Conceptualizing life competencies: EFL teachers' qualitative perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – Meeting the 21st century skills is critically significant to ensure success in today's world, collegiate context and neoteric careers. This qualitative study turns attention to teachers' mindsets, dispositions and perceptions concerning 21st century life competencies required to meet the current, emerging and future needs of learners.

Design/methodology/approach – One-to-one structured interviews were conducted with English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers ($N = 8$), where open-ended questions were asked in order to determine the participants' perception of, support to, and integration of the life competencies into an EFL classroom setting. In addition, teachers' performance and implementation of life competencies (males and females) was observed in the classroom over a long time.

Findings – The results showed that teachers' practices contradict their conceptions of the life competencies. Critical thinking was seen as a priority from teachers' perspectives. Teachers perceived learning to learn and critical thinking as the most important competencies for students to learn. Findings of the study indicated that teachers hold positive attitudes toward integrating life competencies into EFL context; however, they lack a clear vision about how to incorporate them.

Research limitations/implications – This study recommends equipping teachers with professional training and customized orientations offering new insights into how life-competency-oriented instruction might be designed.

Originality/value – Career readiness should be a prominent aim of education where students are equipped with life skills or competencies. EFL practitioners need to understand, support and implement life-competency-instruction.

Keywords Life competencies, 21st Century skills, Critical thinking, Collaboration, Creativity, Communication, Learning to learn, Social responsibility, Autonomy, Lifelong learning, And English language learning

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1. Introduction

Meeting the futuristic requirements of the community as well as learners' needs in the 21st century requires equipping teachers with knowledge and competencies to be able to use pedagogies and

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teaching strategies to personalize learning. Kazemi *et al.* (2020), found curricula that focus on the 21st century skills depend on educational practices that enhance collaboration, think critically and creatively, use technology, authentic learning tools and online resources, and interact with learners from diverse cultures to be prepared to real world context. Furthermore, reflective practices should be highly acclaimed because both teachers and learners need to make self-reflection. This helps teachers to be aware of their practices and learners to adjust their performance.

Authentic tasks and real-world experiences are necessary to foster students' engagement, achievement and interaction. For example, the development of English language teaching (ELT) writing skills may include online discussion or a debate about a topic of the latest news. Overall, teachers should create opportunities for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners to investigate and think critically about real world issues and to suggest creative solutions and purposeful actions.

Serious impediments to effective integration of life competencies can be procedural obstacles when learners are mistakenly marginalized in the classroom. Personal traits may represent another barrier. Additionally, students' personalities (e.g. being introvert/extrovert, having low/high self-esteem, being talented or less experienced) affect their collaboration or communication skills. Time constraint is also referred to as a big challenge for effective practice of life competencies in the EFL classroom.

On the one hand, life competencies can be supported by leveraging personalized or individualized learning practices through student-centered learning, involving students in more self-directed learning, and recognizing individual learning styles, needs and preferences. On the other hand, shifting education in the direction of the 21st century approach might worry teachers. They may get concerned about the assessment of life competencies. Therefore, the professional development given to teachers should draw attention to performance-based assessment, project-based learning, problem solving, self-regulated and career exploration activities to ensure successful implementation of life competencies. In other words, teacher professional development should focus on nurturing these competencies of universal collaboration and become a catalyst of innovation and creativity in EFL classrooms (Gleason and Jaramillo Cherrez, 2021; OECD, 2018).

2. Related work

2.1 Twenty-first century skills in ELT

English as a foreign language education has witnessed a shift from the teacher-centered approach to learner-centeredness. To comply with this shift, life competencies should be integrated into language teaching. However, EFL teachers' perceptions, attitudes and practices are of considerable significance in the achievement of this integration. In this context, according to Eaton (2010), an EFL instructor should focus on cutting-edge frameworks and approaches of teaching that enhance communication around the globe. On that account, an innovative perspective of English language learning practices should be adopted to have a more learner-centered, collaborative and technologically driven classroom (Alzahrani, 2020). Novel skills are required including effective communication, cooperation and autonomy in the EFL context. Furthermore, effective investment in educational technologies is positively related to EFL students' academic performance as well as the ongoing pursuit of knowledge (Brown *et al.*, 2008; Lotherington and Jenson, 2011; Varis, 2007).

Indeed, the argument made in the educational contexts and academic communities is in favor of the integration of the 21st century skills which include collaboration, leadership, citizenship, digital literacy, critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving. These skills are divided into three categories: learning skills, literacy skills and life skills that are considered key factors and qualities of efficient academic and professional performance (Ledward and Hirata, 2011; Trilling and Fadel, 2009). Incorporation of the 21st century skills and life competencies into the educational sector has strongly emphasized designing learning environments which enable learners to be adequately prepared for lifelong learning and professional training. Moreover, innovation and knowledge

management develop digitalization and professionalism (Lai and Viering, 2012). Farrah (2020) indicated that the 21st century skills including critical and creative thinking, communication, collaboration and innovation skills can be considered quality standards to evaluate teaching English courses for adults.

Currently, there is an urgent need for more efficient practices in ELT which adopt and foster critical success skills and life competences for the 21st century. Michaels *et al.* (2017) studied preservice teachers' perceptions about the 21st century skills and about how these skills could be integrated into the educational settings. They also emphasized that EFL teachers should use the 21st century competencies. Therefore, those teachers need more professional development in this area.

Technological revolution, artificial intelligence and the emergence of big data demands a huge educational transformation and curriculum redesign to include renovated competencies and skills. According to Binkley *et al.* (2012), this situation requires EFL practitioners to further their knowledge, apply theory, and be effectively trained to implement such skills in the educational context. Furthermore, educators should empower learners to vivaciously contribute to society and efficiently compete in the labor market. Thereupon, Scott (2015) put forward the 21st-century educational-based tasks and discerned specific standards (i.e. flexibility, adaptability, productivity and responsibility) to trigger learners' ability to inquire, reflect, solve problems, collaborate, communicate and develop digital, life and work competencies.

2.2 Life skills in EFL context

Life skills competencies encourage learners to make decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively and learn how to learn (Dhar *et al.*, 2011; Griffin and Care, 2014; Kagan, 2003; O'Dwyer, 2012). Additionally, contributing effectively to the world and participating meaningfully in the academic community requires a thorough evolution of the soft skills. It is of great importance to stimulate learners to enlarge their knowledge, in terms of the four language skills and the 21st century skills. Therefore, it is essential to develop life skills to deal with life demands and challenges through the promotion of diverse perspectives, collaborative work and employability skills such as critical thinking and self-awareness (Kagan, 2003; Mclean *et al.*, 2012). In other words, the 21st century skills involve *thinking skills* such as creative thinking, critical thinking, problem solving and decision making; whereas, *life skills* include citizenship, social responsibility and interpersonal skills; as well as *professional skills* such as communication, collaboration and cooperation. Furthermore, the main concern of educators is how to make learners qualified for life and work. English language education should maximize learners' potential to be successful in their career and to further their knowledge to develop fundamental proficiency in English skills including employability, local and global citizenship, management of own learning (Griffin and Care, 2014).

English as a foreign language instruction should not merely concentrate on the linguistic aspect. Soft skills as collaboration and teamwork, creative and critical thinking, communication and presentation skills should be given priority (Crystal, 2006). Moreover, a shift from learning by memorization to learner-centered education has been called for (Alzahrani, 2020). This kind of education stimulates inquiry, design and collaborative learning and it takes into consideration the unique and diverse needs and styles of each learner to develop their English language proficiency (Taylor, 2009).

2.3 Framework for life competencies

The life competency is integrated knowledge, skills and attitudes that learners need to perform and accomplish tasks and activities effectively. According to the Council of the

European Union (2018), a competency incorporates knowledge, skill and attitude. Knowledge represents the theoretical facts and conceptions; skill indicates the capability to apply and make use of the ideas and the given information; and attitude means the mental inclination or mindset toward concepts. Additionally, Cook and Weaving (2013) report that competencies are the implementation of knowledge, skills and attitudes in authentic situations. They are the sufficient capabilities and psychosocial features of skills and attitudes used to confront complex problems (OECD, 2018).

Cambridge framework for life competencies illustrates the 21st century life skills and competencies learners need to be equipped with in the digital era. The Framework includes six competencies: creative thinking, critical thinking, learning to learn, communication, collaboration and social responsibilities.

2.3.1 Creative thinking. A high-quality education should endeavor to promote learners' superlative intellectual competencies such as creative thinking. Nedjah and Hamada (2017) examined teachers' perception and implementation of creativity in EFL classrooms. It was found that teachers had positive view about creativity, albeit they lack knowledge of how to integrate creativity into teaching. Creativity is an essential competency and one of the fundamental 21st century skills. Hence, more efficient educational practices in ELT are needed. Consequently, a move toward a dynamic, learner-centered, EFL learning environment requires continuous professional training and customized orientations. This will ensure that teachers demonstrate sufficient expertise, adopt innovative approaches to enhance learners' creative abilities and more importantly, show positive attitude toward creativity.

Updating EFL practitioners' competencies will enable learners to originate high standard preeminent production, have revolutionary modes of thinking, relate unconnected ideas, create noteworthy breadth of vision and find alternative solutions and valuable insights. Teaching creatively requires teachers to be erudite in their field of study. It helps them to employ a vast array of diverse innovative methods and teaching strategies, to adopt reflective teaching practices, and to customize teaching to use adaptive teaching styles. Thus, a great consideration is being given to learners' interests, abilities, learning styles and needs (Aldujayn and Alsubhi, 2020).

2.3.2 Critical thinking. Educators lay emphasis on teaching criticality and hold affirmative tendency to integrate critical thinking skills into EFL courses as positive effects have been proved to be achieved accordingly. Furthermore, incorporation of critical thinking into the EFL context improves adult learners' deep thinking, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, drawing appropriate conclusions and reasoning skills. Therefore, advanced learners develop their speaking and writing ability as a result of improving their critical thinking skills. However, these skills require more training and practice to be mastered (Wang and Zheng, 2016).

In the advanced technology era, EFL teachers have to promote their own critical thinking skills such as problem solving, decision making, asking questions, and constructing new knowledge based on past experiences. Teachers then develop metacognitive skills including reflective competency and monitor their own teaching practices. As a result, this has a positive significant influence on students' critical thinking. To this end, teachers have to be equipped with professional training (Parsi, 2017).

EFL teachers should bolster students' ability to think critically through inquiry-based activities which involve analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, making reflection and making decisions. In this regard, it is essential to initiate training programs for teachers to help them become critical thinkers, perceive how to develop students' critical thinking abilities and identify efficient pedagogical practices to implement and achieve that goal. Training on and practicing critical thinking can positively enhance both EFL practitioners' professional development and students' critical thinking and academic performance (Cruz *et al.*, 2019).

2.3.3 Collaboration. Collaboration skills have positive impact on fostering meaningful learning. When EFL learners with various learning styles, preferences, interests, needs and proficiency levels work together on a collaborative task, they communicate, interact, research, expand their knowledge and exchange feedback and support. These effective educational practices improve the learning experiences and enhance the learning outcomes.

Tissenbaum (2020) illustrated efficient approaches that can encourage learners to interact and collaborate in a productive learning environment. While working on inquiry activities and constructive discussions, learners experience exchangeable knowledge and skills when they offer and receive suggestions which can be integrated into their own understanding and can reinforce their performance. This exchangeable knowledge includes debating ideas or actions, asking questions, providing support, negotiating ideas, sharing resources, taking advantage of the skillfulness and ingenuity of others.

2.3.4 Communication. The improvement of soft skills in EFL learners has to be stressed strongly because they qualify learners to overcome the 21st century challenges. Communication is an overcomplicated process of myriad components including psychological, social, linguistic and cultural factors (Viorica, 2020).

Communicative competence is the capability to use specific skills to perform well. The communication is considered to be effective when the message is received efficiently. Therefore, effective communication is goal-driven. Patterns of communication should be consistent and adaptive to suit the situation, for example, being formal or informal. Skills of communication involve using verbal and nonverbal language adequately and considering different perspectives of an issue. Consequently, constructing cognitive backgrounds are highly demanding prerequisites. Educators have to design informative adaptive learning activities and meaningful tasks customized to each learner to develop their communicative skills. A low-level learner should receive a general description or an outline about the essential features of communication skills. An intermediate-level learner requires reflective practices to build a clear conception about a skill. Advanced-level learners need transferable deliberate practices (Kiessling and Fabry, 2021).

2.3.5 Learning to learn. Al-Jubori *et al.* (2021) explained that the integration of technology in an EFL context and that the development of the learner-centered approach necessitate a broad range of competencies including metacognitive, cognitive, self-regulation, communication and collaborative skills. This also leads to the development of learners' self-awareness and their ability to regulate and control their learning.

The advancement in the technology-based instructional strategies reinforces efficient instruction and boosts deep learning. Therefore, teacher and student roles will be changed and learners will be given more responsibilities to make the most impact on the learning process. Learners are no longer mere recipients of information because they actively construct knowledge, design learning goals and tasks, make decisions and monitor their progress. Teachers' role is to provide a differentiated instruction. A learner-centered approach makes students responsible and active in their own learning. Learning to learn is a competency which helps learners to become more independent, monitor their learning by identifying their own strengths and weaknesses, think metacognitively and reflect on their achievement.

2.3.6 Social responsibilities. The development of the social responsibility competency requires an environment that prompts learners to assume responsibilities of their learning, deal with real-world problems, use problem-solving skills and creative thinking abilities in a collaborative teamwork and direct inclusion in real world issues. Students receive guidance when involved in group discussions where they activate independent thinking while applying theoretical knowledge in practical educational experiences.

Ting *et al.* (2021) investigated the influence of using problem/project-based learning on developing university students' social responsibility. Learners are viewed as citizens who

take ownership to build productive society, collaborate in local prosperity, and participate in community services. In this context, learning has to be learner-centered and self-directed which is intended to divert attention away from academic setting to real-world situations. Curricula should include extra-curricular authentic activities and cooperative tasks addressing real world issues.

3. Research aims

(1) To explore EFL teachers' understanding of life competencies.

(2) To explore EFL teachers' attitudes toward life competencies.

(3) To explore EFL teachers' use of life competencies in teaching English.

4. Research questions

(1) To what extent do EFL teachers understand life competencies?

(2) To what extent do EFL teachers support life competencies?

(3) To what extent do EFL teachers practice life competencies?

5. Methodology

To answer the research questions, qualitative methods were needed to get adequate data. Findings are interpreted from the participants' perspective. Data were collected using semi-structured one-to-one interviews with the participating teachers and observation of their implementation of the life competencies in the classroom.

5.1 Participants

Eight teachers of English in two English language centers, four males and four females, were selected to examine their understanding of, attitude toward, and implementation of life competencies in teaching English.

5.2 Interview

The researchers investigated the participants' perception of the life skills in ELT context. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers in which open-ended questions were asked with probing questions to understand their awareness of life competencies and to identify the extent to which they support and practice life competencies in teaching English.

5.3 Observation

The performance of eight teachers of English (males and females) in terms of their implementation of life competencies was observed in the classroom in three times (time 1, time 2 and time 3) over a long time (13 weeks) throughout the semester. Observation of Time 1 was carried out in week 3 of the semester, Time 2 in week 8 and Time 3 in week 13. A checklist of the six competencies was used with the indicative statements for each competency. The aim of the observation was to compare teachers' responses regarding their use of life competencies in teaching English with their actual use as observed in the classroom.

5.4 Procedures
The interviews were intended to demonstrate teachers' conceptualization of life competencies. Interviews took place on campus after scheduling the appropriate time for each participant. They were conducted individually to have access to the variety of understanding, attitudes, and experiences teachers have. They helped to obtain rich data from each participant. Recorded interviews were transcribed and the transcribed data were coded using the themes we are after in the study, i.e. the six life competencies. Data collected were analyzed thematically to be able to answer the research questions of this paper.

6. Results and discussion
This qualitative study aimed at exploring teachers' understanding, support and practice of life competencies in ELT. The qualitative data were collected through interviews held on individual bases with teachers who had been teaching English to university students. The interview consisted of questions about teachers' general perception about life competencies and follow-up questions discussing their support and practice of the competencies in their teaching. The results from the collected data on each competency are presented in the coming section.

6.1 Results on each competency
6.1.1 Creative thinking. Looking at the participants' understanding of creative thinking, they linked critical thinking to creating new ideas and sharing different points of view. A few participants saw a relationship between creative thinking and critical thinking development as demonstrated in the extracts below:

T5 *Creative thinking includes entertainment and interest of the students and teachers because during practicing this skill, we generate new ideas, point of views and opinions. For me, it's participating in creative activities and creating new content*
T7 *Creative thinking means creating new things out of new ideas. It is an important skill, even in our classroom because our students have to write and they have to speak and normally this calls on them to be creative. If you look at the critical thinking section, after the person has brought up all these ideas, he needs to write with these ideas, and it calls on him to be creative*

As for the participants' attitudes, they emphasized the necessity of nurturing creative thinking. It is an indispensable skill for college students' language learning. They believe that creative thinking helps learners view challenges from a novel perspective and come up with unprecedented solutions. For instance,

T3 *Learning a new language should be creative [. . .]*
T1 *It plays a major role in developing students' ability to be flexible, original and adapt according to the need of different situations*

Participants' views about practicing creative thinking skills in classroom settings depend upon the proficiency level. Teachers think it is difficult to teach creative thinking to beginner students. However, they view the incorporation of creative thinking requires building a question-friendly environment and encouraging learners to generate original ideas. In contrast, a few participants practice creative ideas through developing ideas, solving

problems, using pictures to make stories or games. Other participants give students tasks such as writing tasks understanding keywords from the context, dialogue practice and role-play discussions.

Looking at the consensus between the observer and the participants, the observer and one of the participating teachers are not in conformity with each other regarding the subskill (creating new content from their own ideas and other resources). The teacher is of the view that this sub-competency was undertaken by the learners while sharing information in pair and group work and reporting that to the teacher.

6.1.2 Critical thinking. The participants defined critical thinking as analyzing and judging a set of data, ideas, opinions and relationships. It includes evaluating texts, ideas, and problem-solving. The following extracts from two participants exhibit a general understanding of critical thinking:

T3	*Analyzing a set of data or a problem then evaluating the approaches that are used to solve that problem*
T6	*Understanding, evaluating texts/ideas, synthesizing, identifying and asking effective questions*
T7	*Critical thinking is when people think about new ideas. They think about ideas in order to solve problems*

The participants hold positive attitudes toward critical thinking competency. They saw critical thinking as an important competency for students and teachers in academic and life context. However, their practices did not consent to that view. Some teachers' practices were closely connected to the course book and they mentioned using: guided course book exercises (self-correction), discussion of the reading topics in the course book, showing agreements and disagreement, checking students understanding of the grammatical rules. Other teachers mentioned that they asked their students to use critical thinking skills to do tasks such as summarizing key points in a text or an argument, evaluating ideas and situations, and contrasting different points of view on a specific topic. Other tasks included to give students information (repeatedly) then invite them to discuss it and write about it, to give students challenging topics and to ask them to discuss them, and to give students a topic to discuss during a speaking activity.

Only one participant thought using critical thinking was not possible for her group and she said it was challenging to apply critical thinking skills to her low-level students (beginner). Overall, the participants showed that they were familiar with critical thinking concepts or some aspects of it, and they clearly supported it. Yet, not all of them reflected that in their responses and the examples they gave showed that they used it effectively.

The teachers' observation notes revealed that teachers believed that beginner students need to acquire general knowledge and that it is difficult to develop their higher-level thinking skills. Some teachers employed class discussions, debating and raising questions. However, students were shy or reluctant to participate due to language barriers, lack of interest and lack of knowledge. It was noted that some teachers focused on completing the textbook tasks rather than creating a space for students to participate by engaging them in adaptive activities.

As for the consensus between the observer and the participants, the observer and one of the participating teachers are in disagreement regarding the following subskill: (Identifying unstated assumptions and biases in an argument). One of the teachers viewed that learners utilized this sub-competency while working in pair and group work.

6.1.3 Collaboration. The participants shared a similar understanding of collaboration such as working in groups and they placed high values for this competency including cooperation,

taking responsibilities and showing respect. The following extracts from the participants reflect their views:

T7	*It is one of the most important social skills in which we share our experience by participating in the group work. (share responsibilities)*
T4	*It is sharing, listening, respecting, evaluating and responding constructively*
T8	*Collaboration is taking personal responsibility for your own contribution to a group task*

The participants exhibited a great support for the competency of collaboration as a key competency that students need to improve their learning and communication with others. Most of the participants considered collaboration as a skill required in social and educational contexts. The participants believed that students should develop skills of giving and receiving knowledge, discussing ideas, providing assistance and feedback appropriately and taking initiative.

The actual practices showed valuing group work where students are encouraged to divide themselves into groups and engage in managing and completing collaborative tasks. For example, developing active listening skills in addition to working together and sharing ideas are essential in the following extract:

T5	*I incorporate group work; encourage learners to work with their partners and share knowledge and information with them. I train learners to listen and respond to each other respectfully and offer help whenever needed*

All participants valued this competency and concurred that collaboration is an essential way to support students' learning, to teach them how to work together, to help them share ideas and respect each other's opinions.

6.1.4 Communication. Communication is one of the competencies that participants as language teachers are aware of. In terms of their attitudes toward communication competency, they believe that EFL students need to go beyond learning lists of vocabulary and grammatical rules into practicing meaningful discourse and communicating appropriately. Moreover, they believe that interaction ensures the efficient use of the verbal and nonverbal language in context. The participants emphasized their appreciation to integrating communication skills into the EFL classroom as a learning or as an assessment tool. They valued oral and written communication in gathering or disseminating meaningful knowledge as well as exchanging messages, ideas, opinions and information. Thereupon, they revealed their implementation of certain activities in this context including presentations, role-play, open discussions and cooperative tasks. Participants affirmed that their experience with their students helped them to realize that communicative activities improve EFL learners' self-esteem and self-confidence in addition to creating an outstanding atmosphere.

One of the barriers to practice life competencies in the classroom, in particular the communication competency, is students' lack of interest in the topic of discussion. For example, when the discussion topic was about job preferential conditions, some of the teachers failed to provide clear instructions about the task. They also failed to direct the discussion in a way that can help with the development of the intended skills such as identifying assumptions and biases in an argument, designing engaging activities and provoking students to think creatively and differently.

6.1.5 Learning to learn. It was not uncommon for the participants in the current study to recognize the competency of learning to learn. They showed good understanding of this competency. Teachers believed students should learn how to learn, take control of their own learning, which is an essential skill for language learning and improving language skills.

T5	*Learning to learn is, you judge your own learning. It means you think about your learning*

All participants agreed that the competency of learning to learn empower students' autonomy and independence. T3 noted that learning to learn is a fundamental competency:

T3	*From all of these skills, this is the fundamental one. I tell students that I used to memorize vocabulary and practice it in order to learn it. I facilitate learning and tell them to find their own suitable ways then stick to them*

This competency helps learners practice metacognitive skills of monitoring, assessing and evaluating their learning progress.

T7	*If you do not teach students to have that kind of autonomy, to take control of their own learning, it's going to be a very big problem because the teacher is not going to be there all the time. So it is important that we teach learners how to learn, how to make it interesting for them. How to help them take control of their own learning and how to even assess and evaluate their own learning*

When asked about their use of this competency, the participants named some teaching strategies they used to encourage students to employ the skill of learning how to learn such as self-study, making reflections, debating and discussing different issues.

6.1.6 Social responsibilities. Students' acquisition of the social responsibility competency can be achieved through discussions of social or universal issues to suggest possible creative solutions which will enable them to communicate and interact with others freely and appropriately. Developing this competency may be difficult. Therefore, it should be broken down into subskills.

The educational practices should include collaborative group work where learners can identify roles, realize profoundly each role to accomplish the task, reflect on the performance, recognize the success factors of the task or project and evaluate the whole process. This enables them to communicate effectively, take responsibility for accomplishing the learning objectives and taking ownership of their own progress.

When asked in the one-to-one interviews about this competency, participants showed good understanding of the concept of social responsibility.

T2	*Social responsibilities mean to be responsible for the things you have to do whether in class or outside of college and to contribute to society*
T7	*It is people's duty to benefit the society and its members. Students are individuals that need to contribute to society*
T3	*Social responsibility to me, it means taking responsibility for your actions and how it affects the place that you live and things like that*
T5	*Social responsibility is understanding personal responsibilities as a part of a society, as a part of a citizen. Social responsibility is also taking active role including leadership*

Data gathered from observing teachers' performance collated and explored that EFL teachers have positive perception and tendency toward implementing life competencies into EFL classrooms. Nevertheless, their actual educational practices contradicted these conceptions.

6.2 Results and discussion of research questions
6.2.1 The first question: to what extent do EFL teachers understand life competencies?. To answer this question, the participants were interviewed and asked about the life competencies they are familiar with or know about. The responses revealed that teachers have a good understanding of life competencies. Critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration and communication were found to be the most familiar competencies to the participants. They viewed these competencies as needed skills for daily life and for undergraduate as well as postgraduate studies. They identified them as the skills they were introduced to during their study courses.

Indeed, some of the teachers revealed that they learned about life competencies through teaching the course books. For example, the extracts from T5 and T2 reflect this view:

T5 *As an English teacher, we prepare students to succeed in a world that is changing rapidly. In teaching, I am familiar with the life skills that help students to think critically, communicate confidently and collaborate effectively. The Cambridge Framework for life competencies includes creative thinking, collaboration, learning to learn and communication. I am familiar with these competencies and I teach them as they are incorporated in the textbook*
T2 *I was introduced to critical thinking during the MA program when I had to do the research. As a BA student, only a number of teachers occasionally talked about critical thinking in debates and discussions. Regarding creative thinking, everyone can be creative in their own way. We usually think of arts when we mention creative thinking, but creativity is part of life in general, as in making jokes or solving problems*

6.2.2 The second question: to what extent do EFL teachers support life competencies?. Other questions were also asked to elicit teachers' attitudes toward the incorporation of life competencies in teaching English such as how life competencies are associated with language instruction, how life competencies are effective in EFL learning, how life competencies can be integrated into teaching practices. The responses revealed that the teachers hold positive attitude toward the implementation of life competencies in their teaching practice. The following are a few extracts taken from the teachers' responses to the questions in the interview to illustrate the attitude they demonstrated:

T1 *The most important thing for our students is to be responsible for their own learning*
T2 *These competencies give English learners the power to learn on their own and to communicate creatively and comfortably. They can engage more with the language, collaborate more, and break the fear of making mistakes*
T3 *All these skills involve some level of communication. Without proper language skills, you cannot communicate the other skills like collaboration and critical thinking*
T4 *It is truly important for the teacher and the students to know about them in order to improve themselves*
T5 *Life competencies are very important and linked to the language learning because it helps students to use the language in real life*
T6 *With the help of four language skills, we convert theoretical features of teaching into practice*

6.2.3 The third question: to what extent do EFL teachers practice life competencies?. Although teachers view life competencies as needed skills and are of importance to the teachers to teach and to the students to learn, the data collected from the observation notes and the teachers'

notes after having a consultation meeting revealed that teachers' practices contradict their view and beliefs about life competencies.

From the observation, it was found that there are certain factors that affect teachers' practices, namely students' proficiency level (i.e. being beginner or intermediate), the patterns of interactions between the teacher and the students (i.e. teacher-led, shy students, uninterested students), and time limits (i.e. focus on finishing the materials on a given time frame).

In the current study, life competencies were found to be essential to be incorporated in educational practices. This finding is in line with what has been highlighted in several resources such as (ASCD, n.d.; Council of the European Union, 2018; National Research Council, 2012; OECD, 2016, 2018; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2008a, b; UNICEF, 2012). When asked which competencies they thought were important for the teachers to teach, their answers varied. The distribution of the teachers' responses in the interview about the importance of the competencies to the teachers are as follows: all life competencies ($N = 2$), critical thinking ($N = 2$), communication ($N = 1$), social responsibilities ($N = 1$) and creative thinking ($N = 1$). Furthermore, the participants talked about the most important competency for the students to learn and the distribution was as follows: learning to learn ($N = 3$), critical thinking ($N = 2$), all life competencies ($N = 1$), social responsibility ($N = 1$) and creative thinking ($N = 1$).

Participants considered the competency of learning to learn as the most important competency for learners to be incorporated into curricula as it enables learners to develop lifelong learning skills and then continue to acquire new skills and construct knowledge required to instigate motivation, learner autonomy and self-reflection. These findings come in consonance with the findings of Benson (2011), Feryok (2013), Griffin and Care (2014), Higgs (1988) and Little (2007). Making use of pedagogical approaches to stimulate and improve EFL learners' competencies escalates and accelerates productive learning outcomes. Learners become able to evaluate their performance, take ownership of their learning and monitor their progress (Alzahrani, 2020).

The results showed that critical thinking is the most important competency to the teachers whether as a pedagogical strategy or as a learning objective. The reason why this competency is highly valued by the teachers can be attributed to the fact that it is one of the higher order thinking skills which provoke learners to associate concepts, analyze, synthesize, argue, evaluate and draw conclusions. This is in consistence with (CUP, n.d.; Ghanizadeh and Mirzaee, 2012; Liaw, 2007; Mok, 2009; Tung and Chang, 2009).

It was found that the participants were familiar with some concepts of life competencies mainly critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration and communication (4 Cs). However, collaboration was highly acclaimed by the participants as an efficient life competency that greatly appreciates cooperation, communication and interaction. This finding concords with the findings from Bell and Baecher (2012), Gately and Gately (2001) and Jeon (2010).

Integration of creative thinking into EFL educational practices was seen as a skill of great significance to the teachers and learners as it stimulates learners' ability to activate new ways of thinking, view issues from unexpected perspectives, come up with alternative solutions and boost language proficiency and fluency. Students' creativity had evidently appeared in the escalated improvement of their productive skill especially in writing. This perception was affirmed by Ghonsooly and Showqi (2012) and Sehic (2016). However, educational practices in which there is only reliance on textbook exercises are unable to develop creativity in classrooms.

7. Conclusion
Life-competency-oriented education qualifies learners in the 21st century not only to be sufficiently eligible in the academic context, but also in real life circumstances. Life-

competency-based education increases self-awareness of one's own abilities, latent potentials and assets to connect them with the real world. Additionally, this type of education enhances social awareness through giving prominence to empathy, diversity acknowledgment, respect and communication skills.

Teachers equipped with knowledge and competencies can prepare EFL learners to assume full responsibility for university-level studies and vocation. In this respect, career readiness should be a prominent aim of education where students are equipped with cross-cultural skills to be able to work in distinct teams, collaborate internationally and cooperate effectively. EFL practitioners may understand and support life-competency-instruction. Nevertheless, they may lack the capacity to practice these competencies. They should receive training on classroom pedagogies which integrate life competencies and help them to implement these competencies inside the EFL classrooms.

In view of this situation, there must be a clear vision for the implementation of life competencies. Educational systems should consider avenues to integrate the 21st century skills and life competencies into curricula and should introduce innovative pedagogies and inquiry-based learning environments. This could be realized through the use of technological tools and the current approaches to teaching such as cooperative learning and problem-solving strategies. Therefore, the educational systems should provide pedagogies, authentic resources and tools to prepare learners for life and career and to go beyond academic achievement.

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