

Teaching Diverse Generation Z: Survey Results and Pedagogical Strategies for University Instructors

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PURPOSE

A longstanding challenge within the field of communication disorders is the under representation of culturally and linguistically (CLD) diverse professionals (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2022). Unfortunately, statistics indicate that over time, this situation has changed very little. A major goal of the American Speech and Hearing Association has been to increase representation of CLD professionals in our field in order to increase access to services among CLD populations. This goal must be undergirded by culturally responsive, specific strategies for recruiting and retaining CLD individuals within the professions.

This involves, among other things, improving the academic experience for CLD students in university classes. Because the majority of class instructors are White members of the Millennial, Generation X, and Baby Boomer age groups, there can be a gulf between teaching styles and strategies and the needs of Generation Z CLD learners. This ongoing research project has surveyed Generation Z CLD and mainstream university juniors in order to develop culturally responsive pedagogical strategies to encourage increased CLD representation in our professions.

Literature has described characteristics of Gen Z (born between 1996-2012): (Chunta et al., 2021; Gould et al., 2020; Magano et al., 2020; Marshall & Spinner, 2020; Martin & Bollinger, 2018; Mendoza, 2019; Said et al., 2020; Sari, 2019; Schlee et al., 2020; Seibert, 2021).

1. They are hands-on learners who appreciate variety
2. They are proficient with technology and prefer electronic/digital communication to in-person interactions (2/3 of them were already operating computers before age 5 years)
3. They have extremely short attention spans (8 seconds) and constantly multitask
4. They would much rather read on an electronic device, which is preferred over a paper/print book
5. They prefer to learn online rather than by attending actual face to face classes
6. They may need encouragement to persevere and develop increased tolerance for adversity
7. They may need support in how to use communication “soft skills” in dealing with others in non-digital, face to face interactions to enhance interpersonal relationships
8. They may need support in increasing critical thinking skills

In order to more effectively meet the needs of Gen Z students in our department, we conducted a study to determine their preferences for learning course material. We did this over five years: 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2021 (not during 2020 due to Covid 19; however, students in all cohorts from 2017-2021 were represented). The research questions were: What does Gen Z prefer in terms of university classes? How do the outcomes of our study compare to previous literature in this area?

Figure 1. Survey

Year born_____	Current age_____		Language(s) spoken other than English_____			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. For school assignments, I like group projects and prefer working in groups; I enjoy collaboration.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. For school assignments, I prefer to work alone an assignment or project.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. If I have a question for a professor, I prefer in-person communication rather than electronic communication (e.g., text or email).						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I prefer online classes to coming to an actual classroom with a professor teaching in person.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. I prefer actual classes with a professor teaching in person rather than online classes.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. For textbooks, I would rather have a paper/print textbook than an electronic/digital text.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. I prefer large group lecture format only (e.g., no small group in-class discussions, etc.)						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I find it helpful to break up into small groups during class to discuss topics and how to apply information and to do hands-on activities (not graded).						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

9. My phone is a distraction when I'm studying or trying to complete a school assignment.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

10. I would welcome the chance to learn more about how to study effectively (strategies etc.).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Comments:

PROCEDURES

The survey (Figure 1) was administered to juniors in Sacramento State University's Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders. The survey, consisting of 10 items, asked students to indicate their preferences (on a Likert scale of 1-7) for learning course material in the university classroom setting. Students were given two points of extra credit for filling out the survey.

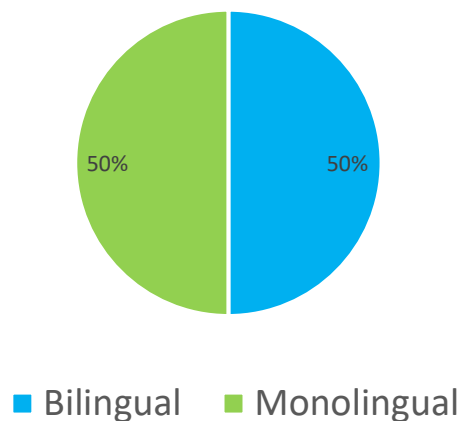
For this study, a total of N=360 surveys was filled out by Gen Z students. The age range of the students was 18-23 years; their average birth year was 1997. The range of birth years was 1996-2002. Their average age was 20.7 years old. The students spoke 19 different languages (see Figure 2); 50% were bilingual (Figure 3).

Figure 2.

Languages Other Than English Spoken by Subjects

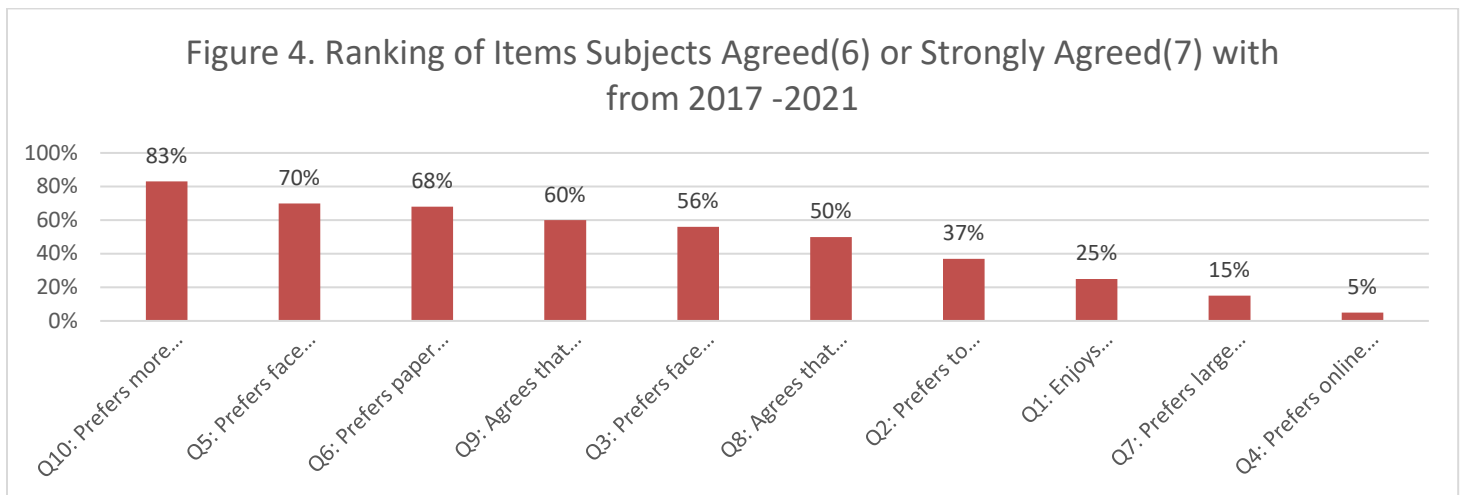
Tagalog	Malayam	Armenian	Swahili
Russian	Polish	Hindi	Ukrainian
Punjabi	Arabic	Romanian	Norwegian
Hmong	Mandarin	Gujarati	Spanish
Cantonese	Uzbek	Urdu	

Figure 3. Percentage of Bilingual Students 2017 - 2021



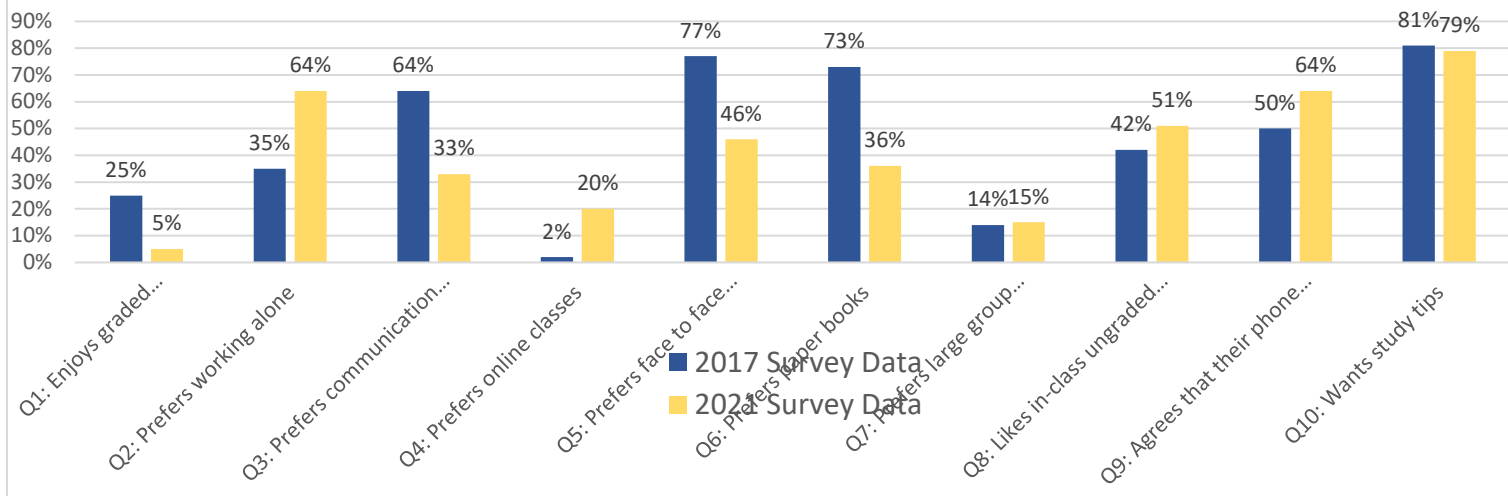
RESULTS

The Likert Scale indicated that 1=strongly disagree; 7 =strongly agree. We collapsed the responses where the students from all five cohorts (2017-2021) indicated a “6” or “7” (agree/strongly agree) with the following results (Figure 4). For Item 10, “I would welcome the chance to learn more about how to study effectively,” 83% of students agreed/strongly agreed with this statement. For item 5, “I prefer actual classes with a professor teaching in person rather than online classes,” 70% of students agreed/strongly agreed. For item 6, “For textbooks, I would rather have a paper/print textbook than an electronic/digital text,” 68% of students agreed/strongly agreed. For item 9, “My phone is a distraction when I’m studying or trying to complete a school assignment,” 60% of students agreed/strongly agreed. For item 3, 56% of students agreed/strongly agreed that they prefer face to face communication with a professor (instead of digital). Fifty percent said they agreed/strongly agreed that ungraded, small group activities during class were helpful (item 8). Thirty seven percent agreed/strongly agreed that they prefer to work alone (not in a group project format; item 2). Only 25% of the students agreed/strongly agreed that they enjoyed collaborative group projects (item 1). For item 7, “I prefer large group lecture only with no small group in-class activities,” only 15% agreed/strongly agreed. For item 4, “I prefer online classes to coming to an actual classroom with a professor teaching in person,” only 5% of students agreed/strongly agreed.



An informal trend analysis (see Figure 5) was conducted to compare the answers of the first cohort of Gen Z students (Fall 2017) with the most recent cohort (Fall 2021). Notable differences (where there was a 20% or more difference in answers on certain items) were found as follows. The 2021 students enjoyed collaborative group projects 20% less than their 2017 counterparts. In 2021, 35% more students indicated that they preferred working alone rather than on collaborative group projects. In 2021, only 46% of students preferred face to face classes as compared to 77% of the 2017 cohort. In 2017, 73% of the students preferred paper books to digital; in 2021, only 36% preferred paper books. In 2017, 64% of students preferred face to face communication with professors; in 2021, this fell to 33%. The effect of the pandemic on the responses of the 2020 and 2021 cohorts is a definite confounding variable in this study.

Figure 5. Percentage of Fall 2017 and Fall 2021 Students who Agreed (6) and Strongly Agreed (7) with Survey Items



DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As our field attempts to attract and retain CLD professionals, we can begin by implementing more culturally responsive, inclusive teaching practices into our university courses. Because our courses contain mostly Gen Z students who are increasingly diverse, this is important to our profession. The implications of this study are:

1. University instructors should directly teach good study habits. This includes avoiding phones as a distraction and avoiding multitasking while studying. This finding is supported in the current literature.
2. Instructors should make an effort to communicate with their students personally in face-to-face interactions as well as electronically.
3. Instructors can feel confident helping students find reasonably priced paper textbooks for optimal learning of course content, though today's youngest Gen Z members are increasingly comfortable with digital books. This preference for digital books agrees with findings in current literature.
4. Instructors may need to help students learn skills for collaborating effectively with each other on group projects/assignments. Work on "soft skills," may be necessary. This finding agrees with current literature that indicates that Gen Z needs support in effective face to face communication
5. Instructors may consider flexible, hybrid teaching models which include both face to face and online components, as attending in-person classes has seemingly become less important to Gen Z students. This agrees with current literature that indicates that Gen Z prefers digital learning.
6. Students enjoy non-graded, small group activities during class; instructors should implement more of these activities. The traditional "sage on a stage" teaching model is not appreciated by many Gen Z students who prefer to be actively engaged in learning. This finding is supported in the literature (Mendoza, 2019; Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

Because diverse Gen Z students have only recently been in our university classrooms, ongoing research with larger groups of subjects in multiple geographic locations is necessary in order to increase the external validity of this study's findings.

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