iLife, ESL, and Past Tense

Benjamin L. McMurry
Brigham Young University
English Language Center



Background Information

The Institution

The English Language Center (ELC) at Brigham Young University (BYU) is an Intensive English Program (IEP) for international students. The ELC serves two purposes. First, it provides student teachers with priceless teaching experience and secondly, it helps international students develop the necessary English skills to excel in English speaking Universities. Currently, there are approximately 250 students from various countries around the globe. The ELC has 5 levels of proficiency ranging from Novice to High-Intermediate. At each level the students have four classes: Grammar, Reading, Writing, and Listening/Speaking.

The Class

The activity described here involved an Intermediate Listening & Speaking class. The course focuses on helping students develop communicative skills in speaking and listening to better communicate with classmates as well as with faculty and staff. It also serves as a bridge between conversational speech and giving formal presentation.

The curriculum for Listening & Speaking courses at the ELC is task-based. in other words, students are taught how to perform certain tasks and are expected to be able to do so with little or no problem.

Example of tasks taught to these students include:

- manage a conversation
- talk about a past experience
- compare two objects

The Students

Thirty-seven students participated in this activity. As indicated from the level of the course, the majority of the students have an intermediate level of proficiency in spoken English. They come from Mexico, South Korean, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, Chile, Columbia, Bolivia, Venezuela, Mali, Honduras, El Salvador and Brazil. They speak Spanish, Portuguese, French, Bambara, Korean, Japanese, Cantonese, and Mandarin. Their ages range from 17 - 50 years old. Some have been in the US for years, while others only a few months.



The Objective

Task-Based Objective: Tell about the Past

Talking about the past is one of the first steps language learners take that pushes them beyond basic proficiency in a language. It's quite simple to talk about things as they are. Most basic foreign language courses start off by helping students learn to talk about their family or describe their favorite food. These topics are easy because they discuss current issues. Cognitively, they are fresh in the students' minds. Linguistically, they are using simple present tense. In English, this happens to be an easy tense to use. One of the hardest grammar objects that students struggle with is using the past tense correctly. With regard to discourse, order is often not important in the present, but in the past it becomes essential in order to effectively convey meaning. Putting events in order and using the correct tense can be very intense for some students.

With this objective, as a teacher I need to help the students use correct vocabulary to tell a past story in the right order. I need to make sure that they give appropriate details and use the correct verb tenses.

As part of the objective, students are given some ideal situations in which they can practice this past tense story telling. They include talking about the following situations:

- Frightening Experience Fire
- Frightening Experience Car accident
- Frightening Experience Getting Lost
- Most Embarrassing Moment

The Problem

The objective seems quite straight forward, and it is. One of the problems I have seen with my students is a lack of motivation to talk about these topics. I thought about changing them, but realized that there were two main reasons they didn't want to talk about them. First, they are hard topics. Many of the students really struggle with talking about the past and using appropriate vocabulary. It makes it even more difficult to talk about a subject that might bring strong emotions to the forefront of their mind which pushes their language abilities to the extreme. This makes these topics very effective, but it is still more difficult for students to talk about these rather than something more simple such as talking about their first day of school. Second, the students don't feel a need to get every aspect perfect so long as the main idea comes through to those they are talking to. They would get everything right but mispronounce the -ed at the end of a past tense verb. Or they would get everything else right but forget to use proper transitions or put the events in order.

The Solution

As I pondered what could be done to make this objective more accessible to my students I realized two needs.

First, students need to be in an environment where they can talk about these experiences without fear or they need to be able to create their own fictional stories. Most students went for a fictional story, but a few, when working with others, decided to tell their own story, or combine it with other true or fictitious events.

Second, the students needed to know that every aspect of language needed to be correct. The assignment needed to be such that they realized that others may be confused my simple grammar mistakes or poor organization.

The resulting idea was to produce some student videos. And unlike typical ESL videos, these needed to help them disguise themselves to lower pressure, but increase the importance of nearing perfection in their accuracy.

The Assignment

Overview

The student videos would be comprised of two parts. First, the students were to draw their story as if it were a comic. Second, the students would narrate the story.

Preparation

1. The students were divided into groups of four or five.

- 2. Each group was assigned one of the four topics:
 - Frightening Experience Fire
 - Frightening Experience Car accident
 - Frightening Experience Getting Lost
 - Most Embarrassing Moment

3. Each group brainstormed to find a good story to tell for their assigned topic.

- 4. The students then began to take turns drawing pictures to go with their stories.
- 5. While not drawing, the other students would review and practice their portion of the speaking part.

During this portion the students had great authentic language use. **Brainstorming** - The students told personal stories about their past while thinking of good topics. The students negotiated ideas as they decided on a story whether fictional or real.

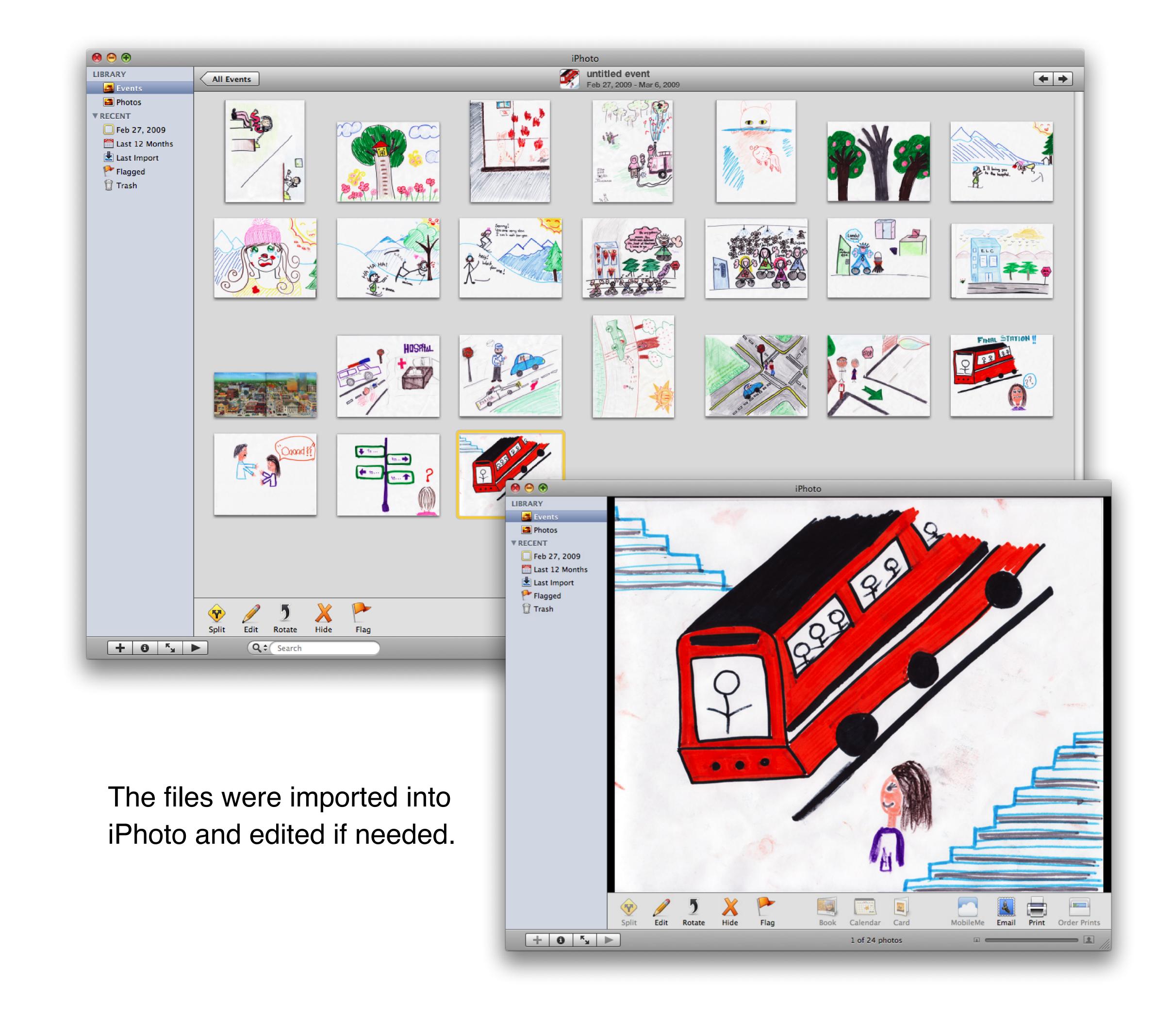
Practicing - The students were able to use more language as they practiced their presentation. They helped one another and corrected each other.

The Project

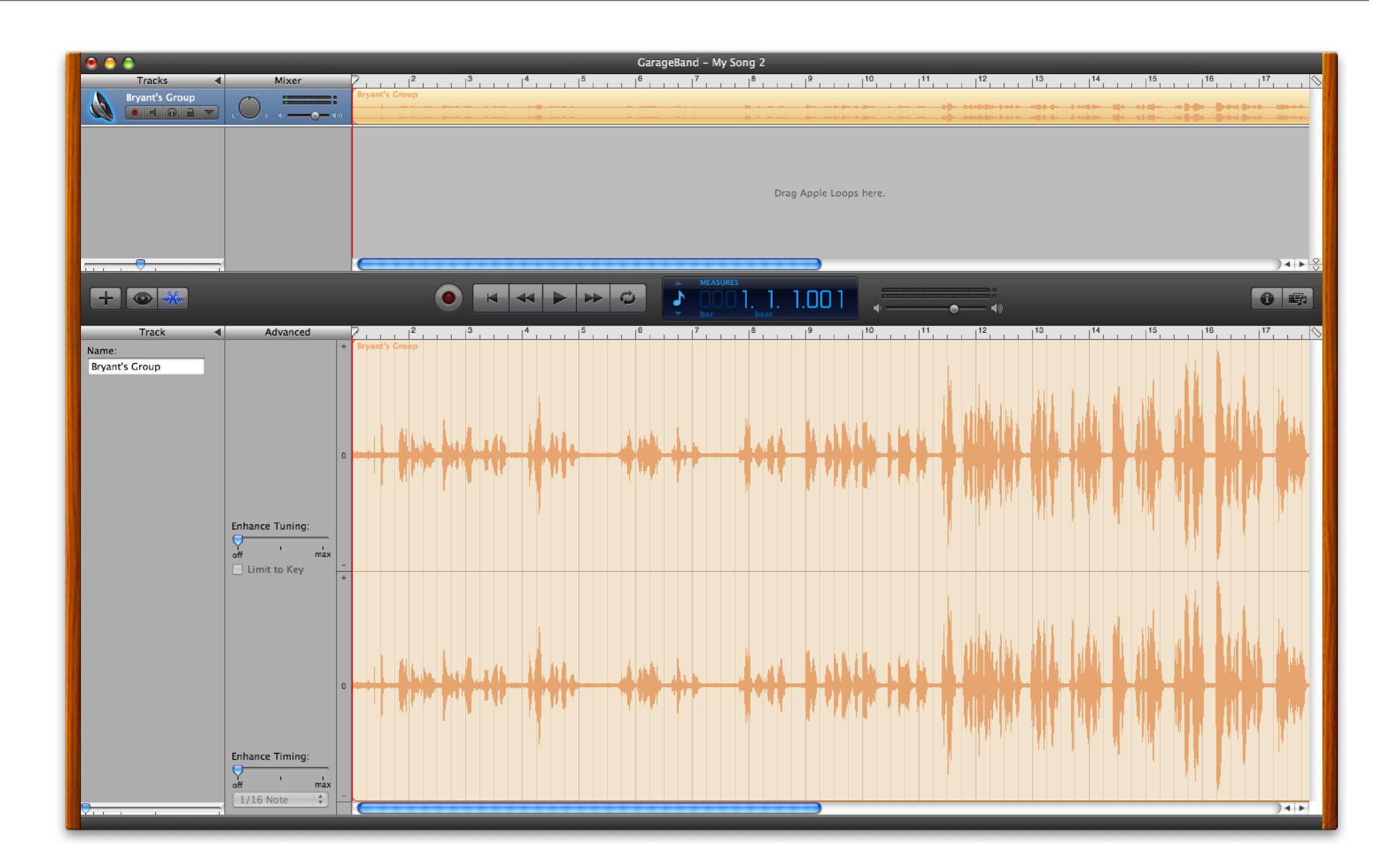
1. The students pictures were scanned and imported into iPhoto where they were edited.

 Students recorded their dialogs using GarageBand, Sound Studio or WireTap Studio Pro. The students used iMacs with their built in microphones.
 The audio and pictures were imported into iMovie where it was all put together.

IPhoto



GarageBand



Although the students used various sound recording programs, this is an example of one of the audio files added to GarageBand for editing.

iMovie



The Results



The students felt so proud of their videos. They worked hard and it paid off. Although no formal research or data collection was done, I noticed that the students made less frequent error with regard to tasks involving past tense forms and vocabulary. Additionally, most of the students scored high on the portions of their tests involving past experiences.