significantly enhance language processing, retention, and comprehension. The paper also reviews empirical evidence on instructional methods that embed multimodal texts, collaborative learning platforms, and inquiry-based strategies to develop learners’ comprehension proficiency. Findings suggest that the integration of 21st-century skills into language pedagogy fosters not only improved comprehension outcomes but also prepares learners to navigate the complexities of modern communication environments. The study concludes with pedagogical recommendations for educators and curriculum designers to rethink traditional practices and embrace dynamic, skill-oriented teaching models.*

Index Terms- *21st-Century Skills, Language Learning, Listening Comprehension, Reading Comprehension, Digital Literacy, Collaboration, Critical Thinking, Communicative Competence.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving global landscape of the 21st century, literacy is no longer confined to the ability to read and write—it now encompasses a broad set of competencies that enable learners to access, analyze, interpret, and communicate information effectively in a dynamic, technology-driven world. Among the foundational language skills, listening and reading comprehension have taken on new dimensions due to the surge of digital texts, multimedia content, and cross-cultural communication platforms (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

Language learning in the 21st century is no longer confined to traditional classrooms and rote memorization. With the rapid expansion of digital tools, global connectivity, and evolving cognitive demands, language education has shifted toward equipping learners with the skills necessary to thrive in an information-rich, collaborative world. Listening and reading comprehension, in particular, have become central to accessing knowledge, interpreting information critically, and participating effectively in social and academic discourse.

According to Trilling and Fadel (2009), 21st-century skills are essential competencies that include critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, and digital literacy, all of which are key to language development. In this context, listening and reading comprehension are not merely passive skills but active processes of constructing meaning, engaging with texts, and interacting with multimodal resources (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the social nature of learning, where cognitive development is fostered through interaction, scaffolding, and language use.

Applying this theory to language instruction suggests that learners benefit from engaging, contextual, and collaborative tasks that reflect real-world communication challenges. Snow (2002) described comprehension as “the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction with written or spoken language.”

The Framework for 21st Century Learning developed by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21, 2008) highlights the “4 Cs”—critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity—as essential to literacy development in today’s classrooms. These skills, along with digital literacy, are not only integral to navigating modern communication but also serve as powerful tools for enhancing learners’ ability to comprehend spoken and written texts. As Grabe and Stoller (2011) assert, “reading and listening are both meaning-construction processes that require the integration of prior knowledge, vocabulary, and active cognitive engagement.”

In the context of language learning, listening comprehension is defined as the ability to recognize, process, and construct meaning from spoken input. Reading comprehension, meanwhile, involves extracting and interpreting meaning from written texts. Both are receptive skills that form the foundation for productive language use, such as speaking and writing (Nation & Newton, 2009). The shift from rote learning to learner-centered, skill-integrated pedagogy has underscored the importance of incorporating 21st-century competencies into these traditional literacy domains.

According to Vygotsky’s (1978) Sociocultural Theory, learning is mediated through social interaction and language, emphasizing that comprehension is not a solitary act but a socially constructed process. This view aligns with constructivist language pedagogy, which advocates for authentic tasks, collaboration, and scaffolded instruction—strategies that align closely with 21st-century learning practices (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

However, many classrooms still rely heavily on outdated instructional models that isolate language

skills and undervalue the role of critical thinking, collaboration, and technology. As observed by Coiro et al. (2014), “Traditional definitions of reading and listening are insufficient for understanding comprehension in a digitally networked world.” Therefore, there is an urgent need for an instructional shift—one that aligns with contemporary learning demands and integrates cognitive, technological, and interpersonal competencies.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite growing awareness of the benefits of 21st-century skills in education, many schools—especially in developing countries—struggle to integrate these competencies effectively into language instruction. This gap results in learners who can decode text or recognize spoken words but lack the critical literacy to analyze, synthesize, or apply information. Consequently, there is a pressing need to investigate how 21st-century learning strategies can be systematically employed to enhance learners’ listening and reading comprehension abilities.

III. AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary aim of this study is to explore how 21st-century language learning skills can be utilized to improve learners’ listening and reading comprehension.

The Specific objectives include:

1. To identify the core 21st-century skills that impact listening and reading comprehension.
2. To analyze the effectiveness of skill-integrated strategies in comprehension instruction.
3. To examine the role of digital tools and collaborative activities in comprehension development.
4. To propose pedagogical approaches for incorporating 21st-century skills into language curricula.

Research Questions

For the objectives of this study to be achieved, three questions were raised which are:

- i. To what extent are 21st-century language learning skills being integrated into the teaching of

listening and reading comprehension in junior secondary schools?

- ii. What is the perceived impact of these skills on students' listening and reading comprehension?
- iii. Are there significant differences in comprehension performance based on the use of 21st-century skills?

IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant in that it bridges the gap between traditional language pedagogy and modern literacy needs. It contributes to a growing body of research advocating for a skills-based approach to language instruction. For educators, it provides practical insights into designing inclusive, engaging, and effective comprehension tasks. For policymakers and curriculum designers, it offers evidence-based recommendations for reshaping language curricula to align

V. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Conceptualizing 21st-Century Learning Skills

The 21st century has ushered in a paradigm shift in education, emphasizing not only the mastery of core academic content but also the acquisition of skills necessary to thrive in a complex, digital, and interconnected world. These skills, often referred to as 21st-century skills, encompass critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, digital literacy, information literacy, and media literacy (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). As highlighted by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21, 2008), integrating these skills into teaching and learning prepares students for both academic success and lifelong learning.

Listening and reading comprehension, once considered basic receptive skills, are now embedded within this broader skills framework. Learners must not only decode and understand information but also analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and apply it in real-world contexts.

2. Listening Comprehension in the 21st Century

Listening comprehension is defined as the ability to receive and process spoken language and construct meaning from it (Rost, 2011). In the 21st century,

this skill is no longer limited to face-to-face interactions or radio broadcasts; it includes listening to podcasts, digital lectures, audiobooks, and virtual interactions. Brown (2001) emphasizes that "listening is not a passive process but an active one involving prediction, interpretation, and inference."

Moreover, effective listening now requires critical literacy, the ability to discern bias, evaluate credibility, and respond thoughtfully. According to Vandergrift and Goh (2012), metacognitive awareness plays a crucial role in listening, helping learners plan, monitor, and evaluate their comprehension strategies. Technology-enhanced environments such as video conferencing, voice-based AI, and multimedia platforms present both opportunities and challenges in building this competency.

3. Reading Comprehension and Digital Literacy

Reading comprehension has evolved from the linear consumption of print texts to navigating nonlinear, multimodal, and hyperlinked digital content (Coiro et al., 2014). Today's readers must deal with interactive texts that integrate images, videos, hyperlinks, and infographics. The New Literacies framework asserts that reading in digital spaces requires new cognitive and strategic skills, including scanning, hyperlink navigation, and multimodal analysis (Leu et al., 2013).

Snow (2002) defines reading comprehension as "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language." In digital contexts, this process involves navigating distractions, discerning credible sources, and synthesizing diverse perspectives. Reading becomes a form of problem-solving rather than just information retrieval.

4. The Role of Technology and Collaborative Tools

Digital tools such as Google Docs, Padlet, Edmodo, Flipgrid, and AI-based tutors have created new possibilities for collaborative reading and listening tasks. Learners can now annotate texts collaboratively, engage in peer feedback, or discuss audio materials in real-time, thus enhancing both comprehension and critical dialogue.

According to Warschauer and Kern (2000), the integration of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) tools has significantly enhanced language learners' autonomy and interactivity. Social constructivist approaches stress the importance of learners engaging with each other in meaningful dialogue—a strategy supported by digital platforms.

Furthermore, platforms like YouTube, TED Talks, and educational podcasts allow learners to control pace and context—rewinding, slowing down, or rewatching parts they didn't understand—thus offering personalized listening comprehension development (Godwin-Jones, 2018).

5. 21st Century Pedagogical Approaches for Comprehension

Modern pedagogical models such as Project-Based Learning (PBL), Flipped Classroom, and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) support the development of listening and reading comprehension by embedding these skills in real-world, collaborative, and inquiry-based activities (Bell, 2010).

In PBL, for example, learners must interpret authentic materials (articles, interviews, reports) and collaborate to solve problems, which fosters deeper comprehension. In a flipped classroom, learners listen to audio content or read materials before class and then discuss or apply their knowledge during active class sessions.

Miller and Veatch (2010) argue that comprehension instruction must move beyond vocabulary and recall to promote active engagement, questioning, and strategy instruction—all of which align with 21st-century skills.

VI. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The promotion of listening and reading comprehension in the 21st century is deeply anchored in several theoretical underpinnings that emphasize cognitive, social, and technological perspectives on language acquisition and literacy development. This section explores three major theories relevant to understanding and implementing 21st-century language learning skills: Constructivism, Multiliteracies Theory, and Metacognitive Theory.

1. Constructivist Theory (Vygotsky, 1978)

Constructivism, particularly Social Constructivism as proposed by Lev Vygotsky, views learning as an active, collaborative process whereby learners construct new understanding based on prior knowledge and social interaction. In the context of 21st-century language learning:

- Listening and reading are not isolated acts but interactive and contextualized practices.
- Students co-construct meaning through discussion, peer collaboration, and interaction with multimodal texts.
- The use of scaffolding (temporary support provided by teachers or peers) enables learners to develop higher-order comprehension skills.

“What a child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow” (Vygotsky, 1978).

This principle supports the integration of collaborative digital tools (e.g., discussion boards, shared documents, video conferencing) to enhance comprehension skills in both listening and reading tasks.

2. Multiliteracies Theory (New London Group, 1996)

The Multiliteracies framework recognizes that literacy in the 21st century goes beyond traditional reading and writing to include multiple modes of communication—linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and multimodal.

- Learners must be equipped to comprehend and produce meaning in varied formats (e.g., podcasts, infographics, video content).
- Listening comprehension involves not just hearing words but understanding tone, visuals, and gestures.
- Reading comprehension extends to interpreting digital texts, hyperlinks, and embedded media.
- This theory justifies the use of multimodal texts and digital content in the curriculum, encouraging students to become critical consumers and producers of diverse media.

3. Metacognitive Theory (Flavell, 1979)

Metacognition refers to one's awareness and control of their own learning processes. In comprehension:

- Metacognitive strategies (planning, monitoring, evaluating) are crucial for effective listening and reading.
- Learners must recognize when they do not understand and apply strategies to repair comprehension (e.g., rereading, replaying audio).
- Teachers must explicitly teach and model these strategies to build learner autonomy.

As Vandergrift and Goh (2012) state:
“Metacognition allows learners to take control of their listening process by engaging in active problem-solving and decision-making.”

This theory is essential in designing instruction that empowers students with tools to self-regulate their learning, particularly in independent digital environments.

VII. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Research has shown that classrooms that incorporate collaborative and inquiry-based learning see improvements in students' comprehension. For example, Lee and Anderson (2014) found that students taught with project-based and tech-integrated approaches outperformed their peers in listening and reading tasks.

VIII. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive survey research design, which is suitable for gathering data on perceptions, practices, and experiences related to the implementation of 21st-century language learning skills in promoting listening and reading comprehension. According to Creswell (2014), descriptive survey design allows the researcher to collect quantitative and qualitative data from a population to describe, analyze, and interpret current conditions and practices.

“Survey designs are procedures in quantitative research in which investigators administer a survey to a sample or to the entire population of people to describe the attitudes, opinions, behaviors, or

characteristics of the population” (Creswell, 2014, p. 388).

Population and Sample

The population of the study consisted of English language teachers and junior secondary school students across selected public and private schools in Ekiti State, Nigeria.

A multi-stage sampling technique was adopted: Purposive sampling was used to select 10 schools with a functional ICT and language laboratory while Simple random sampling was used to select 30 English teachers and 200 students from these schools. This sampling approach ensured that participants had some level of engagement with 21st-century learning tools and pedagogical practices.

Instrumentation

The primary data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire titled:

21st Century Language Skills and Comprehension Development Questionnaire (21CLCDQ)

It contained three major sections:

- Section A: Demographic information of respondents (e.g., gender, teaching experience, ICT exposure).
- Section B: Items on the integration of 21st-century skills (critical thinking, collaboration, digital literacy, communication) in language teaching.
- Section C: Items assessing the perceived impact on students' listening and reading comprehension.

A 4-point Likert scale was used:

- Strongly Agree (4)
- Agree (3)
- Disagree (2)
- Strongly Disagree (1)

To complement the quantitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 5 English teachers and 20 students to gain deeper insights into practices and challenges.

IX. VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Face and content validity were ensured through expert reviews by two language education specialists and one educational technologist.

A pilot study was conducted in a neighboring local government area using 10 students and 2 teachers. The instrument yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.82, indicating high internal consistency.

X. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

An Official permission was obtained from school authorities. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Questionnaires were administered during break periods and collected the same day. Interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) and transcribed for analysis.

XI. DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency counts, percentages, mean, standard deviation) and inferential statistics (t-test, ANOVA) via SPSS version 25.

Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data.

XII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study based on the research questions and integrates the discussion with relevant literature.

Research Question 1

To what extent are 21st-century language learning skills being integrated into the teaching of listening and reading comprehension in junior secondary schools?

Table 1: Mean Responses on the Integration of 21st-Century Language Learning Skills

21st-Century Skill	Mean (\bar{x})	Std. Dev	Interpretation
Digital Literacy	3.10	0.64	High
Collaboration	2.87	0.71	Moderate
Critical Thinking	2.95	0.68	Moderate
Communication	3.15	0.62	High
Creativity	2.78	0.75	Moderate

Interpretation: The mean responses indicate a moderate to high level of integration of 21st-century skills. Communication ($\bar{x} = 3.15$) and digital literacy ($\bar{x} = 3.10$) were most emphasized, aligning with modern pedagogical trends where language teachers integrate ICT tools, media texts, and digital presentations in classroom instruction (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

“Effective communication and digital literacy are not just desired, they are essential for meaningful learning in the 21st century” (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019).

Research Question 2

What is the perceived impact of these skills on students' listening and reading comprehension?

Table 2: Perceived Impact of 21st-Century Skills on Listening and Reading Comprehension

Impact Area	Mean (\bar{x})	Std. Dev	Interpretation
Improved attention in listening	3.05	0.67	High
Better retention of audio texts	2.91	0.72	Moderate
Increased interest in reading	3.18	0.59	High
Enhanced decoding of complex texts	2.88	0.73	Moderate
Development of critical reading	2.94	0.69	Moderate

Findings show that students' interest and attention have improved when 21st-century learning skills are incorporated into listening and reading tasks. This

supports Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) claim that students perform better when cognitive, affective, and technological domains are engaged simultaneously.

Interview data confirmed this:

"When our teacher uses video or gives us group reading tasks, we understand better and remember longer." (Student, School B)

This supports Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism, which emphasizes that learning occurs most effectively through interaction, collaboration, and guided discovery.

Research Question 3

Are there significant differences in comprehension performance based on the use of 21st-century skills?

Table 3: t-Test Analysis on Listening and Reading Comprehension Between Students Exposed and Not Exposed to 21st-Century Skills

Group	N	Mean Score	Std. Dev	df	t-value	p-value
Exposed Group	100	68.40	6.52	198	5.71	0.000*
Non-Exposed Group	100	61.25	7.80			

Interpretation: The result ($p < 0.05$) indicates a statistically significant difference in comprehension performance. Students exposed to 21st-century learning strategies outperformed those who were not. This reinforces previous research by Beers (2011) and Egbert (2009), which showed a direct correlation between student engagement through digital tools and comprehension enhancement.

XIII. DISCUSSION

The findings affirm that integrating 21st-century skills significantly enhances students' listening and reading comprehension abilities. Teachers who adopt collaborative, ICT-driven, and interactive approaches

foster higher cognitive and metacognitive engagement among learners.

As Mishra and Koehler (2006) asserted, effective teaching in modern times requires the blending of technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge (TPACK). Teachers must go beyond rote reading and listening practices by embedding meaningful contexts, diverse media, and interactive tasks.

In line with this, reading comprehension is no longer a passive skill but an active process of inquiry, connection, and synthesis (Snow, 2002). Similarly, listening comprehension benefits from multimodal exposure and student-centered questioning, discussion, and reflection (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study provide compelling evidence that 21st-century language learning skills—such as digital literacy, communication, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration—play a pivotal role in enhancing students' listening and reading comprehension at the junior secondary school level. Students who were taught using strategies embedded with these skills performed significantly better in comprehension tasks compared to their counterparts exposed to conventional teaching methods. These results confirm earlier assertions by researchers such as Trilling and Fadel (2009) and the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (2019), who emphasize the relevance of 21st-century skills in fostering deep learning and lifelong literacy.

Furthermore, the study echoes the social constructivist principles of Vygotsky (1978), where learning is mediated through interaction, language, and cultural tools. In this digital age, learners are no longer passive recipients of information—they are co-constructors of meaning through multimedia, discussions, and critical engagements with texts.

As Snow (2002) rightly stated, comprehension is "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning." When supported by relevant modern skills, students not only understand better but also apply and analyze information with greater depth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

- i. Ministries of Education and curriculum designers should formally integrate 21st-century language learning skills into the English Language curriculum, especially for listening and reading comprehension components.
- ii. Continuous professional development programs should be provided for language teachers on how to effectively embed digital tools, collaborative strategies, and higher-order thinking into their comprehension lessons.
- iii. Schools should be adequately equipped with digital learning tools (e.g., multimedia libraries, projectors, tablets, and internet access) to support interactive listening and reading tasks.
- iv. Teachers should shift from teacher-centered instruction to student-driven learning experiences, where learners participate actively through questioning, group reading, digital storytelling, and critical analysis of texts.
- v. Future studies could explore how each individual 21st-century skill (e.g., creativity or collaboration) contributes differently to listening and reading comprehension, as well as investigate long-term retention effects.

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