The Digital Needs of Generation Z for Foreign Language Instruction

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1. Introduction

Being engaged with ICTs is a natural part of life in the 21st century. Regarding the age factor it has an increasing influence on childhood as digital technologies such as computers, tablets and smartphones are available in the majority of homes and education systems worldwide (Harris et al. 2018). These favourable conditions have contributed to the changed style of learning, playing and socializing (Jenkins et al. 2006), especially in the case of Generation Z. It is obvious that the educational institutions should adapt to the changed needs of the new generation by providing proper infrastructure and up-to-date facilities, and teachers should also transform their previous pedagogies (Blake 2008; Molnár 2011) in order to keep up with the changed conditions.

But what is the present situation in the Hungarian public education? Regarding the distribution of modern technological devices in the primary and secondary sectors, most computer labs (98%) are well-equipped (Molnár – Pásztor-Kovács 2015), however, there is still uneven distribution of digital devices concerning general classrooms on the institutional level (MOD 2016). Furthermore, there is a great need for providing efficient teacher training programmes (e.g. Főző 2006; Kárpáti 2003; Molnár 2011) for those who are not willing to incorporate ICTs in their teaching-learning process because of fear and lack of confidence and competence (Boldizsár 2017; Ollé, In: B. Tier 2012).

In order to integrate the use of digital devices into the educational system effectively many aspects of this complex process should be investigated such as institutional readiness, long-term financing, curriculum design, ICT competence of teachers and teenagers, students' needs etc. The aim of this paper however, is not to explore all these aspects. It only intends to investigate the digital needs of Generation Z in FL instruction. The research is carried out by using a multi-criteria online questionnaire and the article discusses only three major aspects. First of all, the digital competence of Generation Z is identified based on teenagers' self-evaluation. Secondly, the role of their Internet use related to their foreign language advancement is analysed. And finally, students' opinion is investigated on which digital devices could be applied in FL classes besides the ones already used (smart board, PC, projector, mp3 or CD player) and what purposes they would think these should be useful for making their language learning process more successful.

Before introducing the research results I will first discuss the major characteristics of Generation Z and give a brief overview on how digital devices can support the process of institutional language learning.

2. The characteristics of Generation Z

Generation Z, also known as Digital Natives (Prensky 2001), Neomillennials (Dede 2005), Net Generation (Oblinger – Oblinger 2005), was born within the period of 1995 and 2012 in the world of web, smart phones, laptops, networks, so they can said to be "digital centric and technology is their identity" (Singh – Dangmei 2016: 1). In order to understand their needs as learners we have to be familiar with their major characteristics. These features appear in their expert understanding of technology as being completely multi-taskers, interactive, fast and impatient, resilient and socially open through the use of technologies (Fernández-Cruz – Fernández-Díaz 2016), as well as being tolerant of diverse cultures (Grail Research 2011).

Moreover, an average Generation Z learner can multitask across 5 devices at a time, demanding immediate access to social connections and it is typical that their social network influence their way of thinking. It is also a key issue that content and feedback should be available right away. Therefore they require brief, meaningful, and effective learning experiences. As they like to see issues and trends from a global perspective they are known as generalists (know a little about everything) rather than versus specialists in a subject area (Wondergem 2017).

According to Jenkins (2009) "what students do in their online lives has nothing to do with what they are learning in school, and what they are learning in school has little or no value to contribute to who they are once the bell rings." This statement might sound a bit exaggerated but it tries to call the attention to the fact that it is not enough to develop teenagers' digital competence, the key to success lies in fostering teachers' technological and pedagogical skills (Koehler–Mishra 2009) to be able to deal with the new generation effectively (Fernández-Cruz–Fernández-Díaz 2016). As Generation Z is exposed to a massive amount of information through technology, many times without guidance, a number one priority for teachers is to teach them "proper searching techniques, evaluation of sources, use of databases, and the synthesis of a vast amount of content" (Wondergem 2017).

3. Why to use information technologies in FLT?

Digital devices in language teaching have been widely used since the appearance of networks and Internet access (in the 1990s). Language teachers always reacted fast to the new technological challenges and many of them started to incorporate these in their teaching style. According to Benedek et al. (2012) the most widely used ICT tools in language learning and language teaching nowadays are the Web 2.0 and the network supported information and communication devices.

There is a long list of advantages why digital devices can be effective tools of FL advancement instead of or beside traditional teaching materials (books, workbooks etc.). First of all, they can promote the chance for interactivity, offer immediate feedback about student performance and create opportunities for a competitive and a collaborative learning environment. Moreover, ICTs can be used for creating personalized learning experience and differentiation. Furthermore, online teaching materials can make the learning process more lifelike and relevant as they are more interesting and motivating than the traditional, paper-pen-based teaching materials. Last but not least, (online) resources are available anywhere and at any time, therefore promoting synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities (Benedek et al. 2012; Főző 2006; Szabó 2012). However, it seems that even if technological devices are effective tools for learning they cannot fully replace competent, professionally qualified language teachers (Blake 2008; Polónyi 2017).

4. Research on the digital needs of Generation Z
4.1. Research background

Nowadays teacher and student competence on ICT is often researched from a general point of view in Hungarian and international contexts respectively (e.g. Buda 2006; Fernández-Cruz–Fernández-Díaz 2016; Hunya et al. 2006; Kárpáti–Ollé 2007), and there are also a high number of investigations on what purposes teenagers use the Internet for in their free time (e.g. M. Fazekas–Cs. Czachesz 2011; Sági–Bálint 2015). However, there seems to be a gap in research results regarding the classroom use of digital devices from the point of view of language learners and their opinion about how the process of foreign language learning could be made more enjoyable and successful by using ICTs in FL classes. Therefore the results of his articles could be an up-to-date message not only for language teachers but also for heads of institutions.

Therefore the aim of the small scale study was first to give some background information about students' ICT competence, their Internet use habits and their effect on their foreign language development. Further investigations were made in order to find out more about students' opinion and recommendation on what digital devices apart from the ones already used in the classroom and for what purposes these could be incorporated into foreign language lessons to contribute to the success of their foreign language studies.

660 participants between the age of 11 and 19/20 of 41 educational institutions of Győr volunteered to take part in the study (41,8% males and 57,6% females). Data were collected through a multi-criteria online questionnaire between 2nd March and 18th April 2018, focussing on teenagers' FL studies[1]. The rate of respondents from the secondary schools exceeded that of the students attending primary school (61% / 39%).

4.2. Research results

In the following I will introduce the results of the study with respect to students' ICT competence, their Internet use and its influence on their language advancement. Finally, I will summarize teenagers' recommendation on digital devices which they would use in FL classes and their opinion on what these technological tools can be used for.

In the case of students' digital competence 96% of respondents considered as proficient users while only 3% confessed their incompetence in this field. Within the competent group two categories were distinguished: the fully experienced ones (38%) and those who are able to use the devices they have an access to (50%). Interpreting students' ICT competence on the basis of the framework of digital literacies (Dudeney et al. 2013) most of the respondents (over 80%) exclusively from their age have gained proficiency in working with the word processor, writing emails, preparing PPTs or searching information on websites. Furthermore, about 75% of them are expert users of the social media (chatting, Skyping). However, more advanced skills such as redesigning materials with the help of specific software programmes (e.g. Photoshop, graphic design, video editing, web development, digital sound processing) can be done by much less students (20–50%). Finally, less than 20% of the respondents could master highly advanced ICT skills such as system programming, software development or database management. So the overall picture seems to be very positive showing high student competences in ICTs.

Research participants' Internet use on the basis of its frequency and purpose was also investigated. It is found that a high number of students (46–71%) often use the Internet for chatting with their friends, visiting social media sites, listening to music, watching videos or films and searching information. Much less of them (21–41%) use it for writing emails or doing online shopping. Both Hungarian and international websites are visited by the majority of respondents (67%). Those who indicated that they only visit foreign websites outnumbered the group of teenagers (20%) who prefer dealing with only Hungarian Internet sites (13%). Concerning international websites teenagers tend to choose English (73% and 78%) rather than German ones (10,6% and 23,5%) from the primary and the secondary section respectively. So the data show that the majority of the students use Hungarian and international websites with the purpose of socializing and watching videos or listening to music.

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[1] The questionnaire involves close-ended and open-ended questions as well and explores many aspects of the language learning and the "digital world" of Generation Z: the types, number and level of foreign languages teenagers have learnt; the aspects of learning them apart from formal instruction; the range of digital devices they have an access to and the frequency of their use; students' ICT competences; the types of foreign languages and habits related to the Internet use and its effect on the FL advancement; digital devices available in the educational institution and their being used in foreign language lessons; teenagers' attitude towards involving other types of digital devices in foreign language classes and purposes of their use.

Regarding language learning respondents all agreed that dealing with foreign websites had a positive effect on their language development especially in the field of expanding their vocabulary (81%), language skills (especially reading and speaking), pronunciation and written text translation (57–60%). Half of the research participants claimed that by dealing with foreign websites their oral text translation skills also improved. Grammar and writing skills development were mentioned by nearly 40% of the students as well as an improvement in their cultural knowledge (33%).

In order to understand students' needs towards ICT tools that can foster their language learning they were asked to comment on the type of digital devices and the frequency of their use in FL classes. The responds revealed that the interactive smart board, the PC and the projector are still the most often used digital devices. Furthermore, CD players, DVD or video players are still in use but they seem to be much less crucial than the above mentioned ICT tools. In some cases the respondents stated that even if these devices are available, they are rarely in use. These latter finding supports previous research results such as the inappropriate utilization of digital devices (MOD 2016; Ollé In: B. Tier 2012), ICTs with constant functional problems (Boldizsár 2017) or the presence of outdated devices in the educational institutions (Polónyi 2017).

The overall aim of the study was to find out more about students' real needs towards digital devices that can contribute to the success of their language learning. The responses revealed that even if modern IT equipment is available in the educational institutions they would still find it a real benefit to be allowed to work with their own devices (tablets, smart phones and laptops), which must not be used during the lessons in many schools (Ollé, in B. Tier 2012). Some students also mentioned the benefit of digital video cameras, earphones, loudspeakers, e-book readers etc. because of their manifold use in FL classes.

The response of teenagers on what purposes the above mentioned digital devices could be used can be categorized into two groups: the traditional and the 'free time' use of the new technologies. Apart from these comments there was one which could not fit into any of the above mentioned groups.

In the following I will give a summary about the activities students have listed. Unfortunately, only 47,7% of the research participants have provided any feedback to the last open-ended question (N=315). And in some cases teenagers have recounted more than one answer. The rate of answers below will be calculated only on the basis of the collected responses.

In the first category respondents expressed their wish to use their smart phone or tablet mostly for:
-   doing exercises for test preparation or practice previously learnt materials (10,16%);
-   dictionary work (8,6%);
-   language skills development (8,6%);
-   vocabulary expansion (5,7%);
-   translation of e.g. texts, lyrics of music (4,1%);
-   developing pronunciation and grammar skills (3,8%).

Other responses have been encountered by a few teenagers. They would like to use smart phone or tablet during the language classes for making PPTs, enhancing their cultural competence, using visuals (maps, or pictures for storytelling). Two students have also mentioned that by using ICTs the level of their motivation in learning increases.

In the second category of the suggested classroom use of digital devices, respondents highlighted the idea of performing activities that are connected more closely to what they do in their free time. The recommendations are listed below in decreasing rate of mentioning:

- watching videos and films or film extracts (e.g. with educational purposes with Hungarian subtitle), following youtubers and/or watching vlogs in a foreign language (24,4%);
- searching specific information (3,5%);
- working with special applications like Duolingo, Kahoot (3,5%);
- playing (online) games and quizzes (e.g. picture-word matching, crossword puzzles) (3,2%);
- listening to music (e.g. latest hits) (2,5%);
- skyping and chatting with native speakers and/or building partnerships with students from different countries (1,9%);
- reading e-books and listening to news (e.g. Sky News, CNN) online (1,9%);
- recording drama activities, making videos or short films and analysing them together (1,9%).

Other answers have supported the replacement of books or exercise books with digital devices (2,8%) to avoid heavy rucksacks or to be more environmentally conscious. Furthermore a few students think that they would rather use their own device for note taking (1%), e-learning (0,5%) or writing e-mails (0,5) in class.

Finally, there was one student whose respond did not fit into any of the previous categories expressing an innovative use of a device that might otherwise exist and can be used for language learning purposes ("*device like a robot that you can talk to*"). In order to get the whole picture it is needed to mention that there were 6 students who said they did not require any other ICT tools apart from the ones already being used in class, or had no idea what else besides from the traditional purposes these could be used (e.g. *"I have no idea for the use of digital devices, I am satisfied with everything like the way they are"*; *"it is enough what we usually do with the computers"*).

5. Conclusion

The aim of the paper was to explore the digital needs of Generation Z in FL instruction. Therefore three aspects of this issue have been investigated: the digital competence of Generation Z, the role of their Internet use related to their foreign language advancement, and students' needs on digital devices in FL classes and the purpose of their use to promote the language learning process and outcome of learners.

The study has three major findings. First of all, the majority of Generation Z regarded themselves as competent users of ICTs (at least with their own devices) having gained digital literacies in the following areas of digital literacies: language, information, connection and some of them in the field of redesign.

Secondly, considering foreign language use the majority of the teenagers browse Internet sites mostly in English which, in their view, results in vocabulary and language skills development to the greatest extent. Moreover, visiting foreign websites in their free time can significantly promote students' foreign language skills development especially in fostering reading and speaking skills, as well as written and oral translation skills.

Finally, regarding the types of digital devices they would like to use in FL classes, the majority of students (more than 80%) expressed their wish to use their own devices: smart phones, tablets or laptops during the lessons either for traditional language learning purposes (e.g. solving tasks, developing language skills, doing dictionary work) or for doing such activities in class which they would otherwise do in their free time (e.g. playing online games, watching films or videos).

6. Discussion

The article would like to call the attention of decision makers and language pedagogues that it is advisable to promote students' engagement with new technologies in language lessons. Even nowadays there seems to be a gap between the expectations and the reality inside and outside the classroom as in some cases learners of Generation Z are more competent users of the new technology than their teachers or at least they meet and use more advanced technological devices than schools are usually equipped with. If institutions cannot provide up-to-date or good enough technological facilities we should find other alternatives. As the research results showed students are voicing a marked demand for the use of their own devices in FL classes, which could be a short-term solution.

Furthermore, it is also needed to be considered what for digital devices could be used in foreign language classes. The findings of the research show that language teachers should use new technologies not only for traditional language learning purposes such as skills development, dictionary work or translation, but also for real-life activities that teenagers tend to be engaged with in their free time like watching videos, film extracts or vlogs, following youtubers, working with special applications, socializing (or building partnerships with other institutions), recording activities with the purpose of later use etc.

All in all, it is obvious that there is a call for a changed view on the role of ICTs in the educational institutions. Ollé (In: B. Tier 2012) claims that it should be the schools' interest to notice that without making the appropriate steps they will lose the 'battle' in being the number one source of motivation for the young generation as the gap between inside and outside the school circumstances is more and more increasing. The demand for the use of up-to-date and easy-to-use teacher training programmes in FLT is still high and there is a call for the need of reform in ICTs regarding the theoretical and practical aspects of most of the foreign language teacher training institutions in primary and secondary education.

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