Teaching Speaking in English Classrooms?
-- Where to Start

Jennifer Hsieh

National Hsinchu Senior Industrial Vocational School

The purpose of this action research is to explore the possibility of applying instruction on English speaking in high school English classrooms. In the teaching process, mobile devices and groups on Facebook serve as tools and virtual classrooms respectively. The instruction starts with an event, for example My Six-word Memoirs, which focuses on fluency. After this warm-up activity, a video from Youtube is posted on Facebook and students are required to watch it and take notes, focusing on the pronunciation and intonation used in the videos. With their notes and the video, they are expected to improve their accuracy in English speaking by imitating the speaker in the video. Then, one-on-one instruction is offered during breaks in school time, during which teacher offers individual suggestions for refinement, demonstrations of more accurate pronunciation, or/and a check-up on the notes the students have made. At the last stage, the students are required to produce an audio recording of the sentences from their notes, and upload the recording onto the Facebook groups. To highlight the progress each individual student has made and to help build up his / her confidence in English learning, a self- and peer- review is done after a session of the fluency and accuracy activities. The results so far have been quite satisfying, with students managing to speak up and gaining more confidence in themselves within an English classroom, which used to bring many of them memories of failure and frustration. In return, through the whole process, the teacher has learned about the interrelationship among speaking, listening and vocabulary memorization at play in the process, the crucial function of confidence, and the importance of mental support from both learning partners and the teacher. Toward the end of this account, findings and reflections as a whole are also dealt with.

I. Introduction

Whether to offer English speaking instruction in English classrooms has long been a controversial issue for teachers. With a tight class schedule, it seems quite

like mission impossible to teach English speaking in English classrooms as reading, writing and listening activities have filled up the span of classes. The excuse that English speaking instruction can wait used to be further justified by the fact that no official entrance examination to colleges required speaking proficiency. However, with more English interviews being implemented when students apply for college admission, the ability to express oneself fluently within a period of time as short as five to ten minutes becomes the top priority. To succeed in the interviews, students would have to display both fluency and accuracy. That is, they have to have a clear idea about what to talk about, and then convey their thoughts in comprehensible, or, even better, precise expressions. Taking this into consideration, it seems inevitable for the teacher to bring English speaking exercise into ordinary English classrooms.

Teaching English speaking becomes even an urgent issue with the implementation of 12-year Compulsory Education this year. Freshmen have been displaying considerable difference especially in English classrooms. Among them, a growing number of students have found it a great challenge to memorize the new words. After some observation, an underlying problem emerges. In face with new words, many of them memorize the words letter by letter instead of syllable by syllable, which has everything to do with the fact that they failed to acquire skills regarding basic phonic rules they were taught in junior high school. As a result, they are unable to say the words without listening to the CD first or without the teacher's help, which follows that classes on frequently used phonic rules are a must in freshmen classes. By learning the basic phonic rules of words, the students are expected to unconsciously bridge the gap among the spelling, the sound and the meaning of the words. Also, looking at the words and speaking them out at the same time will certainly help retain the words for a longer period of time.

The freshmen classes suffer another frustration when taking the listening weekly test. Since they have received some listening training in junior high school so as to pass the listening test at the entrance examination and most of them found that listening test a breeze, they are not prepared to encounter frustration in their high school listening tests. They were stunned to find the tests challenging, or even frustrating, to them. They complained about the speed of the speaker, they whined about the cluster of "meaningless" sounds they had heard, and they failed to interpret / react to the variation in pronunciation of words when in different clusters. Then, the interplay of speaking and listening becomes again the focus. It is believed that once they get used to speaking by linking words or chunking sentences, or by noticing or even imitating the intonation and speed of the native speakers, their awareness of the

linguistic features mentioned above could be raised, which will lead to their better understanding the utterances they hear in the listening tests.

The very first challenge for the teacher of the freshmen classes actually lies not in the cognitive domain but in the affective domain.   Many freshmen have been long frustrated learners in junior high English classes.   They spent little time on the subject, paid little attention to teachers' instruction, and they simply gave up on English.   When they enter high school English classes, it seems to them a nightmare extended.   They have no faith either in the teacher or in themselves, not buying whatever learning techniques the teacher has suggested and refusing to learn as they have been convinced they are never to be an English learner.   Helping regain their long lost sense of achievement and thus build up their confidence in English learning seems to be the very step to take in getting the students to learn English. Getting frustrated learners to speak up might seem a castle in the air at first glance. However, the results prove the opposite.

II. Goals and Objectives

II. 1 Get students to speak up

After taking the speaking exercises, the freshmen students will be able to show progress both in fluency and accuracy.   They should be able to express themselves in simple but clear sentences, with the vocabulary and sentence patterns they have learned.   Their expressions should be comprehensible and meaningful. Furthermore, they are expected to feel more comfortable sharing with others their ideas in English as the course progresses.

II. 2 Help students retain new words

With the implemented speaking exercises, students will develop the habit of saying new words whenever they encounter them.   Under the teacher's guidance, they will attempt to read the words by syllables, notice the common word-sound connections, and be aware of the word-sound-meaning connection.   Moreover, students will be encouraged to apply the new words in their speech exercises.   In this way, these new words might be meaningful, in the context, and thus stay for a longer period of time.

II. 3 Improve students' listening proficiency

After one or two speaking exercises, a listening activity will be introduced to the class.   The activity will be arranged to help students apply the knowledge / skills they have gained in speaking exercises to listening activities.   For example, if the focus of speaking exercises in that period of time is on linking among phrases like "a lot of," that would be the focus of that following listening activity as well.

II. 4 Rebuild students' self- confidence

In the speaking exercises, students are urged, or forced in a sense, to speak English either to the teacher in person or to their classmates through a recording.   By fulfilling tasks which seems too challenging at first sight, students will receive remarkable sense of achievement when they hear themselves speak in English.   To make sure that no student refrain from speaking up, the teacher use the strategy of self- and peer-review.   Companionship has always been a critical kind of motivation for high school students.   They might feel unwelcome peer pressure, while at the same time, the urge to be a part of the group will give them a push out of their comfort zone.   After the upload, every student is required to listen to his/ her own recordings, and the recordings of his or her classmate. After that, he/ she will get a record of self- review and a comment from a classmate.   At the same time, students are encouraged to give their classmates a "Like" on the recordings.   A sense of achievement, a sense of making progress and companionship are expected to help rebuild students' self-confidence.

III. Getting Ready

III. 1 Teaching material for speaking exercises

A majority of the teaching materials chosen are the videos on Youtube. Videos are preferable as they offer visual aids in the learning process.   Students get to see how the native speakers say the words, and take notes as the learning focuses are shown on the screen.   After some try-outs, the teacher decide to use the series of videos by Rachel on Youtube (http://www.youtube.com./user/rachelsenglish)
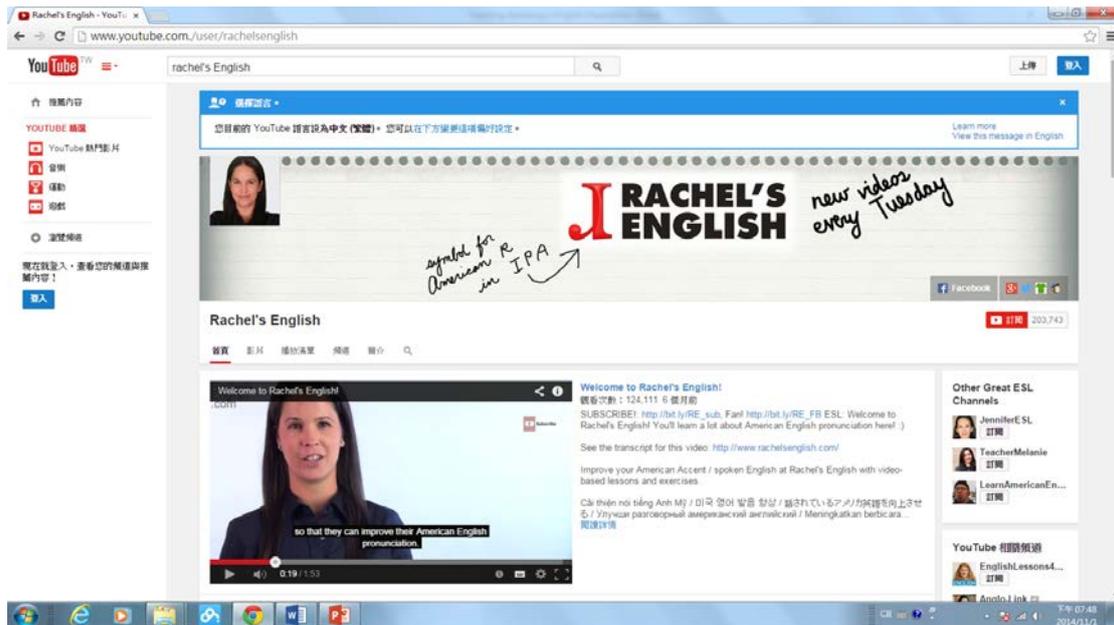
Rachel's English turns out to be an appropriate resource for American English speaking learning. All the videos have captions, which definitely helps when the freshmen watch the videos. In the videos, students finding it too challenging to go straight to linking and chunking exercises can gain access to information about how to pronounce each sound with specific guidance and demonstrations of mouth position by watching another pronunciation series on the same website.

Besides videos, many postcards and pictures are chosen as raw material for fluency exercises. Postcards and pictures that can easily be developed into a narrative are chosen. The teacher is trying to combine storytelling with speaking in these exercises, hoping to add spice to the speaking drills. In guiding the students to write a story of their own, some basic elements of a narrative, the concept of a twist for example, are introduced. It should be noted that the stories are usually limited to 50 words, as it wouldn't be a good idea for freshmen to sacrifice their fluency to memorize a long story. These materials will help students see what to say and how to put it in spoken English. Here's one example.

To connect English speaking exercises to their real life, an activity called Six-word Memoirs was planned.   In order to run the activity, many videos concerning what make up six-word memoirs were previously downloaded as guidelines.   Also, the teacher had collected great works online to show the freshmen what they were expected to produce.

III. 2 Setting up an environment for speaking exercises

As speaking exercises might be a big challenge to the freshmen who mostly have little experience of speaking English, an environment that facilitates the exercises is to be established.   The environment should meet the following requirements.

First, it should allow the teacher to post the teaching videos so that students can watch / listen to them after school.   For many students, for example, watching the demonstration on the chunking and linking of sentences only once will leave them in a panic.   While time won't permits it if the teacher plays the videos many times in class, it would be a better idea for the students to review them after school.   Also it saves them from embarrassment as they won't have to raise their hands and ask for reviews at the presence of their peers.

Second, it should provide easy built-in tools / devices for the students to upload their recordings.   A complicated uploading process would restrict them from refining their works in the process.

Third, it should allow the teacher and the students to offer immediate feedback. Since companionship is an affective factor in the learning process, whether the students get immediate feedback from the teacher and their peers is very important. Besides, the teacher offers instructions on etiquette when giving a comment or replying to comments. It is very important that the feedback should not undermine the friendly and comfortable atmosphere.

In this English speaking class, groups on Facebook function as the virtual environment. Students are familiar with the environment and they would have little difficulty uploading recordings, clicking "Likes," and giving or replying to comments.

搜尋朋友　　　　　　　Jennifer　首頁　尋找朋友　21

建議的社團　朋友的社團　當地社團　更多▾　　　　　　　＋建立社團

你管理的社團

新竹高工綜一乙英文學習圈　　　　　　　　　　　　　　＋加到「最愛」　❈

新竹高工綜一甲英文學習圈　　　　📷 新增封面相片　　＋加到「最愛」　❈

English Only! Let's Chat in English! 2　　📷 新增封面相片　　＋加到「最愛」　❈

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In the learning groups, students will get to interact with the teacher and the other students, read the announcements and reminders for the required tasks, and share their works. To arrange the works in a systematic way, the teacher hosts an event for each task. As the works are arranged in the order of the deadlines, it provides easy access to retrieving the recordings for self-review and peer-review later.

新竹高工綜一乙英文學習圈　成員　活動　相片　檔案

活動　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　＋辦活動　❈

上週

20141104 storytelling 故事蒐集區
2014年10月27日
Lorina Ch 和另外 39 位來賓　　　　　你是主辦人。

10 月

20141012-20141019 Listening & Speaking 音...
2014年10月20日
Lorina Ch 和另外 39 位來賓　　　　　你是主辦人。

20140922-20140928 Listening & Speaking...
2014年10月16日
Lorina Ch 和另外 39 位來賓　　　　　你是主辦人。

Six Word Memoirs 感想
2014年10月12日
Lorina Ch 和另外 39 位來賓　　　　　你是主辦人。

20140922-20140928 Listening & Speaking 音...
2014年10月11日
劉佑倫和另外 39 位來賓　　　　　　　你是主辦人。

9 月

Six Word Memoirs 作品暫存區
2014年9月20日
Lorina Ch 和另外 39 位來賓　　　　　你是主辦人。

III. 3 Recruiting staff / assistants

With many classes to take care of, it wouldn't be a good idea for the teacher to be the only manager of the groups.   In that case, the teacher recruits assistants in both classes and has them "pull in" the other classmates into the groups.   The assistants are also encouraged to furnish the group pages as they like.

IV. English Speaking Exercises

Each session of exercises is composed of mainly two parts, one which focuses on improving fluency, and the other on accuracy.   There is no definite answer as to which to do first.   The two parts are done alternately, thus forming a "teaching cycle":

To-do List for Speaking Exercises

IV. 1 Exercises Which Focus on Fluency

Exercises on fluency focus on what to say and how to make meaningful expressions. After all, the purpose of speaking is to communicate with others, to share with others what a person has in mind.   Students are encouraged to be creative and logical in presenting their stories and to say the sentences in American English.

IV. 1.1 Procedure

Each student is asked to organize their ideas into a short passage based on a photo or picture under guidance.   When the passage is finished, he discusses it with the teacher.   After the revisions are made, he posts it onto the group site on Facebook. In that way, he gets to share his ideas with his classmates and to see others' works. At the same time, he is free to made further revisions before the deadline set by the teacher.   After all the students have finished revising their stories, they have to practice reading out what they have written.   They are required to apply what they have learned in the accuracy exercises to their audio presentation.   To accomplish the task, they upload the recorded version they are satisfied with.

IV.1.2 One Activity Example

In this activity, each student was asked to write a six-word memoir about him- / herself, and make it into a poster.

After that, she made a recording, explaining to the listeners which six words she had chosen and why she had chosen them.   Generally speaking, students were free to put it in the way they liked it.   For students who had no idea what to say, the teacher led them through the task by asking them to finish three sentences:

Sentence one: I am <u>Name</u> from <u>Class</u>.
Sentence two: The six words I chose are <u>(read out the six words)</u>.
Sentence three: I chose these six words because <u>(the reason)</u>.

Most students followed the instruction, and some of them went further to explain the reasons in detail.

IV. 2 Exercises Which Focus on Accuracy

One purpose of doing these exercises is to raise students' awareness of the differences between Chinese and English.   Linking and chunking are not issues in Chinese since it's said character by character.   What's more, the rhythm and intonation in English is significantly different from Chinese.   Another purpose is to improve students' pronunciation and intonation.   However, perfection is not a requirement here as it may frustrate students.

IV. 2.1 Procedure

The teacher plays a video by Rachel's English in class, and talks about the learning focus for the week.   After class, the teacher posts the link to the video on Facebook group site.   The students have to watch the video, take notes, and say the

sentences to the teacher during the breaks.   By the end of the week, students record the sentences and upload their recordings to the Facebook groups.

IV. 3 Self- and Peer-review

After each "cycle" of the above exercises is completed, students are asked to listen to their own recordings again to pinpoint what progress they have made and what further improvement is needed.   Also, they are assigned a peer at random. They have to listen to the peer's recordings, and again point out what progress the speaker has made and what further improvement he could make.

IV. 4 Assessment

For each fluency exercise, grades are given according to how complete the contents are, whether the speaker has clear and comprehensible pronunciation, and whether the speaker has adopted the right tone and intonation.   On the other hand, no grades are given to single accuracy exercises.   Each speaker is given a grade by the end of the semester according to the progress he has made.

In fact, assessment is done throughout the whole process when the teacher listens to the students during the breaks.   The teacher gives more instruction to students who are puzzled or falling behind, does demonstrations at a lower speed for students who have failed to notice the gap between their performance and that of the speaker in the video, and offer mental support to students who are frustrated at not being able to satisfy their own expectations.   When the teacher finds that the exercise for the week has been too challenging to the students, the teacher gives further instruction in class, spends more time working one-on-one with students, and extends the uploading deadline.

V. Students' Feedback

Students were asked to finish a questionnaire after finishing the first session, or "cycle," of the exercises.   So far, they had finished the six-word memoirs fluency exercise, had gone through two exercises on accuracy, and were working on a storytelling fluency exercise.   The first question was about what they thought of the speaking activities.
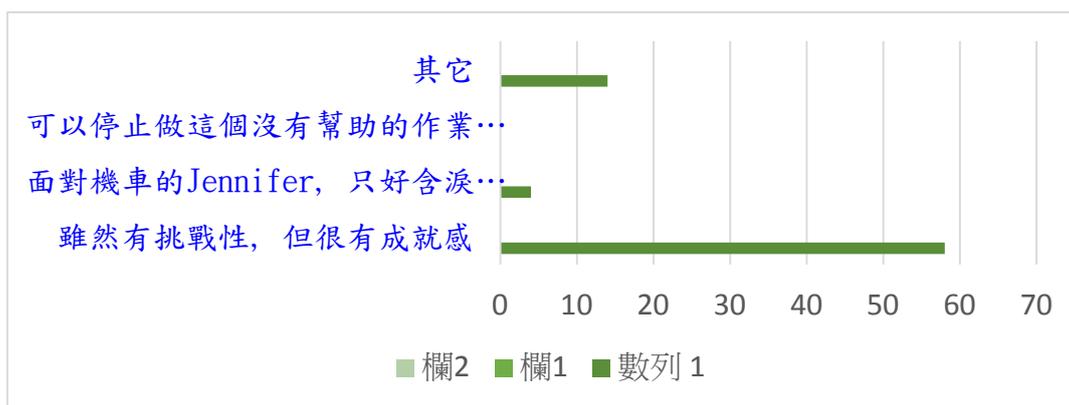
A majority of the students thought it was challenging but rewarding. Four out of 76 students admitted that they would not do such speaking exercises if not pushed by the teacher. Fourteen students thought they were not satisfied with their performance, and required more exercises to improve themselves. No students thought it meaningless.

The next question was about what students thought about recording and uploading. Most students thought they had learned from listening to their own recordings and to others' recordings. Five out of 76 thought it was a waste of their time. Some of them were frustrated by the technical problems, and some were the ones who were reluctant to do the speaking exercises.
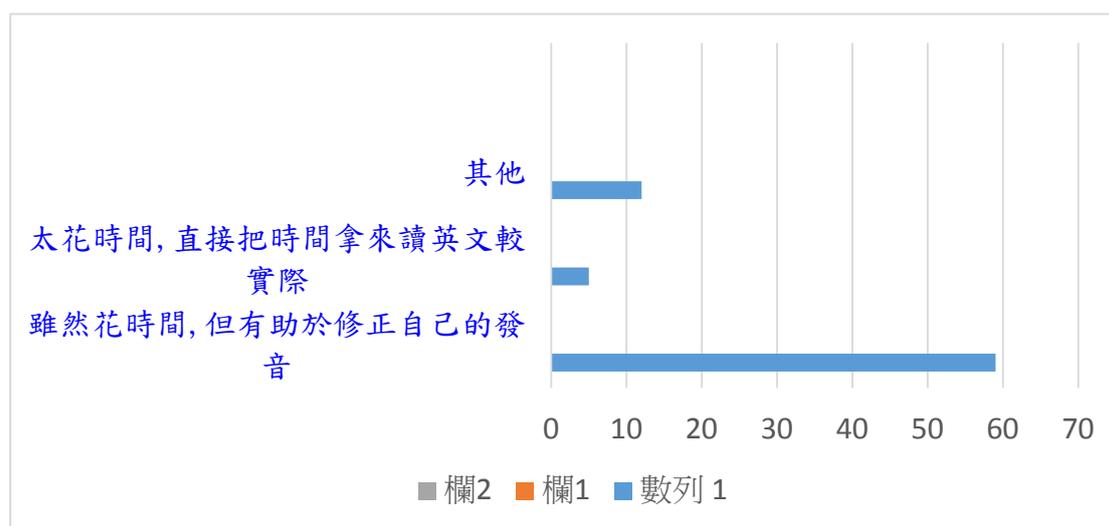
When asked if they were willing to do further speaking exercises, no student held a negative attitude.
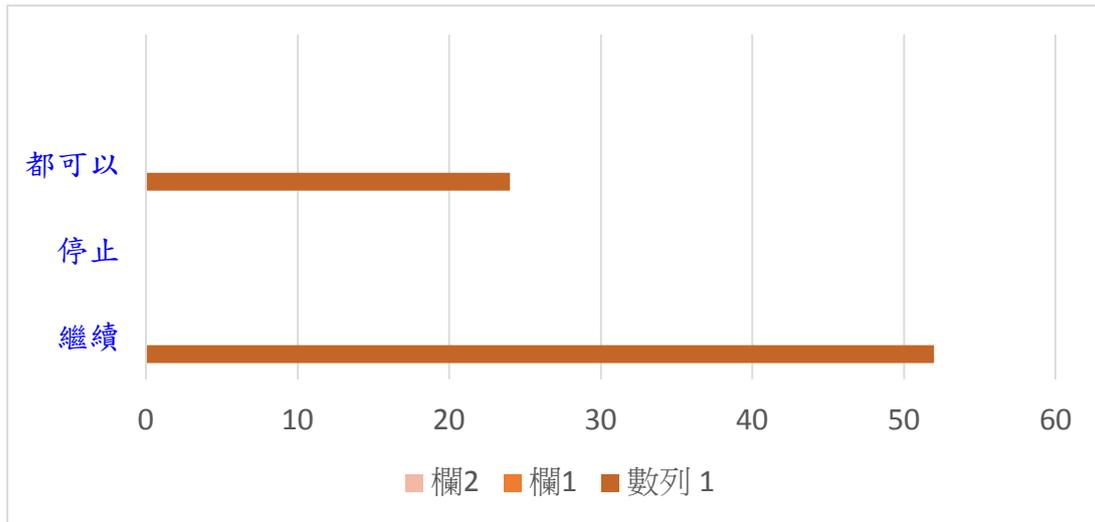
VI. Findings and Reflections

VI. 1 Why recording and uploading?

Originally, the recording and uploading requirements were strategies to keep students on track.   As it turns out, many students skipped the one-on-one instruction with the teacher either because they were too shy to speak in person or because they, in their own words, "forgot about the meeting."   They let it go because they think no one would notice it.   It was a different story when they had to upload the recordings onto the groups.   Each event was scheduled, and it was crystal clear when/if someone had failed to meet the deadline.   When classmates were going through the recordings, his / her "absence" might catch their attention.   Under such peer pressure, students would try to keep track of the deadlines.

However, as more exercises are done, these requirements turns out to be a good way to produce an audible profile of the students' progress.   In a sense, individual progress is recorded, which in turned transforms into motivation to keep students on track.   Moreover, these requirements facilitate self-review and peer-review.   Take one student for example.   In her first exercise, six-word memoir recording, which was done before much instruction on speaking had been given, she said her sentences word by word and in Chinese intonation.   As a result, one sentence she said went like this:

The six words I chose are "don't be afraid just be myself."

It was quite obvious that she had no idea of linking and chunking.   Instead of saying

Thesixwordsichoseare (pause) don'tbeafrad (pause) justbemyself

she said it this way:

The (pause) six (pause) words (pause) I (pause) are (pause) ….

That is, she said every word at the same pace with the same intonation.   In second exercise, she had a rough idea of linking and chunking, so her sentences went like this:
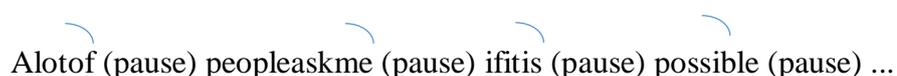
Alotof (pause) peopleaskme (pause) ifitis (pause) possible (pause) ...

She did quite well in terms of linking and chunking, but she did the intonation the Chinese way.   In the third exercise, she noticed the problem and, being a hardworking student herself, she made great improvement:

Thismorning (pause) forbreakfast (pause), Ihad …

With some students questioning the necessity of recording their exercises and uploading them to the Facebook group, the teacher decided to conduct an experiment. The link to a music video, *Safe and Sound* by Capital City, was posted to the group site.   A worksheet in the form of a quiz about the lyrics was enclosed.   The teacher told the class that an online quiz was to be done and they should take the quiz themselves.   After the record of the group showed that all the students had watched the video, the teacher gave the two classes an in-class quiz with only one question: what is the title of the song?   With the worksheet and the fact that the title came out in the lyrics more than 20 times, students were supposed to be quite familiar with the title.   However, the result showed that many students failed to pay enough attention to details.   On the other hand, when they were to record what they said, students paid more attention to the details.

VI. 2 Speaking as a Tool to Boost Confidence

It is quite a big challenge for the teacher to persuade the students to believing in themselves.   To most of them, speaking English in English classes is an overwhelming task they would never be able to accomplish.   A very small number of students showed their willingness to take the challenge when the teacher first talked about the speaking exercises, while most of the students didn't conceal their astonishment and despair.   Many students gave a long sigh of relief every time after the one-on-one instruction with the teacher.   It's quite obvious that they had been under great pressure.   However, in the second or third exercise, they grew comfortable speaking English to the teacher or in their recording.   In fact, it took less than a month for all this to happen.   The teacher noticed the transformation in attitude toward English speaking, and even English learning.   They got more involved in class discussion as they started to believe they themselves had the capability to take the challenge and conquer it.

VI. 3 Companionship as Motivation

In the whole process, companionship / peer pressure played a critical role in getting students out of their comfort zone and to speak up, running the risk of "losing face." Some students who hesitated in recording their sentences uploaded their recordings when they saw peers were doing it. When one student thought his recording boring and added one of his favorite songs as the background music, other students thought it cool and started to do the same in their recordings. Some of them even went further to make their recordings into a movie, and add captions and background music. Boring drills and embarrassing recordings turned into a creative and exciting activity. So far, no student out of the 76 has refused or been late in turning in their recordings.

VI. 4 Individual Learning with In-time Support

Getting students to speak up and getting them to be aware of the features and to accomplish the task takes time. With such a tight schedule in the English classroom, it is quite impossible for the teacher to implement speaking teaching classes. With the help of technology and online community, some learning tasks could be done after school, but there is still need for teacher's in-time support. Some students might need more demonstrations or instruction one-on-one. Some might need more mental support to keep them from panic. When many students were failing the task in one-on-one instruction session, the teacher gave further instruction in class and gave a more reviewed of the learning focus for that week. Sometimes, the teacher might lower the requirements if the task turned out to be too challenging.

VI. 5 Teacher as Catalyst / Facilitator

It was the teacher who set the schedule, it was the teacher who chose the videos, but it was the students who decided what they were to say in their fluency exercises and what kind of presentation they were to show to others through recordings. The teacher was not the only one but among the others who gave positive feedback and constructive criticism for the students' works. The teacher was not the only one students could reach when there were technical problems or puzzles. Through the groups on Facebook, students raised their questions, shared their experiences in problem solving, and spared no encouragement to one another. The students learned from others' sharing and learned by sharing. The teacher followed all along, making sure things were on track, but she was not the only who did the talking.

VII. Conclusion

At first sight, the exercises should have been a breeze for students. It turned out that the teacher had underestimated the impact of the affective variables and the differences in readiness among students. The syllabus was delayed, but it was rewarding. The students have learned to read, listen, speak and write in English, they have learned to face the challenge and acquire a sense of achievement, and they have learned to listen to others and learn to share.

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Appendix A Self- / Peer-review Worksheet

Review on Listening & Speaking Exercises

Class _____ No. _____ Name _____

Schedule (請打勾)	Six-word Memoirs 上傳　　　　□ 已完成　□ 未完成 Listening & Speaking 20140928 上傳　□ 已完成　□ 未完成 Listening & Speaking 20141019 上傳　□ 已完成　□ 未完成
Time Spent	從練習到上傳, Listening & Speaking 20141019 約 _____ 小時
What I've learned	具體列出你由練習中所習得之知識： Ex. t 夾在兩個母音之間時，會由無聲子音改成有聲子音
Self - Review	聆聽已上三個檔案之後，我發現自己有進步的地方是 聆聽已上三個檔案之後，我發現自己尚待改進的地方是

Peer - Review	我所聆聽的是 _____ 號同學
	聆聽已上三個檔案之後，我發現該位同學有進步的地方是
	聆聽已上三個檔案之後，我發現該位同學尚待改進的地方是