Peer Repair in a Second Language Class: A Conversation Analytic Study

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Abstract: *Conversation analysis is a significant approach on research of the second language teaching and learning, among which repair has attracted more and more attention from scholars. This study investigates peer repair sequences between three nonnative speakers of English while they engaged in free talk in the second language classroom. 40 minutes of naturally occurring talk between nonnative speakers were collected and analyzed. The present study reports on the data shows two types of peer repair: first, self-initiated and other-corrected; second, other-initiated and other-corrected. The analysis of the peer repair sequences shows that the self-initiated and other-corrected repair sequences follow a pattern of asking for confirmation on the production of a language item and receiving a correction, while the other-initiated repair do not follow the rules of preference for self-correction described in conversation analysis.*

Keywords: Peer repair, Conversation analysis, English as a second language(ESL).

1. Introduction

Repair is a very common practice in the language classroom, and it has been given a great deal of attention in the field of Applied Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition. A number of researchers paid attention to repair initiated by teachers in classrooms, especially teacher's questioning after student's answer, teacher's feedback and turn allocation (Markee, 2005). However, not many researchers have examined peer repair in the second language classroom from a Conversation Analytical perspective. Gaskill (1980) explored other-repair in what he called "artificial" and "natural" conversations. He concluded that the other-repair that he found in his data were infrequent; they showed uncertainty from the person who did the correction, followed understanding checks, or were done as disagreement. Koshik (2005) found that repair can be done using alternative questions-questions that give the interlocutor two options to choose from, the correct one being stressed by the speaker initiating the correction.

Schegloff (2000: 207) defines repair as "dealing with problems or troubles in speaking, hearing, and understanding the talk in conversation." Repair can be initiated either by the speaker who is experiencing problems in speaking (self-initiated repair), or by someone else in the talk who wants to address problems in hearing or understanding. However, other-initiated repair does not necessarily occur due to problems in hearing or understanding in this paper. On the contrary, other-initiated repair often happens to deal with problems of language production. Immediately preceding repair, speakers often signal that they are initiating self-repair by, for example, cutting off speech, stretching sounds, and/or using lexical perturbations, such as "uh," etc. (Schegloff et al. 1977). When others initiate repair, they may use a variety of different techniques, such as asking wh-questions (who, what, where), repeating the trouble source completely or partially, repeating the trouble source and using a question word, or asking "you mean" plus a possible correction questions (Schegloff et al. 1977).

Self-repair can occur within the speaker's turn construction unit (TCU), after the speaker's TCU, in the turn transition space, or in the third turn after the one that follows the trouble source (Schegloff et al., 1977). Other-initiated repair, however, is always constructed of multiple turns. One turn, for example, contains the trouble source, the next turn contains the repair initiation, and the following turn contains the repair. Jefferson (1973) points out that the speaker initiating the repair usually waits for the speaker to self-correct before initiating other-repair. Schegloff et al. (1977: 363) explain repair is the "replacement of an 'error' or 'mistake' by what is 'correct'." Other-correction hardly ever occurs, but when it does, it is done in "modulated" form, that is, the speaker who does the other-correction often downgrades it by showing uncertainty, with a question, for example, or in a jokily manner.

In this paper, language material collected from three Chinese University students (nonnative English speakers) is analyzed when a nonnative speaker of English makes a mistake in communication. It focuses on the trigger mechanism of peer repair and effect on the second language learner. Meanwhile, the views in previous research will be tested and verified in this context, peer repair in the second language classroom. Specifically, two types of peer-repair are investigated: one is self-initiated, but other-corrected; the other is other-initiated and other-corrected.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data and Participants

For this study, 40 minutes of free talk among students from University of Science and Technology, Beijing was collected. The process was video-recorded while they engaged in free conversation for 40 minutes. This paper focuses on the free talk in English classroom between three students: these three nonnative speakers of English are all from Chinese and we call them A, B, C. The three participants are classmates who knew each other and often do free talk together in English class.

At the time of the recording, A was their classmate as well as the ESL teaching assistant at the time of data collection. The level of proficiency of B was low and he often elicited help from A, when he had trouble saying something in English. C, also their classmate with the experience that he had further study in the United States for two months. In each lesson, there is a part of free talk designed by the teacher to practice students' oral English and improve their peer interaction, the three students are in a group to engage in conversation in class.

2.2 Method

Conversation Analysis (CA) is a method of inquiry that examines "talk and other forms of conduct (including the disposition of the body in gesture, posture, facial expression, and ongoing activities in the setting) in all forms of talk in interaction" (Schegloff et al. 2002: 3). Conversation analysts are interested in looking at naturally occurring talk. For them, one of the most important questions to ask when looking at naturally occurring talk is "why that now?" (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Koshik (2004) elaborates that participants in conversation try to understand what co-participants are doing by saying a particular utterance at a particular point in the sequence of talk. Participants, in the course of interaction, regularly demonstrate their understanding of what other participants' talk is doing. They demonstrate this understanding to other participants as a natural process of responding to their talk, and this same demonstration of understanding is also available to the researcher. Analysts can use this displayed understanding to try to understand what sort of "that" triggers that issue for the participants, what sort of now it is embedded in, and what sort of accounts the participants come up with for it.

Conversation analysts focus on fragments of talk that are typical of the phenomenon that they are interested in studying (Koshik 2005) and they use these fragments to explain how a certain action is being accomplished in the interaction. They explain, line by line, how the participants interact and how they understand and orient to the interaction. Koshik (2005: 5) explains that "a microanalysis such as this can show us in detail how a particular practice of talk comes to accomplish a particular social action."

3. Data Analysis

Throughout the 40-minute recording of the data analyzed in this paper, it was easy to notice how dependent B is of A to get his meaning across to C. Due to his low level of English and lack of vocabulary to express what he wants, his talk is often interrupted by questions about how to say things in English, such as the one in line 4 below:

Excerpt 1

1 B [the Economist. [Economist uh. (0.5) uh.
2 B [((looks at A) [((nods looking at A))
3 C ((nods to B))
4 B → one [material ?]

5 B [((article? how do you say it?))

6 B [((looks at A)]

In line 1 of excerpt 1, B begins a word search, signaled by the stretching of the pause sound "uh" twice, and the 0.5 second pause-sounds stretches and pauses often signal a word search, as reported by Goodwin (1983). In line 4, B says the word that he is looking for in his mind with upward intonation and looking at A. The shift of eye gaze to A is a clear indication that he is seeking help from her and asking her how to signify this concept. This pattern was frequently found in the data-every time that B is experiencing problems saying something in English, he turns his eye gaze to A to ask for help. This pattern occurs throughout the data, including in the two instances of self-initiated, other-corrected repair discussed below.

3.1 Self-initiated, Other-corrected Repair

The examples of self-initiated, other-corrected repair in this section follow a pattern that they all begin with the non-native speaker asking for a confirmation of the language item that he produces in English and being corrected by another speaker. In excerpt 2, B is talking about the site of football games, which took place in Brazil in 2012. Briefly, he is telling C that after the football games were over, the buildings were abandoned, and the people who live in the slums around stole things from the site where the games were held, such as toilet seats.

Excerpt 2

1 B the: people of the slums (1.6) robe
2 B→ [robe? u (0.5) h
3 B→ [((looks at A)
4 B (0.6) em ((looks at A))
5 A→ [yeah they robbed]
6 B [((continues to look at A))]
7 B they robbed (.)
8 B the ((points to the picture of bathrooms))(0.5) [((such as))]
9 B [((toilet seat))
10 B [((looks at A))]
11 B [(.) [as do
12 B [((so you have an idea)) [((of the))]
13 B [((continues to look at A))]
14 A [toi:let seat
15 C [oh my go:d
16 B [toilet seats

In line 1 of excerpt 2, B pronounces the word "rob" incorrectly, and in line 2, he repeats the mistake, but this time with upward intonation, and turning his eye gaze to A. This is the same pattern that we can see in excerpt 1. B is clearly eliciting help from A to either confirm that his pronunciation of the word "rob" is correct or to correct him. This is exactly what B does in line 5, when she corrects not only his pronunciation, but also his use of the wrong verb tense. However, as reported by Schegloff et al. (1977), the repair is modulated to confront to the preference to self-repair. There is a 0.6 second pause in line 4, A uses the filler "em", and A

finally corrects him. B accepts the correction in line 7 by repeating the correct pronunciation and verb tense “they robbed.”

In excerpt 3 below, B is telling A and C that he bought a bike in Beijing, but only used it one time.

Excerpt 3

- 1 B I bought (.) one bike,
 2 B I I bought a bike,
 3 B → (0.5) but (1) I: (1) I walking? [não.
 4 B [(no.)]
 5 B [(turns eye gaze to A)]
 6 B → I I walking in [my bike?
 7 A → [rode.
 8 B [I rode my bike (.) one time
 9 B [((turns eye gaze to C))

B starts his account in line 1, but self repairs in line 2 by replacing “one bike” for “a bike.” In line 3, B signals that he is beginning a word search. He pauses three times, stretches the vowel sound of “I” and finally comes up with a word, but because he is uncertain that “walking” is the right word, he utters it with upward intonation, rejects his own solution to the word search by saying “não” and turns to A for help. By turning his eye gaze to A, B is inviting her to participate in his word search. In line 6, still looking at A, B asks if indeed the word “walking” goes with the word “bike” by trying it out one more time with upward intonation. A corrects both B’s word choice and grammar in line 7 by providing him the solution to his word search with falling intonation, which displays that she is certain of the solution. B accepts her solution and incorporates it into his turn in line 8.

3.2 Other-initiated, Other-corrected Repair

The two examples of other-initiated repair discussed below are very different from previous findings in naturally occurring talk in other contexts. They are not modulated and they do not contain the techniques to begin other-initiated repair that Schegloff et al. discuss-*wh*- questions, “you mean” plus correction questions, repeating the trouble source, etc. In excerpt 4 below, B is telling C that he is watching the first season of “The Big Bang”, a popular American TV series.

Excerpt 4

- 1 B [I’m (1) I’m washing (.) The Big Bang.]
 2 B → the first temporate,
 3 A ((sneezes))
 4 (.)
 5 B [beca-
 6 A → [the first the first season.
 7 B em. the first season.

In lines 1 and 2, B says that he is watching-pronouncing “watching” incorrectly-the first season of “The Big Bang.” However, instead of saying season, he says “temporate,” which is not a right word choice. A sneezes in line 3 and there

is a micro pause in line 4. In overlap with A, B continues his account, which is clearly not complete, as indicated by the rising intonation in line 2. However, without hesitation, A begins to correct B’s choice of word by repeating “the first” that B said in line 2. Since B and A were in overlap, A says “the first” once more, followed by the repair, “season.” Unlike the other-repair done in excerpts 2 and 3, this correction is other-initiated. Furthermore, it is not like most other-initiated repair because A does not use any of the techniques mentioned by Schegloff et al. (1977). She does not ask a *wh*-question, a “you mean” plus correction question, etc. Moreover, the other-initiated and other-repair in excerpt 4 is not withheld. A does not wait for B to self-self before she corrects him. There is also no disagreement, and the correction is given with falling intonation, indicating A’s certainty of it.

In the following excerpt, B is telling C about an article that he read in the magazine “The Economist.” The article talks about the many economic benefits that Brazil will gain from hosting the 2016 Olympic Games.

Excerpt 5

- 1 B (0.6) the Economist (.) ve:ry optimistic (0.4) about Brazil
 2 B → the the article [artigo ?
 3 B [(article?)]
 4 B [(thinking face)]
 5 A → article
 6 B article e: (1) e: say
 7 B e: (.) brazil
 8 B [(take off)]
 9 B [(moves hands up in the air looking at A)]
 10 A will take off
 11 B e [take off (.) in the world
 12 B [((turns to look at C))

The three pauses and the stretching of the word “very” in line 1, together with the two definite article “the the” in line 2, suggest that B is beginning to search for a word. In line 2, he utters the word “article,” but stresses the wrong syllable. After that, he utters the word “article” in Portuguese and displays a thinking face that is typical of word searches (Goodwin & Goodwin 1986). However, unlike excerpts 1-3, B does not turn his eye gaze to A. If he had, this would have been an indication that he was inviting A to participate in his word search. The fact that B is not inviting A to participate in his word search is exactly what makes this an other-initiated correction. In line 6, B repeats the correct pronunciation of the word “article” and continues with his account of the article that he read in “The Economist.” Similarly to excerpt 4, the correction is not modulated, withheld, or in the form of a disagreement. Moreover, it is given with falling intonation, displaying that A is certain of the correction.

4. Discussion

In excerpts 2 and 3, B initiates the repair sequence, but elicits help from A to complete them. What is interesting about the way that A corrects B is that it is not modulated, that is, B does

not provide a repair in the form of a question at all. The most different repair found in this data, are the ones in excerpts 4 to 6. Unlike other-initiated repair found elsewhere in naturally occurring talk outside of the classroom, these other-initiated repairs are not modulated, withheld, or done as disagreement. A does not correct B using a question or displaying uncertainty. Moreover, A does not wait for B to self-correct before she corrects him. Finally, A does not disagree with B when he makes a mistake and she tries to correct him. She simply utters the correction with falling intonation. The lack of these characteristics make the corrections go against the preference for self-correction reported by Schegloff et al. (1977).

One extremely interesting aspect of the repairs reported in this paper is that they do not really address problems of hearing or understanding, at least from the perspective of the speaker doing the correcting. They all address problems in production and possible problems that C might have understanding B's talk. For example, when B says "temporate" instead of "season" in excerpt 4, B obviously knows what he means. If she did not know, she would not be able to correct him with the certainty that she did. However, C probably does not understand what "temporate" means, which probably triggered me to correct B. When B says "robe" instead of "robbed" in excerpt 2, she understands him. This is clear because she later says "yeah they robbed" after B elicits her help. The same thing happens in all 5 excerpts analyzed in this paper. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that the corrections are not done for A's sake or for the sake of simply correcting B. The corrections are done to make sure that C understands what B means.

5. Conclusion

This study investigates peer repair sequences between three nonnative speakers of English while they engaged in free talk in the second language classroom. There are two kinds of peer repair in the analysis: self-initiated and other-corrected; other-initiated and other-corrected. The former type of peer repair follows a pattern of asking for confirmation on the production of a language item and receiving a correction; the latter type of peer repair is done differently from scholars found in contexts outside second language classroom, and do not follow the rules of preference for self-correction. These other-initiated repairs are not modulated, withheld, or done as disagreement. people initiate the repairs do not provide them in the form of wh-questions at all and they say them directly with the speaker with mistakes or errors.

However, these two types of peer repairs have something in common. Firstly, these repair sequences both show a particularly expert-novice relationship in which one nonnative speaker relies on a more expert nonnative speaker to communicate in English. Moreover, the other-initiated repair from peers seem to be a little similar to the ones which occur in language classrooms, where the teacher, who is the expert, corrects the students, who are the less expert speakers of the target language. Secondly, when repairs occur, speakers do not really address problems of hearing or understanding, at

least from the perspective of the speaker doing the correcting. They all address problems in production and possible problems of language.

There are also some limitations to the findings reported in this paper. Firstly, all of the data just come from 3 people which may be not enough to do a more complex research. Secondly, repairs reported in the study are mainly done by one speaker in the conversation. it is still noteworthy to analyze them and try to understand what circumstances make them different. It would be valuable to find whether the same results happen in other contexts, where they are more typical of less proficient nonnative speakers.

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