

## **“They Leave Their Babies Where?”: The Case of Repair-Driven Learner Explanation in an Adult ESL Conversation Class**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In a world in which rampant misinformation and partial truths can spread like wildfire, adult English as a Second Language (ESL) conversation classes can become fertile ground for unplanned discussions about unexpected information. When a student introduces new information, it can lead to repair-driven side sequences in which student explanations take center stage. These moments not only help clarify misunderstandings but also provide valuable opportunities for learners to strengthen their interactional competence and navigate nuanced communication challenges in the target language.

Over the last two decades, conversation analysis (CA) research has uncovered ways in which repair initiations serve purposes beyond addressing problems of hearing, speaking, and understanding. For instance, other-initiated self-repair (OISR) can be used to signal disaffiliation with an interlocutor's statement (Waring, 2005) or to convey surprise or disbelief (Selting, 1988; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006). Similarly, studies of Mandarin repair initiations show they often serve covert functions, such as signaling nonalignment or disbelief (Kendrick, 2015; Wu, 2006). At times, repair initiations can serve to elicit explanations, which typically follow a three-step structure: an introduction highlighting the problem, a core offering a candidate solution, and a conclusion confirming or accepting the solution (Fasel Lauzon, 2015).

With this cross-sectional case study, I aim to extend this line of inquiry into the context of an adult English conversation classroom. Specifically, I examine how one learner's contribution to a class discussion sparks a series of repair initiations that elicit explanations and serve additional communicative purposes. Using a CA lens, I closely analyze a side sequence centered on a single piece of information introduced by an adult ESL student during class.

### **DATA AND METHOD**

The focal episode comes from a video recording of an advanced-level adult ESL conversation class at a community English program housed at a graduate school in the United States. Three and a half hours of video data were collected. The teacher (T) is a multilingual L1 speaker of Turkish with native-like proficiency in English who uses a communicative language teaching approach. The participants in the selected extract are an 18 year old female student from Germany (Liz), and a 19 year old female student from Mexico (Ann). All of the names used herein are pseudonyms.

The video data for this case study were analyzed within a conversation analytic (CA) framework. Recordings were transcribed using Jeffersonian transcription and video clips and transcripts were reviewed by colleagues to verify accuracy. The data analysis began with unmotivated looking (Psathas, 1995) and numerous examples of OISR emerged, as did learner

explanations in response to those repair initiations. While some of the examples of repairs showed OISR being used to indicate trouble hearing, speaking, or understanding, others suggested that the repair initiation was being used as a vehicle to accomplish a different purpose. Intrigued by these instances, I conducted a turn-by-turn analysis informed by CA principles and guided by the question “why that now” (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p. 299) or asking why a particular thing is being said in a particular way at a particular time (Wong & Waring, 2021).

## ANALYSIS

We join the interaction after the teacher begins to lead a plenary discussion about the 2020 World Happiness Report. Liz, seated at the back of the classroom, has already correctly identified the happiest country, per the report, as Finland, to which the teacher responds by asking why Finland might be so happy. The extract begins with Liz’s response to that question. Ann is seated near the front of the classroom and faces forward as Liz begins to speak.

### *Extract 1: Opening with Problematization*

07	Liz	Um (0.2) so I [heard	]
08	Ann		[Turns in her seat to gaze at Liz.]
09	Liz	in Scandinavia people don’t steal? A:nd uh: what	
10		→ I <u>also</u> heard the country is <so safe> that they left	
11			their babies outside of restaurants. °( )°
12	Ann		[Turns to face T]
13	T	[Low	] crime rates, right? Very very low-,
14			(1.6)
15	Ann		Turns in her seat to gaze at Liz They
16			leave their (.) babies where?
17	Liz	→ <Yeah, they- (.) there are (.) u:h park (.) places?	
18			=where you can really put your <stroller.> Gestures with hand
19	Ann		Raises eyebrows >With a baby.<

In the first extract, Liz tells the class why she thinks Finland is a safe country. *Um (0.2) so I heard* in line 07 directs the listener’s attention to an unnamed but external source of information followed by an explanation complete with supporting details. One of those details, specifically that *they left their babies outside of restaurants* in line 10-11, becomes a source of trouble subsequently addressed by Ann in lines 15-16. Ann turns around in her seat to gaze pointedly at Liz and ask “*They leave their (.) babies where?*” in lines 15-16, covertly challenging the information by highlighting one detail—the outdoor location of the babies left in their strollers. In line 17, Liz’s turn-beginning “Yeah” followed by an account with non-lexical perturbation in line 17 seems to treat Ann’s repair as a vehicle for signalling disbelief, specifically of where the baby strollers have been left. At this point, the teacher-fronted lesson is essentially placed on hold while Ann’s turn ushers in an extended side sequence between Ann and Liz (Jefferson, 1972).

The gaze in line 15 is significant because it serves as a contextualization cue that ushers in the OISR. In a thorough investigation of within-turn interaction between speakers and hearers, Goodwin (1981) demonstrates that a non-speaking party can signal that they are acting as a hearer by gazing at the speaker. A speaker can use gaze to indicate that the recipient of the gaze

will be the addressee of the hearer's next turn at talk (Rossano, 2013). In this case, the turn and gaze help to establish Ann and Liz as a dyad in which Ann elicits an explanation from Liz.

In lines 17-18, Liz orients to the repair as a challenge to the believability of her informing act. Ann's repair initiation is a partial repetition of the trouble-source followed by a *wh*-interrogative. The repair initiation is delayed since the trouble source is Liz's story in lines 07-11. The repair segment, or "the interactional space extending from repair initiation to repair completion," spans line 07 through line 18 (Wong & Waring, 2021, p. 316). The turn in lines 15-16 is hearable as a request for Liz to confirm the information that was previously shared. However, Liz does not simply reiterate the location of the strollers. Instead, her turn treats the repair as one that points to a trouble with believability. The turn-initial *Yeah* repair solution treats the trouble as one of belief by giving an answer that doesn't respond to the literal question asked by Ann, but to an implied question of whether the story is true. Liz then adds a detailed account that is punctuated by delays that take the form of micro-pauses and non-lexical perturbation. Accounts and delays are two hallmarks of dispreferred format (Pomerantz, 1984; Pomerantz & Heritage, 2013; Sacks, 1987), giving this turn the shape of one that may disagree with an implied assessment.

By orienting to the repair as a display of disbelief of one detail of the original telling, Liz produces an explanation that elaborates on the detail in question. One response to Ann's question of "where" (line 16) could have simply been to reiterate "outside of restaurants (line 11). Instead, Liz's explanation of <Yeah, they- (.) there are (.) u:h park (.) places? =where you can really put your <stroller.> (line 17-18) treats the trouble as one of believability and elaborates on the detail in question.

*Extract 2: Candidate Solution and Closing*

15	Ann		<i>Turns in seat with both arms to gaze at L</i> They
16			leave their (.) babies where?
17	Liz		<Yeah, they- (.) there are (.) u:h park (.) places?
18			=where you can really put your <stroller.> <i>Gesturing</i>
19	Ann		<i>Raises eyebrows</i> >With a baby.<
20	Liz	→	<Yeah, they j↑ust leave them outs↑ide because
21			Finland is <so safe.>
22	Ann		<Wow. <i>turns away from L</i>
23	Liz		It's crazy. hh
24	Ann		{ <i>Gazes at Liz and smiles-hh</i> }

Although Liz's explanation could end with the word "stroller" (line 18), Ann re-initiates the repair, this time with a candidate understanding using contrastive stress >With a baby.< (line 19). Ann's turn, accompanied by raised eyebrows, is subsequently treated by Liz as a display of surprise or even incredulity that makes further explanation relevant. Liz's further explanation of "<Yeah, they j↑ust leave them outs↑ide because Finland is <so safe.>" (line 20-21) treats Ann's emphasis on "with" (line 19) as a hint that strollers parked without babies in them might be a more plausible version of events. Liz adds an account this time in response to the implied question of why it might be possible for the babies to be left outside, repeating the information that Finland is safe. Ann appears to accept this explanation and account by responding with a sequence-closing third "Wow" (line 22), to which Liz adds "It's crazy" (line 23) and the

sequence is finally closed with a shared gaze that signals affiliation and suggests that a mutual understanding has been achieved.

*Extract 3: Reopening*

23	Liz	It's crazy. hh
24	Ann	{Gazes at Liz and smiles-hh}
25	T	>What do they like-< they leave
26		the baby and they go into shopping? =Like (.) to a
27		shopping mall? =Where do they leave their b↑aby,
28	Liz →	U::m at like restaura::nts, °when they're in
29		restaurants or something, °
30	T	<And they go to the bathroom for like five minutes
31		or something like that.
32	Liz →	No, they- they sit in the restaura:nt, because Finland
33		is so safe, they do that, [hh ]
34	T	[Wow,]
35	Liz	There are like really parking spaces, er- parking
36		lots for these s:trollers.
37		(0.2)
38	Ann	[°hh° ]
39	T	[R↑eally.]
40	Liz	Yeah, I think it was in Finland, but one of these
41		Scandina:vian countries, >and I would say it's Finland
42		because it's< (.) the most (.) safest (.) country, yeah,

In this final extract, Liz, having provided her explanation, now finds herself in the position of defending it as T re-opens the discussion with her own reprisal of a previously-resolved problematization, “>What do they like-< they leave the baby and they go into shopping? =Like (.) to a shopping mall? =Where do they leave their b↑aby,” (line 25-27). This turn calls for additional explanation from Liz. Liz’s repair solution in lines 28-29 orients to the reprisal of the repair initiation as a trouble with believing and a challenge thereto by repeating the pattern of preposition + *restaurants* twice. Unlike in the original telling in line 08, this time there is non-lexical perturbation in *U::m at like restaura::nts*. When the response is recycled again in the next TCU, it is with the additional prosodic feature of a quieter voice as well as the addition of the diminishing phrase *or something*. This time, the repair solution does not display affiliation.

In line 30, with another hypothetical scenario, the teacher pursues the topic of the trouble yet again with <And they go to the *bathroom* for like five minutes or something like that. This candidate understanding offers a downgraded and potentially more believable version of the trouble source. It suggests that, instead of dining in restaurants while their infant children wait outside in their strollers, perhaps they just make a quick trip to the bathroom. However, this alternate solution is rejected by Liz in lines 32-33 who repeats her account from lines 20-21 as she reiterates *because Finland is so safe*. The teacher’s response tokens of *Wow*, in line 34 and *R↑eally*, in line 39 are both treated in subsequent turns as displays of disbelief by Liz, who self-

selects after *Wow*, then recycles her account from lines 17-18 about parking spaces for strollers, this time adding *really* for emphasis that her story is indeed true in line 35.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this snapshot of an unplanned side sequence in a classroom discussion, an opportunity arises for a learner to practice sharing and explaining information, a common occurrence in adult ESL classrooms. However, the learner then finds herself responding to repair initiations that elicit further explanation, and responding to repairs as troubles with believing. I have followed this learner from the initial telling and elaboration, to providing confirmation of the information and an account, and finally to defending the original telling.

This snapshot also offers support for the value of CA data as a resource for reflexive teaching and the content of language instruction (Wong & Waring, 2021). When presented with the transcript and analysis of this side sequence, the teacher expressed surprise at how much had transpired in just a few minutes of discussion. What they had perceived as nothing more than a brief interlude during the planned lesson in fact offered valuable insights into what the learners could do and what they wanted to do in the target language, which informed future instruction and increased language teaching awareness (Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999). In other words, it helped the teacher to capture and capitalize on a teachable moment that may otherwise have been lost.

The intersection of explaining information and negotiating believability is rich terrain for exploration of how the target language might be used by learners when the lesson for the day is briefly placed on hold. The use of repairs that are treated as troubles with believing and the interactions that unfold as a result attest to the value of creating language classroom conditions that provide space for authentic conversations so learners may experiment with using the target language to address everyday interactional challenges. Conducting a close analysis of one such practice can create a window into the interplay of language, interaction, and sociocultural context in an educational space. When students have the agency to share and discuss information in a naturalistic way, then they can create opportunities for themselves and their peers to explore eliciting and providing explanations, thus developing their interactional competence.

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