

“But First Let Me Take a #Selfie”: Using Self-Portraits in the Classroom

by Ravneet Parmar

A “selfie” refers to an informal image taken with a smartphone held at arm’s length, snapped instantly and usually destined for Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or some other form of social media. Everyone with a smartphone has probably either snapped a selfie or been in a group selfie and posted it on social media.

Many teachers looking for innovative ideas for the classroom have started incorporating student phones in their lessons. Since students have smartphones with data access and will try their best to chat, take selfies, and go on various social media without the teacher’s knowledge, why not use that awareness to the teacher’s advantage and incorporate it in the lesson? This will not only make the teacher look “cool” but also keep the students interested in the class.

Many of the following activities can be done partly outside of and partly in class. If your school has a policy of no smartphones, ask your students to do the phone part of the assignment as homework and bring printed copies of the pictures to class. Some teachers create an email address where students can mail pictures beforehand for the teacher to prepare for class. These activities can be adapted for children and adult English language learners. Here are some of the ways selfies can be used to generate student interest:

1. Ask students to either find or take flattering and unflattering selfies on their phones, and think about how and why the photos would be good or bad for different purposes, like a Facebook profile page, a dating site, or a company profile picture. Students can get in groups and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using different selfies in various situations; they can also pick a selfie and write an opinion essay on the topic.
2. As a homework assignment, students can be asked to take selfies with interesting or creative things they see in their daily lives. They can then bring the pictures to class and give a short (2-4 minute) oral presentation on their picture, explaining why they thought the “thing” in the background was interesting.
3. The teacher can set up a class Instagram account where students can post selfies as homework assignments with certain things in the background. For example, a teacher can ask the students to take a picture with a bus or another person with a creative fashion sense in the background. Of course, the teacher has to make sure that the students know not to focus on a particular stranger’s face, as it could be a violation of privacy.
4. The class can participate in “selfie contests.” Students post creative selfies on the class Instagram; the most creative selfie of the week wins a small prize. This encourages students to bring out their creative side.
5. Selfies from the Internet can be used as discussion prompts. Students can analyze the person’s background, facial expression, and body language.

Try these assignments with your students in class—but first, let them take a #selfie.

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