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Repair in L2 English: an analysis of Finnish upper-secondary school students' elicited interaction

This article analyses instances of repair in the speech of Finnish upper-secondary school students. The material for the study comes from the HY-Talk Corpus, which includes both monologic and dialogic speech by students, collected during a spoken English language test. The analysis shows that in order to cope with problems in their own or their fellow students' utterances the participants make use of all the repair configurations present in everyday conversations. There is also a clear preference for self-initiated self-repair, as has been shown to be the case in naturally occurring talk in interaction. Regardless of the fact that the speech by the students has been elicited for research purposes, it displays mechanisms similar to everyday talk.

1   Introduction

This article analyses instances of repair in the speech of Finnish upper-secondary school students. The material for the study comes from the HY-Talk Corpus, which includes both monologic and dialogic speech by students, collected during a spoken English language test. The present study is situated at the intersection of second-language acquisition (SLA) and conversation analysis (CA) in that it analyses with CA methods audio- and video-recorded interaction by speakers who are communicating in a language other than their first language (L1). Since the pioneering article by Firth and Wagner (1997), CA has been used as a tool for analysis of various types of second-language (L2) interaction (see, for example, Buckwalter 2001; Egbert 2004; Gardner & Wagner 2004; Hellermann 2009; Kurhila 2006; Lilja 2010; Seedhouse 2004; Vesalainen 2012).

The aim of the study is to describe and discuss how students taking part in a spoken language test cope when they encounter a problem in their own or their fellow students' utterance, or, in other words, how they monitor and repair their utterances. Because the material studied is elicited interaction, a further aim is to find out if this type of interaction displays repair strategies similar to naturally occurring talk in interaction.

2   Repair in interaction

Repair is ubiquitous in talk, and has been the subject of active research ever since the groundbreaking work by Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks (1977). In addition to turn-taking and sequence organisation, repair is fundamental to how participants organise their talk-in-interaction. Turn-taking deals with the construction and distribution of turns among participants, while sequence organisation deals with how actions are accomplished through turns-at-talk. Repair, then, is the mechanism with which participants can address problems in speaking or hearing as the interaction unfolds (Schegloff *et al.* 1977).

Schegloff *et al*. (1977: 363) make a distinction between repair and correction: despite the fact that repair is related to correction, it is not identical with it. Correction replaces an error by the correct linguistic element, whereas repair deals with any potential trouble in conversation. The trouble source – the repairable linguistic element – can therefore be realised in forms other than 'errors' or 'mistakes' (Schegloff *et al.* 1977: 363). The 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 s/he wanted to say, or 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 & Kasper 1982: 79).[1]

Repair can be structured in four different but related patterns or configurations: it can be (1) self-initiated and self-completed repair, where the interlocutor responsible for the trouble source both initiates and completes the repair; (2) other-initiated but self-completed repair, where the recipient perceives the trouble source and initiates a repair which is completed by the interlocutor responsible for the trouble source; (3) self-initiated but other-completed repair, where the interlocutor responsible for the trouble source identifies it but the repair is completed by the recipient; or (4) other-initiated and other-completed repair, in which case the recipient both identifies and repairs the trouble source. Depending on whether the repair is self- or other-initiated, the techniques for initiating the repair also differ. Self-initiations use a variety of speech perturbations, such as cut-offs or sound stretches, while other initiations use turn-constructional devices, such as *huh?* or *what?* (Schegloff *et al.* 1977: 362–381).

Schegloff *et al.* (1977: 377) point out that self-repair and other-repair are not equal alternatives for repair work: conversation is "so organised as to favour self-initiated self-repair". Research on both native and non-native speakers confirms that in conversation self-repair tends to predominate over other-repair, both in the case of self-initiated repair and other-initiated repair (Couper-Kuhlen & Thompson 2005: 281; Schwartz 1980). It has furthermore been suggested that especially in the case of non-native speakers repair tends to include mostly lexical items and relate more to the negotiation of meaning and gaining time in conversation than for example to correction of mistakes (Hellermann 2009; Rieger 2003: 51, 58; Schegloff *et al.* 1977; Schwartz 1980; Vesalainen 2012).

3 Material

The material of the present study comes from the HY-Talk Corpus, which includes speech samples in English, French, German and Swedish by Finnish lower and upper secondary school students. The subset used in the present study consists of samples in English produced by upper secondary school students. At the time of data collection the students were first-year students in upper secondary school. English was their first foreign language (A-language), which means that most of them had started studying it by the third grade in primary school. After more than seven years of formal English instruction the students could be described as fairly advanced learners of English. The

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1   It is important to note at this point that because repair is executed only when one of the interlocutors perceives something as problematic, there are errors in the material which are not repaired, which indicates that the interlocutors did not find them problematic in terms of communication or understanding (cf. Schegloff *et al.* 1977: 363).

speech samples were collected in a spoken language test organised by the HY-Talk team. In the test, the students worked in self-selected pairs; the subset includes 20 pairs, i.e. 40 students. Before the test, the students had 20 minutes to familiarize themselves with the instructions, which were provided in Finnish, and to plan what they would say. The material was recorded in both audio and video format, and has been transcribed. The samples range in length from slightly over 13 minutes to almost 23 minutes. The tasks to be completed in the test were also specifically created for this purpose. The English test consisted of four parts. The first task was a monologue: the students were instructed to introduce themselves via video to a foreign visitor. All other tasks were dialogues. In task 2, the visitor has arrived and is getting settled, and in the second part of the task the participants are returning from the cinema and talking about the film they have seen. In task 3, the students have to agree on a trip they would take to a nearby destination. The fourth task, which was optional, was a discussion on the TV-show *Big Brother*. Most pairs chose to complete this task as well. With the exception of task 4, the tasks were carefully scripted, providing students with detailed instructions as to what they should say. In task 4, the students were instructed to discuss the topic on the basis of a short text.[2]

As with all elicited speech material, the question arises as to how natural or authentic the speech produced by the students is. In other words, can it reasonably be expected that elicited speech would show the same properties as naturally occurring talk? Huth (2010: 549) suggests that elicited interaction may indeed "draw substantially from mechanisms structuring naturally occurring talk", and so it could reasonably be expected that the HY-Talk samples display these mechanisms, including repair. There is a difference between Huth's material and the HY-Talk material, however, in that Huth's consisted of open role-play tasks, while the majority of the HY-Talk tasks are highly scripted.

In addition, it is important to keep in mind test anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986), because any test situation may of course cause anxiety for the participants and thus affect their performance. The students were informed that the test would not affect their school grade, so it can be presumed that at least some of the anxiety was alleviated. Before the actual test, the HY-Talk team member in charge also had a brief chat with the students in order to try to make them more relaxed. What is evident from the recordings is that the students took the instructions seriously and tried their best to complete the tasks.

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2   The tasks were carefully scripted because the same instructions were used for all the languages involved in HY-Talk. Taking into account the level of the students' language skills, which in the case of foreign languages other than English may not be high even after seven years of studying, it was felt that the students would benefit from a fairly detailed script. The fourth task in the English test was designed to give the students an opportunity for more spontaneous interaction.

4 Results

The questions that the analysis aims to answer are as follows. Firstly, how do the students taking part in the spoken language test cope when they encounter a problem in their own or their fellow speaker's utterance? Secondly, can we find the same preference for self-repair in the interaction of the students in the present study that has been found to exist in interactions investigated in previous studies? And finally, what can the findings tell us about the material as elicited interaction?

The presentation of the results is organised according to the completion of repair. Since self-repair has been shown by previous research to be more frequent than other-repair, instances in which the current speaker completes the repair, either with self- or other-initiation, are discussed first, followed by a discussion of instances of other-repair. In reporting the results, **informal quantification** will be used; in CA, this refers to the researcher's "experience or grasp of frequency, not a count" (Schegloff 1993), expressed with words such as *commonly* and *overwhelmingly*.

4.1 Self-repair

4.1.1 Self-initiated self-repair

In the light of previous research, it is not surprising that self-initiated self-repair is also the predominant type in the material of the present study. Let us begin with instances of repair which address an error, i.e. corrections. Of these, corrections of grammar are the most common; examples (1) to (4) illustrate such instances.[3]

(1) S2: mhm i spend **many no much** time in the internet i love just surf @@ around
     (task 1)

(2) S1: it's a roller coaster
     S2: yeah [yes]
     S1: [ah oh] **i (go- i wi-) i will test that**
     (task 3)

(3) S1: @@ , **erm so what you do _ what did you like about the movie**
     (task 2)

(4) S1: so what do you think **where w- could we go**
     (task 3)

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3   For transcription conventions, see Appendix 1.

Examples (1) to (4) show that various grammatical trouble sources can be the target of self-repair. In example (1), which comes from task 1, the monologue, the speaker corrects the erroneous *many* with *much*; the correction is preceded by a repair initiator *no*. The other examples come from the dialogues. In (2), the trouble source is the tense: the speaker adds *will* to indicate that she[4] is talking about future time. She also replaces the verb *go* with *test*, but this could be regarded as a reformulation rather than an actual correction. In both (3) and (4) the word order of a question is the trouble source, and in (3) this is combined with a correction of the tense. All of the repairs are completed within the same turn.

The speakers also produce corrections of lexical errors, illustrated by examples (5) and (6), although these are less common than corrections of grammatical errors.

(5)   S2: we live in in a **house of blo- in a block of flats**
      (task 1)

(6)   S1: they have to do so many stuffs to show **theirsel- themselves** and to make people like them
      (task 4)

In example (5), the speaker realises in the middle of the word *block* that the wording is erroneous and repairs her utterance with the correct *block of flats*. Similarly in example (6) the speaker initiates repair in the middle of the erroneous word and produces the correct *themselves*.

Finally, corrections of pronunciation can also be found in the material (examples 7– 9):

(7)   S1: yes this room is very beautiful the all the colours are very **gle- great** white sofa and yellow wall it's i like it very much
      (task 2)

(8)   S1: very good american chocolate <S2> oh @@ </S2> it's my dad my dad is made it i bring them 'cause i want you to **cha- taste** my dad('s) chocolate
      (task 2)

(9)   S2: oh it's it's just **a gust- a guestroom** erm it's just for guests
      (task 2)

Interestingly, in all three examples the speaker addresses the difficulty in pronunciation mid-word, i.e. before completing the erroneous word. In (7), *gle-* is corrected with *great*, *cha-* with *taste* in (8) and *a gust-* with a *guestroom* in (9). The difficulty in (9) is quite

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4   Since the majority of the students (25/40) are female, I use generic 'she' to refer to all of the speakers.

likely due to the preceding word *just*, while in (8) the reason for the difficulty (starting to produce *chaste* instead of *taste*) may be the word *chocolate*, which the speaker has produced earlier and which she is about to produce. It is not as obvious why the speaker in (7) would start to produce *great* as *gle*, but regardless of the cause of the trouble, the speaker initiates immediate repair just as in the other two cases.

The previous examples have all included a correction of an error, but as pointed out in section 2, an error is not necessary for repair to be activated. Let us next discuss such examples from the material. As in the previous examples, (10) and (11) also illustrate instances in which an element is replaced, but not because of an error:

> (10) S2: yeah and actually we can do what we want cause my mom er is a- in work so we can **sleep long and sleep late and** eat slowly breakfast
> (task 2)

> (11) S2: okay , and the <S1> [so what] </S1> [music] of movie it wasn't so good [but it was a] <S1> [well i think] it was funny </S1> it was a cartoon so
> S1: so the music **is the has a pretty big role in it** because [there's]
> S2: [i don't] think so
> S1: yes it does
> (task 2)

In both (10) and (11), the speaker decides that an element in the utterance requires reformulation and carries out repair within the same turn. In example (10), the speaker reformulates her speech after first producing *sleep long* and repairs it with *sleep late* to capture the intended meaning. In (11), the speaker starts with *so the music is the*, after which she repairs the utterance from the verb onwards and produces *has a pretty big role in it*.

Self-initiated self-repair can also occur without a replacement of an element with another. Schegloff *et al.* (1977) mention word searches as examples of such self-repair. Let us consider example (12).

> (12) S1: but what do you think i think that the other people in the house what would they think about that ,
> S2: @@
> S1: erm
> S2: i think they <S1> the- </S1> they were very er <FOREIGN> **mikä se**
>   *what was*
> **sana oli** </FOREIGN>
> *the word*
> S1: <FOREIGN> **mikä** </FOREIGN>
>   *which word*
> S2: **shocking**
> (task 4)

In example (12), the speakers are discussing the reality show *Big Brother*. In her answer to speaker 1, speaker 2 encounters a problem, because she does not remember the word she is looking for. She first produces a repair initiator *er*, after which there is codeswitching into Finnish, making explicit the problem: *mikä se sana oli* 'what was the word'. Speaker 1 does not know which word speaker 2 is trying to produce, but instead of replying to her in Finnish, speaker 2 remembers the word, *shocking*, and produces it in the next turn, thus completing the repair. Platt and Brooks (1994) draw attention to a similar strategy in their study of native speakers of English learning Spanish, and note that talk about problems with L2, or metatalk, is often produced in L1 (see also Buckwalter 2001: 386).

We can find an identical organisation of repair, with metatalk in Finnish, in example (13):

(13)   S1: okay erm <COUGH> i i think that this this movie was erm was nice because it's it's totally different that for example er <SIC> grin </SIC> because it's @@ it's so pure and fabulous
S2: okay but erm <FOREIGN> **vitsi mitä täs piti sanoo** @@ </FOREIGN>
                                          oh heck what was i supposed to say here
S1: <FOREIGN> **en muista** @@ </FOREIGN>
                      i don't remember
S2: @@ **er i i like titanic very much** and it's it's so beautiful and touching and i don't like very much about the christmas movies
(task 2)

Example (13) cannot be classified as a word search, because instead of a word the speaker is looking for the actual instructions given to the students for the test. This is an instance which is clearly specific to a test setting. Regardless of the fact that what is missing is not a word but the instructions, in a fashion identical to that in example (12) the speaker indicates that there is a problem by producing a repair initiator, *erm*, after which there is codeswitching into Finnish. Speaker 1 cannot remember the instructions either, but the problem is solved and repair completed when speaker 2 finds the relevant instructions in the handout and proceeds with the task.

As the final group of self-initiated self-repair we will take a look at repetition (examples 14, 15 and 16):

(14)   S1: i guess it's pretty s- er pretty good school or how would i say it erm **i was i was** in <CITY'S> school and people er i i think they weren't that (maturated) or how do you say it
(task 1)

(15)   S2: yeah we can continue our trip there </S1> yeah </S1> and **i think i think** we should ask siiri and liisa if they <S1> [yes] </S1> [would] like to come also with us
S1: yeah that would be fun
(task 3)

(16) S2: i went to cinema with them a lot and and **we go we go we went** to beach
       (task 1)

Repeating items is quite common in the speech produced by the students. Often this strategy is used for processing reasons, when the speaker needs more time to plan what she is going to say next, as in examples (14) and (15). In example (16) repetition occurs in connection with a correction: the speaker repeats *we go* while she is searching for the correct form *we went*.

4.1.2 Other-initiated self-repair

In comparison with self-initiated self-repair, other-initiated self-repair, illustrated by example (17), is extremely rare in the material of the present study.

(17) S1: yeah yeah another movie that's made a really big impression on me was the
       titanic it was really nice great [movie]
       S2: **[why was] it**
       S1: **what**
       S2: **why was it so nice**
       S1: it's just so well done and er it's got a great story in it
       (task 2)

In example (17), speaker 1 uses *what* as a repair initiator, indicating that there was a problem in the previous turn by speaker 2; according to Schegloff *et al.* (1977: 367), question words are typical in other-initiations of repair. The problem may be due to the fact that the speakers produce overlapping speech (*movie* and *why was*), so it may be the case that speaker 1 did not hear what speaker 2 asked. Speaker 2 then repairs her utterance by producing *why was it so nice*.

4.2   Other repair

4.2.1 Self-initiated other-repair

Other-repair is altogether much less common than self-repair in the material. Both types of other-repair, self-initiated and other-initiated, are nevertheless present in the speech produced by the students. Let us begin with self-initiated other-repair, in which the repair is initiated by the speaker producing the trouble and repaired by the other speaker.

(18) S1: erm we should eat something too because we're so @@
       S2: yeah maybe mcdonald's would be best because <S1> yeah </S1> yes
       S1: it's not that <FOREIGN WHISPERING> **kallista** </FOREIGN WHISPERING> <S2>
       expensive </S2> yes <S2> yeah </S2> mhm
       (task 3)

(19) S1: [what's the] what's the best (vehicle) in the linnanmäki
      S2: erm <FOREIGN> **vuoristorata** </FOREIGN> <S1 SIGHS> you will see it @@
      S1: **it's a roller coaster**
      S2: **yeah [yes]**
      (task 3)

In both (18) and (19), the speaker initiating the repair finds herself in lexical difficulty. Taking into account the level of the students as learners of English it is quite surprising that the item causing the difficulty in example (18) is a common adjective *expensive*, which speaker 1 does not remember and has to use Finnish *kallista* instead. As a further indication of the problem, speaker 1 produces the Finnish word in a whisper. Speaker 2 completes the repair by producing *expensive*, which speaker 1 then acknowledges. In (19), the item causing the problem is the word *roller coaster*, which speaker 2 does not know or remember. Instead she first produces a repair initiator *erm* and then the Finnish word for a roller coaster, *vuoristorata*. Speaker 1 produces the word in English, which speaker 2 acknowledges in her next turn.

4.2.2 Other-initiated other-repair

The final configuration of repair to be considered is other-initiated other-repair. According to Schegloff *et al.* (1977: 377) both other-initiation and other-repair are less preferred than self-initiation and self-repair, and in the material of the present study they are extremely uncommon as well. Some instances can be found; for illustration, let us consider example (20).

(20) <S2> well there's a 24 hour mcdonald's in helsinki
      <S1> @@ okay that's good <S2> yes </S2> you know you know about these [things i see]
      <S2> [@@ oh yes i know @@] and well shall we go when **the zoo goes**
      <S1> **closes**
      <S2> **closes yes**
      (task 3)

In (20), speaker 1 recognises a problem in the turn by speaker 2, who produces *the zoo goes*. Speaker 2 executes other-repair with *closes*, which speaker 2 acknowledges in her next turn.

We have now discussed all the four repair configurations. In the interest of clarity, the examples provided have mostly included only one type of repair. Before turning to the discussion of the results and conclusions, let us consider one final example where several repairs are executed.

(21) S1: ah @@ okay yes i think some of **the,** <FOREIGN> **asukas** </FOREIGN> **habi-
habitants** @@ <FOREIGN> niin </FOREIGN> **habitants** have bored to that baby
maybe they maybe they <FOREIGN> **äänestää** </FOREIGN>
S2: **voted [that woman out]**
S1: [**vote vote] out** yes
S2: i think so too or maybe the woman left by herself
(task 4)

In example (21), speaker 1 encounters several lexical difficulties. The first one is indicated by a pause as a repair initiator, after which it becomes apparent that she does not remember the English word *inhabitant* but uses the Finnish *asukas* instead. She then self-repairs with (incorrect) *habitants*, which is followed by Finnish *niin/yes*. The other difficulty is indicated by repetition of *maybe they*, while the speaker is apparently searching for the verb *vote*. She does not remember the word in English but gives the Finnish equivalent *äänestää* instead. Speaker 2 then executes other-repair with *voted that woman out*, which speaker 1 acknowledges by repeating it.

5   Discussion and conclusions

The results presented in the previous section show that the students make use of all four repair configurations to deal with problems in their own or their fellow students' utterances. It is also clear that self-repair is by far more common than other-repair, and of the configurations the students overwhelmingly use self-initiated self-repair. The preference for self-initiation and self-repair that has been shown by previous research to characterise repair work in various types of interaction is therefore also evident in the material of the present study.

If we then look at what the students perceive as problems in their utterances, i.e. what the target of the repair is, both lexical and grammatical items are repaired (as well as pronunciation). It is interesting that all the repairs which target grammar are both self-initiated and self-completed, and most of them are also same-turn repairs. A majority of self-repairs, however, target lexis, and all other-repairs in the material deal with lexis. This is in line with previous research, which has shown that especially in the case of L2 speakers, repair tends to include mostly lexical items. The fact that the students self-repair grammatical items but give opportunities for other-repair with lexical items can be seen as an indication that their grammatical competence is at a higher level than their lexical competence. This would be in line with what Pietilä (2012) concludes in her study on the grammatical and lexical competence of advanced learners of English (university applicants): their grammar is mostly correct, but lexical choices continue to pose challenges.

The analysis also revealed that instances of repair occur in both types of interaction, monologic and dialogic, produced by the students. Unsurprisingly, all repairs in the monologues (task 1) are instances of self-repair. The students had been instructed to produce a monologic introduction of themselves to the video camera, and although both students were co-present during the introduction, no repair initiation led to other-repair. Had a similar initiation happened during one of the dialogues, the other student might well have reacted. For illustration, let us consider two final excerpts from the material (22 and 23):

> (22) S1: i guess it's pretty s- er pretty good school or how would i say it erm i was i was in <CITY'S> school and people er i i think they weren't that **(matured) or how do you say it they were like er didn't think much about school they were like we just wanna have fun**
> (task 1)

> (23) S1: erm we erm we kids play instruments i play piano and oskari plays guitar and samuli plays **viu- erm** <FOREIGN> **mä en tiiä mikä se on** </FOREIGN> **violin** erm we
>   *vio-*   *i don't know what it is*
> live in a big house and we have this nice long hallway and er it's er it doesn't have any (storage) but it's still big
> (task 1)

In (22), the word *mature* presents a problem for the speaker. She produces *maturated*, but is unsure if it is the correct word and consequently explains in detail what she means. In (23), the speaker encounters a problem when she is talking about her brother's musical instrument. She starts to produce the Finnish word for violin, *viulu*, then stops mid-word and produces metatalk in Finnish. After this she remembers the word *violin* and proceeds with her talk. In both instances, following the task instructions, the other speaker remains silent.

In the dialogue tasks, there are more instances of other-repair, although self-repair is predominant in these as well. Buckwalter (2001) reports a similar finding: she concludes that her informants (English L1 speakers learning Spanish) do not wish to appear as teachers, i.e. they do not instruct each other except when repair is self-initiated and there is thus a clear indication that the speaker has encountered a problem. This is the case in the present material as well: the other student completes the repair after the speaker has indicated, for instance by codeswitching into Finnish, that she has a problem with her utterance.

To conclude, when we consider the repair strategies used by the students in their elicited talk, we have seen that they are similar to the mechanisms displayed by naturally occurring talk-in-interaction. The task type affects the repair strategy used in that the monologues exclusively show self-repair at work, while in the dialogues the

students use both self-repair and other-repair in collaboration, no doubt with their shared interest of completing the tasks in mind.

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APPENDIX 1.

Transcription conventions

- Uncertain transcription : (text)
- Unintelligible speech: (xx)
- Laughter: @@
- Pauses:
    Brief pause while speaking 2-3 sec.: ,
    Pause 3-4 sec.: .
    Pause 5 sec. or longer, rounded up to the nearest sec.: <P: 05>
- Overlapping speech: [text]
- Backchannelling (during another speaker' turn): okay, mhm-hm, mhm, uh-huh, uh-uh, yeah, etc.
    <S1> this is an example <S2> mhm </S2> you know </S1>
- Hesitations
    /öö/ –> er
    /(ö)m/ –>erm
    /aa/ (surprise) –> ah
- Unfinished utterances:
    unfinis-
- Nonsense words:
    <SIC> text </SIC>
- Switching into another language than English: <FOREIGN> text </FOREIGN>
- Other events that affect the interpretation or comprehension of what is being said:
    <WHISPERING>
    <BACKGROUND NOISE>
    <COUGH>
    etc.