

Checking Student Understanding Through Incomplete Utterances

Baikuntha Bhatta

Abstract

This paper analyzes the incomplete utterances teachers produce in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms with video-recorded classroom data from Japan and Nepal. The analysis focuses on incomplete utterances and analyzes how they are related to student understanding. The analysis mainly focuses on three different issues of incomplete utterances: (a) providing a framework for student understanding, (b) offering opportunity of self-repair to the students, and (c) demonstrating the model of the target language.

生徒の理解を確認するための 不完全な発話

要 旨

本稿は、日本とネパールの英語教室のデータを用いて、教師が発する不完全な発話を分析し、不完全な発話と生徒の理解の関連性を明らかにするものである。分析では特に、以下の3点に焦点を当てた：(1) 生徒の理解のための枠組を提供すること、(2) 生徒に自己修復の機会を与えること、(3) 目標言語のモデルを示すこと。

Checking Student Understanding Through Incomplete Utterances

Baikuntha Bhatta

Introduction

Contemporary research on second language education has focused extensively on the way teachers manage the interactional environment (Hosoda & Aline, 2010; Kasper, 1986; Koshik, 2002; McCarthy, 1991; Markee, 2000; McHoul, 1990; Mehan, 1979; Seedhouse, 1994; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; and many others). Among these studies, the focus has been on the interpretation and analysis of the structure of turn taking (Seedhouse, 1994), participants' collaborative performance in knowledge construction (Markee, 2000), teacher practices of eliciting student response from students (Hosoda & Aline, 2010; Koshik, 2002), and other interactional features. Adding to the list of research on second language education, this paper presents a conversation analytic perspective of teacher-student interaction in the English language classrooms of Japan and Nepal. The focus of this paper is to interpret the specific type of utterances teachers produce in checking student understanding. This paper presents empirical evidence of teacher production of "designedly incomplete utterances" (Koshik, 2002), assisting the students in their production of answering terms to complete incomplete utterances. By completing the teacher produced designedly incomplete utterance with an answering next item, students demonstrate their understanding of the ongoing interaction.

Background

With a discourse analytic approach in the study of the organizational structure of language-learning classroom, Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) discussed the typical three part sequence abundantly occurring in teacher-student interaction. The three part sequence they describe includes teacher initiation of a sequence, the student response to the teacher initiated turn, and teacher provision of feedback or some type of evaluation in the third turn. This sequence, generally referred to as Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975); Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) (Mehan, 1979); or Question-Answer-Comment (QAC) (McHoul, 1978), provides a basic structure of turn-taking practices in which teachers have maximum control over the distribution of turns in classroom interaction. One of the characteristics of IRF sequences is that they provide opportunities for teachers to initiate repair on problematic student utterances in the third turn. Furthermore, student responses produced in the second turn are always subject to evaluation by the teachers. And thus, the teachers may continuously provide opportunities to the students to modify their answers if they are not sufficient by redoing the turn initiation as a process of pursuing relevant and sufficient response. To assist students to self-correct and revise the problematic response, the teachers use various techniques so that the students could notice self-produced erroneous utterance and repair them.

For example, Koshik (2002) reports the teachers' use of designedly-incomplete utterances in elicitation of student repair on problematic responses. In her study, the teachers use a distinct strategy to provide feedback and to evaluate student utterances. The teachers are found reproducing the student utterances but they tend to stop exactly before the problematic part, providing the students extra opportunity to repair the problematic section. The following example from Koshik (2002) best describes the teachers' practices of designing an incomplete utterance and isolating the problematic section so that it becomes visible to the student to initiate repair on. In the following interaction, the teacher TJ targets the

student's problematic part in the written sentences. The relevant section from the student text is presented before the transcript where the strikethroughs and the italics represent the corrections.

Thirty years later, Jeoy Levick died 13 hours after he ~~got~~ *was* fatally injured in a fight with two acquaintances and left in a ditch. He died not from *injuryies*, but drowned after he was left there for 13 hours without any aids.

Extract 1: (Koshik, 2002, p. 287)

181 TJ: . h: ((*reading*)) > he died not from injuries. <
 182 (0.5) ((*TJ and SH gaze silently at text*))
 183 but drowned
 184 (1.2) ((*TJ and SH gaze silently at text*))
 185 → < after he >
 186 (4.5) ((*TJ and SH gaze silently at text*))
 187 SH: → had been?
 188 TJ: there ya go.
 189 (4.0) ((*TJ writes on text*))
 190 had been left there for thirteen hours
 191 ° without any aid. °
 192 SH: um hum.

This example demonstrates the teacher, TJ pausing while reading the sentences the student wrote. With the pauses in lines 184 and 186, he invites the student to continue reading the sentences. However, the student does not demonstrate his understanding of the teacher's invitation. Then, after the teacher reads "<after he>" and stops before the next verb phrase which is treated problematic. The student continues with the revised form of the verb phrase to "had been" in line 187 after a silence of 4.5 seconds. Here, the teacher targets the problematic section of the student text by reading the student's text up to the point where there was no problem, but stops before the problematic section. In other words, TJ's utterance is designedly incomplete, which invites student self-correction. After SH produces a more relevant item, TJ acknowledges the item with "there ya

go.” in line 188, thus accepting the answer and providing a positive feedback. This example also demonstrates the teacher’s interactional achievement to elicit self-correction by the student with designedly incomplete utterances, which resembles the preference of self-correction (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977) abundantly unveiled in mundane conversation though preference for self-correction is not necessarily an aspect observed in classroom interaction. However, self-correction in classroom interaction helps the student to notice and correct their errors and learn from them. Since teachers’ questions pursue student responses, how the questions are constructed is one of the fundamental aspects of classroom interaction.

As one of the common practices observed in classroom interaction, the questions teachers ask are concerned with eliciting information from the students to check their understanding. Thus, the questions function as a “test question” (Searle, 1969), a “known-information question” (Mehan, 1979), or a “display question” (Long & Sato, 1983). In other words, the questions elicit knowledge from the students that the teachers already have. However, questions are not always limited to the syntactic forms of the questions, but in the form of incomplete utterances, they “pinpoint” (Hadley, 1993, p.23) the target item due. Because of the nature of questions teachers ask, the student responses include only the specific item the questions pursue. In other words, conventional teacher-fronted classrooms embody a power structure where the teachers have maximum control over the interaction.

Because of the asymmetrical power relationship between the participants, students have considerably less opportunity to participate in the interaction and demonstrate their understanding as teachers have absolute control over turn allocation (Erickson, 2004). In addition to the asymmetrical interaction, life in classrooms takes place in a complex interactional environment that includes multiple synchronized activities by various participants (van Dam, 2002). Thus, the complex structure of interaction generates pressure for the teachers to solicit and evaluate student understanding. Furthermore, the institutional environment of classroom also demonstrates that the teachers’ and the students’ actions

have mutual responsibilities towards the achievement of specific pedagogical goals. In this way, the previous studies highlight the periphery of the IRF sequences and student participation in learning process, and the way teachers elicit self-repair from students through incomplete utterances. However, there still remains a gap between how students interpret the incomplete utterances and deal with them. Additionally, does the production of incomplete utterances have resemblances over different educational contexts is still not addressed by prevalent studies. Thus, this study is an attempt to address the bond of incomplete utterances to the overall aspects of teaching learning process of language classrooms in varying cultural contexts.

Method

The data under analysis for this study come from 25 video-recorded naturally occurring language classrooms in Japan and Nepal. The video was recorded in the classrooms of both countries where English is taught as a foreign language. The data from Nepal includes recordings from English classes of high schools (grades 9, and 10) and higher secondary schools (grades 11, and 12). According to the Japanese educational system, grade 9 in Nepal is equivalent to the third year of junior high school and grades 10, 11, and 12 are equivalent to senior high school in Japan. The data from Japanese school English classes include video recordings of junior and senior high schools. In both of the environments, the teacher is a non-native English speaker – a Nepalese national in the Nepalese data and a Japanese national in the Japanese data. The data include recordings managed by the teachers themselves and also recordings conducted on the request of this researcher. The participants were informed about the recording and it was also notified that their participation (or non-participation) would not be pertinent in their academic evaluation. The participants agreed with the purpose of the researcher and provided their written consent (see Appendix A) for the use of the recorded data.

The recorded video was observed repeatedly and transcribed using the conversation analytic transcription conventions developed by Jefferson

(Atkinson & Heritage, 1984) (see Appendix B) and the transcript was presented to various data sessions and discussed with conversation analytic perspective. Based on conversation analytic methodology of rejecting researcher's psycho-mental aspects in the analysis, this study also uses the emic perspective in understanding the interaction. In other words, the analysis is focused on analyzing the interactants' interpretation of the actions (Pike, 1954; Goodwin, 1984; Markee & Kasper, 2004). With the emic perspective in data analysis, CA focuses on how the interactants understand the occurrences in the interaction. It makes an "un-motivated" examination with a piece of data without "a priori" theorization and sees where the data leads the observers (Sacks, 1984). Therefore, in this paper too, understanding of the occurrences of the question-answer sequences among the teachers and the students in the interaction is built from the participants' perspective.

Analysis

This section presents a detailed analysis of the data. Each section presents the relevant transcript from the data corpus and the related observation and analysis follows. Throughout the transcript TJ1 represents the Japanese teacher, TN1 represents the Nepalese teacher, ST1, ST2, and so on are used for particular students and STS is used for choral participation.

The first example below demonstrates how the teacher assists one particular student in producing specific utterance and share the utterance with the whole class. Extract 1 comes from a lesson from a Japanese EFL classroom where the teacher is teaching about different charity projects and asking the students their opinion on donating or not for the people affected by a disaster which is mentioned in the reading section of the textbook. The focus of the lesson is to report the information the students collect from their partner during a pair-work and share them with the class. Before this interaction, the students take part in a pair discussion and elicit their pairs' opinion of donating or not. After the pair discussion, the teacher selects one of the members of a pair group to report the other member's

opinion to the whole class. Let us consider this example:

(1) Charity

01 TJ1: okay. Takecha : n.
 02 would you be a reporter.
 03 ST3: eh:: (0.5) Hashimoto:: =
 04 TJ1: = mis [ter (Hasimoto.)
 05 STS: [hhhhhhhhhhhhhh
 06 TJ1: yes
 07 ST3: put (.) hi : s one hundred twenty yen
 08 TJ1: uhm.
 09 ST3: i : n (.) the charity box
 10 TJ1: in the charity box. yes. ° he is a liar °
 11 ST3: um:: but he wants to:(.) dri: nk (.) juice (.) so::
 12 TJ1: rest. he wants to:: (0.4) what-(.) with the juice.
 13 he wants to:: ?
 14 ST3: he wants to drink juice.
 15 TJ1: oh. drink juice. yes. uh.

In the extract above, the teacher selects ST3 (Takechan) to report to the class his friend's opinion about the donation. Upon continuation of his utterance, ST3 in line 11 reports that his partner "wants to (.) dri: nk (.) juice" instead of donating his money. While ST3 is reporting, his utterance includes various pauses and sound perturbations. Though it is not clear at this point, the teacher stops the student with "rest" in line 12 and uses the student's utterance "he wants to:?" and invites the student to continue on the remaining part. The teachers prolongation of "to:?" and the wait time suggests that the teacher is inviting the student to continue and complete the utterance. However, the student does not display his understanding of the invitation and thus, the teacher explicitly initiates repair asking "what-(.) with the juice." Though the repair initiation is performed with a wh-formatted question, the teacher immediately changes the format into a designedly incomplete utterance, thus making it easier for the student to complete the utterance by producing the remaining section of the

utterance. After the wh-formatted question “what (.) with the juice.” the teacher redesigns into “he wants to::?” and leaves even though it is incomplete in its syntactic structure. At this point the student demonstrates his understanding of the invitation to continue and produces his utterance without hitches and speech perturbations “he wants to drink juice”, which the teacher subsequently accepts. Here the teacher’s initiation of repair with designedly incomplete utterance is helping the student understand the ongoing activity of performing a repair. Also, by stopping just before the target item the teacher appears to focus the student on the target item, which already highlighted by “what-”. This instance resembles the feature of designedly incomplete utterance discussed by Koshik (2002) in writing conferences in the sense that the teacher in above instance “pinpoints” the problematic section in the student utterance and allocates time to the student to redo the item. By producing the less problematic item himself and letting the student redo the problematic section, the teacher is letting the student notice the error and thus allowing learning opportunity.

Incomplete utterances are also used by the teachers to assist the students produce their turn by themselves. The following example demonstrates how the teacher withholds the production of a specific word and pursues the whole word from the student. In Extract 2, the teacher produces an incomplete utterance, which in this slot provides an opportunity for the student to perform self-repair and complete the utterance. In the following extract, taken from the same lesson as above, the teacher is asking the students what they would do in a certain situation; whether they want to buy some juice or donate the money to a charity project. Here the student faces a problem in production of a specific word and the teacher initiates other-repair but provides numerous opportunities for the student to complete the repair.

(2) Contribution

01 ST2 : I would- I wou:: ld buy juice
 02 TJ1 : yeah
 03 ST2 : but I am kind

04 TJ1: . hh you are kind
 05 ST2: yes
 06 STS: hhhhhh
 07 TJ1: yes
 08 ST2: I make con- : :
 09 (1.2)
 10 TJ1: ah. yes con: (.) contri :
 11 ST2: contri (0.8) [(. hh)
 12 TJ1: [bu: [:
 13 ST2: [bu: :
 14 STS: hhhhhhhh
 15 TJ1: contribu: : (.) sh: [: : : : tion
 16 ST2: [su. tion
 17 TJ1: yeah. you- you make a contribution. yeah. ho [w mu-

In the above extract, the teacher asks what ST3 will do in the situation when he has to choose to buy juice or make a contribution. The student says that although he would buy juice (line 01) he also demonstrates his intention to donate as he says “I am kind” (line 03). Upon continuation of the interaction, he attempts to produce a word in line 08 but is unable to complete it “I make con: :”. With the incomplete production of the word, he calls for a repair from the teacher. However, the teacher just adds one more syllable to the word the student has started and abandons it still incomplete. By withholding the complete production of the word, the teacher is providing the student with an opportunity for self-repair. Furthermore, by repeating the beginning of the word with “ah. Yes con:” the teacher acknowledges the choice of the word the student has made and by adding one more syllable “contri:” the teacher helps the student to further complete the incomplete utterance. However, in this instance the student further produces the next syllable “bu: :” together with the teacher but fails to produce the final syllable. The teacher finally provides the final syllable in line 15, which the student repeats following the teacher. Thus, this example demonstrates the teacher withholding the complete utterance and letting the student multiple opportunities to produce the relevant item.

In other words, this example also demonstrates how the teachers provide opportunities for students to develop their understanding.

Teachers in classroom do not always initiate their turn with incomplete utterances to repair the problematic utterances students produce. They are equally deployed to provide a model of the language item to the whole class. The following extract is an example from a Nepalese EFL classroom, where the teacher is teaching about the way to express rules and regulations using English. The teacher asks the students whether they can express the rules and regulations used in the classroom. As the teacher does not select the next speaker, one of the students self-selects after a considerable length of silence and provides one of the commonly accepted and understood rules they have in the class. The teacher accepts the student utterance by repeating it but while repeating produces the incomplete utterance and lets the student complete it.

(3) Rules

01 TN1 : can you tell (.) some of the rules and regulations
 02 of this classroom
 03 (2.0)
 04 STS : ° students are°
 05 ST1 : students are not allowed to make noise ° inside the classroom°
 06 TN1 : students are not allowed to make noise : . (.)
 07 ST1 : inside the clas [sroom
 08 TN1 : [inside the classroom
 09 TN1 : ((writes the model sentence on the board))

In the example above, the teacher asks a known-information question (Mehan, 1979) to the students but he does not select the next speaker. As the teacher does not select a next speaker and no students self-select, the interaction falls into a two-second silence, which is relevant here according to the system of turn taking (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). After the silence, one of the students self-selects and provides an answer. Since the objective of this lesson was to teach the way of expressing rules and regulations using English, the question was targeted not only to elicit an

appropriate answer but also to the way of the production. However, possibly because the final section of the student's utterance is produced in a quiet voice "inside the classroom" the teacher targets the part of the student utterance produced in small voice with a designedly incomplete utterance "students are not allowed to make noise:". With the production of this designedly incomplete utterance the teacher targets the quiet voice part of the student utterance and leaves before the quietly produced part. By producing the target language form of expressing rules and regulations "students are not allowed to make noise" and inviting the student to complete it, he demonstrates the correctness of the student produced utterance up to that point. Also, this production of incomplete utterance (utterance including only the target language form) is another way of drawing student attention on the model the answering utterance is to be produced. Thus, by modeling the target linguistic form within the incomplete utterance, the teacher is demonstrating the part of the language form the students are supposed to deploy when they are producing the responses. In other words, the teacher production of incomplete utterances in separation constructs an easily accessible linguistic device for the students, which can be easily grasped and used in further interactions.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the teacher production of designedly incomplete utterances in two different settings of language classrooms and analyzed their relationship with the ongoing interaction. The analysis revealed that the teacher production of designedly incomplete utterance basically addressed the issues of: (a) providing a framework for student understanding by interpreting and rephrasing the ongoing interaction at hand, (b) offering opportunity for the student to self-repair the problematic part of their utterance, and (c) modeling the target language form and trying to draw student attention to it.

The analysis revealed that not only in the reproduction of written form as discussed in Koshik (2002), the teachers regularly produce designedly

incompletely utterances in spoken form to help student understanding and initiate repair in spoken interaction of language teaching. Furthermore, the way the teachers target and stop before the problematic part in the written discourse is found equally relevant also in the data presented in this paper. In classroom interaction of teaching certain language forms, the teachers target the relevant and topically important aspect of the subject matter with designedly incomplete utterances.

References

- Atkinson, J. M., & Heritage, J. (Eds.). (1984). *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Erickson, F. (2004). *Talk and social theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Goodwin, C. (1984). Notes on story structure and the organization of participation. In M. Atkinson & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis* (pp. 225–246). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hadley, A. (1993). *Teaching language in context*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Hosoda, Y., & Aline, D. (2010). Positions and actions of classroom-specific applause. *Pragmatics*, 20, 133–148.
- Kasper, G. (1986). Repair in foreign language teaching. In G. Kasper (Ed.), *Learning, teaching, and communication in the language classroom* (pp. 23–42). Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press.
- Koshik, I. (2002). Designedly incomplete utterances: A pedagogical practice for eliciting knowledge displays in error sequences. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 35, 277–309.
- Long, M., & Sato, C. (1983). Classroom foreigner talk discourse: Forms and functions of teachers' questions. In H. Seliger & M. Long (Eds.), *Classroom oriented research in second language acquisition* (pp. 268–285). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Markee, N. (2000). *Conversation analysis*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Markee, N., & Kasper, G. (2004). Classroom talks: An introduction. *Modern Language Journal*, 88, 491–500.
- McCarthy, M. (1991). *Discourse analysis for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McHoul, A. W. (1978). The organization of turns at formal talk in the classroom. *Language and Society*, 7, 183–212.
- McHoul, A. W. (1990). The organization of repair in classroom talk. *Language in Society*, 19, 349–377.

- Mehan, H. (1979). "What time is it, Denise?" Asking known-information questions in classroom discourse. *Theory into Practice*, 28, 285–294.
- Pike, K. L. (Ed.). (1954). *Language in relation to a unified theory of structure of human behaviour*. The Hague, Netherlands.
- Sacks, H. (1984). Notes on methodology. In J. M. Atkinson & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis* (pp. 2–17). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. A., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language*, 50, 696–735.
- Schegloff, E. A., Jefferson, G., & Sacks, H. (1977). The preference for self-correction in the organisation of repair in conversation. *Language*, 53, 361–382.
- Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Seedhouse, P. (1994). Linking pedagogical purposes to linguistic patterns of interaction: The analysis of communication in the language classroom. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 32, 303–320.
- Sinclair, J., & Coulthard, R. M. (1975). *Toward an analysis of discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- van Dam, J. (2002). Ritual, face, and play in a first English lesson: Bootstrapping a classroom culture. In C. Kramsch (Ed.), *Language acquisition and language socialization* (pp. 237–266). London: Continuum.

Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

The purpose of this video record is to examine how language is used in real interaction. The researcher has no pre-established focus at the certain areas of the interaction. The examination will not pay attention to the correctness or errors in language use, but will observe the participants' way of achieving communication in the particular social interaction.

The participants' name will remain anonymous as the research papers would use a pseudonym. The video, audio, and pictures from the video will be used only for the research purposes and will be viewed by professional researchers. In case of publications of the snapshots from videos in scholarly journals, the pictures will be blurred so that the participants will be unidentifiable (as in the picture below). The participants' privacy will be completely protected.



I _____ voluntarily agree to the use of my audio and video data in the research with the purpose described above.

Date: _____

Baikuntha Bhatta
Kanagawa University
Email: bhattabaikuntha@gmail.com

Appendix B

Transcription Conventions

[]	start and end of overlapping talk
=	latching utterances
(0.0)	indicates timed pause=in seconds=
(.)	a micro pause=less than a second=
.	final falling intonation
,	non-final continuing intonation
?	final rising intonation
CAPITAL	increased loudness
° °	decreased volume
> <	talk faster than surrounding speech
> <	talk slower than surrounding speech
hh	audible exhalation
. hh	audible inhalation
(hh)	laughter within a word
<u>underline</u>	stressed talk
↑	sharp rise
↓	sharp fall
hyphe-	cut-off of the ongoing talk
((comment))	non-verbal behaviors/transcriber's comments
(talk)	uncertain talk, problematic hearing
` '	idiomatic translation of non-English conver- sations