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The Characteristics of Generation Z: Methods of Adapting the Educational Style. The English Language Teaching Case

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Abstract. Generation Z, also known as Gen Z, represents a distinct and unique cohort of individuals born roughly between 1997 and 2012 that grew in and were raised by an intensively digitalized environment where technology, fast access to information, and social changes strongly impacted the way learning was acquired and interactions unfolded. This paper passes in review the main features of Gen Z and examines how their most specific characteristics such as critical thinking, urgent desire for interconnectivity, proneness to adaptability dictate the need to constantly change the traditional teaching/learning materials by integrating the modern technologies and innovative strategies. In the context of the emerging educational model, this paper also suggests and illustrates in-house devised English teaching/learning materials tailored to Gen Z students’ paradigm. Ultimately, it explores the differences between a good and an excellent teacher, and the need to redefine pedagogical excellence in a digital era.

Keywords: Gen Z, English, digital, education, teaching/learning materials.

1. Exordium. Controversies. An ethical dilemma?

The use of classifications by generation has evolved over time. It sparked as a practice to analyze societal trends in the early 20th century when Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset explored the way historical periods – with their unique challenges and opportunities – impact and shape people differently. Thus, his book *The Modern Theme* (1923) is a notable contribution to forming generational perspectives. (Ortega y Gasset, 1923)

Still looking at the early foundations of the issue in question, another important work that is worth mentioning is the essay *The Problems of Generations* (1928) where German sociologist Karl Mannheim elaborated the theory of generations where he argued that individuals would develop the “generational conscientiousness” if they lived in historical periods and shared historical events simultaneously. (Mannheim, 1952)

Nevertheless, it is in the mid-to-late 20th century that the modern framework of named generational categories started setting conclusively.

The term *Gen Z (Generation Z)* itself has also evolved over time, and it was first used to describe the demographic cohort following the Millennials (Generation Y). Although there is no universal

agreement on the exact birth time interval of this generation, most of the researchers define it as the period of time between 1995 and 2012, sometimes between 1997-2012.

Regarding the origin of the term, the first references date from the 90s and the beginning of the 2000s. This term was first used by the media and the sociologists in the 90s to refer to the generation born right after the Millennials. It came as a logical follow-up name since before it there was Generation X (born between 1965-1980), and Generation Y (the Millennials, born between 1981-1996)

It was in 1997 that the *Ad Age* magazine used this term to describe the children born after 1995. (AdAge, 2021)

However, other names have been put forward over the years such as: *iGeneration* (iGen), a term that was popularized by psychologist J. Twenge in her 2017 book where she made references to the impact of both technology and Internet on this generation. (Twenge, 2017)

Apart from this, *Centennials* was another term suggested by research company McCrindle that points out that the generation in question has made their way into the new millennium since their birth. (McCrindle, n. d)

Alongside these labels, *Zoomers* is one more and it represents a pun, derived from Boomers (Baby Boomers), and it is used mostly on the internet. Although no single individual was credited with its coinage, by 2020 the term with its colloquial usage had made its way into the English dictionary, and is here to stay. (Dictionary.com, 2020)

It was in the 2010s that *GenZ* became the dominant term in both sociological research and the media, and was adopted by several research institutions that put this generation's behavior under scrutiny. (McKinsey & Company, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2019)

Their analysis revealed several defining factors such as: being born into and growing up with the internet age, smartphones and social media, increased social awareness (climate change, diversity, flexibility in education and work, etc.).

To put it a nutshell, *Gen Z* is the term that popped up as a logical extension of the generational labelling pattern, and that has started being used as of 2010, but got completely consecrated as such in 2010 when the characteristics of this generation became sharper and could have been outlined more clearly.

2. Sociological, Anthropological “Astrology”?

Regardless of its provocative and metaphorical flavor, this heading invites to a critical examination showcasing the lack of sound empirical ground when using uni-criterion taxonomy.

More often than not, sociological and anthropological practices may resemble astrology, obviously, not in content but in method (attributing personality traits based on zodiac signs) and credibility. More precisely, labeling by social generational categories is scientifically invalid.

Moreover, it may easily lead to stereotyping, prejudices, and even discrimination. The overreliance on overgeneralizing and simplistic generational terms annuls diverse life experiences, and reduces everything to predictions or assumptions solely.

Therefore, class, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation can be much better predictors than so-called generations, and they win over one-size-fit-all labelling theories.

Striking the balance between acknowledging and using generational features on the one hand, and avoiding the risk of labelling or even stereotyping is no easy feat. Using generational frames contextually rather than categorically would be the first step towards it.

Academic literature contains such examples of critiques targeting generational labelling. For instance, Costanza and Finkelstein caution against this use, arguing that it lacks empirical evidence and theoretical grounding. (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015)

Similarly, Jennie Bristow mentions in one of her books that “generationalism” (the practice of dividing people according to their birth year and distinctive features) is problematic as it is reductionist in its nature. In addition, she warns against it, as generational labels may easily serve as a form of cultural “scapegoating”. (Bristow, 2019)

Quite recently, in his article, C.W. Rudolph reiterates the idea and underscores the fact that generational labels are “more cultural creations than natural phenomena”. (Rudolph, 2021)

A final example comes from McKinsey that points out that Gen Z identity has been molded by “the digital age, climate anxiety, a shifting financial landscape, and COVID-19.”, that is that context (deeper social determinants) is more meaningful than cohort. The article – published in 2024 – emphasizes that generational theory has its limits in that there is enormous diversity within each generation where each and every individual is unique; therefore, it should be used with caution and critical thinking. Ultimately, it may serve as a framework and not in the least as the absolute truth: “of course, these are generalizations: every so-called generation comprises a multitude of unique individuals with their own opinions, values, behaviors, and plans for the future. Some social scientists even believe that the practice of studying generations can obfuscate what motivates people on an individual level. Generational theory should be understood with this caveat, and used only as a way of thinking about society, rather than as the gospel truth.” (McKinsey & Company, 2024)

Taking all of the above into consideration, Gen Z is more of a cultural narrative rather than a scientific, empirically grounded category, and it would be more appropriate and wisely to be treated as a lens and not as a label.

3. Characteristics of Gen Z

While acknowledging the inherent limitations of generational labels, a critical exploration of Gen Z may reveal the several recurrent themes and broad traits. Indeed, it is the first generation to have grown up entirely in the digital era, with access to the internet, social media, and extensive use of mobile technology. All this has impacted their lifestyle and shaped their sociocultural values, digital behavior, customs, education, adaptation to the job market, as well as their integration into society.

3.1. Technology and Digital Behavior:

Gen Z prefers social media platforms that offer fast and interactive visual content such as Instagram, TikTok, or Snapchat. They value authenticity and expect brands and public figures to be transparent and sincere in their online interactions. Also, they use social media as a means of self-expression and identity building.

3.2. Digital Consumption Habits

Gen Z tends to avoid long or elaborate content, preferring short videos, concise posts, and micro-content, and seeks efficiency and quick results, while being extremely careful about privacy and data protection.

3.3. Social and Cultural Values

Gen Z manifests a strong sense of social justice and inclusion; as such, they are sensitive to global issues such as climate change, gender inequality, and minority rights.

3.4. Diversity and Inclusion

Diversity is not just an abstract concept for Gen Z but an essential part of their everyday life. At the same time, they are more open to accepting cultural, gender, and ethnic differences than previous generations, which is reflected in their social circles, choice of workplaces, and the brands they support.

3.5. Engagement in Social Causes

Whether through online activism or by participating in protests and community initiatives, they are often active in supporting social causes, and also eager to see tangible change, and willing to use their purchasing power to support companies that align with their values.

3.6. Education and the Job Market

Education is a priority for Generation Z, but their approach to learning is different from previous generations as they prefer personalized learning methods and have great confidence in self-learning through online resources.

3.7. Adapting to Digital Education

They are the first generation to fully experience digital education, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; this experience strengthened their technological skills and provided them with the flexibility to adapt to various learning environments. There are, indeed, some challenges: maintaining focus and avoiding information overload.

3.8. Professional Aspirations

In the job market, Generation Z seeks financially secure jobs that provide personal satisfaction; they prefer careers that allow them to use their creativity, continue learning, and contribute positively to society. They prefer flexibility in the workplace, whether through working hours or the option to work remotely.

4. The English Language Teaching Case

Delving deeper into examining how Gen Z learns and interacts with educational content, certain learning style and preferences can be noticed. First and foremost, there is the integration of technology in the learning process. Indeed, Generation Z is extremely comfortable with technology, so integrating it into teaching is essential. As such, online learning platforms, educational apps, digital collaboration tools, and the use of multimedia resources can make courses more interactive and engaging. Moreover, online learning platforms can be used for distributing materials and organizing activities while such multimedia tools as videos, virtual simulations, and interactive resources can help explain complex concepts.

Building on the observed characteristics, a set of in-house English language teaching/learning materials have been developed by a team of language professors at the Romanian Naval Academy (RNA) in order to align with Gen Z cognitive styles, digital proficiency, and other communicative needs. More precisely, in the course of several years, four such materials were created and refined as final outcomes of research projects within the DoD's Sectoral Plan of Research and Development

The aim of the projects was to create an online multimedia platform for the midshipmen's English language training of students in RNA, as well as of the military and civilian personnel of the Naval Forces, with a focus on level 2 according to STANAG 6001, cf. E 0356 "Linguistic requirements for the assessment of linguistic competence for personnel in the Ministry of Defence".

The aim was to complement the traditional methods of teaching and learning English by producing a blended-learning material. The modules created for practicing speaking, reading, listening and writing skills aimed to facilitate learning English in a NATO context (STANAG 6001, Level 2) through the integrated use of the four skills, a methodological approach known as "integrated skills".

Each module includes sections such as: Home (which contains a presentation of the assessment test for the respective skill, according to the Participant's Guide to Language Competence Assessment Sessions - English, DMRU 2010); About (information about the project members, as well as about the descriptors of the targeted language competence); Learning (presentation of the learning contents); Connecting (practicing the learning contents by accessing dedicated sites); Practicing (which constitutes, in fact, the original component of each project: tests developed by the project team to assess the level of language competence). The respective formats are shown in Figures 1- 4 below.

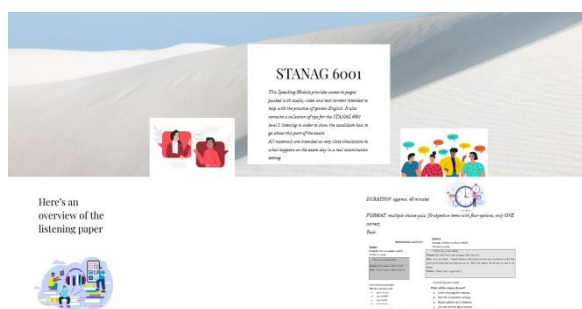


Figure 1. Online multimedia module for practicing the Listening skill in English

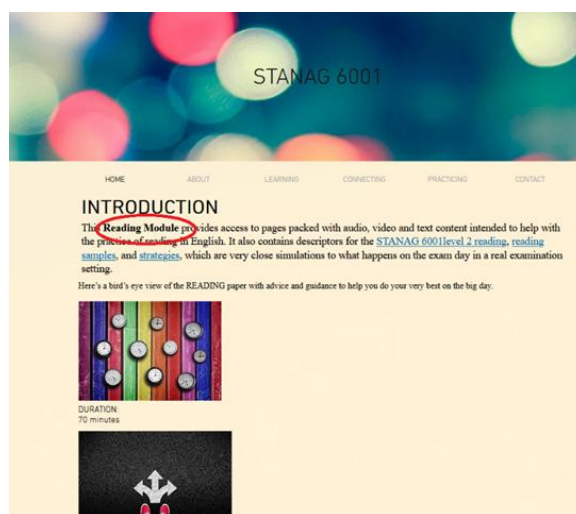


Figure 2. Online multimedia module for practicing the Reading skill in English

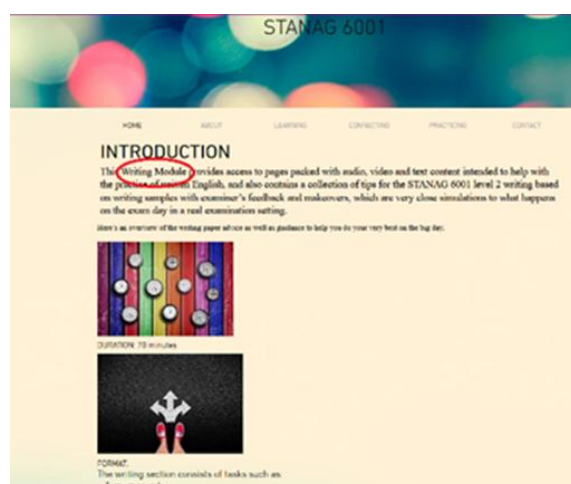


Figure 3. Online multimedia module for practicing the Writing skill in English

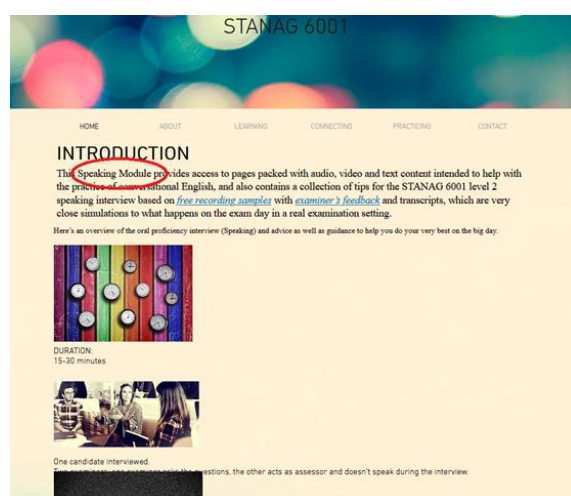


Figure 4. Online multimedia module for practicing the Speaking skill in English

In terms of interactive teaching methods, since Generation Z prefers an active and engaged learning style teachers can incorporate interactive teaching methods, such as: problem-based learning, case studies, and group projects. Problem-based learning provides students with real or hypothetical situations that they must solve, stimulating critical thinking and the application of knowledge while group projects encourage collaboration and develop teamwork skills. An example in this respect is the Lost at sea scenario which successfully aligns with Gen Z's penchant for interactive and experiential learning.

As Gen Z students also like to have immediate and personalized feedback, technology can be used to provide immediate feedback through online quizzes, automated assessments, or learning platforms where students receive comments directly on their assignments. Quizzes and surveys can be used to assess the understanding of the material in real time, and of course automated assessment as educational software can provide instant feedback, allowing students to adjust their learning process.

Each student in Generation Z has different needs and learning paces, therefore, a personalization of learning is deemed necessary. Thus, teachers can offer personalized study options, allowing students to choose how to learn certain concepts, whether through texts, videos, or hands-on activities. A flexible curriculum can be envisaged prioritizing options for assignments or projects that align with students' individual interests, as well as personalized learning resources. additional resources tailored to different learning styles (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, etc.) are highly recommended.

In addition to technical knowledge, Generation Z needs cross-functional skills and non-cognitive abilities: critical thinking, creativity, effective communication, and collaboration. Teachers can integrate activities that develop these essential competencies through organizing debates and discussions on current topics to stimulate critical thinking and argumentation, or brainstorming sessions with a view to encouraging creativity through group brainstorming exercises.

An essential feature is that Generation Z values diversity and inclusion, making it important for teachers to create a learning environment that respects and promotes these values. This can be achieved by help of diverse materials which provide examples and case studies that reflect cultural, gender, and experiential diversity. The climate of respect and openness can be created and maintained by encouraging mutual respect and open discussions, where every student feels valued.

Flexibility and adaptability are highly appreciated by Generation Z, especially flexibility in learning. Teachers can offer options for participation (online/offline), course recordings for later review, and flexible deadlines for submitting assignments, where possible. Other options may include hybrid courses; more precisely, combining in-person learning with online learning to provide flexibility for students, or accessible materials which will ensure that all educational materials are available online for review at any time.

Overall, most of the above-mentioned characteristics are consistent with the research findings of Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace – two well-known researchers that explored Gen Z in higher education and workplace. Gen Z is “smart, digitally infused, driven, and ready to bring about change in our world”. (Seemiller & Grace, 2019:28)

The authors also mention in their book “hands-on learning,” “real-world experience,” and “professional opportunity”. (Seemiller & Grace, 2019: 204)

5. Discussions. Openings. Generation Z Teachers: Good or Excellent?

As the two authors draw our attention to the fact that Gen X (born between 1965-1980) is actually the generation teaching Gen Z, this invites further reflective and honest discussions about whether teachers/educators' impact may be simply just good, or truly excellent.

So, what about shifting the lens to reflect on us – teachers/educators?

Taking the thoughtful turn from observing them to observing us, one significant question may arise: have we simply met the expectations, or have we gone the extra mile?

During the 2023 Merito Gala, Mircea Mică – psychologist, university professor and former Minister of Education of Romania, recognized for his significant contributions in the field of cognitive

psychology and educational policies – provided a detailed analysis of the differences between a good teacher and an excellent one. In his speech, he highlighted five essential characteristics that distinguish an excellent teacher. (Archip, 2023)

The following table summarizes the comparison between good and excellent teachers based on several key features.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Good vs. Excellent Teachers

| Good teachers | Excellent teachers |
|--|---|
| have very good teaching methods; they apply these methods to achieve good academic performance. | integrate various types of curricula: the explicit curriculum (written, official), the hidden curriculum (what students learn when they are in the hallway, interacting with each other, when they see school documents or content from social networks...), the rhetorical curriculum (characters, politicians, and leaders talk about topics that are also covered in school, creating a knowledge vector), the null or phantom curriculum (what we don't teach, explaining omissions). create a relevant mental model for the student, where the goal is not academic performance, but what remains after the studies, influencing lifestyle. integrate the student's spirit with the spirit of the discipline (enculturation where the discipline transforms the student, a fine marriage between teaching the discipline so that the student absorbs it, and explaining its jargon, as a way of seeing the world through the taught discipline). |
| have many procedures | prioritize principles above methods/procedures, and above these, people (e.g., activation through questions, dialogue, projects). Any good lesson is a design: a way to build a solution while considering the real student's contextual constraints. The solution must be highly usable and accepted by the student. |
| create semantic and procedural memories: definitions, theories, concepts, calculation techniques, mechanisms, i.e., "know-how"; good academic performance. | create emotional memories : they associate what they teach with a positive emotion (the student feels curiosity, fascination, pride for understanding a difficult problem); the student becomes the beneficiary of packaging the teaching content into a positive emotion. Once the emotional memory is formed, it settles more effectively and contributes to two essential aspects: 1. The most important choices in life (you can choose a career in that discipline, remembering how you felt during the teacher's class). 2. Commitment: how much effort you invest in that subject. |
| teach knowledge very clearly, systematically, and rigorously. | teach not just knowledge but the questions to which that knowledge is the answer. (e.g., What |

| | |
|--|---|
| | <p>did Einstein ask when he developed this theory? What methods did he use to get to this theory?) connect knowledge to methods and questions; (an adult asks themselves questions, knowing that theories are answers to questions; they can assess/differentiate between true and false knowledge; they have learned about experiments, statistical analysis, and significant sampling; they can protect themselves more effectively from manipulation and fake news).</p> |
| are defined by induction (they are like all other teachers). | <p>are defined by contrast, as being different, as models (they see how the world is, what's happening around them: low salaries compared to their competencies and intelligence, flooded with bureaucracy, they live daily with the disappointment of not receiving a "return" on their investment), but... they continue to meet vocational standards.</p> |

The need for excellent teachers is compelling as they inspire, create emotional memories, integrate curricula, offer themselves as models by defining themselves through contrast, and put people above principles, they stimulate the mobilization of potential and the exploitation of personal resources (they develop their students' potential to the maximum). At the same time, they create a kind of augmented reality: a subjective representation of the reality perceived through the "colored lenses" of our own glasses.

Excellent teachers continuously augment realities, making their students see the world differently even after finishing their studies. By creating enduring mental maps, excellent teachers help their former students – now adults – to make effective decisions, changing their reality through augmentation.

6. Conclusions

2025 seems the crucial year and consequently the perfect time to reflect on Gen Z's unique characteristics, how to address their needs and values, and to create learning/teaching opportunities for them, or to recalibrate our pedagogical strategies to directly relate to them.

Furthermore, by the end of 2025, most of Gen Z will have completed their studies, so it is about connecting with Gen Z now as it may be the last opportunity to focus on their characteristics, needs and challenges but it may also become a valuable lesson on how to build connections across generations. As a matter of fact, 2025 marks the end of Generation Alpha (with the last babies of this generation that were born on New Year's Eve, Dec 2024) and the start of Generation Beta (a cohort that will include all individuals born between 2025 and 2039).

Ultimately, perhaps the teaching methods and strategies put in place for Gen Z have laid the foundation for future generations of students who are likely to more and more technologically immersed in a highly AI-driven educational landscape. Thinking ahead, thinking about the future of education, we – teachers/educators/mentors – carry one question in our minds: Will we be able to be excellent every day?

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