



## Language Learning Habits of Generation Z Students at Azerbaijani Higher Educational Institutions

Ilyas Mammadov | Kamandar Teymurzada | Emil Garayev

<sup>1</sup>Baku Engineering University  
Azerbaijan

<sup>2</sup>Baku Engineering University  
Azerbaijan

<sup>3</sup>Baku Engineering University  
Azerbaijan



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### Abstract

The rapid development of digital technologies and the globalization of higher education have significantly transformed language learning practices among university students. This article examines the language learning habits of Generation Z students enrolled in Azerbaijani higher educational institutions, with particular attention to their strategies, learning environments, and motivational orientations. As digital natives, Generation Z learners demonstrate distinctive approaches to language acquisition that differ from those of previous generations, relying heavily on technology, autonomous learning practices, and informal learning spaces beyond the classroom. The primary purpose of this study is to investigate how Generation Z students in Azerbaijan engage with language learning both within formal academic settings and in out-of-class contexts. Using a mixed-methods research design, the study explores students' preferred learning habits, their use of digital tools and online resources, and the sociocultural and motivational factors influencing their language learning behavior. The findings reveal that students frequently integrate mobile applications, social media platforms, and multimedia content into their learning routines, often supplementing institutional instruction with self-directed practices. Peer interaction and exposure to authentic language input emerge as central components of their learning experience. By identifying both strengths and challenges in current language learning practices, this study aims to contribute to the improvement of language education in Azerbaijani higher education. The results are intended to inform curriculum development, instructional strategies, and educational policy by highlighting the need for learner-centered and technology-enhanced approaches that align with the characteristics and expectations of Generation Z students.

**Keywords:** Generation Z, language learning habits, higher education, Azerbaijan, digital learning, foreign language education

## 1. Introduction

Language learning has become a central concern for higher education systems worldwide, particularly in contexts characterized by globalization, increased academic mobility, and technological innovation. Proficiency in foreign languages enables university students to access international academic resources, participate in global labor markets, and engage in intercultural communication. In Azerbaijan, foreign language education—especially English—has gained growing importance as the country expands its participation in international education and economic networks (Isgandarova, 2020). Higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan are simultaneously undergoing structural and pedagogical transformations aimed at aligning with international standards. Reforms associated with the Bologna Process emphasize student-centered learning, competency-based education, and the integration of digital technologies into teaching and learning processes (Huseynova, 2018). Within this evolving educational environment, understanding how students approach language learning has become essential for evaluating the effectiveness of current instructional practices. The majority of undergraduate students in Azerbaijani universities belong to Generation Z, a cohort typically defined as individuals born between the late 1990s and early 2010s. Generation Z learners differ from previous generations due to their early exposure to digital technologies, constant connectivity, and participation in online social networks. These characteristics have shaped their cognitive styles, communication patterns, and learning preferences, leading to a strong inclination toward visual, interactive, and technology-mediated learning experiences (Prensky, 2001; Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

These generational differences have important implications for language education. Traditional approaches to language teaching in higher education—often dominated by grammar-based instruction, textbook-centered curricula, and teacher-led classrooms—may not fully correspond

to the expectations and learning styles of Generation Z students (Rahimov & Hajiyev, 2016). As a result, many students rely on informal and self-directed learning practices to supplement formal instruction, particularly through digital environments. Language learning habits can be understood as the recurring behaviors, strategies, and routines learners employ to acquire and use a second or foreign language. These habits encompass a wide range of practices, including vocabulary learning techniques, engagement with authentic language materials, interaction with peers, use of digital tools, and self-regulation strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Research has consistently demonstrated that effective language learning habits are closely associated with higher levels of language proficiency, learner autonomy, and sustained motivation (Oxford, 1990).

In the Azerbaijani context, language learning habits are shaped by a complex linguistic and sociocultural environment. Azerbaijani serves as the state language and the primary medium of instruction in most higher educational institutions, while Russian continues to play an important role due to historical, social, and practical considerations. English has increasingly emerged as the dominant foreign language associated with academic advancement, international mobility, and professional success (Bayramova, 2020). Exposure to Turkish through media and cultural exchange further contributes to a multilingual learning landscape. Motivation represents another critical factor influencing language learning habits. According to contemporary theories of second language motivation, learners' engagement is influenced by their personal goals, social identities, and future aspirations (Dörnyei, 2005). For many Generation Z students in Azerbaijan, language learning is closely linked to instrumental goals such as studying abroad, securing employment in international companies, and accessing global information networks. At the same time, integrative motives related to cultural interest and participation in global digital culture also play a significant role.

Digital technologies have profoundly transformed the ways in which students engage with language learning. Mobile-assisted language learning applications, online video platforms, social media networks, and digital communication tools provide learners with continuous access to authentic language input and opportunities for interaction (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013). Studies indicate that Generation Z learners are particularly inclined to incorporate such technologies into their daily learning routines, often blurring the boundaries between formal and informal learning contexts (Godwin-Jones, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified the role of digital technologies in higher education by necessitating a rapid shift to online and hybrid modes of instruction. Although this transition posed significant challenges, it also accelerated students' adoption of autonomous learning strategies and digital resources. For Generation Z learners, this period reinforced habits of self-directed learning, peer collaboration through online platforms, and sustained exposure to foreign languages outside the classroom (Reinders & Benson, 2017). Despite the growing importance of these developments, empirical research focusing specifically on the language learning habits of Generation Z students in Azerbaijani higher educational institutions remains limited. Existing studies tend to focus on curriculum design, teacher perceptions, or general challenges in foreign language education, often overlooking students' everyday learning practices and perspectives (Mammadova & Aliyev, 2019). This gap limits the ability of educators and policymakers to design pedagogical approaches that are responsive to learners' actual needs and behaviors.

In response to this gap, the present study aims to systematically examine the language learning habits of Generation Z students in Azerbaijani higher educational institutions. The study seeks to identify common learning practices, explore the role of digital technologies, and analyze motivational and sociocultural influences shaping

students' approaches to language learning. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What language learning habits and strategies are most commonly employed by Generation Z students in Azerbaijani higher educational institutions?
2. How do digital technologies and online environments influence these language learning habits?
3. What motivational and sociocultural factors shape Generation Z students' approaches to language learning?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to the growing body of research on generational learning differences and context-sensitive language education. The findings aim to inform language instructors, curriculum developers, and higher education policymakers seeking to align instructional practices with the characteristics of contemporary learners in Azerbaijan and similar educational contexts.

## **2. Language Education in Azerbaijan: Historical, Policy, and Institutional Context**

Language education in Azerbaijan has been shaped by a complex interplay of historical, political, and sociocultural factors. Understanding the language learning habits of Generation Z students requires situating their experiences within this broader context, as institutional practices and policy decisions significantly influence learners' opportunities, motivations, and strategies. Azerbaijan's linguistic landscape reflects both its Soviet past and its post-independence efforts to construct a national identity while engaging with global systems of communication and education.

### **2.1 Historical Development of Language Education**

During the Soviet period, Russian functioned as the dominant language of administration, higher education, and interethnic communication across the region. While Azerbaijani was widely spoken in everyday life, Russian held significant prestige and practical value in academic and professional domains (Garibova, 2011). Higher education

institutions largely relied on Russian-medium instruction, particularly in scientific and technical fields, and proficiency in Russian was essential for academic success. Following Azerbaijan's independence in 1991, language policy became closely tied to nation-building efforts. Azerbaijani was established as the state language and gradually expanded as the primary medium of instruction in education. This shift aimed to strengthen national identity and promote linguistic sovereignty (Huseynova, 2018). At the same time, the role of Russian did not disappear entirely; it retained functional importance in certain academic programs, urban contexts, and international communication, particularly among older generations. The post-independence period also marked the increasing prominence of English as a foreign language. Unlike Russian, which carried historical and political associations, English was perceived as a neutral and globally valuable resource. Its growing importance was closely linked to Azerbaijan's integration into the global economy, participation in international organizations, and expansion of academic mobility programs (Isgandarova, 2020). As a result, English gradually replaced Russian as the most prioritized foreign language in higher education.

## 2.2 Language Policy in Higher Education

Language education policies in Azerbaijani higher educational institutions are shaped by national legislation, institutional autonomy, and international frameworks. The adoption of the Bologna Process in the mid-2000s significantly influenced higher education reform, emphasizing learner-centered approaches, credit-based systems, and quality assurance mechanisms aligned with European standards (Huseynova, 2018). These reforms also encouraged greater attention to foreign language competence as a key component of graduate employability and academic mobility. English language instruction is now compulsory in most undergraduate programs, regardless of students' fields of study. In addition to general English courses, some universities offer English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs tailored to

disciplines such as engineering, medicine, economics, and international relations. However, the quality and consistency of these programs vary considerably across institutions, depending on resources, teacher training, and curriculum design (Rahimov & Hajiyevev, 2016). While national policy documents emphasize communicative competence and practical language use, implementation often remains uneven. In many cases, assessment practices continue to prioritize grammatical accuracy and exam performance rather than communicative ability. This misalignment between policy goals and classroom realities can affect students' motivation and shape their learning habits, prompting them to seek alternative learning opportunities outside formal instruction (Mammadova & Aliyev, 2019).

## 2.3 Multilingualism and Sociolinguistic Environment

Azerbaijan's sociolinguistic environment is inherently multilingual. In addition to Azerbaijani and Russian, exposure to Turkish, Persian, and English is common through media, tourism, and regional interaction. For Generation Z students, this multilingual exposure often begins at an early age, particularly through digital media and online platforms. Turkish television series, English-language music and films, and multilingual social media content contribute to passive and active language acquisition beyond the classroom (Bayramova, 2020). This environment influences students' attitudes toward language learning and shapes their learning habits. Many Gen Z students develop receptive skills in multiple languages through informal exposure, even if formal instruction focuses primarily on one or two languages. Such exposure often enhances listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition but may not fully support productive skills such as speaking and writing without structured practice.

The coexistence of multiple languages also affects learners' identity construction. For some students, English represents modernity, global belonging, and professional advancement, while Azerbaijani symbolizes national identity and cultural continuity. Russian, meanwhile, may be

associated with practicality or generational differences. These symbolic associations influence learners' motivation and willingness to invest time and effort in particular languages (Dörnyei, 2005).

#### **2.4 Institutional Practices and Teaching Approaches**

Despite ongoing reforms, teaching practices in many Azerbaijani higher educational institutions continue to reflect traditional pedagogical models. Teacher-centered instruction, reliance on textbooks, and limited opportunities for communicative interaction remain common, particularly in large classes. While communicative language teaching is frequently endorsed at the policy level, its implementation depends heavily on individual instructors' training, beliefs, and access to resources (Rahimov & Hajiyev, 2016). At the same time, some institutions—especially private universities and internationally oriented programs—have begun to integrate more innovative approaches. These include blended learning models, use of learning management systems, project-based tasks, and incorporation of digital tools into language instruction. However, such practices are not yet uniformly adopted across the higher education sector. This uneven institutional landscape has important implications for Generation Z students' language learning habits. When classroom instruction does not align with their learning preferences or provide sufficient opportunities for meaningful practice, students are more likely to rely on self-directed learning strategies. These may include the use of mobile applications, online videos, social media interaction, and peer-supported learning networks (Godwin-Jones, 2018).

#### **2.5 Access to Technology and Digital Infrastructure**

Access to digital technology is a critical factor shaping language learning habits in contemporary higher education. In Azerbaijan, internet penetration and smartphone usage have increased significantly over the past decade, particularly among younger populations. Most Generation Z students have regular access to mobile devices and

online resources, enabling continuous engagement with foreign languages outside the classroom (Isgandarova, 2020). However, disparities in digital infrastructure persist across institutions and regions. While universities in urban centers such as Baku often provide reliable internet access and digital learning platforms, students in regional institutions may face limitations. These disparities can influence the extent to which students are able to engage in technology-mediated language learning and may contribute to unequal learning outcomes. Nevertheless, the widespread availability of personal devices allows many students to compensate for institutional limitations by independently accessing online resources. This reliance on personal technology reinforces habits of autonomous learning and self-regulation, characteristics commonly associated with Generation Z learners (Zimmerman, 2002).

#### **2.6 Implications for Generation Z Language Learners**

The historical, policy, and institutional context of language education in Azerbaijan provides the foundation upon which Generation Z students develop their language learning habits. The coexistence of traditional teaching practices and emerging digital opportunities creates a hybrid learning environment in which students navigate between formal instruction and informal learning spaces. For Generation Z learners, this context encourages flexibility, adaptability, and self-direction. At the same time, inconsistencies in instructional quality and limited opportunities for authentic language use within institutions may place additional responsibility on students to manage their own learning. Understanding these contextual factors is essential for interpreting the findings of the present study and for designing pedagogical interventions that align institutional practices with learners' habits and expectations.

### **3. Literature Review: Generation Z and Language Learning Habits**

This section reviews existing literature relevant to the language learning habits of Generation Z students, with a focus on learning characteristics,

language learning strategies, the role of digital technologies, and motivational dimensions. By synthesizing research from applied linguistics, educational psychology, and technology-enhanced learning, this review establishes a theoretical and empirical foundation for examining Generation Z language learners in the Azerbaijani higher education context.

### 3.1 Defining Generation Z in Educational Research

Generation Z is commonly defined as individuals born approximately between 1997 and 2012, following the Millennial generation (Twenge, 2017). Unlike previous cohorts, Generation Z has grown up in a world characterized by constant internet access, mobile technologies, and digital socialization. As a result, this generation is frequently described as “digital native,” although scholars caution against assuming uniform technological competence among all learners (Bennett et al., 2008). Educational research suggests that Generation Z learners tend to value immediacy, personalization, and interactivity in learning environments. They are accustomed to accessing information on demand, engaging with multimedia content, and participating in online communities (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). These characteristics influence how students approach learning tasks, including language acquisition, shaping their expectations of instructional practices and learning resources. Several studies indicate that Generation Z students demonstrate shorter attention spans for passive learning activities but higher engagement when learning tasks are interactive and relevant to real-world contexts (Turner, 2015). Consequently, traditional lecture-based instruction may be less effective for this cohort unless supplemented with active learning strategies. In language education, this has implications for task design, classroom interaction, and the integration of technology.

### 3.2 Language Learning Habits and Strategies

Language learning habits are closely related to the concept of language learning strategies, defined as the conscious or semi-conscious actions learners

use to facilitate language acquisition (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). These strategies are commonly categorized into cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective domains. Cognitive strategies involve direct manipulation of language input, such as repetition and summarization, while metacognitive strategies include planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning progress. Social strategies emphasize interaction with others, and affective strategies focus on managing emotions and motivation. Oxford (1990) argues that effective language learners employ a combination of strategies and adapt them to different learning contexts. Recent research suggests that Generation Z learners demonstrate a strong preference for strategies that allow autonomy, flexibility, and immediate feedback. These include the use of digital flashcards, online quizzes, and self-paced learning platforms (Godwin-Jones, 2018). In higher education contexts, students' language learning habits often extend beyond formal instruction. Studies have shown that learners who engage in regular out-of-class language activities—such as watching films, listening to music, or participating in online discussions—tend to develop stronger receptive skills and greater overall proficiency (Reinders & Benson, 2017). For Generation Z students, these habits are frequently mediated by technology and integrated into daily routines.

The integration of digital technologies into language learning has received substantial attention in recent decades. Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), online platforms, and multimedia resources have transformed access to authentic language input and opportunities for interaction (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013). For Generation Z learners, these technologies are not supplementary but central to their learning experience. Research indicates that mobile applications support vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation practice, and grammar reinforcement through gamified and personalized learning experiences (Stockwell, 2010). Social media platforms further enable informal language practice by facilitating interaction with peers and exposure to real-world language use. Platforms

such as YouTube, Instagram, and messaging applications provide learners with authentic input that is often perceived as more engaging than textbook materials (Godwin-Jones, 2018). However, scholars also emphasize the importance of guided integration of technology. While Generation Z students may be frequent users of digital tools, effective language learning requires strategic use aligned with pedagogical goals (Hockly, 2013). Without appropriate guidance, technology use may remain superficial or limited to receptive skills. Autonomy and self-regulation are central concepts in contemporary language learning research. Self-regulated learning refers to learners' ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning processes (Zimmerman, 2002). Autonomous learners take responsibility for their learning, select appropriate strategies, and seek opportunities for practice beyond formal instruction. Studies suggest that Generation Z learners exhibit relatively high levels of autonomous behavior, particularly in technology-mediated environments. They frequently select learning resources independently, customize learning paths, and engage in informal learning activities driven by personal interests (Reinders & Benson, 2017). In language learning, this autonomy often manifests through self-selected media consumption, online language exchanges, and independent vocabulary study. Nevertheless, autonomy does not develop automatically. Research highlights the role of teachers and institutions in scaffolding autonomous learning by providing strategic guidance and reflective opportunities (Little, 2007). In contexts where formal instruction remains teacher-centered, students may develop autonomous habits informally but lack metacognitive awareness of effective learning strategies.

### 3.3 Motivation in Generation Z Language Learning

Motivation has long been recognized as a key determinant of language learning success. Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System emphasizes the role of learners' future self-images and goals in sustaining engagement. For

Generation Z learners, motivation is often closely tied to instrumental goals, such as career advancement and international mobility, as well as integrative motives related to global cultural participation. Empirical studies indicate that Generation Z students are motivated by practical outcomes and relevance. They are more likely to invest effort in language learning when they perceive clear connections to real-life applications, such as studying abroad, accessing global information, or participating in international communities (Twenge, 2017). Digital media further reinforces motivation by providing immediate access to target-language content aligned with learners' interests. At the same time, motivation among Generation Z learners can be fragile. Overexposure to information, academic pressure, and lack of meaningful engagement in classroom settings may lead to disengagement (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). This highlights the importance of instructional approaches that support sustained motivation through autonomy, relevance, and social interaction.

### 3.4 Sociocultural Perspectives on Language Learning

From a sociocultural perspective, language learning is viewed as a socially mediated process shaped by interaction, identity, and cultural context (Vygotsky, 1978). Generation Z learners construct their linguistic identities through participation in both local and global communities, often facilitated by digital platforms. Research suggests that learners' sense of belonging and identity influences their willingness to use a foreign language and engage in learning activities (Norton, 2013). For students in multilingual contexts, language choices may reflect aspirations, cultural affiliations, and perceptions of prestige. In Azerbaijan, these dynamics intersect with national identity, post-Soviet legacies, and globalization processes, shaping learners' attitudes toward different languages (Bayramova, 2020).

Social interaction plays a crucial role in developing communicative competence.

Generation Z learners often prefer collaborative learning environments and peer-supported activities, both online and offline. Digital platforms enable learners to interact with a wider range of interlocutors, expanding opportunities for meaningful language use beyond institutional boundaries (Godwin-Jones, 2018).

### **3.5 Research Gaps and Relevance to the Azerbaijani Context**

Despite extensive research on Generation Z and language learning globally, context-specific studies remain limited. Much of the existing literature focuses on Western or East Asian educational settings, with fewer investigations into post-Soviet and South Caucasus contexts. Given Azerbaijan's unique linguistic, cultural, and educational environment, findings from other regions may not be directly transferable. Existing studies in Azerbaijan have primarily addressed curriculum development, teaching challenges, and policy implementation, often from an institutional or teacher-centered perspective (Mammadova & Aliyev, 2019). There is a clear need for empirical research that foregrounds students' experiences, learning habits, and perspectives, particularly those of Generation Z learners. By examining language learning habits within the Azerbaijani higher education context, the present study addresses this gap and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how generational characteristics interact with local educational conditions. The insights gained from this literature review inform the theoretical framework and methodological design of the study, which are presented in the following sections.

## **4. Theoretical Framework**

The present study is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives that provide a foundation for analyzing the language learning habits of Generation Z students in Azerbaijani higher educational institutions: social constructivism and self-regulated learning theory. Together, these frameworks offer insight into how learning occurs through social interaction, digital mediation, and individual agency, all of which are

central to the learning experiences of contemporary university students.

Social constructivism emphasizes the role of social interaction and cultural context in the construction of knowledge. Rooted in the work of Vygotsky (1978), this perspective views learning as a socially mediated process rather than an isolated cognitive activity. According to this theory, learners develop knowledge through interaction with more knowledgeable others, collaboration with peers, and engagement with culturally meaningful tools. In the context of language learning, social constructivism highlights the importance of communication, interaction, and authentic language use. Language is not merely an object of study but a tool for meaning-making and participation in social practices. From this perspective, learning occurs most effectively when learners actively use the target language in meaningful contexts, negotiate meaning, and receive feedback from others (Lantolf, 2000). For Generation Z students, social constructivism is particularly relevant due to their extensive engagement with digital communication platforms. Online environments such as social media, messaging applications, and collaborative learning platforms provide spaces for interaction, peer support, and shared knowledge construction. These environments extend the classroom into informal learning spaces where learners practice language skills in socially meaningful ways (Godwin-Jones, 2018). In Azerbaijani higher educational institutions, where classroom interaction may sometimes be limited by large class sizes or traditional teaching methods, digital platforms can compensate by offering alternative spaces for social learning. From a social constructivist perspective, students' language learning habits—such as participating in online discussions, collaborating on digital projects, or engaging in peer-assisted learning—can be understood as responses to both institutional constraints and social learning opportunities.

A central concept within social constructivism is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), defined as the distance between what learners can

achieve independently and what they can accomplish with guidance or collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding refers to the temporary support provided by teachers, peers, or tools to facilitate learning within this zone. In language learning, scaffolding may take various forms, including teacher feedback, peer correction, model texts, or digital aids such as online dictionaries and language learning applications. For Generation Z learners, technology often functions as a form of scaffolding, offering instant feedback, examples, and explanations that support independent learning (Hockly, 2013). Understanding students' language learning habits through the lens of the ZPD allows researchers to examine how learners strategically use resources and social support to extend their linguistic competence. In the Azerbaijani context, where institutional support may vary, students' reliance on peer networks and digital tools can be interpreted as adaptive strategies for accessing scaffolding beyond the classroom.

#### 4.1 Self-Regulated Learning Theory

Self-regulated learning (SRL) theory focuses on learners' active role in controlling and directing their learning processes. According to Zimmerman (2002), self-regulated learners set goals, select strategies, monitor progress, and reflect on outcomes. SRL emphasizes autonomy, motivation, and metacognitive awareness as key components of effective learning. This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant to Generation Z learners, who are frequently described as autonomous and self-directed, especially in technology-rich environments. Research suggests that Gen Z students often take responsibility for selecting learning materials, managing their study schedules, and engaging in learning activities aligned with their interests and goals (Reinders & Benson, 2017). In language learning, self-regulation manifests through behaviors such as independent vocabulary study, self-assessment of language skills, and deliberate exposure to target-language input. Digital tools support self-regulated learning by providing personalized

feedback, tracking progress, and enabling flexible access to learning resources (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013).

Motivation is a critical component of self-regulated learning. Learners' willingness to invest effort and persist in learning tasks is influenced by their goals, beliefs, and perceived relevance of the learning activity (Dörnyei, 2005). For Generation Z students, motivation is often closely linked to instrumental outcomes such as career opportunities, academic success, and participation in global culture. Self-regulated learning theory emphasizes the interaction between motivation and strategy use. Motivated learners are more likely to engage in effective learning strategies, while successful strategy use can enhance motivation through positive learning experiences. In the Azerbaijani higher education context, where students often face limited instructional contact hours, motivation plays a crucial role in sustaining engagement with language learning outside the classroom.

The integration of social constructivism and self-regulated learning provides a comprehensive framework for examining language learning habits among Generation Z students. Social constructivism accounts for the social and interactive dimensions of learning, emphasizing collaboration, communication, and cultural context. Self-regulated learning theory highlights individual agency, autonomy, and strategic behavior. Together, these frameworks allow for an analysis of how Generation Z students navigate formal and informal learning environments, utilize digital tools, and engage with peers and resources to develop language competence. In the present study, these theoretical perspectives guide the design of research instruments, the interpretation of data, and the discussion of findings. By applying these theories to the Azerbaijani higher education context, the study aims to capture the complex interplay between institutional structures, social interaction, and individual learning behaviors. This theoretical grounding provides a robust foundation for the methodological approach outlined in the following section.

## 5. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to investigate the language learning habits of Generation Z students enrolled in Azerbaijani higher educational institutions. A mixed-methods approach was selected to capture both the measurable patterns of language learning behavior and the subjective experiences, attitudes, and motivations underlying those behaviors. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, the study aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how Gen Z students approach language learning in formal and informal contexts.

The research design follows a sequential explanatory mixed-methods model, in which quantitative data collection and analysis are conducted first, followed by qualitative inquiry to elaborate and interpret the quantitative findings. This design is particularly appropriate for educational research that seeks to identify trends while also exploring learners' perspectives in depth. The quantitative component focuses on identifying dominant language learning habits, frequency of strategy use, and patterns of technology integration among Gen Z students. The qualitative component explores students' perceptions of institutional language instruction, their motivations for learning languages, and the role of digital environments in shaping their learning practices.

### 5.1 Participants

The participants in this study consist of undergraduate students born between 1997 and 2012, aligning with commonly accepted definitions of Generation Z. A total of 420 students participated in the quantitative phase, while 30 students took part in the qualitative interviews. Participants were recruited from six higher educational institutions in Azerbaijan, including both public and private universities. These institutions were selected to represent diverse academic profiles, geographic locations, and instructional languages. The sample included students from faculties such as humanities,

engineering, economics, education, and medical sciences. The demographic distribution of participants reflected gender balance, regional diversity, and varying levels of language proficiency. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent prior to data collection.

### 5.1 Data Collection Instruments

The primary quantitative data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire designed to assess students' language learning habits. The questionnaire consisted of four main sections: demographic information, language learning motivation, learning strategies, and technology use. Items were adapted from established instruments in language learning research and contextualized for Azerbaijani higher education. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The questionnaire was administered in both Azerbaijani and English to ensure clarity and accessibility. A pilot study involving 40 students was conducted to test the reliability and validity of the instrument. The final version demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.86. To complement the survey data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of participants. The interview protocol focused on students' personal language learning experiences, perceptions of university language courses, use of digital tools, and self-directed learning practices. This format allowed participants to elaborate on their responses while ensuring consistency across interviews. Interviews were conducted in Azerbaijani or English, depending on participant preference, and each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### 5.2 Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative data were collected during the spring semester of the academic year through an online survey platform. University instructors assisted in distributing the survey link to students, and

reminders were sent to increase response rates. Data collection lasted approximately four weeks.

Qualitative data collection followed the initial analysis of survey results. Interview participants were selected using purposive sampling to represent diverse language proficiency levels, academic disciplines, and reported learning habits. This sequencing enabled the qualitative phase to directly address patterns identified in the quantitative data.

### 5.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize students' language learning habits, while inferential statistics, including t-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA), were employed to examine differences across demographic variables such as gender, field of study, and institution type. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcripts were coded inductively to identify recurring themes related to motivation, autonomy, technology use, and perceptions of institutional support. The coding process involved multiple readings of the data to ensure reliability and depth of interpretation. Findings from both data sets were integrated during the interpretation phase to provide a holistic account of Gen Z students' language learning habits.

### 5.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional review boards. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. All data were anonymized, and identifiers were removed during transcription and analysis to protect participant privacy.

## 6. Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study by integrating quantitative survey results with qualitative interview data. The analysis focuses on identifying dominant language learning habits among Generation Z students in Azerbaijani higher educational institutions and

interpreting these habits in relation to existing theoretical and empirical literature. The discussion is organized around key themes that emerged from the data, including learning motivation, strategy use, technology-mediated learning, learner autonomy, and perceptions of institutional language education.

### 6.1 Motivation for Language Learning

Quantitative findings indicate that Generation Z students in Azerbaijan demonstrate predominantly instrumental motivation toward language learning. A large majority of respondents reported learning foreign languages, particularly English, for pragmatic reasons such as employment opportunities, academic mobility, and access to international resources. Over 78% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that language proficiency was essential for their future careers. This instrumental orientation aligns with broader global trends in language learning among Gen Z students, who often associate language skills with economic and social capital (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Interview data further revealed that many students viewed language learning as a "necessity rather than a choice," particularly in competitive labor markets. One participant noted that "without English, it is very hard to find a good job or study abroad," reflecting widespread societal attitudes toward language competence in Azerbaijan. At the same time, qualitative data suggested the presence of integrative and intrinsic motivation among a subset of students. These students expressed enjoyment in engaging with foreign media, communicating with international peers, and participating in global online communities. Such findings support research suggesting that Gen Z learners often blend instrumental goals with identity-driven and interest-based motivations, particularly in digitally mediated environments (Ushioda, 2020). Survey results demonstrated that students frequently employed a combination of cognitive, metacognitive, and social learning strategies. Commonly reported habits included watching videos in the target language, using mobile applications, practicing vocabulary through spaced repetition, and engaging in

informal online communication. Traditional strategies such as memorizing grammar rules and completing textbook exercises were reported less frequently, particularly outside the classroom. These findings indicate a shift away from teacher-centered and form-focused approaches toward more flexible and learner-driven habits. Interviews revealed that students often adapted their learning strategies based on perceived usefulness and personal preferences. For example, several participants reported abandoning formal grammar study in favor of exposure-based learning through films, podcasts, and social media content.

This pattern reflects the broader literature on Generation Z learners, who are often characterized as pragmatic, efficiency-oriented, and resistant to learning practices perceived as irrelevant or outdated (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). However, the findings also suggest that such habits may lead to uneven skill development, with students reporting stronger receptive skills (listening and reading) than productive skills (speaking and writing).

One of the most prominent findings of the study concerns the central role of technology in shaping Gen Z students' language learning habits. Over 85% of survey respondents reported regular use of digital tools for language learning, including mobile applications, video-sharing platforms, online dictionaries, and social networking sites. Interview data revealed that technology was not merely a supplementary resource but a primary learning environment for many students. Participants described learning vocabulary through short videos, improving listening skills through online content creators, and practicing communication through messaging applications and multiplayer games. These findings align with research emphasizing the importance of informal digital learning environments in contemporary language acquisition (Reinders & Benson, 2017). However, the findings also highlight a gap between students' digital learning practices and institutional language instruction. Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with university language courses, describing them as overly theoretical, exam-oriented, and

disconnected from real-life language use. This mismatch suggests that higher education institutions may be underutilizing the digital competencies and learning preferences of Gen Z students.

### **6.1 Learner Autonomy and Self-Directed Learning**

The data indicate a high level of learner autonomy among Gen Z students. A majority of respondents reported setting personal language learning goals, selecting their own learning materials, and monitoring their progress independently. Interview participants frequently emphasized the importance of "learning on one's own" and expressed limited reliance on instructors for language development beyond basic guidance. This tendency toward self-directed learning is consistent with theoretical frameworks that associate digital literacy with increased learner autonomy (Little, 2007). Generation Z students, having grown up with constant access to information, appear comfortable navigating online resources and constructing personalized learning pathways. Nevertheless, the findings also suggest that autonomy does not necessarily equate to strategic competence. Some students reported difficulties in maintaining consistency, evaluating resource quality, and achieving advanced proficiency. These challenges underscore the need for institutional support that fosters guided autonomy rather than complete independence.

### **6.2 Perceptions of Institutional Language Education**

Students' perceptions of institutional language education were mixed. While some participants acknowledged the role of universities in providing foundational knowledge and certification, many expressed dissatisfaction with instructional methods and assessment practices. Survey results indicated that only 42% of respondents believed that university language courses significantly improved their communicative competence. Interview data revealed recurring concerns about large class sizes, limited speaking opportunities, and an overemphasis on examinations. These

findings echo previous studies on language education in post-Soviet contexts, where structural constraints and traditional pedagogies often hinder communicative language development (Mammadov, 2020). At the same time, participants expressed a desire for more interactive, technology-enhanced, and discipline-specific language instruction. This suggests that aligning institutional practices with Gen Z learning habits could improve engagement and outcomes.

Taken together, the findings illustrate that Generation Z students in Azerbaijani higher educational institutions exhibit dynamic, technology-driven, and largely self-directed language learning habits. Their practices reflect global trends while also being shaped by local educational structures and socio-economic realities. The prominence of informal learning and digital engagement supports contemporary views of language learning as a lifelong, situated, and socially mediated process (Larsen-Freeman, 2018). However, the disconnect between students' habits and institutional practices highlights the need for pedagogical reform that recognizes and integrates learners' existing competencies.

## 7. Pedagogical Implications

One of the most prominent implications concerns the need to align instructional practices with the learning preferences of Generation Z students. The findings indicate that Gen Z learners favor interactive, technology-enhanced, and authentic language use over traditional, form-focused instruction. Therefore, language courses should move beyond predominantly grammar-based approaches and incorporate communicative and task-based methodologies that reflect real-world language use (Ellis, 2017). Instructors are encouraged to integrate multimedia resources, authentic texts, and digital platforms into classroom instruction. For example, the use of short videos, podcasts, online discussion forums, and collaborative digital tools can mirror the informal learning environments students already engage with independently. Such alignment may

increase motivation, participation, and perceived relevance of institutional language courses.

### 7.1 Integrating Technology into Formal Language Education

Given the central role of technology in Gen Z students' language learning habits, higher education institutions should strategically integrate digital tools into formal language education. Rather than treating technology as an optional supplement, universities can adopt blended or hybrid learning models that combine face-to-face instruction with online learning components (Graham, 2019). Learning management systems, mobile applications, and online assessment tools can be used to support continuous practice, individualized feedback, and learner autonomy. Importantly, instructors should guide students in selecting and using digital resources effectively, helping them evaluate content quality and develop strategic learning skills. This guided use of technology can address the challenges students reported regarding inconsistency and lack of direction in self-directed learning.

While the findings indicate a high degree of learner autonomy among Gen Z students, they also reveal the need for structured support to maximize learning outcomes. Language educators should adopt pedagogical approaches that encourage autonomy while providing clear guidance and scaffolding. Strategies such as goal-setting activities, reflective learning journals, and self-assessment tasks can help students develop metacognitive awareness and sustain long-term learning habits (Little, 2007). In the Azerbaijani higher education context, fostering autonomy may also involve a shift in teacher roles—from knowledge transmitters to facilitators and mentors. Professional development programs for instructors can support this transition by introducing learner-centered pedagogies and autonomy-supportive teaching practices. The findings suggest that many Gen Z students perceive a disconnect between university language curricula and their academic or professional needs. To address this issue, curriculum designers should consider

incorporating English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and discipline-specific language instruction into higher education programs. Tailoring language courses to students' fields of study can enhance relevance and practical applicability (Hyland, 2018). Additionally, curricula should balance receptive and productive skills, ensuring that students have ample opportunities to practice speaking and writing in meaningful contexts. Project-based learning, presentations, and collaborative tasks can help address the reported imbalance between receptive and productive competencies.

## 7.2 Assessment Practices

Assessment practices also require reconsideration in light of Gen Z students' learning habits. Traditional, high-stakes examinations may not accurately reflect students' communicative abilities or informal learning achievements. Alternative assessment methods, such as portfolio assessment, continuous assessment, and performance-based tasks, can provide a more comprehensive picture of language competence (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). Incorporating formative assessment and feedback mechanisms can further support learner motivation and self-regulation. Digital assessment tools can facilitate timely feedback and allow students to track their progress over time. At the institutional level, universities should recognize language education as a strategic component of internationalization and graduate employability. Investment in technological infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum innovation is essential to meet the needs of Generation Z learners. Policy makers in higher education may also consider revising national language education standards to encourage flexibility, innovation, and alignment with global best practices. By acknowledging the evolving habits and expectations of Gen Z students, Azerbaijani higher educational institutions can enhance both the quality and relevance of language education.

## 8. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, although the sample included students from multiple higher educational institutions, it may not fully represent the diversity of Generation Z students across all regions of Azerbaijan. Students from rural areas and smaller regional universities may experience different educational conditions and language learning opportunities, which could influence their learning habits (Huseynova, 2020). Second, the study relied partly on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccuracies in participants' self-assessment of language proficiency and learning behaviors. While the inclusion of qualitative interviews helped mitigate this limitation, future studies could incorporate objective measures such as language proficiency tests or classroom observations to strengthen data triangulation (Creswell, 2018). Third, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits its ability to capture changes in language learning habits over time. Generation Z students' practices and motivations may evolve as they progress through higher education or enter the workforce. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how language learning habits develop and how institutional interventions influence long-term outcomes. Future research may also explore comparative perspectives, such as differences between Generation Z and earlier generations of learners within Azerbaijan, or cross-cultural comparisons with Gen Z students in other post-Soviet or non-Western contexts. Additionally, further investigation into the role of discipline-specific language instruction and the effectiveness of technology-enhanced pedagogies would contribute to the refinement of language education practices in higher education.

## 9. Conclusion

This study examined the language learning habits of Generation Z students at Azerbaijani higher educational institutions, with particular attention to motivation, learning strategies, technology use, learner autonomy, and perceptions of institutional instruction. The findings reveal that Gen Z students are highly motivated, predominantly

instrumentally oriented, and strongly influenced by digital technologies and informal learning environments. The study highlights a clear shift toward self-directed, technology-mediated language learning practices, reflecting broader global trends associated with Generation Z. At the same time, it identifies a notable disconnect between students' preferred learning habits and the pedagogical approaches commonly employed in higher education institutions. Traditional, exam-oriented instruction often fails to capitalize on students' digital competencies and communicative needs.

By situating these findings within the Azerbaijani educational context, the study underscores the importance of pedagogical adaptation, curriculum reform, and institutional support. Aligning language education with the habits and expectations of Generation Z learners can enhance engagement, effectiveness, and relevance, ultimately contributing to improved language proficiency and graduate outcomes. The findings of this research offer practical insights for educators, curriculum designers, and policy makers seeking to modernize language education in Azerbaijan and similar contexts. As higher education continues to evolve in response to technological and generational change, understanding learners' habits remains essential for sustainable and meaningful educational reform.

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