# Increasing students' oral input and practice: a course website for speaking and listening: Developing speaking skills by increasing implicit knowledge

**Giles Witton-Davies, 朱杰佑 : National Taiwan University**

## 1. INTRODUCTION: Rationale and Aims of the Project

Speaking classes (also known as conversation and oral training classes) are common at universities in Taiwan, particularly in English and foreign language departments. They are seen as necessary because of certain limitations of English classes in elementary and high schools, where the medium of instruction is almost always Chinese, and the focus is mostly on written English, with few opportunities for listening and speaking. Teachers also emphasise explicit knowledge of English, by focusing on memorisation of grammar rules and vocabulary lists, rather than building implicit knowledge required for oral communication. University speaking classes aim to make up for these deficiencies, providing university students with the chance to use their knowledge of English communicatively, and to lose their fear of speaking the language.

However, there are various problems with speaking classes, as outlined in more detail in the literature review below. These problems can be put in two categories, one being the lack of genuinely communicative language use, and the other being the lack of sufficient language input for students to gain a strong implicit knowledge of the language. On the first point, speaking classes often focus more on the written than the spoken language, simply because it is much easier to do so. The kinds of speaking activities that are taught and practiced reflect written more than oral language, with the memorisation and recital of written texts, prepared speeches and written dialogues being more common than conversation, discussion or role play, which require more spontaneous and communicative speech. With respect to the second point, little attempt is made to provide students with useful models of spontaneous speech which could serve as comprehensible input, and help to build implicit knowledge of English. Massive input of this kind is required for successful language acquisition. Implicit knowledge, as explained below, is the basis for fluent speech, and is distinct from the explicit knowledge that is focused on in most classrooms in Taiwan, even at university level.

This project aimed to enable and encourage students to increase their exposure to spoken English, while also using new ways to increase speaking practice outside and beyond the classroom. Students were encouraged to watch and listen to videos, programmes, podcasts and films, and to share their experiences, so as to encourage still more watching and listening. This idea was inspired by the experience of several students in recent years who had managed to improve their English dramatically simply by watching and listening to English for enjoyment, without any explicit learning purpose. Students were also asked to record video logs (vlogs), so as to provide out-of-class speaking practice. A website was used to enable the sharing of all these materials – both what students watched and what they recorded.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Problems with current oral English classes

One problem with speaking is its intrinsically ephemeral nature. It is hard to observe and analyse objectively what people say. As a result, teachers may focus only on what is most obvious and easiest deal with – i.e. errors and correction. This builds their explicit knowledge, but may not

affect their implicit knowledge, as explained below. Of course, speech can be recorded, but listening to and analysing such recordings takes vast amounts of time. Meanwhile, interrupting students when they are speaking, in order to make contributions, corrections and suggestions, may be helpful in some ways, but it changes the nature of that speech: the fluency is lost, and the focus shifts from communication to the language itself. It is also unclear whether correction actually helps students improve their spoken accuracy. Truscott has produced compelling evidence that it does not, and that increasing input is of far more value (Truscott, 1999, 2015).

A related problem is that, as speech is ephemeral, speaking classes often rely on written and formal styles of language as input and output. Many teachers rely mainly on oral presentations in their classes, where speaking is often scripted and memorised beforehand, so key elements in the processes of speech production – namely conceptualisation and formulation (Levelt, 1989) - are left out. Giving speeches and presentations has its value, but does not equip students for other, more everyday and interactive kinds of speech. Speaking should be taught mostly through speaking spontaneously and communicatively, rather than as a memorisation task or a reading aloud exercise. The question is therefore how we can have students speak spontaneously, and improve their spontaneous speech, without making that speech sound scripted and unnatural.

Another problem for teachers is that it is often hard to measure improvement in the students' English, and problems with fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation persist, despite their best efforts in this regard. A major reason for this problem is an imbalance among most Taiwanese students between their explicit and implicit knowledge. There is much evidence from both theory (Levelt, 1989) and practice (Ellis, 2009) that speaking spontaneously relies mainly on implicit, rather than implicit, knowledge. However, the kind of English teaching students receive in Taiwan, including most teaching at university, addresses explicit knowledge of grammar and vocabulary (what Krashen calls "learning"), rather than the implicit knowledge that comes from extensive exposure to English though listening and reading – "acquisition", in Krashen's terminology (Krashen, 1981).

Further evidence for the reality of the distinctions made above comes studies of speaking errors and their subsequent correction. It has been shown that when Taiwanese learners speak English, they make mistakes that they know to be mistakes, and which they can easily correct if presented with a record of what they have said (Witton-Davies, 2004, 2017). This is best explained through the explicit/ implicit knowledge distinction. When people speak, they do not have time to access their explicit knowledge, but rely on implicit knowledge, which often includes many first language norms and rules.

Therefore, rather than simply repeating the language-focused instruction that students have already experienced at schools, the aim of speaking classes should be to help them to experience more of the language and acquire deeper, implicit knowledge. This proposal aims to find ways of helping students improve their speaking skills by building a more solid base of implicit knowledge. This will involve providing opportunities for greater quantities of language input and output.

One additional observation has also played a role in prompting this research idea. This is purely anecdotal evidence, but in recent years I have spoken to several students with very high levels of oral proficiency, with levels close to that of students who have lived and studied abroad, yet who have only studied English at school in Taiwan. Some of them have also said that they used to be bad at English at school, until they started watching a lot of YouTube videos and programmes. They all attributed their current ability at speaking English to this habit. The evidence presented below suggests that they may be right.

## 2.2 Explicit and implicit knowledge

Krashen (1981) used the terms *learning* and *acquisition* to refer on the one hand to the conscious study of rules for the use of a language, and on the other to the unconscious assimilation of the ability to use the language correctly, through exposure to it in spoken or written form. He argued that only acquisition is really useful for using the language communicatively, as most of what we say and write depends on this type of knowledge. Learning can only play a role when there is time for monitoring of language production, as is the case when we edit our own writing or do grammar exercises. Schmidt (1990) used the terms "conscious" and "unconscious" knowledge in a paper where he argued, against Krashen, that all learning must be in some way conscious, as noticing was essential for learning to take place. His ideas have been challenged by Truscott (2015), who argued that the ideas of noticing, attention, awareness-of-input, awareness-of-form-in-input and awareness of rules have been confused, particularly by those following up on Schmidt's ideas.

In recent years, the terms explicit and implicit knowledge have commonly been used to refer to this key distinction between deliberate, conscious learning, and effortless, unconscious acquisition, and there have been several book-length treatments of the topic (N. C. Ellis, 1994; R. Ellis, 2009; Rebuschat, 2015; Sanz & Leow, 2011). A parallel distinction is that between declarative and procedural knowledge (Anderson, 1983; Johnson, 1996). In the field of education, similar distinctions are made between deductive and inductive knowledge, or between propositional and practical intelligence (Sternberg, 2000). The common thread in all of these distinctions, in the context of language learning, is that knowing about a language in theory (e.g. its vocabulary and grammar rules) is distinct from being able to use that language in practice, as for example when we need to speak and write it spontaneously. One kind of knowledge or skill does not necessarily require, or even imply, the other. Most language teachers will recognize what this means in practice: learners may study grammar rules many times but still break them when speaking spontaneously. Conversely, most people are unaware of the rules for using their mother-tongue, and certainly unable to formulate them, but they are still generally able to use the language successfully for oral and written communication.

Both of the two main theories of language acquisition emphasise the importance of implicit, unconscious learning. Taking a generally generativist, Chomskian approach, Sharwood Smith and Truscott (2014) argued that the morpho-syntactical aspects of language production are not open to conscious intervention at all, as they are processed automatically in a specially dedicated language module. On the other hand, from an emergentist perspective, Nick Ellis (2002) illustrated how grammar learning could be explained as a process of statistical tallying and reproduction of the most frequent patterns emerging from language input, a process which also takes place without conscious awareness.

The importance of implicit language for speaking is that without it, learners cannot approach satisfactory levels of oral fluency. Explicit knowledge alone may be sufficient for writing, but requires too much time and effort to be sufficient for speaking a language in real time.

## 2.3 Input

Krashen (1981) has researched and written extensively on the vital role played by input in language acquisition, and on the value of self-directed, "pleasure reading" (Krashen, 2004). For Krashen this input is alone sufficient for successful language acquisition, while others, including Schmidt (1990), Swain (1995) Paradis (2009), Long (2015) and others, argue for the need for some kind of attention to form or forms for learners to acquire correct language usage. However, even

those arguing for the need for grammar teaching and correction generally accept the central importance of input, which can only come in the form of reading or listening to sample of the target language. Grammar teaching also provides input in the form of models of correct language use, but few would regard this alone as motivating or as likely to provide the basis of implicit knowledge that people need to speak and write a language well.

Interesting reading materials will motivate learners to read more, and the more they read, the more they will acquire the implicit knowledge of the language that they need. The same applies to listening. Thus input is a necessary condition for acquiring a language, and the more motivating that input is, the more students will search for it, and the more they will be exposed to. Krashen and his associates have carried out invaluable research on the benefits of pleasure reading (Sy-ying Lee, 2005, 2007; Mason, 2004), but less is known about how watching and listening for pleasure can promote speaking ability .

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The main thrust of this project was to increase and direct in a fruitful way the work that students do out of class. We continued to use many tried and tested activities, materials and routines during the two periods of class held each week, one lasting two hours and the other one hour. The kind of listening, watching and vlogging activities that this project was intended to encourage were, however, not suitable for work in class, as each student needed to find what most interested and motivated them. It was also hoped that watching, listening and vlogging habits could be created that would continue in the future, long after the course had ended.

Central to this teaching project was the idea of a class website for speaking and listening activities. The website provided a central hub for the exchange of ideas, recommendations and comments on suitable and enjoyable listening materials, including audio recordings, videos and films. It was also be the place where students were be asked to upload their own video recordings, in the form of video logs (vlogs). The platform used was Google Classroom, and this was where assigments were posted, and students made posts with links to what they had watched or listened to, and to their vlogs.

*Sharing of interesting and accessible listening materials*

The class was asked to share anything had enjoyed, as long as it was available free on the internet and used English, including videos and video channels on video-sharing sites, films, TV programmes, songs, radio programmes, podcasts, audio-books and any websites that include sound and video clips. There is such a variety of material available that there is something to suit all tastes, and once students have decided what they like and where to find it, in most cases they need no further prompting to listen and watch more. Indeed some students were already familiar with such resources and materials and watched them regularly of their own free will before the course began.

Most students, however, needed help and encouragement to get them started, and this was where this project aimed to help, with the teacher, teaching assistants, and fellow-students (through their suggestions on the website) providing suggestions and encouragement. Although ideally watching and listening to materials in English would be voluntary and done purely out of interest and for pleasure, it was felt that students might be lazy when it came to looking for new materials and resources, and so they would need encouragement and even an element of obligation – with for example a minimum requirement to watch and comment on at least one item for each assignment. Students who failed to do so were given further mild and gentle encouragement. However, this was

not done in a heavy handed way, as that would risk depriving students of the intrinsic motivation for listening, namely enjoyment. If listening and watching became a chore they had to do for classes, students would not be so keen to do it when not forced to do so. As a result, they would do less listening and watching, especially after the end of the course, and in the end they would acquire less English. A key idea of this project was to create sustainable and continuing habits that would lead to further learning long after the end of this course.

*Uploading of spoken recordings*

While listening activities are essential for building the kind of implicit knowledge required for a good command of the spoken language, output is also needed in order to practice using this knowledge for speaking in communicative situations and under the pressure of time. During the class time available, pair- and group-work was used to ensure a maximum amount of practice for the whole class. However, an innovation of this project was that students were also asked to film or record themselves speaking out of class, and to upload a link to these recordings to the course web-page. This took the form of video logs (vlogs).

As with the listening materials, the emphasis was on making all such activity creative, free of unnecessary restraint, interactive where possible, and above all stimulating and fun to produce, watch and listen to. There were many possibilities for doing video recordings, and while some topics were predetermined, as students were very unsure of what to do, later the topic was left open, so that students could choose how and what to record. Monitoring of comments and materials on the website was carried out by the two teaching assistants,who regularly checked, read, watched and listened to uploads, as well as keeping a list of who did what, making comments, and giving scores.

*Pleasure Reading*

Despite the focus on technology, videos, podcasts and recording, I continued to emphasise another rich source of input, namely reading. Reading was for a long time the best and almost the only way for students to have access to unlimited input, and it has enabled many learners to reach a high level of proficiency in foreign languages. Regular class time was provided for students to talk about what they were reading, and share their thoughts, while each semester ended with a book fair, where students prepared posters and took turns to talk more extensively about their books to visiting groups of classmates.

**In class work:**

In class we continued to focus on activities that were impossible, or are less likely, to be done online and through the website. This included communicative speaking tasks in pairs and groups, teacher feedback, language focused work, and oral tests. These are activities I have developed over many years and found to be successful and popular with students. I feel that class time is best used for interaction and communication through spontaneous speech, opportunities for which are rare for most students outside the classroom. The web page, watching and listening recommendations, and vlogs were all supplementary to these activities, and were mainly to be attended to outside classes. Vlogging involves prepared, and in many cases scripted, speech, and is a suitable out-of-class assignment that reflects the way people do vlogging in the real world.

## 4. RESULTS

Improving speaking, and increasing implicit knowledge, is a long-term process, and it could not be expected that there would be sudden, dramatic increases in speaking skills over the nine month duration of this course. My own previous research has shown that over four years at university, lower level students who specialise in English do improve somewhat in their fluency, while higher level students show little change, or may even appear to regress (Witton-Davies, 2014). It seems that in the latter case it is vocabulary that improves the most. Visible or audible improvement in speaking over shorter time periods is hard to come by, and difficult to measure. This is especially so while students are studying here in Taiwan, where they have limited opportunities to listen and speak outside class.

As expected, the main outcome of this project was that students spent much more time both speaking and listening than they had previously. It is likely that over time this will lead to greater confidence in speaking English, greater fluency, and a gradual increase in implicit knowledge, which will allow for continuing development in students' future lives. Students completed the listening, watching and vlogging assignments well, and generally reported that they found these useful and enjoyable. Teaching / research assistant support was essential for monitoring this work, giving feedback and encouraging students to do more.

It was in any case a principal aim of this project to foster learner autonomy, and an ability for students to learn in future by themselves through continuing with similar activities to the ones encouraged in this class. It was therefore hoped that the students involved would benefit more in the long term that in the short term. If students are inspired to continue watching videos, programmes and films, while also listening to sound recordings in English, they certainly have a much better chances of long term improvement. Unfortuntely, it is hard to measure learning over the long term, and even more difficult to determine what factors cause greater or lesser success.

Having said that, the following are some of the main ways in which the project was evaluated, both formally and informally.

1. Listening logs: these listed the listening and watching students did, and showed how successful I was in encouraging them to listen to more English. The sheer quantity of listening was an important factor in itself.

2. Vlog and other audio and video posts: these too were evidence of students practising their speaking out of class. The more of such posts, the better. The length of recordings, the fluency of speech, and the range and accuracy of language was seen to improve during the course of the year.

3. I also asked students for oral and written feedback on the class. This was a way to elicit their views and feelings on the course, and on its innovations. Positive responses were a sign that some things had gone well, while negative feedback was also a valuable source of feedback on what needed to be changed or done better in future.

4. Pre- and post-tests might be thought of as an ideal way to provide a more objective measure of progress, or a lack of it, due to the innovations of this project. Oral tests were be given both early on and at the end of the course, and these could theoretically be compared for fluency, pronunciation and the range and accuracy of vocabulary and grammar. However, a period of nine months is too short to notice a change in proficiency, especially when this

teaching project was aimed at long-term improvement through increased input, rather than short term changes. Moreover, any changes that were detected could not be attributed to the project's innovations, as they might equally be due to normal classroom activities, or even learning taking place in other classes.

The first assignments through google classroom involved asking students to listen and watch, the idea being to build up students confidence and experience of spoken English. They were asked to report twice on a video or programme they had watched, and once on a podcast, which was a novelty to most students. They showed enthusiasm in doing this, sharing their recommendations on Google Classroom, and discovering new possibilities through the recommendations of others. Podcasts in particular proved very popular with some students, who expressed the wish to continue listening to podcasts when travelling and commuting.

First reactions to being asked to record vlogs were strongly negative, not only because students were concerned about the technicalities of video recording, but also because they were worried about recording themselves on camera. These concerns led me to delay the recording of vlogs while students got used to speaking English freely in class, and lost some of their inhibitions. They were also reassured that they did not need to film themselves if they did not want to, and could instead show images of other things, places, computer screenshots etc. Thus in the end, vlogging did not begin until the second semester. There were three assignments, the first one being to talk about something that happened during the winter vacation, the second to talk about the place where they lived, and the third being left open for them to choose. The length of vlogs increased, but more importantly the ambition, style and language improved very noticeably. Their first efforts were hesitant and on the dull side, while later vlogs showed much greater technical and linguistic ability, and appeared rather professional in comparison to the first vlogs.

***Table 1: reading books chosen in the first semester.***

| | |
|---|---|
| A Good Fall, Ho Jin | Tiger's Curse, Colleen Houk |
| Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde, R.L. Stevenson | Song of Achilles, Madeline Miller |
| The Invisible Man, H.G. Wells | Circe, Madeline Miller |
| 1974, David Peace | The Phantom of the Opera,Gaston Leroux |
| 13 Reasons Why, Jay Asher | Call Me by your Name, Andre Acimen |
| The Alchemist, Paulo Coelhi | Norwegian Wood, Haruki Murakami |
| More than Words, Jill Santopolo | Death on the Nile, Agatha Christie |
| The Giver, Lois Lowry | The Host, Stephanie Meyer |
| The Light We Cannot See, Anthony Doerr | |

For their pleasure reading, students chose books they found interesting and read at least one each semester. They were encouraged to choose modern, easy-to-read books written in prose, and preferably fiction rather than non-fiction, as such books tend to lend themselves better to pleasure reading. They seemed to enjoy making their own choices of reading books, and reading things that were less difficult and more entertaining than the literature they usually have to read in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures. Table 1 shows their book choices in the first semester.

*Student feedback from questionnaires*

***Table 2: Students views of the course activities.***

| | Yes | No | Unsure |
|---|---|---|---|
| Was it useful to recommendations of watching & listening materials? | 8 | 3 | 2 |
| Was it useful to record vlogs? | 10 | 1 | 2 |
| Does recording vlogs build speaking skills? | 4 | 3 | 6 |
| Was it useful to read books for this class? | 10 | | 3 |

Tables 2 (above) and 3 (below) show some of the students' reactions to their watching/ listening, reading, and vlogging assignments, as expressed in the student end-of-year questionnaire. With respect to Table 2, while some found the listening and watching assignments unnecessary, as they already watched many videos, programmes and films in English, many were motivated to do more than previously, and all agreed that such exposure to English was useful. The strongest favourable response was to the vlogs, which students found daunting and challenging at first, but quickly improved at, with a marked improvement in the length and quality of vlogs over time.

***Table 3: How students felt about continuing with course activities in the future. They were asked whether they would do these activities more or less than they did before they took the course.***

| | Less | Unsure | More |
|---|---|---|---|
| Watching, listening | | 3 | 11 |
| Reading | | 1 | 13 |
| Recording | 5 | 0 | 9 |

With respect to Table 3, when it came to what students would do in the future, the great majority of students (eleven) stated that they would continue to read, watch and listen to English materials, with three saying they might do so or were unsure. On the other hand, nine students thought they would continue recording themselves speaking English, while five said they definitely would not do so, as it was too time-consuming.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The promotion of watching and listening achieved success in encouraging those students who were not used to watching or listening in English to do so, and in helping those who already watched and listened in English to find more sources of interesting materials. The recording of vlogs was a challenging, but popular and rewarding, activity for the whole class. It seems that many students from this class were given useful ideas for developing their English skills autonomously in future, through continuing with at least some of these activities.

While the novelty of watching and listening to English for pleasure seems to offer a valuable way for many students to take interest and expose themselves to more spoken English, it should be emphasised the students also benefitted from, and greatly appreciated, other well-established activities, such as those done in class time, and the pleasure reading they did during the year. In many ways, reading for pleasure was also a novel idea for many students, and was one of the things they were most likely to continue with in future.

There were some limitations and disappointments. The sharing of watching and listening was less successful that had been hoped, with several students stating that they did not have any interest in other students' recommendations, and did not look to see what things their classmates watched or listened to. It seems that a web page for such recommendations is insufficient, and other ways of sharing need to be found, such as more in-class discussions or perhaps a programme-fair similar to the book fair. As for the vlogs, while these were valued, only a minority of students seem enthusiastic about continuing to vlog in future.

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