The Verbal and the Visual in Language Learning and Teaching: Insights from the 'Selfie Project'

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Abstract:

That 'a picture can stimulate a thousand words' aptly summarizes the role of the visual in the field of language learning and teaching. The power of the image to generate language output has been widely acknowledged in the field of second/foreign language acquisition. Posters, diagrams, symbols and pictures are often found in language classrooms; illustrations and photos cohabit with the target language in textbooks. The relationship, however, between the lingual and the visual tends to be one of asymmetry. The visual tends to be held in lower regard and thought of as 'dispensable embellishment' (Millard & Marsh 2001: 55) especially when the learner has acquired a certain level of linguistic competence. Instead of focusing on the 'thousand words', this initial exploration into examining the verbal-visual interplay uses the 'picture', in the form of the selfie, as heuristic device. It draws insights from visual research approaches and digital communication studies to analyse the relationship between the verbal and the visual. Results point to a counter-reading of the selfie. It is suggested that using this digital self-portrait of the 21st century as talking point in an English fluency exercise has brought about unexpected findings—the strengthening of personal relations in the classroom and self-reflexivity amongst the students—aspects that are not often associated with the traditional use of visual 'aids'. It is proposed that current understanding of the 'lingual' can be enriched by bringing the 'visual' back into the frame.

Key words: language teaching selfie visual methods visual aid

Introduction

The language classroom is a universe of visual data. Maps, posters, phonemic charts, diagrams, symbols and different pictures usually adorn the language learning classroom. Photos and illustrations have always found their way in textbooks alongside the target language.

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Indeed, the practice of using visual images alongside the written word has always been a part of the language teacher's armory of pedagogical tools. Visuals, narrowly deployed here as any image in the form of pictures, photographs, paintings, posters, drawings, illustrations or 'anything that would help a learner see an immediate meaning (Canning-Wilson 2001: 3), have been proven to enhance language learning as they enable the learner to make complex connections between the words being learnt. Graphic images, for example, are said to 'bring out more detailed, knowledgeable, responsive, awareness to the object, situation or text being communicated' (Canning-Wilson 2001: 4). In tests for spoken language proficiency, visuals are also used to elicit specific language structures and vocabulary in order to assess linguistic competence.

The relationship between language and visual imagery has always been a fundamental part of learning how to communicate (Britsch, 2010). An entity like a 'tree', for instance, only becomes a linguistic fact once the association between the word tree and the image of a tree has been established (ibid). Although the inextricability between the verbal and the visual is evident from the very early stages of language acquisition and socialization, the relationship between the two tends to be hierarchical in that the non-linguistic is considered subservient to the linguistic. In the language classroom, visual aids are commonly treated as something 'extra, something imported as a frill, as a motivator instead of something central to and integral with the learning process' (Corder 1963: 85). Çetin & Flamand (2013), for example, claim that despite the potential of posters to facilitate incidental vocabulary learning they have been viewed more as decorative items rather than as pedagogical tools. Jewitt (2008:15) posits that the visual is often 'celebrated for its potential to interest and motivate learners' and yet 'the link between visual forms of knowledge and learning is seldom made.'

In the last ten years, scholars have started to interrogate the extremely narrow view of language as speech or text, thus taking for granted other resources that the learners use to convey and receive information (Vigliocco, Perniss, & Vinson, 2014). Petrie (2005: 98) contends that the role of the non-linguistic aspects of language learning has been neglected in spite of the fact that there are more significant non-verbal barriers to culture and language learning than verbal. Along the same lines, Jewitt (2008) points out that the unprecedented level with which technology has changed the production and dissemination of images forces us to scrutinize how words and images combine to inform educational practices. Simply put, in the face of a world saturated with images, it is no longer sustainable to hold on to the notion of learning and literacy as merely linguistic accomplishments. As Jewitt (2008: 6) states, 'the time for that habitual conjunction of "language and learning" is over'.

Using the Selfie Project as a springboard for theorising the verbal and the visual, this exploratory paper looks at how the selfie, the most ubiquitous visual image of the 21st century and the 'first artwork of the network age' (Rubinstein 2015:167), was incorporated into an English fluency activity at a Thai university. As part of the project, EFL students were instructed to take selfies over a period of two weeks. They were then asked to talk about their selfies in class by way of a slide presentation. The activity proved to be successful in helping the students focus on communicating the message rather than worrying about grammar. There were other serendipitous benefits gained from the Selfie Project, which in the words of Perry & Edwards (2010: 859), can be called a 'happy accident'.

The verbal and the visual

Visual materials of various modalities stare us in the face everywhere. The so called 'visual turn' in social science research is attributed to the speed, ease and accessibility of

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technologies used for recording and producing images (Emmel & Clark, 2011; Pauwels, 2015) communication practices. The globalized and networked landscape has made it impossible to ignore the ubiquitous presence of images in the virtual and in the real world (Jewitt, 2008).

Words, selfies, photographs, emojis and emoticons combine to 'show' instead of just 'tell'. It is therefore not surprising that Oxford Dictionaries have proclaimed a symbol of a happy face with tears of joy as 'word' of the year for 2015. Although not a word, emojis combine with texts to express complex ideas in an online environment (Cocozza, 2015). This has important implications for language teachers in conceptualizing their notion of what constitutes a word or the very definition of language itself. There are a growing number of emoji dictionaries on the internet that show the symbol's versatility as it can function as a noun, a verb or an adjective depending on the context of use. It is not within the scope of this paper to explore in-depth the use of visuals in digital communication and other modalities (but see Petrie 2005; Jewitt 2008).

The interplay between the verbal and the visual is more evident in written, digital communication where it is much easier to incorporate images with texts. Considering the ever-growing popularity of the use of internet in language classrooms, the importance of the 'non-linguistic visuality' (Petrie 2005:98) cannot be ignored. Petrie (2005) provides a review of studies on the use of visuality in electronic environments and makes a call for further research into its importance in literacy and language learning. Jewitt, Kress, Ogborn and Tsatsarelis (Jewitt, Kress, Ogborn, & Tsatsarelis, 2001) interrogate the widely held notion that learning is necessarily equated with linguistic accomplishment primarily. Using a science classroom in their empirical research, they argue for a multi-modal approach in education that pays attention

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to the full repertoire of meaning making systems that include not only the linguistic but also the visual and the actional (i.e. facial expressions, gesture etc.).

Visual aids have always occupied a special place in the foreign language classroom. They are valued for their utility in increasing student motivation and aiding retention and recall (Arndt & Pesch, 1984, p. 28); teaching culture and vocabulary (Arndt & Pesch, 1984; Bush, 2007) as well intercultural literacy (Arizpe, Bagelman, Devlin, Farrell, & McAdam, 2014), developing students' intercultural communicative competence (Kiss & Weninger, 2017) and enhancing listening comprehension (Mueller, 1980). But despite the widespread use and acceptance of visual aids , their impact is 'hypothetical' (Arndt & Pesch, 1984, p. 28). Little is known about how students actually engage with and benefit from the use of visual aids. Moreover, indeed there have not been many systematic attempts to explain why a specific form of visual, and not another, produces a particular effect in language production. I contend that one way to push the interpretative inquiry forward is to seek inspiration from other approaches that specialise in the study of the visual. Thus, borrowing insights from visual methodologies, I focus on the ubiquitous selfie to illuminate how the image is used by the language learners to communicate.

The Selfie as social conversation

The selfie, a photograph of oneself usually taken with a smartphone or webcam, has revolutionized notions of social interaction (Saltz, 2014). This form of self-portrait 'which communicates some kind of message about the self' (Iqani & Schroeder, 2015: 01) has become a global phenomenon. It has been reported that more than 93 million selfies are taken by people from around the world, and this figure represents only those taken with a camera phone (Senft & Baym, 2015).

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The selfie has been labelled as the visual manifestation of 'narcissism gone wild'(Giroux 2015: 163), 'deep-seated loneliness' (Murray, 2015: 499), and 'exhibitionism' (Wortham 2013: 04). On the other hand, there are visual studies and communication scholars who view the selfie as an outlet for self-definition (Murray, 2015: 02) and self-expression (Iqani & Schroeder, 2015); as well as a medium for identity formation (van Dijck, 2008), self-presentation, and sociality (Gye, 2007). It has been proposed that a selfie can be viewed as a 'currency for social interaction' (van Dijck, 2008: 62), and as a communication device (Katz & Crocker 2015; Saltz 2014). When shared online, the selfie is argued to take on language-like function and characteristics. According to Frosh, (2015: 1621), the selfie 'extend[s] the photographic grammar of everyday communication' serving as the visual equivalent of reflexive verbs in language use. Katz and Crocker (2015) report that in platforms like the Snapchat, 'selfies and selfie-related practices allow for the flourishing of meaningful "language games" using images as both grammar and vocabulary' (Katz & Crocker 2015, p. 1862). It is said that the rapid exchange of selfies mimics the exchange of words in conversation with its own 'private grammar and vocabulary' (Katz & Crocker 2015: 1870) and phatic quality in the same way spoken words function in the enactment of social relationships (Frosh 2015).

As a pedagogical tool, the selfie has been observed to promote creativity, critical self-reflexivity, social cohesion and community building (Johnson, Maiullo Trembley, & Werner 2014; Victoria, 2016). In a study exploring the use of selfies on Instagram, a photo sharing application, it was found that the selfie facilitated communication and socialization. It is suggested that the exchange of messages occur through an intricate interplay of the photo and the subsequent 'like' and 'comment' options (Al-Ali, 2014). An indication of the important role of this modern-day self-portrait is the newly created Selfies Research Network consisting of

over 1500 scholars and academics from around the world ("The Selfie Researchers Network,"
n.d.). Indeed, educators have started to acknowledge the selfie's role in configuring present
day communication and socio-cultural practices.

Methodology

In this paper, the selfie is entextualized from its usual digital home and inserted into
the flesh-and-blood classroom environment. The selfie is conceptualised here as a
photographic image taken by the photographer of oneself regardless of whether it is privately
held or shared online on social networking sites (Albury, Leaver, Marwick, Rettberg, & Senf,
2014).

To scrutinize the relationship between the verbal and the visual, this study shall explore
the following questions:

1. How do the students use the selfie in a language fluency activity?

2. What are the potential pedagogical benefits of using the selfie as a student-generated visual
in the language classroom?

3. What conclusions can be made regarding the verbal-visual interplay in a language classroom?

In order to answer the questions above, I first give a background of the Selfie Project
and then explain how I modified the photo elicitation method that is commonly associated with
visual research. Illustrative examples of the students' use of the selfie are discussed to provide
evidence of how the learners employed it in ways I had not expected.

Research Context: The Selfie Project

The Selfie Project was designed as a fluency activity to encourage learners to focus on
communicating the content of the message rather than worrying about grammar (Nation, 1989).

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Indeed, getting learners to speak using the target language can be very challenging, especially if EFL is a compulsory subject (Brown & Muller, 2014; Talandis Jr & Stout, 2014). Given the popularity and widespread usage of the selfie amongst young people and college students (Katz & Crocker 2015), this digital self-portrait has been considered as a 'way in' (Albury, Leaver, Marwick, Rettberg, & Senf, 2014) to encourage active participation.

The setting was a university in Thailand. The participants were 28 English language learners; 5 males and 23 females, between 19 and 22 years old, all second year students with intermediate to upper-intermediate level of English proficiency. To prepare for their selfie presentations, the students were given two weeks planning time, which happened during the holiday vacation, to take selfies and reflect on what they wanted to present in class. They were encouraged to take risk in using new words or phrases. I gave them a set of reflective questions designed to generate different verb tenses, 'feeling' words and descriptive expressions:

- When and where was the selfie taken? Why did you choose this particular selfie to talk about in class?
- What were you doing before and after the picture was taken?
- Were you alone or with other people?
- How would you describe yourself – your appearance, feelings, state of mind when the selfie was taken?
- In what ways does the image represent who you 'really' are?

Before the presentations, the students were given the opportunity to practise their talk in small groups so they could work on their pronunciation and fluency. This small group pre-presentation practice was also intended to help them feel more confident and less inhibited

before going in front of the whole class (Ur, 2002). Mindful that some of the more shy students might find the activity threatening, the learners were assured that they did not have to disclose any personal information that they felt uncomfortable with.

At the end of each presentation, the listeners were given the opportunity to ask questions about the content of the talk or any lexical and grammatical aspects they wished to clarify.

Research Method

I drew inspiration from the visual research methods to start a reflective dialogue between the verbal and the visual. Visual research, as used in qualitative studies, refers to the use of images in the research process alongside interviews and other ethnographic based methods (Rose 2012: 298). In this study, a modified version of the photo-elicitation interview method was deployed involving the use of the student-generated visual. Instead of the common practice of interviewing the students individually, they were asked to give a presentation before the whole class. The audience performed the role of interviewers. In effect, instead of the typical one interviewee to one interviewer format, there was a one interviewee to multiple interviewers format. Since it was a fluency activity, it was deemed important to give as many students as possible the opportunity to speak. I acted as facilitator and participant observer.

The data set comprises of extensive observation notes taken during the presentations, the selfie photos, and my research journal. I re-read my observation notes immediately after the classes and made entries on my electronic journal to record my impressions and interpretations. To supplement my analysis, I made use of the class's online social networking group to clarify aspects of the presentation that were unclear.

It is acknowledged that observation notes are necessarily selective and entries in my research journal relied heavily on what could be recalled from the event (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). I considered audio or video recording the selfie presentations so I could give feedback that is more accurate but I abandoned the idea, given that accuracy was not the focus. Furthermore, audio or video recording might make the students uncomfortable. I made a list, however, of problematic aspects of each presentation and integrated these into subsequent lessons.

The Selfie project was not initially intended as a formal research undertaking. However, taken aback by the students' enthusiasm and motivated by an innate 'researcher mentality', I decided to evolve the project into a formal enquiry. Application for ethics approval was made after the activity. The students' were asked for their consent if their selfies, and my observation notes and research journal could be used as part of the database. They were assured that only pseudonyms would be used and their photos would not appear in any publication. This might be considered unconventional in terms of research practice but it can be argued, consonant with Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), that surprising findings and fortuitous circumstances are valid reasons for an academic inquiry. Most importantly, the selfie presentations can be considered as naturalistic data—the students gave the talk as an everyday, taken for granted part of the EFL class, not as elicited data for the purposes of research.

Data Analysis and Discussion

According to Van House and Van House et. al (Van House, 2011; Van House, Davis, Ames, Finn, & Viswanathan, 2005) personal photography can be categorized according to four overlapping functions—the preservation of memory (as reminder of personal or collective experiences), the creation and maintenance of relationship (sending photos on-line to connect

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with people), self-presentation (influencing other people's opinion of oneself) and self-expression (talking about personal view of the world). During the coding process, the overlaps in the selfie functions became evident. However, the intention here is not to create a rigid taxonomy but to use the categories as a lens and a heuristic device to explore the students' use of the visual.

Coding of the selfies was done through NVivo, a software for analysing qualitative and mixed methods data. I uploaded all the selfies onto NVivo and annotated them based on my observation notes and research log. Data analysis suggests that majority of the students deployed the selfie for self-presentation (13 students) and self-expression (9 students). My interpretation is that the preservation of memory function (3 students) is used more often for other types of personal photography, not the selfie. The relationship creation and maintenance function (3 students) is likely more evident when the selfie is shared online via Facebook, Instagram or Snapchats. As one of the students said, 'I want my parents, who live in another province to know that I'm fine. When I send them smiling pictures of me, they know I am okay.'

Below are just a few illustrative examples of selfie stories shared by the students:

Self-Presentation

The two students in the examples below talked about their parents who were not shown in the selfie. I classified these under the self-presentation category because the 'self' is presented as a loving son and daughter paying tribute to a parent.

Khim with her mother (not shown in the selfie)

The selfie shows a somewhat blurred photo of Khim at a seaside restaurant. In her presentation, she talked about her mother who was sitting beside her when the photo was taken. She made

mention of her sad eyes in the picture, swollen from crying. She and her mother had just come

from the hospital where her mother was undergoing treatment for a serious illness. She used

the words 'devastated' and 'very, very, very horrible' to describe her feelings.

Gan and his dad (not shown in the selfie)

The visual is of Gan's face, visibly smiling but with his eyes closed. He talked about his Dad

who had died the year before. Gan narrated that whenever he closed his eyes at bedtime, he

would immediately feel the calming presence of his father. He said he had always 'looked up

to' his father and whenever he thought about him, he felt 'warm inside'.

Self-Expression

The two black-and-white photos, which are un-smiling close up shots of the two students,

embody their feelings about their particular topics.

Nan, in defiance of the 'like' culture

Nan's selfie shows an extreme close-up, unflattering shot of her face (magnified pores and

pimples). She emphasised that the 'ugly' photo is her way of rebelling against the 'like' culture

of Facebook that promotes an idealistic and unrealistic image of young women. 'Sick and tired'

and 'fed up' were the terms she used to describe her feelings.

Bee, eating his homework

Also in black and white, this selfie portrays a serious-looking Bee, unlike his usual smiley self.

It shows him with a piece of line paper clenched between his teeth, hanging out of his mouth.

He said he hated writing in English and thought his essays were 'very terrible'.

Preservation of Memory

<u>Ploy and the Fireworks</u>

The selfie's focus are the fireworks in the background. Ploy's face is only partially shown in one corner of the visual. She described the 'westernized' New Year celebration in her hometown, a popular tourist destination. I noted she used the words 'countdown' and 'New Year's resolution' which were discussed in class just before the holiday break.

Relationship Maintenance

<u>Fai and her Friends</u>

This groufie shows Fai and three of her friends wearing their school uniform. They were sitting in the back of a car, smiling, looking at the camera, and making the 'V' sign. The friends shown with her were present in the audience as they were also in the same class. For this reason, I categorised this visual under relationship maintenance.

The selfie presentations provided a glimpse into the students' multi-dimensional identities. Contrary to the selfie's reductive portrayal (Frosh, 2015; Murray, 2015) as a reflection of vanity and narcissism, the students imbued their self-portraits with multi-layered meanings.

As to the linguistic merits of the Selfie Project, the results are mixed. As stated earlier, the motivation for the activity was to provide students with a speaking exercise that would generate use of different verb tenses and descriptive adjectives. I encouraged the students to take risks in using new vocabulary that are of relevance to them. However, I noted that they mostly relied on words they already knew. There were a few attempts, as shown in the examples, where students used 'devastated', 'fed up' and 'sick and tired.' In terms of grammatical aspects, the simple past tense was used when the past perfect or past progressive would have been more correct. Forming the simple past of irregular verbs also proved to be a

challenge for a few students. There were also some incorrect usage of ungradable adjectives (e.g. 'very, very, very horrible' and 'very terrible'. Nevertheless, despite brief moments of hesitation, all students gave their talks relatively unhampered by lexical gaps or grammatical concerns. Even a female student who very seldom participated in class discussions, opened up about her dog (shown in the selfie with her) that had just died. After her very emotional and tearful presentation, a number of students hugged her and offered words of comfort in English from a plain 'so sorry' to 'condolence.' This instance highlights the spontaneous use of authentic language to show empathy enabling the students to deploy a wider repertoire of communicative resources.

After all the presentations had taken place, the students engaged in a discussion about the influence of social media in their lives, the connection between self-worth and the number of 'likes' one gets on Facebook, and so on. They used the target language to talk about issues of concern and relevance to them.

Another 'happy side effect' (Gauntlett & Holzwarth 2006: 82) of the Selfie Project was the establishment of a palpable positive atmosphere in the classroom evidenced by laughter and multiple speaking overlaps. The students appeared engaged and interested in each other's narrative. As Gye (2007) argues, the sharing of stories accompanied by photographs reinforces social relationships. Imagine a group of people sitting in the living room showing each other pictures from their photo album—this level of informality and intimacy, to a greater or lesser extent, is created in an otherwise formal classroom setting. Oral communication in a foreign language can indeed produce anxiety and insecurity in language learners (Rubio, 2007) in addition to threats to self-concept and negative feelings (Wilson, 2013).

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Wilson (2013: 301) puts it eloquently when she said that 'Narratives of self-discovery, personal liberation and increased confidence run counter to most commonly held views about the feelings produced by learning and using a foreign language'. She adds that studies of negative feelings and anxiety in using the foreign language tend to predominate with little mention of positive aspects. There is strong argument to be put forward for classroom activities that encourage the learners to use the target language as tools for self-presentation and self-expression.

The Visual and 'Verbal editing'

A photograph has an 'uncompromising fixity' (Croghan, Griffin, Hunter, & Phoenix, 2008: 351) both temporally and spatially. This fixity, along with a one-dimensional representation of the subject, summons a process called 'verbal editing' or a 'marked degree of explanatory or repair work' (ibid). Showing Gan's selfie with his closed eyes is just that—a face with closed eyes. However, Gan 'verbally edited' the selfie to present an identity of a grieving son missing his deceased father whom he admired and loved. Nan's unflattering selfie needed verbal accounting to fully express her distaste for the social media's negative effect on self-worth. Khim offered a verbal explanation why her eyes were swollen in the photo in the same way that Bee had to clarify why he had a piece of paper sticking out of his mouth. Resonating with Croghan et. al's (2008) findings in their use of photo-elicitation interviews, the process of verbally editing the selfies made it possible for students to expand and regulate the stories they wish to present about themselves. The visual and the verbal combine to more powerfully breathe life into the narrative.

The Self(ie) in the Visual-Verbal Interplay

In SLA research, aspects of the learners' identity that have typically been invoked position them as 'interlanguage/foreign/fossilized/second language speakers,' 'immigrants', 'non-native speakers' (Duff, 2014, :410), as well as 'beginner,' 'intermediate' or 'advanced.' The tendency has been to view the individuals as a 'model or personification of the learning process' instead of 'real-life, flesh-and-blood individuals with their own subjective and social worlds' (Riley 2006: 206). Indeed, the actual 'self' has seldom been the focal point in the classroom. The focus tends to be on the first person 'I' as the subject or the 'doer' of the action in an active voice sentence construction. That the plural of the grammatical first person 'I' is 'we', and 'me' and 'us' are the object forms of 'I' are taught as fundamental rules in learning the English language. The first person 'I' is learnt as the 'generator' of the target grammar, pronunciation or vocabulary, but seldom the centre of the inquiry (Riley, 2006). Put another way, the learners' role is often reduced to that of an 'animator'or physical source of an utterance; with less attention paid to their role as 'author' (the person who composes the words uttered by the animator and 'principal' (the person whose viewpoints are conveyed in the message (Goffman, 1981). In presenting their selfies, the students enact the multidimensional role of animator, author and principal. The visual serves as an aid to the lingual and as a catalyst for looking inwards and asking 'who am I' and 'how do I want others to see me?' The reflection process goes beyond the traditional use of visuals in the classroom and can be linked to issues such as identity formation (Gye, 2007; van Dijck, 2008) and impression management.

That the Selfie Project proved to be an effective fluency activity can be partially due to the inversion of the traditional knowledge structure in the classroom. The teacher was no longer the information expert. The students were in full control of the contents of their selfie narrative.

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This might have resulted in making the power relations more symmetrical, thus reducing their anxiety. I make this claim cautiously because spoken language fluency in a second or foreign language is difficult to measure (Brown & Muller, 2014).

How can we use insights from visual research scholars to account for the success of the Selfie Project? First, as argued by Harper (2002: 13), images can be more effective than words in evoking 'deeper elements of human consciousness' and facilitating participants' recall of information and related experiences. The selfie as a photographic object enabled the participants to draw from the emotional and physically embodied experience of the *when*, the *where*, the *why* and *with whom* the particular photograph was taken. A photograph has the power to enable the narrator to 'talk about different things, in different ways' (Rose 2012, p. 305), thus yielding 'different and richer information than other techniques' (Van Auken et al. 2010: 373). In Khim's example, she did not talk about the 'self' but instead about the 'other' who was present but not visible in the selfie. She 'relived', through her presentation, a physically embodied experience of sadness because of her mother's illness.

From a visual research paradigm, using a photo to generate ideas is believed to 'elicit more concrete information', 'act as trigger to memory' and 'evoke a more emotional many-layered response' (Croghan, Griffin, Hunter, & Phoenix 2008: 346). It is argued that photographs encourage individuals to construct a new view of themselves and their social world. As Carpenter (1995: 488) states, a photographic portrait offers opportunities for self-recognition, self/study. It provides the extra sensation of objectivizing the self. It makes the self more real, more dramatic.' Furthermore, in terms of encouraging authentic talk, images have the power to 'disarm[s] or bypass[es] the purely intellectual, leading to a more authentic and complete glimpse of what a particular experience is like or of what people think and feel'

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(Weber 2008: 6). Visual research scholars who support the use of participant-produced images claim that the time gap between taking the pictures and the photo-elicitation interview gives participants the opportunity to reflect about the image, which leads to thicker data. In the case of the Selfie Project, the students had two weeks to take selfies and then decide on the one they wanted to talk about in class. The two weeks between taking the photos and then deciding which one to use for the presentation, will have given the learners enough time reflect on the topic and plan their talk. The importance of planning time is of course well documented in second language acquisition research particularly in task-based approaches (Ellis, 2003; Kuiken & Vedder, 2012)

When using images for photo-elicitation interviews, Liebenberg (2009: 442) states that the visuals function as 'reminder notes' in much the same way that cue cards or note cards are deployed when giving a speech. Van Auken, Frisvoll and Stewart (2010) report that when compared to non-photo based interviews, photo-elicited accounts were longer, more focused, and produced thicker data. Indeed, it has been argued that 'even the most banal photographs-a can of cider!-can prompt participant to give eloquent and insightful accounts of their lives' (Rose, 2012: 312)

Whether or not the effects produced relate specifically to the selfie format as opposed to others deserves further investigation. It is argued however that the selfie, deemed to be a 'conductor of embodied social energy' (Frosh 2015: 1623), is unlike any other visual images. It works like a 'mirror with a memory' (Collier & Collier, 1986: 106), an 'additional presence' whereby the selfie-takers have the verbal opportunity to correct or create an impression that others have about them (Croghan et al., 2008, p. 355). Using photographs that they themselves conceptualized, shot, photo shopped, edited using photo editing applications,

and retouched provide the students with an armory of talking points to enable them to 'unleash a [verbal] flood of detail' (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015: 86).

Conclusions

In this study, I extracted the selfie from its virtual environment and mined it for its utility in a Thai foreign language classroom. In this section, I attempt to answer the three research questions posed in the Methodology.

First, how do the students use the selfie in a language fluency activity? Contrary to the pathologized notions of the selfie as a symbol of narcissism and exhibitionism, the students used the selfie in multiple, complex ways but mainly as a resource for self-presentation and self-expression. The process of verbally editing an image of a face or a group of faces facilitated language production. The decontextualised selfie which provides very limited or no information about the background seemed to have motivated the students to add more information, but not in the sense of merely describing the image. As the illustrative examples show, they did not only talk about the *when, where*, *why* and *with whom* but also the visually absent but very much present loved one. I would argue that the visually limited selfie prompted the selfie-takers to linguistically provide the missing context. What also contributed to language production was the two weeks gap between taking the selfies before the presentation in class. The reflective process during the production of the visual image helped the participants to better articulate their experiences (Liebenberg, 2009). In other words, they used the selfie as the kind of 'open sesame' to a whole world of embodied experiences and memory.

Second, what are the potential pedagogical benefits of using the selfie as a student-generated visual in the language classroom? The selfie provided the students with a vehicle to

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unleash a verbal flood of detail (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015) in ways that are already explained above. Discovering or accessing new aspects of their identity can be very motivating for some (Wilson, 2013).Through the process of verbally editing the visual, they had to look inward thus engaging in self-reflexivity. The self-disclosure that accompanied the selfie presentations helped the students to get to know each other, which has direct relevance in enhancing social relations in the classroom. Before the Selfie Project, I must admit that knew little about the students and their world outside of the university campus. It was quite a revelation, for example, to see Bee's selfie showing him eating his English composition homework. It can be argued, following Johnson, Maiullo, Trembley, and Werner (2014), that it is part of the educators' role 'to help students turn the focus in on themselves in order to be critical of their own ideologies, perspectives, and habits' (p. 120). They further note that 'If students are already turning their cell phones inward, using photos and videos to create portraits, we have an opportunity to harness that predisposition' (ibid).

Another pedagogical benefit of this student-generated selfie is that it can empowering to the students to be able to talk about visuals that they themselves produced (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006). In other words, they create their own entry points for expressing and making meaning (Stein, 2000). The students' expert knowledge of the self-as-theme inverted the traditional classroom asymmetry, which seemed to have boosted their confidence during the presentation. From the teacher's perspective, they can save time in searching for suitable visual aids if the students can readily provide them.

Third, what conclusions can be made regarding the verbal-visual interplay in a language classroom? There is much research to be done in order to systematically theorise the interplay between the verbal and the visual. What I have presented is intended to start the ball

rolling, prompted by an opportunistic enquiry. As stated in the Methodology section, I had not intended for the Selfie project to be a formal research but inspired by the selfie presentations, I decided to evolve it into a research undertaking. As part of my approach as reflective practitioner I looked beyond second language research and continued my sense making journey to the visual approaches. The modified photo elicitation interview led me to the notion of verbal editing, a process through which language is used to contextualise the visual, thus serving as a catalyst for self-presentation and self-expression. It has been proposed that the 'image and word attend to discrete aspects of meaning' (Jewitt, 2008, p. 31). This synergistic potential of the spoken word plus image requires much more systematic investigation than I have done here. The use of video or audio recording would yield more detailed language data. This could be supplemented, if feasible, by the diary method and in-depth interviews with students.

The insights from the Selfie Project are drawn from a very specific context and therefore must be taken as suggestive rather than conclusive. It is hoped that this exploratory study has opened up a space to question our own beliefs about the visual-lingual connection. As language teachers and researchers, the time has come to accept the 'limits of language as a channel for expressing the arc of human experience' (Stein, 2000, p. 334). Further investigations are needed in order to create a pedagogic space that can enable learners to effectively use the picture to stimulate ten thousand words ☺.

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