I had won!

That was all that was going through my mind at that point as I held up the highly-coveted trophy on the stage, in front of the cheering crowd. I caught sight of my teacher's smiling face among sea of cameras and the boisterous audience. Gratefully, I grinned at her as she gave me a thumbs-up sign. I had come a long way, all thanks to her...

It was the beginning of a new year, and as the 'smarty-pants' of my cohort, I was placed in the best class, where most of the chatterboxes were. Sadly, I was not one of them. Most of the time, my mouth was zipped very tightly and I hardly had any friends who appreciated my silence. To make matters worse, I was short, meek and very shy, which made all my confident classmates tease me and look down on me. During lessons, teachers almost forgot my existence, and if not for my exceptionally excellent results, no one would have noticed me. I would have been brushed aside long ago.

Thus, the incident that happened three months ago was both shocking and surprising.

There was a speech competition three months later, and our school was to choose a representative from the best class of our level, which was my class. The selection was left to our strict English teacher, whom I feared the most because she hardly ever smiled at us. Due to her high expectations, all of us presumed she would pick one of the biggest mouths in our class. Strangely though, on the day her decision was to be announced to us, she proclaimed, “Jane shall be the one who will join the competition.”

A hush instantly descended on all thirty of us, and for once, there was silence in our usually-noisy class. My jaw dropped as I drew a deep breath awkwardly. Me? A speech competition? Rubbing my eyes to ensure I was not dreaming, I noticed myself blushing amidst the tension that hung thick in the air.

“You have to write a speech today and show it to me tomorrow, Jane,” my teacher, Mrs Lee instructed, thereby breaking the ice. However, all that filled the classroom were
hushed voices, and I knew lots of gossip about me was going on behind my back. Sighing, I thought of having to write a speech on top of my mountain of schoolwork...

The next day, I showed my speech to Mrs Lee. Reading it, she nodded in satisfaction and grinned at me for the first time. In the sweetest voice I had ever heard her muster, she praised me, “Wonderful work! Why don't you read it to the class?”

Instantly, I gulped and my throat went dry. Butterflies fluttered around in my stomach, crashing against my stomach walls and making me feel sick. Did she really have to torture me like this?

Swallowing hard and taking a deep breath, I began reciting my essay with the worst pronunciation anyone had ever heard. However, I stumbled a little and panicked, unable to go on. The entire class burst into laughter as they shouted discouraging words, saying that they should have been in my place instead. Hot tears stung my eyes as I rushed back to my seat, weeping silently in embarrassment, while Mrs Lee admonished the class for such rude behaviour.

After school, Mrs Lee called me to her office, where she gave me a few pointers on how to overcome stage fright. Patiently, she went through the speech with me several times until my utterly bad pronunciation was 'cured'.

It was with much patience that Mrs Lee worked through those three months with me, helping me to overcome my poor memory when memorising the speech, ensuring that my words were crisp and clear and teaching me how to put expressions into my sentences. With much grit and tenacity, I finally mastered my speech and was well-prepared by the end of three months, as the competition approached day after day.

Finally, the day of my competition arrived. As I stepped into the hall where the competition was held, I got caught up with the stress and nerves that all the other competitors were exuding, draining the blood from my face. Instantly, Mrs Lee, whom I no longer saw as a strict, boring lady but as a second mother, rubbed my cold, clammy hands between hers and spoke words of encouragement. I immediately gained confidence and beamed. I could do it! I was not going to let all my hard work go down the drain nor was I going to disappoint Mrs Lee who had put in so much effort!
When the emcee called my name, I strode up the stage. My heart was pounding so hard it felt like it was going to pop out of my chest, and my legs were wobbling like jelly. Reaching out for the microphone, I closed my eyes, said a short prayer and smiled before opening my eyes. Throwing all my fears aside, I began speaking with gusto.

Everything else happened in a flash. My voice came out crisp and clear, and my articulation was perfect. I remembered the crowd nodding in agreement, laughing at my jokes, responding to my rhetorical questions… Before I knew it, the speech was over, and everyone was giving me a standing ovation.

When the contest was over, the judges declared me the champion and asked me to go up on stage to receive the trophy. I was dizzy with delight I could not suppress my nervous giggles, my grin or the tears of joy welling up in my eyes.

I had won!

Smiling into the audience, I spotted Mrs Lee. It was all thanks to her.

Thank you, Mrs Lee! You have proven that nothing is insurmountable, as long as I do not give up and work hard!

By Isabelle Ong, P6