

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

Using Viral Videos in the ESL Classroom

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In today's 24/7 wired society, it is more important than ever to create lessons incorporating materials that speak to today's learners of English. English is far and away the dominant language on the Internet and serves as the lingua franca when users communicate online even when they come from non-English-speaking backgrounds. This means that the Internet is a repository of authentic and contemporary English language usage and content available to language teachers and students worldwide. If enough people all around the world share certain videos, images, and memes, they "go viral," that is, become widespread and popular, very quickly. Viral videos can be especially effective for engaging English language learners and enlivening English language lessons.

Integrating Viral Videos

Viral videos depict all facets of our world, on topics ranging from A to Z. They rely on a mass-appeal "hook" that encourages people to watch them repeatedly and share them widely. By their very nature, they are fresh and harbor the potential to add zing to the ESL/EFL classroom. They also provide an abundant source of material for the discerning language teacher, particularly material created by users of English outside English-speaking countries. By effectively integrating viral videos into their lessons, teachers can motivate learners and provide opportunities to connect their English studies to meaningful, real world communication. What follows are several strategies for incorporating viral videos in English lessons for high school or older students in an EFL context along with an annotated starter list of versatile viral videos.

Strategy #1: Using Viral Videos as Warm-ups

Viral videos tend to be only two to three minutes long. This means they can be simply and readily slotted into regular lesson plans for a variety of purposes, one of which is as a warm-up activity. Often, warm-ups function as points of tran-

sition from a previous lesson to English. Playing a short viral video is a low-stress activity since students can “just” watch it, yet they are sure to respond as well, even if in L1 or non-verbally. In any case, they will be both alert and ready for English. At other times, warm-ups serve to introduce a lesson. For instance, prior to teaching a lesson on the environment I have used a short, lighthearted, but thought-provoking, non-verbal animation called “Man” created by Steve Cutts and available on YouTube. It shows one person’s perspective on human (mis)treatment of our natural world. I had students guess what they thought the lesson would be about and then elicited vocabulary they thought they would see or hear later on in the lesson.

Strategy #2: Using Viral Videos as a Mid-Lesson Change of Pace

Sometimes language lessons are long, difficult, or both. When energy seems to lag, a short, quick viral video can serve to wake up and re-energize the class. For example, “Man,” the video mentioned above, can be used for a short, less than five-minute break with pairs of students working together to narrate what they see as it plays.

Strategy #3: Using Viral Videos as Lesson Closers

Viral videos function well as closing activities. They may be routine but pleasurable, just-for-fun conclusions to lessons or fillers when lessons finish unexpectedly early. They may also be planned to reinforce, review, or showcase a language point studied in a previous lesson or to foreshadow an upcoming lesson. In either case, viral videos can ensure that classes end with a short, stimulating, low-stress experience in English.

Strategy #4: Building Full Lessons Around Viral Videos

From time to time a viral video warrants a whole lesson, exploring issues, analyzing language, and having students express opinions orally, in writing, or both. Videos that focus on recent phenomena or cross-cultural comparisons work particularly well for such lessons. An example of a recent (at the time) phenomenon occurred in the summer of 2014 with fad known as the “ice-bucket challenge,” dumping ice and water over people’s (especially celebrities’) heads as a means of raising funds for the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) Association.

Another viral video from the same year worked well as the center of a lesson on cross-cultural comparisons. Avril Lavigne, a Canadian singer who is popular in Japan, released a music video called “Hello Kitty.” It caused a storm of protest on American social media sites for its perceived exploitation or mocking of Japanese culture. My students viewed the original Hello Kitty viral video along with a YouTube Kids React discussion about it. The interviewees ranged in age from six to thirteen, so they used forms of English that were easier for my students to understand than usual. They were interested in the differences between Japanese and American perceptions of the content in the videos and worked hard to describe what they saw and to express their reactions to it (see Appendix A). Other topics of cross cultural comparison could involve differences of humor or non-verbal communication. Such videos can be a highly effective means of demonstrating nuanced differences of social practices, customs, and culture in different countries.

Strategy #5: Building Language-Focused Lessons Around Viral Videos

Because students love watching and talking about viral videos, they provide excellent input for language-focused lessons. I frequently assign students to three or four videos from a list of seven or eight that I provide. They briefly note their impressions (see Appendix B), and then we use the experience for follow-up language activities. For example, the sentence frame: I liked/enjoyed/hated [video name] because... encourages students to focus on critical thinking and expressing their opinions. These additional sentence frames: It was cute/funny/boring/moving when... or I was amused/excited/moved when... help students see contexts for the often-confusing use of present and past participial adjectives. The same lesson, repeated a few weeks later, with new viral videos, provides a valuable opportunity for review, as well as opportunities for building confidence and fluency.

A Starter List of Versatile Viral Videos

The viral videos described here are easy to locate by searching in YouTube and have been used successfully with English language learners in an EFL environment. The annotations show diversity in content, origin, and genre and are shared here merely as examples of the wide range of possibilities available to teachers interested in making use of such videos. It is quite likely that choosing locally-popular viral videos will prove more successful than adopting these.

1. *Around the World Selfie* is a beautifully filmed and edited travelogue of “selfie-stick” scenes from one man’s trip to 36 countries in 600 days. It never fails to impress viewers. Anyone interested in travel should be inspired by this recording (2:58 minutes).
2. *Cliff Bike Ride* is an exhilarating “bird’s eye” GoPro camera view of a mountain bike ride along a treacherous ridge. The viewer is led to believe the rider is perilously close to tipping over the edge (2:03).
3. *Dog Tease* is an intriguing video of a dog who appears to respond with human words to his owner’s gentle taunts about edible delights hidden in the freezer and then given to people, a cat, and so forth. Viewers are made to empathize with the dog’s frustrations as he “speaks” English, with the dubbed words of a man coming from his mouth. It is cleverly and humorously lip-synched (1:20).
4. *Gangnam Style* is a Korean-pop music video, which became a worldwide hit and, until 2016, the most viewed video in the history of YouTube. It makes effective use of unusual situations and slapstick comedy with scenes that are both silly and entertaining (4:13).
5. *Laughing Bride* shows a groom mistakenly reciting his marriage vows—awfully wedded for lawfully wedded—for example, prompting hysterical and infectious laughter from his bride and eventually the attendees and priest as well (2:23).
6. *Mentos and Coke* wows the viewer with its amateur scientific experiment testing what happens when cola and the brand-named candy are combined, resulting in a surprising geyser-like chemical eruption (1:57).
7. *Shadow Theater* is a Hungarian shadow theater troupe performing on the TV show Britain’s Got Talent. It depicts the story of a young man and woman falling in love, marrying, having a child, and (the man) leaving to fight a war in a foreign land. The viewers see only shadows performers’ bodies that cleverly evoke images, leaving the viewer happy, sad, and deeply moved (6:46).
8. *Sneezing Panda* plays on the element of surprise, with a baby panda sneezing and its mother’s hilariously surprised reaction repeated in slow motion (0:35)

Conclusion

Viral videos offer a means to enliven and motivate students in the ESL/EFL classroom because they lower students’ affective filter and encourage them to ex-

press themselves in both written and spoken English. They also provide stimulating content for meaningful language practice. The pool of available video resources is virtually limitless and growing constantly. Once we signal a willingness to use viral videos in English lessons, students are sure to contribute their own favorites. Nearly any video that provokes an emotional reaction, positive or negative, is suitable, taking obvious precautions with respect to language, content, and context into account. The key is to know our students and what will interest them. Engaging language learners as a class can be a challenge, but viral videos have elicited overwhelmingly positive reactions from my, sometimes difficult-to-please students. I have confidence they will do the same for yours.

About the Author

Simon Kew holds a BA in Asian Studies from Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. He worked three years as an assistant language teacher with the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme and has been teaching at a private high school in Japan ever since. He is an MA TESOL candidate at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies where his research interests include developing writing skills, comparative linguistics, and the interplay between language and culture.

Appendix A

Responding to “Hello Kitty”

Directions

- Think about the questions.
- Prepare to talk with your classmates.
- If needed, write a few words to help you remember your ideas.
 1. Who is the singer in the video? What do you know about her?
 2. In your opinion, what is the song about?
 3. Describe what happens in the music video.
 4. Do you think the video shows the “real” Japan? Why or why not?
 5. Some people say Avril is making fun of Japan. Do you think she is making fun of Japanese culture or respecting it? Explain.
 6. What did the KidsReact panel members think of the video?
 7. What social media do you use? Why? Does it have any bad points? Explain.

Appendix B

Talking About Viral Videos

A viral video is one that becomes very popular after many people have shared it on the internet. They are often songs, commercials or home-made videos. People share them using social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Until 2016, the most popular viral video was the K-pop song: Gangnam Style by PSY. It has been watched almost 3 billion times.

Directions

1. Go to YouTube.
2. Search for and watch four of these videos. You choose.
 - a. *Around the World Selfies*
 - b. *Dog Tease*
 - c. *Gangnam Style*
 - d. *Laughing Bride*
 - e. *Mentos and Coke*
 - f. *Shadow Theater*
 - g. *Sneezing Panda*
3. Use this space to list the four videos you watched and your brief impression of each.
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
 - d.
4. Be prepared to use these sentence starters to explain your impressions.

a. I loved/enjoyed/hated/etc. [name of video] because...

b. It was surprising/exciting/boring/etc. when...

c. I was surprised/excited/moved/etc. when...

5. Are viral videos a fun way to communicate or are they a waste of time?