



Fostering 21st-Century Skills for Sustainable Education through Language Learning Beliefs and Practices: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

Moving further to the 21st century, education needs to provide students with essential knowledge and the abilities required for succeeding in a global interconnection and sustainable environment. The role of foreign language education is crucial in this transformation, but the perceptions of teachers and students regarding language learning are just as significant. Through narrative inquiry, this study explored the foreign language teachers' beliefs toward language learning and a story of how the beliefs foster 21st-century skills- like critical thinking, communication, and global awareness- within a sustainable education context. The analysis revealed two topics of discussion: 1) the influence of personal beliefs on teaching practices and 2) the emphasis on 21st-century skills in classroom practice for sustainable education. The study provides implications for teachers, practitioners, educational institutions, and stakeholders.

Keywords: Beliefs about language learning, 21st-century skills, sustainable education, foreign language learning, narrative inquiry

Abstrak

Di abad ke-21, pendidikan perlu memberikan murid berupa pengetahuan dasar dan kemampuan yang diperlukan untuk sukses dalam dunia yang saling terhubung secara global dan lingkungan yang berkelanjutan. Peran pendidikan bahasa asing sangat penting dalam transformasi ini, namun persepsi guru dan murid mengenai pembelajaran bahasa juga tidak kalah signifikan. Melalui penelitian naratif ini, peneliti mengeksplorasi keyakinan guru bahasa asing terhadap pembelajaran bahasa dan cerita mereka tentang bagaimana keyakinan tersebut mendukung keterampilan abad ke-21 seperti berpikir kritis, komunikasi, dan kesadaran global dalam konteks pendidikan berkelanjutan. Analisis ini mengungkapkan dua topik pembahasan: 1) pengaruh keyakinan pribadi terhadap praktik pengajaran dan 2) penekanan pada keterampilan abad ke-21 dalam praktik kelas untuk pendidikan yang berkelanjutan. Studi ini memberikan implikasi bagi para guru, praktisi pendidikan, institusi pendidikan dan pemangku kebijakan.

Kata Kunci: Keyakinan tentang pembelajaran bahasa, keterampilan abad 21, pendidikan berkelanjutan, pembelajaran bahasa asing, inquiry naratif

Received : 07-04-2025

; Revised: 30-04-2025

; Accepted: 05-05-2025



Introduction

In the 21st-century, the rapid change of global and interconnection challenges the education system to expand to prepare students with knowledge and competencies. It enables students to navigate an increasingly complex and sustainable world. Education, as a catalyst for world transformation socially, economically, and environmentally, has a critical role in forming the competencies for the future. The change in the education system has implications for teachers' professional development, career mobility, and teaching culture (Saavedra & Opver, 2012).

Beliefs about language learning are regarded as one of the key successes in determining strategies adopted by both teachers and learners in the language teaching and learning process (Al-Roomy, 2015; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017; Rahmawati, 2020). The idea that teachers' beliefs determine teaching behavior leads to the other concept that individuals' beliefs determine their attitude (Pajares, 1992). Many educational practitioners agree that teachers' beliefs influence their practice and strategy in the classroom (Martinez et al., 2024; Rodgers et al., 2022). Understanding individuals' beliefs is not easy since it cannot be measured directly and must be inferred from what people state (Pajares, 1992). However, Rodgers et.al (2022) developed a Teacher Belief Score (TBS) to measure and identify teachers' beliefs.

Many research studies have been established regarding 21st century skills. The 21st-century research world responding to the current challenges has become a trend nowadays. The trends of the 21st-century skills are seen as promising, constantly evolving, and full of potential (Saphira et al., 2022). Roshid and Haider (2024) investigated the implementation of 21st century skills in rural schools in Bangladesh, in which the teachers are untrained. The finding reveals that the integration of 21st-century skills in classroom activities was rarely implemented. Opper and Aldridge (2015) conducted a mixed-method method to understand teachers' beliefs and education reform in Abu Dhabi. A large survey by administering the Teachers' Belief Score (TBS) has been conducted. The finding indicated that the teachers hold more traditional beliefs about their responsibility in the classroom.

One of the primary challenges in applying 21st-century skills in language teaching and learning is the lack of adequate training and workshops for language teachers (Bolat & Gençoğlu, 2024; Salvador-Garcia et al., 2025; Wijaya, 2023). In various regencies, especially in remote areas or institutions with limited resources, a number of teachers are not equipped with practical knowledge and skills to integrate critical thinking, collaboration,

communication, and digital literacy into language learning and teaching (Susianita & Riani, 2024). This difference has established a significant gap between the educational policy demands, which emphasize the urgency of 21st-century skills, and the actual situation, which frequently continues to be traditional. As a result, initiatives to transform education to respond to global challenges and to promote sustainability have not been fully realized, since these pivotal skills have not been systematically embedded into the learning and teaching experience. This highlights the urgency of strengthening teachers' competencies through relevant and adequate training. It enables them to fulfill their roles in 21st-century education as agents of change.

Although issues regarding 21st-century skills and language learning have been extensively studied in numerous research studies, there is still a lack of research that connects teachers' beliefs about language learning to their role in promoting sustainable education. Teachers' beliefs have a significant role in teaching methods and strategies they choose in the classroom, particularly in terms of integrating sustainability education (Cheng et al., 2021). The lack of a comprehensive study focusing on this area has resulted in a knowledge void that urgently needs to be addressed, considering the crucial role of educators in fostering educational change that corresponds with today's global challenges (Savira, 2024). Understanding the relationship between teachers' beliefs and sustainable education practices not only enriches academic literature but also offers empirical evidence for designing more focused policy interventions and teacher development programs to support future-oriented educational goals. The current research is conducted to explore how foreign language teachers' beliefs about language learning shape their teaching practices regarding the essential skills for sustainable education. Through this exploration, the research provides insights into how teachers can ultimately contribute to the enhancement of skills that are necessary for a sustainable future.

Method

The researcher has applied a qualitative approach with narrative inquiry as the research design. Narrative inquiry enables the researcher to explore one's experience deeply. According to Clandinin and Connelly in Johnson and Golombek (2002), narrative inquiry can capture and describe experiences from all dimensions of the teacher's experience, potentially developing a "new sense of meaning and significance" for the

teacher and their professional environment. Like any other qualitative study, the findings of the present narrative inquiry are worth it since it poses the participants' views without any complicated statistical procedures, resulting in a more understandable and comprehensible for readers (Ostovar-Namaghi et al., 2015).

The present study selected an experienced English teacher as the participant. She, familiarly called "IKN" is a 25-year-old English teacher who not only teaches English courses and secondary school but also at a university in Madura. She is an experienced and professional English teacher and has taught English for 10 years since she was a senior high school student. At her age, she is energetic when teaching and very up-to-date regarding pedagogical methods and English knowledge. These reasons and the researcher's interest in the participant led her to undertake this study.

Before conducting the research, the researcher asked about her availability to be a part of the study. In collecting the data, a semi-structured interview has been implemented to gather the participant's verbalization. Then, the data analysis was conducted by obtaining the consent of the participant, recording the story, transcribing the story, conceptualizing the experiences, and verifying the conceptualization to the participant with any possible modifications.

Result and Discussion

In narrative inquiry, the researcher explores the teacher's personal story – how their beliefs are shaped by experiences and create new experiences, reflection, and ongoing classroom practice. Additionally, this finding also explores how the teacher internalizes the skills ultimately needed in the current century.

Influence of Teachers' Beliefs on Teaching Practices

IKN, a participant in the study, has been teaching English as a foreign language for almost ten years. When the researcher asked her about her beliefs regarding language learning and what should be done in the classroom, she shared her personal experience of teaching at all levels of education. She pointed out that classroom activities should be based on the students' needs.

“ English teaching and learning in the classroom should be conducted based on what students need and purpose. If the students learn English just because they want to be fluent in speaking, the activity (in the classroom) is much more about vocabulary and practice. But, if the focus only for preparing SNBT (university admission examination), teaching and learning process is about grammar and reading comprehension”.

The teacher's statement indicates that beliefs about language learning can greatly affect teaching method and strategies in the classroom. The teacher thought that English instruction must be tailored to students' needs and objectives, resulting in a more adaptable and relevant approach. When the students' objective of learning English is to be fluent in speaking, the teacher emphasizes vocabulary development and speaking practice; in contrast, for those preparing for university admission tests like *Seleksi Nasional Berdasarkan Test* (SNBT), the teaching and learning process focuses on mastering grammar and enhancing reading comprehension. This notion implies that the teacher does not strictly adhere to the curriculum, but instead thoughtfully takes into account students' learning goals when developing teaching methods. It embodies a student-centered learning approach of language instruction and emphasizes that the teacher's beliefs act as a basis for making adaptive, context-sensitive, and developmentally appropriate pedagogical choices. (Jannah & Puspita, 2023; Lertdechapat & Faikhamta, 2025).

As IKN continued sharing her experience, she explored how she teaches English at different levels of education.

"When I teach junior and senior high school students, I follow the syllabus and the textbook/ module as provided by the school and government. However, I must consider the level of the students. For example, when the topic is about narrative, I provide texts which is suitable for the level of the students, either basic or intermediate".

Then, she continued her story about her private student.

"I have students who learn English just for fun without any specific purposes. So that, I give them the very basic things in learning language, that is, vocabulary."

The data indicate that the teacher holds the belief that language instruction should be adapted to the context and characteristics of the learners. Although they follow official syllabi and government-issued modules, the teacher still modifies the materials based on students' proficiency levels—for instance, by providing narrative texts adjusted to either beginner or intermediate levels. This reflects a degree of flexibility in teaching practice, grounded in the belief that learning becomes more effective when instructional materials align with students' learning capacities (Johnston et al., 2015). Additionally, in the context of private tutoring, the teacher modifies the method by providing very basic vocabulary-focused content, since the learner lacks a particular academic objective and is studying solely for pleasure. This practice strengthens the idea that a teacher's beliefs in the urgency of relevant and

meaningful learning serves as the basis for designing instructional methods that address students' backgrounds and motivations (Wahid, 2023).

In IKN's story, her core belief about language learning evolved from the idea of vocabulary mastery and practices to an emphasis on communication and practical application. Through the narrative inquiry approach, it's known that what teachers do in the classroom is not only based on their beliefs but also on students' beliefs. It also reveals how teachers' beliefs evolve based on their experiences and the background of the students. She added,

“Teaching learning must adapt to the nature of the students. If the students are digital students, the teachers should be. That's why I totally agree with the statement of Ki Hajar Dewantara who said 'pembelajaran harus menyesuaikan kodrat alam dan kodrat zaman siswa' (learning must adjust to the natural disposition and the era of the students)”.

According to IKN, mastering vocabulary is key to mastering language skills: speaking, reading, listening, and writing.

“Teaching English should be started by mastering vocabulary because vocabulary is the key to master a language. If the students want to speak fluently, they need a large vocabulary. If the students want to comprehend in reading, they should master much vocabulary, so do listening and writing. So, when they have a large number of vocabs, it will be easier for them to speak, read, and write.”

The teacher's statement underscores the belief in students' aptitude and the importance of vocabulary mastery as a central influence on the chosen teaching approach. The teacher believes that instruction should be contextual and aligned with the times and student characteristics, echoing the philosophy of Ki Hajar Dewantara. In this view, teaching the digital generation requires educators to be adaptive and responsive to technological developments and the evolving needs of today's students. This belief is not merely philosophical, it is realized in classroom practice that places vocabulary as the foundation of language learning. For the teacher, vocabulary mastery is seen as the key to supporting all language skills—speaking, reading, writing, and listening—since without sufficient vocabulary, students will struggle to fully develop their communicative abilities (Kuncoro, 2017). This perspective illustrates how teachers' beliefs about fundamental elements of language learning play a crucial role in shaping both instructional priorities and classroom strategies (Almunawaroh et al., 2024).

When it comes to the question about another key to enhancing language skills, she pointed mainly to the importance of practicing.

“Either learning speaking or reading, students should practice it. Even if they just learn vocabulary, they should practice in every meeting. At least they can say "Apple is red" "grape is purple", even it's a little thing, they should practice.”

IKN's statement reflects a strong belief that practice is the key to improving language skills. For her, language learning is not sufficient if it only involves understanding theory or passively acquiring vocabulary; it must be accompanied by consistent and practical application. Even at the early phases, such as vocabulary learning, students must be trained to use the words in the basic contexts to familiarize themselves with their real-life usage. This belief embodies the idea that mastering a language entails two fundamental aspects; competence- understanding of the language- and performance- the capacity to utilize the language actively in everyday situations (Loiseau & Luchner, 2021; Nelson, 1992). In this sense, practice is regarded as a vital bridge that connects theoretical knowledge with functional language skills. To sum up, language learning is about practicing that language. It is considerable that mastering language is not only about having competence but also performing it.

Emphasis on 21st-Century Skills

In narrative inquiry, the exploration of the 21st-century skills would also be embedded in teachers' personal stories of practice and reflection. As stated earlier, IKN believes that learning a foreign language is about learning vocabulary. However, she can neglect that teaching and learning foreign language is more than just about vocabulary or grammar; it is also about preparing students for the future. She shared an experience for her classroom aligned with the development of 21st-century skills in language learning.

“Based on my experience, the last 2 months, my teaching learning is done by various activities. At that time, the topic was about analytical exposition in SMK (Vocational high school). FYI, the school is located in boarding school, so the students may not bring or even touch handphone. The activity began with greeting and praying, then I conducted ice breaking. After that, I explained the topic while asking simple questions. To make sure about the students' understanding, I give quizzes in Quizziz App, I ask the students to come forward one by one to answer the question. The Quizziz was showed by LCD projector and I used speaker to make it fun”.

IKN's goal was not just to teach students about analytical exposition but to create an environment where they could use language and be engaged in critical thinking and technology usage. She made an effort to make students keep in touch with technology as they are in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school). Integrating technology becomes a primary requirement for having good quality in education, which later fulfills the needs of students

(Jan, 2017). That is the reason why teacher should be technology savvy in teaching students of 21st century (Rahmawati, 2017; Rezandy et al., 2020).

“Next, I divided my students into several groups, I asked them to make a writing about anything related to their major. Then, I ask the students to write the text on a piece of HVS paper and give some drawing (decorate) it. Last, I ask each group to present their writing while other groups give questions and comments (if it is possible) and score (must). At the end of the class, I gave a conclusion and asked for feedback and their expectation for next meeting”.

The data of interview shows that the teacher consciously incorporates 21st-century skills into their instructional teaching practice. By engaging students in collaborative activities such as group work, creative writing, presentations, as well as peer feedback and group-based assessment, they not only learn the language conventionally but also simultaneously develop today’s necessary skills, such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. Activities like embellishing texts encourage imaginative expression, while presentation and discussion sessions foster analytical thinking and effective communication. By giving students opportunities to provide feedback and assign scores to their peers’ work, the teacher also cultivates evaluative skills and a sense of social responsibility. This approach reflects a shift in language teaching—moving beyond linguistic focus toward strengthening soft skills that are essential for success in the 21st century and relevant to both workforce demands and sustainable social life (Aswita et al., 2022). Therefore, she realizes that what she does in the classroom can develop key 21st century skills, which are collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking. In the teaching and learning process, students can communicate their ideas, work together toward common goals, and be innovative in their projects.

She added, *“From my point of view, I’ve conducted the English teaching process that can boost 21st-century skills. Those are critical thinking (answering Quiziz, arranging text, giving question and feedback), collaboration (making text in groups), creativity (designing the text)”.*

The statement suggests that the teacher has a reflective understanding of the urgency of cultivating 21st century skills through English language teaching. The teacher considered that classroom activities are conducted not only to enhance language but also to simultaneously promote critical thinking, teamwork, and creativity. The use of interactive platforms like Quizziz encourages students to respond promptly and correctly, whereas the collaborative writing fosters cooperation and a sense of collective responsibility. Moreover, activities such as designing texts indicate that the teacher focuses on students’ aesthetic tastes and creativity. The teacher’s belief in incorporating 21st-century skills shows an awareness that language education needs to be contextual and transformative, supporting

students to be adaptive and innovative individuals to prepare for future challenges (Cárdenas & Rocio Ramirez Orellana, 2024).

Conclusion

The current research shows that teacher's beliefs influence their method and strategies of teaching English. As her core belief is that mastering vocabulary plays a crucial role in language learning, the language teaching and learning process more emphasis on vocabulary enhancement. Rather than strictly following the curriculum set by the government or institution, the teacher adapts the language instruction according to her students' needs, goals, and learning phases. She thinks that acquiring a language ought to be adaptable, meaningful, and applicable to everyday life. This belief leads her to create more student-centered and pertinent learning experiences.

The findings also reveal that teachers acknowledge the importance of 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, teamwork, communication, and creativity. The teacher integrates these abilities into their teaching through group work exercises, creative tasks, and the use of digital tools. This instruction shows that language learning entails more than merely grammar and vocabulary; it also emphasizes aiding students in becoming capable and accountable individuals ready for the future.

Suggestions

Based on the conclusion above, the researcher proposes some recommendations for better English learning that support the enhancement of 21st-century skills. First, it is crucial to hold teacher professional development that enables the teacher to reflect on their belief about language learning, aligning with sustainable education. Understanding their own beliefs can help teachers develop more effective, flexible, and student-centered teaching practices. Second, the foreign language curriculum should be designed to enhance not only language proficiency but also critical thinking and global awareness. Regarding this, more efforts are needed to help teachers integrate 21st-century skills into language education. Third, educational institutions and stakeholders should offer resources, workshops, and simultaneous teacher development on collaborative, innovative, and technology-driven teaching approaches. This will enhance teacher readiness to act as change-makers and provide students with the competencies required in the modern world. Fourth, fostering

students' positive beliefs becomes an alternative idea, such as framing language learning as a tool for global communication and engaging in a meaningful intercultural exchange.

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