

Training in Peer Review and Self-review as a Learning Strategy A Longitudinal Study of a Japanese Conversation Class

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Abstract

The present longitudinal study was conducted in an Indian classroom of the Japanese language during summer vacation (April-June 2016). The present researcher conducted Conversation Class for 13 weeks and experimented self-review and peer review as a regularized classroom activity in a class of part time learners of the Japanese language. The study showed that there was a considerable increase in the awareness level of the learners regarding communication strategies, and indirect (meta-cognitive) learning strategies such as recognizing the learning objectives self-monitoring and self-evaluation. There is a boost in the self-confidence of the learners while conversing in pairs and groups. Peer review could be seen as a step towards gaining objectivity in self-review. Learners not only commented on linguistic aspects emphasized by the present researcher (expressions, vocabulary, discourse, intonation etc.); but going beyond, they expressed their views on content, gestures and body language too. The learners' evaluation of the group practice and peer feedback (social strategy) was very high.

Keywords: Self-review and peer review, learning strategies, metacognition, group activities, direct and indirect strategies, Conversation skills, Japanese language learning

Japanese Language Education

The Japanese language education in India experienced an upsurge in the early 21st century, helping it to begin to catch up with other foreign languages traditionally more popular among Indians, such as French and German. A large number of Japanese companies started entering India and exploring her as a market as well as a manufacturing center.

In recent years, there is further rise in the number of the Japanese language learners. The reasons being an increasing demand of bilingual professionals. Other factors, such as the strengthening of political ties between India and Japan and need of human resources in Japan due to its ageing society, also contribute to this rise in the number of learners of the Japanese language.

1. Background of the Study and Statement of Problem

In India, particularly in Pune¹, as there are very less opportunities for oral and written communication in Japanese, learners and teachers need to concentrate on and maximize efforts within the classroom time. Most of the private Japanese schools have a form of tuition class and conduct part time classes where the syllabi required to clear the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) levels need to be completed in limited hours. The class is usually a grammar and vocabulary-based comprehension-oriented class where learners do not get sufficient conversation practice. The learners tend to focus on the JLPT standardized testing with multiple choice type questions since it is a certification recognized as a standard for employability in the industry. Eventually, in spite of obtaining the JLPT certifications, the **learners tend to have weaker oral communication skills**. The **large numbered classes in universities** along with pressing syllabus and time leave hardly any opportunity for teachers to regularly review the oral or written communication of individual learner's performance during the class proceedings. As a result, the learners get less time to look objectively at their own learning process. This leaves no room for training in self-monitoring and self-evaluation which are recognized as high level meta-cognitive learning strategies.

2. Objective of the Study

To study the possibility of incorporating self-review and peer review in an Indian classroom of adult learners of a foreign language as a step towards **increased level of awareness of the learning process among learners**.

3. Research Done So Far and the Concepts Used in the Present Paper

There has been ample study on 'Autonomous learning' or 'Learner's Autonomy' in the history of education. In the domain of foreign language learning, Henri Holec's ground breaking study on Autonomy and foreign language learning resulted into growing interest in the concept of 'learner autonomy' in the last three decades. Holec (1981) defined "Autonomy" as a capacity or fundamentally critical ability to reflect on one's experience and to "take charge of one's own learning". He defines taking charge of one's own learning is "to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning".

As David Nunan (1996) points out, "Learner Autonomy is an end towards which all teachers and learners ought to work, it is a serious mistake to assume that learners come in classrooms with some kind of natural endowment to choose both wisely and well. ... Learners are therefore systematically educated in the skills and knowledge they will need in order to make informed choices about what they want to learn and how they want to learn".

It is perceived that self-monitoring and self-evaluation involved in Autonomous Learning is a result of extremely good metacognitive abilities from the learners' side. However, it cannot be achieved easily in the current Indian teaching scenario of teacher-centric classroom. According

¹ Pune: A city in Western India with the highest number of the Japanese language learners till 2017.

to Oxford (1990), “the language learner can benefit from strategy training which seeks to encourage greater responsibility and self-direction in the learner. There is a need to arrange activities that train the learners and teachers for such practice”.

4. Rationale of Experimentation

The author from her experience identified ‘training in Japanese conversation’ as the problem area and therefore it was experimented during the sessions designed for this study. A consistent amount of interaction among learners through communicative activities, is likely to show development in their conversation skills. However, instead of training just in conversation skills and strategies, an attempt was made to go one step further by including **training of learning strategies**. This may raise the learners’ awareness of learning process, and initiate application to other language skills.

The meta-cognitive learning strategies (For taxonomy, refer to Oxford, 1990) such as **self-monitoring and self-evaluation**, which have been considered as effective learning strategies are applicable to all language skills. With the help of such learning strategies, the learners are likely to be able to review their own performance and become more aware of the overall learning process. Training the learners in reviewing their own performance regularly may develop the habit of managing, monitoring and evaluating their own learning and it would not require constant teacher intervention. The present study also incorporated **peer review**, at regular intervals **which can be considered as an effective Social Learning Strategy**. It was used as a tool to assist in increasing the speaker’s awareness of the listener in conversation as well as in looking at their own performance more objectively.

This study is an experimentation on activities for the conversation class as well as a method of training “indirect strategies”. Therefore, a qualitative study, using self-review sheets, interviews, interaction showing peer review and scaffolding was attempted.

5. Scope and Limitation

All participants were the learners who had undergone a grammar and comprehension centered language learning in classroom. Though as many as 75 learners responded to the questionnaire, only fifteen could consistently attend the extensive training for three months.

6. The Design of the Study

- 6.1 Background and Belief survey
- 6.2 Pre-test and self-evaluation
- 6.3 Conduct of sessions with regular self-review and peer review at intervals
- 6.4 Post-test and self-evaluation

6.1 Background and Beliefs Survey

Before conducting the actual training for the conversation skills (with self-review and peer review), there was a need to check on the learners’ past Japanese learning experience and their perception of own needs. Secondly, it was necessary to inquire into their beliefs and

readiness about the teacher-learner roles, self-review and peer review. The author formulated a questionnaire of twenty-four questions, which were put up before intermediate level 75 learners from various language schools who felt the need to improve on conversation skills. The data collected through the questionnaire survey is given below.

96% agreed to the statement that “A language class should mainly involve communication practice” and 100% said that “Speaking skills can be developed through practice.”

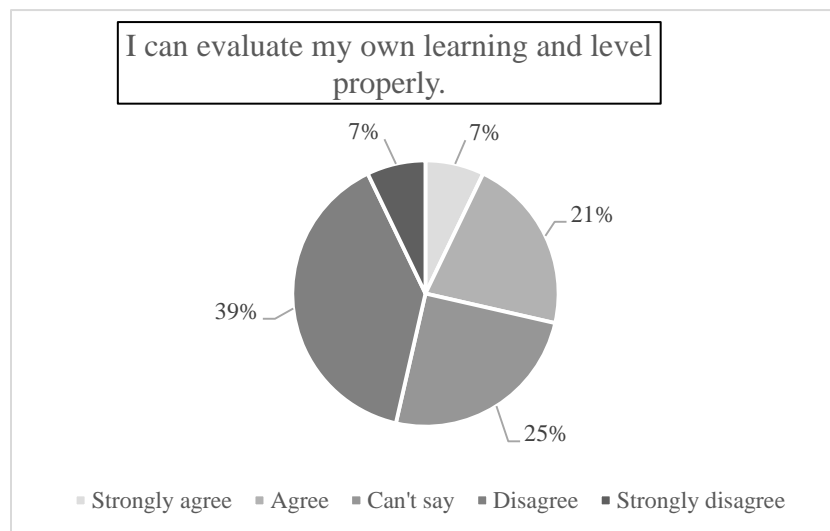
6.1.1 Beliefs on Teacher Being the Centre of the Teaching and Learning Process

Approximately 83% agreed or strongly agreed to the statement “Teacher should always be the controller of the class”. This may be due to the teacher centric classroom that the learners had experienced. In the next question, 41% agreed/strongly agreed with the statement that “Teacher is the only source of knowledge learners should depend on.” However, 59% learners acknowledged that there may be other sources of knowledge apart from teacher.

6.1.2 Readiness for Peer Review

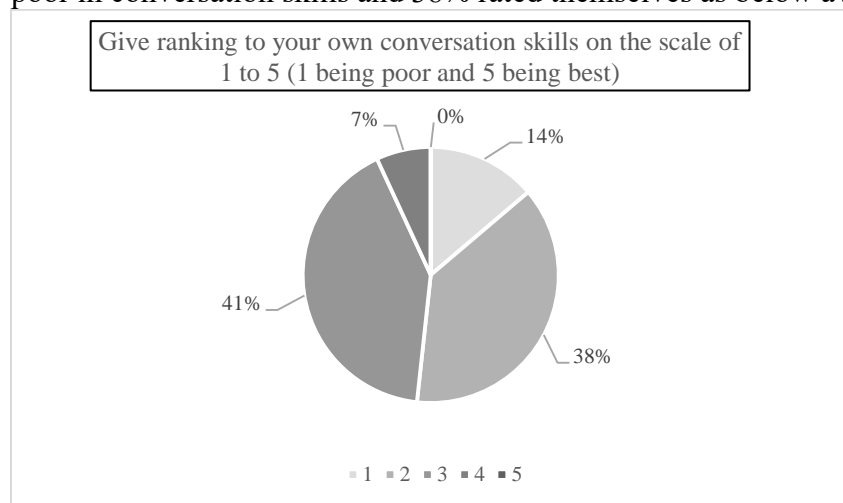
69% believed that the peers can assess their performance and give feedback. We can also see openness to Peer Feedback through 86% agreeing to the statement that they would be more comfortable if friends told them whether they were correct or not. 75% of the learners were confident that correction of errors by friends will not affect their relation and 96% do not mind their friends knowing their mistakes. The learners are less apprehensive of the error correction in front of the whole class than the author’s assumption. As high as 82% did not find it embarrassing.

6.1.3 Readiness for Self-evaluation



Only 28% learners were confident that they can evaluate themselves properly. 25% learners were not sure and as many as 46% did not think that they can evaluate themselves.

By the end of the questionnaire, the learners' self-evaluation on their conversation skills was asked. 41 % said that they are at level 3, i.e. average. However, 14% rated themselves as poor in conversation skills and 38% rated themselves as below average.



For the 23rd question, “Which of the following elements in Japanese are the most difficult for a learner? Give ranking 1 for which you think is the easiest and 7 for the most difficult. A) Kanji B) Grammar C) Vocabulary D) Listening E) Conversation F) Reading g) Writing”, 47% learners rated 5~7 i.e. “Difficult~ Most difficult” for conversation. **This was as per the present researcher’s prediction.**

Then a test to check the problem areas was designed as a pre-test before the course commenced and a 13-session program was designed to train the learners in conversation skills.

7. Observations on the Pre-test Performance

The learners were found generally weak in conversation as they themselves had realised and therefore enrolled for the class. **The following areas were the common weak areas among these learners:**

- ① **Choice of suitable discourse:** Learners are perhaps not aware of the norms of conversation discourse nor are they trained in this area.
- ② **Intonation:** Intonation as per the role and content of conversation is not up to the mark. Learners seem to be less exposed to this important area as well.
- ③ **Choice of correct expressions matching with the purpose of conversation**

- ④ **Choice of honorific language** as per the status of the conversation partner, the formality of the situation and content. Though learners seemed to be aware of such a variety in expressions, they do not have enough practice.
- ⑤ **Smoothness in conversation** lacked which can be again attributed to lack of practice.
- Based on the above findings, a suitable training module was designed.**

8. Details of the Training

8.1 Time period: Thirteen weeks with one session per week, each session of two hours

8.2 Sample size: 13 learners

8.3 Background and level of target learners

The learners were from part time courses and had finished the basic level of the Japanese language, Nihongo Shoho² I and II (which approximately counts up to 300 teaching hours). Their courses were grammar and comprehension based. Five out of the 13 were already employed with an opportunity to use the Japanese language at workplace. They could work on the Japanese language in text format, however felt less confident when they are required to speak. The remaining learners intended to use Japanese in future in order to have better career opportunities. They got less opportunity to speak in Japanese and had rarely participated in live communication.

8.4 Materials Referred to and Used by the Present Researcher

1. Conversation textbooks available in market
2. Practice sheets created by the present researcher

8.5 Sequence of the Class Activities

1. Opening discussion initiated by the teacher and setting goals (8 to 10min)
2. Trial role play (5min)
3. Discussion on materials, listening Teacher's input (30 min)
4. Actual role play practice (40 min) with peer review and self-review
Feedback activities mainly included one out of the two patterns given below:
 - a. Practice among learners and peer review by another pair
 - b. Recording of the conversation and discussion in pairs
5. Filling Self-review sheets was common in all sessions. Then the learners need to fill up self-review forms individually. (5 min)

² “Nihongo Shoho” is a grammar based Japanese text book widely used in Western Maharashtra that was published by The Japan Foundation in 1985.

6. Discussion in pairs and in the class as a whole (10 min)

9. Working of and Improvisation in the Peer Review and Self-review Forms

The self-review forms were created by modifying the questions from Wenden (1983) to suit the purpose of the training. After the teacher's input, when the groups performed role plays in pairs, the peer reviews were done by an adjacent pair. They gave constructive feedback and even suggested better expressions and /or correct grammar.

The self-review forms to be filled at the end of the session were created by the present researcher with the objective of raising the learners' awareness towards their learning process. Therefore, the questions included points like "The goal for today's conversation": (e.g. Introducing yourself/ Introducing a person to your teacher/boss etc.) and their marking for own performance.

However, it was seen that the understanding of the goals of a particular day was sometimes not captured by a few learners when there was a variety of conversations. In such cases, the present researcher herself provided the first line which described the goal for that day's conversation in the self-review sheet. E.g. learn to ask for explanation/meanings of words you do not understand. Furthermore, the question formulated to summarize was changed to more specific summary by asking them to write "Today's wrappers or 3 Key terms/ideas".

The present researcher introduced a new element as "Today's wrappers (It could be 3 Key terms/ideas)", which enabled learners to have a quick review of the whole session. Some learners have identified key expressions, or language functions as central ideas. e.g. By the end of session 4, the 3 wrappers given by learners were conversation strategies / language functions / specific expressions:

1. Request to repeat inaudible part, ask meaning, confirming the content heard (L7)
2. Asking meaning, (asking) confirming, asking once again (L13)
3. すみませんが、~はどんな意味ですか、もういちどお願いします、電話は少し遠いよう何ですが、... (L2 DC)

This offered an insight into how the objective and content is perceived by learners and what is retained.

Other questions were specific to the task. Some examples are:

1. Were you able to remember and fluently say all set expressions during revision?
2. Were you able to introduce yourself well when in different roles?

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3. Were you able to introduce someone else in a proper sequence (e.g. First junior to senior etc.)?
4. Was your speech correct (words, structures, conjugations etc.)?
5. Could you use appropriate level of formal language?

The next part contained more general questions such as:

6. Something *New* or interesting you learnt today from friend/s
7. Areas/points for self-improvement (as specific as possible)
8. Plan for the coming week (time before the next class). What kind of preparation, practice, and revision do you plan?
9. Any particular topic that you would like to be covered in the class?

Question 6 was designed for training the learners to summarize the peer feedback, look at their own learning objectively, revise the areas for own improvement and plan for further learning.

When the present researcher realized that the learners were not prepared well for the session and had not revised the contents, the following questions were included in the sheet in the beginning.

1. Did you execute the plan that You had written for the week 2nd May~9th May?
2. Did you refer to the schedule and prepare for today's session? If yes, please specify the kind of preparation that you did.

10. Findings and Discussions

The data collected before, during and after the experiment was analysed in two ways.

10.1 Quantitative analysis - Pre/Post-test scores and its analysis:

Though the focus of the study was the training of social strategies like peer-review and group work, meta-cognitive learning strategies like self-review, the training in direct strategies like Conversational strategies, the training has resulted in improvement of the conversational skills of the learners. It can be clearly seen through the pre-test and post-test scores of the learners. Both the tests were evaluated by 1 native speaker teacher of Japanese and the researcher who is an Indian teacher. **The conversational skills seem to be improved particularly in case of the weak areas identified in the pretest.**

Grand total

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	Pre-test	Post-test
L1	13.5	23
L2	20.9	29.4
L3	11.6	18.6
L4	15.4	23.9
L5	14.9	20.6
L6	16	24.6
L7	10.5	18.5
L8	12.9	21
L9	13.9	20.7
L10	25.1	37.5
L11	15.3	22.1
L12	5.2	11.8
L13	16.8	25.6

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means

	P re-test	P ost-test
Mean	4.76923	2.86923
Variance	3.02897	6.83564
Observations	3	3
Pearson Correlation	0.978894	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	2	
t Stat	17.3198	
P(T<=t) one-tail	3.71E-10	
t Critical one-tail	1.782288	
P(T<=t) two-tail	7.43E-10	
t Critical two-tail	2.178813	

Remarks

Hypothesized Mean difference '0' means there is no difference in scores due to training p-value is less than 0.05 hence one can reject the null hypothesis of zero difference. i.e. post-test scores are significantly better than pre-test scores.

Secondly, A response to “Whether the activity of self-review and peer-review within groups was helpful”: The first response after the first practice session among learners had an average evaluation of 4.5 marks on a 5 point scale on the Usefulness of the activity.

10.2 Qualitative analysis

A thorough analysis of learners’ comments from the self-review and peer-review sheets was carried out.

1. Learners identifying new ways of learning:

As a response to what they learnt today from peers in session 5, the responses had a variety including specific **new expressions /vocabulary** learnt such as : L9 reporting “Few Phrases like *いろいろことがあって...* ” or **effective communication style** such as “How not to (sound) strict /rude while conversing with others” reported by L4 Or “Adding interesting points to grab the attention of someone you are speaking with” reported by L1. Or “Using different preface (前置き) for making request” as reported by L10. It is seen quite common to be getting **inputs on strategies** like “How to refuse or delay the request.” As learning from peer in session 7 reported by L4. Some **inputs on background knowledge** on socio-cultural aspects as reported by L8 as “Some information about Japan which she (L7) experienced during her stay in Japan” in the same session.

It even exposed to a new way of learning such as “**Imagination of new situations**” as a learning from a peer, according to L6, (PK), a proficient learner by end of session 9.

Learners explored peer-review positively, which can be seen in comments like “Our lecture (session) was also interesting in group. We discussed about our experience and we learnt new words from each other.” Or “During our conversation, we used to speak continuously without taking a pause. So opposite person doesn't get a chance to use Aizuchi. We also noticed that we use less Aizuchi expressions as compared to Japanese persons”.

Other comments on group activities:

- 1) L4: loved answering in group, it helped a lot to find mistakes
- 2) L11: It is better to do it in group as it reduces the level of hesitation in you.
- 3) L15: Working in group is definitely better for conversation skills. Also it helps to come up with new ideas

A new Learning strategy for reviewing own performance was introduced in session 8:

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“Recording our own conversation is a very good idea for practice. This will surely help to improve”/ “It was great to record the conversation and to realize mistakes on our own and recording again for improvement and again doing new” (session 8).

2. Learners Shifting from Generalized Comments to More Specific Feedback to Oneself and Peers.

Initially learners tended to comment in a generalized manner such as, L3 saying “Need more practice” (session 1) or L1 saying “Conversation is a must, want to improve”, or “conversation was good” or “I enjoyed the conversation” (around session 2). However, it slowly got more focused that is evident in comments such as “I need to improve on the use of polite language” or “I need to put in a lot of efforts to improve my intonation. (session 5)”. “Giving responses every now and then in between a conversation was something very new to me. I have never been doing this while speaking in other languages.”(L 6 in response to the session on Aizuchi, after session 8).

Some clear observations of self, such as L10 after 2nd session saying “I became more hesitant when given role in front of the class. I need to improve that”.

Whereas, a learner like L4 was seen to be very much aware of her own performance level from the beginning. She comments after pre-test, “I was unable to recollect the words, verbs, connectivities (perhaps she meant conjunctions giving connectivity/flow). Even though I knew all these very well at the time of writing”.

3. Comments Started Shifting Gradually from Mother Tongue/ English to Japanese as a Medium of Expression

Some learners after gaining confidence, though not instructed to do so, slowly switched over to Japanese for comments and opinions. This can be taken as a very positive sign. Though there may be a few flaws in grammar, expression is very genuine as learners have given honest feedback to their peers and themselves.

- 1) Self-review: 会話を自然に続く(続ける)のはためしました。(L9, a proficient learner, by end of Session 5)
Interestingly, weaker learners too resorted to The Japanese language for expression.
- 2) Your role for today’s conversation: 私は日本語の学生ですが、日本人はたずねてレシピを教えてください (日本人に日本料理の作り方を教えるように頼む日本語の学生 (Translation: I was a learner of Japanese, and the Japanese was teaching me a recipe) (SP, a weak learner by end of session 10, though she has missed writing that it was her role to request the Japanese to teach her the recipe). Same learner in the same session: Review of what was difficult: 場面によって反応をするのは難しいでした (かったです) (Translation: It was difficult to respond as per the situation. Her response has an error in basic grammar)

3) L2, an average learner: Review of what was difficult in session 10: 適切な言葉を覚えるのと場面によって返事すること (Translation: Response with appropriate expressions depending on situation)

4. **Learners on Their Own Started Thinking Deeper on Reasons for “What Went Wrong?”** which can be seen as the first step towards problem solving and self-improvisation. L9 (GS), a proficient learner, comments on session 5 saying “Had not practiced well so, it was bit difficult to continue conversation.” L4 (NJ) comments on the same session saying “In above said points, there were a few points I could not express properly. May be because of vocabulary”. L11, a weak learner says, “I can't remember (recall) fastly (quickly) when (while) talking” whereas L3 gives an affective factor as a reason when says “Found it little difficult to refuse (a request)”.

5. Observations on Smoothness and Conversation Style

L8 observes, “Today's session was very interesting one. The flow which was missing from the conversation, was there today as we could fill up the gaps in-between the talk using Aizuchi.”

Clear and frank observations on Japanese communication from a weak learner like L11 (SP) was an unexpected outcome. “learnt some new words i.e. Aizuchi. I (am of) clear opinion that Aizuchi was very interesting but it was very interrupting (for) the flow of conversation.” by end of session 8. It shows the growth in learner who now doesn't think of only difficult vocabulary or grammar but observes communication style of another culture from her own perspective.

6. Learners Trying to Apply the Content of the Past Sessions

L 5 (RK) says it was difficult to “Remember appropriate expressions at right time. Forgot Aizuchi.”, which was taught 3 weeks before.

In peer-review, there was a change in the number of categories of feedback and an improvement Change in the precision of comments. By the time of session 10, learners were spontaneously coming up with comments on not only newly learnt expressions, but intonation, Aizuchi, Flow of conversation (discourse) and even body language or content of the conversation such as “reason given for declining an invitation”.

7. Improved Self-confidence

Practically everyone has reported a boost in self-confidence. L18, with a poor pretest score, says “I used good language and I could speak very well than all previous lectures” (Session 6). L2 reports by end of session 8, “My confidence level has gone up. Now, I can speak in Japanese, not so fluently, but certainly more fluently than before.”

8. Planning of Further Learning Became More Concrete in Nature

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When asked for the plan for coming week, till the next session, most of the learners say, “Practice what is taught” or “Revise the class work”. However, gradually, the plan becomes more concrete with steps such as “Will practice with my friend”, or L18(BB), who has been evaluated very low in spoken skills, and has a poor score, says “I (need to) correct and study informal and polite language”.

By the end of study 1, when asked “This was the last session of the conversation class. What have you thought about your conversation practice hereafter? Are there any particular points and specific line of action for your own improvement?”, the responses were quite positive as the following:

L11 “I will improve myself in the proper flow of the conversation like explained above and improve my grammar, vocabulary, intonation. I am trying hard for that.”

L8, a working person says, “Using whatever is taught in this course in daily conversation will help me a lot as I can feel my confidence building up for speaking Japanese with friends, colleagues and so on.”

11. Comparison with the Initial Beliefs Survey

We can compare the performance of the learners with their beliefs (regarding the teacher Learner roles and Autonomous learning) known through the pre-session survey. We can say that though **83%** said that they thought that “Teacher is and should always be the controller of the class”, the learners very well took charge of their learning in terms of monitoring and evaluation of their performance and some very preliminary planning too. Secondly, **94%** felt that “When I speak for practice, the teacher should correct all my mistakes then and there” which was practically not possible in a large numbered class and yet, the amount of conversation practice had to be secured. The learners took help of peer review and self-recording very positively when it was introduced as a new method of evaluation. Perhaps it can be contributed to the fact that 72% had also expressed agreement to the statement that “It is possible for my classmate to assess my performance in speaking and give me a feedback”. Also, 75% disagreed to the statement that “If I correct my friends’ errors, it may affect my relations with them” and 96% were fine even if their friends came to know their mistakes.

Though the learners’ opinions were quite distributed as to whether they “can evaluate their own learning and level properly” (7% strongly agreed, 21% agreed, 25% were unsure, 39% disagreed and 7% strongly disagreed), they participated very positively in the whole activity of self-evaluation and showed growth as a learner.

12. Scope for Improvement

There is a need of interaction between the teacher and the learner on individual basis regarding the learning that occurs through self and peer review. It will ensure the outcome as well as give more insight into the learners’ thought processes. The present researcher can think of

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a provision for teacher's comments on self-review sheets for this purpose, which can also be linked with a follow-up. These sheets can be kept in a common place and accessible to both, teachers and learners to improve interaction.

13. Conclusion

It can be said that more than a challenge, the large number of learners in an Indian classroom can be a good opportunity to initiate conversation practice and some new learning strategies such as peer review and self-review. It can be an effective mode of learning if conducted in a systematic manner and can be developed for other levels and other languages and other language skills too.

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