

## **ENHANCING EFL WRITING SKILLS THROUGH 21ST CENTURY COMPETENCIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract**

Writing in a foreign language requires not only linguistic knowledge but also critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and digital literacy. Traditional methods often fail to keep students engaged and motivated. The study aims to explore how integrating these competencies into writing instruction improves EFL students' performance. Forty 1st year students participated in a six-week experimental study using a mixed-method research design was applied, involving pre- and post-tests, classroom observations, and questionnaires. The findings reveal that students exposed to 21st century skill-based instruction demonstrate significant improvement in writing fluency, coherence, and creativity. The study suggests practical implications for language teachers in higher education.

**Keywords:** EFL, writing skills, 21st century competencies, higher education, critical thinking, creativity.

### **Introduction**

#### **Annotatsiya**

Chet tilida yozish nafaqat lingvistik bilimlarni, balki tanqidiy fikrlash, ijodkorlik, hamkorlik va raqamli savodxonlikni ham talab qiladi. An'anaviy metodlar ko'pincha talabalarni jalb qilish va motivatsiyasini saqlab qolishda samarasiz bo'ladi. Ushbu tadqiqot ushbu kompetensiyalarni yozma nutqni o'qitishga integratsiya qilish EFL talabalarining natijalarini qanday yaxshilashini o'rganishga qaratilgan. Tadqiqotda 1-bosqichning 40 nafar talabalarini ishtirok etdi va olti haftalik eksperimental jarayon davomida aralash metodli tadqiqot dizayni qo'llanildi. Tadqiqot doirasida oldingi va keyingi testlar, sinf kuzatuvlari hamda

so'rovnomalar o'tkazildi. Natijalar shuni ko'rsatdiki, 21-asr ko'nikmalariga asoslangan ta'lim olgan talabalar yozish ravonligi, mantiqiy bog'liqligi va ijodkorligida sezilarli yaxshilanishni namoyon etgan. Tadqiqot oliy ta'lim muassasalarida ishlovchi til o'qituvchilari uchun amaliy tavsiyalar beradi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** EFL, yozish ko'nikmalari, 21-asr kompetensiyalari, oliy ta'lim, tanqidiy fikrlash, ijodkorlik

## Аннотация

Письмо на иностранном языке требует не только лингвистических знаний, но и критического мышления, креативности, сотрудничества и цифровой грамотности. Традиционные методы часто не обеспечивают достаточную вовлечённость и мотивацию студентов. Данное исследование направлено на изучение того, как интеграция этих компетенций в обучение письму влияет на успеваемость студентов EFL. В исследовании приняли участие 40 студентов первого курса, и в течение шестинедельного эксперимента применялся смешанный метод исследования. Были использованы пред- и пост-тесты, наблюдения за занятиями и анкетирование. Результаты показали, что студенты, обучавшиеся на основе навыков XXI века, продемонстрировали значительное улучшение в беглости письма, связности и креативности. Исследование предлагает практические рекомендации для преподавателей иностранных языков в высшем образовании.

**Ключевые слова:** EFL, навыки письма, компетенции XXI века, высшее образование, критическое мышление, креативность

## Introduction

In the context of EFL learning, writing is one of the most challenging skills, as it requires the integration of grammar, vocabulary, organization, and idea generation. (Ken Hyland, 2019). However, students in early stages often face several difficulties while writing essays because of limited vocabulary and grammar, poor organization, lack of ideas, weak coherence, low confidence. Traditional approaches of teaching writing often focus on grammatical accuracy and controlled exercises, which may limit students' ability to express their ideas

freely. Therefore, there is a growing need to adopt innovative teaching approaches that incorporate 21st century competencies into writing instruction.

In recent decades, the demands of global education have shifted toward the development of 21st century competencies, which include critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning, 2019). These skills are considered essential for students to succeed in academic and professional environments. (World Economic Forum, 2021). However, despite their recognized importance, studies focusing on the development of writing skills through 21<sup>st</sup> century competencies are still limited, especially in Central Asian regions such as Uzbekistan. Thus, this study aims to investigate how the integration of these competencies can enhance EFL students' writing skills in a higher education institution.

### Methods

The study employed a mixed-method approach combining both qualitative and quantitative data to ensure a comprehensive analysis. The participants were 40 1<sup>st</sup> year students studying English at a higher education institution. They were divided into two groups: Control group including 20 students (traditional instruction) and an Experimental group including 20 students (21st century competency-based instruction).

To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, several research instruments were employed. First, pre-test and post-test writing tasks were administered to measure students' writing performance before and after the intervention. These tests allowed the researcher to identify changes in students' writing skills over time. In addition, classroom observations were conducted throughout the study to monitor students' participation, engagement, and interaction during writing activities. Finally, student questionnaires were distributed to gather learners' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences regarding the use of 21st century competencies in writing instruction.

The study was carried out over six-weeks.

Week 1: Pre-test of writing skill was administered to both groups.

Week 2-5: The experimental group was taught using activities specifically designed to develop 21st century competencies. Critical thinking skills were fostered by encouraging students to analyze essay topics, brainstorm ideas, and evaluate different perspectives before starting their writing tasks. This helped

them produce more thoughtful and structured responses. Collaboration was promoted through group writing activities and peer feedback sessions. Students worked together to generate ideas, review each other's work, and provide constructive comments, which improved their awareness of writing quality. Creativity was developed through tasks such as storytelling, free writing, and open-ended assignments. These activities encouraged students to express their ideas freely and think beyond traditional writing patterns.

Finally, digital literacy was integrated into the learning process by using online tools such as blogs and collaborative platforms. These tools allowed students to write, edit, and share their work in an interactive environment.

In contrast, the control group followed traditional writing instruction, which mainly focused on grammar rules, sentence structure, and controlled writing exercises, with limited emphasis on interaction and creativity.

Week 6: Post-test was conducted.

Students' writing tasks from both groups were carefully analyzed using several assessment criteria. These included grammatical accuracy, which measured the correctness of language use; vocabulary use, which evaluated the range and appropriateness of lexical items; coherence and cohesion, which assessed the logical organization and flow of ideas; and creativity, which examined originality and the ability to express ideas effectively. The comparison of pre-test and post-test results provided a clear picture of students' progress.

### Results

The results presented indicate that both groups showed improvement; however, the experimental group demonstrated significantly higher progress. For instance, grammar accuracy increased from 60% to 82% in the experimental group, while the control group improved only from 58% to 65%.

Similarly, creativity showed the most notable growth, rising from 52% to 85% in the experimental group, compared to a modest increase from 50% to 58% in the control group.

Overall, the findings confirm that integrating 21st century competencies lead to greater improvement in writing skills compared to traditional teaching methods. These results are consistent with findings from Trilling & Fadel (2009) and Ken Robinson (2006), both of whom emphasized that integrating 21st century skills such as creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration enhance learners' writing

performance and overall cognitive development. The evidence strongly supports the hypothesis that incorporating 21st century competencies into writing instruction can significantly improve both linguistic accuracy and creative expression in language learning.

### Discussion

The results of this study indicate that integrating 21st century competencies into writing instruction significantly improves students' writing performance, particularly in terms of grammar accuracy and creativity. This improvement can be interpreted through Trilling and Fadel's (2009) framework, which highlights that skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration are essential for effective learning outcomes. When these competencies are embedded in classroom activities, learners are encouraged to move beyond mechanical writing and engage in deeper cognitive processing.

Moreover, the notable increase in creativity among the experimental group can be explained by Ken Robinson's (2006) argument that creativity is a fundamental educational skill that flourishes in learner-centered environments. The use of interactive and problem-solving writing tasks likely stimulated students' imagination and encouraged original expression. In contrast, traditional instruction tends to focus on accuracy and repetition, which may limit creative output.

From a sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky's (1978) theory further supports these findings, as learning occurs effectively through interaction, scaffolding, and guided practice. In this study, collaborative activities and teacher support may have helped students internalize writing strategies more effectively, resulting in higher grammatical accuracy and improved overall performance.

Additionally, Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1987) knowledge-building theory suggests that writing is not merely a linguistic exercise but a process of constructing and reorganizing knowledge. The higher performance of the experimental group indicates that students were more actively engaged in knowledge construction when 21st century skills were integrated into instruction. However, it is important to note that successful implementation depends on well-structured lesson design and appropriate task selection. Without clear guidance and scaffolding, students may struggle to balance creativity and accuracy.

Therefore, teachers play a crucial role in facilitating effective integration of these competencies in writing instruction.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the findings of this study demonstrate that integrating 21st century competencies into writing instruction has a significant positive effect on students' writing performance. The experimental group showed a remarkable improvement in both grammar accuracy and creativity compared to the control group, confirming that modern, skills-based instruction is more effective than traditional teaching methods.

The results further indicate that when learners are engaged in activities that promote critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity, they are more likely to produce accurate and meaningful written work. This supports the theoretical perspectives of Trilling and Fadel (2009), Ken Robinson (2006), and Vygotsky (1978), who emphasize the importance of active, learner-centered, and skill-integrated learning environments.

Overall, the study confirms the hypothesis that the integration of 21st century skills enhances both linguistic and creative aspects of writing. Therefore, it is recommended that EFL teachers incorporate these competencies into their writing lessons to improve students' academic writing outcomes and foster more meaningful learning experiences.

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