How to engage and motivate Generation Z in German EFL classes: A mixed-methods enquiry

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1. Introduction

This paper is a summary of the research into Generation Z (GenZ) in EFL conducted in several secondary and tertiary schools in Germany for an MA dissertation conducted at the University of Central Lancashire in 2020. Firstly, an overview of recent generations is presented. Thereafter, research methods and participants are discussed. Subsequently, the most prominent results with potential implications for the lay community, i.e. teachers and policymakers, will be presented and discussed.

Generational differences may hinder effective intergenerational collaboration and learning, this project may be able to provide a way forward in the contemporary education landscape. Furthermore, it may be crucial to harvest information from today’s cohorts as, for the first time in history, four generations inhabit educational settings simultaneously (Lancaster, 2004).

1. Generation X, Y, Z, Alpha

The following section will discuss characteristics of the four Generations, namely GenX, GenY, GenZ, and Gen Alpha, currently inhabiting the educational sector, based on Lancaster’s (2004) timeline.

Generation X (born 1965 – 1980)

This generation’s career aspirations are driven by enjoyment (Lancaster, 2004) and the idea of a functional work-life balance (Cilliers, 2017). That cohort is the first to utilise the digital world for professional and socialising purposes.

Generation Y (born 1981 – 2000)

They are digital immigrants and the first generation to shift their realities from the offline to the online world. They have seen massive changes in the world, e.g. 9/11, 2008 economic crisis (Lancaster, 2004).

GenZ (born 2000 – 2012)

Currently representing the generational cohort in secondary and tertiary settings (Lancaster, 2004), GenZ may be a unique cohort of learners in many respects. They have grown up through political and societal uncertainty (e.g. the War on Terror, the 2008 financial crisis) whilst being exposed to over-protective parents and ubiquitous digitalisation (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). Full-time exposure to digital devices and the resulting flood of information and stimuli may have physically and perhaps irreversibly changed GenZ’s brain structure (Kinash et al., 2013).

Generation Alpha

This cohort does not know an analogue world (Rusman et al., 2019). Potentially, this emerging generation may require a highly entertaining approach to education in order to prevent boredom.

* 1. GenZ in EFL and second language education

Language educators, especially in the field of EFL, are left with only little more than assumptions about GenZ (Shatto & Erwin, 2017). Due to the lack of research into GenZ in Germany, this project’s enquiry was based on cross-disciplinary studies and results from various fields including Human Resources (cf. Morales, 2018), sociology (cf. Turner, 2015), and language pedagogy (cf. Seemiller & Grace, 2017).

This enquiry focusses on motivational, pedagogical and methodological factors relevant for a GenZ EFL classroom in Germany.

1. Methods and participants

The study has been conducted in three different educational settings in three federal states in Germany. Pupils currently attending secondary education as well as those attending a vocational college have been invited to participate. Initially, 150 participants were invited. Due to the on-going coronavirus crisis and a full lockdown in the education sector in Germany, only 20 participants volunteered, however. The age range of the participants spans from 12 to 19 years. The participants had to meet the following three criteria: (1) born between 2000 and 2012, (2) non-native speakers of English, and (3) attending English lessons. Due to the status of English as a compulsory school subject in Germany, all the participants will have attended English lessons. A mixed methods approach was chosen for data collection. The QUAL data collection is based on the findings from the QUAN enquiry. QUAN data was obtained through a questionnaire containing 84 Likert-scale items and 5 open-ended questions. The questionnaires were made available in print and as an online survey using SurveyMonkey. QUAL data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews via zoom. The interviews were transcribed subsequently and colour-coding was used to identify main themes and arguments. Due to length restrictions, the questionnaire as well as the interview questions can be requested by email.

1. Findings

The following section will discuss this project’s motivational, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistic findings. The findings have been harvested from both the questionnaire data, which gave a general idea of tendencies, and follow-up interview data, which helped explore those tendencies further. Table 1 below, will summarise these findings. However, it must be pointed out that a small sample size does not allow for generalisable results and implications but may only suggest tendencies. These tendencies deserve more research, which is strongly encouraged by the researcher.

Table 1. QUAN and QUAL findings summarised and categorised.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Fun & Enjoyment | Relatability | L2 Media | Global Citizenship | Teachers Roles | Digital Tools | Social Media | Opportunities to practise |
| 90 % generally motivated  (QUAN) | 60 % find non-relatable content demotivating  (QUAN) | 80 % motivated to consume foreign TV and web shows  (QUAN) | 87.5 % want to travel and use English as lingua franca  (QUAN) | 95 % rely on teacher feedback (cf. 75 % want to discover content on their own first)  (QUAN) | 37.5 % wish for more digital tools and the use of the internet  (QUAN) | 60 % use social media to communicate with English speakers  (QUAN) | 72.5 % want opportunities in real-world situations (e.g. field trips)  (QUAN) |
| 87.5 % motivated because English is a gatekeeper  (QUAN) | - learners are more motivated if content is applicable to their environment and communities  (QUAL) | - watching Netflix without dubbing  (QUAL) | - ‘since everybody speaks English’, motivated to learn and use it abroad  (QUAL) | - teachers should give guidance but allow for exploration  → learner-centred approach  (QUAL) | 80 % prefer pen-and-paper  (QUAN) | 40 % would use social media for learning purposes  (QUAN) | 80 % prefer group projects over independent study  (QUAN) |
| - learners want to use English for ‘creative, enjoyable activities, such as creative writing’  (QUAL) | - inclusion of learners’ hobbies and interests into classroom projects  (QUAL) | - engaging in social media globally  (QUAL) |  | - teacher as a safety net  (QUAL) | - online resources appreciated for independent study, yet not in classroom  (QUAL) | - social media can help passive practice at home but seen as privacy invasion if used in classroom  (QUAL) | - shared projects with English-speaking schools and student exchanges/fieldtrips  (QUAL) |

* 1. Fun and enjoyment

The data suggest that a large majority of participants has a positive attitude towards learning and using English per se. GenZ have recognised that English can function as a gatekeeper. The multi-faceted applicability of English to their lives may be the source of their high intrinsic motivation.

4.2 Relatability

A one-size-fits-all approach to education may have detrimental effects on motivation and actual intake, i.e. the psycholinguistic processing of input. Topics and tasks, however, may be more effective if they reflect GenZ’s real lives. This also includes personal interests and the direct application of contents. The latter is extremely important as GenZ do not seem to learn for the future but live in on-demand settings.

* 1. L2 media consumption

This study has shown that the majority of learners prefer to consume L2 media. Whilst films and music ranked high, YouTube is GenZ’s favourite medium. Apart from re-watchability, the internet platform provides edutainment, i.e. entertainment with added educational value. Additionally, due to the global nature of English, online tutorials and contents are increasingly available in English. Furthermore, due to GenZ’s early exposure to screens and digital devices, their brain structure may have changed irreversibly (Kinash et al., 2013) requiring increased exposure to optical stimuli to process input successfully. This may indicate that the introduction of YouTube or similar media into the classroom may engage learners better.

* 1. Global citizenship vs travel and culture

The data suggest that GenZ is well aware of the circumstance that English has moved from a regional to an international language. Although participants replied that they were interested in the Anglo-American cultural background, they also admitted that they use English more globally than regionally. This means that learners are more interested in communicating across borders than communicating with English native-speakers.

* 1. Teacher roles

Teachers are still perceived as authority figures. However, contrary to this perception, GenZ also claim independence from their teachers including reduced teacher-talking time. Simultaneously, they expect their teachers to act as conductors guiding learners through the information jungle and nudging them into the desired direction. Similarly, teacher feedback and praise is a crucial component to GenZ learners. In a nutshell, GenZ expect their teachers to create opportunities for independent learning whilst functioning as a safety net and guide who is in charge of classroom management.

4.6 Digital tools

Surprisingly, GenZ do not wish for digitalisation of the classroom. Whilst they recognise that Google is essential for doing research, apps, and digital technology beyond dictionaries have been dismissed. It must be noted, however, that participants replied reluctantly to that question, which may indicate a lack of understanding and knowledge about how to incorporate digital tools in the classroom. Furthermore, they still prefer pen-and-paper methods and the traditional worksheet over devices. Whilst accessibility of information is facilitated using a laptop or similar, these devices only play a minor supportive role in GenZ’s lives.

4.7 Social media

Whilst participants acknowledge that social media can be helpful in passive L2 acquisition, active involvement of platforms such as Instagram have been dismissed for privacy reasons. It can, therefore, be suggested that the incorporation of social media may not lead to desirable reactions as it might invade one’s privacy.

4.8 Opportunities to practise

GenZ want to practise in real-world situations. Their world has figuratively shrunk, and access to (non-) native speakers of English has become very easy. The data suggest classrooms should be opened up to the world with language exchanges and field trips being promoted. Furthermore, taking into account the financial aspect, exposure to native speakers for practising purposes may be worth investigating in terms of online exchanges, e.g. pen pals, as well.

1. **Conclusion**

Although the small sample size and the extraordinary conditions under which this research was conducted do not allow for generalisation of results, several tendencies emerge. Firstly, it must be noted that GenZ in Germany are self-motivated and highly interested in learning and using English in numerous academic and non-academic situations. This may create a need for the notion of World Englishes to find recognition in the field of EFL teaching. Secondly, school settings need to become more learner-oriented and should allow for socialising and a supportive climate amongst learners. Groupwork and exchange with other speakers of English in natural settings are favoured by GenZ. Furthermore, learning for learning’s sake may have detrimental effects on GenZ as this cohort requires meaningful application of contents to prevent boredom. Educators and policymakers might want to exploit this by rendering contents relevant to and reflective of GenZ’s lives. There may also be a need to replace visually less appealing materials with colourful and digitalised input, e.g. YouTube videos.

Even though the implications of that for the classroom deserve more research, it can be said with some certainty that GenZ no longer use books for research but resort to search engines. However progressive GenZ appear to be, the majority still prefers traditional pen-and-paper approaches to learning. Neither are GenZ in favour of including social media into the classroom as that would be perceived as privacy infringement. In a nutshell, it can be said that GenZ are highly reliant on each other and require high levels of socialising. They are problem-solvers and may best be taught by presenting a problem that needs solving through the use of teacher-selected tools (i.e., materials, lexis, grammar). Lastly, teachers may face a new role for themselves to assume. The teacher as the transmitter of knowledge might be obsolete as GenZ may require their teachers to be facilitators and guides on this cohort’s exploratory quest.

Bio

A person with a beard

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Kevin Frank Gerigk completed his MA in TESOL with Applied Linguistics at UCLan in 2020. In the same year, he started his PhD in Linguistics at Lancaster University. Previously, he had worked as a language teacher, mostly with adults and teenagers. His main research interests are Second Language Acquisition and Psycholinguistics, Corpus Linguistics, Authenticity in EFL/ESL, Course Book and Materials Design for EFL/ESL.

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