Chapter 8

Students in the New Millennium: How Much do We Know about Them?

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ABSTRACT

Vast and fast technological advancements mark the new millennium. New emerging technologies are changing the world and our society at a magnitude and scope never witnessed before. Who are our students in this new millennium? What do they look like? Are they a fundamentally different new generation as some claim, or do they still look similar to us in many ways? A clear understanding of the characteristics of our students is vitally important for our educational practice. The current study was conducted to contribute to this understanding. The findings of the study show that while students nowadays do enjoy a much broader access to new technology than students of the past, they still look similar to us in many ways. As educators, it is important for us to treat our students as individuals instead of just labeling them and placing them in a black and white dichotomy.

INTRODUCTION

Since the term “digital natives” was coined at the turn of the century (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b), there has been a general belief among educators that students in the new millennium are much more technology savvy than those in the old millennium. Although basic observations and some limited research seem to have confirmed this belief, many specific questions remain unanswered. At the same time, many instructors often struggle to find the best way to teach with technology, because they are not sure what students like or dislike, and what works or does not work for them. There are simple questions such as exactly how many students have cell phones and/or smartphones; how many students like technology and consider themselves good at technology; and what technology-related
class activities are effective from the students’ perspectives. Apparently, answers to these questions will help instructors better understand our students and provide guidance for the more effective use of technology in teaching and learning.

The technology survey reported on in this chapter was conducted in order to answer some of these questions. 1,047 language students at a university on the east coast of the United States participated in the survey. In fact, the initial motivation for conducting this survey came from students’ course evaluations. A large number of students reacted negatively to having their classes in the language lab and using technology. These comments were bewildering and contradicted the belief that students in the new millennium like technology. This survey aimed to find out the reasons why these students felt negatively about using technology in the language lab. The survey contained both multiple choice/select questions and open-ended questions, thus yielding both quantitative and qualitative data.

In this chapter, the author will report the findings of the survey, analyze the results, and discuss their implications for foreign language teaching and learning. In order for language teachers and technology professionals to use modern technology more effectively and efficiently to enhance language instruction and learning, the first and foremost important thing to do is to understand our students better. We need to know who they are and how they are different from, or similar to, the previous generations, particularly in terms of their capabilities in and attitudes toward technology. This book chapter will contribute to this understanding of our students, and provide an important aspect and student perspective to the study of computer-assisted foreign language teaching and learning.

BACKGROUND

Impact of Modern Technology on Students

The beginning of the new millennium witnessed a remarkable display of technological innovations and applications. New technology products and services such as Google, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, iPhones, iPads, and many more to come are dramatically changing the world and our society in many different ways. Clearly, given the magnitude and scope of the technological advancements, no one will deny that the new emerging technologies will have an important impact on education, our schools, our teachers, and our students. What is unclear and controversial is the nature and degree of such an impact. In this section, the author will review the existing literature and discuss the impact of modern technology on students in the new millennium.

To discuss this topic, one cannot go without mentioning Prensky, a popular but controversial figure in the field of education technology. He coined the term “digital natives” in his two manuscripts published in 2001 (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b). By digital natives, he refers to the generation born after 1980. According to Prensky, digital natives live their lives totally immersed in technology, “surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age” (Prensky, 2001a, p. 1). He claims that as a first generation to grow up with the new technology, digital natives think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors. He even argues that “it is very likely that our students’ brains have physically changed—and are different from ours—as a result of how they grew up.” Apparently, Prensky represents a school of thought, which maintains that the new technology has fundamentally changed our students into a brand new generation. Other researchers holding a similar view include Oblinger
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