

# ***Generation Z Students' Characteristics and Attitude in a Chinese English Language Teaching Classroom***

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**Abstract:** Recently, the notion of Generation Z has been received a wide attention in various academic studies. As the generation who were born and raised in the era of the Internet, digital tools, and social media, Generation Z tend to have different characteristics from the previous generations. In this respect, this paper focuses on providing a better view of Generation Z' characteristics and their attitude towards English writing and classroom instructions in an English as foreign language classroom in Yunnan, China. Questionnaires and essay analysis were used to present the experimental Generation Z students' opinions and their writing features. The results indicated the experimental Generation Z students have shown both the "general" characteristics (such as tech savy, multi-taskers) and the "typical" Chinese characteristics, and that these students had negative attitude to English writing and classroom instructions. As the current English language teaching seems ineffective in meeting the needs of Generation Z students in an L2 English language classroom, this paper concludes that it is urgent for language teachers to find effective methodology to enable the Generation Z students to achieve more in their English language learning practices.

**Keywords:** Generation Z, characteristics, attitudes.

## **1. Introduction**

The majority of students currently in high education are labeled as Generation Z (Gen Z). Because of their unusual behavioral characteristics, this generation has been in focus of many different academic studies and discussions. Gen Z refers to a cohort of people born after the mid-1990s. This generation is well-known as the first generation to have been born and raised through the process of Internet popularization [1] and the first generation that may truly find it difficult to live a life without the Internet, smartphones and social media [2]. In educational settings, many researchers focus on the personality traits of these young people [3] [4] [5], and some tend to analyse the socio-cultural factors behind these particular traits [6]. Even more studies are trying to provide feasible teaching approaches regarding this generation [7] [8] [9] [10] [11].

But in the field of Second Language Acquisition, studies related to Gen Z are, by far, insufficient. On the one hand, although a few studies have taken Gen Zers as research subjects. These studies focus on either analyzing Gen-Z English learners' traits or introducing teaching methodology for these EF/SL (English as a Foreign/Second Language) students. On the other hand, no studies have focused

on Gen-Z English learners' characteristics in terms of the English language itself. In other words, no one has paid attention to Gen-Z English learners' language output, for example, how they form a sentence, what kind of attitude they hold towards English. Moreover, no studies have been reported on Gen Zers in an EFL teaching context in China.

This paper focuses on two things. First, it reports the characteristics of written L2 English of a group of sophomore EFL learners in Yunnan, China, and, second, it reports the attitudes of these students towards the English writing and the ESL teaching. This paper is divided into 9 parts. First, we start the introduction. Section 2 is the literature review. Sections 3 and 4 discuss typical learning styles of Gen Z, and attitudes and their role in the ESL. Sections 5-8 present the research questions, the research methodology, and the discussions based on the collected results. Section 9 concludes the paper.

## 2. Literature Review

This section presents the most relevant definitions and literature on Gen Z in the Chinese and international context.

### 2.1. Understanding the Notion of Gen Z

Gen Z is the first generation born in a globally connected world through Internet technology [8][12]. With respect to the definition of this term, its definition may vary according to Gen Z members' birth year [3] [6] [13]. One common feature reported in the literature is that Gen Z constitutes the main population of current education, most of which are in primary and high schools, and the oldest of which either are undergraduate university students or have entered the workforce.

As discussed above, studies connected with Gen Z are largely focused on their personality traits. DiMattio and Hudacek have provided a broad view of this cohort of young people -- they call them "innovative, pragmatic, goal-oriented, responsible and determined" (page 7) [14]. And Szymkowiak et al. introduced them as "active participants in civil society" (page 3) [8].

Apart from the stated characteristics, more personality traits have been identified, which are as stated below [4] [5] [8]:

A) They are tech savvy. Members of this generation tend to know the world or even their surroundings through the Internet, computers, smartphones, Apps and social media; in a way, they depend on these digital tools to live and study, and they acquire new technological advances more quickly than their elders. This dependency on the media and the digital world makes them inept at social situations outside the context of the digital world. As they grew up with various social networking sites, they are used to connecting with their friends in real life and strangers online to form online conversations; moreover, to some extent, the appearance of instant messaging become an assistant for them to build up communicative relationship with others both in real life and online [5].

B) They have a short attention span. This is caused by multi-media environment they are accustomed in. As the increasing communicative interactions through the digital tools and social networking sites is integrated in the routines of these young people, they are receiving information in a rapid, instant and even fragmented way. The habit of obtaining instant and fragmented information has made their brain be prone to have a shorter attention span [15].

C) They are multi-taskers. They can perform different tasks at the same time. For example, you may see a Gen Zer talking on the phone while listening to music and surfing the Internet.

## 2.2. Introducing the Chinese Gen Z

When it comes to Chinese educational context, Chinese scholars have their unique interpretations of Gen Z. In China, Gen Z are mainly called 00 后, which seems to refer to those who were born after the year 2000 based on its literal meaning.

The understanding of Chinese Gen Z covers 3 aspects: first, they are born and raised under the one-child policy [16], which is an official policy to limit the majority of family units in the country to one child each; second, they are born in the years between 2000 and 2009 [16] [17]; last, they are born and raised in a typical period when China has achieved great success in various aspects, such as in economic, cultural and political fields [16] [18]. With respect to a better understanding of Chinese Gen Z, the one-child policy might be of vital importance among the above 3 features in that the children born under this policy are more self-centered than the previous generations, which claim the nature of collectivity. For the purposes of this study, I will assume Gen Zers as those undergraduates in a Chinese college who were born after the year of 1999.

Now, I will present the characteristics of Chinese Gen Z as noted in the previous literature [16] [18]:

They are both diligent young people and “Buddhist youths”. On the one hand, most Chinese Gen Zers have a clear goal in life, and they believe that only through hard working can help them realize their goals. On the other hand, part of them tend to identify themselves as “Buddhist youths” which literally means those who desire nothing and seldom take initiative, in case they will encounter problems and feel disappointed. Here, their “Buddhism” could be considered as a way to reject the pressure and challenges caused by current social reality such as the severe competition in job markets

They reject authority, which in contrast to traditional Chinese social values. Here, the notion of authority mostly refers to the elder family members, teachers, experts in a specific field, etc. This rejection of traditional values is observed in 2 ways. First, this generation questions authority and does not take the authority view at face value. Second, this generation are independent problem-solvers. When this generation comes across problems, they would rather find out answers or solutions themselves rather than rely on authority for solutions.

## 2.3. Introducing Previous Studies with Gen Z Respondents in the Context of ESL

Although there are intensive researches around the topic of Gen Z, there are not many studies related to Gen-Z L2 learners and their language learning practices in the ESL field. Some notable studies are listed in the following.

Aarts et al. have developed a mobile phone application which provides a convenient way in assisting language learners to look up grammar rules and related grammatical knowledge. With this app, they could better integrate technology into language learning and teaching process [7]. Harmanto has presented a thorough and detailed analysis about Gen Z members’ characteristics and learning style; with the analysis, he further gives several constructive suggestions [5].

On the other hand, the following two articles show different characteristics in Hungary and Thailand. Törőcsik et al. provides a view of characteristics in Hungarian youth, which are closely related to their lifestyle [4]. For example, Hungarian youth “spend quite a lot of time by themselves, and they dare to be themselves and they regard money and success important” (page 41). According to Sriprom et al., Thai Gen Zers are more confident in expressing their views on all issues, and they have a high level of agreeableness with others especially with friends and family, which indicates that they rarely have conflicts with their friends and family [3].

The most relevant one for my purposes is the study conducted by Demir and Sönmez where the researchers investigated ESL context and the Gen Zers’ expectations from their English language

instructions within the context [19]. Their findings mainly reflect a fact that traditional English language teaching approach are not suitable for this generation in many aspects. For example, Gen Zers consider their current language learning as boring and ineffective, they prefer to use more technology and digital tools in in-class teaching. When it comes to assignments, they prefer to get instant and individualized feedback and hand in assignments via digital tools instead of pen and paper homework.

### 3. Typical Learning Styles of Gen Z

To have a better understanding of Gen-Z students' learning performance, their typical learning styles should be taken into account. Harmanto has listed 5 learning styles of Gen Zers, which could be summarized as following [5]:

(1) They prefer visual learning to hands-on learning practices. As this generation is born in an era with the prevalence of different digital devices, they are accustomed to picking up information and even knowledge through visual images presented by these devices. In a way, as the ways they acquire information and knowledge are basically through their touch and play with these devices, they would rather learn from doing experiments (to experience a voyage of self-discovery) than learning from requirements (to do what they are told to).

(2) Their learning practices are actually "edutainment". The word "edutainment" is a combination of education and entertainment, which means "educational entertainment or entertaining education". With the above analysis, it is evident to know that Gen Zers' daily learning practices includes the fun part (the part they play with the digital devices and interact with the various apps and online platforms) and the learning part (the part they get to know instant information and knowledge).

(3) They like to work in groups. They enjoy working with their peers to benefit from collaborative efforts, and they can scaffold their learning through a cooperative and supportive learning process.

The other two points mentioned by him are that they are multi-taskers, and that they have short attention spans [5]. As these two styles coincide with the characteristics of Gen Z, the related discussion can be found above.

### 4. Attitudes and their Role in the ESL

In order to gain overall insights into Gen-Z students' language behavior (as relevant for the current study), I should also draw on their language attitudes and their role in the ESL context. It is well-known that studies around the notion of attitudes have been conducted from various angles according to different theories; in this way, there is no unique way to define "attitudes". In this paper, I followed the concept of language attitude developed by Ryan, Giles, and Sebastian: "that is any indicator, which might be feelings, knowledge, or behavior or verbal statement, of evaluated reaction towards a given code or language or the speakers of the language" (cited in [19], page 242).

It is worth mentioning how attitudes play a role in second language learning. They affect individuals' decisions in using a language, moreover, they influence language learners' achievement [21]. Particularly, positive attitudes can lead to more efficient and successful language learners.

Next, I present research questions and hypotheses.

### 5. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following 3 questions will be addressed:

- (1) What can the ESL essays show about the style and language that the experimental group uses?
- (2) Are the writing features (presented in their essay writing) relatable to these students' general characteristics of Gen Z, such as their learning styles, social behavior, etc.?
- (3) Are these writing features in any way relatable to this experimental cohort students' attitudes

towards English, and the teaching materials? For example, does avoiding complex syntactic structures in essay writing relate to the negative attitude towards English or learning English in a traditional educational context?

The study addresses the following hypotheses:

(1) Students' written language is related to their attitudes towards English. This means that the grammar and constructions used in the essays are expected to be different from what I have informally observed as ESL teachers about the same ESL proficiency level of students who are not considered Gen Zers.

(2) Students' characteristics as Gen Zers is reflected in their writing and attitudes. This could be reflected in their writing style (such as simplified language as used in text messaging), and a non-conformist attitude towards the institutional requirements.

## **6. Methodology**

### **6.1. Participants' Background**

The participants of this study are 31 EFL language learners, with a mean age of 20, which comprise 15 females and 16 males. In this context, the participants are non-English majors, and they are in their second year of a college in Yunnan Province, China. Out of 31 learners, 20 students are from Yunnan Province, and only one student had a frequent communication with native speakers of English via online video games.

According to common regulations of this college, after their enrollment, non-English majors have to complete compulsory foreign language courses during their first two years in college. Within this requirement, students have the freedom to choose a foreign language to learn among the four languages: English, Japanese, Korean and Thai. In this study, these participating students are all in English classes, and they have learned English for at least 6 years before their admission in the college. Prior to enrolling, all the students passed the English examination which assesses their English level roughly comparable to a level B1 in the European language standard.

In addition, as students enrolled in this college are mostly from the local province, their major motivation for learning English largely stems from passing the national standardized examinations – CET-4 (College English Test-Band 4) and CET-6 (College English Test-Band 6). One interesting cultural/geographical fact about the Yunnan province is that it is a remote inland province with diverse ethnic groups. Based on some of the current participants' opinion, people in the province tend to be comparatively less willing to move to another province or country for living, than people living in other regions of China.

### **6.2. Instruments**

I used two instruments: the questionnaire that probed the learners' attitudes towards English and I used the essay analysis. The latter was used to assess the students' grammar, and their knowledge (or the level of application) of the standard English essay structure.

#### **6.2.1. Questionnaire**

To collect the data on the Gen Z students' attitude towards the English language writing (and written language), a questionnaire consisting 17 questions has been designed (the specific questions are available in Appendix). Apart from the questions about the respondents' basic information (such as age, gender and the length of learning English), with respect to accessing the students' attitudes, this questionnaire is divided into four parts:

The first one is about attitude towards students' performance in ESL classroom. In this section, I



have the students to do a self-assessment about their own performance in classroom, which includes the satisfaction of learning material, grades received in this course and their overall performance (how they speak and write).

The second is about attitude towards ESL classroom instruction. In this part, I gave all the 31 students an imaginary situation to be a teacher of language themselves. Here, our questions are to constructed in a way to get their ideas about learning materials and APP/media, and whether these need to be involved in the learning process. Additionally, I wanted to know what the students thought about would be the best method they could use in class to truly express themselves.

The third is about attitude towards writing in ESL classroom. To collect data about the attitudes I was interested in frequency of English writing outside the classroom, their attitude towards essay writing, and their suggestions of more interesting and useful ways of essay writing.

The fourth is about the students' use of the English language. In this section, I asked the students to note down the English sentences they used most frequently, the occasions they used them, the grammar points they avoided to use and that they would like to learn and the writing format they would prefer to adopt.

Before conducting the questionnaire, all of the questions were evaluated by two experts, one specializing in linguistics and one who is an English language teaching methodology expert. As the questionnaire consists of both close questions and open questions, the participants were required to fill out the questionnaire within 35 minutes in class without the presence of their English teacher. Following that, these data were analyzed and sorted into the categories discussed above. The questionnaire was administered in Chinese, which is the language the participants preferred.

### 6.2.2. Essay Analysis

A total number of 31 essays were analyzed for syntax, and the essay structure. The essays collected in this study were from the participants who filled out the questionnaire. In the essay analysis, I focused on the following: typical writing style (such as “free flow” or conforming to the essay structure “rules”), sentence patterns (simple or complex sentences) and a specific grammar point (e.g. passive voice). I also looked at the overall essay structure and whether it follows the standard essay structure.

## 7. Results

This section presents findings based on the analysis of the essay writing and questionnaire including the themes and categories discussed above.

### 7.1. Questionnaire: Findings Related to “Attitude”

The main body of the questionnaire covers four parts which are presented as below:

Table.1 The attitude questionnaire results.

	Positive	Negative	Total number of responses
Attitude towards students' performance in ESL classroom (4 questions)	51.6%	48.4%	31
Attitude towards ESL classroom instruction <sup>1</sup> (3 questions)	80.6%	19.4%	31
Attitude towards writing in ESL classroom (5	27.1%	62.9%	31

<sup>1</sup> In this section, the students, who were not satisfied with the current teaching material and their own overall performance, did not

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For the part of “Attitude towards students’ performance in ESL classroom” in the table, the number of the students who have positive attitude to their in-class performance is slightly higher than those who adopt the negative one. The students were mostly dissatisfied with the learning materials and their overall performance. In terms of the learning material, 15 students noted that as the learning materials were quite difficult and academic, they would seldom use the language they learned in class in their daily life, which was the reason why they found the current learning materials unattractive. On the other hand, when it comes to their overall performance, 13 students found this course boring, and they could not focus their mind on the lessons. Moreover, these students also mentioned that they seldom expressed their ideas in English for 3 reasons: one is that they just were not used to expressing their opinions in English; the second is that they could not see the value in voicing their thoughts to others; and the other is that they were afraid of making mistakes in front of their classmates.

For the part of “Attitude towards ESL classroom instruction” in the table, the students have positive attitude (81%) to the current classroom teaching. With respect to the learning materials, there are altogether 12 students who said they would like to see more popular movies, TV plays, English songs included in classroom teaching; while the rest of the respondents gave different opinions: 7 students said they wanted to add more materials relevant to CET-4, and another 6 said, “I didn’t want my entertainment (such as movies, TV plays) to be my learning materials.” However, these students did not give many choices in involving other APPs or media other than the two APPs we were currently using (as they thought the APPs or media would be a distraction and an excuse for them to use their phones to do other things). Similarly, these learners did not provide many suggestions in enabling voices in class other than classroom discussion and essay writing. They agreed that classroom discussion and essay writing were effective ways to express oneself, but 3 students pointed that they just wanted to be left alone when they did not want to share their ideas with others.

As to the part of “Attitude towards writing in ESL classroom” in the table, a majority of students (62.9%) negatively evaluated their own writing attitude. The results show that 2 out of 31 students would write essays in English for the purpose to better prepare the exams (such as CET-4) instead of for fun. Besides, although 23 students thought essays were a good way for them to express their opinion on an important topic, only 12 students said essays is the best writing format to express oneself (following by messages, story-telling and Emails). When it comes to the question why the students held negative attitude to English essay writing, the reasons are as follows: 15 students said the appropriate structures of the essay made them feel annoyed by essay writing, 11 students’ negative attitude was caused by the grammar rules and grammar points they were not acquired, while boring topics were another factor leading to the rest of the students’ negative feelings. In terms of their suggestions, only 8 students gave their answers. They agreed current teaching approach (to present relevant writing patterns first, and then to give some practice on grammar), and they also wanted to involve some online video clips in teaching, while 3 of them said, “I don’t like writing, so I don’t like any form of writing.”

Next, I present the results of the language features questionnaire.

## 7.2. Questionnaire: Findings Related to Language Features

Table 2 not only presents what kind of English language the experimented students use in their daily life, but also shows the grammar points they want to learn and that they avoid to use. From their answers, we can see the sentences they used most frequently are the short ones in greetings or to express one’s gratitude, and they would use them in their daily communication and online chatting.

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give their thoughts in this part were counted as those who hold a negative attitude.

And nearly for all of the respondents, the grammar points they avoid to use were the same as those that they would like to learn. Nevertheless, these students also added their ideas about grammar points. They said, for them, actually, “there was no grammar points they avoid to use due to the fact that there was only the grammar they did not know how to correctly use”. In other words, the reason why they seldom some grammar points/the grammar points, for example, reported in Table 2, is simply that they did not know whether they can produce a correct sentence with these grammar points.

Table. 2 The language features questionnaire results.

Questions	Sentences/expressions used most frequently		Grammar points you would like to learn			Grammar points you avoid to use		
	Greetings used among friends (e.g. How are you, Hello)	short phrases used among friends (e.g. Thanks.)	Attributive clauses (e.g. It was a new form of art that many perceived as a passing phase.)	Inverted sentences (e.g. Not only / Hardly ..)	Past Perfect (e.g. when to use this tense)	Attributive clauses (e.g. It was a new form of art that many perceived as a passing phase.)	Inverted sentences (e.g. Not only / Hardly ..)	Past Perfect (e.g. when to use this tense)
Number of the responses / Total number of respondents	27/31	31/31	20/31	30/31	28/31	20/31	30/31	28/31

On the other hand, the features mentioned above are further illustrated in their essays. Through thorough review of these students’ essay writing, their writing has shown several features which are different from their seniors, as informally observed by the teachers.

### 7.3. Essay Analysis Results

In this part, the focus was on the syntactic well-formedness of sentences in essays and the knowledge of the essay structure. The most common characteristic of the essays is the “free flow” as illustrated below.

Extract 1:

“Science and technology is a symbol of national strength, laser technology in medicine, astronomical satellites, space craft, military weapons and with the development of science and technology, it has been integrated into people’s life. Household appliances, out of traffic, mobile payment, these relative to ancient times, has been a historic jump.



The great changes in the way of production and life of human beings caused by scientific and technological progress are obvious. Farmers' production and life can be an example."

As shown above, the text lacks connectors, the sentences are almost telegraphic (very simple). However, looking more closely into the sentence patterns, it is not the case that the students' essays lack any syntactic structure (as the sample above might suggest). The most common language structure is "subject + be + noun/adjective". Additionally, there are no subordinate clauses. Some samples for the structure with "be" are given below:

Extract 2:

"Science and technology are the primary productive force. The development of science and technology is unstoppable. The advantages and disadvantages of science and technology are obvious."

Additionally, there are no subordinate clauses. Another aspect is related to the use of passive voice. Take the sentences below as examples.

Extract 3:

"Modern technology and science can really use by us."

"Our way of life can change by science and technology."

In Extract 3, we can see the incorrect use of passive voice. This is surprising because passive voice is one of the least problematic grammar points for Chinese L2ers of English in my experience. In my teaching experience, I hardly ever see this kind of a mistake, and, thus, I find it surprising that 10 of my Gen-Z L2ers of English investigated here did not use it correctly.

Another type of mistake is related to essay composition. Table 3 shows the common mistakes regarding essay structure.

Table. 3 The mistakes of essay composition.

Types of mistakes	Number of responses / Total number of respondents
Missing topic sentence in a paragraph	26/31
Missing the conclusion part	10/31
Being off the topic	13/31

As it is illustrated in the above table, when it comes to paragraph structure, they seldom followed the traditional paragraph structure, namely "topic sentence + supporting sentences"; specifically, their essay writing seldom had a topic sentence in a paragraph. On the plane of essay structure, their writings either missed the conclusion part (e.g. for 10 out of 31 students), or their main contents were irrelevant to the topic (e.g. for 13 out of 31 students).

## 8. Discussions

This paper is aimed at exploring the characteristics of the Chinese EFL Gen Zers, the language features presented in their English essays, and the attitudes they hold towards English teaching instruments. The essay also investigated the Gen Zers attitudes towards English as an L2 (in a classroom setting). The main idea behind the research was to understand whether there is a possible

relation between the students' L2 English competence in the written form, and their attitudes towards L2, given the fact that these students belong to a Gen Z.

### 8.1. Chinese Gen Z Experimental Results in Characteristics, Attitudes and Learning Style

In terms of Gen Z characteristics, the experimental students have shown the same characteristics discussed by Harmanto [5], Töröcsik et al. [4], and Szymkowiak et al. [8]. First, the experimental group reported that they use the internet and social media on a daily basis, and they want a quick exchange of information. Second, the essay analysis showed that the Gen Z students struggled with more complex grammar of English, which could be related to the way they use language more generally. In fact, there is a strong correlation between the use of emoticons and simplified language as exhibited in Gen Z written texts [22]. Third, our study reports that Gen Zers lack patience when it comes to reading, and syntactically analyzing complex syntax of articles in English which have been a standard part of the ESL curriculum in their college. This finding is consistent with the finding in Sriprom et al. [3] who reported the Gen-Z pupils prefer to obtain formation through digital tools in a fast way due to their impatience to be involved in an inquiry process. Fourth, our experimental group reported being multi-taskers. As reported in the attitude questionnaire, these students are used to doing their assignments while listening to music or with a film or video on, which is in line with findings in Harmanto [5], Töröcsik et al. [4] and Szymkowiak et al. [8].

Apart from the characteristics mentioned above, the "typical" Chinese Gen Zers' characteristics reported in previous studies [16] [18] have also been demonstrated in these experimental students. First, from their questionnaires, they show unwillingness to voice their opinion related to the class materials and content in class and engage consciously with pedagogical materials that they see detached from their career advancement. This finding is consistent with what reported in 陈莉 and 高铭竺 [18] and 杨雄 [16] -- the experimental group reported being demotivated when it comes to engaging with social activism as they are afraid of ending up not being acknowledged. Another trait that the current experimental group shares with the reported Chinese Gen Z characteristics is rejection of authority [16]. Perhaps, the most obvious evidence for this is coming from the students' essay analysis. In their essays, they tended to refuse to follow the traditional essay writing structure (although they are familiar with it), and write in a "free flow" style with simplified sentence structure. These writing practices could suggest their rejection of the authority, particularly, the institutional requirements.

When it comes to attitudes, the questionnaire analysis shows that Gen Z have negative attitude towards writing in English, and also classroom instruction. For example, when asked the reason why they feel annoyed when writing in English, many of them answered "when I think of English writing, I will immediately think of the complex requirements I need to follow, which makes me feel frustrated and annoyed". When asked how to make students engage more in the in-classroom activities, many of them answered "I can't see what English would help me to achieve in my future career, so I don't want to put lots of efforts in this class. That's why I feel reluctant to take part in the activities". These findings are also consistent with the typical Chinese Gen-Z characteristics: one is their rejection of authority; the other is their lack of initiative [16] [18].

Additionally, the negative attitude towards English could be related to the reported poor essay performance. The essay analysis shows that about 50% of the respondents completely ignored either the essay structure or the assigned topic. Moreover, almost 60% of the experimental group would use simplified syntactic structure. The latter could superficially mean that using simple syntactic could be a sign of resistance to conform to the rules or the grammar level that is expected of them. However, whether the language of their essays could be related directly to their attitudes towards educational requirements or not is a matter of future research. Nevertheless, the simplified language ties better

with the reported general characteristics of Gen Zers who prefer the use of emoticons, and simplified language as a part of their chat exchange and the need for quick solutions and instant information [16].

Another observation that I would like to mention regards the learning style of Gen Z. Recall that Harmanto [5] mentions 5 types of learning style, two of them are different from what I have observed: one related to “edutainment”, and the other related to teamwork. When asked whether they want to include teaching resources like music or videos, 45.2% of the respondents reported that they felt that neither music nor videos should not be a part of the school learning environment because they refused to make their entertainment as a part of the learning materials.

In addition, the questionnaire results reveal that Gen Zers prefer individual tasks to collaborative work. From the responses, such as, “I feel unnecessary when I work in a group”, or “When I work on my own, I feel more motivated and creative”, I conclude that the experimental group feel more authentic when working alone.

## 8.2. Chinese Gen-Z Experimental Results in the Crosslinguistic/Cross-cultural Context

Finally, I would like to present how the current study fits more generally into the crosslinguistic/cross-cultural perspective. For example, our findings are in line with the findings in Demir and Sönmez [19]. The experimental students both in this paper and in Demir and Sönmez [19] have shown similar attitude to current English language learning as the two groups of student Gen Zers regard the language learning boring and unsatisfied. However, the characteristics demonstrated in our study are different from those of Gen Zers presented in Töröcsik et al. [4] and Sriptom et al. [3]. The study showed that their experimental group showed confidence and willingness to present their “true selves” in class and educational environment in general. However, this finding is very different from our own finding, namely, as our experimental group neither felt confident in voicing their ideas nor would be themselves in in-classroom teaching environment.

## 8.3. Gen Z and the Sense of Identity

An interesting finding from the current study that, to our knowledge, has not been previously reported in the literature regards the identity of the Gen Zers in the ESL environment. Based on my observations, the problems with writing in English disappeared when the same group of students did an online writing exercise where they wrote their essays under an alter ego. This informal observation that needs to be investigated more thoroughly in the future research, suggests that the way the technically savvy generation, such as Gen Z, relate to their L2 learning may be different than what I have observed in teaching generations that came before them. If, as the Gen Z students in my classroom expressed, they felt they were unable to relate to English in a classroom environment, but were able to relate to it in the “digital world”, this is something that would be worth looking at from the perspective of “identity” or “L2 identity” in the digital era.

## 9. Conclusion

In this study, I demonstrated that there is a link among attitudes, writing features and characteristics of Gen Z in Chinese educational context (Yunnan Province). Starting from the observation of unexpectedly simple language in L2 English essays, our research question was whether this linguistic behavior could be linked to the students’ attitudes and more generally their “culture” as Gen Z. As it is well known, Gen Z has been a topic of many scientific studies as these “children of the digital era” show many characteristics and behaviors that stand out from any previous generation.

For one thing, the Gen Z students’ attitudes reported in the attitude questionnaire show some common features shared with the behavior of Gen Zers in educational systems worldwide, but they

also show Gen Z features reported in educational systems in China. Importantly, these Gen Z members' writing features, which are very specific, have been an essential way to make the Gen Z characteristics in the students "visible". Once we can, as teachers and educators, perceive the needs of our students, we are in a better position to re-evaluate our educational goals, as well as our syllabus.

Our findings have indicated that there is a gap between the requirements of current English language teaching and the expectations and needs of the Gen Z in an L2 English language classroom. Hence, I believe it is urgent for language teachers to find ways to fill this gap and enable the Gen Z students to achieve more in their language learning practices.

As this generation are "digital natives", some venues for improving the teaching methodology are to include the Internet and social media as substantial part of the curriculum. For example, some discussions have already been started. Hockly and Dudeney mainly provides different teaching approaches according to the current technology-oriented learning context: blended Learning, flipped learning, mobile Learning and machine translation [9]. Mohr and Mohr also focus on discussing teaching implications for Gen Z students; they place an emphasis on assisting students to better consume the informational literacy, for example, teachers could provide more reliable online sources for students to learn first and motivate students to "analyze, summarize, and synthesize" these sources [10].

As the Gen Z students demonstrate different characteristics and attitudes to their second language learning practices within different sociocultural context, future studies could be more focused on developing teaching methodology to help the Gen Z students to be more efficient language learners, according to the particular characteristics and attitudes.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire about Your English

#### Part I Basic information

Gender (性别):

Age (年龄):

Learning English as a second language for \_\_\_ years (英语作为第二语言学习了\_\_\_年)

#### Part II In-classroom performance

1. Do you think your English learning materials (in this course) help you express yourself in English? ?

(你觉得这门课程的学习资料在自我表达方面有没有帮助?)

2. With all the English learning materials in this course, do you feel more confident when you use English in everyday life?

(这门课程的学习资料有没有让你在日常使用英语时更自信?)

3. Are you happy with the way your work is graded in this course?

(你对这门课程作业的评分满意吗?)

4. Are you satisfied with how you speak, write and communicate (using English) in this course?

(你对自己在这门课程中的自我表现满意吗?)

#### Part III If you were a teacher of English, (如果你是英语老师)

1. What other materials, media, exercises, etc. would you include in this course?

(你会在这门课程中增加什么样的学习资料、媒体、练习等?)

2. What kind of APP/APPs or media you would use in the class?

(你会在上课过程中增加什么样的 app (apps)、媒体等?)

3. What would you do to allow your students to say what they truly think/feel in the class?

(你会用什么方式让你的学生真实地表达自己?)

#### Part IV About your English language (对你英语语言的了解)

1. If you think about your English, what sentences (questions/statements/short answers) do you use the most frequently?

(请你想想,你使用最多的英语句子是什么? 这些英语句子是疑问句? 陈述句(表观点)? 简短句(回答问题)?)

2. Now, think about the most frequent sentence(s) you listed down in 1, where do you use it/them? In class? On the social media chat? Outside the classroom (online, on a social media, etc.)? (现在,回顾一下上一题的答案,你什么时候会

使用这些句子？课上？课外（上网、社交媒体等）？

3. Is there a grammar point/rule that you avoid on purpose in English? If “Yes”, which one?

（有没有哪一个语法点或语法规则是你不想使用的？）

4. Is there a grammar point/rule that you don't know, but you would like to learn because this could be useful for you? If “yes”, please write down the rule/grammar point.

（有没有哪一个语法点或语法规则是你不知道但是想学习的，因为它对你有用？）

5. Do you have a “speaking buddy” that you communicate in English? 5. If “yes”, what do you talk about (themes/topics, such as gaming, family life, food)?

（你有没有一个用英语聊天的小伙伴？）

#### Part V About your English writing （对你英语写作的了解）

1. How often do you write essays (in English) for fun or for a reason other than for school?

（作为放松或者娱乐的一种形式，你在课外写英语小论文的频率是多少？）

2. Do you think essays in English are a good way for you to express your opinion on an important topic?

（针对一个重要议题，你认为论文是一种发表见解的途径吗？）

3. Do you think that it is important for a person to be able to express how they feel and what they think in writing in English are? If so, what is the best writing format to do so (e.g essays, emails, story telling, messages...)

（你认为人们需要具备通过写作来表达所思所想的能力吗？如果是，那么你认为最好的写作形式是什么？论文？电子邮件？说故事？发信息？）

4. If you can point out one thing that makes you annoyed/unhappy/angry when you have to write in English, what would that be (boring topics, the structures of the essay, many rules for writing “appropriately”)?

（当你被要求用英语写作的时候，请你指出哪一点会让你产生烦躁、不开心甚至生气等负面情绪？比如，无聊的话题，论文的写作结构，写“好”文章的规矩？）

5. In your opinion, what would be the most fun way and the most useful way to write in English?

（你认为在用英语写作时，什么样方式是既有趣又有用的？）