



## Teacher repair in a second language class for low-literate adults



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### ABSTRACT

This paper complicates the practice of teacher repair in the second language (L2) classroom by specifically focusing on the subset of adult English learners who have a background of low literacy. Using Conversation Analysis, this study explores the interactional means locally available for the low-literate learners to deal with teacher repair in the activity of vocabulary introduction. The analysis shows that the organization of teacher repair is oriented to the learners' state of literacy, which for the teacher holds priority over what the literature has found as repair strategies *sui generis* either inside or outside the L2 classroom. The teacher profitably tailors her (para)linguistic input for the learners to perceive and react to her repair, and this rule-governed turn construction helps them identify the pedagogical intent of each turn. These findings will enrich the discussion of whether our existing knowledge of L2 repair can be extended to all learners.

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### Introduction and background

Considering that language is both the means and the object in second language (L2) classroom interaction, conversation analysts have found that repair in L2 classrooms is reframed by the institutional object and thus distinct from repair in mundane discourse (Jung, 1999; Kasper, 1985; Lehti-Eklund, 2013; Nakamura, 2008; Okada, 2010; Rolin-Ianziti, 2010; Seedhouse, 1997, 2004; van Lier, 1988). Based on and along with research on repair in generic classroom talk (Macbeth, 2004; McHoul, 1990), those studies of L2 classroom repair have shed light on how repair is exploited instructionally as well as interactionally towards the goal of language acquisition.

While following this strand of research, this paper focuses specifically on teacher repair towards low-literate adult learners' troubles in L2 communication. Repair understood by this particular learner population is an intriguing topic for its own right because it is a dialogic site where the learners potentially negotiate meanings and keep engaged in learning activities. This topic also merits attention to extend our knowledge of repair by and for widely defined types of language learners. Liebscher and Dailey-O'Cain's (2003) focused interest in advanced L2 learners in their repair study, for example, implies that different L2 learner groups may develop and benefit from different repair trajectories. At the other extreme of language proficiency, this paper explores the context-sensitive mechanisms that low-literate adults find appropriate for identifying and resolving breakdowns in their English as a second language (ESL) classroom talk.

Low-literate ESL learners in this paper refer to those who cannot read or write in their first language (L1) but who currently read and write Roman alphabets and are in the process of practicing how to combine them to read and write English words.

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These learners are to be distinguished from literate learners at a beginner level of ESL, who are familiar with basic skills of reading and writing language as a semiotic system (Bigelow, 2010; Moore, 2007). ESL learners with low print literacy also depart from native speakers (NS) of English with low literacy (Eme, 2011) in that they need to practice speaking and listening to English as a new language as well as reading and writing. In this respect, the pre- or low-literate students in ESL classes are primarily immigrants who recently arrived in the Anglosphere and whose background of L1 illiteracy may result from a number of reasons: one's schooling might be severely disrupted before entering the host country, or one's ethnic group might traditionally prefer oral language performances such as stories or poems to literacy, compared to the prevailing "chirographic culture" in most developed countries (Ong, 1988, p. 2).

L2 researchers have called for more studies on this particular learner group in response to an exploding migrant population, the majority of whom is coming to the first-world countries where English language skills are essential for everyday life (e.g. Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011; Strube, 2010; Tarone, 2010; Wrigley, 2007; see also proceedings of Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition for Adults symposia, available at: <http://www.leslla.org>). Investigating adult L2 learners with limited print literacy or formal schooling is an important and thoughtful move because they have been largely understudied compared to school-age or higher-educated immigrants. There is evidence that pre-literate and low-literate adults acquire the oral processing of an L2 differently than literate learners, with little awareness of linguistic units like words and phonemes (Tarone, Bigelow, & Hansen, 2009). These authors' finding indicates that our current understanding of how "the human mind acquires L2s" may be in fact merely "based on data from *some* humans (the literate ones)" (Tarone & Bigelow, 2011, p. 6, emphases in original). The field of second language acquisition (SLA) must include learners' alphabetic literacy level and interrupted education in its research agenda for a more comprehensive and ecological theory-building.

It is of particular value to examine the practice of repair that occurs in low-literate adults' language classes and how it is distinct from repair in classes for other learner groups or outside the classroom. In their ESL classroom contexts, the asymmetry of language competence is greatest between an NS teacher of English and her students. What is considered repairable in this situation will predominantly be language problems made by learners, who are positioned at an extreme of "not-yet-competent" interactants in the literate and English-speaking social world (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977, p. 381). Therefore, L2 classes for low-literate adults are likely to have a particular repair trajectory, where the teacher helps the learners carry out smooth interactions, by both initiating and completing repairs toward their silence, cut-off or try-marking utterances, as presented in the following example:

|   |          |                                  |
|---|----------|----------------------------------|
|   | Teacher: | What do you see in this picture? |
|   | Student: | Dino-                            |
| → | Teacher: | A dinosaur.                      |

Exploring how low-literate L2 learners navigate teacher repair in the classroom environment is also meaningful because their access to repair as a resource determines how they modify L2 input and output, which may contribute to language development (Hardy & Moore, 2004). By constantly adjusting what is said (trouble source) and what is heard (repair), the learners notice the linguistic gap between the two, which is central to the acquisition of a language (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Prior to identifying such a connection between repair and language learning, this paper investigates how trouble is repaired in L2 classes for learners with low literacy. To examine the detailed fabric of talk surrounding repair using their own perspective, this study utilizes conversation analysis (CA) as a methodological framework, which will be outlined in the following subsections.

### *Repair in the L2 classroom*

Transparent and smooth communication is built on a conversational mechanism that breaks through what is obstructed and clarifies what is cloudy. Defined as "practices for dealing with problems or troubles in speaking, hearing, and [...] understanding what someone has just said" (Schegloff, 2000, p. 207), repair is one of the most ubiquitous events in human interaction. Repair in the L2 classroom environment, among others, has been comprehensively investigated under the category of institutional talk (Drew & Heritage, 1992). The consensus among those studies is that the "institutional or professional identities" assigned to each participant constrain the organization of repair and hence result in certain features of L2 classroom repair *sui generis* (Drew & Heritage, 1992, p. 4). The effect of such contextualized repair is the transmission of L2 knowledge, as Iles (1996) states that "language is demonstrated, experienced, and worked on by both teacher and learner in repair trajectories" in L2 classroom discourse (p. 25).

Kasper (1985) represents one of the early efforts to explore the interaction between repair and L2 classroom contexts. Explaining the repair organization in language-centered and content-centered phases of foreign language lessons, the author shows that the dominant type of repair and the teacher's goal correspond to which phase the class belongs to: more other-repairs appear in language-centered phases and more self-repairs in content-centered phases. Seedhouse (1997, 2004) moves a step beyond Kasper by focusing on various pedagogical contexts of L2 classes that define what is repairable: form-and-accuracy, meaning-and-fluency, and task-oriented contexts. The pedagogical focus of each context is related reflexively to the organization of repair. Similarly, van Lier (1988) examines pedagogy as a key factor that differentiates the way repair is dealt with in the L2 classroom from that in non-pedagogic settings. And this is why other-repair prevails in the L2 classroom, whereas self-repair dominates in daily conversation.

Other L2 repair studies have revisited Kasper, Seedhouse, and/or van Lier's works by examining interaction between NS–NNS (Hellermann, 2009; Hosoda, 2006; Wong, 2000), NNS–NNS (Kasanga, 1996) or teacher-led classroom interaction

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