

How to teach generation Y with technology

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Introduction

The 21st century invites a perhaps begrudging acceptance of the role that technology plays in almost every aspect of daily living. Nevertheless, when it comes to incorporating it into language classes, even the most accepting and forward-thinking teachers may not be able to make the right choices all the time. Indeed, every language teacher could benefit from asking the following pertinent questions (Berk, 2010):

- How do you decide which technology to use in your classroom?
- What criteria, if any, do you use to make an informed choice of technological tools?
- Are these criteria related to the learners' features, pedagogy, and learning outcomes?

After reflecting on these questions, the next step should be to examine the research that has so far been conducted on the use of technology by Generation Y learners. This generation is also known as the Millennials or the post baby-boomer generation (Noveck & Thompson, 2007; Wilson and Gerber, 2008). With the literature in mind, it is hoped that the technology tools the millennial learners are already utilizing can be leveraged to match the teachers' use of technology with the learning styles of Generation Y. The goal of this chapter is therefore to provide a means of connecting language teachers with their learners and build credibility in terms of integrating technology into language classes.

Although these learners have grown up in a technology-saturated environment, randomly employing technological tools in language

classrooms may not automatically result in effective teaching, or indeed learning. Doing so is in fact little short of a disservice. Language teachers need to go beyond such facile acts by need to recognizing *how the Millennials think and use technology* before selecting technological applications for their classrooms.

Bridging the gap between the two worlds

Despite the plethora of literature examining this generation and the educational implications of their particular distinctiveness (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), there is as yet no consensus regarding the defining features, nor of specific teaching strategies matched to those features (Sturges, 2008).

How might this generation's needs be defined in terms of the use of technology in language teaching? Of utmost importance is the necessity to understand the learners and their culture so that teacher technology strategies might be tailored to their characteristics. Language teachers must seek a clarification of the technology-related characteristics of Generation Y learners, so as to suggest specific technology directions for our teaching.

Chronology and Terminology

The second half of the 20th century heralded the era of the much-researched and clearly defined generation model. Many teachers are members of Generation X (born between 1961 and 1981), while a significant number of their colleagues are Baby Boomers (born between 1943 and 1960). In recent years, Generation X teachers have been joined by Generation Y colleagues (born 1982-2003), although the vast majority of this population demographic remain of student age. This current student population find themselves inhabiting a high-tech, constantly-connected media world. While all inhabit this world, certain aspects of this environment nevertheless seem alien to many. This fact is perhaps the defining characteristic of Generation Y: this is their normality.

Whereas the years used to define the boundaries of this generation vary according to different surveys, there appears to be a degree of conformity in the literature; this generation is defined as having been born between 1982

and 2003 (typically, we might see a variation of one or two years either way, according to the particular research). These learners now span the ages of those approaching early teenagehood through to those in their early thirties. Consequently, very few if any language teachers can escape the impact of this generation.

Although this generation is well-defined chronologically, naming it has proven to be noticeably more litigious. Authors and researchers have assigned various labels, such as the *Net Generation*, *Digital Natives*, *Millennials*, *Trophy Kids* and *Generation Y*, among others. This chapter prefers the term Generation Y. Unlike their immediate predecessors in Generation X, with whom they are easily contrasted, these people have been born into a world of home computers and the Internet. While it avoids the clichéd nature of some of the other terms, it still ostensibly points to a significant impact of technology on these learners' lives, as well as their step forward from Generation X.

How Generation Y think

More research has been conducted on this generation than any other, highlighting Generation Y's culture and values. Seven traits specific to this generation have been identified (Noveck & Thompson, 2007; Wilson and Gerber, 2008): they are '*special*', in that they are a smaller section of the demographic and as such are valued by and enjoy an intimate relationship with their parents; they are '*sheltered*' inasmuch as they are protected from the rigors of the wider world in a way that no previous generation has been; they are '*confident*' and have a positive outlook on life, feeling confident about their futures; they are '*team-oriented*' are used to working in task groups and so are skilled in collaborative effort; they are '*achievers*' who have big aims and ambitions when it comes to their careers; they are '*pressured*', in that they have been raised with the notion that they must build an impressive resume and fast; and they are '*conventional*', valuing the family structure and not wishing to deviate from cultural norms. While this framework may be useful in a general approach to teaching this generation, it still needs to be examined how their use of technology differs from our own in more detail.

How Generation Y use technology

When in a classroom environment, Generation Y learners instant message their friends while taking notes on their tablets, surfing the internet, or reading an e-book (Carlson, 2005). Such behavior may seem strange or just plain unacceptable to those of us who grew up in previous generations, but such behavior is their norm, regardless of how much Generation X fails to appreciate it. Generation Y now forms the vast majority of all school goers around the world and students in higher education. The technology available to them has had a deep impact on this generation, making them significantly different from their predecessors. They have grown up with the Internet, PCs, video games, Facebook, Skype, Flickr, iPhones and iPads (Berk, 2008) and own an array of electronic devices. They use technology to access social networking, games, TV programs, music and videos.

For Generation Y technology is the portal through which they view the world. However, their world is neither better nor inferior to the world of Generation X; it is merely different. Recognizing and coming to terms with this difference is an important goal for language teachers. One way to achieve this is to understand the learner characteristics and then leverage the technologies with which they're already familiar in our teaching. Getting to grips with the extent of their access to and use of technology in their daily lives is a pertinent starting point.

A US survey of 7,705 university students (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007) uncovered the following features of Generation Y learners:

- 97% own a computer
- 94% own some kind of mobile phone
- 76% use text messaging, are logged on 35 hours per week, chat 80 minutes a day, while 15% are logged on all the time
- 34% use a website as their first-choice source of news
- 49% download music, 15% download movies, while 16% download software via peer-to-peer software
- 92% multitask during instant messaging
- 75% own a Facebook account
- 56% have a device for playing music or video

Additional research indicates that 99% of Generation Y learners make use of the Internet to do research or homework (Pryor et al., 2009), 57% are creators of media (Oblinger, 2008), 35% keep a blog, while 57% read the blogs authored by others (Pryor et al., 2009), 89% rely on search engines like Google in any kind of search (OCLC, 2006), in addition to 87% reading news online (Pryor et al., 2009). These figures give a clear insight into the extent to which technology impacts on this generation's daily lives and why teachers should therefore accord it due attention. Below are the recommendations for Generation X teachers, based on the above research.

1. There should be no fear among teachers about using technology in the classroom

To Generation Y learners' relying on most forms of technology is second nature (Carlson, 2005); it therefore influences everything they do to a certain extent. Furthermore, their experience with technology makes it possible for them to accomplish intricate tasks and reach decisions quickly (Prensky, 2006; Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007). In contrast, they do not appear to be technology-savvy (Lorenzo & Dziuban, 2006). The sheer mass of information and applications available to them means that they may not necessarily be able to locate, evaluate and use what is in front of them. Consequently, they are not so far ahead of Generation X teachers in terms of their technology use: the only difference is their degree of comfort.

The teachers' role, therefore, remains a vital one. Rather than being frightened by Generation Y's use - it turns out they are not doing anything spectacular with the tools at their disposal - of technology, teachers should be aware that they still need to be taught critical thinking and information literacy skills (Oblinger & Hawkins, 2006). A must for language teachers is to discuss the role that technology plays and to what extent learners would like it to be utilized in class.

2. Their reliance on search engines should be coupled with an ability to use them effectively

When it comes to searching for what they need, Generation Y learners have developed an '*ease-of-use*' mentality. Even as far back as 2006 approximately

89% were initiating any searches using search engines like Google (OCLC, 2006). Moreover, this high level of ease around technology possibly has the effect that they mostly overestimate their ability to find or evaluating the information available online (Manuel, 2002). A survey of 394 college students from six different countries (Online Computer Library Center, 2006) showed that 94% of Generation Y learners consider search engines to be an ideal resource for their lifestyle, whereas 63% considered physical libraries to be suitable. Despite expressing awareness that physical libraries offered more reliable information, such facilities fell short of learners' expectations in terms of speed, convenience and general ease of use (OCLC, 2006).

Teachers are in a position to facilitate better search engine use by assigning tasks which draw on the students' current search engine use skills, while also offering structure and guidance on how to maximize on their search results. Tasks that require an internet search should also aim to get learners thinking critically about the information and how to use and interpret it. Also, information literacy skills should be made the focus of tasks, rather than the means.

3. Video clips are a must for language classrooms

Many Generation Y learners have never known a world without YouTube and are used to accessing videos, music, games, and all other information whenever they wish. Leveraging the video media that learners access on a daily basis in the classroom is a significant opportunity for teachers to connect with their world (Berk, 2003).

The teachers' role here is twofold. Firstly, using videos in our classes can play a major role in connecting them to the content. The videos may be chosen as pre-class viewing homework, or learners might be even asked to investigate videos around the theme of the class themselves. Secondly, learners should be taught how to search for what they want in an adequate, critical-thinking stimulating way. To that end, tasks should be designed accordingly.

4. Multitasking must be handled with extreme care

Generation Y learners switch fast from one task to another, from one medium to the next. Some of the examples of this behaviour are texting while chatting

with their friends on their smart phone, or e-mailing, while surfing the Net during the process of doing homework (Prensky, 2006; Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007). Nevertheless, regularly doing such tasks simultaneously puts a strain on their brains, causing stress, the inability to solve problems and inhibition of creative ability among others. Their brains record much less collective activity when they are engaged in two actions than when they are concentrating only on one (Just & Buchweitz, 2011). Therefore, multitasking should be handled cautiously.

Tasks that allow for multitasking should require a minimal level of mental processing. For instance, learners may be encouraged to check for meaning of unknown words in a text using an online dictionary. Any tasks that require problem solving or creative thought should not be done in conjunction with another task.

5. Use visual stimuli at every opportunity

Generation Y is a generation with high visual literacy, comfortable in an image-rich environment. Many prefer not to read books, in particular textbooks, although if necessary, they do so after all (Vaidhyanathan, 2008). Indeed, the Millennials generally view print as costly, uninteresting, or unprofitable (Gomez, 2007). Instead, they tend to communicate visually. This is often done by capturing images with their digital cameras, in order to post them on social media profiles (Oblinger, 2008). They also post still frames on Flickr and video-clips on YouTube, making ample use of their ability to integrate text, sound and images (Frاند, 2000; Manuel, 2002; Oblinger, 2008).

While presenting new language teachers must include graphics, images, and visual representations with which students can relate, especially video clips from television, movies, and YouTube. Getting learners to develop visual presentations which combine music, video, or other visuals may engage them and motivate them to work towards desired learning objectives.

6. Encourage the sharing of ideas and opinions

Generation Y learners tend to express their emotions honestly and straightforwardly. They enjoy meeting new people and sharing personal

information, such as aspects of their lives in online blogs, on Facebook, or through other online avenues (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007).

Teachers may wish to capitalize on this culture of sharing. Using methods such as digital storytelling to encourage online interaction would help learners to reflect on what has happened in class and enable them to share resources relating to their learning experiences.

7. Foster teamwork and collaboration

This generation is fiercely socially-oriented and readily engages in online as well as in face-to-face interaction (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007; Tapscott, 2009), which signals a preference for team-work. Collaboration, more so than quiet individual reflection, seems to allow their collective intelligence to develop by way of joint research, insights, arguments and knowledge (Jenkins, 2006).

Language teachers should look for opportunities to pool knowledge, share opinions, debate, conduct research and create new insights through blogging, wikis, podcasts, or e-portfolios. They may also assign group work in online chat rooms, or schedule meetings and group events with learners. Another strategy is to assign learners to create visual presentations including videos , requiring them to interact and to teach each other outside of class.

8. Create opportunities for typed work

For Generation Y, the benefits of word processing win over any sort of printed text communication (Frاند, 2000). These learners, while retaining the physical ability to write just as well as the preceding generations did, nonetheless see such practices as being old-fashioned. Typing is, quite simply, the normal way of writing. What they are used to doing is typing messages, notes, or term papers on their computer or tablet.

The teachers' role here is to facilitate such typed communication by encouraging the use of word processing software for homework assignments. Students may also be encouraged to take notes and do assignments in-class using Word or similar software. As learners feel comfortable writing in this way, they may be motivated in their work.

9. Create opportunities for learners to develop content

Generation Y learners contribute to the Internet in a major way by developing, using, commenting on, and rating materials. Furthermore, Web 2.0 has enabled social book marking, which allows learners to comment, evaluate, and accumulate published works (Polin, 2007). This phenomenon has fostered an environment in which direct peer-to-peer engagement is the norm.

Language teachers' goal should be to utilize tasks that allow their learners to share, create, and interact via applications such as Flickr or YouTube. Learners need to be given opportunities to be website contributors, write their own blogs, and contribute to wikis or YouTube videos, in addition to creating content-relevant podcasts, connected to the objectives of language courses.

10. Provide feedback via technological means

This generation has gone through life getting immediate feedback on their performance. Brender (1998) notes how these learners now want the same degree of response from teachers in terms of depth and immediacy. Moreover, traditional correction practices may be inadequate, in that they are no longer a good fit for the demands of Generation Y (Truscott, 1996).

Technology has opened up a new world in terms of what can be done with feedback. Some strategies that may be employed are to use screen capture software to comment on word processed writing work, or to record oral feedback which can then be emailed to learners.

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