

Understanding Gen Z Learning Preferences: A Needs Analysis for Innovative Learning Outputs in a Summer Camp Context

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Abstract: *This study investigates the learning needs and preferences of international Generation Z (Gen Z) students to inform the development of innovative learning outputs for a Language and Communication module within a summer camp context. A descriptive survey was conducted with 14 participants (N = 14) to examine their learning experiences and preferences. Quantitative analyses (Tables 1-11) assessed self-perceived language proficiency, preferred instructional formats, and attitudes towards digital and cultural integration, while open-ended responses provided further insights into recommended tools and learning experiences. Findings indicate that most participants rated their English proficiency as moderate, while Malay and Kadazandusun proficiency remained limited, highlighting the need for scaffolded and culturally responsive support. Strong preferences emerged for interactive applications, multimedia resources, concise written materials such as digital pocketbooks, and experiential learning activities. Open-ended responses reinforced these trends, with students recommending platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Google, alongside practical tasks including video production, presentations, and cultural engagement activities. Overall, the findings suggest that Gen Z learners prioritise digital interactivity and meaningful, culturally grounded learning experiences. Integrating these elements through technology-enhanced and task-based approaches can enhance learner confidence, inclusivity, and sustained engagement. The study provides practical implications for higher education institutions in designing dynamic learning outputs for short-term programmes aligned with Gen Z learning preferences and national educational goals.*

Keywords: Summer Camp; Gen Z; Needs Analysis

1. Introduction

Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2012, is characterised by multicultural awareness, independence, and strong digital fluency (Pichler et al., 2021). As digital natives, their learning preferences are shaped by continuous exposure to technology, with a clear inclination towards speed, interactivity, and personalised learning experiences (Chardonens, 2025; Hammad, 2025; Paulina & Ernawati, 2022). Consequently, they tend to favour immersive, dynamic, and hands-on approaches over conventional lecture-based instruction (Nicholas, 2020).

For international students within this cohort, these preferences are further influenced by cross-cultural adjustment, linguistic barriers, and unfamiliar academic environments (Andrade, 2006; Sawir et al., 2012). Understanding how generational traits intersect with international student experiences is therefore essential for designing effective educational interventions. This is particularly relevant in short-term programmes such as summer camps, where meaningful engagement must be achieved within a limited timeframe (Düzenli, 2021).

This study examines international students' needs in developing learning outputs for a Language and Communication module implemented in a university summer camp in East Malaysia. The module incorporates English, Bahasa Melayu, and Bahasa Kadazandusun, providing both linguistic development and cultural exposure. While English serves as the primary medium of communication, the inclusion of local languages facilitates opportunities for cultural engagement.

To respond to evolving expectations among Gen Z learners, the module requires enhancement through the integration of technology-driven and experiential learning resources. Accordingly, this study seeks to inform the development of innovative, culturally responsive, and pedagogically effective outputs. Adopting a needs analysis approach, it investigates how digital tools and experiential activities can support learning and engagement in short-term educational contexts.

1.1 Research Questions

The research questions of this research are as follows:

- a) What are the international students' preferred learning outputs for the Language and Communication module?
- b) How can these outputs be designed and developed for implementation in the university's summer camp programme?

2. Literature Review

To establish a comprehensive framework for this study, the literature review is divided into three sections. It begins by defining the characteristics of Gen Z as learners within a global context. Next, it examines the role of technology-enhanced learning in higher education. Finally, it explores the efficacy of summer camps as experiential platforms for developing language and communication skills.

2.1 Generation Z Learners in a Global Context

Gen Z learners are widely recognised for their openness to diversity, independence, and strong technological orientation (Pichler et al., 2021). They have been socialised in an environment that differs substantially from that of their teachers, particularly with respect to the accessibility of information and the breadth of life experiences available to them (Hammad, 2025), which has had a significant influence on the ways in which they look for and access information, as well as engage with them.

Research indicates that Gen Z values clarity, structure, and relevance, favouring practical and real-world applications over abstract tasks (Cameron & Pagnattaro, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Traditional lectures and static materials are often perceived as less engaging, reinforcing the need for adaptive and student-centred pedagogies (Nicholas, 2020).

For international students, these preferences intersect with challenges related to language proficiency and cultural adjustment. Therefore, designing learning outputs that are both engaging and inclusive is critical. Incorporating student-centred innovations aligned with generational expectations can significantly enhance motivation and long-term engagement.

This study sought to explore potential strategies for integrating the learning outputs into the module to enhance participants' overall learning experiences. Previous research has highlighted that student-centred innovation, particularly when aligned with generational needs, plays a crucial role in fostering sustained engagement and skill development (Cameron & Pagnattaro, 2017). By incorporating the perspectives of Gen Z learners, the study not only addresses their immediate learning needs but also supports the broader objectives of higher education in maintaining relevance, inclusivity, and future-oriented practices.

2.2 Technology-Enhanced Learning in Higher Education

The Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) emphasises the integration of information and communication technology (ICT) to enhance learning quality and accessibility nationwide (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). In line with this, higher education institutions increasingly adopt technology-driven approaches to engage Gen Z learners.

As digital natives, Gen Z students are accustomed to interactive media, mobile applications, and personalised learning environments. Consequently, conventional teaching approaches are often viewed as inadequate, prompting educators to modify their pedagogical strategies to better match these learning preferences (Saxena & Mishra, 2021). Empirical evidence further demonstrates that digital tools enhance knowledge retention and engagement (Fitrianto, 2024; Sakr & Abdullah, 2024).

Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and language-learning applications (e.g., Duolingo) have become integral to learning and information-gathering. UNESCO (2024) highlights that digital platforms now play a central role in attracting and engaging learners, particularly in higher education contexts. These developments highlight the need to embed technology as a core pedagogical component rather than a supplementary tool.

2.3 Summer Camps as Experiential Learning Platforms for Language and Communication

In contrast to traditional classroom settings, summer camps provide a dynamic and flexible environment for language and communication development. These short-term programmes create opportunities for learners to develop communication competence, interpersonal skills, and resilience within engaging and less formal contexts (Wilson & Sibthorp, 2019). By emphasising active participation, peer interaction, and real-world application, summer camps enable learners to practise language in authentic situations, thereby enhancing both fluency and confidence.

Empirical evidence indicates that a combination of structured and unstructured activities within camp settings contributes significantly to communication development. Activities such as team-building exercises, role-play, simulations, and cooperative problem-solving tasks encourage learners to negotiate meaning, seek information, and apply communicative strategies in real time (Mohamed Zain et al., 2020). Studies conducted in various contexts, including China and Southeast Asia, further demonstrate that interactive approaches - such as storytelling, games, and collaborative tasks - improve speaking fluency, pronunciation, and learner engagement (Friesen, 2023; Idham et al., 2022; Noraisah et al., 2017). These findings

collectively highlight the effectiveness of experiential, task-based approaches in strengthening communicative competence.

Beyond communication skills, summer camps play a crucial role in enhancing learner motivation. The emphasis on enjoyable, student-centred activities fosters sustained interest and positive attitudes towards language learning. Learners in camp environments often exhibit higher levels of engagement compared to those in traditional, exam-oriented settings, largely due to the emphasis on meaningful interaction and relational learning (Friesen, 2023). Furthermore, collaborative and strategy-based activities have been shown to increase learner confidence and participation, particularly when learners are given opportunities for autonomy and creative expression (Rahman, 2022). This suggests that the “fun factor” in camp settings is not merely recreational, but pedagogically significant in sustaining motivation and engagement.

In addition, summer camps serve as valuable platforms for fostering intercultural competence. Through interactions with peers and instructors from diverse cultural backgrounds, learners are exposed to different communication styles, perspectives, and pedagogical approaches. Such experiences promote empathy, adaptability, and cross-cultural understanding - skills that are essential for international students navigating new academic and social environments (Zhang & Luo, 2022). Consistent with broader research, experiential and relational learning within camp contexts enhances intercultural awareness and supports social integration (Wilson & Sibthorp, 2019).

Overall, summer camps offer a holistic learning environment that integrates communication development, motivation, and intercultural competence. Their emphasis on experiential, learner-centred, and contextually meaningful activities makes them particularly well-suited for addressing the needs of international Gen Z learners in short-term educational programmes.

3. Research Methodology

This section describes the research design and data analysis procedures used to address the research questions. It outlines how the needs analysis data were collected and analysed to ensure methodological rigour and transparency.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive survey design to explore the learning needs and preferences of international Gen Z students. Surveys were used to efficiently collect self-reported perceptions, and open-ended items provided insights to complement the numerical findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The research forms part of a broader project that investigated the needs of 14 international students enrolled in HEIs in Malaysia. While the larger dataset included both local and international students, the present article focuses specifically on the international student subset. This subgroup was selected because international students face distinct challenges, including language barriers, cultural adjustment, and the negotiation of new academic expectations (Andrade, 2006; Sawir et al., 2012). A targeted analysis of their responses provides insights into how innovative learning outputs can be designed to address these unique needs.

Data were collected using a Google Form survey consisting of both closed-ended Likert-scale questions and open-ended items. The closed-ended questions elicited self-ratings of language proficiency and preferences for different learning resources and formats, while the open-ended questions invited participants to share digital tools they would recommend for camp outputs and the types of assignments they found most engaging.

3.2 Data Analysis

Data for this study were collected using a Google Form survey administered to the participants. After the collection phase, responses from the respondents were exported into Microsoft Excel for cleaning and systematic organisation. The analysis followed a quantitative approach, utilising descriptive statistical analysis for quantitative items to identify key trends and learner requirements within the dataset.

For the quantitative data (Likert-scale items), descriptive statistics were calculated, including frequencies, percentages, and modal values, to summarise the distribution of responses. Results were tabulated (Tables 1-11) and accompanied by short interpretations to highlight emerging patterns. For instance, self-rated English proficiency (Table 1) revealed a modal response of “3” (moderate), reported by 57.1% of international participants, while 100% of respondents in Table 10 indicated a preference for real-life scenarios in learning. This descriptive approach enabled a clear visualisation of participants’ self-assessed language proficiency, preferences for learning resources, and perceptions of digital and cultural integration. As for the open-ended questions in the survey, responses were synthesised into a single integrative theme: “Technology and Experiential Learning Preferences of Gen Z.”

4. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on learners’ self-assessed language proficiency, preferred learning resources, and expectations for technology, experiential activities, and cultural integration. The discussion is organised around five interconnected themes: (1) *Language Proficiency and Confidence*, (2) *Preferred Learning Formats*, (3) *Technology and Interactivity in Learning*, (4) *Real-Life and Experiential Learning*, and (5) *Cultural Integration in Learning*.

4.1 Language Proficiency and Confidence

The descriptive findings in Table 1 below show that a majority of respondents rated their English proficiency as moderate (57.1%). This suggests that although students are able to use English, they may lack the confidence to comfortably manage spontaneous communication tasks. These findings echo previous research on international learners, showing that moderate proficiency is frequently paired with uncertainty and a lack of confidence in oral participation (Liu & Jackson, 2009).

Table 1: English proficiency (self-rated)

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	1	7.1
2	0	0.0
3	8	57.1
4	2	14.3
5	3	21.4

N = 14. Interpretation: The modal response was “3” (moderate confidence) - 57.1% (n = 8). This indicates that most respondents assess their English level as moderate and could benefit from scaffolded, confidence-building speaking activities.

In contrast, self-reported proficiency in Malay and Kadazandusun was considerably lower, with 71.4% of participants stating they had limited or no ability in Malay (Table 2) and 57.1% reporting no knowledge of Kadazandusun (Table 3). These findings are not unexpected, as international students generally have minimal exposure to local languages. The results highlight the necessity for beginner-level support and culturally sensitive pedagogical approaches. However, instead of designating Malay and Kadazandusun as compulsory, their inclusion should serve the purpose of cultural enrichment. This approach would provide international students with opportunities to experience Malaysia’s linguistic diversity without the added pressure of being assessed on unfamiliar languages.

Table 2: Malay proficiency (self-rated)

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	5	35.7
2	5	35.7
3	2	14.3
4	0	0.0
5	2	14.3

N = 14. Interpretation: 71.4% (n = 10) rated Malay at the low end (1–2), confirming limited prior exposure and the need for beginner-level materials and culturally sensitive scaffolds.

Table 3: Kadazandusun proficiency (self-rated)

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	8	57.1
2	3	21.4
3	1	7.1
4	0	0.0
5	2	14.3

N = 14. Interpretation: A majority (57.1%) reported no knowledge (1), which signals that any inclusion of Kadazandusun should be introductory and framed as cultural/affective enrichment rather than required learning.

Taken together, these language-related outcomes highlight the value of providing structured support for English learning, while positioning local languages as a means of cultural and affective enrichment. This approach not only enhances learners’ confidence in communication but also promotes a deeper sense of intercultural awareness and sensitivity.

4.2 Preferred Learning Formats

Analysis of Table 4 indicates a pronounced inclination towards succinct reference materials, such as pocketbooks or guides, with 78.5% of respondents expressing positive views. Additionally, Tables 5 and 6 indicate the potential value of a digital pocketbook, such as an e-book and a digital guide for instructors’ and students’ use. These findings illustrate Gen Z’s marked preference for learning resources that prioritise clarity and organisation. As Seemiller and Grace (2016) observe, Gen Z frequently favours explicit guidelines and concrete examples, choosing efficiency and practicality over open-ended approaches. Accordingly, concise reference tools provide rapid access to key information and facilitate self-directed learning.

Table 4: Preference for written texts / booklet / pocketbook

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	0	0.00
2	1	7.1
3	2	14.3
4	3	21.4
5	8	57.1

N = 14. Interpretation: 78.5% rated this item 4–5 (combined), indicating strong receptiveness to concise written references

Table 5: Digital pocketbook (e-book/guide) is a practical tool for instructors

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	0	0.00
2	0	0.0
3	4	28.6
4	5	35.7
5	5	35.7

N = 14. Interpretation: 71.4% rated 4–5 (combined), implying moderate-to-strong support for a digital pocketbook for instructors

Table 6: Digital pocketbook would be engaging/useful for learners

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	0	0.00
2	1	7.1
3	5	35.7
4	5	35.7
5	3	21.4

N = 14. Interpretation: 57.1% rated 4–5; overall the digital pocketbook is viewed as useful/engaging by a majority, though some respondents are neutral.

Interestingly, the results suggest that learners are receptive to both digital and physical formats, reflecting a blended approach to resource use. While digital guides are portable and interactive, physical pocketbooks may appeal to students who prefer tangible study aids. This multimodal preference aligns with Cameron and Pagnattaro (2017), who argue that relevance and accessibility are critical to Gen Z learners. Providing resources in multiple formats ensures inclusivity and caters to diverse learning styles. Thus, the inclusion of a pocketbook or e-guide serves as an efficient tool to scaffold learning during and after the camp, supporting Gen Z's demand for structured, practical references.

4.3 Technology and Interactivity in Learning

Consistent with their identity as *digital natives*, respondents demonstrated a strong preference for interactive, technology-driven learning modalities. A majority (64.3%) preferred app-based learning formats (Table 7), and 78.6% agreed that such apps facilitate the transfer of knowledge to real-world situations (Table 8). Moreover, all participants (100%) identified multimedia

resources, including video and audio, as essential learning tools (Table 9). These results highlight the pivotal role of technology as a key facilitator of learning for Gen Z.

Table 7: Preference for interactive apps

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	0	0.0
2	1	7.1
3	4	28.6
4	3	21.4
5	6	42.9

N = 14. Interpretation: 64.3% rated 4–5 (n = 9). Respondents show a clear tilt toward interactive app formats — consistent with Gen Z tendencies to prefer app-based microlearning.

Table 8: Learning through an app helps apply skills in real contexts

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	0	0.0
2	2	14.3
3	1	7.1
4	6	42.9
5	5	35.7

N = 14. Interpretation: 78.6% rated 4–5; respondents generally believe app-based learning will transfer to real contexts.

Table 9: Multimedia resources are essential

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	0	0.0
2	0	0.0
3	0	0.0
4	4	28.6
5	10	71.4

N = 14. Interpretation: 71.4% rated item 5; 100% rated 4–5 - multimedia (video/audio) is widely considered essential by respondents.

According to Prensky (2012), the learning experiences of Gen Z have been fundamentally influenced by digital technologies, with learners expecting continuous access to interactive and multimedia-enriched content. This expectation is also reflected in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025), which advocates for the integration of ICT to enhance educational quality and accessibility nationwide (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Practically, this implies that summer camp deliverables should incorporate mobile apps, interactive tasks, and multimedia elements to optimise learner engagement.

Furthermore, the use of technology addresses the specific challenges faced by international students, who often encounter language and cultural obstacles. Apps and multimedia provide flexible, self-paced, and non-intimidating learning environments that can alleviate anxiety and promote learner autonomy. Overall, the findings highlight that technology must be regarded not as a supplementary tool but as a fundamental pedagogical component to fulfil the learning expectations of Gen Z and to achieve sustainable educational outcomes.

4.4 Real-Life and Experiential Learning

The most notable conclusion was the unanimous preference (100%) for real-life scenarios in learning activities, with 64.3% strongly supporting this method (Table 10). Respondents expressed a strong need for role plays, simulations, and task-based activities that mimic authentic environments. This significant preference reflects Gen Z's need for practical, hands-on learning and is consistent with Kolb's (2014) experiential learning theory, which emphasises learning by doing and reflecting.

Table 10: Preference for real-life scenarios in learning activities

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	0	0.0
2	0	0.0
3	0	0.0
4	5	35.7
5	9	64.3

N = 14. Interpretation: Strong majority (64.3% = rating 5; 100% rated 4–5) prefer real-life scenarios — a robust signal to prioritise role-plays, simulations, and task-based camp activities.

International students particularly benefit from experiential learning, as activities like simulations and role-plays create secure settings for practising authentic communication while minimising feelings of embarrassment or risk of miscommunication. Moreover, prior studies indicate that task-based learning enhances language skills and simultaneously boosts motivation and adaptability across various learning environments (Mudinillah et al., 2024).

Incorporating experiential learning activities within the module enables participants to enhance not only their language skills but also essential soft skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability, which are highly regarded in both academic and professional settings. These findings advocate for the use of immersive, task-oriented instructional approaches rather than traditional lecture-based methods to optimize learner engagement.

4.5 Cultural Integration in Learning

Cultural elements also emerged as a significant dimension, with 71.4% of participants agreeing that incorporating local Sabahan culture would enhance their learning (Table 11). This reflects the broader recognition of cultural content in language education as a means of promoting engagement and intercultural competence (Byram, 1997; Hoff, 2020). For international students, situating language learning within meaningful cultural contexts not only enhances relevance but also strengthens retention and motivation (Friesen, 2023; Srisermbhok, 2020).

Table 11: Incorporating local Sabahan culture enhances learning

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	0	0.0
2	2	14.3
3	2	14.3
4	5	35.7
5	5	35.7

N = 14. Interpretation: 71.4% rated 4–5; integrating local cultural aspects is perceived as beneficial and should be embedded into learning outputs and activities.

Embedding Sabahan traditions, narratives, and practices into learning activities further aligns with Malaysia's educational aspirations to balance global readiness with local cultural identity (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Beyond linguistic outcomes, such integration cultivates affective learning dimensions, including empathy, openness to diversity, and belonging - skills that are critical in internationalised academic and professional contexts (Deardorff, 2009; Zhang & Luo, 2022). Hence, cultural integration should not be treated as supplementary but as a core pedagogical strategy for inclusive and engaging language camps.

4.6 Technology and Experiential Learning Preferences of Gen Z

The open-ended responses confirmed that learners' preferences extend beyond structured surveys to emphasise two interconnected needs: digital interactivity and experiential tasks. Many participants suggested platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Douyin, and Google, reflecting Gen Z's fluency with digital tools and preference for fast, visual, and interactive media (Cameron & Pagnattaro, 2017; Hammad, 2025; Pichler et al., 2021). This trend resonates with the literature that highlights Gen Z's expectation for technology-enhanced, social, and mobile learning environments (Fajarwati, 2025; Nicholas, 2020; Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Equally, students valued experiential and creative assignments - including films, group presentations, role-play, speaking practice, and cultural crafts as engaging and useful. These preferences triangulate with survey data (Tables 9 and 11), where real-life scenarios and cultural integration were rated highly. Prior studies confirm that such task-based and performance-oriented approaches foster deeper engagement, communicative competence, and collaborative learning (Idham et al., 2022; Mohamed Zain et al., 2020; Rahman, 2022).

Overall, these findings reinforce the view that Gen Z learners thrive in learning ecosystems that blend digital interactivity with experiential and culture-rich tasks, echoing calls for innovative, technology-enabled pedagogy that aligns with the needs of digital natives (Fitrianto, 2024; Manoharan et al., 2024; Prensky, 2012).

5. Conclusion

Taken together, the findings indicate that effective outputs for the Language and Communication summer camp module must balance digital interactivity, scaffolded support, and experiential, culturally embedded activities. In response to Research Question 1, international students prefer multimedia resources, mobile applications, and social media-based tools, alongside real-life scenarios, creative projects, and culturally immersive tasks. Although they show a strong inclination toward technology-enhanced learning, their moderate English proficiency highlights the need for structured guidance and confidence-building support.

Addressing Research Question 2, the findings suggest that these outputs should be developed through a blended approach integrating interactive digital tools, pedagogical scaffolding, and authentic cultural experiences. Technology must be embedded in familiar and meaningful ways, while experiential activities promote real-world communication and intercultural engagement. This balance between digital immediacy and linguistic support ensures both engagement and developmental progression.

Overall, the study contributes to understanding how innovative outputs can effectively engage international Gen Z learners within a short-term summer camp context. It offers practical guidance for higher education institutions in Malaysia to develop technology-supported,

culturally enriched summer programmes aligned with Gen Z values and the Malaysia Education Blueprint's ICT integration goals.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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