A Comparative Study of Sequences Elicited by Incomplete Utterances in EFL Classroom Interaction

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Abstract

The sequence plays a central role in EFL classroom interaction. Incomplete Utterance(IU) is universally found in EFL classroom, and many scholars mention the sequences elicited by IUs. However, little research has been done to compare IU sequences between an experienced EFL teacher's classroom interaction and a novice EFL teacher's classroom interaction in China. Therefore, this study aims to explore the similarities and the differences in terms of locations, formats, and the number of pedagogical functions of their IU sequences. The study eventually finds that both of them use IU sequences in the same interactional locations and with the same formats, and they both use IU to check students' knowledge, engage more students in classroom interaction, and help students solve outputting difficulties. The differences are that the experienced teacher designs more IUs to elicit students to display knowledge than the novice teacher and there is no student initiation of IU sequence in the novice teacher's classroom interaction. The findings can enrich English teaching practice and English teacher development.

Keywords: Incomplete Utterance, pedagogical goal, knowledge display

1. Introduction

IU (Incomplete Utterance) is an utterance which is incomplete and is commonly used in language classrooms (Eg., Lerner,1995; Koshik,2002; Margutti, 2010). Sometimes, it is used for questioning students (Lerner,1995); Sometimes, it is used for eliciting students to do self-correction (Koshik,2002); Sometimes, it is used for checking students' knowledge (Margutti,2010). Koshik (2002) and Margutti (2010) primarily focus on Designedly Incomplete Utterance (DIU), one type of IU. In a word, IU is admittedly an interactional device that implicitly facilitates students' engagement in classroom learning and reaches different pedagogical goals (Persson,2017). There are some IU research achievements in language classrooms, but little IU comparison research is found in classroom interaction between language teachers at different career stages. Therefore, the study explores the similarities and differences in IU sequence between an experienced EFL teacher's and a novice EFL teacher's classroom interaction practices in the mainland, PRC.

2. IU in Language Classroom

2.1 Conception of IU

The phenomenon of IU was the earliest found in Lerner's paper "On the Syntax of Sentence-in-progress" in 1991. He found there was a type of collaboratively constructed sentences in ordinary conversation in this paper, for example, a compound sentence of "if X-then Y" was uttered by two speakers. The first speaker utters "if-X" and the second completes it with "then-Y" (Lerner,1991). However, Lerner didn't define IU in it. It is Koshik (2002) who initially defined DIU as "it is designed to be incomplete (Koshik, 2002)" because the teacher uses incomplete utterances to elicit students' knowledge deliberately. Margutti (2010) continued to explain DIU as a way of "wording a question" because, in her data, DIU was used to ask students a known information question in the

language classroom. She also found that three essential features of DIU were the presence of intra-TCU pauses, the slight upward of the last words of DIU and the orientation to the local pedagogical goal.

DIU is one type of IU. The concept of IU in our data is broader than Koshik's (2002) and Margutti's (2010) DIU. There are two different IUs in language classrooms: teachers initiate incomplete utterances and students complete; students initiate incomplete utterances and teachers complete. In their studies, the latter is excluded. In this study, IU includes the former and the latter. The reason is that teachers are always ready to help students to reach the targeted answer, and they often complete incomplete utterances deliberately. Although students use IUs to utter incomplete turns, teachers design IUs to complete the rest of students' utterances. Therefore, the phenomenon in which students utter incomplete utterances and teachers' completion is also included in our collection of IU sequences. One example is shown as follows.

Excerpt 1. What does the American experience (Te)

1		S1:	Urh. (.)in America, American the food experienced,
2			↑HE experienced, The-the general
3			(0.5)
4	→		[(Tauos)] (chicken)
5	→	T:	[Tso:?]
6			YES. general Tso's chicken?

In Excerpt 1, S1 utters an incomplete utterance in line 2. After a 0.5 seconds' gap, the teacher provides a part of complement to fill the utterance in line 5. In line 6, S1 gives up the speakership, and the teacher makes a positive evaluation by using the positive word "YES" and reformulates the students' contribution by combining the student's words "general" and "chicken" and her cue "Tso".

Moreover, it is undoubtful that the language classroom is an institution, which means any sequence in language classroom interaction should satisfy teaching aims (Seedhouse, 2016). Therefore, the sequences elicited by IU should satisfy specific pedagogical goals of the language classroom, among which "the teacher will teach the learners the L2(Seedhouse, 2016) " is the first important.

2.2 TRP and IU

Transition-relevance position (TRP) refers to a possible utterance completion place in verbal interaction (Lerner,1995), that is, during the conversation, the participants quit when their turns are completed syntactically, prosodically, and pragmatically. IU seems to break this rule because it is incomplete in syntactic. On IU, the prosody and the pragmatic are complete. Prosodically, the last sound in IU typically has lengthening, pausing, rising or level intonation, accentuation, etc. Pragmatically, IUs are used by teachers to inquire students or by students to search for specific words in our data. The completion of prosody and pragmatic practice provides a possibility of changing the speaker and "many possible syntactic completion points turn transition become possible turn transition (Perssan,2017)". So speakers might theoretically give up their speakership at any place. In addition, any turn construction unit in the course of its construction can project another turn unit because the preliminary component projects the form the final component will take and the possible location it will join in(Lerner,1991), that is, the first part of a sequence makes the completion, the second part, conditionally relevant. One example is as follows.

Excerpt 2. Chinese-English translation of "gǔ diǎn wén xué" (Tn)

1	→	T:	For example, gǔ diǎn wén xué. classical?
2			(.)
3			[music.
4	→	Ss:	[music.
5		T:	and how about ↑classical literature.

In Excerpt 2, the teacher asks students to translate the Chinese phrase "gǔ diǎn wén xué" into English. She provides "classical" as a preliminary part of the translation. "Classical" is not a complete turn but projects a noun necessary in the next turn based on the teacher's translation instruction. With the cue of the upward intonation of "classical" and a small gap after it, students successfully examine the pedagogical goal the teacher transfers and sense the upcoming transition-relevant completion. Indeed, they speak out "music" at this possible place to complete the translation agenda.

2.3 Epistemic and IU

IU in language classrooms needs to satisfy pedagogical goals, which the teacher initially prepares when doing a teaching plan. The status of institutional knowledge can closely influence what IU is used to do and how the recipients complete the second part. IU is a device to propose a question in our data because teachers, who have known the answer, often use it to check if the students know the knowledge. So the teacher frequently used "cued elicitation (Mercer,1995:26)" to ask "known information questions (Mehan,1979:285)" in the IU sequence. When students use IUs to seek information genuinely, the teacher may not know the knowledge. Such information-seeking information utterances are called "fill-in-blank questions (Perssan,2017)". In our data, we find that even when the students use IU as "fill-in-blank questions", the teachers also showcase their knowledge to complete the turn and take the speakership back in the third or fourth turn.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Method

The study uses Conversation Analysis method and comparison method to explore the features of IU sequences in different EFL teachers' classroom interactions. CA method is based on turn-by-turn in conversation and emphasizes the observation of the participants' management of different interactional resources (Persson, 2017) and of mutual construction of linguistic structures (Shen&Yao,2022). Data transcription is highly spotlighted because CA purports to be an emic account. Depending on the transcription, the researchers can comb, compare, and conclude the social interaction process from the conversation participants' perspective. The current study uses Jefferson's transcription rule (See Appendix A). Comparison is a suitable method to see the global structure and recurring themes across different contexts and groups. Comparison can be used better to spot the unique features of different EFL teachers' classroom interactions.

3.2 Research Participant

Two EFL teachers in one Senior High School in China participated in the study voluntarily. All the data were collected with their and their students' consent. We recorded one lesson respectively. Their basic information is as follows:

Table 1. Teachers' Basic Information

Name	age	Years of working	Education qualification	Gender	Teaching grade
Tn	26	0.5	Master of English	female	Grade 1
Te	35	12	Master of English	female	Grade 1

3.3 Research Questions

IU is a device teachers can use to reach their different pedagogical goals(Margutti,2010). Teachers at different career stages might show different ways of using IU sequences to reach their pedagogical goals. In the IU sequence, IU is the first part; the response completing part is the second part. This sequence can elicit some specific social actions. Through comparison, we try to observe whether there are similarities and differences between the experienced EFL teacher's IU sequences and the novice EFL teacher's IU sequences. If there are, what are they? And how do they perform different ways to orient to their pedagogical goals by using IU sequences? To specific, there are two research questions:

1)   What are the similarities between the experienced EFL teacher's IU sequences and the novice EFL teacher's?

2)   What are the differences between the experienced EFL teacher's IU sequences and the novice EFL teacher's?

The similarities and differences mainly embody how EFL teachers use IU sequences in terms of location, format, and number of pedagogical functions.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 The Location of the IU Sequences

The data shows that the locations of IU sequences are the same in the two EFL teachers' classroom interactions. They both use IUs to initiate new sequences.

Excerpt 3. Sandstorm can be prevented. (Tn)

1		T:	now. look at the five sentence. look at the fifth sentence.
2	→		sandstorm actually they can be: [prevented.]
3	→	S?:	[prevented.]

In Excerpt 3, in line 1, Tn uses "now" to indicate a coming pedagogical activity. Then, it comes because she guides the student to look at the fifth sentence on the slide in line 1. In lines 2-3, Tn reads the fifth sentence and uses IU to initiate students to complete the turn with "prevented". Simultaneously, the teacher's completing action overlaps with the student's response. Because the teacher knows the completer, this IU sequence is a new one to check if students know knowledge of "prevented" in nature.

IU sequences usually form basic sequences in a context like the one above. However, some IU sequences are proposed to extend the basic sequences. For example, the teacher uses IU sequences to repeat what the students have said in the earlier talk. It is as follows.

Excerpt 4. The meaning of "a case in point" (Te)

1		T:	In China, our Chinese cuisine is a
2			(.)
3		S2:	(example)
4		S?:	( )
5	→	T:	Thank you very much. Yes, good.
6	→		Chinese cuisine is a perfect
7			(.)
8	→	S2:	[Ex-example.]
9		T:	[example.] So, new phrases for you.
10			A case in point means a perfect or very good example.

In Excerpt 4, there are two IU sequences. The first is lines 1-4, and the second is lines 5-8. The second one is the extension of the first one because it is a repetition of lines 1-4, and they both complete the same pedagogical goal. In line 5, the teacher makes a positive evaluation with "yes, good" in feedback to S2's answer "example" in line 3. This indicates the teacher accepts S2's answer. Generally, she will move to the next pedagogical point. However, she does not do it. In line 6, she repeats the same IU, adding the word "perfect," at the final part and elicits another request for students to complete this IU. S2 does complete again, overlapping with the teacher's completing action in line 9. The teacher uses the inferential mark "So" to initiate a new turn, which indicates she will summarize the sequence in line 9, and it is clear that all she does is to explain the meaning of "a case in point," a new phrase in line 10.

In our data, in the third turn, the two teachers usually comment and evaluate students' completing actions after finishing IU sequences. However, their comments are sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit. In Excerpt 3, the teacher explicitly makes a positive evaluation by using "Yes, good" in line 5, while implicitly makes another positive evaluation by using a repetition of "example" and a concluding word "so" in line 9. "So", as a concluding word, indicates the teacher will move toward the next pedagogical goal, thus, it implies that the teacher accepts the student's answer and that the pedagogical goal has been reached successfully.

4.2 IU Sequence Formats

IU might have more formats in ordinary conversation than those in language classrooms. Lerner(1991) found that IU sequences have eight types of formats in ordinary conversation, while we only see one of them in our data: list structure as a projectable feature of talk. The current speaker lists two in his data, and the recipient lists the third. In our data, the list structure is slightly different from Lerner's category, because the current speaker merely lists one and then quickly adds "and" to elicit a completion. In addition, in the second part, the recipient completes the incomplete turn with a word or a phrase. One example is as follows:

Excerpt 5. List the regions the American has travelled in China (Te)

1		T:	Good, northern Xinjiang more?
2		Ss:	( )((voice mixed))
3	→	T:	Guangdong and:?
4		Ss:	Henan.
5		T:	Henan. Right,

In Excerpt 5, Te initiates an IU with "and" in upward intonation in line 3. In line 4, students complete this turn with "Henan". In line 5, the teacher repeats the students' complement and comments on "right", which indicates the teacher accepts the complement. The IU sequence in line 3-4 is also an extension of the line 1-2 sequence.

Besides the list structure, IU ends with subjects such as "their friends", proverbs such as "is", articles such as "the", prepositions such as "of", part of a phrase such as part of "General Tso" –"general" and part of word spelling such as part of "towards" -"t-o-w-a" in our data. On most occasions, the recipients merely need to complete IUs with several characters, one or two words and other simple, easy and visible completing elements. The difficulty and complexity of completion are mostly related to whether the recipients know the answer. If they know, the completed part might be complex; if they don't, the completed part might be shorter and more manageable. Excerpt 6 and Excerpt 7 will show their differences:

Excerpt 6. The meaning of desertification (Tn)

1		T:	desertification.
2			this mean. this word means that there are more and
3			more(0.3)area more and more land turning into(0.2)
4	→		desert(0.7)and there is↑high[temperature little rain.]
5			(("high temperature and little rain" appears on the slide))
6		Ss:	[temperature little rain.]
7			((in neat and choral voice))
8		T:	just as ( ) mention(1.0)
9			and there is: serious↑air and ↑water pollution(1.6)

In Excerpt 6, the teacher elicited "there is high" in line 4, and the students completed it with "temperature little rain" in line 6. Three words are a bit difficult, and "temperature" is a complicated word. The students can respond neatly in choral responses because the slide has presented them, making them fully know the answer. Therefore, with the answer in the slide, the students can complete the incomplete utterance with more than one word and complicated words.

Students can complete the complex part when they know it. However, students who know the complements won't always have chance to do so. The following is one example.

Excerpt 7. What is peppercorn (Te)

```
1          T:       It is a:
2                   ((point at the blackboard on which "spice" was written before))
3                   (.)
4          Ss:      (   )
5          T:       RI:ght. It is a (.) [spice.]
6          S2:                        [spice]
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In Excerpt 7, the teacher pointed at the blackboard on which "spice" had been written before, so the students know the answer. In lines 5-6, the completed part of the IU sequence is only one word: "spice", which is not quite complex and difficult.

4.3 IU Sequences' Number and Pedagogical Functions

As aforementioned, language classroom interaction has its institutional pedagogical goal or function, which the IU format should serve. Some scholars have found that IU can be used for teasing or mitigating derogative comments, handing over the right to speak, word searching, etc., in ordinary conversation (Shen&Yao,2022). However, it seems that IU has fewer functions in language classrooms than those in ordinary conversations. In our data, IU is commonly used to check students' knowledge, elicit students' self-repetition, and engage more students to participate in classroom interaction, as well as students' word searching. The epidemic status is the division criterion for distinguishing Te's and Tn's IU sequence functions. There are four categories: Student display of common knowledge, Student display of unknown knowledge, Student repetition of displayed knowledge, and Student initiation of word searching. The first three are initiated by teachers, while the last one is by students.

It is calculated that there are 16 sequences headed by IU in Tn's classroom interaction, while 22 sequences in Te's. The number of different pedagogical functions IU sequences display in the two teachers' classrooms are as follows:
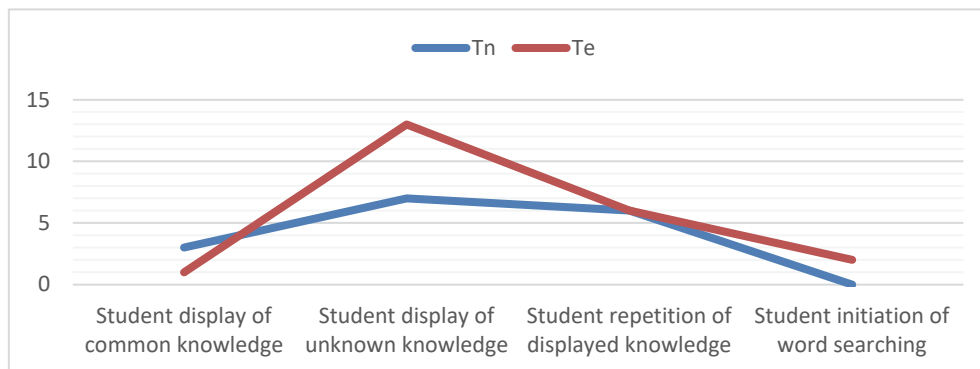

Figure 1. Number of different pedagogical functions of IU

According to Figure 1, both EFL teachers use the IU device to prompt the students to display common knowledge and unknown knowledge and repeat earlier displayed knowledge. They both elicit the same number of student repetitions of displayed knowledge, which means both are inclined to refocus the earlier displayed knowledge. Comparatively, Te uses IUs to check students' knowledge thirteen times, while Tn's frequency is seven times. Tn uses IUs to engage students in displaying common knowledge three times, while Te's frequency is once. There is one more significant difference in the IU sequence's pedagogical function: students initiate an action of word search twice in Te's classroom interaction while none in Tn's.

Students' initiation of word searching indicates they meet difficulties in outputting English. At the moment, teachers can know the border of students' knowledge and decide how to assist them and what help they need. Still, take Excerpt 1 for an example, in Te's class, students' IU initiations emerge, and Te then completes it with "Tso", ending with upward intonation, which means Te is trying to provide a cue for the student but is not confident on it. After all, this is a sequence the student initiates, and only the student himself knows what he intends to utter, so students can gain more knowledge than the teacher on these occasions.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Research Findings

The study compares the IU sequences of an experienced EFL teacher (Te) and a novice EFL teacher (Tn) in terms of location, format, and pedagogical functions. Both teachers initiate IUs within the same locations and formats, typically because both initiate IU at intra-TCU places, that is, any places in TCU. Completing formats vary, including phrases, spellings, or other objects. The complexity of student completion depends on their prior knowledge, often influenced by cues like blackboard notes or PPTs. Both teachers evaluate student responses in the third turn, highlighting the potential for ongoing assessment (Seedhouse, 2005). If the teacher completes the student's IU, they tend to reclaim the turn in the third turn. Similar pedagogical functions, such as checking knowledge and promoting interaction, are observed in both teachers' IUs. However, Te uses more IUs overall, particularly to check knowledge and assist students in difficulty, indicating a more flexible and goal-oriented approach compared to Tn. While student engagement is crucial, the ultimate goal is knowledge mastery, which requires more than just participation.

Apart from the IU sequences mentioned above, there are some "failed IUs(Margutti,2010)" in Tn's classroom interaction. In our data, Tn fails to use IU twice to elicit students to correct their wrong answers. Although the result is unsuccessful and these excerpts haven't been collected in section four, these phenomena mean that Tn uses IU for more pedagogical goal because she tries to cast IU as a device to make students aware of their mistakes and correct them on their own. In addition, Tn often uses IUs combined with more nonverbal languages such as gaze, hand gestures and the slide. These points are good topics which can be researched in future.

5.2 Research Implication

The research findings show that both Te and Tn can use IU sequences to perform different pedagogical functions. However, Tn uses fewer IU sequences in total and relative more IU to engage students in classroom interaction, and Te uses IU more flexibly to reach different pedagogical goals. These findings can improve EFL classroom teaching, enrich EFL teacher development and contribute to general teacher education.

For EFL classroom teaching, the research finding tells us how IU is used in EFL classroom interaction. EFL teachers know the location, the format, and the functions IU sequence displays and then know how to use it efficiently. Especially when students meet difficulties, the study has shown how an experienced EFL teacher helps them by use of IU, which might provide an example for the novice teachers.

For EFL teacher development, on the one hand, EFL teachers can reflect on their classroom teaching regarding the current research findings. On the other hand, EFL teachers can be more sensitive to IU and other conversation devices in classroom interaction to observe, compare and learn their practice in EFL classroom teaching. Awareness is the first step for teachers' learning and development. After being aware of differences in others' classrooms, EFL teachers may have profound and comprehensive reflections on their teaching.

For general teacher education, detailed description of IU practices in classroom teaching can help general teachers to analyze and determine which practices in their classroom are most effective. Oral communication and interaction are essential in any classroom teaching. When special conversation practices reach the specific goal, we know they are effective. This gives general teachers a good perspective to observe, compare, evaluate and improve their classroom teaching.

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Appendix A

Transcription Conventions

The transcription conventions are based on transcription conventions (Jefferson, 2004)

(0.)   Time gap in tenths of a second

(.)   Brief time gap

=   "latched" utterances

[The beginning of overlapped talk

]   The end of overlapped talk

( )   Uncertain contents

(( ))   Non-verbal behavior

:   Elongated sound

::   Longer elongated sound

?   Rising intonation

.   Falling intonation

;   Between rising and falling intonation

↑   Marked emphasis of following word

£   Talking with a smile

° °   soft sotto voce

Appendix B

Abbreviations

T   Teacher

Ss   Many students

S?   Unknown student

S(1,2…)   Known student

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