

# What Repetitive Self-correction may tell us about learner acquisition

Joseph Tomei Sachiyo HAYASHI

## Abstract

This paper introduces a phenomenon termed Repetitive Self Correction (RSC) in EFL learner speech and discusses how it may reveal facts about the underlying acquisition of English. After reviewing the related literature on RSC, a qualitative discussion of how RSC may reveal these facts follows, discussing several grammatical points that emerge. The data suggests three possible sources for RSC and reveals future pedagogical and research avenues to explore.

要旨：本稿は、EFL学習者の発話における反復自己修正（Repetitive Self Correction: RSC）と呼ばれる現象について、それが根本的な英語習得に関する事実をどのように明らかにしうるかを論じるものである。RSCの関連文献を概観したのち、収集したデータにおいて浮かび上がってきたいくつかの文法的ポイントを論じながら、英語習得とRSCの関連について質的考察を行う。また、RSCを引き起こす要因として3つの可能性を提案し、今後の教育、研究の方向性を明らかにする。

## Introduction

One of the challenges facing the classroom teacher of English is to understand which aspects of the language have been acquired and which have not. Every classroom teacher has had the experience of a student

making an error, such as failing to pluralize a noun or use the proper verb tense, that has been taught and possibly ‘learned’, but not ‘acquired’, in the sense that students only make this mistake due to external factors as opposed to a lacuna in acquisition.

This is a particular challenge for Japanese students, such that a large number of college textbooks are specifically advertised for ‘false beginners’. These can be defined as students who have been taught a number of basic points about the grammar of the language, yet when asked to produce them, fail to, thus necessitating a textbook that re-presents these basic points. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that the majority of university English textbooks can be placed in this category.

One of the problems is a lack of automaticity. This has been exacerbated in recent years by the adoption of *yutori kyouiku*, where repetition of grammar structures and reading aloud has been deemphasized, to be replaced by an admirable but vague goal of ‘communication’. While there is not scope in this paper for a detailed discussion of *yutori kyouiku* (see Sakurai, 2016 for more details) the decentralization policies such as forming small study groups during class lessons and introduction of PC usage in the classrooms replaced drilling and choral repetition in English classes.

The phenomenon that we will introduce and discuss here, that of Repetitive Self Correction (RSC), seems to have arisen because of the deemphasis on automaticity and we feel that it offers several interesting possibilities for both the classroom teacher to intervene as well as the researcher to probe into where students are and are not acquiring the target language.

### **Towards a definition of RSC**

Repetitive Self Correction (RSC) can be defined as repeated words and phrases in learner speech, generally at the beginning of clauses, which learners use to accomplish the following goals:

- call up particular vocabulary items and phrases that are unavailable when the utterance begins
- make repairs to mistaken utterances
- to act as 'placeholders' while actual communicative content is accessed for production

A search of the literature reveals several concepts that are related, but nothing that fully encompasses what we observed. The concept of RSC shares several features of the concept of self-repair in Conversational Analysis (CA), but RSC differs in key aspects and must be modified to account for EFL learner English, especially for Japanese students in the CEFR (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) A2 range. (see Council of Europe, 2001 for more details)

RSC was initially revealed as a concept through research on a formative online assessment tool (Kirchmeyer, in prep.). A simplified description of the context of the tool is as follows. Students (non-English majors who could be placed in the A2 band of the CEFR) were placed in trios and given a topic to discuss. Each student was recorded with a directional mic and the recording was processed to yield text from the speech and then the students were to review and correct their own oral contributions. Together with that, the transcript was analyzed to determine the number of turns per interaction, the number of words per turn and the vocabulary content. An initial examination of the raw transcripts revealed a massive amount of repetition by the students. Below are three examples from

Kirchmeyer's data.

Student one:

*I like I like ninja. I want to ninja I want to be a ninja. I want to strong. I want to be strong.*

In this example, the second and third repetitions represent the student correcting malformed utterances and could be explained as the student having acquired *nani nani ni naritai* as 'I want to', and producing that, but realizing afterwards that it has to be 'I want to be xxx.' We can suggest that represents some automaticity for *naritai* but it has not sufficient automatized 'I want to be...'. Interestingly, the student does produce the indefinite article ('I want to be *a* ninja'), so there is some automaticity involved there, but there is clearly a difference between the student's acquisition of the two.

However, the first repetition possibly represents an interesting lacuna in acquisition. A plausible explanation for the repetition is that the student wanted to say, 'I want to be a ninja because I like ninja' and placed the presupposition clause first, as it would be most naturally placed in Japanese. To produce the Japanese equivalent requires the use of the phrase *naze ka to iu to*, suggesting that the student has not acquired the English phrase structure of clause followed by presupposition. Given the errors in the second and third repetition, this is the most likely explanation.

With this example in mind, further research utilizing a different elicitation technique was done, yielding interesting results that suggest that this phenomenon may hold clues to underlying acquisition. To understand why this may be the case, we now turn to the literature on self-repair.

### Literature review on self-repair

The term *repair* first enters the literature with Fromkin's (1971) discussion titled *The Non-Anomalous Nature of Anomalous Utterances*. In that paper, while she is primarily dealing with phonological errors, she does note that "[w]hile we may not be able to explain as yet the exact mechanisms involved in speech errors, the errors made are not only highly constrained, but provide information about speech performance which non-deviant speech obscures" (p. 48), a spirit that animates this article. The construct of repairs was most fully explored through the approach of Conversation Analysis (CA), with *self-repairs* being defined as corrections which are made by the speaker within the same speaking 'turn' (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). However, this research was framed in an analysis that did not connect to traditional grammar, possibly because the founder of CA, Harvey Sacks, was tragically killed in a car crash as his early work in CA was being disseminated, so CA is now based on a separate framework from traditional grammatical categories, though there are hints that Sacks had drawn some equivalences between the system of CA and traditional grammar (McHoul, 2005). In addition, as the name might suggest, CA is concerned with conversation and how speaking turns are allotted, used and understood by speakers of a first language. So much of the literature on self-repair in CA does not speak to the situation here, why EFL students are using repetition as a compensatory mechanism for problems with fluency.

A second influential discussion of self-repair is Levelt (1983), which is again, a discussion of self-repair for 1<sup>st</sup> language speakers. This discussion of self-repair is one of the building blocks for Levelt's (1989) theory of speech production and Levelt (1983) argues that some structural properties of the original utterance are 'transferred' to the correction, which

creates ‘systematic dependencies’ between the initial utterance and its correction. If Levelt’s observation holds merit, then we can also look at the systematic dependencies in the speech of language learners to identify lacunae in their acquisition, an assumption that drives this paper.

A second observation that emerges from CA as well as from Levelt’s theory is the question of precedence. With the term ‘repair’, and to a similar extent with ‘correction’, an error needs to be initially made. Levelt’s model has three independent systems in the following order, a conceptualizer, a formulator and an articulator. Thus, it can be argued that the error can precede the repair, even if there is no surface realization of the error. In a similar fashion, Sacks was aware that errors, or in CA terminology ‘trouble sources’ were not necessarily the only reason for ‘corrections’. As McHoul (2005) writes:

In short, what gives the correction its quality as a correction - or, we might say, how it comes to have the meaning of being a correction-is not so much a matter of its content. In this case, it is not that it has content which replaces the originally projected utterance by virtue of some trouble that can be heard with that original utterance. In fact, there is no “trouble” as such and no replacement; instead there is an amplification or “specification.”

(McHoul, 2005, p. 120)

This observation, true for the native speaker, assumes a fully acquired grammatical system. On the other hand, when we work with language learners, we are well aware that they have not fully acquired the grammatical system and we need to identify what pieces they have failed

to acquire. In that sense, RSC, to use a metaphor, operates as an ‘x-ray’, showing us the grammatical ‘bones’ that the learner is using and can allow the classroom teacher to identify what portions of this skeleton may be lacking or malformed.

As Wong (2000) points out:

Repetition forms a crucial resource by which children and adult learners of a second or foreign language gain increasing competence in the language of interaction. Language learners are exposed to and make use of repetition, in both the classroom and naturalistic contexts, as the acquisitional processes of knowing and using the language of interaction come together and are separable.

(Wong, 2000, p. 408)

One reviewer suggested that the literature on learner interlanguage (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1974) might yield insights into this phenomenon. However, in accounts of interlanguage, it is described as “the separate linguistic system evidenced when adult second-language learners attempt to express meaning in a language they are in the process of learning” (Tarone, 2006: 476-477). While it would be possible to include repetition and describe it as part of such a system, the effect has generally been relegated to performance and therefore not considered part of the grammatical system of the learner. While this is true, the points at which the speaker uses repetition are not random and do reveal the underlying system. In this sense, RSC is a tool to reveal the underlying structure of the learner’s interlanguage.

### The data collection

The introductory example was part of a conversational triad and more suited for a CA analysis, as the presence of two other interlocutors helps to impose a turn structure, but our interest was in what RSC would reveal about the underlying grammatical system, so our data collection was based on a replication of the data collection method done for the Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage (LINDSEI) corpus. (Granger, S. et al., 2009) A brief description is as follows: Students were presented with a four frame cartoon and, after an opportunity to examine the cartoon, were asked to narrate the story depicted. Based on a previous research project, it utilized the four frame cartoon given in figure 1. The subjects, all second year university students in English departments, were high A2 or low B1 on the CEFR scale, in contrast to the initial example, which is of a non-English major whose level is probably a low A2 or a high A1 on the CEFR scale. Subjects were given the option of narrating in either Japanese or English first. Because of the ongoing COVID pandemic, all the data was collected via Zoom, which were made following student consent, and transcribed. A preliminary examination of the data revealed a number of interesting points that provide bases for both potential research avenues as well as pedagogical interventions.



Fig. 1. 4 frame cartoon prompt

### Analysis of selected data

A typical example would be student K, who first gave the following Japanese narration.

*1 koma-me wa, futari no jousei ga kaimono ni kite imasu, ee-, kaimono no kyūkei-chū ni, futarigumi no otoko ga futari ni hanashikakete kite, ee , kuroi kami no danseï ga, futari no jousei ni nanika setsumei shite iru tokoro wo, ee , kinpatsu no danseï ga, ee , kaban kara saifu wo nukidashimashita. Ato kara futari wa, ee, saifu ga nusumareta koto wo kizukimashita.*

This was followed by this English narration with the instances of RSC underlined and instances of self-repair in bold.

*One day, two women two women went to went to shopping and **while when he aaa when they are taking breaks, some break** two men talked to them. And while one one person who has black hair two two women one person who has who has gold hair stole a wallet from woman's from*

*woman's bag. And after that, they realize that their wallet has stolen.  
That's it.*

The first interesting point is that the student uses, in the Japanese, the hesitation marker *ee* at 5 points in the description. The first two mark the speaker's movement to the next frame (from frame 1 to frame 2 *ee-*, *kaimono no kyūkei-chū ni* and from frame 2 to frame 3 *ee*, *kuroi kami no dansei ga, futari no josei ni nanika setsumei shite iru tokoro wo*), while hesitation pauses 3 and 4 mark divisions in the third frame (*futari no josei ni nanika setsumei shite iru tokoro wo, ee*, *kinpatsu no dansei ga, ee*, *kaban kara saifu wo nukidashimashita*) while the final pause marks a division in the fourth frame. The subject gave the Japanese first, and we see that the first two hesitation pauses correspond to the instances of self-repair, where the speaker replaces *while* with *when* and then replaces *he* with *they* or when the speaker changes the plural *breaks* to the singular *break*. These examples seem to be along the lines of Levelt's model and the speaker, while monitoring the 'formulator', opts to change their statement after it has been produced. On the other hand, the following three points in the English, which we will mark as RSC because they are not repairing but acting in a different light and are not changes in the statements, but simply repetitions. These repetitions seem to have the purpose of filling up the narration and allowing the speaker to access the next word or phrase.

It is notable that this is a strategy that almost every student resorted to when speaking in English, but only appeared once or twice when speaking Japanese. This student, who chose to speak in English first, followed by Japanese, produced the following in English. The numbers in brackets are the long pause timings, which are marked in tenths of a second.

*Two womens were at the clothes shop. One one woman is looking at a dress and [5.1s] another is [11.3s] another is pointing at it [4.3s] ah She already she already bought some clothes and [4.6s] she had she had a [18.2s] a [8.7s] she had a bag [7.0s] hmm [5.3s] There are there are smiling to look at the clothes. [20.6s] [interviewer: dozo] Second paragraph [15.9s] mm the two womans bought a lot of goods and they they were sitting at the chair. [3.8s] Then [4.5s] two two mens [6.9s] spoke to the two womans They are surprised. [9.9s] One of one of the mens [3.4] asked the two womans to tell the ways tell the way. [8.6s] While they while they teach him another man stole [5.9] stole the their their wallet from their bag. [7.3s] After a while [7.4s] one one of the woman noticed that they don't have their wallet [2.6s] they were surprised and shocked.*

In the Japanese portion, the subject did use *eto*, but also had a number of long pauses marked in brackets, though.

*Futari no josei ga, eto [4.7s], butikku de kaimono wo shite [3.6s] ite, eto [5.6s] kanojotachi wa, eto [6.3s], fuku wo, fuku wo ko kau ka do ka sodan shite imashita. [2.9s] Eto, kaimono wo shi owatte, eto benchi ni suruwatte iru to, futari no otoko no hito ga koe wo kakete kimashita. [3.7s] Sono otoko no hito wa, eto, kanojotachi ni, eto, michi wo oshiete hoshi to tanondanode, eto [4.8s] a, tanonde kimashita. Eto, kanojotachi wa, eto, kare ni michi wo oshiete iru aida ni, mouhitori no otoko no hito ga, eto, kanojotachi no bakku, kara, eto, saifu wo nusumimashita. [1.9s] Shibaraku shite, [13.7s] kanojotachi wa, eto, saifu to, bakku no naka ni saifu ga nai koto ni kizuki, eto, shokku wo ukemashita.*

The extensive pauses, while marked, are not surprising in the context of Japanese discourse. Shigemitsu (1989) analyzed four Japanese family conversations and found that average length of the pause in was 7.3 seconds. However, for the English conversation, several of the pauses were within repetitions. This suggests that one potential reason for RSC is a ‘reboot’ of the sentence.

Another interesting point is the observation by Fox, Hayashi and Jaspersen (1996) that the syntactic structure of Japanese is SOV, it is more difficult for Japanese to predict what the content of the speaker’s clauses may be, and so Japanese conversation tends to be more fragmented and have longer pauses. Fox et al. (1996) term these as ‘syntactic practices’ and write:

We are not suggesting that Japanese recipients are completely unable to make predictions about what the speaker might say next, just that projection may take place later in the utterance in Japanese than in English. [...] We are instead suggesting that the syntactic practices of English make early projection of the upcoming syntax a more straightforward process than do the syntactic practices of Japanese; the syntactic practices of Japanese do not facilitate this process to the extent that the syntactic practices of English do.

(Fox, et al., 1996, p. 211)

If this is the case, ‘syntactic practices’ may have an influence on the amount and quality of repetition by Japanese L2 speakers. West (2018) adds a further wrinkle to this. In a CA analysis of repair strategies used when Japanese students were speaking to native peer participants in

English versus non-native peer interlocutors, he observed that there was a significantly higher average of same-turn repair strategies, with repetition to be the third most common strategy, when Japanese subjects were interacting with other Japanese subjects than while interacting with a non-Japanese subject. While all these recordings were done with a non-native instructor, future data collection might ask for the subject to address a particular audience, which may affect the production of RSC.

The initial plan for this research was to compare the production of Korean university students with Japanese students, but because of the COVID pandemic, only limited data was gathered with Korean students. However, in that limited data, the type and quality of repetition was quite different from the Japanese students. Here, a 2<sup>nd</sup> year Korean student in a non-English major, tackles the same task:

*Maybe t - two girl is have friend, They are shopping together and maybe **she want this she want this shirt** and **this looks like second one looks like** they already **buy it buy this shirt** and they have a rest then **two boy two boy** come to girls because they want steal their money and number 3 they did it. One boy talk with girls and **that yellow yellow** hair people take money and they lost and they **go go** back these two girls **know know** they lost the money.*

What is notable is that while there are a few instances (such as *two boy* and *yellow*) that have the same feel as the Japanese student repetitions, the earlier repetitions are recasts that add more information. This suggests that the repetition is a cultural artifact, picked up by students who aim for ‘fluency’ by increasing the number of words they speak even though they accomplish this only by repeating phrases.

## Conclusions

This preliminary study suggests both pedagogical interventions and future research. In terms of pedagogical interventions, the close transcriptions of student speech can yield a number of new insights to student production. In addition, while subjects were allowed to choose which language they wanted to speak first, following Kirchmeyer, student analysis of transcripts as well as comparisons between Japanese and English descriptions may help student acquisition by identifying areas students are able to express in Japanese but cannot in English.

While classroom practitioners are always pressed for time, taking the opportunity to ask students to produce the language extemporaneously and then transcribe that can reveal particular points where classroom interventions can suggest themselves. With speech to text options, transcribing has become much easier, and it would serve as an opportunity to examine student output in closer detail.

A second classroom intervention would be to identify repetitions and then ask students to predict what will follow. If the observation of Fox, Hayashi and Jasperson (1996) is correct and Japanese find it more difficult to predict the content of a speaker's clause, it stands to reason that improving that ability in English could be an important detail in developing language fluency.

In terms of research, when travel to Korea is possible, looking at the student output in Japanese and Korean, two languages with similar grammar and a large shared vocabulary, and comparing that with their English output could make acquisition patterns clearer. Research into the effect of the perceived audience would also prove interesting while investigating whether there is a grammatical typology that gives rise to issues with RSC would

help us better understand some of the mechanics of acquisition.

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