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## Upload in Your Own Words

### Using Smartphones to Realize a Critical Approach to EFL Pedagogy

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**Abstract:** Currently, 1 in 2 people around the world has Internet access, most of them via smartphone. And 1 in 3 are learning English, with over 80% of these students coming from Asia and the global south. Despite the incredible growth in these 2 trends, few steps have been taken to adapt EFL education methods around access to these devices. This article tests the efficacy of 1 such approach, working with university students in Bogotá, Colombia, to create videos aimed at developing language proficiency and challenging cultural representations. Via a critical-discourse analysis of their responses, the author of the study hopes to highlight potential benefits and downsides offered by smartphones and other devices in developing language and critical-expression skills.

#### Introduction

As of 2016, 3.5 billion people have regular Internet access, a figure representing nearly half of the world's current population. Two details stand out in this figure. First, the majority of this access is occurring via mobile devices. Smartphones, viewed as luxury items less than a decade ago, now account for 2.1 billion of this figure and are expected to hit three billion by 2020 (IDC, 2016). Second, the typical smartphone user is now more likely to live outside the “developed” West, specifically Asia, Africa, or South America. In 2016 alone, nearly a million iPhones, Galaxy, and other smartphones were sold in these areas every day (Poushter, 2016).

Concurrent with this smartphone boom is the growth of English as a foreign language (EFL) education. Nearly two billion people engaged in some form of EFL learning in 2016. These learners come primarily from the developing world, representing a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Connections between EFL education and Internet access figures are not difficult to find. Globalization, further accelerated by growing Internet access, has, for the moment at least, solidified English as the world's lingua franca. While just 10% of the world's population count as native English speakers, 60% of all content on the Internet is written in English (IALC, 2016). A growing number of economic opportunities, currently the biggest motivator for EFL learners, now require at least some proficiency in English (McClanahan, 2014).

These overlapping trends present an image much different from “disadvantaged” representations commonly associated with developing-world EFL students. The question now, as McLean (2012) articulates, is whether EFL educators will adapt. Can they “abandon outdated fears and assumptions and, instead, embark in a new direction in adult ESL education: one that takes advantage of the technologies many of their students may be familiar with already?” (p. 13). At present, the answer is largely *no*. Despite these connections, EFL education has been slow to embrace technology in classroom practice (Lotherington & Jenson, 2011; McClanahan 2014). A historical reliance upon a skill-and-drill-based pedagogy has continued to center EFL curricula around grammar textbooks and rote learning styles. In following this “banking model” of education (Freire, 1970), teachers are unable to adapt to shifting language usage or to offer cultural context and to relate to students' personal interests (Kazantseva, Valiakhmetova, Minisheva, Anokhina, & Latypova, 2016; Valdés, 2001). Equally powerful is a lingering

Western stereotype of the EFL classroom, one that conjures images of dirt-floor classrooms, old donated books, and poverty-stricken students (McLean, 2012).

In my former position as an English language instructor at Universidad EAN in Bogotá, Colombia, I saw a starkly different picture: students dressed in designer clothes, voice messaging each other on WhatsApp, and studying in order to join a globalized economy increasingly built upon English. Certainly these students, attending a private business school in a posh downtown district, are more privileged than most in Colombia or around the world. Yet statistically speaking, they now present a more accurate vision of today's EFL student: ready to learn with smartphone in hand.

In almost every major field of study, the integration of technology into educational practice is no longer a debatable issue (McClanahan, 2014). As I aim to argue here, the same holds true for contemporary EFL education. This study aims to join a small but growing body of literature in calling for greater integration of technology such as smartphones into EFL classroom practice (Gholami & Azarmi, 2012; Kremer, Brannen, & Glennerster, 2013; Lotherington & Jenson, 2001). Smartphones, of course, should not be implemented as a means unto themselves, as has happened with so much other classroom technology. Instead, this study looks to understand how these tools might point toward a more pedagogically inclusive and engaging classroom space. In this effort, this study frames smartphone integration around several core ideas of critical pedagogy, in particular a “problem-posing” approach to education that relies on student inquiry to drive instruction. Freire (1970) offers the student-driven problem-posing approach as an alternative to the banking model. In the latter, students are regarded as passive recipients of knowledge, a view that disallows them from accessing personal experience and knowledge in order to draw authentic connections with the material. Educators must overcome this banking model by both placing themselves on equal level with students as knowledge creators and by granting students the ability to follow their own course of inquiry. Only by practicing such problem-posing approaches can the classroom become a place for students to engage in authentic inquiry. The goal for EFL educators, then, must be to apply classroom activities that activate inquiry, thus allowing students to connect previous cultural and linguistic knowledge with expression in the target language (Barrot, 2014).

## Study Framework

This study sought to understand how these goals might be actualized in the everyday teaching context of an EFL course. Over the course of a year spent working with Fulbright Colombia as an EFL instructor at Universidad EAN in Bogotá, Colombia, I carried out a smartphone-based activity centered on critical pedagogy with students in a college-level English course. Throughout the semester, I asked them to answer a specific question typically focused on representations of either Colombian- or English-speaking cultures. Students submitted their responses via smartphone videos and uploaded them to a common class Google drive. The classroom activity comprised eight distinct video assignments spaced out across the 18-week semester. As instructor, I would present a prompt (“What is your favorite food?” “How do you travel to school?” “What three words do you associate with the USA?”), and students would record their responses on their personal devices. They would then upload their response to a shared class Google Drive folder. I did not specify the format, length, or content of their responses.

In total, students submitted 250 video responses to the eight total questions posed over the four-month-long project. This article presents a critical-discourse analysis (CDA) of the materials collected for the activity, totaling some 32 video responses. I limited the overall corpus by analyzing only responses to the question “Is Colombia a dangerous place?” Using a critical-discourse analysis of these responses,

my analysis targets how dominant social forces are enacted, reproduced, and resisted through text (Van Dijk, 2003). In particular, it targets text representations of Colombia as a place synonymous with violence and drug trafficking. Though instances of violence have subsided greatly since their height in the early 1990s, images of that era continue to dominate Colombia's reputation around the world. English-language media reaching from *Miami Vice* on through the current Netflix hit *Narcos* have ensured that the conversation on Colombia, in the United States at least, fixates on cocaine, violence, and figures such as Pablo Escobar. So to what degree were my Colombian students aware of these Western representations of their country? To what degree might they challenge these forms and assert new ones? And might the personalized format offered through the smartphone video submission allow students to speak more freely on this often-touchy subject? My use of CDA works through the lens of critical pedagogy, focusing on students' perception of hegemonic representations of Colombia in the West. What actions, if any, have they done to disrupt these representations? And to what degree do they see themselves as influencers on this discourse?

## Research Goals

The classroom activity tested for this study was conceived with three goals in mind: to increase English proficiency and expression using the smartphone video format, to access personal and cultural knowledge in the course of expressing themselves in English, and to view English as a means of challenging cultural representations. These aims, along with my aim to use critical pedagogy as a framework through which to tie technology and language development, led me to analyze student video responses around these three research questions:

*RQ1:* How did students use the video response format? Freire (1970) places heavy emphasis on students' ability to express their voice, either in dialogue with their teacher or with each other. Within the context of EFL education, dialogue becomes a trickier proposition, as students are now tasked with conversing in a nonnative language. Aside from lacking linguistic proficiency, many students may resist expression due to the embarrassment of speaking incorrectly in front of an entire class (Yaman, Şenel, & Yeşilel, 2015). My intention with this theme is to see whether the video format, which allows students choice in time, location, and frequency with which they record their message, might encourage more open and fluid expression.

*RQ2:* Did they access personal knowledge in answering these questions? Effective critical pedagogy requires students to access personal knowledge and experience in order to actively engage in their own educational process (Giroux, 1989; hooks, 1994). Within EFL education, with its long history of banking-style education, personal expression has been, if not actively discouraged, deemed less important than grammatical correctness and pronunciation clarity. By eliminating these traditional evaluations of performance, I hope to see whether students will naturally use the activity to express themselves more, in the process concerning themselves not with how to speak in English but with more self-reflexive considerations of what they wish to say in English. I plan to highlight uses of personal experience and other cultural knowledge to track these developments. How do they position themselves as English speakers? Related to the previous goal of self-reflexivity, my concern here is in students' intercultural positionality in their responses. In these English language responses, how are they framing the conversation? To this end, I am interested especially in what identity markers they ascribe to themselves—pronoun use in particular—and what qualities they ascribe to their perceived audience.

*RQ3:* How did students negotiate representations in the target language? English-language media

contain no shortage of Colombian caricatures, most of which adhere closely to the *narcotraficante* archetype. So how aware are these Colombian students of these English-language media stereotypes about their country? And if aware, to what degree do they critically engage with these representations, either through negotiation or resistance? Keeping in mind Freire’s maxim empowering students to “rewrite the world,” will they feel limited by these texts, or take actions to respond to and recast these representations?

## Findings

For the response to “Is Colombia a dangerous place?” a total of 32 videos were analyzed. These responses came toward the latter half of the activity—week 10 of the 16-week term—meaning students were at this point comfortable with the video response format. Transcripts from video responses used here have been reproduced with grammatical errors.

Beginning with RQ1, I noted several interesting aspects of students’ use of the video format. Though I did not specify the duration of the responses, videos were generally :30–45 seconds in length, with the longest 2:13 and the shortest 0:08. Five videos featured editing of some sort. The majority of these were simple cuts used to edit together multiple clips, likely as a means of maximizing language clarity. One ambitious submission, however, also included a customized introduction featuring the question prompt and background music. As far as the location, the vast majority of responses seemed to be filmed at students’ homes. Their bedrooms seemed to be the most popular filming location, which upholds Yaman et al.’s (2015) finding about students’ proclivity to use personal spaces for language learning. Following this trait, all but four responses featured the student on his or her own. Of these remaining four, two were both members of the class using each other as cameramen. Finally, only a handful of responses appeared to be scripted, a promising finding that suggests students felt comfortable expressing their views in a more conversational style.

As the transcripts show, grammar and pronunciation were far from perfect. However, given the particular interest of this study, self-expression is a far more encouraging outcome. This self-expression mostly took the form of extremely formalized messages, ones that often seemed more reflective of media discourse around issues of Colombia’s violence than personal views. Almost a third of student responses implemented a similar rhetorical strategy of comparing Colombia’s violence to that in other countries, using some version of the phrase “Colombia is not a dangerous place; the world is a dangerous place.”

I think that no, Colombia is not a dangerous place. Like in all the world, in many countries and many cities, there are specific dangerous places. But in general, I think that Colombia is not a dangerous place, Colombia is a wonderful country that has everything which makes it a complete destination. (Dhayana)

The similarity of this response again suggests a repetition of a popular discourse within Colombia on the topic of its violent reputation around the world. Dhayana’s interest in selling Colombia as a “complete destination” further suggests an interest in repairing this image for the sake of domestic tourism. It seems interesting (perhaps even distressing) that her concern regarding violence extends not to her own safety or that of her family, but to that of foreign visitors. Still, given the institutional context of the video-response activity in an internationally minded business university, such formalized and financially incentivized responses perhaps should not be all that surprising.

Regarding RQ2, students seemed to access personal knowledge only intermittently in their responses.

Though a handful of students drew upon experience, mostly their answers seemed to be drawn from news reports and other institutional sources. Trust in institutions such as the police was a commonly repeated theme among student responses; they largely viewed the government and supporting security forces as positive agents of change.

Is Colombia a dangerous place? This is hard to ensure, and can say yes or no. But I can't tell some things of the security of Colombia, first of all the security in the city is very low, and there are many stealings. You have to take care in the street, in the driving, because here are many people walk in the street with the cars and the motorcycles. Colombia is going to create a peace treaty with the FARC and I think this is going to increase the security in Colombia. (Andres)

As Andres illustrates with his focus on peace talks with the FARC taking place during the course of this study, it is reasonable to assume that a sense of progressing toward peace would be on the minds of many students when answering this question. Even then, given the problematic history of these institutions in academic literature and personal conversations with other Colombians I had had in the months before this project, this trust surprised me a great deal. It is possible that these students' ages—born well after the height of Pablo Escobar's power in the early 1990s—and middle-class status affected this more positive view of government security forces, but perhaps there are other factors driving this trust.

While few students explicitly spoke from personal experience, a common tendency was to offer a sort of impersonal advice drawn from a number of knowledge sources.

I think that Colombia is a dangerous place, as can be in other countries. But depends on the place you visit, like if you visit Avenida Jimenez it would be very dangerous and Las Cruces. I don't know; it depend on the places you visit. And I think that the violence is everywhere, you just must be very careful when walking on the street. (Catalina)

I will further detail the use of pronouns by students to designate in- and out-groups within responses later in this analysis; however, even here in Catalina's response, there is a clear sense of audiencing, in this case to me, their visiting, non-Colombian professor. Indeed, many students framed their responses as street-smart warnings of a local to a visiting tourist.

If you are in a bigger cities, it's important that you don't walk in an unfamiliar street at night, or carry cell phone in full view of everyone. For example, you should not take taxi in the street, it's better to use the phone. It's better to visit the smaller towns, because these towns have lower levels of crime and are very beautiful. (Sara)

Again, this framing should not be all too surprising. Though I asked students to consider their responses around a broader English-speaking audience, it is sensible that they would direct their messages at me, the one assigning and assessing the activity. However, this tourist–local framing of the discourse seemed to limit self-reflexivity in their responses. Of the responses, only a small number drew on explicit personal experience to address the question.

I think it depends on the place you go. For example here in Bogota I think it's a little bit dangerous, and right now you know about the situation with the new mayor. But I think overall in Colombia everything is okay. I used to live down where the violence was quite strong, but now everything is nice. You can travel everywhere here without any problems. (Karen)

Though still working out of the tourist–local frame, Karen’s use of personal knowledge mixed with other knowledge sources represents a strong example of the possible dialogue offered through this activity.

As for RQ3, students took a range of tacks in negotiating Colombian representations present in various English-language texts. To begin, students almost uniformly showed awareness of Colombia’s reputation in English-dominant media. While some responses mentioned this reputation only in passing, many others directly addressed specific representational elements.

There is crime, theft, corruption, these things, but what will (be the most) impact is the drug trafficking. Maybe for that reason, a lot of people have the idea that Colombia is only crime and drugs and cocaine, and that Colombians are addicted to these things. (Maria)

With rare exception, students rejected portrayals of Colombia as a dangerous place. As noted earlier, these renunciations often used the tactic of deflecting Colombia’s violent reputation back onto the world as a more generally violent place. This was often used in tandem with what I call the “*dar papaya*” explanation, a common Colombian phrase that translates to “don’t put yourself at risk.”

I think it’s not dangerous because it has an excellent strategic security provided by the government Colombian. It is true that there are some problems. Everyone should care and know which areas to no longer visit because they are dangerous. My advice to you is to not give *papaya* as we say here. (Lina)

Lina’s mention of the “excellent strategic security” again shows a tendency among students to place trust in Colombian security institutions. The use of pronouns here further illustrates the demarcation of insider/local (*we*) and outsider/tourist (*you*) groups within the responses. While this frame was by far the most common, the use of the inclusive plural *we/us/our* showcased a more hopeful tendency to change the discourse around violence through social action.

I think that Colombia is so dangerous place, because we have high levels of poverty and misery. We also have 50 years of conflict with armed groups, and obviously this problems have caused Colombia to become a dangerous place. However we are entering a process to stop violence and to become more safer country. (Diana)

Diana’s use of the first-person plural connects her both to Colombia’s many social issues along with the process of improving upon these conditions. The “process” in mind here is likely the FARC peace deal mentioned earlier, one which in effect places her hopes on improvement upon the efforts of government peace negotiators. Several students also seemed to be aware not only of the influence of negative cultural representations of Colombia but showed a personal responsibility in disrupting these representations.

I think we are a stereotyped country, because we are not all like that. We also have good things to be known. For that reason, I think people all around the world should stop thinking about Colombians as drug traffickers because we can do better things. (Michelle)

While few of the collected responses reflected this level of nuance, my overall finding was that students seemed willing to speak candidly about the issue of Colombian representation. Further, the video format seemed to offer a safe platform through which to speak candidly about this issue of representation.

## Discussion

Despite a fair number of shortcomings, overall I believe the smartphone activity was effective in

achieving the goals outlined. Most encouraging was students' use of the video format, which showed positive support for RQ1 and upheld earlier research as to the effectiveness of smartphones as a vehicle for expression (Yaman et al., 2015). In spite of a handful of minor video-compatibility issues, students experienced no difficulty in recording or submitting videos for the activity. Their technical proficiency, further demonstrated by their customization of both the form and content of their responses, seems to have emboldened their linguistic expression, particularly in the case of a handful of typically shy students. By being able to record (and re-record) their own speaking, they had access to a useful reference by which to evaluate and improve their own performance as English speakers. Crucially, this evaluation was self-conducted and did not subject them to the possible embarrassment of public performance.

As for the content of the responses themselves, students' frequent use of imperfect English was also highly encouraging. Supporting RQ2, the focus of the activity for most students seemed to be on the message of their response rather than its grammatical correctness. The wide range of views offered across these 32 responses also highlights a distinct advantage of the video-submission format of the activity. It is hard to imagine such a variance of expression through a traditional format such as classroom discussion, where—especially in EFL classrooms—the most confident speakers typically dominate the conversation.

Results related to RQ3, however, were far less unanimous. Much of this, I believe, is related to a number of problematic components to the activity that limited the opportunity for more personal expression. Though a handful of responses offered candid perspectives on representations of violence in Colombia, most seemed to be framed around either state-sanctioned retorts or on tourist advice. These results (the later especially) I see as a failure to account for my own influence on students as the perceived audience for their responses. Despite my instruction to frame their response to a general English-speaking audience, students logically directed their message at me, the one native English speaker directly involved in the activity. A useful revision might be to provide such an English-speaking audience in order to provoke more personally grounded responses. One possibility might be to set up the activity as a sort of video pen-pal project, in which students in the United States and Colombia could coparticipate by posing questions to each other and respond via video responses. Beyond allowing for more direct intercultural communication between students, this approach allows for student-driven inquiry. In setting the questions in the activity myself, I was not able to uphold this key Freirean element. Letting students follow their own curiosity by posing their own questions through the video activity might be an effective means of positioning it closer to critical pedagogy concepts.

The activity did produce some interesting examples of students' negotiating violent representations of Colombia. Overall, most showed a clear ability to identify hegemonic structures that set the discourse of Colombia as a violent place. Beyond media portrayals, many identified political, military, and other social forces at play in this construction, and they often showed a desire to fix the problem rather than just comment upon it. Despite these positive results, I believe the activity could be revised to allow for more self-reflexive considerations of these representations. Mostly because of student embarrassment, I avoided playing any of these responses in class. The issues brought up by these students, however, seem to be a wonderfully organic opportunity through which to ground intercultural discussions in class. A reworked version of this activity should consider ways to apply content from these videos into class activities, allowing students to reflect upon concepts, build upon vocabulary, and develop greater fluency on these issues.

Through this analysis, I sought to better understand the efficacy of this activity in stimulating target-language speech, not just in the sense of practicing words, but in using language as a vehicle for self-expression and self-reflexivity. Though this analysis focused on just this one activity, I hope its findings will provide valuable guidance for EFL educators looking to best integrate technology and language development into classroom practice. Using a common language (English) and tool (smartphones), students now have the opportunity to exchange and access knowledge in newly possible ways. I believe it is now up to educators to open students to these possibilities, using the classroom to bolster language learning and, more broadly, new forms of exchanging knowledge.

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