The Use of Self-Initiated Repair Practices by Tertiary Level Students in Online EFL Speaking Classrooms

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Abstract

This article discusses the results of a research study that employed Conversation Analysis (CA) to analyze self-initiated self-repair structures in online classroom discussions. The study's objective was to gain insight into the self-initiated repairs employed by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The data for the study were collected during the period of 2021-2022, with approximately 120 EFL students participating in the research. The students' conversations were audio- recorded during listening and speaking online course. The classes were conducted via Blackboard. There were 427 sets of self-initiated repair instances produced by the students. The study utilized the CA approach as the theoretical framework. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted on the students' utterances. The results indicated that English learners from Saudi Arabia, studying English as a Foreign Language, utilize ten different self-initiated self-repair structures. These structures involve a range of actions, including substitution, insertion, deletion, searching, parenthesizing, aborting, sequence-jumping, recycling, reformatting, and reordering. The study also found that the most frequently used strategies employed by students during online EFL classrooms are aborting and replacing.

1. INTRODUCTION

The number of students who enrolled in studying English as a second/foreign language has been increasing recently. Students are expected to produce speaking problems inside EFL classrooms. These problems include pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar. Problems commonly arise in spontaneous conversations, especially when using a second or foreign language. Thus, EFL students find that speaking classes are challenging as they have to speak and communicate in English. To overcome these problems, repair strategies are used to locate the problem and to correct it.

Repair strategies refer to the methods employed by students to address and resolve difficulties encountered during spoken interactions, including challenges related to speaking, listening, and comprehension [1]. These strategies can be instigated by either the person speaking (self-initiated) or the person receiving the communication (other-initiated) [2]. Additionally, a repair can be initiated by the person who made the error or encountered the problem with their speech or utterance (self-repair), or it can be initiated by the listener or recipient of the communication (other-repair). This study focuses on self-initiated self-repair used by tertiary level students to overcome different problems during EFL speaking classes. It also explores the types of communication problems that

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face tertiary level students while trying to speak in English. Understanding students' ways to correct their talk and how they express themselves in various contexts is one of the benefits of researching spontaneous conversations. Thus, this study is significant since it contributes to our understanding of Saudi learners' use of self-initiated repair in EFL classrooms. The primary objectives of this study are as follows::

1.   Determine to what extent do tertiary level students practice self-initiated self-repair to overcome communication problems in EFL speaking classes.

2.   Determine the most frequently used self-repair strategy employed by students during online EFL classrooms.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of repair was initially undertaken on L1 speakers' interactions. Subsequently, the research findings were expanded to examine the interactions of L2 speakers. For the first time, repair in daily conversations was thoroughly and methodically studied by Schegloff et al. (1977). Repair is a communicative mechanism that encompasses the various strategies utilized by speakers to address and resolve challenges that may arise during conversations. These challenges can include difficulties in speaking, listening, and comprehending the dialogue (Schegloff et al., 1977). They divided the repair into four categories depending on the individual who initiates and completes the repair. The classifications consist of the following: (1) Self-initiated self-repair, (2) Self-initiated other-repair, (3) Other-initiated self-repair, (4) Other-initiated other-repair. This research focuses on the first type in which the speaker of the problematic talk initiates the repair and corrects it. Self-initiated repair uses many non-lexical "perturbations; such as: cut-offs, sound stretches, 'uh', etc." [2, p. 367]. In addition, self-initiated self-repair is considered to be the preferred strategy in daily conversations. However, in SL/FL context, conversations are not as smooth as daily conversations. Learners produce many communication breakdowns due to the lack of certain vocabulary or the lack of proper communication skills [3].

Self-initiated Self-repair is defined by Kormos (1999) as: " when the speaker detects that the output has been erroneous or inappropriate, halts the speech flow, and finally executes a correction" [4, p. 315]. In this scenario, the speaker detects the mistake before speaking and corrects it prior to articulating the utterance. Furthermore, self-repair can be classified into two categories: overt repairs and covert repairs [5]. Additional subcategories within overt repair include repetition of the same information, message/information replacement repair, appropriateness repair (including abandonment, replacement, and insertion repair), error repair, and back-to-error repair   [6]. Furthermore, self-initiations are placed in three positions: (a) within the same turn; (b) in the turn's transition space; or (c) in third turn to the trouble-source [2]. They concluded that self-repairs are highly preferable to other repairs and are hence more effective.

According to [7], self-initiated repair is considered as self-interruption. When the speaker feels like there is a problem in his speech, he/she cuts off his talk and goes back to repair the previous utterance. The classification of self-initiated repair structures, as outlined in reference [7], includes the following categories: expansion of the turn, hesitation, repetition of the previous word(s), replacement of a word or structure, abort and restart, abort and abandon, insertion, deletion, meta-repair, and modify order.

Regarding language learning classrooms and the use of repair, [8] stated that Language learners have demonstrated the ability to utilize interaction maintenance strategies that are not specific to any particular language. These strategies contribute to improving the understanding of a new language. It has also shown that students are capable of using many repair strategies in second language interaction [9], [10] to correct troubles in their talk. These troubles may be problematic because the speaker fails to convey what he or

she intended to say, and the listener might not be able to interpret what the speaker meant. The speaker can also infer that the recipient misunderstood what they heard [11]. However, ESL/EFL students reveal lack of linguistic knowledge; therefore, they modify their talk and use their existing knowledge in order to communicate effectively and provide a comprehensible message.

Furthermore, students' use of self-initiated repair in correcting their talk inside EFL classrooms has been paid little attention. [12] investigated repair strategies employed by Turkish students in English classrooms. He found that students used self-repair strategies to perform lexical, phrasal and phonological errors. However, students do not repair content or pragmatic errors. On the other hand, [13] investigated two repair techniques, self-initiated repair and repetition, that are employed by German and Jordanian EFL learners. He found out that students employ repairing techniques to compensate for their lack of language or to gain more time to get the vocabulary they need to continue the conversation. The findings also show that Jordanian students employed repair strategies more frequently. This was explained by the fact that they created more story events, which increased the quantity of words they spoke.

In addition, [14] conducted a study that focused on the repair strategies employed by Iranian learners and the influence of gender on their use. The results show that there was no variation in the use of repair strategies according to the learners' gender, and the teacher's gender. However, they revealed that single-classes used more repair strategies than mixed-classes. While [6] focused on the specific self-repair strategies that are employed by Ethiopian students in EFL classrooms. They stated that students employed different kinds of self-repair's strategies. These include: repetition (36.9%); appropriateness repair (35.4%); error repair (24.6%); and back-to-error (3.1%).

It would be interesting to look into whether students employ a range of self-repair techniques during EFL classes in light of the articles discussed earlier. While this subject has also been studied in previous research, no studies have been done specifically on how different self-repair techniques are applied in online classroom settings at tertiary educational institutions. The objective of this study is to examine the self-repair techniques utilized by students in online English as an EFL classrooms in Najran, Saudi Arabia. Previous research has primarily focused on self-repair strategies employed by students in face-to-face classroom environments and how they correct language errors. However, there is a dearth of research on the utilization of self-repair strategies in online EFL classroom interactions, especially within the context of Saudi Arabia. Consequently, this study aims to investigate the self-initiated repair strategies employed by students in EFL classroom interactions, with a specific emphasis on the online teaching context. To address the research gap, the following research questions are proposed:

1.   What are the self-repair strategies used by Saudi students when facing communication breakdowns during online EFL classrooms?

2.   During online EFL classrooms, which self-repair strategy do students use most frequently?

3. METHODOLOGY

The current research utilizes a conversation analysis framework and employs a descriptive qualitative approach to explore self-initiated repairs in online English as a EFL classrooms. The qualitative methodology is deliberately selected to investigate the extent to which students employ self-initiation self-repair strategies in online classroom environments. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon, capturing the intricacies and nuances of the strategies employed. Furthermore, a quantitative approach is employed to quantitatively analyze the frequencies and percentages of utterances, providing a systematic categorization of the various types of

self-initiation strategies utilized in the online classrooms. This mixed-methods approach ensures a comprehensive examination of the self-repair phenomena within the online classroom context, combining qualitative insights with quantitative analysis for a more robust understanding.

3.1 Participants and Data Collection

The participants in this study were EFL students who were enrolled in the Preparatory Year Program at Najran University in Saudi Arabia. The total number was 120 students (m = 70; f= 50), their age ranges between 18-20 years. As part of their first year at college, students have to take a listening and speaking course during that program. This course aims at developing their EFL listening and speaking ability as undergraduate students. During the data collection of the current study, the students were enrolled in speaking and answering questions about different subjects assigned by the text book. Thus, the data were obtained from the whole students during their interaction in front of the teacher and other-students in that online course in the academic year (2021/2022).

The students' conversations were audio- recorded during the online listening and speaking course. The classes were conducted via Blackboard; an e-learning tool. One-week classes were recorded from two different sections with two different EFL teachers. The recording started when the class begun. Overall, there were 427 sets of self-initiated repair instances produced by the students. The students' self- initiated repair instances were then transcribed in detail using ten Have's transcription model (2007). Transcription conventions are commonly employed in conversation analytic studies to provide accurate representations of talk.

3.2 Reliability of Data Analysis Procedures

To ensure the reliability of the classification process, the researcher sought the input of two professors of Applied Linguistics at Najran University in Saudi Arabia. The self-repair instances of the students were identified, and the complete utterances in which the self-initiated repairs occurred were transcribed. The professors were then asked to review the researcher's classification and determine its accuracy according to the definition of each self-repair strategy. If they disagreed with the researcher's classification, they were encouraged to provide an alternative classification. The researcher carefully considered their comments and incorporated them into the final categories and frequencies. This collaborative approach aimed to enhance the accuracy and reliability of the classification process.

4. RESULTS

When analyzing the collected data, students' self-initiated types were analyzed using Schegloff's (2013) ten operations. The following table shows the frequency and percentage of their occurrences in the analyzed data:

Self- repair type	Frequency	Percentage
Replacing	97	22.7%
Inserting	44	10.3%
Deleting	32	7.5%
Searching	40	9.4%
Parenthesizing	12	2.8%
Aborting	115	27%
Sequence-Jumping	20	4.7%

Recycling	45	10.5%
Reformatting	14	3.3%
Reordering	8	1.8%
Total	427	100%

Table (1): Self-initiated repair operations, their frequencies and percentage of occurrences

Analysis of Findings

An example of each kind of self-initiated self-repair operations is explained and analyzed in the following section:

1. Replacing: [15] defined replacing as: " a speaker's substituting a wholly or partially articulated element of a TCU-in-progress for another, different element, while retaining the sense that 'this is the same utterance" (p. 43). It refers to the ability of a person to identify an error in his own speech and then independently replace the wrong element with the correct one. During EFL classrooms, this operation involves the student to make a deliberate effort to correct errors in speech, such as by changing pronunciation, selecting a more suitable word, or correcting a grammatical error. In excerpt 1, the student answered the teachers' question by saying "go", then he realized that he used the wrong tense to indicate a past event. He repaired his talk by replacing the word "went" instead of "go".

Excerpt 1:

T: What did you do yesterday?

→S: I go uuh went to the mall yesterday.

2. Inserting: It is defined as cases in which the speaker "inserts one or more new elements into the turn-so-far, recognizable as other than what was on tap to be said next" [15, p. 45]. Inserting is considered as alteration since it occurs as something to be improved rather than something that has to be corrected. In the following excerpt, the student first identified the building as a big one; then he employed insertion repair to suitably serve to identify the referent city.

Excerpt 2:

→S: I saw uh a big uum huge building in the city.

3. Deleting: In this operation, the speaker "deletes one or more elements already articulated in part or fully in the turn-so- far" [15, p. 47]. However, it has been observed that deleting is a less common operation in the collected data and in the native speakers' talk. It involves omitting or removing elements from their speech to correct errors, enhance clarity, or refine language usage. In excerpt 3, the student deleted the word "Tuesday" and replaced it with "Thursday". Perhaps he did do because he mispronounced between these two days of the week. He used "um no" as a way to cut off the previous talk.

Excerpt 3:

→S: I, um went to the market um on Tues ooh no on Thursday.

4. Searching: Self-initiated repair can also be initiated as a word search during one's next talk. They pause their current conversational turn to look for words (or phrases) that they suddenly forgot. It involves a brief pause or hesitation while they mentally search for the right word or expression. This allows students to navigate vocabulary challenges independently. It also contributes to their language development during conversation. In the following excerpt, the student forgot the exact word, so he initiated repair by

searching for the right word by using a non-lexical speech perturbation 'uh'.

Excerpt 4:

→ S: I visited a, uh, you know, that place where they display old things... a museum.

5. Parenthesizing: It is contrasting to inserting in that it is typically made up of clausal TCUs. Here the recycled materials were created as a framing technique to add details or correct information. In excerpt 5, the student first said "a pet" but he thought that this was not specific enough, so he used "a cat" to reach a higher level of specificity.

 Excerpt 5:

→ S: I have a pet, uuh a cat, mm her name is Bunny. I like her so much.

6. Aborting: It is used to describe two distinct orientations which keep a TCU unfinished. The first one includes aborting and abandoning what the speaker is about to say (aborting and abandoning). Here the speaker introduces an entirely new statement that has nothing to do with the one that came before it. The second one includes aborting and restarting the whole turn (aborting and restarting). Here the speaker assumes that the listeners won't be interested in what he/she has said or that he/she is abandoning from the core subject [15]. In the following excerpt, the student recognized a mistake during his attempt to describe what he did yesterday. Then, he abandoned the incomplete expression and restarted a more accurate and coherent statement about his visit to the library.

Excerpt 6:

→ S: Yesterday, I went to the ,um, sorry, um , I visited the library and I borrowed some books.

7. Sequence-Jumping: jumping without pause to something unrelated to the current turn [16]. Excerpt 7 shows how the student jumped from describing the things he did during the weekend to another topic which is buying a new car.

Excerpt 7:

→ S: On Friday, we went to my grandfather's house, and uh on Saturday, I stayed at home with my brothers, um played with, uuh oh my father bought a new car that day.

8. Recycling: refers to the repetition of some stretch of talk that the speaker has just said [15]. The following excerpt, the student used one-word recycling by repeating the word "my".

Excerpt 8:

→ S: I had a haircut and um I dyed my my hair black.

9. Reformatting: according to [15], reformatting is usually grammatical in which a grammatical form (e.g. declarative) is changed to another form (e.g. interrogative). In excerpt 9, the students first used the word "challenge" then he reformatted it and used "difficult. Cases of reformatting are rare in this study.

 Excerpt 9:

→ S: I find ,um, learning new vocabulary challenge ,uh, is difficult for me.

10.Reordering: when the speaker attempts to determine the proper arrangement for the elements in his turn. The following excerpt shows that the student first said "hard study" which is out-of-order, then he reordered them "study hard".

Excerpt 10:

→ S: I um, hard study um, study hard for exams.

5. CONCLUSION

It is obviously noted that the investigation of self-initiated repair strategies may reveal some insight into students' overall perceptions and understanding of the target language, their areas of difficulties, and their language acquisition techniques.

The study's findings indicate that aborting was the most frequently used self-repair strategy employed by students during online EFL classrooms, about 27% of the collected data. Students seemed that they frequently abandoned their turn when they were unfamiliar with a certain vocabulary. The second frequently used strategy was replacing, about 22.7% of the collected data. Replacing may include lexical, phonological and grammatical errors [17]. Students use replacing to try to arrange their thoughts and to create an organized and structured turn [18].

Furthermore, the study findings support [11] finding, which show that Iranian students, sophomore and junior, used replacement more frequently. The study also supports [16] in that students in their study used four main self-initiated repair practices; replacing, deleting, inserting, and aborting.

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