

Students' attention span – where has it gone?

Classroom experience shows that students' attention span seems to be getting shorter and shorter.

Possible reasons:

Some findings from cognitive psychology seem to show that the lack of concentration some students demonstrate within the classroom is caused primarily by the sensory overload that young people are constantly exposed to in today's world.

Global teens have been brought up to experience and expect sensory stimulation. This generation is constantly looking for new thrills that entertain. The preferred music is loud. The movies enjoyed feature fast action. The dances are rhythmic and frenetic... Global teens have a very low threshold for boredom. ... Do not bore this generation or it will abandon you. (Elissa Moses)

There are other experts who say claim that "short attention span" is nothing but the important ability of students to evaluate information rapidly before moving on to the next item.

We are coming to understand that what we so valued as an attention span is something entirely different from what we thought. [...] The child of the remote control may indeed have a 'shorter' attention span [...]. But this same child also has a much broader attention range. The skill to be valued in the twenty-first century is not length of attention span but the ability to multitask—to do many things at once, well. (Douglas Rushkoff)

The computer generation

- are un-authoritarian
- see no need for authorities and often do not consider authorities as legitimate
- are significantly different from previous generations who might have distrusted authorities, but still accepted them as authorities
- often have beliefs that “disobedience works” (e.g. illegal downloading from the web)

Therefore, we do not seem to get the level of ‘respect’ in our role as a representative of a system (school) that we gave to authority when we were younger.

Possible consequences:

If students fail to focus their perception and attention within the classroom, basic mental aptitudes essential for developing more sophisticated thinking are lacking. These aptitudes are fundamental to developing ‘higher order thinking skills’, such as problem solving and critical thinking, but are also needed for effective foreign language learning.

Hence students certainly need to develop both:

- the ability to focus their attention for a longer period of time
- the ability to evaluate information rapidly and multi-tasking skills

Challenges for the teacher:

We need to

- GET our students' attention and
- HOLD it over a longer period of time...

Getting and holding attention - a few suggestions for the language classroom:

1. Be present, and relate to each student on a personal level.
2. Use stories and metaphors.
3. Change your sensory input modes frequently.
4. Be pro-active.
5. Challenge your students.
6. Make relaxation part of the students' learning routine, and use humour.
7. Create shifts between uptime and downtime, the students' inter-personal and intra-personal intelligences.

Background reading:

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