

Teaching Generation Z: Methodological problems and their possible solutions

by Svetlana Popova

Svetlana Popova Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University) vetka-aktev@yandex.ru

Published in Training, Language and Culture Vol 1 Issue 4 (2017) pp. 25-38 doi: [10.29366/2017tlc.1.4.2](https://doi.org/10.29366/2017tlc.1.4.2)

Recommended citation format: Popova, S. (2017). Teaching Generation Z: Methodological problems and their possible solutions. *Training, Language and Culture*, 1(4), 25-38. doi: [10.29366/2017tlc.1.4.2](https://doi.org/10.29366/2017tlc.1.4.2)

The focus of the article is on the younger generation of today, which is referred to as Generation Z. The theoretical grounding is based on the Strauss-Howe Generational Theory. The paper discusses lack of motivation to study efficiently and looks into the reasons for misunderstanding which often arises among students and teachers born a few generations earlier. Analysis proves the significance of the difference in values and worldview influenced by various venues, circumstances and surroundings that are unique for each generation. Online games, computerisation, communication via text messages and inability to read the context are mentioned among the features of Generation Z. Difference in the attitude to work and studies is explained with the continuous 'information noise' and special hypertextual perception of reality that influences the personal and social life of Generation Z representatives. The article suggests a number of steps to optimise the teaching process with the coming generation of students.

KEYWORDS: context reading, computerisation, fan fiction, Generation Z, hypertext, motivation, text messages, theory of generations



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1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of studying foreign languages is rarely questioned. Having failed to learn a foreign language, one might find it quite tricky to soar to success regardless of occupation, age or nationality. Learning a foreign language is a must for most of the world population. Nevertheless, only a small number of students can admit that they have mastered a foreign language easily, effortlessly and speak it fluently. By the end of secondary school, students usually succeed in mastering English at elementary or pre-intermediate levels. Yet, should they fail to sustain their level of language proficiency, many learners

return to the beginner level, in many ways due to lack of proper motivation and a conservative approach to the teaching process. The situation might appear even more challenging in view of a seemingly decreasing interest in education. What is the reason for this? Is it because teachers are now teaching differently, or is that students are less capable of learning? Is there any reason that we fail to notice or tend to ignore? Is it possible to turn things around? These are some of the questions this paper aims to address.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The age gap between teachers and students is said

to result in misunderstanding and poor training outcome. To address this concern, the study relies on the 'Generational Theory' developed by William Strauss and Neil Howe (1991) and adapted for Russia in 2004 by a team of scholars led by Eugenia Shamis, Rugenerations Project Coordinator (Shamis & Antipov, 2007). According to this theory, everyone can relate themselves to one of the following generations:

- Baby Boomer Generation (1943-1963)
- Generation X (1963-1984)
- Generation Millennium or Y (1984-2000)
- Generation Z (since 2000)

The theory is based on the values of large groups comprising average citizens born within a particular period of time and having witnessed certain political, economic, technological and social changes. Their character, perception of reality and reaction to what is happening around them has been formed by a combination of factors.

Since the events of social life, educational methodology and the level of intelligence in society are similar throughout separate historical periods, the values of most people who form a certain generation are similar, too. Some values formed in childhood and adolescence are acquired automatically in the process of social communication and upbringing. Subsequently, they largely determine the model of human

behaviour in various life situations and manifest themselves unconsciously and instinctively. Sometimes the behavioural characteristics of one generation seem inadequate and inexplicable to the representatives of another generation, thus leading to misunderstanding and conflicts between the two. Modern children are born in the age of computer technology, mobile communications and the Internet. Per Generational Theory, they belong to Generation Z – people born post-2000. They form their own set of social characteristics in view of political, economic and cultural events taking place during this period of time.

This study is about understanding the world of today's high school students and future university students against the backdrop of the Strauss-Howe Generational Theory.

Teaching experience of the past has proved that teacher-centred methods are conservative, flat and limited in tools and technologies. The teaching of the future demands a student-centred approach as the only possible way for teenagers to develop skills and abilities, promote self-expression and keep motivated during the whole period of studies.

Today's teenagers are born into the world full of technological knowhow. The global network also provides resources of a new kind. While earlier websites offered piles of information to read and download, today one can create their own virtual

space based on the suggested platform. Such resources are called Web 2.0. Thus, in order to catch up with this dynamic world, teachers need to master and implement the latest computer technologies.

To engage students and enhance their motivation, the communicative approach should be established as a teaching priority. The younger generation is very dynamic and versatile. Therefore, it is difficult to meet everyone's learning aspirations equally, for there is a danger of destroying the stem of the whole system of education that can end up lopsided, sophomoric and unqualified. Thus, the communicative approach in teaching should be combined with constructivist strategies so that the teacher facilitates the process of learning and encourages students to be responsible, interactive and dynamic.

3. STUDY AND RESULTS

3.1 Text messages

One of the phenomena of modern youth communication is the language of text messages originally presented in SMS (Short Message Service) and ICQ (Internet Chat Query). Short text messaging began its rapid development about fifteen years ago, the resulting phenomenon being labelled 'textese', 'slanguage' or 'hybrid shorthand'. The greatest development was observed in the sphere of SMS. Later on, scholars

analysed 'the language of SMS' (Crystal, 2008), i.e. the language of abbreviations based on the standard English language. For example, a common sentence like *How are you doing today? Want to go for a coffee later?* can be transformed into *HRU 2day? Wnt2go 4 a cofy l8r?* Such mode of writing allowed sending maximum of information in one message and helped save money on mobile communication services. Besides, it was a kind of encryption code for the younger generation, as it was easily understood by adolescents, but proved difficult to read for their parents. Crystal (2008) points out most prominent linguistic features typical of texting, including abundance of pictograms and logograms (xxx for 'kisses' or *b4* for 'before'), initialisation (i.e. words replaced by single letters, as in *Y* for 'Yes' or *NP* for 'No problem'), omitted letters (*englis, rite, txtn*), shortenings (*pos* for 'positive'), or the so-called genuine novelties incorporating several of the above features. Later, with the introduction of touch screens with wide keyboards and decrease in SMS cost, the need for contractions, once so fashionable among modern youths, was no longer there. ICQ messages were surpassed by unlimited Internet access and a new generation of iPhones and smartphones with functional apps, such as *Viber, WhatsApp* and *Telegram*. And while it is no longer customary to use abbreviations in texting, 'emoticons' or 'emoji' are now coming into fashion as a replacement for emotional writing, along with static pictures and gifs. This is a feature

'Later, with the introduction of touch screens with wide keyboards and decrease in SMS cost, the need for contractions, once so fashionable among modern youths, was no longer topical'

of a more emotionally charged informal communication, whereby one can express sympathy or convey interest in the conversation.

Taking into account this peculiarity of youth communication, one might set out to develop an original evaluation system using 'emoji' accompanied by a brief motivating comment. As far as classes of English are concerned, one way of doing this could be a verbal message with complex vocabulary, which students would have to translate to understand the meaning. Such an assessment might be more relevant for young people, and the teacher may earn students' approval by doing so. It could be a good opportunity to build reputation, which is a valuable intangible asset in teacher-student relations especially in the case of teenage audience.

3.2 Computerisation of society and online games

Text communication developed alongside the advance in computer technologies. The Internet

originated in the second half of the 20th century and for some time it was mainly of interest to military and later academic professionals, since at its initial stage it consisted mainly of an exchange of technical documentation and e-mail messages. Rapid development of the Web took place after 1993, when a number of network nodes and users began to grow in geometric progression. Soon, the Internet was an alternative to other means of communication, as well as a convenient way of transferring and storing information. Today, Internet resources are used by a vast number of people and has become an integral part of modern life. At the moment, World Wide Web is acknowledged as the most popular Internet service and the most convenient means of working with information.

Together with the development of the Internet, computer games have become widely popular. This hobby is chosen by millions of people all over the world, regardless of gender, age and occupation.

With the transition of games to online mode, the tradition of online text messaging has been developing as well. In a game, all messages between team members should be as informative and brief as possible, since the time for making a general decision and developing an action strategy is limited, and the positive outcome of the game also depends on this. As a result, the slang of

gamers has rapidly developed and is understandable only for players with experience.

Firstly, due to the limitation imposed on the number of characters in the message line (10 characters) and, later, saving time for communication during a dynamic game, players turned to all sorts of abbreviations, contractions and numeric designations, such as:

2 – addressed to (e.g. *2 Anna* meaning ‘To Anna’);

555 – laughing;

G2G – got to go;

AKA – also known as;

BTW – by the way;

OMG – Oh, my gosh;

WTB – want to buy;

WTS – want to sell;

YT – your turn;

WB – welcome back;

TISNF – that is so not fair;

UL – upload;

Y – why;

RDY – ready;

LOL – lots of laughs.

They also use abbreviations widely spread among computer programmers.

BRB – be right back;

NC – no comment;

AFK/AFTK – away from the keyboard.

There are a lot of abbreviations that have special meanings and are understandable only for gamers, because they have rich experience of communication on the network and therefore know patterns of virtual characters’ behaviour in the course of the game.

B / S – I both buy and sell something;

AoE – area of effect, spells of mass destruction with damage to the area;

DD, Damager – the character whose main job is to inflict damage;

DP – Divine Power, points of ‘rage’ collected after the 10th level and allowing the player to use the skills of special destructive power;

IDDQD – the code of immortality in the game ‘DOOM’. Usually it’s a joke, wishing luck before an attack.

There is, of course, a possibility of misunderstanding, especially among people who are not gamers. To avoid miscommunication and help beginners, special slang dictionaries have been compiled. And since many concepts quickly become obsolete while new notions appear, the dictionary is uploaded to one of the chats rooms for everyone to see or make suggestions for editing the content.

Online games erase borders between countries and continents. People from different parts of the world can play in one team. This can be a great stimulus for learning English because it is a 'lingua franca' for most of the online gamers.

As a rule, it takes a long time to master the special terminology of the game and become a full member of one of the teams. Commonly, the study of such 'online dictionaries' does not require knowledge of the English language, as about 75% of the words included in such glossaries are only transliterations into the native language of the gamer that do not clarify meaning and the ways of word-formation. Perception of such vocabulary is often passive, and the time of assimilation is directly proportional to the time spent online communicating in the network.

Trying to withstand the passive perception of information, and also make the most of this fashionable pastime, it might be appropriate to apply a more conscious approach to the study of these words. This study sets out to explain the language processes that resulted in the formation of certain concepts, citing examples from etymological dictionaries, describing semantic parallels and also providing explanations about certain features and rules of computer gaming. One of the gamers' dictionaries offers the following interpretations for some of the most common notions.

Bit by the bear (expression) – having a bad luck streak, often considered contagious by superstitious players. Possibly comes from the old adage, 'Sometimes you eat the bear, and sometimes the bear eats you.' Also called 'bear-bit'.

Clippy (noun, derogatory) – a player who reminds the GM (Games Moderator) of a rule that is harmful to the PCs. Named after the annoying paper clip from Microsoft Office which constantly offered unwanted advice.

Four-Point Hanger (expression) – a positive phrase referring to a close call that ended up working out perfectly. Taken from the barroom game of shuffle puck, in which a puck hanging off the edge of the board is worth a coveted 4 points. While on the board, the puck is worth 3 points; had the puck fallen completely off, it would have been worth no points. Example: 'Wow, those two mutant super-Nazis accidentally killing each other instead of us was a real four-point hanger!'

Get Medieval (verb) – to use excessive violence. Popularised by the film *Pulp Fiction*.

These are words and phrases that need to be explained even to native speakers. Teenagers speaking English as a foreign language are bound to encounter even more difficulties. Coming across a new word while playing, they usually don't give

it deep thought but simply translate it into their native language. They may guess its meaning by the action of the characters they can see on the screen but not bother to learn more about the translation, etymology, etc.

A more 'linguistic' way of providing vocabulary will contribute to a better understanding of the words' semantic origin, their formation and translation, thereby increasing interest in learning English. Implementation of this strategy has a number of advantages.

Firstly, being beginners and taking the study of gamers' slang seriously, students can expand their vocabulary, especially if they play the original version with the software written in English.

Secondly, a teacher of English who understands the terms of the game will be elevated in the eyes of students, and, as a result, the interest in the teacher's personality will increase interest in the subject he or she teaches.

Thirdly, it is crucial to consider the general trend towards gamification – the process of adding games or game like elements to something (such as a task) so as to encourage participation. It is possible to create an interesting interactive educational game where, as a key to passing to a new level, it will be necessary to upload the completed homework or use different grammatical

and syntactical structures instead of a variety of weapons. And when the student is graded, the following message can be displayed: *GG (Good Game!)*.

3.3 Networking literature, fan fiction and hypertext

By the end of the second millennium, the Internet included large arrays of literary texts. Initially, these were primarily libraries with electronic versions of works that had already been published. Later on, there appeared websites for posting books by amateur writers. A special place in the network is occupied by electronic diaries – blogs, many of which serve to discuss issues of interest to the author and to post small texts. This way of writing has become widespread and has opened the doors for a special kind of electronic literature – networking literature.

The volume and variety of electronic texts that exist on the Internet have become comparable with traditional printed texts. Literary works that exist on the Internet have become extremely diverse. However, one of the most notable places among them is taken by a special phenomenon commonly referred to as 'fanfiction'.

The emergence of fanfiction is primarily associated with the growing popularity of the genre of fantasy, with J.R.R. Tolkien and J.K. Rowling as its most prominent representatives. Since the publication of

The Lord of the Rings trilogy and the *Harry Potter* series, their popularity has been steadily growing to attract a vast number of fans among readers of different ages. The books were translated into various world languages and several films were made based on the plot of the books to contribute to an even greater growth of the writers' popularity. Many children and teenagers not only read these books, but also aspire to take up writing themselves.

By the start of the 21st century, a number of communities of science fiction and fantasy fans had begun to appear. They arose as clubs providing a platform for the exchange of thoughts, impressions and opinions. Via the Internet, fans of the fantasy genre moved to a new level: visitors of many specialised websites not only discussed their favourite books, but also made their first attempts at writing. Literature created by fans was called 'fanfiction' and their texts were called 'fanfics' or 'fics'. For now, this phenomenon is familiar to most of today's youth. Teenagers either read fanfiction, or create it themselves.

Another phenomenon of interest to the study is hypertext which in the broadest sense refers to an electronic text with markup words (commands) inserted into it to link the reader to other parts of the same text or related online documents, photographs, pictures, etc. Hypertext is a multi-level concept used not only in programming, but

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also in other areas of knowledge (particularly in language studies and literary criticism).

The idea of a hypertextual information system is that a user has an opportunity to view documents (pages of text) in the desired order, rather than lineally as is customary in reading books. Hence, hypertext is often defined as 'a non-linear text'. This is achieved by creating a special mechanism linking different pages of the text using hypertextual links, i.e. the plain text has links like 'next-previous', and hypertext can build as many other links as the programmer likes.

Computer hypertexts as a particular phenomenon have become widespread because of the special features offered by such data organisation. First of all, modern users, to which the children of Generation Z also belong, are attracted by an opportunity to choose the source that best meets their current needs, as well as by the presence of built-in and associated hypertextual links, built-in graphs and the ability to search by keywords. A potentially unlimited number of potential consumers of information and free access to it

regardless of location is an added attraction.

Given the peculiarities of hypertextual perception of information by young people and their desire to create their own works on the web, it will be advisable to develop educational portals, and unite pupils/ students in communities according to the level of knowledge, the topic of the project / research or according to their interests. The main form of presentation may be an essay, a composition or even a fanfic on a pre-arranged topic, but teachers should try not to limit students to the precise framework of the structure and genre so that they could feel free to be creative and build their own hypertextual algorithm while fulfilling the task.

It is important to update the information on this website regularly, add useful links and assignments such as a case study or a dilemma task that will provide freedom of choice and self-expression for the Generation Z students.

3.4 Reading the context

Even though Generation Z students are keen on computers, surf the net freely, don't have any difficulties with expressing and supporting their point of view and building their own hypertextual reality, they often fail to follow the clues of the context of a simple text when dealing with an ordinary gap-filling task. It would seem that 'jumping' from one page to another and following

their own logic of thinking should help develop the skill of seeing connections among documents, pages, ideas, etc., and yet in practice this is often not the case. Instead of setting thoughts in order, it blurs the logical ties and derails the process of building associative links between different pieces of information. This ultimately results in less efficient performance in humanitarian subjects at schools and universities, especially as concerns reading, which is estimated as the most difficult, time-consuming and tiring task to fulfil. Students lose concentration as they often aren't able to 'read between the lines'. They see an unknown word and very often skip it. If it's not essential, they're lucky, otherwise they lose track of the plot and make mistakes or try to look up every word in the dictionary or even use Google Translate or similar services. Thus, another problem of modern students is that they can't work with context. While this is a difficult issue to resolve, it is far from hopeless.

First and foremost, students should be taught to use contextual clues. There are always phrases and expressions in the text that might help. Examples are synonyms, definitions, antonyms and background knowledge.

The task of a teacher here is not to give out the translation of the word or the correct answer at once but create a 'problem solving' situation, set a challenge for the students to cope with, be able to

intrigue the audience and motivate them to carry out small contextual research. It's better to start introducing these types of tasks in the early stages in order to develop skills and confidence by the time of exams which can influence students' future life and career.

There is an example of a task that can help develop the skill of contextual reading, taken from flo-joe.co.uk.

Which one word fits all three sentences?

1. If someone has a of cards I can show you a trick. 2. During the cruise we spent our days on soaking up the sun. 3. My parents got me a tape for my birthday. (The answer is 'deck'.)

What word best fits the blank space?

1. Michael Chamberlain was a pastor with the Seventh-day Adventist, a protestant denomination. 2. I believe in America where the separation of and state is absolute. 3. Dr William Estes, an Old Catholic Bishop, put a finer point on this temptation. (The answer is 'church'.)

This type of exercise is easy to compile using one of the open corporuses of the English language available online. The task encourages students to use their background knowledge and think out of

the box beyond the limits of a single context as well as motivate them to read more and to develop their confidence.

3.5 Psychological and demographic characteristics of a Generation Z student

From the first minutes of life, modern children are inundated with an incessant flow of information. TV, computers, laptops, tablets, mobile phones, game consoles – these gadgets are accessible to most kids already in their early childhood. As a rule, their moms and dads get tired of communicating with children, who, in turn, are often restless and tend to quickly switch from one type of activity to another and lose interest in monotonous, longer-term tasks. This can lead to a growing lack of understanding between adolescents and their parents. There are a number of reasons for this.

1. Difference in the speed of cognition (with the younger generation it considerably exceeds the analogous indicators of their parents).
2. Grandparents play a less significant part in the education of their grandchildren.
3. Due to demanding economic conditions, parents spend ever more time at work, trying to earn more money.
4. Increased consumerism contributes to the

increase in the material needs of the society, which also forces the current generation of mothers and fathers to work longer and spend less time with their children.

5. Statistics shows that parents of many Generation Z youngsters are often divorced, therefore, in most cases, they are busy solving material problems rather than spending time with their children, sharing their life experience and views.

6. The coming generation of future students are better at typing than at writing, since they were born in the age of computers, smartphones, fast and cheap Internet and social networking.

As a consequence, modern children are often left to themselves in matters of finding the right information and developing their own views, their world outlook. Moreover, since today there are fewer 'filters' of information flows, the child's organism and brain learn to protect themselves, developing a reaction of indifference and abstraction from 'information noise' (Popova, 2016). Therefore, modern educators should not be surprised that children do not hear them, do not understand the instructions the first time round, and perceive information slowly.

Children usually have hundreds of 'online friends' they communicate with using short messages replacing emotions and speech figures with

'emojis' and 'memes'. In a most general interpretation, a meme is defined as '*an idea, behaviour, or style that spreads from person to person within a culture*' (Dawkins, 1976, 44).

A new generation of children is not used to correcting mistakes, remaking, repairing things, redoing and rewriting. For them it's always easier to throw a thing out and buy a new one, abandon the project and start from scratch. Children of Generation Z change activities easily, looking for what exactly they are good at. Thanks to Internet technologies, the world of Generation Z children is wider than that of their parents and teachers. They are often called lazy and selfish, yet they are very efficient and quick if motivated properly. These people are talented and better oriented in the world. They quickly analyse large amounts of information, find new original solutions, and easily cope with several tasks simultaneously (multitaskers). Their handwriting is often incomprehensible but they type fluently. One might think they have bad memory and cannot concentrate, but they remember all the keyboard buttons combinations for text formatting and codes of immortality for computer games. These children may experience difficulty understanding text which is longer than 140 characters, the maximum length of a Tweet. There seem to be even more drawbacks and weak points we want them NOT to possess. But why not try and play the game by their rules?

'A new generation of children is not used to correcting mistakes, remaking, repairing things, redoing and rewriting'

Networks and bloggers obviously keep them informed about current trends. They are a treasure for teachers and scientists. But to get this 'treasure', one needs to change the strategy of giving and representing tasks.

The question of motivating Generation Z students is a highly relevant issue. The point is that external types of motivation that work well with the representatives of other generations do not play out with modern teenagers. The main reason for this is their unwillingness to follow instructions and conform to strict rules. They have got used to dealing with everything new in their life without instructions manuals. The quickest and the most effective way of mastering the subject for such teenagers is to start with practice, introducing theory in small portions before, after or during a practical task. The teacher should be ready to adapt quickly and to follow the hypertextual model of the lesson giving the students 'freedom within limits' that is very similar to the Montessori approach to education, projected onto the modern environment and background.

The quickest way to convert the external type of

motivation to study a subject to an internal one is to praise students for the things they've done well. It's difficult to explain this to some teachers today because there is a misconception that any compliment will decrease the enthusiasm of students, making them lazy and idle in the near future. Research suggests that praise is underused in both general-education and special-education classrooms (Kern & Clemens, 2007).

To make the praise effective and sincere for Generation Z students, one simply needs to give a short description of what they are praising them for. These children often perceive the teacher as someone who is keen on the subject. A pure emotional reaction to the performance, such as 'Good job!', is likely to be considered inadequate as it lacks behavioural description (Hawkins & Heflin, 1997). If the teacher makes an effort to give a short description with a behavioural element, such as, '*You've found and located three strong and topical facts in your essay. Good job!*', the phrase achieves its goal and extends its triggering effect onto further work and studies. Moreover, it has been suggested that praising the general ability to be good at the subject can reduce the student's desire to take risks and show effort. Instead, the teacher should focus on specific examples of students' accomplishment. Thus, if the phrase '*You are really good at English*' is transformed into '*It's obvious from your grade that you worked hard to prepare for the test. Well done!*', then such praise

can help students see a connection between the invested effort and make them more interested in academic performance.

One more characteristic feature of modern children is that they are not used to solving complex problems on their own. They grew up in a fairly safe environment. In their childhood, loving parents decided which kindergarten, school or hobby group they would go to, the choice of the university and future profession was also made under parental control, only partially independently. These children are used to trusting adults making important decisions.

In this regard, teachers should be flexible and understanding. If the student loses interest to the project, they should ask him/her to look at the problem from a new angle, for example, from the position of competitors, not importers but exporters. Students of Generation Z should be enthusiastically motivated. At the same time, the teacher fulfils the duties of a leader who should consider interesting and prospective facets of a student's personality, notice what they are keen on and what areas or topics they are interested in. It is essential today, as Generation Z students will successfully cope with the task only if the topic aligns with their personal interests.

4. CONCLUSION

A fact of modern reality is that one of the market leaders, Twitter, is going to double the amount of

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the characters available in a single message. They will soon make it 280 instead of current 140. It is already causing much fuss among the users. Some of them approve of the initiative as they believe there are always many details left unexpressed when you are restricted to a short message. Others disagree, saying that it will take more effort to read and to grasp the main idea if there are more words in a single tweet. They claim that the whole spirit of 'the brief and sharp' messenger will be ruined. One writer who supports longer tweets is Kurt Wagner who writes, *'Twitter's character limit is a holdover from the app's early days when tweets were sent as texts, which were limited to 140 characters. It has since become one of the product's defining characteristics'* (Wagner, 2017).

It is obvious that it will take time for the innovation to be totally accepted. But Facebook hasn't give up on the idea and keeps trying despite the negative reaction of some of the users and a risk of losing some customers. They continue implementing the initiative, claiming that in the end it will attract more people who will tweet. *'When people don't have to cram their thoughts into 140 characters*

and actually have some to spare, we see more people tweeting' (Wagner, 2017). The point is that at present the whole system of education, each educational institution and each teacher in particular should follow the above-described model. They need to find out what the students expect from them, analyse their potential abilities in mastering a particular subject and adapt the

content and methodology to the coming generation of 'education consumers'. But at the same time, it should be done in a wise and forward-looking manner – firstly, in order to attract more attention, effort and not to scare them away, and secondly, not to lose the valuable component of every subject by making it an item of goods but perceive it more as an opportunity granted.

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