

Investigating and Comparing Repair Operations in Oral Discourse of Iranian EFL Students

Amirhossein Talebi¹, PhD candidate in TEFL

Reza Biria², Assistant Professor

^{1,2} Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch

Author Note

Reza Biria, Assistant Professor at English Language Faculty, Isfahan (Khorasgan) branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran; Amirhossein Talebi, PH.D Candidate, Islamic Azad University of Isfahan.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Amirhossein Talebi, Faculty of English Language, Islamic Azad University of Isfahan

Abstract: *This paper sought to investigate whether replacement and insertion operations, as two of the self-initiated repair operations, are employed by Iranian EFL learners in oral reproduction of short stories. In addition, the present study examined learners' priorities in employing repair operations. To this end, two groups of thirty EFL students in two oral reproduction courses at Khorasgan university(Iran) were required to reproduce two short stories as their final exam. This study purposefully used two groups of learners in two different academic years, sophomores and juniors, to inspect if the academic background has an impact on the frequency of repair practices. To collect data, two short stories were selected from Oral Reproduction of Stories by Abbas Ali Rezai, and participants were voice recorded. By transcribing the data and using appropriate statistical measures, data were analyzed, and the results revealed that both sophomore and junior Iranian EFL learners produced replacement repair practices more frequently. Furthermore, the results indicated that students in the sophomore group produced more repair practices as a whole. The findings presented here may facilitate improvements in syllabus design and raise awareness in both teachers and students.*

Keywords: *self-initiated repair, repair operations, replacement, insertion, oral reproduction*

1. Introduction

The topic of language repair has been one of the most engrossing areas in the recent second language research. As it is evident, students in educational EFL settings frequently encounter

conversational challenges when they are to interact with other interlocutors such as other students or teachers i.e. they mostly experience moments of conversational breakdowns for various reasons. In fact, They struggle to transmit a comprehensible message to their interlocutors, and they sometimes fail to do so. Therefore, Leonard (1983) suggests that competent communicators learn to regulate and modify messages within a conversation. Speech modification may entail planning to select appropriate words, reducing the complexity of utterances, or elaborating on a statement for clarification. When individuals do not properly regulate or modify messages, a communication breakdown may occur. Interactants, thus, try to make repairs to their utterances in order to maintain communication.

Language repair was first defined by Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks (1977) as the set of practices by which a co-interactant interrupts the ongoing course of action to attend to possible trouble in speaking, hearing or understanding the talk. Thus, it is used as an important communication strategy to maintain the conversation and avoid breakdowns. ‘ Trouble ’ includes such things as “ misarticulation , malapropisms, use of a wrong word, unavailability of a word when needed, failure to hear or to be heard, trouble on the part of the recipient in understanding, incorrect understandings by recipients” (Schegloff, 1987a : 210), among others. Repair is used to ensure “ that the interaction does not freeze in its place when trouble arises, that inter-subjectivity is maintained or restored, and that the turn and sequence and activity can progress to possible completion ” (Schegloff, 2007b : xiv).

A key distinction has been provided by conversation analysts between *initiating* repair and actually making the repair by giving the repair solution. In fact, this is an important distinction because repair can be initiated by one party and completed by another. Most often, repair is initiated by the speaker of the *trouble-source* or *repairable* (these terms are used interchangeably in the literature), and this is referred to as *self* - initiated repair. Generally the speaker who self - initiates repair also completes the repair by producing a repair solution (Kitzinger, C. , & Lerner , G. H., 2010).

In self - initiated self - repair, then, a current speaker stops what s/he is saying to deal with something which is being treated as a problem in what s/he has said, or started to say, or may be about to say — for example, cutting off the talk to replace a word uttered in error with the correct word. By contrast, in *other* - initiated repair someone other than the speaker of the trouble - source initiates repair. Hence, it is the recipient of a turn - at - talk (rather than its speaker) who initiates repair on it (Schegloff, et al., 1977).

Self-initiated repair operations identified by Schegloff (2007b) are: replacing, inserting, deleting, searching, parenthesizing, aborting, sequence jumping, recycling, reformatting and reordering. Replacing and inserting are the focus of the present study. In fact, replacement involves “ a speaker’ s substituting for a wholly or partially articulated element of a turn - in -

progress another, different element, while retaining the sense that this is the same utterance ” (Schegloff, 2008). Inserting is another very common repair operation and, as with replacing, it is used across many different languages. Wilkinson and Weatherall (2011: 71) describe insertion as distinctive in that it “retains and *modifies* the original formulation, rather than, for example, deleting it or replacing it.” The inserted material mostly comes to modify the original reference formulation to *make* it more identified as a unique referent.

Replacement repairs come in various forms such as antonyms or synonyms, alternative formulations of the trouble - source term. Also, They can substitute a full - form for an indexical reference, or a new full - form reference for the trouble - source reference, either for the same referent or for a different one. Replacing can extract an individual from a collectivity or conversely can aggregate an individual to a collectivity by replacing (e.g. “ I ” with “ we ”) (Lerner and Kitzinger, 2007a). Speakers can also use replacement to change the tense of a verb (e.g. from past to present).

Insertion is mostly used to achieve two particular goals: The most common end is for the inserted material to modify the original reference formulation so as to *specify* it more closely by identifying a unique referent. Another common objective in which inserted material can modify an original formulation is to *intensify* the meaning of the words it modifies (Wilkinson and Weatherall, 2011).

Cut-offs are a common way of halting progressivity in English (and in many other languages). So, too, are various other hitches in speaking — including sound stretches and other delaying productions (e.g. “um”, or “ uh ”). Such hitches do not initiate repair by themselves, but rather alert recipients to the possibility of a repair of trouble (if it was trouble) only becoming evident from an inspection of what happens next. Nevertheless, Repairs can also be initiated tacitly, without any explicit advance indication that progressivity is being suspended; in such instances it is only apparent on production of the repair solution that a repair is being effected, and that the onward progressivity of the turn has been suspended for the purposes of that repair (Lerner & Kitzinger, 2010). There is no one - to - one relationship between the method of repair initiation and the repair operation: repair initiated with a cut - off can turn out to be replacing, inserting, deleting, or any other of the full range of repair operations.

On the basis of such assumptions, the present research aims to investigate whether the two repair operations, replacement and insertion, are used in the oral production of Iranian EFL learners. This study also aims to identify how repair operations are prioritized in terms of actual practices to regulate and maintain conversation, pass comprehensible messages to their interlocutors and achieve their communicative goals. The findings will hopefully provide insights into how important these practices are in real life communication; in addition, EFL syllabus designers may gear the courses toward the linguistic knowledge of their students.

Indeed, a couple of prior studies have been carried out on language repair. For example, Nagano (1997: 81) in his study on the self-repair of Japanese learners of English concludes that "... the self-repair of Japanese speakers of English is not very different in some ways from that of the L1 speakers in Levelt's study".

Research has also shown that repair, which is a language phenomenon, is necessary for keeping communication smooth and accurate, and it has been evident in the literature that language learners are able to employ many repair strategies in second language interaction (Schegloff et al., 1977; Schegloff, 2000, 2007; Watterson, 2008). Additionally, It is evident in language repair research that both native and non-native speakers of English use repair practices while negotiating meaning in order to understand or make themselves understood (Firth & Wagner, 1997).

Drew (1997) suggests that "self-repair is also a mechanism of remedying mistakes in conversation". 'Mistakes' may also relate to acceptability problems, such as saying something wrong in a broad sense, that is untrue, inappropriate or irrelevant (Schegloff, 2007).

According to Schegloff et al.(1977), self-initiated self-repair (self-repair) takes the form of initiation with a non-lexical initiator, followed by the repairing segment (p. 376). These non-lexical initiators include cut-offs, lengthening of sounds, and quasi-lexical fillers such as *uh* and *um*. In order to repair their errors in problematic talk, language users repeat words and use fillers to gain time and achieve their communicative goal. Schegloff et al.(1977) state that self-initiated and self-completed repair (self-initiated self-repair) occurs when the interlocutor who is responsible for the trouble source both initiates and completes the repair.

The problematic talk 'trouble source' can be defined as an utterance or a part of an utterance that is perceived as problematic by at least one of the interlocutors. The speaker may feel that the utterance did not correspond to what he/she wanted to say, while the hearer may be unable to decode the intended meaning of the utterance. The speaker may also assume that the recipient did not understand the utterance in the right way (Faerch and Kasper, 1982:79).

Self-initiation, self-completed repair is the most common repair strategy used (Schegloff et al., 1977). The speaker makes an error, detects it, cuts off what he/she was saying, and repairs the error. Repairs are signaled through the use of strategies, such as interruption, editing expressions (*er*, *em*) and backtracking. Similarly, Berg(1986: 212) admits that the repair process begins with an error. An error means "all kinds of inadvertent behaviors". Errors are usually detected during the articulation of the problematic word, which is usually signaled by the interruption of the flow of speech by the speaker himself.

Research on the repair of second language learners (e.g., Kranke & Christison, 1983; Schegloff, 2000) shows preference for self-initiated repair, although variations can be seen in the amount of initiation depending on the learner's language level (cf. Krahnke and Christison, 1983). Krahnke

and Christison (1983) remark that "...language learners have demonstrated ability to utilize non-language-specific techniques of interaction maintenance which also facilitate their comprehension, and we can assume, their acquisition of the new language" (p. 234).

When EFL learners come across situations in which they make conversational mistakes, repair comes to help to smooth the way to return the conversation to normalcy. However, lack of linguistic knowledge may impede them from using repair practices or lengthen the time before repair is produced. According to Faerch and Kasper (1983), during the planning and execution phases, L2 speakers encounter problems due to their lack of linguistic resources; therefore, they modify their plan and use their existing knowledge, usually consciously, with the intention of sending a comprehensible message and achieving their communicative goal.

As a matter of fact repair operations take various forms as mentioned previously. To demonstrate the difference, the following examples show how learners make repairs through inserting and replacing their utterances (taken from the data of the present research):

(1)

- 1 S: Buh the men we:re the men **are were** surprise'd
2 T: [nod]

(2)

- 1 S: The man **said told** his son he should'n heve done id
2 T: Okay

(3)

- 1 S: ...He jus wanid ta know if he'd err (0.2) he'd **perfectly** done the job
2 T: Aha

(4)

- 1 S: ...The summer wez n- **really** nice
2 T:

As it is evident from these repair examples, students in examples (1) and (2) replaced new utterances for their troubled utterances without any advance indications to let the interlocutor become aware of the suspension of the turn; additionally, in examples (3) and (4), students alerted the cut-off by using sound stretches and inserting new utterances.

Replacement is a common repair practice whose role in communication could be one of the "most effective strategies for promoting comprehension that a speaker can use" (Hoekje, 1984: 10). However, research literature on repair operations in Iranian EFL learners' discourse is not rich. Hence, the need for more research on repair practices, especially repair operations, is felt as teachers and syllabus designers can benefit from the findings of this type of research to have a better grasp.

Zahra Fotovatnia & Afrooz Dorri's study (2013) concentrated on repair strategies used by Iranian learners in accordance with gender's effect on their use; nevertheless, repair operations were not the focus of the study. Yet, the focus of the present study is to investigate replacement and insertion operations in oral reproduction of stories. It compares replacing and inserting repair practices produced by Iranian EFL learners in retelling short stories. More specifically, the aim of the present research is to answer the following questions:

1. Are replacement and insertion repair operations employed by Iranian EFL students in retelling short stories?
2. Which repair operation, replacement or insertion, is more frequently practiced?
3. Is there a relationship between the participants' academic background and the frequency of repair practices?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants of this study were sixty male and female third-year and second-year EFL students enrolled in the oral reproduction courses at Khorasgan university. In December 2014, these participants, in two groups of 30, ranging from age 20 to 24 performed a story-retelling task as their final exam. The first group included fifteen males and fifteen females, and they were all selected from the oral reproduction of short stories course offered to sophomores. Also, the second group included fifteen males and fifteen females, but they were selected from the same course offered to juniors. To control the effect of prior English studies, all students who had enrolled in these two classes took an Oxford Placement Test [OPT, Allan, 2004]. And, sixty participants (thirty males and thirty females) were selected for the subsequent stages of the study. Also, students were not informed that they were selected for this study to keep the natural state of their performance. However, the researcher let them know the fact after the exam.

2.2. Materials and Procedure

Prior to the study, the Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 2004) was used to assess the participants' homogeneity in terms of proficiency. The test had 100 multiple choice items. Along with Allan's (2004) scoring guidelines, 60 of the participants who scored higher than 68 out of 100 were selected as upper-intermediate learners for the main phase of the study. Two short stories were selected from Oral Reproduction of Stories (Rezai, 2013): *The Six Rows of Pompons* and *All Summer in a Day*, which were thought to be interesting, and within the proficiency level of the students, after consultations with three university professors. All participants were assigned to read the stories and prepare for oral reproduction as their final exam. The participants were individually audio-recorded in the researcher's office while retelling the stories to the researcher.

The researcher used gestures, such as nodding, to show that he was following, and interested, and to encourage the participants to continue their retelling. Since real-life conversations require more interaction between speakers, the researcher also tried to interrupt the participants, using words and expressions, such as *then, aha, OK, oh my God!, Did he do that? Oh Really!, and What happened then?* This had a positive impact on the participants' performance, and their motivation to complete the task. The participants' production was carefully transcribed. All pauses and sound elongations were included in the transcription. In the transcription, every pause was shown in seconds, which was measured with the use of a stop watch. Markee (2000) suggests that the entire speech event should be transcribed to "provide an exhaustive account of the data potentially available for analysis" (p. 105).

The researcher was interested in analyzing the oral production of the participants because the interlocutor who was the researcher of the present study himself, did not produce much discourse. Basing on repair operations, the researcher detected both operations in the transcription of the spoken discourse of Iranian learners of English, and then assigned them into two categories: replacement and insertion. Next, frequencies and percentages of both repair operation practices were calculated for sophomores and juniors. Finally, to find out any statistical differences in the use of repair practices between the two groups of EFL learners, a t-test was run.

It should be noted that in order to maximize the reliability of the researcher's classification, it was passed to three intra-raters, who are professors of Applied Linguistics at the University of Isfahan. In order to make the raters' task easier, the operations were highlighted and classified in context. That is, the whole utterance in which repair was practiced was transcribed. The raters were asked to verify whether that the researcher's classification was accurate based on the definition of each operation. Their comments were taken into consideration and after necessary rectifications, the final categories and frequencies were ready.

Also, the researcher selected two groups of students from two different academic years of studies to find out whether offering this course to both sophomores and juniors was an appropriate decision taken by syllabus designers.

3. Results

Table1. Frequencies and percentages of repair practices of the first group (Sophomores)

Repair Operation	Frequency	Percentage
Replacement	163	81.09
Insertion	38	18.91
Total	201	100%

As can be seen in Table 1, the participants in the first group recorded 201 instances of repair practices while retelling the two stories. It was observed that they tried their best to report as many events as they could; even very specific details were reported. This was evident in the average number of words used in their oral production which by means of MS Office word count, was found to be 600 words per story on average. It was also observed that all the participants in the first group used some instances of repair operations, either replacing or inserting. They practiced the two operations under investigation at the rate of 163 and 38 instances, respectively.

Table2. Frequencies and percentages of repair practices of the second group (Juniors)

Repair Operation	Frequency	Percentage
Replacement	112	75.67
Insertion	36	24.33
Total	148	100%

Table 2 above shows that the juniors used fewer repair practices than the sophomores; they employed a total number of 148 instances of replacement repair practices, representing both operations. Contrary to the participants of the first group, it was noted that the third-year participants described only the key events; very specific details were not reported. This was manifested in the average number of words they produced, which was 450. Again, participants of the second group produced replacing repairs more frequently (112 cases).

In order to find out whether the differences in repair practices were significant in terms of academic background, a t- test was applied. As Table 3 below shows, the sophomore participants' mean score was 6.7, while the junior participants' mean score was 4.93, indicating that the sophomores produced more cases of repair on the average.

Table3. Independent t-test output

Group Statistics					
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total Repair Practices	Sophomore	30	6.70	2.276	.415
	Junior	30	4.93	3.119	.352

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Total Repair Practices	Equal variances assumed	.719	.400	-2.02	58	.036	-1.10	.545	-2.19	-.010
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.02	56.48	.036	-1.10	.545	-2.19	-.009

As it is evident, “The mean score of the sophomore group ($M = 6.7$, $SD = 2.27$) is significantly higher ($t = -2.02$, $df = 58$, two-tailed $p = .036$) than that of the junior participants ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 3.119$)”.

4. Discussion

Above all, the results of the present study confirm that replacement and insertion operations are frequently used by Iranian EFL learners too. Also, the use of the two repair operations by Iranian EFL learners reveal that the findings are in line with the results of previous research on language repair (Lerner & Kitzinger, 2010). However, it was found that there were significant differences between the two groups in terms of the frequency of repair practices.

The statistical analysis presented in Tables 1&2 revealed that the learners in the first group significantly produced more replacement repair practices and fewer insertion repair instances in the story retelling task, when compared to those in the second group. This may have been due to a number of reasons. As stated previously, the number of words uttered by sophomores exceeded the number of words produced by juniors, which might be attributed to the paucity of other abilities since linguistic background was controlled by through the application of an OPT.

Replacement operation as a self-initiated repair practice was used by both groups as an attempt made by the speaker to plan for a new utterance or to gain time to recall the next lexical item, when s/he felt that s/he made an error. Another point is that the juniors produced fewer repair instances, which could be attributed to the fact that they were more concise in story-retelling, i.e.

they reported only the major events in both stories. It was possible that the juniors, due to the fact that they were more experienced, had designed a plan before attending the short stories retelling session. The answer to this question can be found by applying further research.

Also, Self-initiated repair was used when the speakers encountered problems with retrieving different items of the stories such as names of characters, story events, and main ideas. Additionally, it was noticed that replacement repair was not always successful; that is, the speakers tried to correct what they thought to be a mistake, but they did not do that successfully. This finding is thus a verification of the view that self-initiated repair is a well-organized, orderly, and rule-governed phenomenon and not a chaotic aspect of spoken discourse (Schegloff et al., 1977).

Furthermore, it was found that participants in both groups were keen on taking risks to transmit comprehensible messages to their interlocutor, who was the researcher in the present study. They practiced repairs to retrieve ideas and lexical items and maintain conversation, and to produce correct forms or ideas. The participants' use of such repairs made their oral production comprehensible, despite the presence of hesitations and pauses.

5. Implications

This study raises the need for EFL syllabus designers and researchers to be aware of differences in producing repair practices among learners. In fact, courses offered to students must have been geared towards specific communicative abilities of the target learners, for example, when students can benefit more from their courses as they become more communicatively competent. In addition, teachers will be able to respond to the communication problems of students more effectively when they understand students' ways of resolving the conversation problems and the factors that affect them. In fact, teachers may help their students by giving awareness of appropriate strategies to overcome conversational difficulties.

Another implication is what can be used by students as learners' strategies i.e. learners get a better grasp of their own oral productions and find necessary strategies to deal with their own conversational breakdowns and in case of retelling short stories, students may find pre-planned strategies which can help them to perform the task more successfully.

The present study suffered from several limitations such as time and small samples. Also, this research included only students with an upper-intermediate level of proficiency; therefore, generalizations cannot be made to all levels of proficiency.

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