Disfluencies and hesitation strategies in oral L2 tests

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Abstract

This paper presents an investigation of hesitation strategies of intermediate learners of German as a second or foreign language (L2) when they take part in oral L2 tests. Previous studies of L2 hesitation strategies have focused on beginning and advanced L2 learners. They found that beginners tend to leave their hesitation pauses unfilled making their speech highly disfluent [17], while advanced L2 speakers – similar to native speakers – use a variety of fillers [10, 11, 13, 14]. In oral L2 tests, intermediate learners hesitate mainly for two reasons: to search for a German word or structure, or to think about the content of their utterance. Some participants use a variety of strategies to signal to the addressee that they are hesitating. This variety is not as rich as it is for advanced L2 learners or native speakers. Other participants leave their hesitation pauses unfilled or rely on quasi-lexical fillers to hold the floor when hesitating.

1. Introduction

Hesitations are pauses of varying length, which are usually not left unfilled. They occur when the speaker is at a loss for words or is engaged in cognitive or verbal planning [2, 10, 12]. Native speakers use a variety of fillers to fill their hesitation pauses, such as non-lexical fillers, i.e., the lengthening or stretching of sounds, and quasi-lexical fillers, as well as repetitions of one or several lexical items, and lexical fillers [10, 11, 13, 14]. Bilinguals tend to develop a very unique strategy when hesitating, called idiosyncratic fillers [11].

Hesitation strategies belong to the larger class of 'disfluencies' or 'self-repairs'. The latter are umbrella terms which cover more or less the same phenomena, but depending on the researcher and the field of study hesitation strategies are either included or excluded. In many studies on disfluencies or self-repairs, fillers do not receive much attention. While conversation analysts have not investigated the role of fillers, they do recognize that fillers are self-repair strategies. Mostly, they recognize them as repair initiators or indicators [15]. Psycholinguists do not always recognize fillers as part of the disfluency or self-repair 'family'. Bear, Dowding, Shriberg & Price [1], who have developed a labeling system for all types of self-repair, do not in all instances label quasi-lexical (or lexical) fillers. Lexical fillers are often ignored by researchers in the study of self-repair. Most of the time they are not mentioned at all, let alone analyzed. Lickley [5] believes that their inclusion in the category of disfluency, is controversial, but Shriberg [16] shows that fillers have the same surface structure as other self-repair and Rieger [10, 11] argues that they fulfill the same function, namely dealing with some kind of trouble in spontaneous speech.

Most sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic or conversation analytic studies on disfluencies or self-repair focus on the production of these phenomena by first language (L1) users. By contrast, this study will concentrate on hesitation strategies of intermediate second language learners. The production of self-repairs or disfluencies by second language speakers has

only recently become of interest to linguists (cf. reviews in van Hest, Poulisse & Bongaerts [19], Kormos [4], and Rieger, [10]) and needs more extensive research so that similarities and differences between L1 and L2 disfluencies can be identified. Which in turn will lead to a better understanding of speech production in general and L2 speech production in particular. Furthermore, since hesitation strategies are not taught in the second/foreign language classroom [10, 14] it is important to find out when and how L2 learners do acquire these useful strategies that not only make their speech more fluent, but also prevent them from losing the floor or prevent the conversation from breaking down.

2. Disfluencies of second language users

While countless studies focus on L1 disfluencies very few investigate self-repair strategies of second language users. So far studies on L2 disfluencies have focused on beginning and advanced L2 learners and they reveal that beginners use self-repairs differently than L1 speakers do while advanced learners use strategies similar to those native speakers employ.

Among the first investigators was Hieke [3], who found that non-native speakers employ more self-repairs than native speakers do. Wiese [20] studied self-repair in L1 and L2 production in order to demonstrate that L1 and L2 production are distinct processes. Wiese confirms that L2 speakers use more self-repairs than L1 speakers do. He argues that L2 speakers make more errors than L1 speakers and that they are also more inclined to correct these errors than L1 speakers are. He further infers that his results prove that L2 speakers need more time to plan their contributions, that they have an insufficient knowledge of their L2, and that they demonstrate a low degree of automatization in processing their second language. However, Wiese & Hieke fail to explore the relationship between language proficiency and self-repair usage.

O'Connor [7] analyzed the speech of beginning and advanced L2 learners and discovered that beginners do not use more self-repairs than advanced learners do. However, they employ different types of self-repair: they utilize more corrective repairs than anticipatory repairs (i.e., covert repairs[1]) while advanced learners use more anticipatory self-repairs.

Temple [17] investigated self-repair in the speech of L1 and beginner L2 users. She measured speech and repair rate in both samples and discovered that native speakers appear to speak twice as fast as non-natives because of their frequent and skillful usage of fillers. The non-natives, on the other hand, tend to leave their hesitation pauses unfilled. They also produce more false starts and leave more errors uncorrected compared to the native speakers. Like Wiese, Temple

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[1] Covert repairs or anticipatory repairs are self-repairs in which the repairable is produced in inner speech and thus is not hearable. These repairs are realized by hesitations and repetitions.

concludes that L2 speakers display a low degree of automatization in L2 processing.

Kormos [4] reviewed psycholinguistic studies on self-repair in L2, focussing on their relevance for second language production. She shows how Levelt's perceptual loop theory of monitoring can be adapted to describe monitoring in L2 speech. She also reports on studies by van Hest [18] and Poulisse & Bongaerts [9] which reveal that content words are more often corrected than function words. However, it needs to be stressed that this finding is not a characteristic of L2 self-repair, since it is comparable to results obtained by Maclay & Osgood [6], Lickley [5], and Rieger [10], who found the same phenomenon for L1 speakers, namely that content words are more often corrected or replaced while function words are more often repeated. In other words, monitoring seems to focus on content rather than form in L1 as well as in L2.

Kormos concludes from the findings of psycholinguistic studies in L2 self-repair that limited metalinguistic awareness and a lack of automaticity in beginning L2 learners reduces their command of preplanning mechanisms and leads to a higher production of errors and a lower correction rate of these errors. However, Kormos does not consider the production of fillers and repetitions, which, as Temple [17] points out, are used more frequently in the speech of native speakers compared to L2 learners. It may well be that the usage of fillers and repetitions increases as learners become more advanced and their attention shifts from lexical, grammatical, and phonological errors to pragmatic and discourse level difficulties.

3. Method

The subject group consists of ten intermediate learners of German. Prior to the data collection, they had either three years of high school German or one year of intensive German at the university, i.e. five hours a week over a period of two terms. Most (eight out of ten) of the participants I report on here had three years of high school German.

Over the course of one academic year three oral tests with the students from an intermediate German class at a large Canadian university were digitally recorded. The three oral tests consisted of a conversation in German between a student and his/her teacher. The conversations took place in the teacher's office and lasted approximately five to twelve minutes. Prior to the tests, the students had to read and prepare a German text so that they would be able to retell the story of the text in German and answer questions related to the text.

The conversations started with explanations on the format of the test and clarifications on the recording. These oral tests are mainly recorded for the purpose of accurate marking and to allow the teacher to be a full and natural participant in the conversation, that is, regardless of the research. It means the teacher does not need to concentrate on the student's errors, performance and proficiency, instead she can concentrate on the content of the student's utterances and her reaction to them. For this purpose a very small digital recording device is used. It is characterized by a very low-noise, high-sound-quality and large dynamic range. The recording device is attached to a preamplified boundary microphone characterized by high sensitivity, excellent sound quality and hemispherical directional sensitivity which has the ability to pick up the utterances of two or more people (sitting around a table or facing each other at a desk) at the same time. Once the students agree to be recorded, the oral test starts with some polite small talk to put the students at ease before they are asked to summarize the text they have prepared.

At the end of the academic year, the teacher asked the students' permission to transcribe and analyze their oral tests for research purposes. At the time of the data collection the students did thus not know that their conversations were the object of a research study, much less what the objective of this study was. This permission as well as some background information was received from ten students.

After having received written consent from ten students, a total of thirty conversations were carefully transcribed and divided into units. The clause or a modified clause was chosen as the basic unit before the main coding process was undertaken. All elements of self-repair were coded for analysis.

This paper reports on the qualitative analysis of the participants' hesitation strategies which is situated within the framework of interactional sociolinguistics (cf. the description of the method used in [10]).

4. Results and discussion

The qualitative analysis of the data revealed that the participants in this study mainly hesitated for two reasons: One, the foreign language created difficulties, i.e., they had to search for a German word or a German construction, or two, they had forgotten parts or details of the text they prepared.

Regarding the filling of hesitation pauses all the students together used a variety of fillers, among which quasi-lexical fillers were used most frequently. An example is given in (1).

(1) ST: ja die mittagspause war <u>ehm</u> … langweilig ☺
yeah the "mittagspause" *was <u>uhm</u> ... boring* ☺

In this example, the student is referring to the text 'mittagspause' which he finds boring. Since he needs to pause and think about the German equivalent of boring, he hesitates and uses the quasi-lexical filler 'ehm' (*uhm*) followed by a short but noticeable pause to signal to the teacher that he is hesitating.

Quasi-lexical fillers are frequently used in combination and we find more often 'ehs' (*uhs*) and 'ehms' (*uhms*) combined, than several repeated 'ehs' or 'ehms', as in example (2).

(2) ST: gregor s. <u>ehm .. eh</u> .. liest ehm die annonce
gregor s<u>. uhm .. uh</u> .. reads uhm the ad

Another frequent combination is 'und eh' (*and uh*) plus a pause. In these cases 'und eh' is almost pronounced like one single word and it clearly functions as a place-holder while the student plans his or her next conversational contribution. Two such instances are presented in example (3).

(3) ST: da war'n viel dialoge <u>und eh ..</u> es war auch lustig
… <u>und eh ..</u> ich habe gedacht […]
there were many dialogues <u>and uh ..</u> it was also funny ... <u>and uh ..</u> I thought […]

Another frequent strategy is the stretching of sounds. It occurs in lexical items as well as in quasi-lexical fillers. In the transcripts, an equal sign indicates sound-stretches. Example (4) shows the stretching of the word 'und' (*and*) while example (5) presents two lengthened quasi-lexical fillers.

(4) ST: ja sie sind ganz süß .. <u>u=nd</u> sehr laut .. <u>u=nd</u> voll von energie […]
yes they are very sweet .. <u>a=nd</u> very loud <u>a=nd</u> full of energy […]

(5) ST: aber .. <u>e=h</u> die maschine hat .. <u>e=hm</u> hat eh .. aufgeschrieben?
but <u>u=h</u> the machine has .. <u>u=hm</u> has uh .. written down?

Some students use code-switching to signal that they are searching for a word. This is an interesting strategy, which has not been observed for beginners or highly proficient L2 speakers. In fact, in a corpus of more than 60,000 words

uttered by English-German bilinguals, there were only two code-switches observed to fill hesitation pauses [10]. Which at the time did confirm what research on code-switching has shown, namely that code-switching or language mixing is not an indication of inferior language skill but a natural part of bilingual speech. In fact, Poplack [8] has claimed that code-switching is avoided by all but the most fluent bilinguals. However, the code-switches in this corpus were not produced by fluent bilinguals. Moreover, the students who used them to signal that they were searching for a word were among the weaker of the ten students. (6) is a longer example containing several code-switches.

    (6) TR: was passiert .. in dem text?
          ST: eh … <u>it's a</u> … <u>oh man</u> … eine <u>inventor</u>?
          TR: ja ein erfinder
          ST: ein erfinder und eh er hat eh <u>invented</u> eine ehm … (3) eh eine <u>rude</u>?
          TR: *what happens .. in the text?*
          ST: *uh … <u>it's a</u> … <u>oh man</u> … an <u>inventor</u>?*
          TR: *yes an inventor*
          ST: *an inventor and uh he has uh <u>invented</u> an uhm … (3) uh a <u>rude</u>?*

This student is well prepared. He has read and understood the text, nonetheless, he has many difficulties remembering the correct German terms to express the content of the text; instead he uses English words with a questioning intonation hoping that the teacher will help him out which she does. This student also uses the English language to express the frustration with his performance in the interjection 'oh man'. Other students who use code-switching for hesitation purposes also use it for other purposes. They produce complete English clauses or English interjections ('oh' is common), or the conjunction 'or' is used on many occasions and most popular are discourse markers, mainly 'whatever', 'actually' and of course 'like'. Here is another example with several code-switches.

    (7) ST: e=h e=h .. ich mag .. wenn ehm .. <u>I don't know</u> .. wenn der professor macht <u>or</u> macht die denkmaschine und sie ist <u>like</u> frech
          ST: *u=h u=h .. <u>I like it</u> .. when uhm .. <u>I don't know</u> .. when the professor makes <u>or</u> makes the thinking machine and it is <u>like</u> rude*

The code-switching in oral tests is an interesting phenomenon. The students are eager to show that they are well prepared and if they lack German vocabulary to express all their knowledge they rather express it in English than not at all which is a wise decision. It is also a more advanced interactional behavior than remaining silent. It shows that these students – as opposed to those who leave their pauses unfilled – have internalized the fact that there are conversational and interactional rules similar to the ones in L1 conversations. Some mental or cognitive capacity is freed to monitor not only their verbal behavior but also their interactional behavior. Their automaticity is already at a higher level and they have more command over preplanning techniques and conversational strategies than beginners, but less than more advanced students who do not simply code-switch when searching for a word. Instead, they use a variety of strategies, such as appropriate German fillers, paraphrasing, and substitution – for instance one student used 'entdecker' (*discoverer*) instead of 'erfinder' (*inventor*).

Another strategy that intermediate L2 learners use when hesitating is the repetition of one or several lexical items, as in examples (8) and (9).

    (8) ST: also <u>dem dem</u> erfinder fällt keine idee ein […]
          ST: *well <u>the the</u> inventor can't think of an idea [...]*

    (9) ST: <u>ich fand ich fand</u> das sehr interessant
          ST: *<u>I found I found</u> that very interesting*

This strategy is very common among native speakers as well as advanced learners, and addressees tend to tune it out. That means, as addressees we are not even aware of the fact that a speaker is using repetitions unless they are repeated several times, such as 'I I I I I found that very interesting' or they are so frequent that they occur in several consecutive clauses or turn-constructional units.

A further interesting hesitation strategy is the reformulation of the teacher's question or the verbalizing of the word search in the form of a question in the target language. Example (10) contains both strategies.

    (10) TR: erzählen sie ein bißchen über ihr wochenende
           ST: ach <u>mein wochenende?</u>
           TR: nur so ein zwei sätze
           ST: als=o .. <u>was hab ich gemacht?</u> e=hm … nicht viel einfach .. e=hm ich war zuhause und e=hm ja hab .. hab pitas gebackt (sic!)
           TR: ja
           TR: *tell me a bit about your weekend*
           ST: *oh <u>my weekend?</u>*
           TR: *just one or two sentences*
           ST: *wel=l .. <u>what did I do?</u> u=hm ... not much .. u=hm I was simply home and u=hm yeah I backed pita bread*
           TR: *yes*

In addition, some of the stronger students use German lexical fillers, which must be considered the most advanced hesitation strategy since they fulfill additional functions [10, 14]. However, the students do not use a great variety of lexical fillers. The German 'oh' was observed which is comparable to the English 'oh' (but pronounced differently) and the German 'okay' which is comparable to the English 'ok', as well as the German 'ja' and 'also'. The last two have different functions depending on their position in the utterance [14]. 'Also' can be seen in examples (8) and (10) where it is used at the beginning of the turn-constructional unit and has a similar function as the English 'well'. In example (11) – which is a continuation of example (4) – the student uses another German lexical filler, namely 'ja'. Here 'ja' simultaneously functions as a discourse marker to frame and stress the content of her utterance and to create a link to what has been said before.

    (11) ST: .. und ehm <u>ja</u> die sind sehr süß .. <u>ja</u>
           ST: *.. and uhm <u>yeah</u> they are very sweet .. <u>yeah</u>*

Finally, some of the weaker students leave some of their hesitation pauses unfilled. They display a behavior that has been observed for beginning L2 learners. If the students were to do that in a different context or setting, outside of school that is, they might lose the floor, have difficulties getting their point across, or the whole conversation might break down. In an oral test, however, or in classroom discussions the conversation does not break down, but the student loses the floor temporarily, as can be seen in example (12). Here, the student cannot remember what the inventor invented. She says:

    (12) ST: e=hm … e=r erfinden= … (3.5)
           TR: okay das ist nicht schlimm wenn sie sich da nicht dran erinnern können .. das ist auch nur ein detail .. […]
           ST: *u=hm… h=e invents= ... (3.5)*
           TR: *ok it is not a big deal if you can't remember it .. this is only a little detail .. […]*

The teacher intervenes when the student hesitates for more than three seconds. Unfortunately, for a teacher it is not always easy to determine when a hesitation pause is too long.

Some students get uncomfortable when the teacher waits for more than three seconds to help out while other students get uncomfortable when the teacher intervenes after three or four seconds. Another problem is for the teacher to know whether a student is hesitating or not. When students tend to leave their hesitation pauses unfilled it can be difficult to determine whether students are indeed hesitating or simply thinking they are done and have made their point.

5. Summary and conclusion

In this small group of ten students we observe a rather divers behavior regarding hesitation strategies. Some students use strategies, which are commonly used by beginners, others use strategies commonly used by advanced learners while a third group seems to fit somewhere in between. Interestingly, the less complex strategies were used by the weaker students, i.e., those with less good grades, whereas the students with the best grades also employed more complex strategies.

The students with the lowest grades used:
- unfilled pauses,
- quasi-lexical fillers, and
- very few repetitions of lexical items.

The students with average grades used:
- many quasi-lexical fillers,
- code-switches, and
- few repetitions of lexical items.

The students with the best grades used:
- German lexical fillers,
- repetitions of lexical items,
- paraphrases of the teacher's question or verbalization of their word search, and
- quasi-lexical fillers.

This confirms that the usage of fillers and repetitions as hesitation strategies increases as the L2 students become more advanced since it can be claimed that the students who perform best on a linguistic or grammatical level also perform best on a conversational or discourse level. This might not be surprising since it is generally assumed that as the knowledge of the target language increases, the metalinguistic awareness also increases and, thus, attention shifts from lexical, grammatical, and phonological performance to the pragmatic and discourse level. Nevertheless, this study cannot determine whether a better linguistic performance leads to a better conversational performance or the other way around because the best students are also those with more conversational experience in the target language. They have been to Germany for extended periods of times where they took part in conversations with native speakers of German and they have made friends with whom they keep in touch. At the same time, they participate more often in German classroom interactions and make longer contributions. They also seek the opportunity to converse in German with their teacher, while the weaker students try to avoid conversing in German.

As the knowledge of the target language increases and this knowledge is more efficiently applied, L2 speakers allocate more attention to monitoring their speech performance at the discourse level. This seems to be the case for most intermediate students who, as this study has shown, are in the acquisition process of appropriate and diverse hesitation strategies. Since these are not part of the explicit teaching they seem to be acquired in conversations with native speakers outside of the classroom.

In sum, intermediate L2 learners' hesitation strategies vary widely and there seems to be a correlation between students' linguistic or grammatical knowledge and the complexity of the hesitation strategies they use.

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