



Take out your Cell Phone! Selfie-Videos in College ESL Classrooms

by Christine Discoe

Some ESL teachers have been known to intone, “Put away your cell phones” sometimes with shocking regularity, but why? We all know that the cell phone can be a distraction for students in the classroom. However, rather than a distraction, smart phones, tablets and computers can be wonderful tools for generating self-directed content that enhances students’ pronunciation, fluency, abstract and critical thinking as well as improve their vocabulary, self-correction, pronunciation, grammar and reading comprehension. Using “Selfie-Videos” as tools in the ESL classroom is a comfortable, accessible way for students to improve their skills in English.

Part I: Why Selfies?

Ask your students to take out their smart phones or tablets and make a video of themselves speaking English for anywhere from 30 seconds to 3 minutes (or longer) and you will have a Selfie-Video. While possibilities for topics are limitless, and Selfie Videos are an especially rich area of exploration for ESL teachers, here, I’ll focus on the question “Why Selfie Videos?” and give some brief descriptions of how to employ the method in your classroom. The intention here is to explore the reasoning that led to passionately developing this method as a viable ESL resource and technique, and to leave a deep exploration of how-to in the classroom for another article.

Comfort:

We know that having students record and listen to themselves is a helpful exercise. Many ESL teachers have used some type of recording device, such as Audacity, Photo Story or Pure Voice (some of us may even remember using video recorders), but these recording devices don’t have the advantages of the smart phone. The important factor here is comfort and enhanced self-awareness. According to Folse (2006) and Nation and Newton (2009), most fluency is developed through extra-curricular activities, a desire to communicate and *comfort*. For this project, the definition of comfort needs expanding. Folse (2006) and Nation and Newton (2009) might have defined *comfortable communicative activities* as those taking place with others; however, now we must also include *comfortable communicative activities* as those where a student interacts with a screen or even ultimately, with his or herself. As ESL teachers, we often fret about how to tap into or construct “genuine communicative activities”; we must not overlook the opportunity for students to have a substantial, meaningful communicative activity in the comfort of their own face-to-face interaction on their phone.

So imagine you're in your classroom and say, "For your class (or home) work, take out your cell phone." At INTO Colorado State University (CSU), the "Selfie Video Project" has fostered a wide variety of types of assignments where students are asked simply to take out their cell phones and start recording. Since students are already taking out their phones on a regular basis, there's very little discomfort with buy-in when they do so, taking out the gap between the explaining the assignment and the doing—they already know how to use their phones! In my class, I record a Selfie Video (of myself) explaining the assignment, including topics and, where needed, particular grammar or pronunciation points that they should be paying attention to. I usually record while sitting in a chair or while walking on the street to show the relaxing nature of the assignment and to give students the idea that this language production can happen as naturally and comfortably as chatting on skype. Students then watch the video, and then follow-up by recording their own Selfie. In fact, even after I listen and grade their Selfies, I send their comments and feedback in another Selfie, which they have to listen to and respond to. In this way, the recording, listening, and responding to language comes in the way of multiple videos, a medium which is comfortable and accessible to students. It's this recording-watching-listening-checking-re-recording –assessing loop that creates a real, communicative activity not unlike real conversation. I call it "conversation 2.0."



Data collected from the Selfie Video Project at INTO CSU can help us assess how effective this method can be. In conversation classes when students were asked to rate Selfie assignments for ease and comfort, they consistently rated them high in difficulty yet easy to execute. In other words, the difficulty in the self-correction process did not hinder them from trying again and again to improve their Selfies. Not only in conversation classes, but in other classes students report that they are easily able to do their Selfie assignments and rate them as "highly effective." Selfie Video assignments have been successfully added to grammar classes (students practice learned grammar structures, such as subordinate clause use), vocabulary classes (students practice using vocabulary), reading classes (students summarize material), and writing (students read what they have written and then say what it means—essentially practicing summarizing, paraphrasing and rewriting skills through speaking). In each of these activities, students overwhelmingly want to play back and check how they sound, how they look and, as a by-product, how their language comes off.

Perhaps because of social media culture and our current exposure to public presentation of on-line personas, students want that persona to be curated, which includes speaking well. We can capitalize on this as ESL teachers. For us, that means we don't have to drive our students to check their own grammar, pronunciation and language because they're already motivated to project the best image to the world. The key here is that students' smart phones represent that oh-so-comfortable medium they know so well. At the same time, Selfie Video assignments elicit students' self-reflection during and after their Selfie Video production, so students will be driven to *improve themselves*. Overall, Selfie Videos can be a *comfortable communicative activity* that enhances students' fluency by tapping into

their internal ego-driven desire to see themselves as "speaking better." In this way, students reinforce learned material, reassess understanding of what they've said or written, and practice in a neutral, comfortable environment.

Awareness:

Many of us see the smart phone as essential, private and necessary — indeed, the current crop of college students can barely remember a time when smart phone technology didn't exist. Data show 92% of students report using their smart phones during idle time (Payne, 2016), the time that we, as teachers, want to tap to enhance fluency and communication. Daniel T. Willingham, professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, has shown that this idle cell phone time may be used for two types of pursuits: outward attention, as in trolling YouTube or BuzzFeed videos or concentrating and watching something on the news, and inward attention, as in inwardly reflecting on, thinking about or reviewing a past event. When students are working on their Selfies, they use both outward and inward attention, watching and observing their video, and also being self-aware internally, correcting their Selfie video to perfect their language (Willingham, 2015). Willingham tells us that these two types of attention are mutually exclusive, so when one is in use, the other one shuts down. I would suggest that when the students are paying such close attention to the outcome and final copy of their Selfie Video, that this deep "directed inward" attention (Willingham, 2015, p.3) is in process. It's this inward reflection, self-assessment and rumination that ESL teachers want to capture. According to Willingham, we have a unique ability to toggle between these two types of focus, inward and outward. With the Selfie Videos, we shift the perception in the students' minds from one where the phone is used mainly for trolling, searching and playing games (outward attention) to one where the cell phone can be used particularly and easily for assessing and learning (inward attention).

Indeed, both current teaching methodology researchers and even President Barak Obama (Obama, 2016) have argued that for students to succeed in today's world, teachers must employ the 4 C's to learning in the classroom: Creativity, Critical Thinking, Communication and Collaboration. Technology, rather than being only a way for students to receive information, should be a way from them to discover learning. Creation, thinking critically and self-discovery is what constitutes genuine language use, and Selfie Videos can truly become a creative endeavor. When students produce a Selfie Video and in the process search around to find the correct vocabulary word or check their grammar by looking inward, this is creative, spontaneously formed language. Unfortunately, in many EIPs, cell phone use in the classroom is considered to be either a mild annoyance or an evil with little redeeming value. Are we only seeing the "outward focus" use the cell phone (checking Instagram), and not the "inward focus" that can happen when students take a deep look at their language production? Let's take a closer look at what is really happening with students and their phones, and expand the realms of influence on their language production and awareness to include cell phones for in-and out-of-class assignments. When it comes to current ESL students, capturing that inward focus to make their assignments authentic, personal, and creative is a key teaching strategy of the Selfie Video project.

Indeed, educational theory and practice compel us to creatively harness technology. At INTO CSU, we found that when students were asked to record a Selfie Video and to check their grammar and pronunciation and re-record a *maximum* of three times, they did this homework more deeply than was required. In fact, the average amount of times that students reported they re-recorded themselves was 10 times, comprising students who re-recorded themselves a minimum of 7 and a maximum of 18 times! This means that upon listening and seeing themselves on their own videos, they were able to find errors and attempt to improve them by re-recording themselves, and, as students reported, by making themselves sound better. In fact, when directed to listen and look especially at grammar errors, students had a high rate of self-correction. When asked to reflect on their own learning process, they reported that they could hear (and see) that their grammar was “wrong” in a way that did not correlate to their self-correction during classroom conversation (which took place in a traditional setting—that is, without a cell phone recording). These data may show that students not only employ a deep inward focus, but also that college-age students may have a unique kind of interaction with and awareness of their own image, actions language *in a video*. In my classes, Selfie Videos are shared with either a teacher, a classmate or the entire class. As expected, the use of self-correction and the reporting of awareness and correction of grammar mistakes increased the more the videos were public. Ultimately, ESL teachers should strongly consider capitalizing on the self-awareness that Selfie Video assignments bring.

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