



Expanding ELT Objectives for 21st-Century Learners

by [Silvia Breiburd](#)

“Education is, above all, preparation for the future”
(Lucas & Claxton, 2013, p. 3)

Education systems throughout the world are evolving. Moving toward a new educational paradigm implies shifting present perceptions, beliefs, and actions regarding the purpose of education and the idiosyncratic nature of students’ preferred learning styles. English language teachers should address the complex interplay of factors that influences 21st-century students’ identity and cater to learners’ present and future real-life needs in their classes.

This article is founded on the assumptions that learning should be envisioned as a “collective social endeavor” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 11) and that “schools must take down the walls that separate the learning that students do, and could do, in school, from the learning they do, and could do, outside” (Robinson & Aronica, 2015, p. 149).

There is no denying that many instructional practices in the field position these teachers as qualified facilitators toward 21st-century readiness all over the world. From the use of specific cooperative learning structures to ordinary practice game-like language drills, English language teaching (ELT) professionals count on a wide array of pedagogic procedures that favor the transition to a different educational paradigm. Even so, the task may prove to be an unprecedented challenge. Students have changed, and educators who have been in the profession for more than two decades can attest it.

Recognizing the Generational Mindset: Characteristics of Generation Z

Generation Z learners, also called Gen Zers, Centennials, Igens, Recessionists, or Plurals, are individuals mostly born between 1995 and 2012 (Twenge, 2017; Elmore, 2015; Stillman & Stillman, 2017; Breiburd, 2017) who display unique cognitive and socioemotional characteristics that differentiate them from previous generations of learners throughout the world.

According to generational theory, groups of individuals who are born during a specific time span and affected by the same key events during late childhood and adolescence develop a collective persona with a typical mindset (Strauss & Howe, 1991). This acquired framework influences the way reality is perceived by the group and originates distinctive and easily recognizable

generational personality traits. To put it simply, a generational mindset constitutes a filter or lens shared by a collective of individuals which is used to interpret reality quite homogeneously.

Worldwide factors and key defining moments that have contributed to shape Z students are

- war on terror and 9/11,
- the H1N1 pandemic,
- the effects of global warming and natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes Katrina, Sandy, and Maria),
- the effects of economic crises,
- school shootings, and
- cybercrime.

Moreover, significant events that globalization has managed to spread all over the world—such as the advent of Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube—together with the impact of heightened parental influence during these students’ upbringing act as a “social DNA.” The resulting social identity of 21st-century students is so unique and remarkable that new terms have been coined to profile them (e.g., digital integrators, prosumers, task-switchers, crowd-source searchers, hacktivists, micro-learners, and key word spotters, with fear of missing out or messing up—FOMO and FOMU for short), according to various researchers (Twenge, 2017; Elmore, 2017; Stillman & Stillman, 2017; Breiburd, Nacamuli Klebs, & Vázquez, 2018).

By implementing more empathic, Gen-Z welcoming activities that match generational traits, ELT professionals may both favor learning and expand the effect of their classes. As I explain each of these characteristics, I’ll suggest strategies for enhanced ELT practice together with guidelines on how to cater to learners’ collective motivations and interests.

Teaching Gen Zers

Zers have never experienced a world without the Internet (McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2009), and technology is seamlessly integrated to their lives. Their access to information through this channel is primarily on-demand and for all needs, which include socializing, entertainment, and learning and can border on dependency or compulsion. Intertwining traditional and technology-mediated ELT activities may contribute to softening the effect of this Gen Z typical characteristic.

1. Use Realistic, Web-Mediated Activities

A distinguishing fact that cannot be overlooked is that Gen Zers’ interaction with the web is reciprocal, because these learners both produce and consume information from the net on equal terms. This generational trait that originates the term *prosumer* needs to be tackled to enhance English language learner (ELL) learning and the acquisition of 21st-century skills. Realistic, web-mediated activities appeal more to digital integrators because they resemble real-life collaboration.

Classroom Practice: Have students write a hotel review or a description of their hometown and upload it on a travel-based website.

Gen Z students are Internet hacktivists in its positive meaning in social and environmental causes. Moreover, parental upbringing has entitled them to voice their opinions on any issue since an early age, so designing class activities that intertwine language objectives with actual real-world causes may both engage and prepare students better for the 21st-century adult world.

Classroom Practice: Have students participate in blogs or virtual communities to channel connectivity dependency while developing civic skills.

2. Segment Learning and Grade Conscientiously

Centennial students are also profiled as task-switchers and microlearners. Concentration span tends to be shorter than that of previous generations, and long reading passages may go against their word-spotting acquired reading style. Strategies for tackling this generational weakness should become an objective in themselves.

Classroom Practice: Improve student outcomes by giving learners numerous tasks that are shorter, incremental in difficulty, and, if possible, cross-subject.

It must also be remembered that Z-learners have grown up being bubble-wrapped by parents (Stillman & Stillman, 2017) and show insecurity and risk aversion due to their “protected” upbringing. These students display low frustration tolerance that may lead them to give up when they face the first obstacle.

Classroom Practice: Reduce and grade objectives carefully and provide several opportunities for students to look back, revise, resystematize, and learn from mistakes in a growth mindset environment (Ricci, 2013). Avoid whole-term projects, which imply facing risks and delaying gratification over long periods.

To develop learners’ academic tenacity, praise effort more than results and incorporate the mantra word “yet” to their classroom vocabulary (Ricci, 2013), as in “You aren’t able to spot the verb *yet*” or “You aren’t able to speak fluently *yet*.”

3. Use Visuals, Games, and Constant Feedback

It is of paramount importance to remember that this generation is profiled as visual. As Medina (2014) explains it, “the more visual the input becomes, the more likely it is to be recognized - and recalled” (p. 191).

Classroom Practice: Use graphics and images (e.g., infographics)—and better still if these graphics are combined with humor, as in the case of cartoons or memes.

Furthermore, tutorials and video games rank among Zers' favorite learning resources; they have a trial-and-error video-game style of learning. Feedback, either positive or negative, also works better when it is instant, personal, or provided constantly.

Classroom Practice: Frequently use game-like drills that appeal to multiple intelligences. Also, provide optimal feedback for this generation by using apps and specialized sites such as [Edmodo](#) or [Google Classroom](#).

4. Utilize Peers With Collaboration

A remarkable characteristic to consider is that Z students naturally tend to resort to peer assistance either face to face or virtually on any everyday life issue. This refereed-by-peers approach, named crowd-source searching, poses another challenge to English language educators as it may fall into academic dishonesty. Better ELT learning practices could be fostered by providing simplified rubrics to help learners compare and contrast their own productions or those of their peers against clearly set standards.

Classroom Practice: To avoid conflicts of any type, clarify rules from the start and turn student crowd-sourcing into an opportunity for receiving scaffolding, peer-assessment, and formative feedback.

As Murphy and MacMillan (2013) explain it, there are many “I’s” holding teams together, so effective collaboration and the vocabulary needed to materialize it should be purposefully taught and not just expected.

Classroom Practice: Assign collaborative, online exercises (e.g., writing). Specify in advance how effective collaboration works and delineate the role of the individual’s contribution to the “collective whole.” Teach the vocabulary students will need to collaborate effectively and persuade others to adopt/adhere to their viewpoints.

Caveats

It is important to bear in mind that generational traits are broad generalizations which may juxtapose with and are compounded by specific institutional cultures and other general differentiating categories, such as class, gender, ethnicity, and geographic location—and the characteristics I’ve written about here describe large populations that may not necessarily apply to the students in any class. According to Abrams & von Frank (2014), “We are looking at an overall picture, not a self-portrait” (p. 4).

Conclusion

To sum up, today, ELT professionals are challenged to address 21st-century ELLs’ needs. Effective teaching for authentic learning, or authentic teaching for effective learning—no doubt the reverse is also true—will take place if and only if planning is grounded on Gen Zers’ generational trademarks, their preferred learning styles, and their dispositions.

Gen Zers need to adjust through teachers' socializing influences to become active members of their communities and to conform to what is expected from them in the present. It is therefore ELT teachers' invaluable task to guarantee learners' present academic readiness while preparing them for what is yet to come. And it is only then that ELT teachers will clearly help their students thrive in a quickly changing world.

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