



## Teaching 21st-Century ELs: 5 Areas of Impact

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New educational paradigms compounded by new student profiles (Elmore, 2017) bring winds of change within the teaching profession. Responding to the needs of 21st-century learners has become the new north in pedagogy, and English language teachers all over the world are facing unprecedented times to make their invaluable contribution to this worldwide cause. Read on for five areas of strategic impact where you may expand your ELT practice in an easy, Z-friendly way.

### Area 1: Look Who Is Learning

English language classes, from primary to high school, are being populated by Gen Zers, also called IGens or Centennials. This unique demographic group, defined as global, visual, and digital (McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2009), shares a collective mindset that affects the way they make sense of the world and differentiates them from previous generations of learners. Being aware of their distinctive personality traits and responding to their specific wants and needs paves the way for academic and real-life success.

Maximizing the impact of an English language lesson starts with planning. Chunk your lessons into smaller units to suit gen Zers' microlearning, trial-and-error style. Remember this generation's need for immediate feedback, so include plenty of simple drills and interactive games that allow them to deal with the risk of failure (Twenge, 2017) in a gradual way. Flipping the class and giving students the choice to select the time and pace of their practice works great, especially with adolescents. Briefly: The more you flex, the more they play, the more they learn.

### Area 2: Focus on Me, My Community, and My World

Gen Z students are profiled as pragmatic, entrepreneurial, and down-to-earth. They may become passionate hacktivists who want to make a contribution to the world. Designing learning tasks that offer a cause to pursue or a problem to solve, and where English becomes the means to a more transcendental aim, both engages and rewards them.

Invite Centennials to raise their voices in their communities, starting small but aiming high and equipping them for life. Making a poster or a vlog may open up new roads for creative, meaningful work and provide sound platforms to exercise civic and political rights. And better

still if they can partake through social media in interactive forums or petition websites that spread their claims all over the world and allow them to take immediate action.

### **Area 3: Collaborate to Learn and Vice Versa**

Because Gen Zers learn better at their own speed and when they are challenged within their zone of proximal development (better known as ZPD, i.e., what they can do with help), collaborative or cooperative work may suit them. Yet, this generation of students tends to be quite individualistic because of their progenitors' parenting styles and may find it difficult to be effective team players. Also make sure the team line-up allows all members to "trade strengths and outsource weaknesses," in Zhao's (2018) terms.

Go for that expansive whole that is more than the sum of the parts by training students to take ownership and accountability of their performance. In addition, focus on those language items or structures that they will need to carry out their collaborative tasks. It is convenient to check your class' mastery of the language of collaborative interactions beforehand, in case you need to teach it first. In short, your Gen Zers' objectives must run both ways: They should be able to collaborate to learn and to learn to collaborate on equal terms.

### **Area 4: *Abracadabra!* It's the Power of "Yet"**

Digital natives show distinct traits in the way they approach the unknown and resemble both pioneers and settlers in the way they like to learn: Strangely enough, they feel an urge to explore but are risk-averse and afraid of failure. Help them stretch their horizon and develop perseverance and grit by fostering a flexible mindset classroom that sees mistakes as learning opportunities. Bear in mind that *abracadabra* in Hebrew means "I create as I speak."

When students want to give up, and they express their feelings of helplessness through phrases such as "I can't do it," or "I don't know how to...", get them to include the mantra word of flexible mindsets: *yet* (Ricci, 2013) at the end of their statements, to envision a positive scenario. Providing selected activities at the end of which students can choose whether to add their grades to their records or not may also contribute to creating a welcoming classroom environment where mistakes are just a necessary step toward learning.

### **Area 5: There Are Two Sides to Every Story**

In an interrelated, hyperconnected world, being able to develop empathetic understanding and critical thinking skills becomes priority number one. English language teachers can make a great contribution toward 21st-century real life readiness by working systematically on persuasive language and similarities and differences on the widest array of topics.

For instance, introducing activities where students compare and contrast the same news, movie, or video-game trailers as depicted by the eastern and western world may provide an inestimable source of inspiration for negotiation, politics, and citizenship development. And these kinds of activities match Gen Zers' generational interests because the students feel empowered and believe they have a voice and can provide a solution to world problems.

## Five Areas, Two Paradigms, One Objective

Changing education paradigms may both perplex and motivate teachers on a daily basis. It is undeniable, though, that now that geographic boundaries have collapsed in the wake of the digital community and that conventional notions of self and others have become blurred in lieu of a new worldwide student identity, English teachers have been given a platform to stretch their influence to unknown horizons.

No doubt, troubled though they may seem, these times provide an incredible opportunity and a unique chance to resignify the importance and maximize the impact of English language teaching professionals in the quest to develop global citizens. And no teacher should be left behind.

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