

Understanding and Teaching Generation Y

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 generations. 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 Millennials, and Generation Y (McCrindle Research 2006).

There is no precise time frame about when Generation Y—also called “Gen Y”—came into being; some researchers indicate it began in 1977, some suggest 1980 (Lancaster and Stillman 2002), and others say 1982 (Wessels and Steenkamp 2009). In spite of these differences, there is no doubt that Gen Y makes up a significant part of the world’s population—20 percent, according to NAS Recruitment Communications

(2006). Because Gen Y’s members are young, it is fair to say that most English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) learners belong to this cohort, making it worthy of teachers’ attention and understanding.

Not surprisingly, the majority of research and reports in the media about Gen Y comes from developed nations, specifically the United States. However, the examination of Gen Y is on the rise at universities throughout the world, including in countries such as Mexico (Casteñeda et al. 2011), South Africa (Wessels and Steenkamp 2009), Costa Rica (Pérez, Aguilar, and Víquez 2007), and New Zealand (*New Zealand Herald* 2010). While Gen Y receives substantial attention in the professional literature of many fields, this is not true of ELT journals. This lack of attention is unfortunate because most English language learners are Gen Yers. This article will address this gap by informing ELT professionals about the nature of Gen Y and presenting a few teaching strategies designed to engage this generation in the English classroom.

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. In Prensky's (2001, 1) words, "Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach."

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?

I ask one student to be a secretary and write down the most important comments that come up. If students want to comment in their first language, they may do so. When I reenter the room, the secretary reads the comments to me in front of the class. I respond by explaining how I can adjust the course or my teaching in accordance with their suggestions. It is fair to add here that not all teachers will be comfortable trying this technique, or it may not be appropriate in certain cultures. However, my experience in Mexico has been that students appreciate being listened to and even having the opportunity to influence certain aspects of the course.

Gen Y individuals are kinesthetic and visual learners

Human resource departments in today's firms have discovered the value of simulation software to recruit and train Gen Y (Skiba 2008). Simulations of the real world, or "virtual reality," engage and motivate Gen Y because they are visual and involve learning by doing. According to Polimeni, Burke, and Benyaminy (2009, 66), employers realize that "if they want to appeal to this technologically

savvy generation, they will need to dramatically change the way they market the accounting profession." It begs the question: Don't teachers need to change as well?

Similarly, in the field of education, Faust et al. (2001) describe the mismatch between Gen Y's learning styles and their instructors' teaching styles. She modified the teaching methods and materials being used in a university computer course to make them more attractive for today's students. Her research suggests that students prefer kinesthetic and visual learning activities over traditional teacher-centered and text-based tasks. McCrindle Research (2006) reported on research with Australian students and found 52 percent prefer to learn kinesthetically and 42 percent visually, while just 6 percent are primarily auditory learners.

Teaching strategies for kinesthetic and visual learners

To increase motivation to learn, we need to get students moving and include visuals in course work. Using concentric circles to exchange information, Find Someone Who... tasks, and rallies get students out of their chairs. PowerPoint presentations, YouTube videos, and student-made posters and drawings increase the visual nature of our classes. Here are two activities from my work week. First, each Monday I take a DVD and small TV from my home to use with a group of with five twelve-year-olds. I start and stop an action-packed video and ask the students to write sentences based on what they have seen. They write, and then they exchange notebooks to check and correct their classmates' sentences. They also perform skits based on the segments. Second, at the university, I dedicate ten to twelve minutes each Wednesday to a song. A different student selects the song each week and prepares a cloze handout for the class. The student pauses the song, checking that all students have heard correctly. I always ask the student why he or she selected that particular song.

Gen Y is feedback-dependent

Gen Y has received significant doses of feedback from many sources throughout their lives. It started with parents who "helped them plan their achievements, took part in their activities, and showed strong beliefs in their child's worth" (NAS Recruitment Com-

munications 2006, 1), making Gen Y the most child-centered generation in history. When they attended after-school activities, teachers and coaches offered them a humanistic, empowering learning environment. At the same time, frequent instant messages and hours spent in chat rooms have made today's students sensitive to peers' opinions. Perhaps the most intense feedback has come from video games and the Internet, which offer immediate results.

Teaching strategies for feedback-dependent learners

How can English teachers respond to their students' need for feedback? First, teachers need to explicitly express what students need to do to learn better. Gen Y does not respond to reprimand. Instead, this generation prefers sincere concern on the part of teachers, who can provide this in the form of non-blameful I-messages to the whole group or an individual (e.g., "When you speak Spanish in class with the person next to you, I feel uncomfortable because it is more difficult for you to learn English").

Error correction is a second type of feedback we offer students. Normally, we have been trained to use different techniques such as recasting, clarification request, and metalinguistic cues to correct individual students. What we need to keep in mind is that the more we encourage learners to discover their own mistakes and those of peers, the more active they are in the learning process and, therefore, the more appropriate the process is for Gen Y. This cohort prefers to have time to think about and generate the correct form rather than having the teacher supply it. Mindful of these insights, perhaps the most time-efficient way the teacher can give feedback involves first jotting down common mistakes heard during pair and group work. Then, at the end of class, she writes the incorrect language on the board and asks students to think for a moment and then identify (and correct) the mistake.

Another strategy to offer feedback involves digitally recording students. Many teachers have had the experience of being filmed and subsequently asked by a head teacher to study the recording to learn how aspects of their teaching affect learning. For the past three years, I have turned the camera on students

and discovered that it is an equally valuable tool for them. Here is how it works.

1. First, students prepare a PowerPoint presentation of three to four minutes. The topic could be on a free-time activity or a grammar point.
2. Second, on the day of the presentations, all the files are saved on a computer that is connected to a digital projector. As each student presents, class members evaluate their peer's talk by using a rubric to assign scores from 1 (low) to 4 (high) on elements such as posture, eye contact, tone of voice, clarity of speech, vocabulary, fluency, grammatical accuracy, and overall organization. The rubrics are given to the presenter at the end of the talk. This procedure allows the student to receive feedback from his or her peers and the teacher.
3. In the following class, a one-minute video segment of each presentation is shown to the class, allowing each student to observe him- or herself.
4. Finally, each student writes a reflection paper for homework that summarizes the feedback from peers, the teacher, and self-observation.

I must add that a change in the students' attitude about this strategy is evident over the course of the semester. At the beginning, learners report that anxiety is high and they do not see the benefit of doing the recordings. After the strategy is repeated two or three times in the semester, students invariably report that they learned from it. Specifically, they report that their anxiety drops with experience and that they are able to correct many grammar and pronunciation mistakes.

Gen Y and academic dishonesty

Research on what this generation believes to be cheating has been completed by Ahrin (2009). Her findings suggest that most nursing students are clear about what is and is not acceptable during exams. One exception is that only 45 percent of students believe that grading a peer's exam leniently comprises an instance of cheating. A greater discrepancy between what faculty and students believe to be dishonest arises when completing assignments. Surprisingly, 50 percent of university

nursing students do not consider that borrowing a friend's ideas to complete an assignment is dishonest; 35 percent do not view copying and pasting direct quotes without referencing the sources as dishonest; and 45 percent of students do not clearly identify fabricating laboratory results as cheating. In her discussion, Ahrin (2009) expresses that Gen Y's characteristics of dependence on peers, resourcefulness, and need for instant gratification form the basis for these behaviors.

Teaching strategies for dealing with academic dishonesty

Educators have cited several ways to reduce academic dishonesty among Gen Y learners. First, institutions need to develop an honor code. Ideally, student input is taken into account to formulate the policies, procedures, and sanctions regarding dishonest behavior. Second, faculty members need to explain behaviors such as plagiarism and institute practices to curb inappropriateness, such as encouraging students to write drafts of their papers. Regarding exams, test generators are helpful to create different versions of tests. In addition, exams must be carefully proctored, electronic devices should not be allowed in the room, and students can be asked to write a statement on the answer sheet indicating that they did not behave inappropriately during the exam.

Gen Y's predilection for entertainment and games

Halvorsen (2008) writes that Gen Y listens to an iPod on a roller coaster because the roller coaster is not entertaining enough. She discusses the importance of entertainment as a motivating factor to get students to come to class and remember what they learn. She encourages teachers to tell jokes, share anecdotes, teach with PowerPoint, distribute handouts of presentations, be expressive, smile at students, have students stand up, show and discuss movie segments, incorporate mini-breaks during classes, be unpredictable, and have students learn by seeing and doing.

Games have traditionally been associated with recreation; however, research is growing about the educational value of gaming. Skiba (2008, 174) states that "given the emergence in higher education of the net generation, which was raised on video games, we should begin to explore the new world of educa-

tional gaming." The Federation of American Scientists (2006) has illustrated the value of educational gaming by identifying attributes that contribute to learning, such as the provision of clearly defined goals, ample practice opportunities, continuous feedback, and scaffolding. What teacher would not want to offer these elements to her learners?

Teaching strategies for including entertainment and games

We teachers need to remember that learners are quite entertained in their personal lives. Therefore, if we continually expect students to show a strong work ethic, we will be perceived as being overly demanding. First, teachers need to experiment with Halvorsen's (2008) ideas mentioned above and encourage students to take an active role in the class activities to maximize their participation. Second, materials developers need to increase the number of digital games that are specifically designed for language learning. Hopefully, soon publishers will consistently include entertaining digital activities with textbook series. Third, Gen X teachers, who are more time-conscious than their Gen Y students, should try to view games as tools of engagement and negotiation: "Sure we can play a game, but first I'd like you to work with a partner to do the activity that I am going to explain now."

One example of how games can promote language learning in a fun way is the *Weakest Link Game Show* organized each spring by my language department. To begin the game, all of our university's English students are given a list of 100 trivia questions to study for two weeks. Then, the teacher of each class holds a contest to identify the two students that best answer the questions. The winners from each class then participate in an online, semi-final round that includes new questions. Eight finalists are identified. At the end of the semester, the final event, attended by several hundred people, is held in the university auditorium. A university trivia champion is crowned and awarded an important prize. This semester-long event promotes English study in an entertaining manner.

Gen Y customizes tasks

Erikson (2008) explains that because Gen Y grew up in a child-centered world, they are

accustomed to getting what they want, when they want it. Oftentimes, they are not willing to conform to organizational rules because they view the rules as ineffective. For example, the Gen X and Baby Boomers' tendency to have face-to-face meetings is viewed as a huge waste of time. Gen Y prefers flexibility in how they do their work, with frequent texting and emails to report on their progress. Today, the number of workers who work from home is on the rise, and managers say that turnover drops by 35 percent when employees have this option and can communicate electronically with supervisors and clients. Similarly, Gen Y learners show a preference for the convenience and flexibility of online courses (Moskal et al. 2006).

Teaching strategies to customize tasks

Lockstep learning does not sit well within the personalized world of Gen Y. Faust et al. (2001) found that when web assignments were customized, university students were more likely to complete their homework and improve on semester exams. Like employers, teachers need to reduce the emphasis on how, when, and where students do their work. Instead, they ought to increase flexibility and focus on the quality of student performance. Researchers have suggested that technology allows learners to more readily advance at their own pace and receive feedback, as well as demonstrate that they have mastered material (Federation of American Scientists 2006). One way to do this in the language class is to give students the option to record and upload their oral presentations to YouTube rather than have everyone present them in class.

Multitasking is something most students do at home when completing homework assignments (Herbison and Boseman 2009), and they do it more easily than previous generations. Therefore, teachers ought not to be offended when students attempt to do it in class. At the same time, to alleviate tension on this point, teachers could try the following experiment: At the beginning of the semester, ask students to form two concentric circles, with the students in the inner circle facing out and those in the outer circle facing in. Have students in the outer circle hold their cell phone or laptop. Ask the outer circle to have two conversations at the same

time, one with the person in front and a second with another person in the outer circle. Tell them the topic is "The best teacher you have ever had." After a couple of minutes, the outer circle can rotate two spaces to the left. This time, students in the outer circle should put down their devices and give full attention to the person in front of them. The topic could be "A person you admire." Finally, ask students to share how they felt in the two situations. Hopefully, you can draw out that communication and learning are better when students do not divide their attention between class activities and their electronic devices.

Gen Y redefines respect

For professionals of every generation, being respected in the workplace is a fundamental need. Interestingly, however, Gen Y has lost respect for authority figures due to the notorious scandals of politicians, artists, and athletes. In the workplace, their attitude is often misconstrued as "lacking respect, but this is not the case. They are just more forthright and believe that everyone, including the boss, has to earn respect" (Wallis 2009, 63). Generally, this generation admires family, friends, and people with innovative ideas over people with a title or years in the company. Erickson (2008) reports that 95 percent of Gen Y say that they like to spend time with their parents. Further, because this cohort grew up chatting with and text messaging friends, they trust their friends more than they trust authorities.

Teaching strategies for the redefinition of respect

First, teachers must anticipate that at the beginning of a course, their students may not reflexively hold them in high esteem. Learners have had more interaction with their peers, so there is a prior relationship. Also, the tendency to multitask makes it likely that youths will start talking with peers as the teacher initiates and runs learning activities. Teachers should avoid resenting their students for this, and recognize it as a natural expression of Gen Y's mindset. To counter it, teachers need to hold an open discussion about the importance of listening to each other.

Second, considering the importance of parents, family, and friends, teachers ought to

be sensitive to personal matters that Gen Yers are experiencing. Students of teachers who create a warm, caring environment perform better than students who do not perceive their teachers as caring (Weinberger and McCombs 2003). These authors emphasize that teachers need to maximize an atmosphere of learner-centeredness in their classrooms. Finally, having learners offer feedback on their classmates' projects or English proficiency is another way to capitalize on the importance of peers.

Gen Y seeks a purpose and a passion

Gen Y has been told by parents, teachers, and coaches that they can do or be anything they want to. They are confident because they do not fear change, but welcome it. Thus, they have set their sights high, and one aim is to make a difference in the world. For example, they are often concerned that former generations have not taken care of the planet. Erickson (2008) reports that Gen Y job candidates inquire during interviews about what the company is doing in terms of community service and/or responding to environmental issues. Lindquist (2008) says that accounting firms that wish to attract top talent have initiated projects such as conducting food drives, holding ecological preservation events, and helping out in soup kitchens on holidays.

Teaching strategy for encouraging purpose and passion

English language textbooks commonly include at least one unit on saving the planet (e.g., tropical forests) and social issues (e.g., poverty). Gen Y finds these topics interesting and worthy of study. Teachers can extend these units by having students investigate a related topic and present what they discover in the form of PowerPoint presentations, posters, and role plays. A second valuable strategy involves inviting someone, such as a fellow teacher or community member, to present on an important issue affecting the local area. Third, a song, newspaper clipping, or movie segment involving a world problem can also engage learners. Institution-wide projects also help students feel proud of their school and more engaged in learning. Unfortunately, time-conscious teachers may claim that such projects take their courses off the syllabus track. However, they need to realize that if

they do not include projects of this sort, Gen Y may not engage in learning at all.

Gen Y reads less and less well

The U.S. Department of Education recently revealed that due to the technological age that Gen Yers have grown up in, they are reading and writing less and doing these activities less well (National Endowment for the Arts 2007). These "screenagers" are naturally more visual than textual and therefore show a reduced tendency to read. Block (2004) adds that Gen Y is more drawn to contemporary issues and scenarios in texts, rather than the classics. This does not mean that today's students will never experience the classics, but they should not be pushed early on in reading programs. For extensive reading programs to work, learners need to select what they read.

Teaching strategies to encourage reading

Teachers need to get highly visual reading material that focuses on modern-day issues into their students' hands. This is a tall order in EFL scenarios because libraries are often scarce and outdated. Here teachers can do two things to generate reading materials. First, students in higher levels of a program, middle school for example, can be asked to create stories and illustrations of simple books to be donated to primary levels. I saw how one school in Monterrey, Mexico, did this and generated dozens of books for young children. Older students have the satisfaction of creating; younger ones gain access to reading materials.

A second idea involves teachers surfing the web for stories that are written and published online by children who are native speakers of English. Many youths from English-speaking countries write funny, even inspiring books that include their own drawings. These stories can be printed out and bound and put in a classroom's reading corner.

A final note on reading: This generation is more holistic than analytic; therefore, extensive reading is likely to be more attractive for them than intensive reading. Let us implement the suggestions of extensive reading advocates: make a variety of materials available to students; allow them to select what they want to read; and try to make those materials visually attractive, relevant, and appropriately challenging for learners.

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. Sandars and Morrison (2007) explain:

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. (87)

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 feedback, 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 therein 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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