An Analysis of Repair Work in an EFL Classroom in Japan

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Repair work is recognised as an valuable component of effective teaching and learning in the foreign language classroom. The primary objective of this study is to observe and understand how repair work is carried out in an EFL classroom in a Japanese setting. In this paper, a total of eight extracts from one English language lesson are analysed based upon four patterns of repair work. It is revealed that this distinction of repair work, though useful and relevant, is not sufficient for a comprehensive explanation of the present EFL classroom. In order to make a more detailed sequential analysis of repair work, therefore, the perspective of language functions is proposed. This new description of repair work is found particularly relevant to detecting what is missing in the L2 classroom and enhancing teachers’ awareness of teacher-student interactions.

1. Introduction

Repair work has been the focus of research attention in language classrooms for many years. It is interesting to see how participants deal with their own and each other’s errors or troubles in the L2 classroom. When they get together in the classroom, they “routinely make various sorts of errors and then either revise what they have said or have the problems rectified by other participants” (Nofsinger 1991: 124).

Much of the literature on repair work, however, has focused on bilingual communities. Here in this paper I should like to make a sequential analysis of L2 classroom repair in the Japanese setting, where English is taught as a foreign language. This is intended as a way of exploring the implications of classroom research findings so as to improve foreign language teaching in this country.

Before proceeding, I need to clarify what repair means in the classroom. Repair can be defined as “the treatment of trouble occurring in interactive language use” (van Lier 1988: 183). Richards et al. (1992: 314) follow basically the same line by defining it as “a term for ways in which errors, unintended forms, or misunderstandings are corrected by speakers or others during conversation.”
There are four possible patterns of repair work which occur in spoken discourse (Schegloff et al. 1977 and Levinson 1983): self-initiated other-repair, self-initiated self-repair, other-initiated self-repair and other-initiated other-repair. Nofsinger (1991) explains these distinctions in more depth as follows:

In summary, repair is initiated when a participant marks some portion of a turn as a trouble source. This is often done by the speaker of the trouble-source turn (self-initiation), but is also done by other participants (other-initiation). The repair itself can also be accomplished either by the speaker of the trouble (self-repair) or by another (other-repair). (131)

Using the framework proposed above, I should like to investigate initiation and repair strategies in conversations between a non-native teacher of English and non-native learners of English in the Japanese junior high school setting.

2. Data Collection and Analysis

It should be noted that the English language class for this analysis was videotaped on 3 September 1984. Nearly two years later the tape was published for teacher education by Hoso Kyoiku Kaihatsu Centre, which is affiliated with the Japanese Open University.

(1) Subjects

All the participants in this interaction were natives of Japan, with a common L1. The teacher was a female student teacher, and the learners were in the third grade at a junior high school in Tokyo. The class consisted of 20 boys and 20 girls, who were 14 to 15 years old. These pupils had been learning English as a foreign language for two and half years. Most of them had not used English out of their classroom in their life. The teacher was a college senior who majored in English literature, and this was her first class. She stood at the front of the classroom, while the pupils sat at desks.

(2) Teaching procedures

The following is a rough sketch of a sequence of the tape-recorded lesson:

1. Self-introduction (2 minutes)
2. Oral Presentation and Drill
   a. New sentence structure (21 minutes)
   b. New words and phrases (25 minutes)
3. Consolidation (2 minutes)
   (Time duration is approximate)
(3) Analysis

The following extracts are arranged in accordance with the above-mentioned sequence of the lesson, and the time indicated in the brackets shows approximately how many minutes have passed since the lesson began. The transcription conventions are based mostly on those recommended by van Lier (1988). It should be noted, that utterances in single quotation marks indicate that they are made in Japanese. In this lesson each Japanese learner is called by an English name, not by his or her own real name.

EXTRACT 1 (approximately 1 minute has passed since the beginning of the lesson)

1 T: Junko Kobayashi... I'm a senior at Meiji Gakuin University. I'm a... I'm in the fourth grade. at (u) at Meiji Gakuin University 'yonensei ne'. ((tr: senior))

Since this is her first appearance in an actual classroom, the teacher spends a few minutes talking about herself in the beginning of this lesson. She finds the word “senior” too difficult for junior high school pupils (self-initiation), and so paraphrases it (self-repair). We can note an instance of a pause when she is at a loss for words. She still finds the altered word “grade” difficult, but tries in vain to paraphrase it in easy English. That is why she adds Japanese translation as the last resort (self-initiated self-repair). This extract illustrates an example of intra-turn repair done by the teacher, not by the learner(s). It is said that intra-turn repair is often used by teachers to guide learners in the formulation of a turn, but this does not seem to be the case. The teacher does not expect learners to respond verbally, but simply continues her talk.

EXTRACT 2 (3 minutes after the beginning of the lesson)

1 T: the boy is Toshihiko the boy is Toshihiko we call the boy Toshihiko we call the boy
   Toshihiko ah sorry we call the boy Toshi we call the boy Toshi.

The above extract shows another instance of intra-turn repair-initiation, which is quite similar to Extract 1. The teacher intends to introduce a new sentence pattern of “S + V + O + C”, but gets confused over the selection of appropriate words. “Toshi” is the nickname for “Toshihiko”, but she temporarily forgets which is which. She loses no time in doing self-initiated self-repair in order to correct her own mistake in her utterance.

EXTRACT 3 (6 minutes after the beginning of the lesson)

1 T: we call this girl Emi... please repeat after me please ah this ah we call this
   girl Emi ‘hai’ ((tr: please))

2 LL: we call this girl Emi

Extract 3 illustrates an instance of self-repair, which is apparently activity-oriented (van Lier 1988: 188). The teacher is supposed to tell “Please repeat after me. We call this girl Emi. hai.” But she forgets
the lesson procedure, and then remembers what she has planned to say. Thus she quickly self-initiates and self-repairs her teaching procedure.

She frequently utters “ah” when procedural problems arise in her mind. It should be noted that the word ‘hai’, which means ‘please’ or ‘yes’, is commonly used as a cue to guide learners to respond quickly to the teacher’s request in the classroom.

**EXTRACT 4** (7 minutes after the beginning of the lesson)

1 T: ‘hai’ Edward, they call him Roy ‘dou iu imi’? ((tr: What does this mean?))
2 L1: ...
3 T: they
4 L1: ‘karera wa’ ...... ((tr: they ...... ))
5 T: um .. *call him Roy* ((tapping on the board))
6 L1: ‘karera ha’ ...... ((tr: they))
7 T: um ..... him
8 L1: ‘kare o roi to yobu’ ((tr: call him Roy))
9 T: OK OK good!

In Extract 4, the teacher nominates L1 to translate the expression: “They call him Roy.” L1 seems to be a little nervous and fails to translate it into Japanese in 2L1. The teacher repeats the trouble-source item in 3T, 5T and 7T (other-initiation), so that the learner can get a chance to make a correct translation (self-repair). In other words, the hearer initiates repair, but leaves it up to the speaker to carry out the repair. During this interaction, the teacher understands how embarrassed the learner is, and tries to ease his tension. In 7T, she utters “um” as a listening response in order to let him know that he is not off the track. It seems that she tries to give him an opportunity to monitor his own performance and to do his own repairing during this interaction. In 9T, she evaluates the learner’s response without listening to it carefully. It is very probable that her concern with the smooth running of the sequence occasions her utterances to overlap the learner’s in 9T.

**EXTRACT 5** (13 minutes after the beginning of the lesson)

1 T: this dog is Friday ‘hai’ ((tr: please))
2 LL: we call this dog Friday.
3 T: OK we call this dog Friday.
4 LL: we call this dog Friday.
5 T: OK .... this boy i- this boy is Toshi. ‘hai’
6 LL: this boy is Toshi.

7 T:  ‘ii kaete ne’* we call ‘nani nani de’** OK this boy is Toshi ‘hai’
*((tr: rephrase it))    **((by something something))

8 LL: we call this boy Toshi.

Extract 5 illustrates how different the teacher’s intended activity is from the learners’ interpreted activity. Before the above sequence begins, the teacher explains how to carry out a sentence-pattern drill. The learners are required to say, “We call this dog Friday,” in chorus if they hear the teacher say, “This dog is Friday.” They make a chorus response without any difficulty in 2LL. In 6LL, however, they fail to respond as is expected by the teacher. What they actually do is to repeat what they have just heard in 5T. This is all because in 4LL the teacher gets the learners to repeat exactly what she says in 3T. In 6LL, therefore, all the learners think that they need to repeat in chorus what they hear in 5T. The teacher finds her own teaching direction inappropriate and is obliged to do procedural self-repair in 7T. As a result of this, the learners do other-initiated self-repair in 8LL. What is particularly interesting in this sequence is the process in which the teacher becomes aware of the procedural problem and does self-initiated self-repair and also gets the learners to do other-initiated self-repair.

EXTRACT 6 (35 minutes after the beginning of the lesson)

1 T:  they were made many years ago. they were made many years ago. OK? Please repeat after me. they made, they made many years ago ‘hai’ ((tr: please))

2 LL:  they made many years ago ((feebly))

3 T:  many years ago ‘hai’

4 LL:  many years ago

5 T:  many years ago

6 LL:  many years ago

7 T:  they made many years ago ‘hai’

8 LL:  they made many years ago.

9 T:  OK ‘e:::to’* OK Charles, Charles ... ‘dou iu imi kana’** they made many years ago
*((tr: we:::ll))    **((tr: what does it mean?))

No repair work is made in Extract 6. This sequence of interaction shows how a linguistic and communication breakdown occurs between the teacher and the learners. Without knowing it, the teacher is trying to teach a wrong sentence to her pupils, creating considerable activity confusion in the classroom. The teacher presents a target sentence in 1T, but changes it into a wrong one in the same turn. That makes some of the learners feel less confident and reluctant to repeat the problematic sentence in a loud voice in 2LL. This reaction vaguely indicates that they do self-initiation. Believing that the trouble source is “many years ago”, however, the teacher tries to get the learners to repeat the part in question in 4LL, 6LL and 8LL, and then asks one pupil to translate the wrong target sentence into Japanese in 9T.
EXTRACT 7  (42 minutes after the beginning of the lesson)

1  T:  'over te iu no wa ... ((teacher writing on board)) ... more than to onaji imi desu hai ja: (Robita) do iu imi kana?'* ((unt)) over
* ((tr: “over” means “more than” then now (Robita) What does it mean (in Japanese)))

2  L3:  .....  

3  T:  um... ‘over, more than te iu no wa nani nani ijo ni te iu imi nanone .. hai’
((tr: “over”, “more than” means “over something” .. please))

Extract 7 shows that the teacher takes a different attitude towards a pupil. She usually tries to supply prompting or cluing when she finds a learner in trouble. But this is not the case. She asks one of her pupils what it means by “more than” in 1T. She notices the learner’s pause in 2L3, but does not wait long enough for him to answer the question. In 3T, she provides repair before the learner gets a chance to initiate self-repair. This is a typical instance of other-initiated other repair found in the present data.

It seems that the teacher in this interaction is much concerned with the smooth running of the sequence rather than the learner’s smooth production of the target utterance. This is probably because she thinks she has already spent so much time towards the end of this lesson. This data segment suggests that other-repair may be done in the interest of the “smooth” development of the lesson.

EXTRACT 8  (45 minutes after the beginning of the lesson)

1  T:  ‘hai’ OK, ‘hai tsugi’.* .... a:Carol .. o- *
* ((tr: next please))

2  L4  over

3  T:  one thousand=

4  L4:  =over one thousand . years before the Inca empire

5  T:  ‘hai’ Arthur,

6  L5:  over- . over one- ..

7  T:  one thousand

8  L5:  over one thousand(s)- years=

9  T:  =thousand ... over one thousand years,

10  L5  over one thousand years ..

11  T:  before,

12  L5:  before the Inca empire

13  T:  ‘hai so:ne.’* ‘hai’ class over on- one thousand years before the Inca empire hai
* ((tr: yes right))

Extract 8 illustrates same-turn other-repair, which “may be an L2 classroom-specific way of repairing” (van Lier 1988: 199). “Over one thousand years before the Inca empire” is a phrase which the
learners are required to repeat. Before this sequence begins, they practice this phrase in chorus several times. Thus, they can repeat the target sentence in chorus with comparative ease. When they are called upon to produce it individually, however, they have difficulty in repeating it at one time. Therefore, the teacher is necessitated to do a lot of “helping” so that they can repeat such a long, complex item. It is apparent that her pupils need much more practice before they are nominated individually.

3. Discussion

We are now led to account for and explore the implications of classroom research findings.

1 Self-repair vs. other-repair in the L2 classroom

It is important to describe who repairs in the foreign language classroom. According to van Lier’s sequential study of the process of repairing (1988: 211), there is “a heavy emphasis on other-repair in the classroom in contrast to non-classroom settings, where self-repair predominates.” He also points out in the same book (206) that in teacher-fronted activities opportunities for self-repair tend to be less than in pair and group work. Allright and Bailey (1991: 90) suggest further that “one characteristic of language classes that marks them as somehow different from ‘real life’ is the preponderance of other-initiated other-repair: teachers often tell learners that they have made errors and then tell them what to say instead.”

Though most of the language activities are teacher-fronted, other-repair is not so conspicuous in this classroom. I have identified all the examples of initiation and repair in the whole lesson, and then classified them according to the self/other distinction. The data which I have collected from the whole lesson shows only two instances of other-repair in this sequence of discourse. Throughout this lesson, the pupils in this class did one self-initiated other repair and one other-initiated other repair. The rest are self- or other-initiated self-repairs. A great majority of their repair work is self-repair.

In sum, the teacher initiated repair, but left it up to the pupils to carry out repair. She attempted to help the learners to do self-repair by all means. She, for example, asked for clarification and further information when necessary (Extract 6). In Extract 4, she produced listening responses or positive feedback “to let students know that they have performed correctly, and to increase motivation through praise” (Nunan 1991: 195). She gave prompts (Extract 6), repeated trouble sources (Extracts 4 and 6), or did helping (Extract 8) when she intended to elicit self-repair from her pupils.

It is readily admitted that self-repair is more desirable than other-repair in the classroom because “More actual learning may ensure if the learners accomplish a substantial proportion of the corrective task themselves” (Allright & Bailey 1991: 107). On the other hand, other-repair “may deny the speaker the opportunity to do self-repair, probably an important learning activity” (van Lier 1988: 211). Thus, the low frequency of other-repair indicated in the present data seems to suggest that the teacher managed her classroom quite well.
(2) Repair work and language functions

Van Lier (1988: 187-8) groups the variety of repair activities in the L2 classroom into the following three broad macro-categories of language functions which reflect the range of purposes of the participants:

Medium-oriented: a focus on the forms and/or functions of the target language.
Message-oriented: a focus on the transmission of thoughts, information, feelings, etc.
Activity-oriented: a focus on the organization and structure of the classroom environment, rules for the conduct of activities, etc.

Based upon the three criteria, I have attempted to make an analysis of repair work by the teacher in the above eight extracts of discourse. Though it is sometimes difficult to make a clear-cut classification, this distinction is particularly relevant to the description of L2 classroom repair.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repair Patterns by the Teacher</th>
<th>Language Functions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extract 1</td>
<td>Self-initiated self-repair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extract 2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extract 7</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extract 8</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the eight extracts, the teacher did 5 self-initiated self-repairs: 2 for medium- and 3 activity-oriented goals. The teacher frequently did self-initiated self-repair, while her pupils did other- initiated self-repair. As mentioned earlier, self-repair on both parties is desirable in the classroom. The problem is that 3 out of 5 self-repairs done by the teacher were activity-oriented. She used self-initiated self-repair when classroom procedural problems arose. In some cases, the learners were obliged to do self-repair because of her poor management. This frequency was so high that she made the learners (and even herself) confused once in a while. Such activity confusion occasioned considerable repair work, and she had to spend much time switching from one activity to another. This is probably because she did not acquaint herself with classroom procedures yet. Here in this interaction it is not always “the learner who has the trouble, and the teacher who resolves it” (van Lier 1988: 186). Thus, it can be concluded that the teacher in this data left much to be desired in the classroom interaction.

(3) Who dominates the interaction?

As is evident from the previous discussion, the teacher dominated the classroom from the beginning to the end. She determined almost all the proceedings in this lesson, though she tried to help the learners to do self-repair in the interaction. This is probably because she spent nearly all her time on
teacher-fronted activities, in which her pupils had few opportunities to speak out on their initiative. It is often said that one learns to speak by speaking in foreign language teaching. Most of the interaction in this lesson, however, occurred between the teacher and learners, and virtually no interaction took place among the learners. The findings might have been different if the teacher had encouraged more interaction among the learners themselves.

4. Conclusion

It is important and useful to produce a transcription if we really want to examine classroom interaction in depth. Though foreign language teachers are well aware of the importance of its findings, classroom research is still in its infancy in Japan. This is because most teachers (and researchers) in this country have not realised yet that this area of investigation is directly relevant to them. Through this research, I have been able to notice what I missed on the spot in the classroom. At first, I thought it was the pupils that were to blame for failing to understand what was going on in the classroom. After reading the transcribed classroom data carefully, however, I have found out that it was the teacher, not her pupils, who produced trouble sources during the teacher-learner interaction. It is high time for us teachers to be aware that classroom research is a “dynamic area of investigation and one bearing fruitful results of major relevance to many facets of teaching, syllabus design, materials development, testing, and teacher education” (Allright and Bailey 1991: xiv).

There are two questions which have arisen while I have been engaged in this research. Firstly, it would be interesting to analyse and compare how experienced teachers and inexperienced teachers repair trouble in L2 classrooms. I wonder if we can find systematic differences in classroom repair work between them. The second question is whether there is any significant difference between Japanese teachers of English and native speakers of English in the Japanese classroom setting. Though this may vary from teacher to teacher, and from class to class, I have noted that there are some differences between what van Lier (1988) points out and the data I have examined. Is it because Japanese teachers of English take different approaches towards classroom management? It might be too hasty, of course, to generalise the Japanese classroom by analysing only one classroom. More data and further analytical work are needed before we can find more about classroom interaction and language learning in Japan.

References