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NEEDS AND DEMANDS OF 21st CENTURY LEARNING SKILLS: A REFLECTIVE
APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of technology ubiquitous has advanced the pace of learning process and the 21st literacy skills by subverting the traditional way of teaching-learning activities and the paper-based source of knowledge and information. The world is experiencing the changing trends of education and it prioritizes to determine the 21st century learners' needs and demands to succeed and thrive in the global workplace today. Behind this global scenario, this paper has ventured to ponder over the reflections of teachers regarding the issue through survey questionnaires, observation and primary and secondary sources. The data were collected through questionnaires from a total of 25 teachers at some renowned universities. The research results recommend that in maximizing classroom effectiveness at this digital age, the curriculum designers need to change the traditional curriculum, pedagogical strategy, test assessment, and incorporate instructional technology, and organize schools to better prepare students as future leaders to be creative citizens and productive workers in the 21st century global society and economy. In addition, the 21st century learners to succeed in real life must master skills, knowledge, attitudes and intercultural communicative competence as a vital road map to meet the needs and challenges of the interconnected complicated changing world.

KEYWORDS: 21st Century skills, 4 C'S, inter-cultural and media communication, learning technology, task-based pedagogical approach

1. INTRODUCTION

The world has changed so dramatically that the roles of education and learning have come across radical changes. Education at this 21st century is not merely teaching traditional skills but to foster 21st century skills like critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity for students to take the challenges and opportunities of today's world. 21st century learning skills can be applied to all academic and interdisciplinary areas, and civic settings throughout a student's life. The 21st Century Learning is a term used to refer to a kind of education that is not based on traditional teaching methods or a type of learning through memorization but to involve in developing learners' real life skills to meet up the demands and challenges of ever-changing global economy. Educators and workforce experts opine that without improving 21st century skills, our children

will not be able to thrive successfully in workplace and participate in the global economy. So to speak, 21st century skills refer to a broad set of content knowledge, literacies, proficiencies, work habits, and character traits to be critically prepared individuals to succeed in today's world in educational programs, contemporary careers and workplaces. In line with the temperaments of the time, researchers and education experts attempt to define 21st-century learning from their own perspectives. In this context, Elizabeth Rich defines that *"The term '21st-century skills' is generally used to refer to certain core competencies such as collaboration, digital literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving that advocates believe schools need to teach to help students thrive in today's world. In a broader sense, however, the idea of what learning in the 21st century should look like is open to interpretation — and controversy"* (Rich, 2010). In Sarah Brown Wessling's viewpoint *"Twenty-first-century learning embodies an approach to teaching that marries content to skill.... the 21st-century learning paradigm offers an opportunity to synergize the margins of the content ... to help us navigate our future. Embracing a 21st-century learning model requires consideration of those elements that could comprise such a shift: creating learners who take intellectual risks, fostering learning dispositions, and nurturing school communities where everyone is a learner"* (as cited in Rich, 2010).

Actually, current global society lays emphasis on information and knowledge based-economy which demands a more competitive, knowledgeable, creative and innovative workforce in education, training, research and development. In this regard, many frameworks have been drawn up under the auspicious collaboration of international organizations, governments and academia. American organization founded in 2002 conceptualized a framework for twenty-first century learning skills. The demands and needs within this framework have become well-known in the field of information technology (IT) in education (P21, 2009) with three competencies which are: (1) learning and innovation skills, (2) information, media, and technology skills, and (3) life and career skills. Behind such global learning perspectives, this paper explores the issues related to "Needs and Demands of 21st Century Learning Skills" from the reflective view-points of teachers and educators.

1.1 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

To navigate the challenging job markets and to thrive within this rapidly evolving academic and economic environment, we need to focus on skills and talents through self-directed lifelong learning processes that produce skilled professional cadres. The reason behind that strikes us to initiate this paper is to discern the perspectives of how to orient the major challenges of the 21st Century literacy skills with substantial implications in the academic arena to prepare the global 'digital natives' and to find out curriculum needs and insights into the matters. Under the tutelage of such promising perspective, this paper investigates the essential advances in academia and technology into the network of communicative competencies to address the needs and challenges of 21st century learning skills with special reference to the few emerging countries of Asia and the Middle East.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, in the vicinity of teaching-learning synergies and recent developments in education paradigms, the researchers have attempted to contribute available insights into the matter related to the 21st Century learning skills and global workplace needs and demands. In this section, this paper looks into the relevant available research information on this issue across the few respective evolving areas of research and learning.

2.1 Life-long Learning Process in Tackling 21st Century Real Life Needs

From the pragmatic view-point, everybody needs to be prepared for and convinced of the need to be lifelong learners to keep pace with the evolution of education and technology. In its 1974 General Conference, UNESCO adopted a Recommendation Concerning Education for International Understanding and Cultural Aspects. A learner-focused approach is considered to promoting cultural understanding of the individual learner that would go beyond those traditional learning programs directed primarily at building awareness of slogans and of the goals of international cultural understanding (Medel-Anonuevo, Ohsako, & Mauch, 2001). Within the range of renowned education systems in Asia, Hong Kong is highlighted partly due to its multicultural environment and availability of state-of-the-art technology owing to its blending nature of Western and Eastern cultures in the most harmonious way for the real needs of cosmopolitan life. Its Reading,

Writing, and Research standards require that students comprehend, evaluate, and present increasingly complex information, ideas, and evidence through reading, listening, and speaking as well as through engagement with information technology and media communication in all its forms. Considering Language Arts/Literacy (ELAL) and mathematics, the CCSS standards attach considerable importance to the application of higher order thinking skills integrated with a range of technology tools for the development of rigorous knowledge and its application to solving world problems (CCSSI, 2010). As students experience multidimensional use of language effectively in a variety of online platforms, they need to master the standard literacy skills and understandings for college and career readiness in multiple disciplines. Behind this scenario, the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) and American Association of School Librarians (AASL) in 2007 attempt to formulate standards for digital and information literacies, which include outcomes specifically related to creative technology uses and dispositions for productivity with technology tools. The 2016 ISTE Standards for Students have been designed to prepare students for work and life to absorb the intricacies of the global issues and skills including communication, creativity, critical thinking and collaboration.... computational thinking, combined with the problem-solving and solution-making mindsets (ISTE, 2016).

2.2 Changing Landscape of Higher Education

Asia has undergone profound transformation during the past half-century from the 1970s to the present and the dynamics are also reflected in the landscape of higher education. These are mainly in the emerging countries like Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, and China which have recently experienced strong economic growth and steps-taken towards the internationalization of their higher education institutions. The Chinese government declared its intention to transform China into “an innovative society” by 2020 and a world leader in science and technology by 2050. Thailand upgrades the needs to enhance the effectiveness, equity and efficiency of its education system for students in order to achieve positive outcomes that match the country’s investment in education. As with their counterparts worldwide, Thai teachers are expected to teach 21st century skills, such as analytical thinking, creativity, problem solving and teamwork, and encourage learning outside the classroom. They are expected to prepare students for active participation in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, communities and the competitive global markets, while promoting Thai values and culture (Casiple, 2014). Singapore, within its excellent dimension, has a highly successful knowledge transmission education system that is now trying to balance knowledge transmission with more explicit attention to 21st century competencies. The development of 21st Century competencies helps students to embody the Desired Outcomes of Education (DOE). Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) in Malaysia are constantly challenged to produce graduates with 21st century skills in today’s knowledge-based society. The implementation of the National Mission 2006-2020, the 10th Malaysian Plan and the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2007-2020 are the examples of policies taken by the Malaysian government to meet the needs for 21st century human capital (MOHE, 2007). Saudi Arabia has already begun to adopt the concept of standardization a few years ago in order to define the critical skills and knowledge that need to be mastered by students in each subject at different levels of school. Altayar (2003) states that the contents of the course curriculum in Saudi Arabia are not up to the needs of the community. The Saudi government embarked upon a giant project with a huge budget in 2010, called King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz for the development of public education (as cited in Alnahdi, 2014). Here, the focus is on the development program of public education regarding teachers’ development of practical skills and theoretical knowledge to fulfil the new requirements and standards of teaching and learning skills. Pointing to this issue, Musa mentions that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia places great emphasis on education, towards preparing future generations who are the nation's true fortune (Al-Mousa, 2010, p. 7).

2.3 The Landmark Frameworks of 21st century Learning Scenario

There are a number of frameworks for 21st century learning skills to meet up the demands and needs of the changing global situation in pedagogy, education, workplace and citizenship. The Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21) advocates for the integration of 21st century skills (critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creativity, technology literacy, and social-emotional development) to encourage educators, service providers to young children, administrators, and policymakers to include early learning as they develop

strategies for full integration of 21st century skills into their learning programs (P21, 2007). See the figure below the P21's **Framework** :

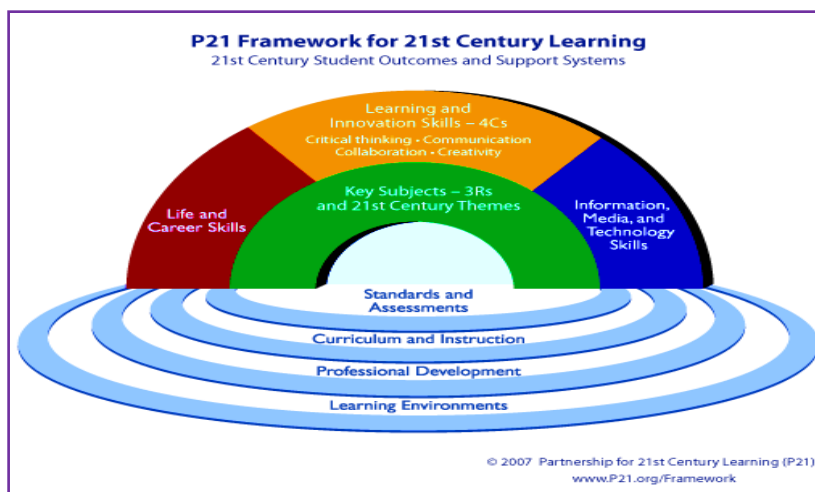
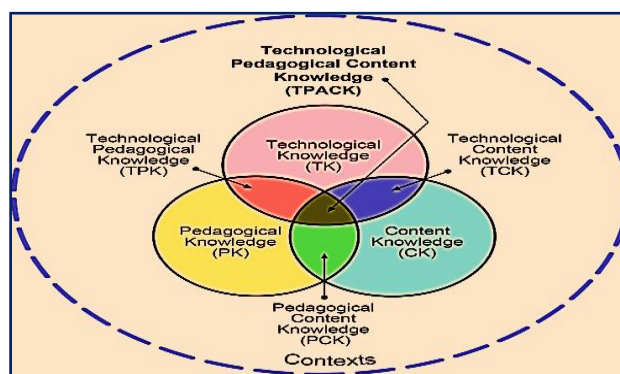


Figure 1 : The Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21)

Remarkably, another landmark framework for 21st century ever-changing learning scenario is Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) which emerges from the interaction of content, pedagogy, and technology knowledge. The TPACK framework advocates that teachers must have to be effective classroom constructors of transformative learning experiences. Here, the authors cite seven cognitive tools needed for success in the new millennium towards building exciting transformative learning experiences across a variety of subject matters (Mishra , Koehler, & Henriksen, 2011, p. 22). The TPACK framework graph is shown below:



(mkoebler, 2012)

Figure 2 : Framework TPACK. &Source: <http://www.tpack.org/>

2.4 'Teach Less, Learn More' Dictum

21st century literacy skills rely more on practical axioms than theoretical exegesis. The slogan "Teach Less, Learn More" movement enabled the realization of pedagogical change and brought success in modernizing its education system in Singapore (Trilling & Fadel , 2009, p. 37). In fact, problem-based methods outshine traditional methods in developing 21st century skills like flexible problem solving and applying knowledge to real-world situations. Design-based learning approaches can be found across interdisciplinary subjects like science, art, technology, engineering, and architecture. To keep the flow smooth, Cognitive skills are significantly more important in determining economic outcomes than a traditional measure of educational success. For example, employers in Malaysia want the graduates having hard skill and soft skill qualifications. In line with these global demands, the skills in communication, problem solving and critical thinking, team working, lifelong learning, information management, entrepreneur, ethics and moral professional management and leadership are considered to be the topmost priority. The Ninth Malaysian Plan on March 31, 2006 reinforced that the development of human capital and the upgrading of the mentality and intellectual capacity of a nation have come forward in the context of globalization (Shakir, 2009, pp. 309-315). In this regard, it is important to quote from Bacon's seminal 1605 treatise *The Proficiency and Advancement of*

Learning, "...if persons of learning, armed with new methods and insights, would simply open their eyes and minds to the world around them" (Simpson, n.d).

Apparently, this aspect of the related literature review reflects the importance and value of current needs-related learning and technology-driven education of core standards for 21st century learners and it reinforces the value of the present research.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Context and Population

The study was conducted among teachers who were teaching at Department of English at Universiti Sains Malaysia (Malaysia), Mohidul University (Thailand), Sultan Qaboos University (Oman), Eskisehir Osmangazi University (Turkey), Bangladesh Islami University, & Chittagong University (Bangladesh), University of Calcutta (India), Allama Iqbal Open University (Pakistan), Sana'a University (Yemen), King Khalid University, Najran University and Jazan University, Saudi Arabia. The participants were chosen on random basis. A total of 25 teachers having PhD degree took part in this study.

3.2 Data Collection & Questionnaire

The device of data collection for this paper encompasses a two-page written research questionnaire (See Appendix). The researchers sent questionnaire to 30 teachers via e-mail, Facebook and IMO in between August and September of 2017. There were multiple choice questions as well as question asking for short suggestions, offering the respondents a free rein. The pedagogical goal of the survey was explained in the appendix, and asked the participants to answer the questions. They answered the questionnaire pretty willingly, and most of them made some suggestions on the basis of their experiences. The questionnaire for this research seeks for teachers' reflections, evaluations and suggestions about 21st century literacy skills and emerging demands of the job market. Practically, this research is designed to capture the ground reality concerning the issue discussed as "personal reflections are integral to the emerging analysis of a cultural group, because they provide the researcher with new vantage points and with opportunities to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 100). Out of 30, a total of 25 questionnaires were returned representing a response rate of 83%.

4. RESULT & DATA ANALYSIS

The data of questionnaire were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The collected data of questionnaire were sorted out, and the percentage of teacher participants offering the same answer was computed. Typically, throughout the data analysis processes, it is strived to "...describe and explain patterns and themes from the perspective of the participants(s)" (Creswell, 2003, p. 203). Figures are drawn below to show the frequency of responses (See figures).

In the data analysis processes, the contributing data of questionnaires have been taken into consideration. The first section of the questionnaire was set to determine teachers' self-reported reflection on the general view of the institutional stance regarding 21st century core subjects, contents, learning skills and teacher & students' readiness to face 21st century challenges for a new order of life. The majority of the teachers (72%) reported that current EFL course in use does not address the real life and career related learning for future professional needs and challenges (See Graph).

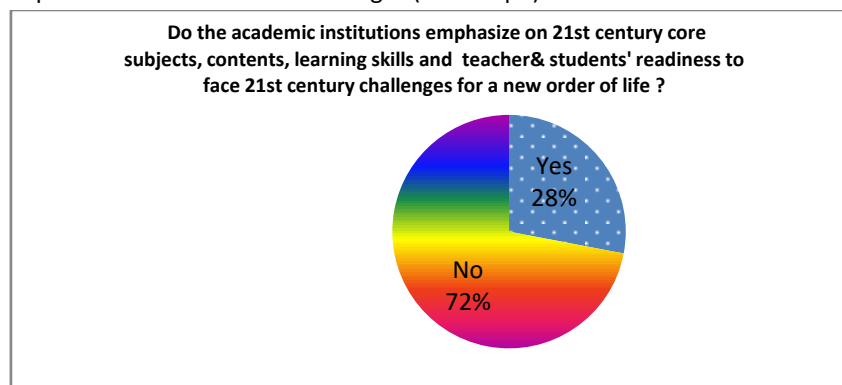


FIGURE 3 : TEACHERS AND STUDENTS' READINESS TO FACE 21ST CENTURY NEEDS

The teacher participants' concern over learners' 21st century needs-related education and academic institutional position echoes very much positive. It shows that the academic institutions do not reflect the evolving 21st century workplace needs and demands of emerging views on real life and career skills in the teaching learning curriculum system. It divulges the problems and predicaments of the current academic practices.

The 2nd section of the questionnaire seeks to know the readiness and reliability of the institutional practices imparting learners' 21st century information and digital literacy skills. The respondents show a poor and negative (80%) stance in keeping pace with the new literacy demands and inevitability of the practice.

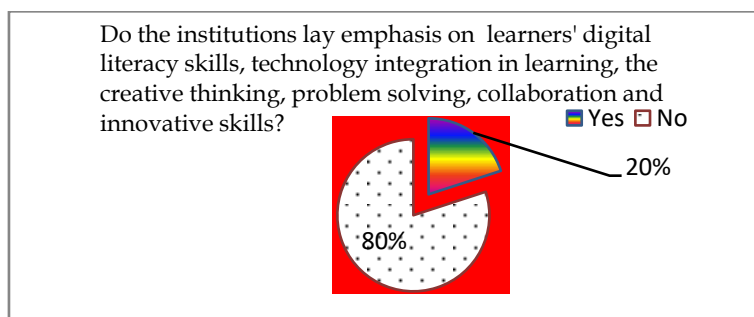


Figure 4 : Do the academic institutions lay emphasis on 21st century 'digital literacy' skills ?

The responses reflect the inability of the institutions to supply the current needs of the students. So, the suggestions to the institutions and teachers imply about how much attention the situation demands to immerse students' 21st century digital skills so that they can access to current technologies, online journals, Web 2.0 applications, Google Scholar and Scopus materials, course intranets and virtual learning environments and can master the creative thinking, flexible problem solving, collaboration and innovative skills.

The 3rd section hinges upon the teachers' reflection on learners' communication competence, integration of digital media technology (e.g., Podcasts and video casts, blogs, web-based recording libraries, MP3 players, computer-enhanced language learning etc.) in teaching-learning language skills (listening, speaking, reading & writing). The participants' reflection (60%) is very much positive and realistic. So, schools must lay emphasis on media literacy and learners' communicative competence and language literacy skills by using modern media that heighten learners' engagement in effective learning (See Figure 5).

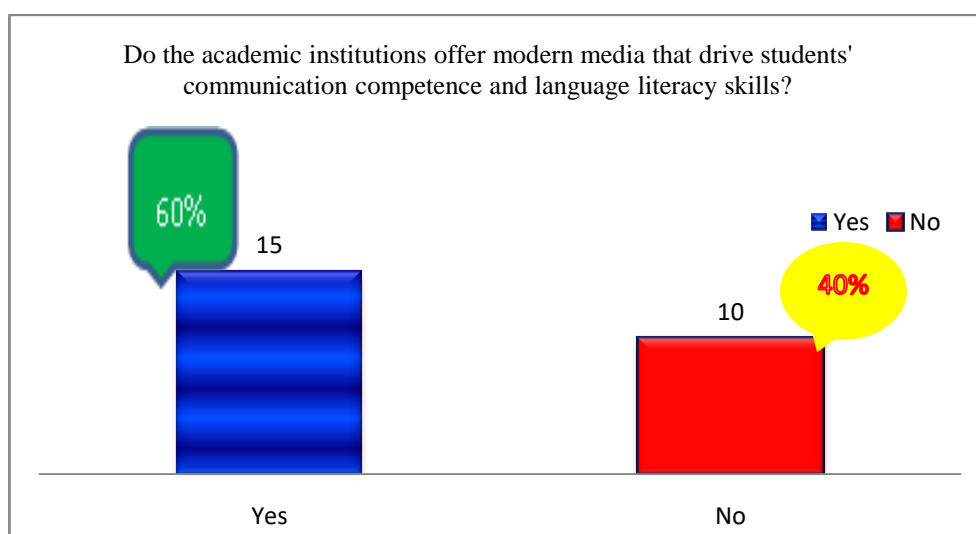


Figure 5 : Students' Communication Competence and Language Literacy Skills

The 4th section strives to capture the participants' view about pedagogical practices and students' participation in group/team work activities shaping their interpersonal and inter-cultural competence. The result of participants' response underscores a daunting aspect that 84% institutions fail to ensure interactive classroom practices(See Figure 6).

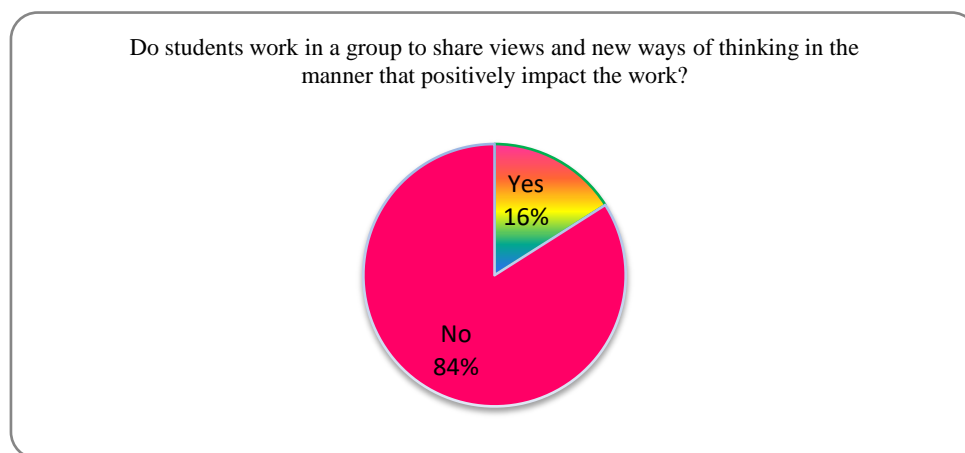


Figure 6 : Learners' Team Work & Innovative Skills

Here, teacher participants (84%) divulge an important aspect of pedagogical practice which is devoid of teacher-student interactive learning hub. Through interactive sharing views, students develop cross-cultural connections and mode of presentation with others by which they learn how to solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought. It is suggestive that interactive class room learning environment is a must for 21st century learners to understand and adhere to work in a group.

Finally, the 5th question offers a free reign to the participants to give more reflective views for formulating an effective and pragmatic learning portfolio. Majority of them offered suggestions but few did not have any. Teachers' suggestions are reported into structured answers (See table-1). 93% of the respondents suggested that teaching approach should be more on learner-centred than on teacher-centred. 84% participants laid emphasis more on *speaking*, and *writing* skills respectively. 80% of the respondents pointed out that learning technology should be integrated into teaching practices. 72% participants suggested that the learner should be exposed to the variety of cross-culturally relevant activities in order to surpass the local psychological limitations through gaining tolerance & respect towards cultural variations.

Table 1: Teachers' Reflective Views

Sl. No.	Suggestions	Answer	Percentage
1.	It focuses more on the high standards of learners' oriented classrooms than teachers' oriented.	23	93 %
2.	It is needed to expose our learners to the latest learning technologies to meet the demands of the time.	20	80 %
3.	In the socio-cultural perspective, the learners should be exposed to the variety of cross-culturally relevant activities in order to surpass the local psychological limitations through gaining tolerance & respect towards cultural variations.	18	72%
4.	More emphasis on speaking and writing skills.	21	84%
5.	Students need to develop intercultural communication competence to communicate confidently across countries and cultures.	20	80%

Finally, the teachers (80%) lay emphasis on learners' intercultural communication competence to communicate confidently across borderless contexts and cultures.

5. DISCUSSION

This paper strives to analyse the diverse information on 'needs & demands' of 21st century learners' skills meeting up the demands of the hyper-linked workplace and teaching-learning issues especially for language literacy skills for intercultural communication in a diverse socio-cultural dimension. This study reports based on statistical survey data analysis and reveals the following points of hypotheses.

5.1 Problem Issues

5.1.A Absence of Interactive-Lesson practice

The present study reflects that 84% institutions fail to ensure interactive classroom practices to develop learners' interpersonal and intercultural competence.

5.1.B Lack of up-to-date Instructional Equipment

80% academic institutions reflect their inability to provide cost-expensive 'digital literacy' and technology integration related equipment as learning aids which are the current needs of the students. Thus, the academic institutions do not reflect the evolving 21st workplace needs and demands of emerging views on real life and career skills in the teaching learning curriculum system. It divulges the problems and predicaments of the current academic practices.

5.1.C Media Communication Literacy Gap

The current curriculum does not address modern media communication skills by integrating 21st century digital technologies, online journals, Web 2.0 applications, Google Scholar and Scopus materials, course intranets and virtual learning environments.

5.2 Viable Suggestions:

In today's newly flat world of connected knowledge, work, global markets, netizens, and blended cultural traditions, the 21st century demands a fresh set of responses to its needs. Education's 21st century learning goal, preparing students to contribute to the world of work and civic life, has been one of our century's biggest challenges. To contribute to learning and minimizing those challenges, this paper divulges following viable suggestions based on research data analysis:

5.2.A Competence & Performance

To thrive in the global competitive workplace, the professionals need both 'competence and performance'. The learners need to have creativity, critical thinking and problem solving capacity, and innovation with soft and hard skill simultaneously. So, the curriculum designers should redesign the syllabus considering the 21st century literacy skills.

5.2.B Facilitating Instructional Technology

To immerse students' in effective learning, the academic institutions should facilitate learning technologies, online journals, Web 2.0 applications, Google Scholar and Scopus materials, course intranets and virtual learning environments so that they can access to and master the art of creative thinking, flexible problem solving, collaboration, innovative and 21st century digital literacy skills.

5.2.C Interactive Teaching Environment

The new curriculum contents and pedagogical technique should be more learner-centred strategic than on information retention. Through interactive sharing views and questioning & answering practice, students can develop cross-cultural connections and mode of presentation with others by which they learn how to solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought. Their involvement in the problem-solving process builds a culture of inquiry, in which asking and answering their own questions becomes the centre point of the learning process which incorporates the 21st century skills: creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and communication. So, interactive class room learning environment is a must for 21st century learners to contribute to the global community.

5.2.D Intercultural Competence & Media Communication

Learning cultures of other people don't mean losing one's own cultural identity and values, rather cultural knowledge leads to a fruitful communication in Foreign Language (FL). Learning other language and culture is a 21st century skill that is vital to succeed in the global environment in which the students live and work. To confront the twenty-first century challenges to our economy and national security, our education system must be reinforced with special emphasis on the foreign language skills and cultural awareness of our students. At this turn of technology ubiquitous, to enhance learners' media communication competence need to integrate media technology, e.g., Podcasts and video casts, blogs, web-based recording libraries, MP3 players, computer-enhanced language learning etc. in teaching-learning practices.

5.2.E Cost-effective Technology

Simulating the real-world environment with media supplying a more authentic context for learning heightens the pace of students' immersion in studies. Technology is expensive and it requires a lot of funds for the academic institutions. In this case, cost-effective learning technology should be arranged to equip the classroom for effective learning environment.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper divulges some effective implications emerging from the research results and analysis. First, the core curriculum contents concentrate more on 21st century soft skills and learners' intercultural competence for future workplace needs with special emphasis on communication skills like speaking, and writing. Second, the academic institutions need to facilitate media technology and 'digital literacy' for the students' readiness to face the 21st century real life challenges. Third, the learner-entered task-based communicative approach should be adopted as a mode of teaching in the classroom. Fourth, for effective teaching, media technology (e.g., audio, video, internet or art movies, hypertext materials) integration into teaching-learning should be a paramount focus as a demand of the time. Academic institutions need to rethink and reshuffle their approaches to learning from the global perspective if they are to equip people with critical thinking, communication, creativity, leadership, collaboration and problem-solving skills which are needed now and in future. Effective learning makes room for the students to reflect on what they are learning and know how to apply new concepts/skills in real world. In summing-up, the research paper expects that through the process of internalizing an effective 21st century literacy skills and pragmatic knowledge, the global digital natives will lead the world in a charismatic fashion for peace and prosperity.

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Appendix

Dear **Participants**, this questionnaire focuses on the 'Needs and Demands of 21st Century Learning Skills'. It is important to design students' practical needs related curriculum to orient them practically and pragmatically meeting up demands of the time. So, you are requested to answer the questions related to the issue (The information will be used only for academic purposes). We really appreciate your contribution with thanks.

Dr. Rabeya Begum & Hussain Ahmed Liton, Jazan University, KSA

Questionnaire

1. Developing general views on real life and career skills:

[To express your opinion mark (v) /(X)].		Yes/ No
a. Do the academic institutions emphasize on 21 st century core subjects, contents, and learning skills to build up life and career skills?		
b. Do the methods of schooling focus on the creativity towards preparing young people to thrive in the 21 st century workplace?		
c. Do you think that the teachers and students ready to face 21 st century challenges for a new order of life?		

2. Developing views on information and digital literacy skills:

a. Do the institutions facilitate students getting information to acquire the creative thinking, flexible problem solving, collaboration and innovative skills?	
b. Do the media-literate learners operate decoding, analyzing, and evaluating multimedia texts to be critical consumers and creators of multimedia texts?	
c. Do the learners use multi-media applications in EFL learning as a platform of electronic texts in developing their skills?	
d. Do the institutions offer students access together to current internet technologies, online journals, Web 2.0 applications, Google Scholar and Scopus, course intranets and virtual learning environments?	

3. Developing views on language and media communication literacy skills:

Listening		
a. Do the today's academic institutions' digital media offer a wider range of listening sources than these? (e.g., Podcasts and video casts, blogs, web-based recording libraries, MP3 players, computer-enhanced language learning materials etc.)		
b. Do the multi-media listening/viewing options give chances to combine listening, viewing and reading for long-term learning?		
Reading		
a. Do the practices focus on reading texts on a screen (computer, mobile or TV) as on the printed page?		
b. Do the academic institutions offer modern media that require new reading skills, critical reading and corpus reading?		
Speaking		
a. Do the aspects of modern speaking focus on giving presentations using Power Point?		

b. Do the institutions apply technology for developing speaking skills?	
Writing	
a. Do the writing skills focus on source-based 'written and verbal communication'?	
b. Do you think your graduate students in the writing program learn how to use research-based assignment writing?	

4. **Developing views on interpersonal skills and inter-cultural competence:**

a. Do students work in a group in ways that allow them to create new knowledge or to solve problems?	
b. Do students work in groups of members with diverse cultural background and areas of expertise?	
c. Do students learn to share views and new ways of thinking in the manner that positively impacts the work?	
d. Do you think that students are open to synchronize knowledge and learning from and with others?	

5. **Do you have any remarks and opinions to add about the achievement gaps?**

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