Peer Assistance in Interactional Repair by Chinese EFL Students

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Abstract

This paper uses conversational analysis to study the roles that peers play in the interactional process. It focuses on the interactional repair that learners initiate and make in conversation. The research finds that English major students can adopt various strategies of meaning negotiation to remove the trouble sources in their communication to make the conversation more comprehensible. They also assist each other by co-constructing the conversation when their partner encounters difficulties in expression and by other-correction when their partner makes errors. However, there are also situations when initiated, repair may be abandoned or neglected. The research about conversational repair and peer assistance between non-native speakers can also enlighten second language teaching.

1. Introduction

Pair work is a common practice in second language teaching. As most learners do not have many opportunities to communicate with native speakers, learners become each other’s main interlocutors and resources for language learning (Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos & Linnell, 1996). In the process of communication, learners monitor not only their own output of language, but also the speech of their interlocutors. Through their interaction, they make attempts to resolve difficulties in expressing themselves and understanding each other.
As a research field in conversational analysis, conversational repair is an important component of conversational structures. Schegloff defines repair as a mechanism used to deal with problems in speaking, hearing, and understanding (1977). Repair may include correction but is not limited to correction. The targets of repair are not limited to errors either. The trouble sources may be due to word searching, hearing problems or uncertain understanding.

Ever since Schegloff et al. (1977) put forward the concept of conversational repair, many researchers have shown interest in this field. The scope of research extends from conversational interactions between native speakers (NS) to those between native speakers and non-native speakers (NNS) (Gaskill, 1980; Chun, Day, Chenoweth & Luppescu, 1982, 1984; Wong, 2000). The NNS-NNS conversational interactions also attract the attention of some researchers.

Varonis and Gass (1985) compared the interaction between non-native speakers with NS-NS, NS-NNS interaction and found that meaning negotiation was most prevalent among NNS-NNS pairs. They argue that this type of interaction facilitates second language acquisition as it provides learners with an opportunity to manipulate input to make it more comprehensible. Aston (1986) however raised doubts about previous researchers’ conclusions and argued that a greater frequency of meaning negotiation would not necessarily entail a better acquisition but a greater effort to maintain rapport and thus greater difficulty of acquisition. It was not simply the frequency but the social context of negotiation that influenced acquisition. Pica et al. (1996) compared the interaction of English L2 learners with that of learners and English NSs and concluded that learners received less modified input from other learners than from NSs. Foster and Ohta (2005) examined the interaction between non-native speakers both quantitatively...
and qualitatively. The quantitative results show that interactional modifications are infrequent. A qualitative analysis of the data investigates the phenomenon and concludes that learners assist each in a variety of ways and that maintaining a supportive and friendly discourse benefits second language acquisition as much as obtaining comprehensible input.

In China, the application of conversational repair in the field of second language acquisition is mainly reflected in teacher-student repair patterns (Zhao, 2004) and learners’ self-initiated self-repair (Yang, 2002; Chen & Pu, 2007). Despite the predominance of self-initiated self-repair in learners’ conversations, this type of repair does not require the intervention of the interlocutor and is solely conducted by the speaker himself/herself. So it will not be the focus of this paper as it does not involve much interaction. For detailed analysis of the types and features of self-initiated self-repair conducted by Chinese learners, see Chen and Pu 2007.

There is currently no empirical study on the interactional repair between Chinese learners. Thereupon, this paper plans to fill in the gap and study how Chinese English-major students assist each other through interactional repair.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data Source

The occurrence of learners’ corpora has provided a good source for the study of second language acquisition. This paper is based on the Spoken English Corpus of Chinese Learners (SECCL) and draws evidence from its conversational part, which is the third task of Oral TEM 4 (Test for English Majors). The topics (see appendix) are mostly the ones college students are familiar
with and the task requires the students to make a conversation of four minutes according to given roles and situation. The corpus covers the sample recordings of the oral test in seven years, from 1996 to 2002, with a total of 1148 samples. This paper randomly chooses 200 conversation samples to carry out the research.

Table 1: Conversation sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>200</td>
<td>800 minutes</td>
<td>110,378 words</td>
<td>400 candidates for oral TEM 4</td>
<td>7 topics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2 Data Analysis

The 200 conversation samples are analyzed based on the following three types of interactional repair:

(1) **Self-initiated other repair (SIOR):** repair that is initiated by the producer of the trouble source and completed by the recipient.

Example 1 (00-11-20)
B: And at the first year we have taken part in the performance of *May Flower*.
A: Oh, How how does, how did it go?
B: Not bad, I should say.
A: Oh? Did you give get some... how to say?
→ B: Prize. We we got, I won the second prize.
A: Oh? Congratulations!

In this example, speaker A has difficulty in expressing herself and is considered as the producer of the trouble source. She initiates repair and the recipient (speaker B) completes her repair.
(2) **Other-initiated self-repair (OISR):** repair that is initiated by the recipient and is completed by the producer of the trouble source.

Example 2 (01-01-04)
A: Yes, I know that. But you know nowadays, the universities, especially the famous universities in our country, for example, the Peking university. Seeing surroundings here is... is very good too.
B: But it's too difficult for us to take part in, you know.
→ A: Take part in what?
B: In Peking university or Qinghua university.
A: Yes, and besides that I think the course is very love too.

As seen in this example, the trouble source occurs in the first turn where speaker B’s inappropriate omission of the object makes the sentence opaque for A to understand. In order to remove the obstacle in understanding, A thus initiates repair in the second turn, and the repair is made in the third turn by B.

(3) **Other-initiated other-repair (OIOR):** repair that is initiated and completed by the recipient.

Example 3 (02-01-06)
A: So I think... he should keep his... permission.
→ B: A promise.
A: A promise. Yes. Eh..., buter...... do you pay attention to the results of the exams.
B: Yes.

In this example, A uses an inappropriate word “permission” and is considered as the producer of the trouble source. B makes the correction in the next turn. So the repair is initiated and completed in the same turn by the recipient. This type of
interactional repair is also called other-correction.

We read the 200 samples carefully and manually tag them with the three broad categories: SIOR, OISR and OIOR. Then we use the software Antconc to search for all the instances with the three respective labels and analyze the characteristics of each category in details.

3. Findings

The frequency and percentage of the three types of repair can be seen in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of repair</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SIOR</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>16.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OISR</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>68.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OIOR</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>14.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from the table, interactional repair occurs 221 times in the 200 samples, occurring at least once in a sample on average. Although it is not as frequent as self-initiated self-repair, it is still worth studying as it indicates there is a considerable amount of meaning negotiation and peer assistance in learners’ conversation.

3.1 Self-Initiated Other-Repair

When a speaker encounters some problems in speaking, especially in search of some word or phrase, he may seek help from the interlocutor. The types of appeal can be either explicit or implicit.

The percentage of explicit appeal for help, compared with that
of implicit appeal for help, is strikingly low, as is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Distribution of explicit appeal versus implicit appeal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of appeal</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>83.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1.1 Explicit Appeal for Help

Example 4 (99-44-11)

B: I... I think... um... but for our young people... for us the young people, maybe um... to sit, sitting in the office all the day is not very... how to say, it’s not a good way... a proper way.

→A: Yeah! Yeah! You are right on target! You know, this kind of life is... is too peaceful. There’s no challenge.

B: Yeah! Yeah! There is no challenge, and um... I think, it may... how to say, it will restrain <restraint> your mind.

Speaker B intends to express the meaning that “sitting in the office all the day is not very challenging,” but she cannot recall the word within the time constraint. Thus she uses the expression “how to say” to solicit help from her partner and makes do with a more general term “it’s not a good way... a proper way.” Then speaker A offers a more specific and accurate expression in her turn - “this kind of life is too peaceful. There is no challenge.” Speaker B is obviously quite satisfied with the help her partner has offered, saying “Yeah! Yeah! There is no challenge.” As can be seen from the example, the assistance provided by the interlocutor is fairly constructive in enriching the conversation. Prompted by her interlocutor, speaker B contributes more input to the conversation - “it will restrain your mind” - and thus explains why she thinks sitting
in the office all day is not “a good way.”

3.1.2 Implicit Appeal for Help

When a learner hesitantly uses incorrect language or hesitates painfully searching for words, his partner offers the correct linguistic form or expression to save him out of trouble. Thus, hesitation can sometimes be seen as an implicit appeal for help.

Example 5 (00-11-02)
B: Yes, yes, and you should be... eh... ... you should be... eh... ... very active in your... in your life time. You should be very active to enter some to join... eh... ... to some exa-, exter-, extari-, extaricular...
→ A: Oh, extracurricular activities <activity> are very important <imported> to us.
B: Yes.

Speaker B knows about the word “extracurricular” but does not know how to pronounce it correctly, hence a lot of hesitation and repetition. She is apparently implicitly appealing for help from A, and speaker A senses her difficulty and takes her out of trouble by offering the correct pronunciation.

Example 6 (01-01-18)
B: Yeah, sure. I know there’re many ..eh.......eh....... such kind of...
→ A: Institute?
B: Ins..
→ A: Organization?
B:Yeah, so-called organization to help the students...eh....... to go abroad for study.

In this example, speaker B has trouble finding the appropriate expression “agency” and pauses in her turn of speech. Speaker
A first offers the word “institute” but speaker B does not show a very positive response. She just repeats part of the word as if reflecting what this word is about. A then goes on to offer another word “organization”, which is more general and easier to understand. This time B expresses her recognition of her partner’s assistance, as can be seen from the word “Yeah”. B is not fully satisfied with the word substitution “organization” for “agency”, the word that she wants to say but fails to recall. This can be seen from the use of the attributive “so-called”, which is usually used to describe something that is not quite appropriate. Nevertheless, she is able to pick up the unfinished speech during her turn. Thus B and A have jointly produced coherent and comprehensible speech.

### 3.2 Other-Initiated Self-Repair

Among the three types of interactional repair, other-initiated self-repair is used most frequently, accounting for 68.78% of all the examples in the sample. Learners initiate repair mainly because they want the interlocutors to clarify what they have said due to non-understanding or incomplete understanding or because they want to confirm what they have heard due to uncertainty of understanding. There are four types of other-initiated self-repair as can be seen from the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of other-initiation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open class</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Segmentation</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>28.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking for elaboration</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>23.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate understanding</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>35.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**Total</td>
<td>**152</td>
<td>**100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2.1 Open Class

Open class initiation refers to the use of words like “sorry”, “pardon”, “um” to initiate repair. This initiation technique is usually employed when the hearer fails to catch or understand the speaker’s prior utterance, usually the complete sentence.

Example 7 (02-01-33)
B: Um... I think, I don’t think the department should stick to the original plan because I think... um... if those score if those results that the females have scored higher than males.
→ A: Um?
B: So I think we should change our original plan to ... En ... to admit more males than females.
A: Oh, I think I couldn’t agree with you.

As we can see, speaker B stumbles a lot in her speech. Speaker A fails to understand what B tries to convey as her talk contains quite a few pauses and self-repairs, which make the talk vague and difficult to understand.

This kind of open clarification request does not occur very frequently in the corpus, accounting for 11.84%, the lowest percentage among the four types of OISR. This may show that English major students can generally understand each other despite their mistakes and pauses. But too many pauses, repetitions and grammatically incorrect sentences may still hinder the understanding of the speech. Misunderstanding may also arise because the partner suddenly changes the topic which makes the speech difficult to understand.

Example 8 (01-01-08)
B: Yes. You’re right. But... do... are you confident of...
overcoming... all the difficulties by yourself?
A: Um, I think... eh.... .... I can if um... if I usually... be away from my parents.
B: By the way... the... your English is very... good.
→ A: <...> sorry.
B: But we your English is very good. You know... English is very useful especially... in foreign countries.

In this example, speaker B’s sudden shift of topic makes speaker A unprepared. Although B uses the phrase “by the way” to indicate the change of subject, A may think the following sentence has no logical connection with the prior talk, hence the occurrence of misunderstanding.

3.2.2 Segmentation

Segmentation is also called partial repetition. It refers to the hearer’s repetition of an isolated word or phrase from a prior utterance of the speaker indicating misunderstanding or incomplete understanding.

Example 9 (98-17-28)
B: Hello, I’m just going to... eh... have a trick.
→ A: Have a trick?
B: Trip, I mean.
A: Trip.
B: Yes.
A: Where are you going to travel?

In this example, B makes a phonological mistake in the first turn and causes the difficulty in understanding. A thus repeats the phrase that contains the trouble source in the second turn to give a signal to B to make a repair. B immediately realizes the problem and corrects her mistake in the third turn.
Misunderstanding is usually caused by the speaker, on the other hand, there are also instances in which misunderstanding arises on the part of the hearer.

Example 10 (98-17-19)
A: Um... I want to um... to be a secretary.
→ B: Secretary?
A: Eh... secretary... um... secretary.... Do you know<low>?
→ B: Sorry, I can’t get <got> it. A: Eh... eh.... That’s to say. Eh... um... some some people um... do something I write down something.
B: Oh, I under I understand it. But I think that job does <is not con... is>not fit you.

Obviously speaker B hears the word “secretary” but fails to grasp its meaning. She may have learned the word before but cannot recall its meaning within the time constraint. Speaker A’s brief explanation, although not accurate enough, helps her take in the word as can be seen from her response - “Oh, I understand it.”

3.2.3 Asking for Elaboration

In this category, the speaker has heard the interlocutor’s prior utterance, but cannot understand its meaning completely. He thus responds by asking for more details or further explanation. In most cases, it is caused by the unclear expressions or semantic opacity on the part of the speaker.

Example 11 (00-11-18)
A: well, I have another problem, um, I found it’s very
difficult to communicate with each... with each other.
→ B: Oh, you mean the relationship between...
A: Teachers and my classmates.
B: Oh.
Speaker A’s unclear referent of “each other” makes the conversation hard to follow. Thus B makes a clarification request regarding the referent that A intends to point towards.

3.2.4 Candidate Understanding

In many cases, interlocutors initiate repair because they are not quite sure whether they understand the meaning of their partners correctly. Thus they provide a candidate understanding to confirm their understanding. This type is usually in the form of “You mean” plus a possible understanding of the prior speech.

Example 12 (99-44-11)
A: But, don’t you think it’s more dangerous, I mean that maybe I will be dismissed, if I didn’t work hard... um... um... I would have no money.
→ B: You mean it is not... the as steady as the wor... the job in the government?
A: Yeah! And there are so many people around you, so... it becomes important that I have to learn how to get along with them. But you know it’s very... um... difficult... it’s very difficult.

Example 13 (99-44-03)
A: Yesterday I went to the job... the job agent. I must make a choice in working in a government and other in a joint venture. Do you think which is the better?
→ B: Oh, you mean, you have been offered the two jobs?
A: Yes.

In the above two examples, speaker A’s verbose and unclear expressions make the conversation a little bit obscure. Therefore, speaker B uses a more concise and accurate way to check the understanding. By doing so, they not only confirm their
understanding but also assist their partners in finding a more appropriate way of expressing themselves. This kind of peer assistance is crucially valuable in second language acquisition.

3.3 Other-Initiated Other-Repair

Different from OISR, which is usually accompanied by incomplete or uncertain understanding, OIOR is usually targeted towards errors or inappropriate expressions that the other speaker makes in communication. It is also called other-correction.

3.3.1 Types of Trouble Sources for Correction

The categories of trouble sources and their frequencies can be seen in Table 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of trouble sources</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phonological</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexical</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>78.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task-related</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3.1.1 Phonological Correction

Learners make many phonological mistakes, but they seldom correct each other. We only found one correction case in the sample.

Example 14 (02-01-16)

A: Yeah, that’s the point, um... but I think they are more careless <carless> than girls.

→ B: Yeah, careless, yeah... but... but you you can see they are lot of careful may in the word too. Right?
Here speaker A mispronounces the word “careless” as “carless”. Speaker B corrects her phonological mistake but adds “yeah” at the beginning of the sentence to soften the effect of the correction.

3.3.1.2 Grammatical Correction
Common grammatical mistakes in speaking include wrong forms of verbs, subject-verb disagreement, misuse of articles and pronouns, wrong morphology and word order.

Example 15 (99-44-19)
A: I don’t know, maybe it’s more challenge.
→ B: Yes, more challenging.

In this example, A misuses a verb for an adjective and B makes the correction in a mild way by adding the interjection “yes”.

3.3.1.3 Lexical Correction
Most trouble sources are lexical in nature, accounting for the majority of other-correction. Chun et al (1982) found in their study of native-nonnative conversations that word choice errors were corrected significantly more often than grammatical errors. Learners are also inclined to make more semantic corrections than form-related corrections.

Example 16 (00-11-09)
A: And... what the life on the dormitory. You know, I think it’s very very interesting, yeah.
B: Ah, yes, interesting, eh..., dormitory is like a collect-collective.
→ A: Like family, yeah.
B: Yeah, like family, it’s very, eh... cozy, and warm, comfortable, eh..., you have many sisters.

As can be seen here in the example, speaker B makes a
self-repair in her speech, changing the word “collect” to “collective.” She successfully corrects herself grammatically, but the effort is hardly satisfactory semantically as the word “collective” refers to an organization or enterprise and is usually characterized by attempts to share and exercise social power and to make certain decisions. Speaker A thus corrects her diction and offers a more appropriate word “family.” Speaker B is quite satisfied with the correction. She not only shows her recognition of the peer assistance by saying “yeah” but also adds such attributes as “cozy, warm, comfortable” to the family-like dormitory.

3.3.1.4 Task-Related Correction
This type of correction is confined to conversations where the learner, who is supposed to simulate certain role, fails to carry out the task as required.

Example 17 (01-01-33)
A: And I have know you will have a chance to go abroad.
→ B: You... not me... I’m B.
A: And, um... because, because you know, um... um... now China, China is a developing countries and China is com comparatively China is powerful but the level of living, um... but the level, but the level of living is lower than foreigners. So I want to, um... go abroad. What do you think of my idea?

In this example, speaker A does not perform the required role. According to the task, it is one of A’s friends who plans to go abroad after graduation from high school. A thinks that he should go abroad while B thinks that he should first finish college at home. Therefore, B points out the error that A makes in carrying out the task. As a matter of fact, B does not grasp the meaning of the task either. He should say, “It’s your friend who will have a chance to go abroad, not me.”
3.3.2 Ways of Correction

As for the ways of correcting errors, learners, like native speakers, adopt two strategies, one explicit, the other implicit. Chun et al (1982) use different terms for these two strategies, namely, on-record corrections and off-record corrections.

Table 6: Distribution of explicit correction versus implicit correction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of correction</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>43.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>56.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3.2.1 Explicit Correction

When one speaker bluntly corrects the error the other speaker makes, usually by highlighting the error that the other speaker makes, it can be called explicit correction or on-record correction.

Example 18 (97-01-10)

B: Yeah. Most people feel very nervous when they want,... make a speech. And I think maybe it’s the idea that if they don’t speak well, they will lose <losing> face or something like that. So I think you must first make your mind in the right way and if you make enough preparation and know who are your audien... who your audience are and what do you want to say. Then make yourself... self-confidence.

→ A: Confident.

B: Yeah. That’s enough, I think.

Speaker B has made a grammatical mistake here, and speaker A makes other-correction by highlighting the mistake. This is a typical example of explicit correction.
In Chun et al.’s study (1982), native speakers only corrected 8.9% of the total errors that NNS make. Among the corrections, “on-record corrections accounted for 125 of the 189 NS corrections, or 66%” (p. 545). From this, we can see that NSs do not correct NNS very often, but when they do, they usually correct directly. Learners also correct their partners very infrequently. However, when they make other-correction, they tend to adopt the implicit strategy of correction.

3.3.2.2 Implicit Correction
Implicit correction or off-record correction, as Chun et al (1982) names it, “is ambiguous; it may be interpreted in at least two ways - as a correction or as a continuing contribution to the conversation” (p. 544).

Example 19 (02-01-32)
A: But just the result... could not decide... anything, you know? Just the result. I still think the boys are more suitable for our department.
B: Oh, so we we should we should come to the manager...
→ A: Ok, we should come to the dean to decide.

Obviously, B has used an inappropriate word here as the decision of recruiting students is made by the dean or principal rather than the manager. A repeats what B says but replaces “manager” with “dean”, making a tactful repair which minimizes the degree of threatening B’s face.

4. Discussion

4.1 Politeness Levels in Other-Initiation Techniques

In OISR, the four types of other-initiation techniques mentioned in Section 3.2 are not placed in a random order. They have an ascending order based on their capacity to locate the trouble
source and in terms of politeness, with open-class initiation being the least specific and the least polite and candidate understanding being the most specific and the most polite.

Among the various theories about politeness, Brown and Levinson’s face-saving theory (1987) can best explain the politeness strategies in conversation repair. According to Brown and Levinson, politeness is the result of using politeness strategies to save the addressee’s face. And face, in their definition, is the public image that every competent adult member of a society wants to claim for himself.

When a speaker uses such words as “sorry”, “pardon” and “um” to make an open-class initiation, he is indicating that some element in the previous speaker’s speech has become the trouble to him. While he does not point out which element is the trouble source, he sends a message to the interlocutor that the whole utterance poses a problem or he simply does not hear his conversation partner’s talk. If the whole utterance is thought to pose a problem, it implies that the speaking act of the trouble-source producer is terrible, as no segment of the utterance can be understood. If the speaker simply does not hear his interlocutor’s talk, it might be explained that he does not pay much attention to the speaking act of his partner, regarding his talk as unimportant. Both implications threaten the trouble-source producer’s face to a high degree.

When a speaker uses segmentation to initiate repair, he conveys a message to the interlocutor that he can understand most of the utterance except the part that is repeated. The trouble source is clearly located. It also implies that he considers his interlocutor’s speaking act as desirable to a great extent. Thus the initiation technique lessens the possible threat to his partner’s face.
In the third type when a speaker asks for elaboration, he not only locates the trouble source, but also makes a clear signal for the interlocutor to make repair. The initiation technique is more specific than segmentation. By asking for elaboration, the speaker sends a message that the interlocutor’s utterance does not have much trouble and the only thing he needs is more detailed explanation on certain element. This initiation technique is more polite as the degree of the face-threatening act is further reduced.

The last type—candidate understanding—is the most specific initiation technique. By offering a candidate understanding, the hearer conveys a message that he has actually heard and understood the prior talk but cannot be sure whether the understanding is correct or not. The hearer seems to imply that the trouble does not come from the trouble-source producer but rather from his own limitation of understanding. This initiation technique minimizes the degree of the face-threatening act and has the highest level of politeness.

Sometimes when a weaker or less specific other-initiation cannot get the expected answer, a stronger initiation will be used.

Example 20 (00-11-19)
B: Yeah, I think so too. But, eh..., after all, you go to the university... eh... is... eh... Your aim to go to the university is to study. So I think the study is the first, is the first thing for you to do. And then... eh... you will, you should not only study. Eh... ... you will also take part in many activities at the university.
→ A: Many activities?
B: Yeah.
→ A: Can you introduce some examples for me?
B: Eh... ... For example, to join in some associations
A: Oh.
B: To attend some matches of the university.
A: So, eh..., I think university life is colourful, because of these associations?

After speaker A makes the first other-initiation for repair—segmentation, speaker B simply confirms what he says in the prior turn and does not realize the need for making repair. Then, speaker A adopts a stronger initiation—asking for elaboration. This time, B provides some more details of what “activities” mean and A finally understands what B intends to say.

4.2 Preference for Implicit Over Explicit Initiation

In both SIOR and OIOR, there is a preference for implicit initiation over explicit initiation. Learners often do not ask for help explicitly probably due to the sake of face. This is the same as what Long (1985) discovered, “learners rarely ask for help, no matter who their interlocutors may be” (p. 216). The majority of self-initiated other-repair belongs to the second type—implicit appeal for help.

As Foster and Ohta (2005) noted, learners are quite sensitive to the difficulties their partners are experiencing and actively offer “a variety of conversationally-based assistance, including co-construction and other-correction” (p. 421). This kind of peer-assistance is extremely constructive to language learning. It not only allows the conversation to flow smoothly but also consolidates the partner’s retention of certain linguistic forms. The words that learners make conscious efforts to recall and are provided at the appropriate time can usually leave a deep impression on them.

In OIOR, implicit correction is less threatening as it is not given
bluntly and baldly. The correction is usually embedded in another complete sentence and the correct form is provided unobtrusively. Thus the potential harm in committing the face threatening act of correction is lessened.

Therefore, we can see learners are quite aware of protecting their own face and the face of their interlocutors in communication. They tend to use a more mild way of initiating repair and making correction. In the less-threatening environment, learners feel freer to practice their language.

4.3 Outcome of Repair

In most cases, interlocutors are quite satisfied with the repair made by their partners. Speakers usually use “Oh”, “Oh, I understand”, “Oh, I see”, “yeah”, “yes” to acknowledge the repair. This shows peer assistance is quite helpful and successful.

Nonetheless, there are also cases when initiation for repair fails to get the expected answer and is thus abandoned, which is also called repair failure.

Example 21 (01-01-16)
B: But you have to be separated from friends and relatives, and the strange environment must do harm to his ordinary life and study, and... it is known that you know what culture shot mean.
→ A: Cultural shot?
B: Yeah.
A: But I... I think to our student, whose major subject is English, it is good to live in an... English speaking culture or foreign language speaking culture. So good environment is bene... is beneficial to learn foreign language.
The process of repair abandonment can be seen in the following steps:

1st turn: trouble source
2nd turn: initiation (segmentation)
3rd turn: response (yes, without providing any new information or correction)
4th turn: abandonment

In this example, speaker A manages to locate the trouble source in speaker B’s utterance, but speaker B regards the initiation as a signal for confirmation check rather than a signal for making repair and fails to make any repair. If B were more competent linguistically, she might have realized her own problem and changed it to “cultural shock” after A makes the initiation for repair. Speaker A does not move on further to modify B’s error either because she does not want to threaten the face of B or because she herself does not know how to correct it, thus the trouble source is left unsolved. Just as Foster (1998) explained in his study about the disinclination of EFL students to initiate or pursue negotiation for meaning, students might have been disposed to adopt the strategy of “pretend and hope” (i.e. pretend to understand and hope a future utterance will cast light on the darkness) rather than the strategy of “check and clarify” (pp. 18-19).

5. Conclusion

From the study, we can see that pair-work can make up for the drawbacks of individual oral work. It simulates real-life situations and provides a friendly and relaxing atmosphere for students to practice using the L2. In the process of interaction, the attention shown by the partner, the participation and involvement of the partner are all conducive to the output of L2. The partner not only plays the role of a listener and a participant, encouraging the interlocutor to contribute more to
the conversation, but also plays the role of a monitor and that of a prompter. Peer-assistance is particularly valuable in improving the quality of language output. The speaker can monitor the linguistic problems that the interlocutor fails to notice by making other-repair or other-initiation so that the conversation partner can adjust his language to ensure comprehensible output. When one speaker encounters problems in communication, the partner can sometimes offer appropriate help, thus assisting each other in completing the communicational task.

Be that it may, we should also notice that although English major students have mastered the ability of making self or other repair, there are still a lot of trouble sources that are left unnoticed or abandoned due to the strain of time or lack of competence or the pragmatic reason of not wanting to threaten the face of the interlocutor. As learners need to develop strategies for obtaining comprehensible input as well as establishing and maintaining a friendly atmosphere of conversation, teachers can show the students the significance of meaning negotiation and peer assistance and teach them the initiation techniques. Pair work or group work should be regarded not only as a light-hearted and relaxing part of the class, but also a pedagogical activity designed to promote second language acquisition. Teachers can also ask students to re-listen and study their recorded conversation. If the trouble sources cannot be removed when sufficient time is given, it then calls for the participation of a more competent speaker or the teacher.

Appendix - Topics of oral tests from 1996 to 2002

1996: Discuss with your partner whether second-year university students should take part-time jobs. Try to think of all the advantages and disadvantages of taking part-time job.

1997: Your department is going to have an English speech contest. You are eager to enter it but you have a lot of worries. So you come to your friend for advice.
1998: You and your friend are discussing what to do in future. You and your friend have different plans for future, which, however, are unrealistic. Through the discussion, you and your friend have come to realize what you want to do is different from what you can do in future, and when people make decisions on what job to take, they have to take several factors into consideration.

1999: You have been offered two jobs: One is working in the government and the other is in a joint venture. You feel difficult to decide which one to take. Eventually both you and your friend have found it is not easy at all to select one job out of the two.

2000: You are a freshman who has just enrolled in your university. You are wondering about what the university life would be though you have heard a lot of it. Now you meet a sophomore of your department and ask him/her for advice on how to make good use of time, how to study well and how to make friends in the university. Eventually you become confident about your future again.

2001: Many high school graduates in China are going overseas for their college education. A friend of yours is graduating this year and would like to ask for your advice on whether it is a good idea for a high school graduate to go abroad to study. You think this friend should go by all means, and you should try to convince your partner.

2002: The geology department of a major university is planning to admit 30 male and 5 female students. However, the results of the college entrance examination show that by average, of all the applicants, females have scored higher than most males. Should the department stick to its original plan? You think the department should stick to the original plan, and you should try to convince your partner.

Note

In order to save space, the topics are just given from the perspective of student A. In each year, it is student A who should start the conversation. Student A and B should not discuss with each other during the preparation.

References


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