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## Integrating 21st Century Skills in the Alternative Learning System's (ALS) English Communication Skills: Policy Recommendations for Enhanced Learning Outcomes

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The Philippine Alternative Learning System (ALS) provides a crucial educational pathway for out-of-school children, youth, and adults. To determine if ALS learners are equipped for the demands of the 21st century, this policy brief examines the integration of key competencies – communication, collaboration, critical thinking, problem-solving, technology literacy, innovation, information literacy, and life/career skills – within the Communication Skills-English learning strand. A curriculum audit reveals a heavy emphasis on traditional communication skills, such as sharing of thoughts, questions, ideas, and solutions including, but not limited to, verbal and non-verbal communication with moderate integration of critical thinking. However, significant gaps exist in the incorporation of collaboration, technology literacy, innovation, problem solving, information literacy, and life/career skills. To address these deficiencies, this brief recommends curriculum rebalancing, continued professional development for ALS teachers focused on 21st-century pedagogy, and enhanced institutional partnerships to provide real-world learning opportunities. These recommendations may help ALS Communication Skill-English curriculum be more relevant, ensuring learners acquire the higher-order skills necessary for success in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

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## Introduction

Non-formal education (NFE) in the Philippines is delivered through its Alternative Learning System (ALS) to cater to Filipino out-of-school children, youth, and adults (Department of Education, 2022a). The ALS responds to the 1987 Philippine Constitution that mandates the state to provide “non-formal, informal, and indigenous learning systems...particularly those that respond to community needs.” This provision has prompted the Department of Education to primarily deliver ALS through learning modules and flexible in-person classes (Department of Education, 2022b). With this modular approach in ALS, it is vital that necessary competencies from the ALS curriculum are met. Moreover, as the world becomes more complex- competitive, knowledge-based, and characterized by technology-driven economy, learners must be equipped with 21st century skills that are crucial for success in today’s society (Scoular, 2020).

With English being a global language and crucial for many job opportunities, effectively teaching English communication skills within ALS is paramount. DepEd categorizes Communication Skills in English as “including all forms and contexts, including but not limited to verbal and non-verbal communication, active listening, as well as the ability to express feelings and provide feedback. This skill set also covers negotiation/refusal or assertiveness skills that directly affect one’s ability to manage conflict (Department of Education, 2017). As ALS caters to a population facing various challenges, providing a relevant ALS education focusing on English communication skills can level the playing field in the labor sector and offer opportunities for social and economic mobility. Additionally, ALS is the explicit alternative pathway for gaining basic education hence, it should ensure the necessary skills for communication are taught. If ALS falls short, it perpetuates a cycle of marginalization for its learners.

The current Philippine ALS framework emphasizes flexible learning approaches that cater to diverse learner needs, making it an ideal context for the incorporation of 21st century skills. With the ALS framework designed to provide flexible, learner-centered education tailored to the needs of out-of-school youth and adults, it allows learners to study at their own pace, time, and place, accommodating their personal circumstances and life responsibilities. This flexibility supports the integration of 21st-century skills, such as self-direction and adaptability, which are crucial for modern education and workforce demands (Mahinay & Manla, 2025). Moreover, the ALS curriculum is substantially aligned with the formal education’s K-12 Basic Education Curriculum but

contextualized to suit non-formal learners. Its six learning strands include critical areas such as communication, scientific thinking, problem-solving, life skills, societal understanding, and digital literacy. This alignment ensures that learners acquire competencies relevant to the 21st century while addressing their unique educational needs (DepEd, 2022a).

Specifically, this study questions whether the current ALS curriculum for the learning strand Communication Skills – English, effectively incorporates the 21st century skills such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving, technology literacy, innovation, information literacy, and life and career skills. To review the integration of 21st century skills, a curriculum audit of the current curriculum of the Communication Skills – English learning strand, was done. A heat map was used to highlight the presence of 21st century skills in the curriculum. Firstly, competencies from the curriculum guide were extracted. Next, these competencies were mapped against the 21st century skills-- communication, collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving, innovation, technology literacy, information literacy, and life and career skills. Mapping of the competencies against the 21st century skills depended on the classified degree of integration as either Completely Present, Moderately Present, and Slightly Present.

The findings offer an opportunity for curriculum experts in ALS and communication to revisit the current curriculum for the learning strand Communication Skills – English to explicitly and effectively integrate 21st century skills.

## Key Issues

The learning strand Communication Skills-English has a total of 125 competencies extracted from its curriculum guide. The study revealed that while this learning strand in the ALS curriculum intends to incorporate 21st century skills, the actual integration is inconsistent and limited.

1. **Emphasis on Communication.** Communication is the most integrated 21st century skill in the listed competencies of the learning strand with 114 competencies integrated. This indicates that the curriculum heavily emphasizes the ability to convey information, ideas, and feelings effectively. It aligns with the DepEd’s view of communication as a “gateway to developing soft skills” and being essential in the workplace and public life (DepEd, 2022). These competencies aim for students to convey information verbally (spoken) and non-verbally (written), with the use of visual aids like multimedia presentations, while using language appropriate to the situation or context of the communication. Examples of these



competencies are “Employ an appropriate style of speaking, adjusting language, gestures, rate, and volume according to audience and purpose”, “Compose clear and coherent sentences using appropriate grammatical structures”, and “Use appropriate graphic organizers for texts read”. These competencies range from Applying to Creating, in terms of level of cognitive skills.

2. **Moderate Integration of Critical Thinking.** Of the 125 competencies reviewed, 84 were integrated into Critical Thinking, reflecting their relevance and applicability. The competencies that were integrated in Critical Thinking centers on actions such as analyzing information from various forms of communication and providing thoughtful spoken or written responses. Examples of these competencies are “Analyze situations and determine appropriate responses”, “Make inferences from passages” and “Detect biases and propaganda devices used by speakers”. These competencies range from Applying to Creating, in terms of level of cognitive skills. This emphasizes that the competencies are geared towards analysis of information and providing thoughtful responses in various contexts.
3. **Higher-Order Thinking and Application Deficit.** This finding pertains to the four 21st century skills—Problem Solving, Information Literacy, Innovation, and Life and Career Skills. In summary, 36 Communication Skills-English competencies were integrated to Problem Solving; 27 to Information Literacy; and 22 integrated to both Innovation and Life and Career Skills. These four skills represent higher-order thinking and practical application. The lower numbers suggest that the curriculum may not adequately challenge learners to apply their communication skills in complex, real-world scenarios. They might be learning about communication, but not necessarily how to use it effectively for problem-solving, innovation, information management, or career readiness.
4. **Low Integration of Technology Literacy.** Technology Literacy is one of the least integrated 21st-century skills, with only 12 out of 125 competencies integrated. Mapped competencies involve basic use of multimedia for presentations, writing (e.g., word processing), research, and online communication (e.g., email). While the integration indicates that ALS learners are able to apply their skills through the actual

use of integration, this standard is not applied evenly across all competencies.

5. **Significant Lack of Collaboration.** There were only five (5) competencies out of 125 that were integrated in Collaboration. Collaboration is a cornerstone of 21st century skills, involving teamwork, communication, and shared decision-making, but there are only a handful of competencies that open ALS learners to these activities. Competencies must be able to show an inclusion of joint communication, as well as the need for parties to contribute information that is needed to come together.

These results reveal significant gaps in the integration of 21st century skills into the current ALS curriculum. While some foundational competencies (e.g., basic communication skills) are addressed, higher-order skills like critical thinking, creativity, and information literacy are underdeveloped.

## Key Recommendations of Policy and Practice

### 1. Curriculum Rebalancing

The curriculum audit revealed that competencies heavily relied on traditional language instruction (e.g., grammar and vocabulary) without adequately addressing how these skills can be applied in modern contexts. This could be done by restructuring the competencies to reflect explicitly the other 21st century skills such as Critical Thinking, Collaboration, Problem Solving, Innovation, Information Literacy, Technology Literacy. Moreover, a clear framework on how 21st century skills are integrated in the learning strand Communication Skills – English will contribute to the better restructuring of learning competencies. Since the curriculum is utilized primarily by teachers, a framework can guide them to identify that this specific competency is hitting a 21st century skill.

### 2. Continued Teacher Capacity

ALS teachers are key players in incorporating 21st century skills into their lessons, working towards enhancing the current curriculum through contextualization within the learning strand. Professional development (PD) programs designed to equip ALS teachers with strategies for teaching critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and digital literacy within the context of English communication should be held frequently. These PD programs must be designed specifically to ALS teachers as their context of teaching and learning is different from that of the teachers in the formal basic education. Additionally, as

technology literacy is a weakness in the integration of competencies, ALS teachers may be equipped with the right training and information on the use of new tools for enhancing communication in English (e.g., generative AI).

### 3. Enhanced Institutional/Organizational Partnerships and Collaboration

Improving opportunities for the application of 21st century skills will entail collaboration and partnerships with institutions or organizations that could provide real-world opportunities for learners to apply the skills. The flexible delivery of ALS and the background and context of ALS learners could fit this kind of partnership as ALS learners are exposed to the actual practice of the skill even if they have not graduated yet from the program. Moreover, the needed infrastructure that the current ALS classrooms (if they have) can be answered by the partners, particularly the technology needed to showcase integration of technology literacy.

### Conclusion

The study highlights that while the learning strand Communication Skills - English learning strand addresses the integration of foundational language skills effectively, it falls short in preparing ALS learners for the demands of the 21st century with the moderate integration of identified skills to existing competencies. To bridge this gap, there is a need for curriculum rebalancing, continued teacher capacity, and enhanced community institutional/organizational partnership and collaboration. These efforts will ensure that ALS learners acquire not only basic literacy but also higher-order communication skills essential for success in today's world..

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### Declaration

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### Objectives

The EPRDO shall manage the University's research production, enhance human resource capabilities, and share expertise to other Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) in the area of teacher education research

### Strategies

1. Establish and maintain a web-based university research portal that facilitates automated research management systems, and which also serves as the database of teacher education policies and teacher education research in the country and Southeast Asia.
2. Share research expertise and competence in teacher education research with other TEIs throughout the country;
3. Develop and disseminate the University research agenda
4. Design and implement the research capability program for faculty and staff;
5. Manage University's research production particularly the conduct of educational policy studies in education and teacher education; and
6. Serve as the implementing arm for research incentives and research ethics review.

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SYNERGY (Working collaboratively as a team)  
 EFFICIENCY (Delivering research services efficiently)  
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 PRODUCTIVITY (increasing research production of the University)



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