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5   Creating your own content

A teacher friend of mine often used to invite his father into his classroom to speak to his adult learners. They were always fascinated with the stories that he shared – many of them involving his own son in some way or other.

Human beings are fascinated by other human beings. Bringing a family member into your classroom can be a memorable, language-rich experience. Unfortunately, it can also be impractical, inappropriate, or against school regulations. A video can be the next best thing.

Take Rollo, for example. As a good friend of mine, I have referred to him in class on a number of occasions.

My students have always been intrigued about Rollo because of his name. In Spanish, the word *rollo* has a number of meanings, all of which sound quite strange for a man's name. For a while, they even refused to believe that he existed. It seemed natural, then, to introduce Rollo to my students through a short video and ask him to say hello (Video 5.1).

With just a little planning and preparation, a simple video-recording device allows a teacher to capture personalized spoken texts from English-speaking friends, family members, colleagues, and acquaintances. The resulting videos can be used for a variety of teaching purposes. For example, they can be used to study language, give deeper meaning to a coursebook topic, or provide sample spoken texts on which students can model their own (more about this in Chapter 8).

↓ CONSIDERATIONS

Finding volunteers

Regardless of where you are in the world, you will always have access to expert users of English. Don't assume that the people who you film must be native speakers. Individuals who share the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds with your learners often provide the best language models.

In your search for willing subjects, consider any of the following:

- People who express themselves well
- People whose jobs require good communication (teachers, doctors, managers, anyone with presenting experience)
- Good storytellers
- People that your students already know (colleagues in your school, for example)

- People that your students know of, but have never met
- Children (it can be interesting and engaging for English learners to hear how children communicate in the language. Parental permission must be obtained)
- Young people, who are often particularly comfortable in front of a camera (parental permission must be obtained)
- People with unusual accents or dialects (this is useful for studying diversity in English).

✓ *Getting it right*

Personal and cultural attitudes to being filmed

Be sensitive to people's feeling about being filmed. Some people hate the very idea of it and shouldn't be forced. Also be sensitive to cultural implications. For example, in many countries there are sensitivities about what should or should not be filmed.

✓ *Getting it right*

Uploading videos

You may want to upload a video so that students can access it in their own time, for study or revision, for example. If this is the case, you must make sure that your subject is willing and aware of your intentions. Look into privacy options that your chosen video-sharing site offers (these were discussed in Chapter 2).

Semi-scripting

It is important to have a basic idea of what you are going to say in front of a camera before the record button is pressed. Negotiate the basic outline of a monologue or the structure of an answer to a question, for example.

Encourage your subjects to grade their language to your learners. For example, suggest that they avoid low-frequency, obscure, or cultural language items if possible. Run through what they are going to say before filming. Allow subjects to make use of notes if they want but insist on heads up communication with the camera.

Note that it may require more than one attempt or 'take' to get a good result.

Framing

Plan the **framing** and composition of your shot – fill the rectangular video frame with your subject's head and shoulders. Use the rule of thirds to ensure that your subject's eyes are two thirds of the way up the screen (see figure 5.1a opposite). If your subject likes to communicate using prominent hand or arm gestures, try to keep them in the frame as well.

Don't stand too far away from your subject (see figure 5.1b). Apart from making your subject appear too small, a distance between the subject and the camera can result in unclear audio.

If you are using a mobile phone, make sure that you hold the device the correct way when filming. You don't want a vertical video (see figure 5.1c).
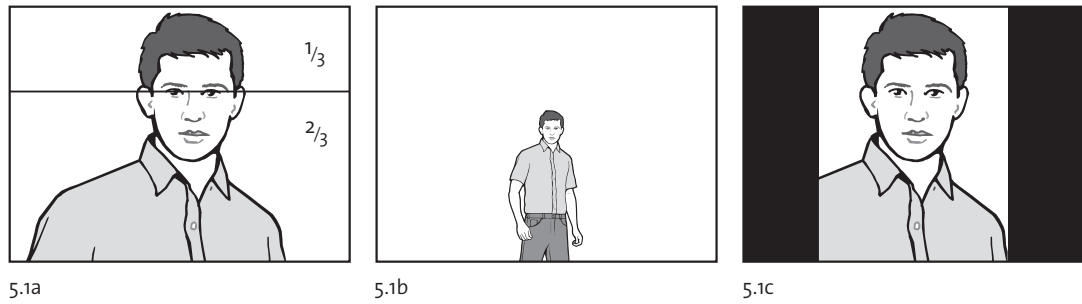
5.1a   5.1b   5.1c

FIGURE 5.1   *Examples of correct and incorrect framing*

Once you have composed your frame, keep it. Don't pan the camera around unnecessarily. Put it on a tripod if possible.

Choosing locations

It is annoying to have an otherwise good video ruined by a noisy background. Choose your location well. Look for quiet places away from traffic, wind, and noisy children. Also consider how your location could contribute to the meaning of the video. For example, if your subject is going to talk about food, and you are filming at home, then it would make sense to film in the kitchen or at the dining room table.

Video chat applications

Rather than filming an individual in person, you can make use of popular video chat applications such as Skype and Facetime (see Appendix 7). In order to capture an online video conversation, screencast software will be necessary (see page 40).

↓ MONOLOGUES

In the language classroom, stories are best told by human beings. Persuade camera-confident friends to share their anecdotes, memorable experiences, and jokes with your students. Such spoken texts can be invaluable for language learning. Video 5.2 is an example from Jamie Zhang from China. After telling me about an amusing misunderstanding involving her English teacher, I asked if she would mind repeating it in front of the camera.

Me: So tell me about your misunderstanding.
Jamie: All right – that was back to the year 2000 when I was studying at Leicester University and in my spare time I chose writing and pronunciation as my – you know – subject. And one day I went out with my teacher – my pronunciation teacher who is about two meters tall and I looked up at him and said wow, erm, you know – Chinese are short and he turned to me and asked me, who _____ them?

Try this ☞ **Reading**

As the above transcript demonstrates, video texts can be transcribed and used for activities that involve intensive reading. In this case, the students' task is to guess what the missing word is. They are given the clue that the misunderstanding resulted from the fact that Chinese speakers of English sometimes have problems pronouncing /r/ sounds.

Try this ☞ **Transcribing**

If you feel that a short story or monologue contains some useful language for your students, ask them to transcribe it for homework. In order for this to be possible, you will probably want to upload it onto a video-sharing site and make it accessible to students.

Try this ☞ **Comparing language**

Create videos in which different individuals tell the same story, independently from each other. For example:

- Ask a couple to tell the story of how they met (one at a time)
- Show two people a written joke. Then ask them to tell it to the camera in their own words
- Show two people a short video clip and then ask them to describe what happened. For example, Video 5.3 and Video 5.4 show two people telling the same story.

In class, ask students to compare the different ways of communicating similar ideas. This can be good for strengthening awareness of individuals and their personal language choices and perceptions of events.

Try this ☞ **Modelling a speaking task**

Look for monologue speaking tasks and activities in your coursebook in which students have to, for example:

- Recount a time in which they were misunderstood when speaking English
- Describe their daily routines
- Talk about the most courageous thing they have ever done
- Give advice to their younger self
- Describe their home.

Before class, find a friend who would be willing to engage in such an activity. Film their response, and bring the video into the classroom to introduce the task, demonstrate key language, and provide a model for students' own answers.

Try this ☞ **Speaking exam preparation**

Many speaking exams have a part in which candidates are required to talk, at length, on a subject of the examiner's choice. To prepare students for this part of the exam, make use of a past paper, an expert user of English (another teacher, for example), and a video camera. Film a good performance of a model monologue and use the video to draw students' attention to good language, good structure, and good strategies.

Creating your own content

The dynamics of spoken language change considerably when more than one person is involved. In a conversation, for example, speakers interact with each other and construct meaning cooperatively.

In Video 5.5, James and Jess share their personal feelings and thoughts about a hypothetical situation that I have put to them. In doing so, they respond to each other's ideas by questioning them, challenging them, or elaborating on them. Interestingly, without being asked to do so, they reach a consensus.

In Chapter 8 we will be examining this video in greater depth.

✓ *Getting it right*

Encouraging interaction between subjects

In the above video, I pressed the record button on the video camera, asked my question and then walked away. (In fact you can briefly see me in the background at 0:11.) It is important to create distance between yourself and your subjects in this way or you risk becoming involved in the discussion. Even if you stay silent, it is often too tempting for your subjects to look to you for reassurance and try to draw you into the conversation.

Try this 👉

Modelling or setting up a speaking activity

For any communicative speaking activity that you intend to set up in class, consider that you could create a video in which it is demonstrated by two expert users of English. Draw students' attention to any useful language that is used, and then ask them to get into pairs to construct answers of their own. The above video was created to model a 'would you rather' discussion in which students were required to make use of hypothetical 'would', and consider similar questions such as:

● Would you rather be the world's best singer or the world's best dancer?
● Would you rather time-travel to the past or the future?
● Would you rather speak English like a native or twelve other languages at elementary level?
● Would you rather be able to fly or make yourself invisible?
● Would you rather eat a sheep's eyeball or walk to work naked?

Try this 👉

Guess the relationship

Show students a video in which two people you know are conversing. Ask students to guess the relationship between them. This can add an extra depth to students' engagement with the video, the body language of the subjects, and the language that they use. You could give students a multiple choice such as:

● They are colleagues
● They have just met for the first time
● They are brother and sister (siblings)
● They are married
● They are just good friends
● They are boyfriend and girlfriend.

Try this ☞ **Turn taking**

Use a video text such as the one above to examine how interlocutors interact and cooperate. For example, transcribe the spoken text and print it off. Cut up the individual turns and ask students to attempt to put them into order. Draw attention to the way that meaning is constructed collaboratively. Finally, ask students to make a note of any language items or chunks that they would like to make their own.

Try this ☞ **Discussing a photograph**

Choose a thought-provoking photograph and select two volunteers to go in front of the camera. Start filming and hand them the photograph. Ask them if they have ever seen it before and if so, what they know about it. Give them enough space to allow them to share ideas and construct a narrative. In class, use the video to study language used to speculate about photographs (modal language, *looks like*, *looks as if*, etc.)

Try this ☞ **Discussing a video**

As above, select two volunteers to go in front of the camera. Show them a short video and then ask them to do any of the following:

● Offer an interpretation of the video
● Reconstruct the narrative
● Decide whether or not the video is real or if it involves trickery
● Decide how the video was made.

In class, use the spoken text to equip students with the language necessary for talking about videos.

Try this ☞ **Speaking exam preparation**

Many speaking exams have a section in which candidates have to converse together. Look for a past paper and find two expert English-speaking friends who would be willing to perform the task in front of a video camera. Use the video to provide a model of what is required of them. Draw students' attention to the dynamics and language of turn taking and interaction.

↓ INTERVIEWS

In Chapter 12, we will see a Try this idea, in which video chat applications (Skype, Facetime, etc.) can be used to bring individuals into our classrooms to be interviewed by students in real time (i.e. **synchronously**).

We can also use video recording tools to conduct interviews **asynchronously**, although this can require more work on the teacher's part.

Try this ☞ **Asynchronous video interview**

1 Use a video-recording device to interview a friend or acquaintance with an interesting job, hobby, or lifestyle. Use questions that have previously been prepared by your students. Ask your interviewee to address your students by name when possible. Later in class, show students the video of the interview and draw attention to any useful language that is used.

2 Do the same as above but make use of a video chat application (Skype, Facetime, etc.) to conduct the interview outside class time and use screencast software to record it for class.

Try this ☞ **Vocabulary interview**

Compile a list of vocabulary items (individual words, collocations, phrases, idioms, etc.) that you would like your students to revise. Set up a video camera on a subject – a British or American friend, for example – and go through the list, one item at a time. Ask your subject questions that will clarify, reinforce, or provide an alternative view on the use and semantics of the items in question (see Video 5.6 as an example). Good questions include:

● What would you call this? What would a British person/American call this?
● Do you use the idiom ...? Can you give an example of when or how you would use it?
● Which would you say is more common ...?
● How do you pronounce ...?

When you play the video in class, you may want to create a listening task for your students. However, this may not be necessary: as long as the audio is clear, learning benefits can be immediately obvious and students will often be motivated enough to listen.

↓ STAFFROOM VOX POPS

Vox pops (or *vox populi*) are sometimes referred to as 'man or woman on the street' interviews. They generally involve an interviewer roaming public spaces with a microphone and a camera operator, looking for willing subjects to answer questions about issues of the day.

Vox pop interviews are usually very short. During news broadcasts, they are often played in succession, with one interviewee's thoughts following another's.

The vox pop format is perfect for the language classroom. A simple question can be asked to a number of subjects. Often, answers will be diverse, but the language can be predictable and useful for the classroom.

Of course, it would be too time-consuming and impractical for any teacher to go onto the street and interrogate members of the public. However, the school staffroom can be a fantastic place for conducting quick interviews with colleagues just before going into class. Make sure that they aren't too busy or stressed before you bother them!

Try this ☞   **Staffroom vox pops**

Choose a language point from your coursebook and consider a question that would lead to its production. Any of the following would work:

Question	Language point
What are you doing at the weekend?	Present continuous to talk about future plans (could also include *have to*, *probably will*, etc.)
What did you do at the weekend?	Past simple
What would you do if you won the lottery?	Second conditional
How are you?	Responses to a common question: (*I'm fine, great, not bad, I've been better, I can't complain*, etc.)
How many different countries have you visited?	Present perfect
What do you want for Christmas?	Would like

TABLE 5.1   *Examples of questions eliciting language points*

Watch Video 5.7 as an example. In class the video would be a perfect way to introduce the language point in question.