

A Study on the Features of Conversational Repair Among Chinese Learners of Japanese

Anqi Yang

College of Foreign Languages, Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou 350007, Fujian, China.

How to cite this paper: Anqi Yang. (2025). A Study on the Features of Conversational Repair Among Chinese Learners of Japanese. *The Educational Review, USA*, 9(4), 470-474.
DOI: 10.26855/er.2025.04.013

Received: March 18, 2025
Accepted: April 15, 2025
Published: May 15, 2025

Corresponding author: Anqi Yang, College of Foreign Languages, Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou 350007, Fujian, China.

Abstract

This study employs a corpus of conversations by Chinese learners of Japanese to investigate the features of conversational repairs from three perspectives: unguided, self-guided, and other-guided. The findings indicate two primary outcomes: (1) The most frequently used type of conversational repair is the unguided type. This may be because beginner learners of Japanese, whose second language proficiency is still low, do not yet have sufficient ability to monitor their own knowledge and make self-repairs; and (2) The least frequently used type was the other-guided type. This may be related to the nature of task-based conversations, where the main goal is to complete one's own part of the conversation. As long as the content is understandable, learners tend not to actively guide or correct the other speaker, even if they notice grammatical or lexical errors in the other person's speech. It also reflects the unilateral subjectivity characteristic of beginner learners. Therefore, how to effectively enhance learners' interactive subjectivity while completing communicative tasks is also a topic worth further discussion at present.

Keywords

Conversational repair; unguided; other-guided; self-repair; Chinese learners of Japanese

1. Introduction

Interactional competence is one of the key abilities required for successful communication, including turn management, topic management, listener interaction, conversational repair, and nonverbal behavior (Galaczi & Taylor, 2018). Among them, the ability to perform conversational repair is a sign of learners' second language development and an indication of their communicative competence (Wang Cheng & Wu Yongyi, 2017).

In recent years, theoretical research on conversational repair has become increasingly rich. However, domestic studies have primarily focused on conversational repair strategies among foreign learners of Chinese and Chinese learners of English, with relatively few investigations into the characteristics of conversational repair among Chinese learners of Japanese. Therefore, this study employs a corpus of conversations by Chinese learners of Japanese and, drawing upon the interactional perspective-based conversational repair framework proposed by Zhao Gang and Jia Qi (2012), examines the features of conversational repair from three perspectives: self-guided, other-guided, and unguided. The aim is to provide guidance for Japanese language teachers and thereby enhance the development of conversational repair skills in Chinese learners of Japanese.

2. Analysis Framework of Conversational Repair

This study adopts the research framework established by Zhao Gang and Jia Qi (2012) from an interactional behavior

perspective. Based on the actual conditions of the selected corpus, conversational repair is divided into three major categories: self-guided, other-guided, and unguided. Considering that instances of conversational repair in the corpus occasionally occur without the necessity of directing guidance toward the source of the breakdown, the “unguided” category has been added to the framework proposed by Zhao Gang and Jia Qi (2012) to establish an analysis framework more suitable for the present study.

Self-guidance refers to speakers actively detecting obstacles in their own turns and then guiding themselves to resolve them. Depending on who performs the repair and whether it succeeds, self-guided repair can be subdivided into self-guided/self-repair, self-guided/other-repair, and self-guided/zero repair. Other-guidance refers to someone else guiding the speaker through obstacles in their speech, and this category includes other-guided/self-repair, other-guided/other-repair, and other-guided/zero repair. Similarly, unguided repair denotes cases where repair occurs without any explicit guidance directed toward the obstacles; it consists of unguided/self-repair, unguided/other-repair, as well as unguided/zero repair. Specific examples are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Theoretical Analysis Framework for Conversational Repair Strategies

	Subtype	Definition	Example
Self-guided	Self-repair	Speaker identifies and repairs an obstacle in their own utterance.	A: Uh, for Mr. Son's dorm, <u>um...is,are</u> there any other rules? A: So, Shiina, you've got serials in Weekly Bunshun and Weekly Gendai <u>right now</u> ? B: <u>Plus Weekly Friday makes three</u> , but I'm also doing a column in the Sunday edition of the Hokkaido Shimibun—so it'll be four a week.
	Other-repair	Other-repair performed by another participant following the speaker's self-initiated repair upon detecting a trouble source in their own utterance.	A: You... you <u>came, um, come</u> to visit me... A: I heard you used to cry every day... Are you feeling a little better now? B: Yeah, I'm totally fine now. A: <u>“Totally fine.” huh?</u> (laughs) B: Well... <u>I guess I still feel lonely after all.</u>
	Zero-repair	Speaker initiates repair but is either not implemented or unsuccessful following the speaker's detection of a trouble source in their own utterance.	A: Do people in their 20s and 30s dislike it, I wonder? B: <u>It's not that, it's just that</u> people in their 20s and 30s might not listen to enka much. A: Why is it... beca— because it's <u>unforgebale</u> (unforgettable)? B: (pause) (uh) Why <u>unforgeb... unforgeb...</u> yeah? (pause) (uh) Cai, is there something you can't forget?
Other-guided	Self-repair	Interlocutor signals an error, prompting the speaker to self-correct.	A: A week of, a week of enjoyment, fun things too. (Uh-) (Uh-) I mean, nostalgic <u>things, no, experiences</u> too. A: If a good job comes up, should I go ahead and do it? B: <u>It's “I'll go ahead and do it,” not “should I.”</u> A: <u>Which person</u> (What kind of people) is Mr. Zhang? B: He's strict, but...
	Other-repair	Interlocutor directly corrects the speaker's error.	
	Zero-repair	Interlocutor prompts repair but no correction occurs.	
Un-guided	Self-repair	Speaker spontaneously corrects own utterance without external cue.	
	Other-repair	Interlocutor spontaneously corrects without prior cue.	
	Zero-repair	No repair occurs despite evident communication breakdown.	

3. Research Design

3.1 Participants

This study selected students from the Japanese major at a certain university, specifically those enrolled in classes of the 2018 and 2020-2022 cohorts. A total of 83 conversation samples were collected to examine the features of conversational repair in their final semester conversation examination during the first year of study. In addition, all instructional conditions were the same for students within the same academic year.

3.2 Research Methodology

The dialogue materials for the final oral exam were produced by pairs of students randomly selected by drawing lots to perform conversations on everyday topics. The recordings lasted between one and five minutes and were transcribed by computer and manually.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Through the analysis, collation, and statistical examination of the collected corpus, a total of 989 conversational repair instances were identified. Among these, the unguided type of conversational repair was the most frequently used, accounting for 70.07% of the total. The second highest proportion is self-guided type at 28.62%, while other-guided type accounts for the smallest proportion at merely 1.32%. The detailed distribution of conversational repair strategies in this study's corpus is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of Conversational Repair Strategies

Repair Type	Interaction Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Self-guided (28.62%)	Self-guided/Self-repair	141	14.26
	Self-guided/Other-repair	2	0.20
	Self-guided/Zero repair	140	14.16
Other-guided (1.32%)	Other-guided/Self-repair	7	0.71
	Other-guided/Other-repair	0	0.00
	Other-guided/Zero repair	6	0.61
Unguided (70.07%)	Unguided/Self-repair	262	26.49
	Unguided/Other-repair	8	0.81
	Unguided/Zero repair	423	42.77

As shown in Table 2, the most frequently used type of conversational repair is the unguided type, among which the unguided/zero repair category accounts for the highest proportion at 42.77%. This data indicates that beginner Japanese learners, due to limitations in their language proficiency, have not yet developed sufficient abilities to monitor their own linguistic knowledge and perform self-repairs. This finding is consistent with the conclusion of Wang Cheng and Wu Yongyi (2017) in their study on the conversational repair abilities of Chinese as a second language learners, which found that the strength of one's monitoring ability is proportional to one's second language proficiency.

Observation of the conversation groups reveals that, within the unguided/zero repair category, the most common errors made by beginner Japanese learners are grammatical mistakes and expressions that are unnatural due to interference from their native language. Among the grammatical errors, tense errors and incorrect use of Japanese particles are most common.

Thus, in classroom teaching interaction, it is necessary for teachers to emphasize guidance on the common grammatical errors made by students so as to enhance learners' self-monitoring and self-repair abilities. On the other hand, the high proportion of unguided/self-repair instances (26.49%) further indicates that beginner Japanese learners do possess a certain level of metacognitive ability, including self-monitoring, self-planning, self-repair, and problem-solving (Yao Jianpeng, 2012).

Secondly, the self-guided type of repair, accounting for 28.62%, should not be overlooked. Its presence indicates that beginner Japanese learners are, to some extent, capable of self-monitoring, thereby further substantiating the existence of an internal speech monitoring mechanism among second language learners (Kormos, 1999). Additionally, an analysis of the strategies employed in self-guided repairs shows that beginner Japanese learners frequently use strategies such as the repetition of Japanese vocabulary or kana representation of Japanese vocabulary, as well as filler words like "Hmm" and "Uh" to signal to their interlocutors that they are making an effort to resolve the problem while still attempting to maintain control of their turn. And in self-guided strategies, the tendency to rely on word repetition or phonetic approximations

may arise because language complexity imposes cognitive burdens on second language learners, hindering real-time verbal encoding and resulting in repetitive patterns (Wang Cheng & Wu Yongyi, 2017). This finding also corroborates Yang Shiqiao's (2013) conclusion that repetition is a commonly used self-repair strategy in communicative interactions.

Within the self-guided category, the frequencies of the subtypes self-guided/self-repair (14.26%) and self-guided/zero repair (14.16%) are similar. This data shows that beginner learners of Japanese attempt to correct their errors through self-guided strategies. However, such attempts are sometimes unsuccessful. The unsuccessful repairs typically involve lexical errors or difficulties in expressing complex sentence structures.

The least used type is the other-guided category, accounting for only 1.32%. This may be attributable to the fact that all conversation group members are beginner Japanese learners who, due to their limited proficiency, often fail to promptly detect conversational errors; consequently, they are unable to offer appropriate guidance or corrections to the speakers. Moreover, within the corpus, instances of other-guided repair typically occur when a speaker struggles to manage the turn-taking process, adversely affecting the listener, or when the speaker's utterance contains obvious logical inconsistencies or misexpressions.

Thus, this study concludes that the low frequency of other-guided repairs may be related to the task-based nature of the conversation, as the conversations in the corpus were all conducted in the context of a final examination. The primary objective in such task-based interactions is to accomplish one's own conversational content, so even if a speaker detects grammatical or lexical errors in their partner's speech, they tend not to intervene actively. This observation is corroborated by Wang Cheng and Wu Yongyi's (2017) questionnaire and interview findings involving 60 Chinese language learners, and it reflects the unilateral subjectivity of beginner Japanese learners in task-based conversations, who "focus on their own performance" (Wang Gang & Shu Yan, 2023). However, as conversational repair ability is both an indicator of second language proficiency development and a reflection of communicative competence (Wang Cheng & Wu Yongyi, 2017), it also suggests that teachers should, in routine classroom instruction, encourage students to pay attention to their interlocutors' performance, thereby fostering interactive subjectivity.

Finally, from the perspective of repair, self-repair occurs far more frequently than other-repair. Self-repairs are primarily aimed at correcting lexical or grammatical errors. These findings align with Nooteboom's analysis of the German error corpus compiled by Meringer and Mayer, which concluded that over 50% of the speakers' utterance errors are self-repaired.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzed conversation samples from the final examination of Chinese learners of Japanese to investigate the phenomenon of conversational repair during communicative interactions. The aim was to explore the characteristics of learners' conversational repair types, thereby helping Japanese learners identify shortcomings in their repair strategies and ultimately improve their repair skills. The findings reveal that: (1) the most frequently used type of conversational repair is the unguided category, which may be attributable to the learners' low second language proficiency, as beginner Japanese learners have not yet developed adequate skills to monitor their own linguistic knowledge and perform self-repairs; and (2) the least frequently used type is the other-guided category, which the study suggests may be related to the task-based nature of the conversations.

This study also offers several implications for second language teaching. First, within the unguided/self-repair category, Chinese learners of Japanese commonly commit tense errors and particle errors. This finding suggests that, in beginner Japanese instruction, teachers should place greater emphasis on explaining Japanese verb tenses and particles. Second, the implementation of task-based conversations appears to encourage learners to concentrate on their own linguistic output. Therefore, exploring methods to effectively enhance learners' interactive subjectivity while still achieving communicative goals remains an important area for further research.

It is important to note the limitations of the present study. For instance, due to limited corpus resources, the investigation focused solely on beginner Japanese learners. Future research will aim to examine the characteristics of conversational repair among learners at different proficiency levels in Japanese.

References

- Doi, M. (1994). Characteristics of breakdown repair in Japanese learners' conversations. *Journal of Japanese Language Education Methods Research*, 1(2), 36-37. https://doi.org/10.19022/jlem.1.2_36
- Galaczi, E., & Taylor, L. (2018). Interactional competence: Conceptualisations, operationalisations, and outstanding questions. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 15(3), 219-236. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15434303.2018.1453816>

- Izaki, Y. (1997). Repair strategies in conversations between Japanese native speakers and French learners of Japanese. *Nihongo Kyōiku Ronbunshū (World Japanese Language Education)*, 7, 77-95. <https://doi.org/10.20649/00000246>
- Kormos, J. (1999). Monitoring and self-repair in L2. *Language Learning*, 49(2), 303-342. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0023-8333.00090>
- Lei, Y. (2021). How interactional participants address utterance troubles: Self-repair by Japanese native speakers in contact situations. *Bulletin of the Graduate School of Language and Culture*, 7, 79-101. <https://doi.org/10.15034/00007730>
- Li, L. (2015). Self-repair in foreign language classroom interaction. *Journal of Heilongjiang Vocational Institute of Ecological Engineering*, (4), 100-101. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1674-6341.2015.04.044>
- Nakano, S. (2022). The role of instructors in “Small Talk” in elementary school foreign language classes: Focus on conversational repair. *Bulletin of Hokuriku Gakuin University and Junior College*, 15, 35-49.
- Nooteboom, S. G. (1980). Speaking and unspeaking: Detection and correction of phonological and lexical errors in spontaneous speech. In V. A. Fromkin (Ed.), *Errors in linguistic performance: Slips of the tongue, ear, pen, and hand* (pp. 87-95). New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Shi, X. (2021). Repair strategies in English classroom group discussions. *University Education*, (10), 162-164, 186. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.2095-3437.2021.10.049>
- Su, C. (2018). Conversational repair phenomena in Chinese learners: A case study of Slovenian native speakers. *Taste Classics*, (3), 61-64.
- Suzuki, K. (2008). Other-initiated repair for “incomplete utterances”: Reexamining ellipsis through conversational data. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 10(2), 70-82. https://doi.org/10.19024/jajls.10.2_70
- Wang, B., & Du, J. (2023). An analysis of Chinese repair strategies. *Theoretical Observation*, (4), 132-135.
- Wang, C., & Wu, Y. (2017). Conversational repair competence in Chinese L2 learners. *TCSOL Studies*, (4), 14-22. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1674-8174.2017.04.002>
- Wang, G., & Shu, Y. (2023). Typology and subjectivity of conversational repair in naturalistic discourse. *Journal of Huzhou University*, 45(11), 90-97. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1009-1734.2023.11.013>
- Wang, W. (2008). Japanese teachers’ negative feedback and learner repair in one-on-one conversations. *Language, Culture, and Japanese Education*, 36, 72-75.
- Wang, X. (2019). Adaptability of self-initiated self-repair patterns in conversation. *Journal of Lüliang University*, (3), 17-20. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.2095-185X.2019.03.006>
- Wu, Y., & Zhang, Y. (2023). Repair phenomena in L2 conversation: A conversation-analytic perspective. *Journal of Suihua University*, 43(5), 92-94.
- Yang, S. (2013). Self-repetition repair within the same turn: A conversational analysis. *Journal of Zhejiang International Studies University*, (2), 9-15.
- Zhao, G., & Jia, Q. (2012). A study on repair mechanisms in Japanese conversation. *Japanese Learning and Research*, (2), 86-94. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1002-4395.2012.02.011>