From Theory to Practice: Teaching English to Generation Z

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Abstract
Language education evolves and is shaped by the needs of the generations as well as the contemporary realities of the world. Today, humanity faces with rapid developments and innovations in technology and science. These realities shape the society and each community in the world. In this regard, the term Generation Z (Gen Z) has emerged. Gen Z has its own dynamics and realities which, in turn, entails new issues in learning and teaching. It is not possible to implement classical and obsolete techniques and ways while teaching English to Gen Z. Current paper is an attempt to investigate the theoretical and practical issues of teaching English to Gen Z.
Keywords: Generation Z, English Language Teaching, Language Learners.

Introduction

English language teaching (ELT), like all other teaching practices, is affected and shaped by several variables including learner, teacher, classroom, setting, society etc. Considering its rapid development and intervention to educational settings, ICT should also be mentioned as one of the significant variables of ELT. Increasing effect and importance of technological advances and changes on education are apparent on 'young learners', in other words 'the teenagers'. This group, which can also be called as the Generation Z (Gen Z), has their own way of learning. Thus, teaching English to Gen Z requires understanding their characteristics in order to implement suitable techniques and ways.

Generation Z

Generation Z include young people who were born between 1995 and 2010 (Seemiller & Grace, 2017); or according to Strauss and Howe's (1991) theory of the demographic of humans those who were born after 2000. People in Gen Z are also called as iGeneration, Post-Millenials, the Homeland Generation, Generation We, Centennials, and the Recession Generation (Beck & Wright, 2019; Johnson & Sveen, 2020). The characteristics of Gen Z'ers are associated with technology as well as their personalities which have also been shaped by the techno-world they were born in. They grew up with smartphones, smartboards, the Internet and several other devices and networks. They are very intimate with social media. It is quite easy for them to access information through the Internet. Schools and higher education institutions need to deal with them and their needs (Mohr & Mohr, 2017; Seemiller & Clayton, 2019; Seemiller & Grace, 2017). That's why, their personal factors, characteristics and expectations should be investigated thoroughly.

The Characteristics of Gen Z

Gen Z's (hereafter the term is used to describe the group of Generation Z learners), as the learners, have distinct characteristics. These can be defined as:

Social: They were born in a world where friendships, relationships and emotions are experienced and exhibited through social media platforms. Friendships, memories, or even quarrels among young people have been experienced on facebook, twitter, snapchat, Instagram etc. According to Harmanto (2013) they are able to change their environment very quickly as well as adapting the work environments easily. They are collaborative and creative. In contrast to the previous generation, they are able to set friendships easily in school or work environments. They have less psychological barriers; and a great majority of them are extroverted.

Multitasking: Being able to use technology in a very smart and easy way, they can undertake and complete several task types. Their skills and mastery of learning new things may be stunning for adults. For example, in workplace they can be very competitive in completing various tasks by using up-to-date technologies and tools. Sometimes teachers experience their skills of fixing a smartboard or a computer programme in a very short time. They do not need too much time to learn how to use online tools and programmes.

Civic-minded: Though most adults think that young people are not interested in social and daily issues, Gen Z population is described as being civic-minded (Nilson, 2010; Worley, 2011). That is they are interested in their society. They are engaged in finding solutions for civic needs and daily problems of their society. Also, according to Pew Research Centre, they are more active in advocating social change (Annie E. Casey Foundation).

Pragmatic: Gen Z seems to have learnt a lot from their parents regarding the financial and social concerns. They approach the life in a more pragmatic way. They plan to complete their education and have a career which will provide them prestige and money without too much effort. They seek the opportunities. A couple of decades ago people were not as daring as today's generation in seeking education opportunities in overseas education. Today, Gen Z seek opportunities of getting a post-graduate position or a career option in USA or UK easily.

The Challenges of Gen Z Learners

In spite of their skills and dynamic abilities, Gen Z learners have several challenges which can make teaching and learning process an arduous task for themselves as well as teachers. The challenges and obstacles against their learning are as follow:

Motivation: They become demotivated easily as they realize that people do not care them too much. Their social environments and networks cause them feel that everybody is interested in their lives. They feel that people care them everywhere and every time. They think people are following what they do, care whatever they say or think. When they feel that they are not at the centre of people's attention, they become demotivated easily.

Reluctance: They are reluctance to learn in traditional ways as they have access all kind of information through web. Nowadays, teachers encounter students who are reluctant to take notes in their notebooks but are willing to take pictures of what is written on the board. They think hardcopies are redundant.

Short Attention Span: According to Shatto and Erwin (2016), the average attention span of Gen Z learners is 8 seconds. They do not focus on detailed and complex problems for minutes. They prefer surface level problems and solutions. Teachers should not expect a Gen Z learner focus on a diagram or puzzle for a couple of minutes. Also, they do not prefer classroom tasks which require focused attention or process oriented activities. They expect immediate communication and feedback from their peers and teachers (Rickes, 2016; Shrestha & Hansen, 2021).

Teaching English to Gen Z

There are several studies on how to teach English to Gen Z population (Biswas, 2021; Kumari & Hemalatha, 2020; Prokopchuk & Vinnikova, 2021; Szymkowiak et al., 2021). The basic findings of relevant studies provide a comprehensive list of tips and suggestions on how to teach English to Gen Z:

An effective use of technology: Teachers should be well aware of the fact that these learners are not reluctant to take notes and follow pen & paper activities.

Re-designing teaching activities in accordance with short attention span: Gen Z population is accustomed to 'snack' and 'fast food'. They do not like everlasting lectures or activities. Classroom activities should be somehow 'snackable': short and easy to follow activities.

Integrating more up-to-date and popular content: Classroom content should appeal to their needs and demands. Popular figures, events and trends will charm their interest more than classicals. For example while teaching English literature, Gen Z learners will be more active and motivated if the topic modern adaptations of classic masterpieces rather than simply reading Shakespeare or Chaucer.

Multiple assessment: Gen Z are educated through multiple intelligences theories. This entails multiple

assessment requirements. They expect instant and face to face feedback from their teachers.

Immersion/Communication: English is the second language for all Gen Z learners regardless of their geographical location or the official status of English in their countries. They are exposed to English in all social media and internet environment. The smartphones and social networks are the gates to English-speaking world for Gen Z. Teachers should be aware of the fact that this generation has the best opportunities of accessing spoken language. Teaching materials and contents should be as authentic as possible. Otherwise, course books will not charm their interests.

Conclusion

The profile of a Gen Z student as a language learner is quite different from ordinary language learner profile. Gen Z learners have specific characteristics shaped by several dynamics. Their motivation, attitude, beliefs, aptitudes and conceptualization towards language learning is quite different. All aspects and variables of language teaching activities should be designed to meet the needs and requirements of Gen Z learners. This task is not a prerequisite for only teachers; policy-makers, higher education institutions and teacher trainers should be aware of this generation and plan the future of ELT for Gen Z and beyond.

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