

Repair Strategies in Chinese EFL Learners' Story-Telling Conversation

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Abstract

This study investigates the repair strategies employed by English as foreign language of Chinese learners in response to communication breakdowns, with a particular focus on their role in facilitating the progressivity of storytelling conversations. The examination delves into specific repair strategies, including self-initiated repair and repetition strategies, to shed light on their utilization and effectiveness. The findings of the investigation reveal that among the array of repair strategies utilized, English as foreign language of Chinese learners demonstrate a pronounced tendency to rely on self-initiated repairs. Notably, participants in the study primarily addressed issues related to pronouns and verb tense, with a specific emphasis on addressing tense inconsistencies, word order discrepancies, and grammatical errors. This phenomenon underscores the concerted efforts made by Chinese learners to enhance the clarity, coherence, and fluency of their communicative endeavors. Furthermore, the prevalence of self-initiated repairs exemplifies the learners' dedication to surmounting linguistic challenges, fostering mutual understanding, and navigating the complexities inherent in interactive discourse. Such endeavors not only signify their commitment to linguistic improvement but also underscore their proactive engagement in fostering effective communication in intercultural contexts.

Keywords: repair strategy, self-initiated repair, repetition, story-telling conversation

1. Introduction

Schegloff et al. (1977) initially explored the concept of "repair" in conversation, which encompasses more than rectifying linguistic errors. It involves various actions such as confirming understanding, seeking clarification or repetition, and proposing alternative interpretations. A repair sequence is structured with a trouble source or repairable element, followed by a repair initiation, and ultimately results in resolving the issue identified within the conversation.

Repair in spoken discourse is a prevalent aspect that emerges when speakers identify flaws in their plans. Communication breakdown arises when a message fails to transmit effectively among participants, resulting in a halted or blocked conversation. These breakdowns can be addressed through different repair actions by either the speakers or the listeners. The source of trouble causing communication breakdowns may arise at any point in the communication process. Additionally, participants in a conversation can repair any element, whether it's a grammatically correct structure or a pragmatically suitable expression. As outlined by Faerch and Kasper (1983), individuals learning a second language encounter difficulties during both the planning and execution stages due to limited linguistic resources. Consequently, they adjust their strategies, often consciously, utilizing their existing knowledge to ensure they communicate a comprehensible message and achieve their communicative objective.

It is clear that individuals, whether native or non-native speakers of English, employ repair strategies when engaging in the negotiation of meaning to enhance their understanding or convey their thoughts more effectively. However, there has little research on the repair strategies of Chinese EFL learners' speech session discourse. Based on these findings in the prior literature, the present study is designed to address self-initiated and repetition repair strategies used in Chinese EFL learners on speech session discourse and the most frequently used strategy between them.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Repair Strategies

Tye-Murray (2020, p. 163) provides a contemporary comprehensive explanation of repair strategies as methods utilized by participants to resolve communication breakdowns during conversation. This implies that repair strategies serve as means to address any communication difficulties, expanding their scope within the realm of communication. Research on repair has identified a variety of repair strategies, namely self-initiation self-repair, other-initiation self-repair, other initiation other repair, repetition, paraphrase, confirmation checks, clarification requests and comprehension checks (Schegloff et al., 1977; Schegloff, 2000; Nagano, 1997; Drew, 1997). Schegloff et al. (1977) suggest that self-repair constitutes a significant component within the broader repair system during conversation. It is favored not only due to its numerous occurrences but also because the system is designed to prioritize self-repair positions over those of other types of repair.

In the field of second language acquisition, it is apparent that both native and non-native English speakers utilize repair strategies while clarifying meaning to either comprehend or express themselves. For instance, Nagano (1997, p. 81), in his research on Japanese learners of English, concludes that the self-correction techniques employed by Japanese individuals acquiring English display some similarities to those observed in Levelt's research conducted on native English speakers. Studies have indicated that repair, as a linguistic phenomenon, is essential for ensuring smooth and accurate communication. Literature demonstrates that language learners exhibit the capability to employ various repair strategies during interactions in their second language (Schegloff et al., 1977; Watterson, 2008; Leftheriadou & Badger, 1999; Schegloff et al., 2000, 2007).

2.2 Self-Initiated Repair

Self-repair stands as a widely employed effective strategy (Mauranen, 2006). It serves as a mechanism aimed at rectifying issues encountered in speaking, hearing, and understanding during conversations (Schegloff et al., 1990, p. 24), which occur repeatedly. In instances where linguistic or cultural differences impact mutual understanding in conversation (Mauranen, 2006; Wong, 2000), participants tend to repair or correct their discourse (Kurhila, 2003; Wagner, Johannes, Gardner, & Rod, 2004). Research indicates that non-native speakers initiate repairs when faced with difficulties in production, or when auditors encounter challenges in hearing or perceiving the content (Sacks, 1987). Studies by Mauranen (2006) and Kaur (2009) revealed that speakers engage in repair even in the absence of speech errors to preempt potential issues (Kaur, 2009). Repairing serves the purpose of achieving clarification and conciseness.

Self-initiated repair involves the speaker interrupting their speech (Sparks, 1994), pausing, and then revising or rectifying what was previously said in the ongoing discourse. This type of repair strategy encompasses various structures such as extending the turn, pausing or hesitating, repeating words or phrases, substituting words or structures, discontinuing and restarting, discontinuing and discarding, adding words, removing words, reflecting on the repair process, and reordering sentences. Sparks (1994) categorizes repetition, deletion, and insertion as fundamental correction methods.

Hellermann's (2009) study investigating routine conversation practices related to self-initiated self-repair revealed significant findings. It provided evidence that self-initiated self-repair strategies were prevalent in everyday conversations. The research aimed to analyze the patterns, frequencies, and implications of these practices, demonstrating their regular occurrence and importance in managing and rectifying communication breakdowns during ordinary conversations.

Studies investigating the repair strategies of second language learners (e.g., Kranke & Christison, 1983; Schegloff, 2000) reveal a preference for self-initiated repairs, although the frequency of initiation may vary depending on the learner's language proficiency level (cf. Krahnke & Christison, 1983). Krahnke and Christison (1983) note that language learners have demonstrated the ability to utilize interaction management techniques that are not exclusive to language, assisting in their understanding and, potentially, their mastery of the new language.

2.3 Repetition

Repetition stands as a frequently used strategy in communication, often considered as one of the most potent methods for enhancing a speaker's ability to facilitate comprehension (Hoekje, 1984).

Rieger (2003, p. 47) discusses repetition, a form of self-repair that comprises specific repair strategies where both the segment in need of repair and the corrective action occur within the same speaker turn. According to her research, English-German bilinguals utilize repetitions as self-repair strategies differently, based on the language they are speaking. Rieger notes that repetitions, also known as recycling, involve the sequential use of the same

lexical or quasi-lexical item(s) (p. 51). Furthermore, her findings indicate variations in repetition patterns among bilinguals, with more repetitions of pronoun-verb combinations, personal pronouns, and prepositions in English compared to German. Conversely, more recycling of demonstrative pronouns occurs in German compared to English. Rieger (2003) connects these differences to the structural distinctions between the English and German languages, suggesting that the unique structure of a language influences the repair strategies adopted by its speakers (p. 47).

Although repair strategies in communication have been extensively explored within intracultural and intercultural contexts (Schegloff et al., 1977; Schegloff, 2007; Dascal, 1999; Tzanne, 2000; Bosco et al., 2006; Birkner et al., 2012), there is a notable scarcity of research examining the repair strategies utilized by Chinese learners of English. Two studies, conducted by Rieger (2000, 2003), have delved into the areas of self-repair and repetition. Rieger's (2000) doctoral dissertation investigated how language, gender, and proficiency levels influenced the utilization of self-repair strategies among English-German bilinguals in informal conversations. Similarly, in Rieger's (2003) research, she scrutinized the role of repetitions as self-repair strategies in English-German conversations, noting that the repetition of one or multiple lexical items constitutes a component of self-repair organization.

3. Materials and Methods

The study comprises six Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners currently residing in Korea. Among them, three are in their initial semester of study, while the remaining three are in their second semester, totaling six participants. Four of the participants specialize in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), while the remaining two pursue studies in linguistics. Each participant has dedicated over a decade to the study of English and exhibits a keen interest in the language. Noteworthy is the fact that all participants are embarking on their first experience of studying abroad, with none having prior exposure to residing in or visiting English-speaking countries.

The speech sessions were recorded on video, and the transcribed data incorporates multimodal annotations (Mondada, 2014). Over a period of one month, these participants took part in speech sessions, during which they were prompted to narrate a personal experience or a movie plot, followed by a brief discussion related to the story.

The excerpts provided below have been meticulously selected following a thorough review of all transcribed sessions encompassed within the entire corpus. This initial scrutiny was directed towards identifying episodes that prominently exemplify language-related challenges. These findings are systematically organized into four distinct sections, each delineating a unique approach to addressing language issues, with variations contingent upon the evolving nature of the unfolding narratives. The meticulous selection of these three excerpts is predicated on their illustrative and insightful qualities, effectively shedding light on the diverse strategies employed in overcoming language obstacles throughout the storytelling sequences.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Repetition Strategy

The data is from the first speech session talking about a film named "The Underdog Lady" is an inspirational film about an academically and morally poor student who through immense effort, transforms herself and successfully gains admission to her dream university, fulfilling her college aspirations with the help of a teacher. In this exchange, the three participants are discussing their former teaching experience as an English teacher in high school.

Excerpt 1

L: Lily

Y: Yu

T: Ting

94. T: Yeah, yes, con:fidence and(0.5) later maybe he(.) or she, they will(.)
 95. have more confidence to show. Yeah, I can do this.
 96. L: Yeah, they are inspired by(.) the wor:ds.
 97. > T: Yeah, espe:cially for some people(0.5), they::they are not(0.5)they
 98. > are not good at(.) talking with oth:ers a lot. Maybe at the first time.

99. So I think the story really means(.) a lot for me.

In this excerpt, the speaker Ting shares her experience of being an English teacher in high school and how she encouraged these shy students to speak out in the class.

Noticing there are some repeated words or phrases in the telling. In lines 97 and 98, the speaker Ting reiterated the term “they” and inserted “are not” to modify it to “they are not,” subsequently appending “good at” to transform it into “they are not good at” in line 98. These frequent repeating and adding allow herself a pause to process the incoming information and allowing a moment to comprehend or organize her thoughts before proceeding with the conversation. It shows that the speaker may be progressively building and continuing her speech by repeating the initial part of the sentence. The repetition strategy she used serves as an immediate strategy to manage and seek the confirmation or clarification in the ongoing storytelling.

Excerpt 2

104. > T: So when I first hear your story, I thought that (0.5) I think (.) ah I think
 105. > of (0.5) ah:: I think of (0.2) I think of a(.)a Chinese↑, a Chinese(.)very
 106. popular (0.5) the boxing champion: is the Zou Shiming.
 107. L: Yes, Zou Shiming. I heard it. Do you know Zou Shiming? (turn to Yu)

In this excerpt, the speaker Ting is talking about a famous boxing sportsman who inspired her a lot, named Zou Shiming. One of the most salient repair strategy used in the excerpt is repetition. In lines 108 to 109, the speaker restated the phrase “I think” and appended “of,” forming “I think of”; afterward, she reiterated “I think of” twice and included “a,” resulting in the sentence “I think of a.” She repeated the phrase “a Chinese” twice, frequently pausing as she rephrased her speech, striving to express her thoughts accurately. This repetition suggests the speaker’s effort to refine her grammar progressively while constructing her sentences and searching for the appropriate words to complete her utterance. The repairing segment and repaired segment of the several repeated lexical items are lexically identical. In these lines, the speaker repeated part of her previous utterances in response to a perceived communication breakdown. She used repetition to correct her errors or maybe she want to organize what she wanted to say without disrupting the flow of the conversation.

Excerpt 3

H: He

S: Su

X: Xie

204. H: I just want it very(.)very comfortable↑ and relax, not
 205. so much complex processes(0.5).
 206. > S: Yes, it’s one day(0.5) it’s one day(0.2)someday::that I(.) and
 207. > my future husband,(0.2)yes,(0.1)my future husband::
 208. and we are invited some maybe the(0.5) [close friends]
 209. X: [close friends?]
 210. S: Yes, very close friends, that’s okay(.)And we gather together,
 211. > maybe like a family(.), a family dinner(0.5)to just eat
 212. something or(.) talk something just relax:: and free.
 213. > H: Okay, so do you think(0.2)um: do you think your wedding
 214. ceremony will be perfect like that?

In this excerpt, the interlocutors engage in discourse concerning their envisioned wedding ceremonies, with Su articulating her conceptualization. The predominant repair strategy evident in Su’s discourse is the repetition of phrases and sentence structures. For instance, in line 206, Su iterates the phrase “it’s one day” twice, seemingly employing repetition to afford herself additional time for articulation. However, encountering difficulty in formulation, she subsequently substitutes the term “someday.” Similarly, in line 207, 211, and 213, Su employs repetition by reiterating “a family”, “my future husband” and “do you think” in succession, likely employing this strategy to facilitate the construction of her narrative and mitigate potential breakdowns in communication. The utilization of repetition as a repair strategy in this excerpt contributes significantly to the continuity of the

ongoing conversation. Notably, the reiterated segments maintain lexical consistency, thus preserving the coherence of the discourse without impeding comprehension for other participants.

4.2 Self-Repair Strategy

The data is from the third speech session talking about a film which is adapted from a true story tells the tale of a seemingly worn-down and destitute sand factory owner who leads a group of children to learn martial arts, breaking free from the shackles of fate. In this exchange, the three participants are discussing their views about a famous sportsman in China.

Excerpt 4

108. T: [No, but I hear (.) but I heard the in:terview from the Wang Baoqiang,
109. the director (0.5), yeah, talk about his film.
110. > L: Yes, the character in the film(0.5), the children:, they are (0.5) they are
111. > real (0.5) they (0.2) they come from a rea:lly, really poor:: family.
(after several turns)
123. L: Yes, Zou Shiming. I heard it. Do you know Zou Shiming? (turn to Yu)
124. > He's a ve:ry famous sportsman(0.5) and he fights for(0.5) he(1.0) ah
125. his caree:r is boxing?
126. Y: No...

In this excerpt, the speakers are talking about two famous men who inspired them a lot, named Wang Baoqiang and Zou Shiming. The self-repair strategy used in the conversation is abandoning and restarting. In line 110, besides repeating the words “they” and phrases “they are,” the speaker initially tried to express “they are real poor.” However, she recognized a grammatical error in this sentence, leading her to discard the phrase “they are real” and abruptly halt that part of the conversation. She then restarted her statement with “they come from.” Interestingly, this restart is closely related in meaning and context to the abandoned part.

Additionally, in line 124, the speaker first said “he fights for” but then paused a short time and abandoned the sentence and reorganized it by “his career”. It is very likely that the speaker was about to say “he fights for boxing” and therefore she abandoned the talk and restarted a new one. In these two sentence, repairing segment and repaired segment are different, but the part of the restart is quite semantically and pragmatically linked to the abandoned part.

Excerpt 5

112. > L: hahaha She got (0.5) He got golden medals:: about boxing.
113. > T: Yeah. And his wife(.) just had an (0.2) the interview: because(0.5) the
114. > Zou Shiming wanted the (0.5) his son (0.5) the first son::
115. L: Yeah, I know, the very cute boy.
116. > T: inhe:rit (0.5) inhe:rit his business↑, but his wife(.) didn (0.2) doesn't
117. agree, because(0.5) ah I still remember:ed that(.) his (0.5) his wife
118. > said it was very(0.2)very vo:lent.
119. L: Violent?
120. T: Yeah.
121. > L: Boxing is very violent. People can (0.2) people often hur:t themselves
122. > or (0.5) some bleeding or hurt or in:juries.

In the excerpt, the speakers are talking about the violence of boxing. The most salient repair is the language form. For example, in line 112, the speaker committed a linguistic error with personal pronouns, initially using “she” and later correcting it to “he,” altering “she got” to “he got.” This does not indicate a low proficiency in English; rather, it appears to be a slip of the tongue for both speakers. Additionally, the speaker uses replacement strategy to repair her utterance from “into a vide” into “into a film”, and from “an” interview into “the” interview even though there are no semantic error. In these sentences, repairing segment and repaired segment are semantically and pragmatically related. However, in line 116, Ting reformulated her utterance from “didn” to “doesn't”

autonomously because she recognized it was a verb tense mistake and spontaneously self-correct without other partners' external prompting. It shows that the speaker recognized the potential errors or lack of clarity in her own speech and then took immediate actions to correct or clarify them without waiting for the partners to signal a need for clarification.

Another significant self-repair strategy used in the excerpt is adding or inserting new elements. In line 114, the speaker first said "his son" and then paused a short time and replaced "his son" to add lexical item "first" to modify and emphasize the background information. This suggests that the speaker aimed to provide further description to clarify her point, particularly since she knew the sportsman has two sons and wanted to emphasize the first son to avoid potential misunderstanding. Additionally, in lines 121 and 122, the speaker sought to elaborate on the term "violence". This action followed a repair initiation in line 119, indicating that the speaker had not previously explained the wife's statement, "boxing is violent," which implied the wife considered her husband to be violent. Instead, the speaker modified "hurt" by adding an alternative explanation or expression of the same content "hurt, injuries, bleeding" to clarify the characteristics of the sport "boxing", potentially using different words to enhance comprehension.

The following data gleaned from the subsequent speech session pertains to the participants' reflections on their teaching experiences prior to their enrollment at the current institution for academic pursuits. Given that certain participants previously majored in English education, they engaged in numerous internships during their academic tenure. Within this session, participants deliberated on their collective learning and teaching endeavors, as well as the influential role played by their educators.

Excerpt 6

323. H: Oh:: so lucky to you.
 324. S: I think so.
 325. > X: I still have a(.) have the experience about(0.2) my learning
 326. expe:rience about the physics(.), just about my(0.2) as my middle
 327. > school(0.5)no the high:: school maybe. So(.)my physics teacher,
 328. > she was very straight(.)strict and she didn't say some,(0.2)some
 329. > the(.) some the wor:d that encouraged me(.)so (0.5)I'm really not,
 330. > I was not really in:terested in that:: class. I think maybe this is
 331. > my reason that(.) I can(0.2)I don't like(.)I don't like the(.)physics.
 332. > S: What are you(.) were you physics' score? Is it very low?

In this excerpt, Xie, the speaker, recounted an experience involving his physics teacher, who engaged in frequent self-repair throughout her narrative. Among these instances of self-repair, the most prevalent and noteworthy strategy involved rectifying syntactic errors and language forms. For instance, Xie initially stated "have a," but promptly corrected it to "have the" upon recognizing the grammatical error without external prompting. Similarly, he initially referred to "my middle school," but swiftly rectified this by stating "no" and providing the accurate information of "high school." This instance of self-repair involved a semantic discrepancy. Additionally, when Lin mispronounced the word "strict," he promptly self-repaired the error, which did not reflect an inability but rather a slip of the tongue.

In another instance, Xie initially uttered the sentence "I'm really not," but recognized the incorrect structure and tense, subsequently revising it to "I was not really." Here, the self-repair pertained to grammatical aspects such as tense and word order, while the semantics and pragmatics of the sentence remained consistent. A similar repair strategy was observed in subsequent instances. For example, when Su aimed to inquire about Lin's physics score but mistakenly used the present tense, she promptly self-corrected it to the past tense. In these cases, the segments requiring repair were semantically linked, and the overall meanings of the sentences remained largely unchanged.

Excerpt 7

264. S: But I think that(.) it will be very interesting:: in the village. The
 265. People(0.2) the children can come here: and they can enjoy their
 266. lunch. We can talk a lot. For families or fri:ends to get together.
 267. X: Yes.

268. > H: It's ve:ry different from the(0.5)um:: It's like a big family lunch.
 269. X: So you know: all of the people(.) who went?
 270. > H: I didn't know(0.5)Most of them I did not know:: them. Because
 271. they were(.) his relatives(.)not mine.

In this excerpt, the speakers recounted their experiences attending wedding ceremonies with friends, wherein a prominent repair strategy observed was the use of restarting. Specifically, in line 268, the speaker He appeared to intend a comparison between wedding ceremonies held in a village versus those in a hotel. Initially, he began with the phrase "it's very different from." However, following a pause, presumably due to difficulty in retrieving the desired expression, he abandoned this syntactic structure and subsequently introduced a new formulation: "it's like a big family lunch." Notably, this instance of repair resulted in a notable semantic shift from the original sentence.

Moreover, in line 270, the speaker initially responded to a question with a concise statement but later opted to restart with an altered sentence structure conveying the same meaning "Most of them I did not know them." This suggests the speaker's perception that the expression "I didn't know" lacked clarity in conveying his intended meaning, prompting him to restart with an alternative construction providing more nuanced information regarding "most of them."

5. Conclusion

This study examines the repair strategies used in Chinese EFL learners to deal with communication breakdown to realize the progressivity of storytelling conversation. Specific repair strategies such as self-initiated repair and repetition strategies are covered in the study.

The investigation revealed that among the repair strategies employed, Chinese EFL learners predominantly utilized self-initiated repairs. This preference aligns with prior studies (Kranke & Christison, 1983; Schegloff, 2000) indicating a similar inclination toward self-initiated repairs. The most commonly addressed repair types among participants in this study pertained to pronouns and verb tense, mirroring findings in Lee's research (2005) that highlighted non-native speakers' active engagement in self-initiated repairs, specifically focusing on tense, word order, and grammar. This exemplifies the concerted efforts of Chinese learners to enhance clarity, coherence, and fluency in communication. Moreover, it demonstrates their commitment to overcoming linguistic hurdles, promoting mutual understanding, and navigating communication intricacies in interactive conversations.

In summary, examining repair strategies offers insights into learners' overall understanding and interpretation of the target language, revealing their specific challenges, language acquisition approaches, and attitudes. This study might also contribute valuable insights to EFL researchers. There is a need for greater emphasis on EFL curriculum development, particularly to aid Chinese learners in cultivating more effective repair strategies for navigating communication breakdowns.

However, it is important to acknowledge that this study has several limitations regarding its validity. Firstly, while the recordings have provided valuable data for the analysis of repair strategies, it should be noted that the participants exhibit varying levels of education background and language proficiency, which may have influenced their repair strategies. Secondly, the utilization of repair strategies is likely to be influenced by the specific conversational content and topics discussed. Thirdly, the analysis focused exclusively on graduate students in China, thus potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings to other student populations. These limitations highlight potential avenues for future research in this area.

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Appendix A

Transcription Notation

- []: Overlapping utterances
- (2.0): Timed silence within or between adjacent utterances
- (): An uncertain hearing of what the speaker said
- (()): Scenic description and accounts
- (.): A short untimed pause
- =: Latching that indicates no interval between adjacent utterances
- : A halting, abrupt cutoff
- ∴: Falling intonation contour, not necessarily an assertion
- ∵: A slightly rising intonation, not necessarily a clause boundary
- ?: Rising intonation, not necessarily a question
- i: A rise stronger than a comma but weaker than a question mark
- : Quieter than surrounding talk

:: A prolonged stretchon
on: stressed syllable, either by increased amplitude or higher pitch or both
pa::sing: Pitch moves up then down
les'n:s: Pitch sliding up through
^v: Marked change in pitch: upward or downward.
huh or hah: laughing
h: Aspiration, breathing out
.h: Inhalations
ha(h)ve: Smiley voice
< >: Utterance is delivered at slower pace than surrounding talk
> <: Utterance is delivered at quicker pace than surrounding talk
>: A line of a particular interest in the discussion (see Hepburn & Bolden, 2013)Multimodal Notation
& #%.⊥ : Each participant has one for gaze and another one for gesture
——— >⊥ : Gesture/gaze is elongated until > point
<< — >>: Gesture/gaze begins before talk or ends after talk (Mondada, 2014)

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