

THE PROBLEM OF UNDERSTANDING AND TEACHING YOUNG GENERATION

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Abstract

This article deals with the problem of teaching young generation. The ability to reduce students' sense of entitlement and help them understand that schools are not so responsive and English teachers are not so lenient as they expect. Therefore, teacher effectiveness depends on the ability to adapt instruction to the needs of today's learners. Language teachers can benefit from the insights of the needs of Gen Y.

Key words: Generation, benefits, educators, language, options, primary school.

English teaching professionals working with children in primary school, adolescents in secondary school or adults at university know that learners nowadays think and behave differently than those from previous generation. These students were born into a world of information technology; they prefer to multitask rather than focus on one thing at a time, and they can be more attracted to the ideas of a peer or a web video than what their teachers have to offer. This generation has been given different names, including Net Gen, the Millennial, and Generation Y Professionals from various fields including accounting, law, and medicine, to name just a few have written increasingly about generational differences and the implications of those differences in the workplace. Lindquist (2008), for example, compared the values of Gen Y accountants with those from the previous two generations and found that today's employees are more concerned about what their employer can do for them, rather than vice versa. Workers of former generations identified "respect for the company's mission statement" as the fifth-most important reason to join a company. Gen Y does not even consider a company's mission in their top ten reasons to accept a job offer. As their number one reason to join a company, Gen Y cites "professional growth opportunities" in other words, "What can this company do for me?" Another difference is that Gen Y values comfort at work more than previous generations have. Articles in many professional journals pertain to how human resource departments are developing strategies to recruit and retain talented members of Gen Y. Can educators, and specifically ELT professionals, take the hint from other professions and apply strategies to engage Gen Y in the classroom? Educators have also discussed the nature of Gen Y and the challenges that they bring to the classroom. Experienced teachers who have been around a while know that the values today's students hold are not congruent with traditional course content and methods. Teachers who merely follow the textbook are likely to be perceived as "old hat." Therefore, teacher effectiveness depends on the ability to adapt instruction to the needs of today's learners. In his book *Educating the Net Generation: How to Engage Students in the 21st Century*, writes that a significant number of American youth drop out of high school in part because they feel disengaged in the classroom. Considering that jobs in the future will increasingly require a college education, dropouts are in for a difficult time. In a similar vein, a survey that I carried out with 100 middle school students in my home state of Aguascalientes, Mexico, revealed that only 25 percent of EFL teachers include Internet-based activities in class or for home-work. Another survey question revealed that 71 percent of the students describe their English class as "boring" or "very boring." These results are not surprising because while young people spend significant time in front of the screen at home, public schools in Mexico have limited funds to acquire the technology for classrooms. The question arises: How can teachers compete with the stimulating

entertainment that their students get at home? The rest of this article will focus on characteristics of Gen Y as presented in journals, mostly from outside of ELT, and also advance some logical strategies for English teachers to experiment with to better engage this generation. Answers to two questions will be explored: (1) What should teachers know about the nature of Gen Y? and (2) What strategies could enhance ELT effectiveness? Gen Y is tech-savvy The most salient characteristic of this generation is its comfort with technology. In other words, today's youth have never known life without computers and the Internet, and therefore see information technology as an integral part of their lives. It is not uncommon to see news reports on the increasing time that children are spending in front of computer screens at home. Last semester, teachers in our university language department read about these activities in Peachey's (2009) Web 2.0 which is available online for free and Sharma and Barrett's (2007) text on blended learning. These two sources alone offer teachers many leads on how to include technology in their classes. Apparently, an essential question for teachers about classroom behavior has evolved from "How can I keep my students from using electronic devices in class?" to "How can I use e-tools to get and keep my students motivated?" It is important to mention here that teachers need regular encouragement and guidance about how to use new technologies. PowerPoint, for example, is popular software that can promote interaction and learning. However, for new users who lack the proper training, its menus, options, and icons can be daunting. And once teachers have learned how to create a presentation, they must also learn how to incorporate it into their class in a way that Gen Y will find engaging. Interestingly, younger teachers are often better demonstrators of technology at teacher meetings, and they can even become the mentors of older teachers who are trying to assimilate technology into their classrooms They value comfort and informality over rules and deadlines. Yet it would benefit teachers to reflect on the life experience of this generation. Gen Y witnessed, all too often, that their Gen X parents sacrificed to move up the company ladder and showed great loyalty to their employers, only to wind up stressed out, suffering through a broken marriage, or laid off due to downsizing (Eisner 2005). Gen Y, therefore, prefers to work smarter rather than harder. They believe they can because technology makes them more efficient. Information and knowledge are readily available to them via the Internet, allowing them to complete projects faster. This generation believes it can outperform previous ones without paying such a high personal price. The bottom line: employers and teachers need to accept this cohort's new mindset. Gen Y will not return to past ways of being; their life experience has been different. ¶ Teaching strategies to balance personal and work lives First, teachers need to stop resenting students' apparent lackadaisical attitude and get on with the task of learning how to

engage them. In other words, teachers and schools need to understand the nature of this generation and adopt teaching strategies that work with them; otherwise, students will feel bored and learning will be minimized. Here is one way I try to better engage my university students. Every two or three weeks of the course, I write three questions on the board and ask students to discuss them among themselves. I then step out of the room for ten minutes. The questions are:

- What do you like about the course?
- What do you dislike?
- What can Peter do to be a better teacher?

The teacher's role

Those of us paid to teach English today may, in fact, form the primary obstacle to Gen Y learning in a way they want to. As we see it, the main barrier to implementing such teaching is likely to be not the learners but the educators; there seems reluctance among many educators to move away from traditional teaching methods ... a radical departure from a system that has worked well for a very long time. Why are English teachers reluctant to adapt? It is probably fair to say that many prefer to stay on their current course because it is familiar and has reaped some benefits. This attitude is unfortunate because for learning to occur, teachers need to update their teaching strategies. They need to adopt more technology based tasks, include visual content, and provide the opportunity to be physically active in the classroom. If students are not given ample opportunities to practice and receive feed-back, then the classroom experience wanes in comparison with learners' personal lives. The relationship between teacher and student becomes more tenuous, and student interest in learning drops. English teachers and administrators must ask themselves how to combine most effectively the value of personal interaction with the glittery attraction of the digital world. Some teachers might object to this call to change. Why should we teachers adjust to our students' expectations? Shouldn't learners have two channels of operation: one that they control in their personal lives, and a second that requires them to complete learning activities that schools and teachers have prepared? This may be true. Teachers and students may need to meet each other halfway. The problem is that often, both parties operate in ways that do not take the needs of the other into account. Perhaps there lies an essential quality of an effective 21st-century language teacher: the ability to reduce students' sense of entitlement and help them understand that schools are not so responsive and English teachers are not so lenient as they expect.

Conclusion. Writers from a variety of professions have pointed out that Gen Y has different values and needs than previous generations. Language teachers can benefit from the insights

of these writers about the needs of Gen Y. Those needs relate to their customized, digitalized, and visual lives; their attitude toward rules, effort, and honesty; feedback-dependence; redefinition of respect; reduced interest in reading; and their desire to make a difference. Mindful of these characteristics, English teachers need to do two things: (1) pursue an understanding of the nature of Gen Y and (2) adopt teaching strategies that respond to their academic needs.

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