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## THE 'FOURS Cs' - COLLABORATION, COMMUNICATION, CRITICAL THINKING AND CREATIVITY AT THE FACULTY OF ARTS (FLUP), UNIVERSITY OF PORTO, PORTO, PORTUGAL

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### Abstract

English as a lingua franca, is considered to be as a leading language throughout the world. As such inclusive language that is needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century's societal global connection, more people are learning it for the purpose of communication. This communicative learning includes learning of communicative competencies, which can be accomplished with the combination of the 'Four Cs': (a) collaboration, (b) critical thinking, (c) communication and (d) creativity in the learning process. These have been chosen because they are considered to be as a 'mainstream' that surely reflect the current practice of the 21<sup>st</sup> century language pedagogy not only in Portuguese context observed by a non-Portuguese researcher. As such, this study discusses the impact of the 'Four Cs' in English language classes at higher education at the University of Porto, Department of Anglo-American Studies, Porto, Portugal, conducted in a period of five months, September-January 2016. It included classroom observations (for teachers, and students' activities) and researcher's teaching classes. The observations and the researcher's teaching participation show that the students and the teachers are eager to collaborate, to think critically, express their creativity and communicate, i.e. to grasp new teaching/learning activities and techniques from the others, respect their own (and their friends') ideas, and then adapt their learning based on the teachers', i.e. group's demands.

**Keywords:** Collaboration, Communication, Critical Thinking, Creativity.

### Introduction

A lot of thought and efforts about education perspective, as well as discussions, conferences and congresses are held in order to help the 21<sup>st</sup> English Language Teaching (ELT) characteristics. As previously said, English as the most important social tool in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is definitely 'the' language that needs attention to maintain and spread effectiveness and efficacy of teaching and learning it. Of such importance, English language is also in Portuguese context, proved by English Proficiency Index 2015 Rankings, in which Portuguese society is the high-ranking in its list of English speaking countries. Based on this success, the paper will try to present the essentials of ELT within the 'Four Cs': (a) collaboration, (b) critical thinking, (c) communication and (d) creativity, with all generalizations observed by a non-Portuguese researcher, hoping to discuss ELT issues that could usefully serve as a reference point and be shared to other countries' educational institutions.

Taking into consideration Scrivener (2011), who claims that teaching doesn't mean teaching all the time and teaching which doesn't mean talking all the time, this paper tries to address some of the most important skills of the 21<sup>st</sup> century ELT and students' learning needs: the 'Four Cs'. Only analyzing Scriveners' (2011) claim about teaching, that teaching doesn't really mean teaching or talking all the time, we should think of a "plan B". Then the question to be raised is: Who/ what to use for educative prosperity? Since we are talking about global society and the ELT of the current era, then obviously certain English Language (EL) teachers take part in different certain social ELT activities; while when discussing about classroom EL activities, then the paper adds these activities that can surely challenge the students and contribute to students' motivation to further English Language Learning (ELL): language learning activities that are wanted and expected by the learners, activities that are wanted but unexpected by the learners, activities that are unwanted but expected, and activities that are unwanted and unexpected. Deep analysis and examples of each activity can be given; however, the reasons for these kinds of activities' occurrences need a deeper clarification. Provided by clear ELT instructions, all these activities, wanted and

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unwanted, expected or unexpected ones, can have a deep impact on students' language progress, by becoming very challenging activities.

Since the focus is in classroom environment, the teacher is considered to be a 'sparkling' learning reason, who can have different roles: observer, evaluator, model for collaboration, facilitator, organizer and prompter, and task participant. However, these teachers' names are not fixed.

Teachers are also 'tropheyed' by other names, by Dorney (1994), Richards (2002), Ellis (2005), as they plan and organize how and what to teach at a given time. Their important role is evidenced only if teaching is suitable for learning needs, in our case applying the 'Four Cs'. Additionally, in order to understand complete relation of the 'Four C's in the English language classroom, the study will try to identify main principles for each skill, based on famous linguists' point of view, and on the research's observations. It is believed that it can provide a meaningful and an easy guideline for language teachers' teaching in classroom and help the students acquire a foreign language, even out of the learning environment. Moreover, when discussing about the principles of each skill, the aim is not to adopt a positivist stance of one skill and lessen the importance of the other one, but to understand how they are related with each other and what impact they have in the 21<sup>st</sup> English language classroom. It will try to identify the English learning/teaching principles that underpin the 'Four Cs'. However, as the study is within the Portuguese context, the findings may provide only few definitive specifications for English language instruction, but they can also be important in understanding current 21<sup>st</sup> century ELL.

The paper discusses these four general English teaching/learning skills, which as mentioned, have a strong impact in speaking mainly, as the most wanted skill nowadays, combined with listening, reading and speaking. In addition, grammar learning within these 'Cs' is not left aside, as supported by Ellis' (2014:13) claims:

- "1. Frequent exposure to the target structure and/or frequent opportunities for learners to attempt production of the target structure,
2. The creation of "real operating conditions". That is, exposure to and use of the target structure need to occur in a context where the learner is engaged in trying to communicate in order to achieve some outcome other than that of learning the target structure.
3. A periodic focus on the target grammatical form while communication is taking place".

This only shows that when learning a foreign language, whether focusing on meaning or on form, there is conscious or unconscious grammar learning going on, i.e. as the students are exposed to target language that includes target structure as well.

All these skills can be implemented in EL classroom environment as a solo work, whole class, group work or pair work, which usually depend on teachers' teaching style, the topics, and/or students' learning styles. Harmer (2001:20) has his point of view about whole class, justifying that "tasks can sometimes be successfully accomplished when working in a whole class". However, it does not mean that teachers should use whole group activities only. Group work activities are becoming more and more wanted activities within the class, and the studies have shown to have many advantages, as reported by Harmer (2001), Porter and Long (1985), Nation (1989), Ellis (1999).

If we recall Scrivener (2011:21), who says that "teaching does not equal learning, (T≠L)", it means that teachers should not take all the responsibility in Teacher Talking Time (TTT), but organize teaching and learning in which *the students* would be the main 'actors' in the learning contribution. As such, other factors in learning, as the most appropriate to explain the importance of the 'Four Cs' in our case, could be task based activities. As Ellis (2014:13) claims, in Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) students can "perform various types of tasks which create contexts for the interactionally authentic use of language". And this paper considers that this 'interactionally use of language' is a part of the 'Four Cs' when related to the group work and classroom activities, which is also supported by Nunan (2004:2), claiming that "tasks defined in terms of what the learners will do in class rather than in the world outside of the classroom". In addition, Porter and Long (1985) claim that group work increases language practice opportunities, improves the quality of student talk, helps individualize instruction, promote a positive affective climate, and motivates learners. Ellis (2014) has his opinion about the term "task" as an instructional activity that satisfies four criteria, which exactly fulfill the 'Four Cs' understanding. Based on Ellis (2014:13) the 'task' 1). "requires a primary focus on meaning"- in our case Collaboration - mainly focused on getting the meaning across, (2) his, Ellis (2014:13) second criteria, "there is some kind of gap (e.g. an information gap that motivates the learners to communicate)"- Creativity, followed by the third Ellis' (2014:13) claim (3) "learners use their own linguistic resources (i.e. they are not provided with the language needed to perform the task"- Creative thinking, in which students can analyze and come up with their own ideas, and the last Ellis' (2014:13) criteria about the task: (4) "communicative outcome"- in our case: Communication, i.e. sharing the information with the others and trying to use the language correctly.

The 'Four Cs' as a broad sets of skills can be best understood when explained in details:

**Collaboration**, as a skill includes ability to respect and work with different learners, i.e. Collaborative Learning, as a learning skill nowadays, is a very common educational term. On the other hand, the other term: Cooperative Learning is also used. As this paper focuses on the famous teaching "Cs"- as acronyms used in educational sciences, it tries to describe a broader distinction of both of them, as they are usually interchangeably used: 'collaboration' or 'cooperation'. Accordingly, Panitz (1996) makes a contrastive analysis on these two terms. Based on him, collaboration is a philosophy of interaction whereas, cooperation is a structure of interaction. Panitz (1996) states that collaborative learning does not deal with classroom techniques. In teaching/learning environments, learners adapt and adjust themselves with the others. That is, the learners respect the other learners' learning skills, take equal learning responsibilities hoping to work together and contribute together. On the other hand, when discussing about cooperation, Panitz (1996) continues by adding that cooperative learning is more directive, which includes different processes to interact in order to accomplish a specific goal. All in all, based on him, Panitz (1996) student-centeredness is in collaborative learning, while cooperative learning is teacher-centered, while Nunan (2003) uses both terms interchangeably. Bossano and Christinson (1988), in Nunan (2003:4), consider "cooperative learning as an important element in successful classroom management, adding three areas in which cooperative learning can figure: classroom environment and social task, process tasks, such as peer tutoring and goal setting and progress monitoring and evaluative tasks". Still, since both collaboration and cooperation, deal with group activities, we may say that collaborative learning includes cooperative learning, as they both focus on the students' 'output' i.e. both of them serve as basis for discussing the classroom teaching/learning atmosphere. The upper mentioned fact is also supported by researchers, such as Delucchi (2006), Harmer (1995), Gokhale (1995), who claim that students who are given activities for collaborative learning perform significantly better. Additionally, as they work towards a common goal, the opportunity to exchange ideas by being less anxious makes students to interact and cooperate with one another.

**Communication**, is a skill that includes ideas on how to express themselves effectively, whether in productive skills as spoken or written forms, or receptive skills as listening and reading. It also includes successful understanding and positive attitudes towards the learning in a FLT classroom. Richards (2013) considers that communicative teaching methods emphasize functional, as well as situational language use. Role plays in whole classes, or group works, or simulations employ activities that require students to use their imaginations and think creatively.

**Creativity**, makes the learner able to come up with innovative ideas that may contribute and challenge further learning through new original learning with other. Richards (2013) has his opinion about creativity. Based on him, Richards (2013:2) "Creative intelligence seems to be a factor that can facilitate language learning because it helps learners cope with novel and unpredictable experiences". What Richards claims, is exactly what the 'Four Cs' can achieve in language classroom: students have a chance to produce their own responses when a new, unpredictable question is posed to them.

**Critical thinking**, as a skill involves rational involvement in the learning process, i.e. each situation should include analysis of proofs, arguments, and then come up with reasonable points of views and successful solutions. Of course, critical thinking does not stand alone, but it is closely connected to other skills mentioned above.

Therefore, in order to understand different skills' effect to English learning, this paper posed these queries:

- How are the 'Four Cs' integrated in B2.1. classes?
- To what extend does each "C" effect the other "C"?
- Which "C" is the dominant "C" in B2.1 English classes?

All things considered, this paper tries to acknowledge that general education enhances English knowledge, by comprising major 'Cs' in education, which are based on social culture, students' attitude towards the specific learning and global perspectives on learning. In addition, when discussing about more comprehensive, large scales of skills in EL education, students, teachers, the teaching material, and the policy makers are also included. They are all important factors in this era's EL teaching/learning process. However, the students are those who need the opportunity to experience both the teaching and the learning process; and they are responsible for finding out their own 'comfort zone' of learning and to reflect on their learning performance by understanding, balancing, tolerating the co-workers in the group, adding new ideas, evaluating the learning situation and the learning responsibilities.

### **Methodology**

The study was conducted at FLUP, in a period of September-December 2016/2017. There were 250 students enrolled in the first year (about 20% of the students were mobility students from around the world),

divided in five classes/groups, and taught by three different teachers (Teacher A, teacher B and teacher C). All teachers were one big group that shared their teaching ideas with each other and followed the same teaching syllabus, by using "Textos"- their prepared teaching material for English B2.1 level ( followed by B2.2 level 'Texto' in the following semester), and they often added extra material throughout the semester.

As the study was interested to investigate the 'Four Cs' in B2.1 General English classes, it included fifteen random classroom observations: seven observations were in Teacher A B2.1 classes, four observations were conducted in Teacher B classes and four observations were in Teacher C classes. All these observations aimed to indicate the impact of the 'Four Cs' in English classes: how 'soft' or 'rough' did the students persist with the locally and globally appropriate and applicable teaching methods in ELT classes.

#### **Collaboration in B2.1 classes.**

The observations showed that group work and discussions were always part of learning. Both teachers and students were willing to take active parts in these activities, which were usually students' opinions about different topics introduced in classes, always including 'multiculturality' and 'multinationality'. Group work activities in stress free environment, in which everyone had the same level of responsibility, showed effective positive language learning climate. If we recall Porter and Long (1985) who claim that group work increases language practice opportunities, this was evidenced with observations in group work activities in which students could agree or disagree, express pros and cons of a given topic or, accept or refuse a suggestion. While when dealing with the improvement of the quality of student talk, mentioned by Porter and Long (1985), the observations showed that students were quiet only at the beginning of the semester (suggesting that they were not familiar with the teaching/learning process). However, by the time, these relatively 'quiet classes', became 'relatively noisy (talkative)' when talking in groups, showing confidence and were determined to support (or to oppose) what was said by using more qualitative-fluent and accurate language. Following other Porter and Long's (1985) factors, such as individualization of instruction, and students' motivation to learn, the observations showed that students communicated with each other and tried to understand the instructions, which also promoted students' motivation to further learning.

When given instructions for individual, 'solo' work, on the other hand, the observations showed that the students were given opportunities for multiple choices, for example. And many of the responses/choices were repeated, suggesting that these kinds of activities involved each student's personal response, i.e. each student's responsibility. If there were mistakes that students made, there were contextual analysis inducing attention to linguistic forms.

On the other hand, pair work, was also an important ELL activity which was usually shifted to group work activity. i.e. the students were asked to work in pairs and then to turn to the other two students sitting behind and discuss about the responses, or ideas. Noticeably the teachers tried to establish student-centered activities in which the students were challenged to embrace English language, to speak and to discuss the issues they were interested about, by becoming more confident and more competent EL users.

#### **Critical thinking in B2.1 classes**

The observations showed that students were mature and showed responsibility towards their own responses and ideas presented in EL classroom. They could all understand what was being taught, and then they could argue about the idea presented. When comparing Past Tense with Present Perfect Tense, for example, (which seemed at first problematic for Portuguese students from the point of view of the researcher, suggesting that the students compared these two tenses with their Portuguese language), the best explanation is given by Ellis (2014:13) who mentions that "students' attention to form can be motivated either by the way the task is designed (e.g. a task that involves reporting an accident will provide a natural context for the use of the past tense) or by the way the task is implemented (e.g. by means of corrective feedback)". In both cases, 1). The way the task is designed- the observation show that 'Life experiences' or 'A past event', were tasks that helped the students to understand the upper mentioned tenses, while the second Ellis' (2014) explanation, 2). the way the task is implemented- again the observations showed that the students were first asked to write few sentences in the Past Tense and the Present Perfect, then to read them aloud and to discuss why those sentences were in the Past or Present Perfect. This deeper level of knowledge, i.e. of understanding, was supported by both teachers' and other students' questions with "Wh" - questions: What and Why.

#### **Creativity in B2.1. classes**

Although creativity is considered as a 'hard' skill to be identified in ELT, the observations showed that students in General English classes were able to show their creativity. Of course, when dealing with 'focus on form' there were lesser 'signs' of creativity. However, it was evidenced. Examples of students' creativity in grammar was when students, for example, were asked to write seven different sentences using the Present Perfect Tenses and guess which one of the seven was not true. They had to find different ideas to

express themselves. And these ideas seemed that went even beyond students' current speaking abilities. These only helped them in oral activities and in thinking, as well.

Another example of students' 'creative' language learning in class was when they had to write a touristic brochure. Most of the students wrote about different 'unknown' places, where they could manipulate with their own vocabulary and their grammar, which also suggested their creativity to explore 'the unknown'. When using this 'the unknown', the observations also noticed students' new collocations, explained through *this* brochure of this 'unknown place'.

**Comment:** Both the teacher and the researcher/observer were amazed by students' responses and creative way of thinking. It was also discussed later with other teachers (and other mobility researchers).

When dealing with the students' creativity in B2.1 classes, observations showed that the students were fully involved in expressing themselves with new the vocabulary and interesting ideas, moving from what was known to unknown and vice versa: from the unknown to the known, challenging themselves and motivating themselves to further learning. All activities included speaking activities in which students could express their imagination (as in task: Write seven sentences, one to be untrue. The students had to find out their friends' 'untrue' sentence, and explain why they thought that sentence was untrue). The students could surprisingly add new thoughts and ideas by connecting known with the unknown. These are best supported by Richards (2013:3), who points out that creativity is

"the ability to solve problems in original and valuable ways that are relevant to goals, seeing new meanings and relationships in things and making connections; having original and imaginative thoughts and ideas about something; using their imagination and past experience to create new learning possibilities".

Although creativity as a skill could be easily noticed in dramas and role-plays, they were not evidenced in B2.1 General English classes. However, all of the three teachers supported and encouraged students' independence and encouraged students to participate in class as free as they could, all aiming one thing: English Language Learning (ELL), conducted whether with *deliberate* application of the 'Four Cs'- in which the teachers advised and instructed the students to conduct a communicative activity, to collaborate, or to think and imagine, or the application of the "Four Cs' activities was *spontaneous*, as mostly evidenced in observations. In these cases, students were just given the task, divided in groups (mostly five students in each group) and it was students' choice what skill of the 'Four Cs' to use to accomplish the task. In this way, through collaboration firstly, the students could create their own opportunities to accomplish the task, to receive new language input, to combine the 'new' language with the already 'known' language and to try to foster the new learning for using it outside the classroom.

#### **Communication in B2.1 classes**

It is important to note that when it is about communication, the observations revealed that students tried to make different linguistic adjustments. As there were mobility students, all students tried to adjust their conversation to their friends' understanding, in line with Dorney (2009:163) who adds that "communicative competence develops automatically through their active participation in meaningful communicative tasks". Those different linguistic adjustments were through students' active participation, trying to convey meaningful ideas in every activity. B2.1 English language instructions always provided extensive group work activities in tutorial classes. They were based on the carefully pre-selected teaching material (i.e. discussed about it with other General English teachers), suitable for the B2.1 level and students' interests. i.e. students' age. The students had different opportunities for conveying ideas within the group, or within the whole class. *What* was said, and *how* was it said, were always regarded by the students and by the teachers.

The observations showed that activities conducted in English classes and the language acquisition were well tuned. This is also supported by Nunan (1997:15-17) who gives his list of principles of teaching:

- "Make instructional goals explicit to learners in ways they can understand.
- Give learners opportunities to make their own contributions to the learning process.
- Encourage active communication through sequenced, achievable tasks
- Provide opportunities for learners to apply their skills beyond the classroom
- Teach learning strategies as well as language content.
- Teach grammar in ways that show the essential harmony between form and function.
- Go beyond declarative knowledge to procedural skills development.
- Give learners an opportunity to work with authentic data.
- Maximize opportunities for learners to work cooperatively
- Provide learners with opportunities to self-monitor and self-check".

In every class the teachers made the students aware about their learning goals. Group work activities, pair work, or even individual ones, were activities where students could collaborate and share their opinions and suggestions, usually shifting from one type of activity to the other, i.e. shifts from pair work to group work, individual work to group work, group work to pair, individual or whole class work, which made classes enthusiastic and active. All these activities contributed students' skills development, speaking mostly, then reading, writing, listening, as well as critical thinking, creativity, and communication; all these activities were conducted through collaboration, as observed. Grammar teaching and learning was not left aside, however, it was mostly taught indirectly. As the students were first year students, it is suggested that this way of teaching grammar is in line with Ellis' (2014:10) claim "... to abandon the aim of teaching grammar for immediate communicative use and replace it with a lesser aim - helping learners to develop metalinguistic understanding of grammatical structures (i.e. explicit knowledge of rules)".

It is important to emphasize that the objectives of the each of the 'Four Cs' skills mentioned above have a unique importance, and they should not be separated in language classroom practice. For example, creativity requires other students' consideration, helpfulness, adaptability and tolerance in teamwork; so good communication and collaboration skills are necessary in order to promote positive teaching environment in B2.1 General English classes. i.e. by promoting the 'Four Cs' principles: English usage as the language of instruction. As observed, high-order thinking in B2.1 classes was both critical and creative, and the students tried to generate and evaluate other students' and 'self' ideas at the same time. i.e. Critical thinking and creativity were fully evident in the students' ELL, which were shared through students' collaboration and communication.

As discussed, the B2.1 English language classes observation dealt with the 'positivist' approach of the 'Four Cs'. However, in order not to be a biased paper, it is of importance to mention that there were also 'quiet students' or 'quiet groups' from time to time in B2.1 English language activities. There were students who could not accomplish the task, or had difficulties in speaking, or (rarely) they would just simply give up the whole activity. When investigated about this (rare) phenomenon in classes, the answers were that those 'quiet' students were mobility students who (as suggested) might have found it difficult to adapt in this Portuguese teaching system at the beginning, or they were coming from a country that their previous teaching and learning was 'a quiet learning style'. i.e. individuals in very heterogeneous groups sought for locally appropriate applicable English teaching and learning. Eventually, all the observations evidenced ongoing (and rapid) ELL by the end of the semester, which is evidenced on students' written assignments (with the teachers' written feedbacks), tutorial classes and final oral exam.

### **Conclusion**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century society has lots of needs. English language speaking is the most wanted by the society nowadays, as it is considered as the leading language that can help further success. As such language, ELT has a crucial role to prepare teachers and students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century ambitions and the 'Four Cs' are only few skills that are needed to further mastering of English.

In response to the study queries, about the 'Four Cs' integrated in B2.1. classes and the 'C' dominance, the study concludes that they are fully integrated with a very balanced approach, however, collaboration and communication are 'the leading Cs', which also respond to the second query that was about the extent of each "C" that effect the other "C", adding that they are all interchangeably connected. i.e. No one stands alone but one fulfills the other, and they have equal significance in ELL.

They are helpful skills that can be used in every subject of education, as Halinen (online, cited by Klein,2015) explains, "being good at one specific subject is not enough in the changing world, and that students must be able to apply their skills and knowledge to a multitude of contexts". The above mentioned claim advocates that both teachers and students need personal effort in order to develop their intellectual the 'Four Cs' skills.

In conclusion, '**know how**' is one of the most important issues in ELL and ELT, and the encouragement of students to spontaneously focus on the 'Four Cs' aspects and the selection of additional global teaching/learning topics would definitely broaden and supplement the aim of the English teaching. This '**know how**' does not apply for ELT only, but in general education as well, which can be easily grasped and learnt through teaching training programs. Since all the students are involved in actual deep learning, with regards to its cognitive progress, the paper calls the 'Four Cs' as skills of 'cogno-progressing skills' i.e. the students are actively involved in the learning process which is mainly supported by interaction, applying locally appropriate knowledge to suit globally appropriate knowledge. This paper does not consider that speaking, listening, reading and writing skills are the only

skills that can be applied while learning a foreign language. This firmly proves that English language and its learning through the 'Four Cs' should be adapted based on social changes and students' needs, in which other skills, such as demonstration-role play, presentations, problem solving are parts of collaborative learning, critical thinking, creativity and communication.

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