A CALL–Based Student Action Research Project for Developing a Reflective Approach to Improving English Conversation Skills

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1.0 Introduction

This paper is a report of the findings of an action research project carried out by the authors in September and October of 2005 in a first year English major conversation class at Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College.　The project was initiated in response to a problem identified by the authors: Students seem to have a difficult time staying in the target language during in-class conversations.　They seem to slip into their L1 without being aware of it.

This problem led to the larger consideration of student awareness of their own learning. To what extent are students aware of their conversation practices?　How do students conceptualize good and bad practices for improving conversation skills?　To what extent does students' past experience of Japanese classroom culture affect their present approaches to improving their English skills, especially in conversation?　Given students' previous classroom culture, to what extent should teachers be directive or non-directive in facilitating student awareness of good and bad practices?　Can teachers create non-intrusive scaffolding that will guide students but also facilitate student autonomy in self-awareness and reflection?

Action research involves identifying a problem, designing a potential solution to the problem and evaluating the efficacy of the solution.　This is the approach that the authors wished their students to take to their own learning as well.　In brief, the authors' teacher action research plan was to teach the students, themselves, to use *student* action research to increase their awareness of their language practices.

The authors' action research would be to monitor students' action research methods, which included analyzing a self-made movie of a conversation in order to identify problems

and solutions related to their conversation practices, and monitoring their analysis, solutions and evaluation of solutions through guided writing and questionnaires.　A CALL based curriculum was chosen as the medium for students to view their conversation movies and do the majority of their guided writing.　In particular, an open source content management system, Moodle (moodle.org), which the students had used in other classes, was chosen as a medium of communication and analysis.　Students would also use printed reflection sheets to evaluate their practice and solutions after each class that took place outside of the CALL lab.

2.0 Conceptual framework of the project

2.1 The use of CALL

Properly speaking, this paper is not a study of the efficacy of using CALL for increasing student skills in English conversation.　It is a study of the efficacy of using CALL for learner training or facilitating learner reflection with the intention of learners, themselves, designing methods to better their own conversation skills.

Using a CALL approach to the project had three main advantages.　First, the cameras that were available for students to use to record their conversations were digital and produced the movies as MPEG4 files.　These files could only be viewed on the cameras, themselves, or on a computer.　Transferring the movies to another format (such as VHS) would have been time consuming and difficult.　Because the files were available on the Internet students could study their conversation movies anytime, anywhere they had Internet access.　Students who were absent during the movie analysis class or who wanted to check on their analysis could do so freely.

Second, the authors wanted to evaluate and respond to students' analysis of the movies and evaluation of their student action project quickly.　Use of Moodle facilitated this.　For example, in one 45 minute class the teachers asked students to answer a questionnaire in order to rate their conception of their English level as well as well as their feelings about speaking English in class and on the conversation movies.　Following this they would view the first three-minute conversation movie and identify good and bad practices in their conversations.　As soon as the students finished the Moodle-based questionnaire, while they were watching the first minute of their movies, teachers could read and print out a summary of student responses.　This was used in giving students advice and encouragement in completing the next part of their in-class assignment, analyzing the movies.　A paper-based questionnaire would have taken days to assess and feedback to students couldn't have taken place until the next class.　CALL can speed up the communication process and allow teachers to customize their feedback more effectively.

Finally, students were familiar with the CALL and CAI systems involved.　First year students had used several CALL programs, and Moodle in particular, during their first semester.　No time was spent teaching students how to use the CALL materials involved. In general, the technological aspects of the project: making a movie; responding to question-

naires and guided writing activities on Moodle; and viewing movies involved no learning curve. Instruction related to the technology involved took less than two minutes for each of the above.

In particular, students seemed fascinated with the technology of making and viewing movies. When students typed their responses to the web-based questionnaires and guided writing activities there was almost total silence in the classroom except for an avalanche of the sound of clicking keyboards. The authors, themselves, were quite amazed at this. Of course, this is only partly related to use of CALL. Student desire to respond to their own movies was probably the reason for their concentration.

2.2 A general systems or ecological view of the English conversation classroom

More important than CALL in this study, is a view of the English conversation classroom from a general systems or ecological approach. The authors hoped to understand the complexity of students' concepts of their own conversation skills within the context of their culture, the culture of the university classroom, and the network of human interactions called forth in the classroom. A general systems approach views any particular situation or problem as a part of a larger whole that at the same time has its own component parts.

> The educational context, with the classroom at its center, is viewed as a complex system in which events do not occur in linear causal fashion, but in which a multitude of forces interact in complex, self-organizing ways, and create changes and patterns that are part predictable, part unpredictable. Such systems must be analyzed from the bottom up.... (van Lier, 1996: 148)

The classroom can also be viewed from an ecological perspective. Any behavior of students can be seen as having evolved because of the conditions or needs of the ecology of the classroom. In this sense the authors did not approach their examination of the improvement of students' conversational abilities as centering on a set of discrete practices that should be taught and learned. They hypothesized that elements in the ecology of the classroom such as students' feelings of stress or embarrassment, relationships with conversation partners, or prior learning culture would be variables in understanding student self-awareness and possibilities for growth.

> Thus, AR *(action research)* does not seek for causal relationships, but attempts simply to describe the interaction of local variables and to predict the global emergence of learning trends. Rather than claiming that results are dependent on research, therefore, AR investigates the participants and their perceptions, in order to positively influence them, often through raised awareness (on the part of the participants) of the existence and nature of the variables. (Finch, 2004)

One aspect of the ecology of the classroom is to consider the language of the classroom. The target language is English. The method of learning the target language is mostly focused on peer conversation practice. If communication is authentic it becomes engaging to students. In this process of engagement, the goal of learning the target language may be

forgotten in the excitement of authentic information exchange.   Moreover, while the goal is to learn the target language, the method, peer practice, actually takes place in an interlanguage peculiar to the culture of the classroom.   This interlanguage is ecological.   It arises from and meets the needs of those enmeshed in the learning environment to communicate effectively with one another.   One way of viewing this study is to see it as an attempt by the authors to facilitate student ability to first, distinguish differences between their interlanguage and the target language, and then, to design and test strategies that would decrease that gap.

2.3 The culture of Japanese classrooms

Many writers have suggested that in Japanese classroom culture, especially in that of junior and senior high school, silence and obedience are important virtues.   Murakami (2002) describes the ideal attitude of Japanese students as being *sunao'* (being gentle and obedient, or reluctant).   In addition to this, traditionally in junior and senior high school, the purpose of education has been mainly considered as the delivery of subject matter.   Japanese students are traditionally molded not to question matters.

Hofstede (1986) describes Japanese school culture as a typical example of collectivist culture, in contrast to other cultures that he describes as individualistic.   According to him, in collectivist cultures there is a strong tendency that students expect to learn how to do, in comparison with individualistic cultures in which the emphasis is on learning how to learn. Hosftede also claims that Japanese education is teacher-centered education rather than student-centered and is also an extreme example of the high power of the teacher, e.g., "Teachers are expected to have all the answers", and "Teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as personal disloyalty" (Hofstede, 1986: 11).

The idea of teacher as facilitator to lead students to become effective learners is becoming popular in Japan and claims that this approach to learning should be fostered in order to promote effective learning are well known in theory.   However, it is not very frequent to encounter the idea and specific methodology of "learning to learn" established in actual classroom settings in junior and senior high schools, where learning to learn could quite actively occur if given the chance.   Junior and senior high school students are mostly trained, as much as is possible, to memorize the teachers' transmitted knowledge.   The main reason for this is the existence of entrance examinations that put emphasis on measuring memorization rather than skill.   Under these circumstances, students are very often reluctant to evaluate themselves -- for they are not used to it.   This suggests that Japanese school culture may be a weak foundation on which for students to build reflective learning skills.

This also suggests that teachers should be very careful in facilitating student acquirement of reflective learning skills.   If student autonomy is not fostered, rather than learning to learn, students may simply mimic the teacher's example without actually reflecting on their individual reality.   They might attempt to "get the right answer" by copying the teacher's "right answer." The authors originally intended to begin the project with a learner

training exercise that introduced students to examples of good and bad conversation practices. This idea was dropped because it was felt that this training might limit students' exploration of their own reality and provide them too easily with "the right answers" that they could easily choose without much thought.

On the other hand, in elementary school children complete a great deal of group work that includes discussion and this group cooperation can be a powerful force in learning (Edwards, 2005). This group cooperation and autonomy is not only present in elementary school but in secondary extra-curricular activities and throughout Japanese society in general in clubs and "circles." Could this aspect of Japanese classroom culture be harnessed to create a learning community?

2.4 Student reflection

A number of researchers have focused on how to learn to learn effectively, in other words, how to facilitate the development of self-regulated learners. Davis (2000) insists that learning to learn is facilitated by the process of self-monitoring -- reflection. Elbers (2003) points out the need to establish a community of inquiry in the classroom.

According to Ertmer and Newby (1996), reflection on the process of learning is believed to be an essential factor in the development of effective learners. Boud *et al.* (1985) insist that reflection is a vital element in any form of learning and that teachers need to consider how they can incorporate some forms of reflection in their courses. Reflection can be in various forms: writing a diary/journal, discussion with peers, talking with the teacher, observing the classroom, etc. The appropriate form of reflection should be selected with a consideration of each learning context.

Moreover, it is important to consider negative and positive attitudes toward learning. Learners may experience a loss of confidence or dissatisfaction towards certain learning experiences or content. A student, who has an unpleasant experience, when exposed to similar situations in the future, will experience the same feelings of discomfort. Boud *et al.* (1985) assert that with such an emotional load unless some way can be found to resolve these feelings there will be no new learning.

Learners may also experience a positive state of mind by solving difficult problems or discovering new facts. Boud *et al*. (1985) claim that those who approach a new learning experience from a history of success in similar situations may be able to enter more fully into the new context and draw more from it. In this light the authors felt that it was important to learn how students felt about their conversation practice. Did students have the kind of positive state of mind that would foster learning? How did negative emotions such as anxiety or embarrassment in speaking English affect students? Could the authors present student action research in such a way as to allow the students to have a positive experience?

2.5 Teacher reflection: The notion of action research

Wallace (1991) argues that practice is valuable for professional education and develop-

ment *to the extent that it is reflected upon*. The simple act of teaching day after day can develop self-confidence and make the teacher feel more at home in his/her profession, but it is essentially a consolidating function. Development implies change, and fruitful change is extremely difficult without reflection (Wallace, 1991: 54). The reflection cycle which Wallace describes clearly indicates that neither received/experiential knowledge nor everyday practice alone can lead teacher to professional competence. We need reflection to develop competence. Ur (1997) also argues that the most effective source of learning is teachers' reflection on their own experience. She adds that our own experience can be enriched by hearing, seeing, or reading about the reflections of others. We need to process knowledge through our own experience, reflection, conceptualization and experimentation in order for it to function as real knowledge.

Richards and Lockhart (1994) also argue strongly that a reflective approach is the one with greatest potential for teacher learning. According to them, reflection is a deliberate process which allows learners to make better sense of what they are already doing, which leads to deeper insight. Based on this model, they propose that teachers should engage in action research. The aim of action research is to identify problems or issues in the situation in which *participants are actually engaged*, and try to bring about critically informed changes in practice by reflective thinking and actions.

3.0 Outline of the teacher action research plan

The authors designed a *teacher* action research plan based on the premise that using the same action research methodology, students would also benefit from being taught to carry out a *student* action research plan related to increasing their awareness of their English conversation practices. Action research involves the following five steps (Richards and Lockhart, 1994), which in the authors' plan included:

1. Find a problem:

   Students seem to have a difficult time staying in the target language during conversations. They seem to slip into their L1 without being aware of it. This is part of what the authors hypothesized to be a larger problem: Students were not aware of their conversation practices, either good or bad.

2. Draw up research questions:

   Question 1: How do students conceptualize good and bad practices for improving conversation skills?

   Question 2: After carrying out their own action research plan, to what extent will students view action research as useful in learning English?

   Question 3: To what extent should teachers encourage student autonomy in facilitating increased awareness of good and bad practices in language learning? Can the teachers create scaffolding that will guide students but not intrude into students' sense of autonomy in research?

3. **Set Action Plan:** Design a CALL program to facilitate students' analysis of their conversation movies. Read and react to student questionnaires and logs.
4. **Observation:** Monitor student progress by observing classes or reading student evaluations on the Internet and in their Reflection Papers.
5. **Evaluation:** Analysis of responses to a web-based student evaluation form.

4.0 Description and discussion of the student action research process

Students made two movies, answered a questionnaire concerning their feelings about English conversation in various situations, analyzed the movies to discover their productive and unproductive conversation practices, selected one practice to accentuate or delete as a student action research project, practiced and then evaluated the efficacy of their student research project. The eight-step process outlined below will be described and discussed in the following section of this paper.

1. Students produced two short (three and ten minute) conversation movies with a partner.
2. They answered an online questionnaire about their feelings when speaking English.
3. They viewed their three-minute conversation movie and discussed their good and bad practices with a partner.
4. They individually reflected on the movies in a CALL-based online guided writing activity that helped them to identify good and bad practices and to choose one as the center of their student action plan. They designed a student action research plan.
5. They practiced the action plan during the next two classes and reflected in writing on the success of their plan at the end of each class.
6. After teachers responded online to students' responses to the guided writing activity (step 4), students read teacher feedback, listened to the teachers' in-class guidance, viewed and discussed the second (10 minute) movie with a partner, and adjusted their action research plan. They then repeated Step 5, practicing for the following two classes.
7. In the next class, students shared their action plan with a partner in English and then practiced the plan with the partner during conversation.
8. Finally, students evaluated their action plan and the teachers' curriculum.

Each section of the process is discussed below.

4.1 Production of student conversation movies

Students made two movies, three and ten minutes long, of conversations with a partner. Three Sanyo Xacti cameras were used in two classes of eleven and twelve students. Students formed groups of four: two performers, one cameraperson and one timekeeper. After the first movie was completed, students switched roles. Students switched partners when their group made the second set of movies (10 minutes) in the next class. Students

seemed fascinated with the cameras, were able to use them after only a few minutes instruction, and, for the most part, completed making their movies with few problems.　One reason for this was the design of the cameras.　They are compact, stylish and easy to use.　The viewing screen is reversible so students could easily frame their conversation scene so that they were seated within the view of the camera lens.　After completing the movie recording, they could view a replay instantly.　Another reason for students' fascination with the movies was that for almost all of them it was their first time to see themselves speaking English. Although most seemed to have felt a certain degree of embarrassment, they were "glued" to the screens watching themselves.

The Sanyo Xacti saves movies in an MPEG4 format on SD cards.　The movies could be copied to the computer from the computer's SD card slot and finally uploaded to a web server for student viewing.　The movies were from 17 MB to 150 MB in size, depending on their length and the quality of the recording.

4.2 Questionnaire about feelings when speaking English.

The authors suspected that students' affective entry into conversation tasks had a strong effect on how they communicated in English with different partners.　In particular did the students' experience of recording themselves cause enough embarrassment to make the movies unsuitable for analysis?　The authors also suspected that when students were embarrassed because of not being able to communicate in English they would adjust their speech to a simplified, Japanese-style English in order to lower their anxiety.

A survey was created online using Moodle.　Students answered seven questions in the CALL classroom before viewing the movies.　The survey included three kinds of questions focusing on: how students felt about their conversation ability; if their feelings changed in relation to their partners' skills; and if their perceptions of how much

they could continue a conversation in English had any connection to their conversations in pair-work, groups or in the movie.

1. How do you feel about your conversation style and ability?   Describe your good points and drawbacks. (written response)
2. How is your conversation ability compared to others in your Oral English class? (evaluated on a scale of 1 through 5)
3. How do you feel when you are having a conversation with a partner whom you think can speak English much better than you? (written response)
4. How do you feel when you are having a conversation with a partner whom you think speaks English worse than you? (written response)
5. How do you feel when you are having a conversation with a partner whom you think can speak English at about the same level as you? (written response)
6. Have you ever felt any of these emotions when you were talking to your partner in English in class? (Selection: embarrassed, happy, sad, confused, excited, anxious, other)
7. Try to remember the balance of English and Japanese that you usually use in English conversation.   What percent English do you use in,
   a) an ordinary class b) a group of 3-4, c) the conversation movies that we made. (a, b and c were evaluated on a scale of 1 through 10 with 10 representing 100% English)

The teachers were able to view a summary of the students' responses immediately after they finished the questionnaire.   Student responses are discussed below:

4.2.1 How do you feel about your conversation style and ability?   Describe your good points and drawbacks.

There were two patterns found in student responses:

- Not many students pointed out the good points of their style (6 out of 18).   They cited good points such as "volume of voice" and "rich topics to discuss".

- Most students have a critical view of their conversation style.   They pointed out "lack of vocabulary", "using Japanese", "katakana-English" (English with strong Japanese accent) or "lack of ability to talk, I only listen to my partner".

One student described her feeling toward English conversation style as:

My drawback is that I use Japanese in the conversation and that I am embarrassed with native-like pronunciation.   I feel embarrassed to "imitate" native English speakers.

Another student stated her drawbacks as follows:

I often cannot find appropriate topics or words quickly during the conversation and I go like 'eeto (well...)' then think alone for a while, which creates silence.   I think this makes my partner feel uncomfortable...

4.2.2 How is your conversation ability compared to others in your Oral English class?

The graph shows an interesting fact.   None of the students said that they were better (0.0%) than others.   They declared themselves either average (42.9%) or worse (52.4%) than
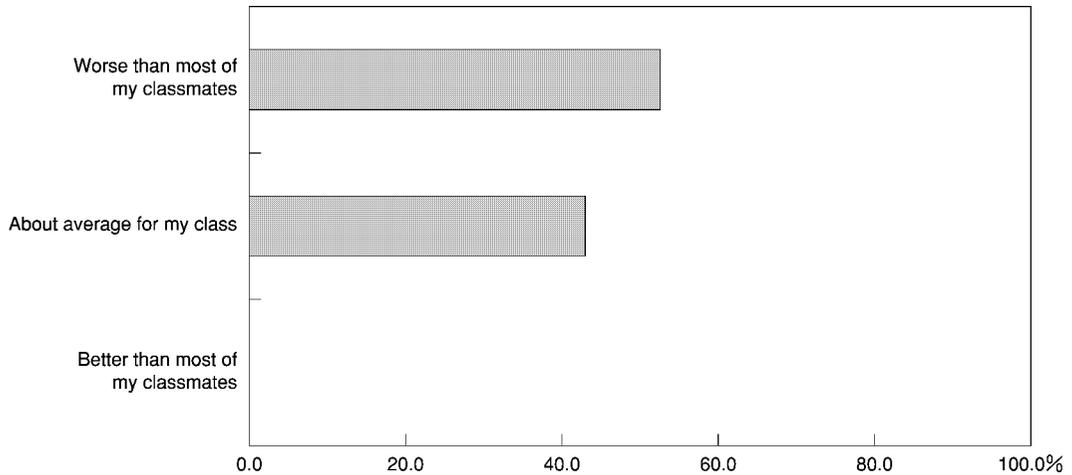
others.　Probably some think that they are better than others but were embarrassed to say so.

4.2.3 How do you feel when you are having a conversation with a partner whom you think can speak English much better than you?

Many students mentioned about their worry during the conversation.　One student said,

I get nervous thinking whether my talk is understandable to them (better speakers). Also, my speed of response is slow, so I become worried wondering if they have a hard time listening to me, that (mental process) leads me to be stuck in the conversation.'

On the other hand, many students also mentioned positive feelings such as:

I feel like trying hard to learn things from them, such as how to speak and how to pronounce.

4.2.4 How do you feel when you are having a conversation with a partner whom you think speaks English worse than you?

Students in general mentioned feelings such as relaxed, happy, feeling it's easier to talk, feeling as if they were a better English speaker than usual.　Some students mentioned that they felt stressed or worried about how much they let the other understand what they are saying.　On the other hand, three students said that they haven't ever felt they are better than another student.

4.2.5 How do you feel when you are having a conversation with a partner whom you think can speak English at about the same level as you?

Most of students reported feeling relaxed or that it was easy to talk.　One student stated:

It is the most fun when talking with partners with the same level.　It is easy to talk, and I don't get nervous.　I feel very relaxed.

4.2.6 Have you ever felt any other emotion when you were talking to your partner in English in class?

The graph shows that almost all students had positive feelings (happy, 90.5%) when talking.   On the other hand, they have also experienced negative feelings such as embarrassed (52.4%), confused (66.7%), and anxious (47.6%).
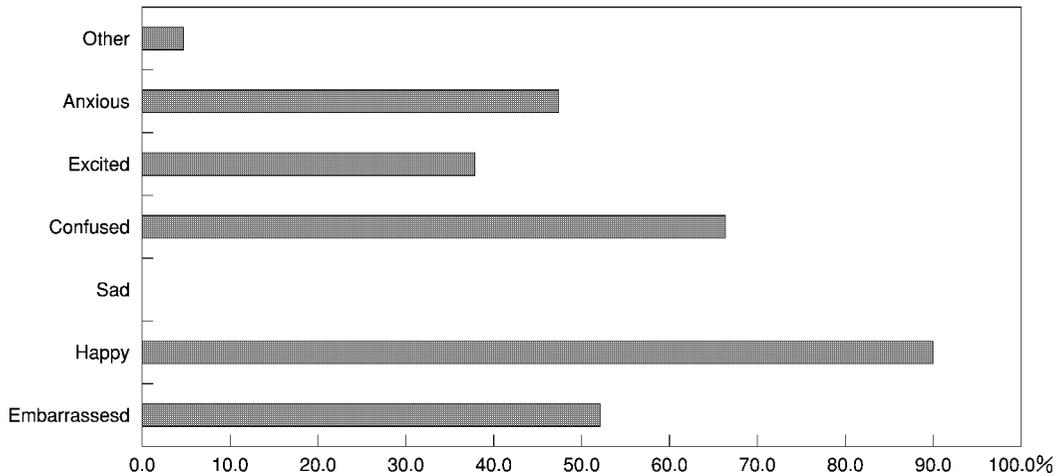
4.2.7 Try to remember the balance of English and Japanese that you have used in English conversation.   What percent English did you use in the conversation movies that we made, in groups of 3-4, and in ordinary class pair work?

The graph shows there are only slight differences between the three.   As expected, in the conversation movies (73%) students evaluated themselves as showing slightly more effort to stay in English that in ordinary pair work (70%) or in groups (68%).   The authors, however, expected to see a larger percentage of English listed for the conversation movies. In fact, when the authors viewed the movies they found that students were able to stay in English for more than 90% of the time.
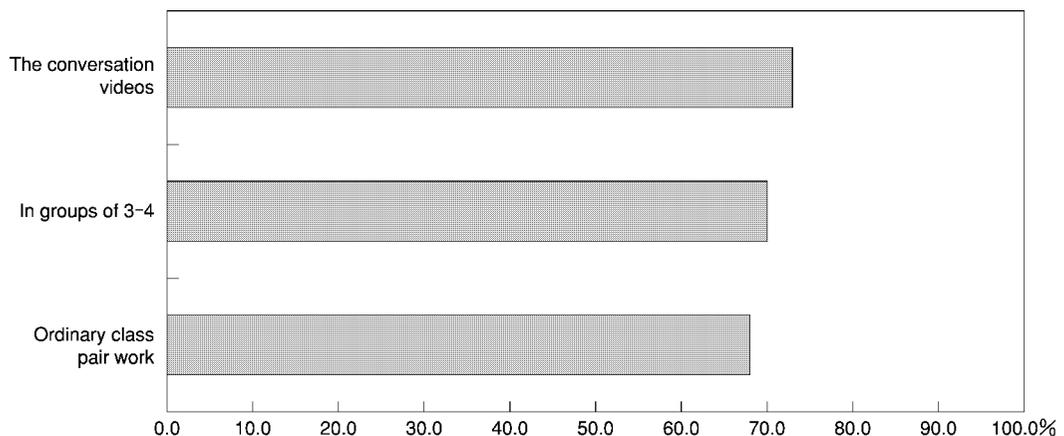
4.3 Students viewed the short movie on the computer and discussed strong and weak practices (habits) with their partner.

After completing the questionnaire students viewed the movies online with the same partner with whom they had made the movie. After viewing the movie students were asked to discuss the strong and weak points of their conversation practices with their partner. In particular they were asked to identify four to five practices among either their or their partner's practices that they could work to increase or decrease in the future with the goal of improving their English conversation ability.

The project was designed to include social construction of learning as one of its major strategies: making the movies in teams of four; discussing conversation practices with the team members who appeared in the same movie; and later sharing their action plan with each partner before conversation practice. (Boud *et al*., 1985; van Lier, 1996). The authors suspected that students would have difficulty identifying their good and bad practices because the exercise was new to them and also because the learner training that they had probably received in secondary school inclined them to search for a "right" answer rather than to analyze a new situation.

Students seemed to express a range of emotions when viewing the movie with their partners: embarrassment, surprise, delight, disbelief, excitement. Of course, both partners appeared in the movie they were viewing so it was natural for them to share these emotions with one another. Despite the range of emotional reaction they appeared to be positively engaged in viewing the movies. It was hoped that this engagement with both the movie and their partner would set the stage for discussion of their and their partner's conversation practices and completion of the guided writing assignment.

4.4 Creating the action research plan

The teachers created an online writing assignment using Moodle to guide students through the process of analyzing the movie and choosing one practice that would become the basis of their action plan. Moodle's Assignment Module includes a function that also allows teachers to give feedback to each student online and for the student to adjust their responses to the assignment as often as they wish.

In this process, students were asked to focus on a "practice or habit" which could be increased or reduced with short term training (about one month), and to avoid focusing on problems related to general language skills such as overall vocabulary building or improving listening, which would not only be vague but are long-term goals. Students were asked to be as specific in describing the plan as possible.

Although students were allowed to use either English or Japanese for their convenience, all students chose Japanese when writing. Five students mentioned 'be careful with eye contact', which is a non-verbal problem that can be solved with little practice. These students may have focused on nonverbal problems because of the novelty of seeing them-selves in a movie for the first time. They were advised by the teachers to come up with

another action plan related to verbal problems. In general, students' plans were relatively ambiguous, but were modified later with teachers' advice in the classroom and on the Internet. Some examples follow:

> **Student A:** My ending of syllables was very 'Japanese English', so I want to speak syllables more smoothly.
>
> **Student B:** From next time, I want to ask many questions to widen the conversation.
>
> **Student C:** I will replace 'un-to' and 'e-tto' (Japanese words for 'well...') to 'Ooo-' and 'Aaa-'.
>
> **Student D:** When I am not careful, Japanese always pops out of my mouth, so I will focus on the conversation more and when I respond to my partner, I will respond in English, not in Japanese.

4.5 Practicing the action plan and written reflection

Students were asked to check for their teachers' online feedback to the guided writing assignment and to adjust their action plans if necessary before their next conversation class, which was not a class taught by the authors. Only three students did so. The remaining students began to practice their action plans during the next two classes without reading their teacher's feedback.

Students were given a Reflection Sheet (paper) to use after every English conversation class (in not only the authors' but also in other teachers' classes). They were asked to focus on the practice targeted in their action plan during conversation practice, to analyze to what extent the plan was successful, and to identify the elements which led to success or created obstacles in carrying out the plan.

The two other teachers in charge of these classes were asked to remind students to practice their plans during class. The teachers also agreed to allow students to use the last 5 to 10 minutes of the class to write reflections on the success of their plans. It was hoped that by asking students to reflect on their plans as often as possible, they would be reminded of their plan and thus focus more actively on making the targeted changes during conversation practice.

4.6 Teacher feedback and adjustment of student action plans

To what extent would students need teacher guidance in identifying useful and harmful English conversation habits? One of the research goals of this study was to discover how students conceptualized their conversation practices. Another was to promote learner autonomy and get a sense of how much scaffolding or guidance was consistent with promoting that autonomy.

While students were engaged in the guided writing exercise that resulted in creating their action plan, the teachers circulated around the classroom answering questions and giving guidance. After the class, the teachers read students' plans and gave feedback using the messaging functions of the Moodle Assignment Module. Most students, however, did not read the teacher's feedback until three classes later when they once again had the authors as their conversation teachers.

During the authors' class, after reading the online feedback and listening to a further explanation of action research, students watched the longer movie (10 minutes) and modified their research focus with the teachers' assistance when necessary. Students continued to practice and reflect during two more classes. Teacher online and face-to-face guidance included advice such as:

- Avoid ambiguous plans such as "I want to try to speak more smoothly".
- Think of more specific and descriptive examples.
- Think of several bad examples you found from movie and write how to make a change on the base of that.
- It seems you found that your style of responding to the partner is poor, now try to think of several specific sentences that you can use to enrich your way of responding.
- You chose a non-verbal practice to change, which is important to change, but this time please also think of one more plan for the next two weeks.

Watching two different movies seemed to be especially effective for students as researchers because student conversation style often varied according to both their affinity with their partner and their partner's ability in conversational English. The authors saw this clearly when reviewing the students' movies. Two or more movies made with different partners would provide the best data for students to analyze their conversation practices.

Below are the modified action plans of Students A and B that were introduced earlier:

Student A: My end of the syllables was very 'Japanese English', so I want to speak syllables more smoothly. I speak vowels which do not exist, in particular, I speak 'Ai-' for 'I', and 'Batto-' for 'But'. I think I am saying 'Ai-' because I want to save time for myself thinking about the next sentence to say. So, I will be careful, I will just say 'I', then add 'Ah,' between the sentence. I will ask my partner to mention when it happens as well.

Student B: From next time, I want to ask many questions to widen the conversation. In the movie, I asked the partner 'What did you do this weekend?' and she answered 'Part time job'. I know she was working part time so I just said 'Fu-n (I see)' and the

conversation stopped there.　Even though I knew it (she does part time job), I could have asked questions using the words as 'where, how long, why', it will lead conversation to different angle.　Also, another partner said 'I went to the beach, but I don't know the name of the beach', so I could not ask any question.　But I could have said 'Who did you go with?' or 'What did you do there?'...

Other students' plans also became more descriptive.　Many identified practical sentences that they could use during conversations such as "That sounds nice", or "What do you call it...?" in order to improve their conversation style.

However, in the process of their designing an effective plan, the teachers' suggestions often played an important role.　For example, the authors advised some students with ambiguous plans to reflect back on the movie and choose one or two scenes, describe what was wrong and analyze them trying to think of "What could have been different if I used sentences such as XYZ (authors did not give actual examples of the sentences here)".

Student B was one of the students who needed this much scaffolding.　Careful attention was needed here to try not to cause students to lose the feeling of autonomy — the feeling that they are in charge of their own research themselves, and that the teachers are only facilitators.　During the student action plan design process, teachers often stated the importance of *students' own* reflection as being very valuable, of customizing their plan to *their own practices* and of their *own critical and original thinking* being the only possible base on which to build an effective plan with a positive outcome.

4.7 Students shared their action plan with a partner in English and then practiced the plan with the partner during conversation.

After two more classes of implementing their improved action plan, students once again returned to the authors' class.　Each student received an Action Plan Card, copied and printed out from their online, guided writing action plan.　Students were asked to share their action plan in English with their partner before beginning a conversation practice.

The aim of this sharing was to increase the cooperative atmosphere between partners and to reduce obstacle feelings such as embarrassment and anxiety (Boud *et al*, 1985), which had been reported earlier by students in the questionnaire.　It was also hoped that sharing would foster a feeling of cooperation and of being part of a community of inquiry (Elbers, 2003) with similar goals.

Students seemed to be very relaxed and cooperative as they shared their action plans, their successes and their difficulties, each helping the other to express the plan in English.　It was also hoped that sharing action plans would raise students' consciousness of practicing the plan itself, during the conversation practice that followed.　They engaged in three conversations with different partners following the same pattern, first sharing their plans, then continuing the conversation all in English.

## 4.8 Student evaluation of the success of their action plans

Finally, students evaluated their action research plans and, at the same time, the project as a whole.   The teachers once again chose an online questionnaire created in Moodle with seven questions as the format.

1. To what extent was your Action Plan successful? (scale of 1-5)
2. To what extent was your Action Plan successful? Describe some changes happening in your conversation style.   If it was not successful, analyze the possible reason. (written response)
3. How much do you think it is useful to find your good and bad practices, then to find a point to improve your conversation style? (written response)
4. Was the teachers' advice useful? (scale of 1-5)
5. Evaluate the whole process of this project regarding the following items (scale of 1-5 the criteria are listed below)
6. Evaluate the whole project in detail.   Including making a movie, watching it, answering the questionnaire, choosing one point for the Action Plan, modifying it, putting it into practice, and evaluating it.
7. Many of you stated the feeling such as 'confused', 'anxious', and 'embarrassed' when talking to your partner.   After sharing the Action Plan with your partner using the Action Plan Card, did any mental change occur?   If yes, please describe it.

The answers are summarized below.

4.8.1 To what extent was your Action Plan was successful?

Students rated their action plans as somewhat successful.   On a scale of 1 to 9 most students rated the success of their plan at 4, 5 or 6.   No one rated themselves as very successful (8 or 9) whereas, at the lower end two students rated their plan 2, one student 1, and one student, mentioned below, chose 0.
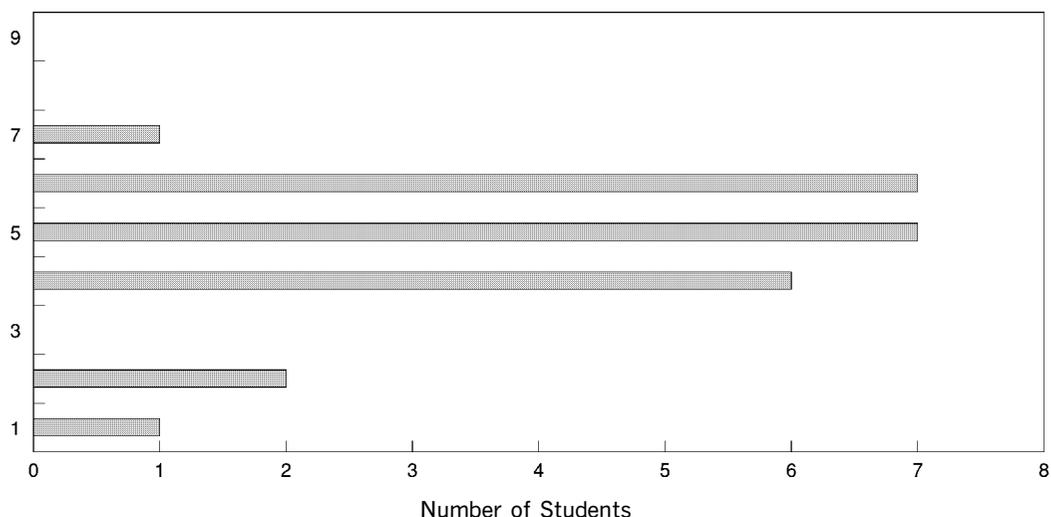
4.8.2 To what extent was your Action Plan successful?　Describe some changes happening in your conversation style.　If it was not successful, analyze the possible reason.

Of 23 students in the project, 22 mentioned positive changes to some extent.　However, one student stated clearly that the plan was not successful.　In completing the final evaluation that one student confessed that he only went through the motions of establishing the plan and actually did nothing to carry the plan out.　Teachers should have been more aware of this situation and intervened with advice and support.

The positive changes students found can be subdivided into two categories: Some focused on technical changes in the conversation, and others focused on a change in attitude or in the degree of awareness toward the language they use.

Student B: …the length of my silence is reduced.　I am reaching the goal I set.

Student E: I became good at becoming aware of the times when I make the endings of words too long (bad habit) now.　I can change it without my partner's help.　It is getting better.

Student F: When my partner is stuck, I try to ask questions spontaneously.　It seems that it makes my partner feel easier in talking to me.

Student G: Not only in this class, but also in every class I am now constantly aware and careful of the plan I set.　That made me a better listener toward partners and teachers.

4.8.3 How much do you think it is useful to find your good and bad practices, then to find a point to improve your conversation style?

Twenty-two students said that the exercise was useful and described this in detail.　Two students stated "I will know how useful it is after continuing this action plan longer." and "It was good to find a point to improve, but when putting the plan into practice, it was difficult".　On the whole, however, many students evaluated the action plan as "very useful":

Student H: Before (the action plan), I only used to try to imitate the conversation style of good speakers.　However, by looking at myself objectively, I was able to find to what extent I was successful, and to find my bad habits as well which I had never been aware of before.　It was very useful.

4.8.4 Was the teachers' advice useful?

In general, students felt that the teachers' advice was useful.　On a 1 to 9 point scale, students rated online (7.5) and in-class advice (7.2) as somewhat higher than average.　Of course, given the usual deference to teachers in Japanese classroom culture these figures may be meaningless.　Nevertheless, the results, especially when compared with other sections of the evaluation, at least suggest that an inappropriate amount of scaffolding was not a problem.

4.8.5 Evaluate the whole process of this project.

The graph shows that students had a positive view of the project on the whole.　In
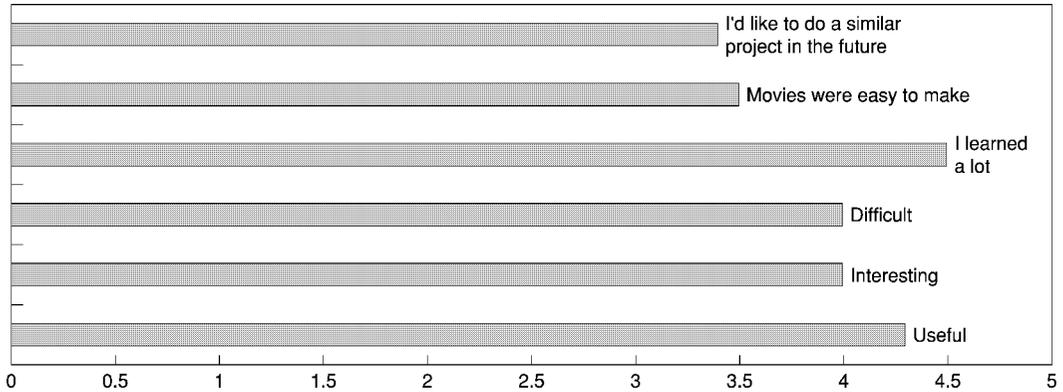
particular, on a 1 to 5 scale, they rated "I learned a lot" (4.5) high, which suggests that the project in general was successful.　They also rated it as useful (4.3) and interesting (4.0) despite its difficulty (4.0).

4.8.6 Evaluate the project in detail.

　　Twenty-two students evaluated the project as effective, for various reasons.　In fact, the authors were somewhat taken aback by the overwhelmingly positive comments that students made in the evaluation.　Some of the points they mentioned were:

　　- It was effective in "skill-up".　I think I will be even better and it will be more fun when we continue on this plan.

　　- It can make us be objective.　It makes us aware of points to improve more.

　　- It was interesting since I used to rely only on teachers and textbooks before.

　　- It was fresh and interesting.　It was eye-opening.

　　- I hope I will have this type of opportunity again.　I want to record a movie again.

　　It could be said that the project successfully stimulated students' integrated motivation (Gardner and Lambert, 1972, refer to earlier section), and that it lead them toward becoming learning oriented learners (Dreck, 1986) by bringing joy into the action of learning Itself. That is, the process of the student action plan was effective in giving them a chance to have a positive experience in completing a difficult task (Boud *et al.,* 1985).　On the other hand, bad points they mentioned were:

　　- Writing on the Reflection Paper after every class was troublesome.

　　- Explanation of the Action Plan was sometimes difficult to understand and I felt it was a time waste.

　　- Technical problems such as the camera battery was low.　Some groups could not finish recording.

This suggests directions for further study or the necessity for adjustment in classroom management.

4.8.7 Many of you stated feeling 'confused', 'anxious', and 'embarrassed' when talking to a partner. After sharing the action plan with your partner using the Action Plan Card, did any change in feelings occur? If yes, please describe it.

Four students mentioned that no change occurred, and one student stated that she became more worried wondering how successful the plan would be. Eighteen students mentioned a positive change in attitude. They mostly described that the confused, anxious and embarrassed feeling they experienced when speaking was reduced by sharing their action plans. For example:

Student I: I used to feel embarrassed because of my low level of English proficiency before. But (after sharing) now I know everyone has their own problem to consider, so I feel like not only reducing my bad practice but also cooperating with my partner so that we both can head toward improvement. Unlike before, now I don't get nervous...

This outcome shows that fostering a cooperative social atmosphere in which to work on self-reflection is a vital element, in particular in collectivist cultures such as Japan.

5.0 Conclusion

How do students conceptualize good and bad practices for improving conversation skills?

The study found that students tend to have a vague or general concept of good and bad practices for improving language skills. In general they are aware of problems of poor pronunciation, using too much Japanese, not having appropriate vocabulary for what they want to express, or inappropriate body language. Before their student action research experience they probably did not have a concept that these problems could be analyzed and solutions experimented with in order to solve the problems.

The process of viewing the movies of their conversations, discussing good and bad practices with their partners, and sharing their action plan with a partner in English seemed to have raised the awareness of the entire class and created a climate for continued deepened awareness of good and bad practices which could extend into the future. How long would this awareness last without a regular renewal of action plans? Will the awareness that students gained from this project transfer to a greater awareness of good and bad practices in other classes or focusing on other skills such as reading, writing, listening or study for tests? These are good questions for further research.

After carrying out their own action research plan, to what extent will students view action research as useful in learning English?

Students did view the action research project that they carried out as useful (4.5/5) and interesting (4.0/5) although difficult (4.0/5). However, they were not as positive about doing the project again (3.4/5). How much was their high rating of the project related to its novelty? Continuing practice, renewing action research plans, analyzing new movies followed by evaluation in several weeks would provide more data with which to answer this question.

To what extent should teachers encourage student autonomy in facilitating increased aware-ness of good and bad practices in language learning? Can the teachers create scaffolding that will guide students but not intrude into students' sense of autonomy in research?

This question cannot be answered without further research. In this project reliance on the culture of the classroom (peer discussion, sharing of plans), some scaffolding (asking open-ended questions, online guided writing, Reflection Sheets), and "teacher talk" valuing the students' own decisions and ideas promoted student autonomy. In a similar fashion the authors designed online and face to face feedback to be as non-directive as possible in order not to encroach on student autonomy. This approach probably gave students the chance to be more autonomous than in most of their other classes.

Properly speaking, this project's goal was to train students to do student action research autonomously. At the present time they have only completed one action research project. To what extent will they be motivated or able to continue in the future on a regular basis? This project introduced students to action research values of being critical, descriptive, autonomous and responsible in problem solving directly related to their own language learning. Students' response to whether they would like to continue in the future (3.4/5) is slightly positive but far from conclusive. On the other hand students, themselves, seemed to have added a new awareness into the complex of variables that make up their particular experience of Japanese classroom culture. Will that awareness wax or wane? To return to the paradigm of van Lier, quoted earlier in this paper, only further research on the particular classroom culture of these twenty-three students can answer the question. This particular Japanese classroom culture is a

> complex system in which events do not occur in linear causal fashion, but in which a multitude of forces interact in complex, self-organizing ways, and create changes and patterns that are part predictable, part unpredictable. Such changes must be analyzed from the bottom up. (van Lier, 1996: 148)

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[Abstract]

A CALL-Based Student Action Research Project for Developing a Reflective Approach to Improving English Conversation Skills

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　　This paper is a report of the findings of an action research project carried out by the authors in the second semester of a first year conversation class of twenty-three English majors.　The project was initiated in response to a problem identified by the authors: Students seem to have a difficult time staying in the target language during in-class conversations.　They seem to slip into their L1 without being aware of it.　Students made two conversation movies with partners, answered a questionnaire concerning their feelings about English conversation practice in various situations, analyzed the movies to discover their productive and unproductive conversation habits, selected one habit to accentuate or delete in a student action research project, practiced and then evaluated the efficacy of their student research project.　In designing the materials, the authors were especially interested in exploring the relation of the findings of recent studies on the cultural appropriateness of language training activities (Holliday, 1994); the notion of the self-regulated, reflective learner (Boud, *et al*., 1985; Ertmer & Newby, 1996); and the relation of social interaction and context (van Lier, 1996) to language learner awareness and CALL curriculum design.