

COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS OF REPETITION IN CLASSROOM INTERACTION

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ABSTRACT. *As teachers of English using communicative methods, we may often feel that repetitions is a kind of meaningless mechanical practice. This could be due to the fact we are still influenced by the objections to the mechanical activities of the Audiolingual approach. However, we should remember how often repetition occurs in real life interaction. Tannen (1989) has shown that repetition is constant in our native language interaction. It facilitates production, enabling a speaker to produce language in a more efficient, less energy-draining way. Furthermore, it makes comprehension easier since the listener needs to process less information.*

Our hypothesis is that repetition in class-room discourse far from being a "meaningless mechanical practice" is just as functional and communicative as it is in real life discourse. In both teacher's and student' talk, repetition facilitates production and comprehension, as well as teaching and learning.

RESUMEN. *Como profesores de inglés que utilizamos métodos comunicativos, a menudo pensamos que la práctica de la repetición es una práctica mecánica y sin sentido. Esto puede deberse a que todavía nos encontramos influenciados por las objeciones a las actividades mecánicas del enfoque Audiolingual. Sin embargo, deberíamos recordar que la repetición es un fenómeno muy frecuente en la interacción de la vida real. Tannen (1989) ha demostrado que la repetición es constante en nuestra interacción en la lengua nativa. Facilita la producción permitiendo al hablante que produzca lengua de forma más eficaz y menos desgastadora. Además, hace que la comprensión sea más fácil puesto que el oyente necesita procesar menos información.*

Nuestra hipótesis es que la repetición en el discurso en el aula, lejos de ser una "práctica mecánica y sin sentido" es justamente tan funcional y comunicativa como lo es en el discurso de la vida real. Tanto en las intervenciones del profesor como en las del estudiante, la repetición facilita la producción y la comprensión, así como la enseñanza y aprendizaje.

1. SUBJECTS AND METHOD

To study the communicative functions of repetition, we analysed the discourse of 18 students of English as a foreign language, and their teacher. The students were in their third year of Teacher Training, majoring in English. Our corpus is based on five subsequent hours of class which were recorded and transcribed. The flow of speech was divided into macro-acts, according to the topic of interaction. In our understanding of the definition of macro-speech act, we have followed van Dijk's approach (1977).

We have observed that, in the context of the classroom, the topic of the interaction was related to the task performed; for example, a class started with a conversation about Christmas holidays, to continue with an introductory grammar explanation by the teacher. This categorization of macro-speech acts has allowed us to identify some specific tasks and examine the functions of repetition in relation to the type of task. Variation in students' performance in relation to classroom tasks has been identified by Tarone (1985) whose work has provided us with a very interesting approach to classroom research. Following Tarone, we have distinguished three types of tasks:

1. *controlled* tasks such as checking comprehension questions in a listening text; the content and the form of the answers are usually known beforehand;
2. *semi-controlled* tasks like commentary on a text or an image; the content of the interaction may be predicted though it may be different from what we have expected; the form is never controlled;
3. *free* tasks such as talking about television programmes; neither the content nor the form can be predicted and it resembles real life interaction.

To analyse each macro-speech act in detail, we considered the speech act as the basic unit as described by Searle (1969), and we associated a linguistic function to each speech act. Several studies which offer different categorizations of functions are available in the literature. Holmes (1983) states that some systems such as those described by Hymes (1974) and Halliday (1973) show macro-speech functions of the language, while Austin (1962), Wilkins (1973) and others (e.g. van Ek 1980, Finocchiaro 1987) have listed the micro-level speech acts.

In our analysis of repetition, we have followed Wilkin's social or communicative categories, since we were interested in micro-speech acts. To the functions proposed by Wilkins, we have added others which reflect classroom interaction. These functions are the use of repetition for correction, acceptance of correction or drilling; also repetition being used as a learning strategy and as an attention attracting device; and repetition for turn-taking and for retaking a topic.

2. RESULTS

2.1. Amount of teacher's and students' repetition

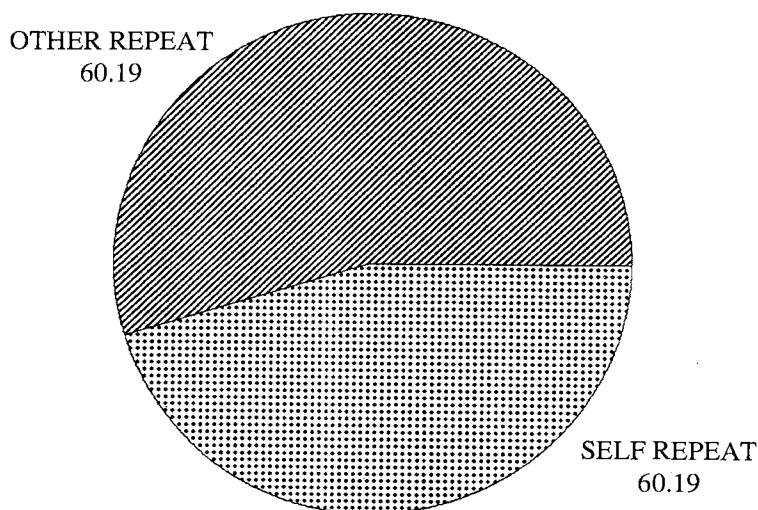


Fig. 1. Amount of teachers' and students' repetition

Figure 1 shows the amount of teacher's and students' repetition. We can observe that the teacher is the source of most of the repetition. However, it should be considered that previous research on classroom interaction indicates that teacher's talking time is usually two thirds of the interaction. We could conclude with Chaudron (1988), and the extant literature on the subject, that the teacher tends to dominate classroom speech.

2.2. Functions of teacher's and students' repetition

The main functions of teacher's and students' repetition are shown in figures 2 and 3. We may note that, though students seem to take a very active part in the class, the teacher tends to control the interaction by means of the repetition of utterances. In fact, repetition is used by the teacher to give information, elicit some specific information, confirm students' production, correct students' errors, give emphasis to sentences or vocabulary, evaluate students' performance, ask for information, retake a topic, show agreement and disagreement, give instructions, gather students' attention, give opinions and show surprise.

Like the teacher, students use repetition to give information. Among other functions of students' repetition, it is interesting to point out how repetition is used as a learning strategy. This occurs when students repeat spontaneously some structure or vocabulary item they have heard in order to internalize it. For example, in the

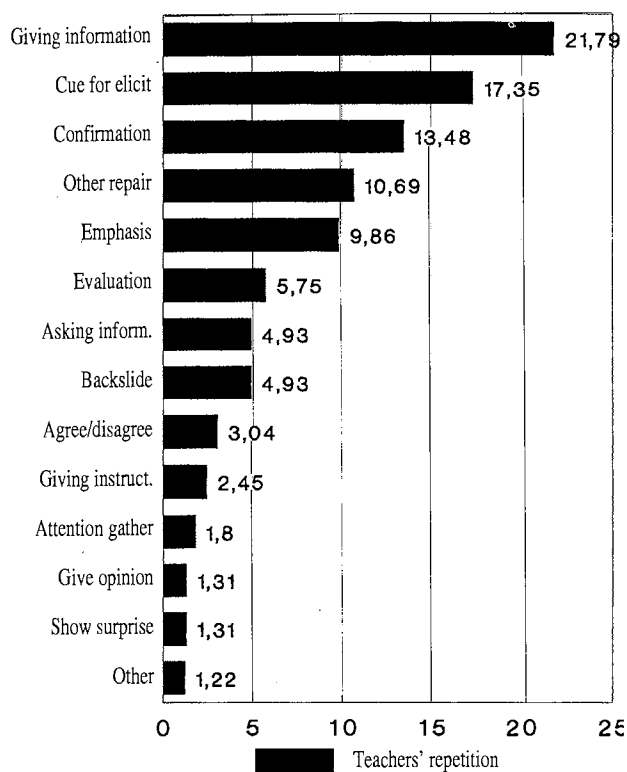


Fig. 2. Functions of teachers' repetition

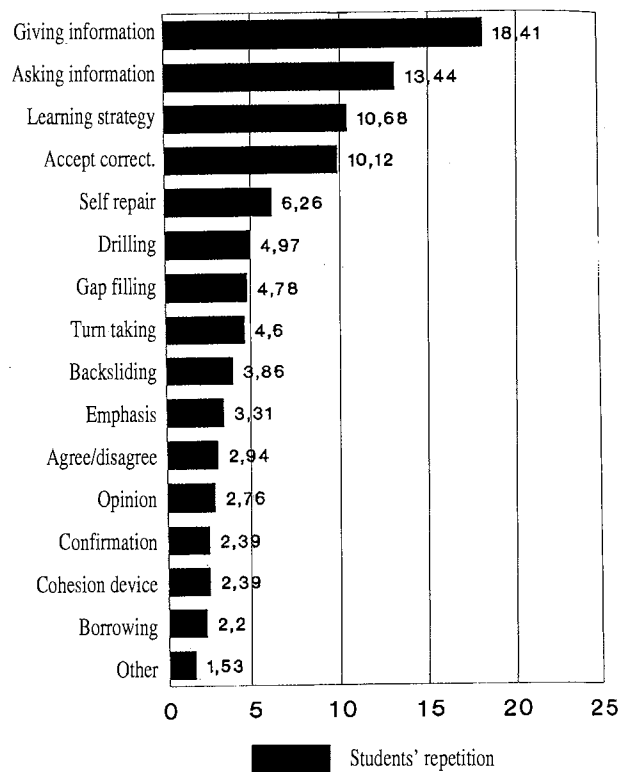


Fig. 3. Functions of students' repetition

following extract, students are doing some controlled practice on the use of the present perfect with adverbial time expressions. Two students use repetition as a learning strategy and one of them for turn-taking. The teacher uses repetition for correction, eliciting and giving information. Also, at the end of the extract, one student uses repetition to ask for information:

Elena: Which is the longest time ...

Teacher: Yes, what is the longest time you ... ?

Elena: You have ... permanecer

Teacher: You have ...?

Elena: stayed

Ana: stayed.

Elena: stayed in the high of the mountain.

Teacher: Yes, or "on a high mountain", or "You have spent", "has pasado", "you have spent".

Elena: You have spent.

Antonio: It is always in the past or in the present "have you spent"?

Students also tend to repeat the corrections performed by the teacher. Occasionally, they concentrate on the error they have made and just repeat that part of the sentence, but most frequently they repeat the complete utterance in order to learn the word or expression in its context.

In the analysis of the functions of students' repetition, we can observe that students also achieve some control over the interaction by means of repetition. According to our data students use repetition for the following interactive purposes: self-repair their utterances, ask for information from the teacher, take their turn, retake a topic, show emphasis, show agreement or disagreement, give opinions and confirm their own statements.

As a cohesive device, repetition facilitates students' production; they do not know enough vocabulary to provide synonyms or paraphrases and tend to repeat the same words several times. The last function of students' repetition, borrowing, is associated with what Slobin (1981) has described as "scaffolded speech"; the learners borrow some constructions from the other participants in the conversation in order to construct their own speech. Drilling, which is commonly associated with repetition and mechanical practice is not very relevant in our data.

2.3. *Self repeat and other repeat*

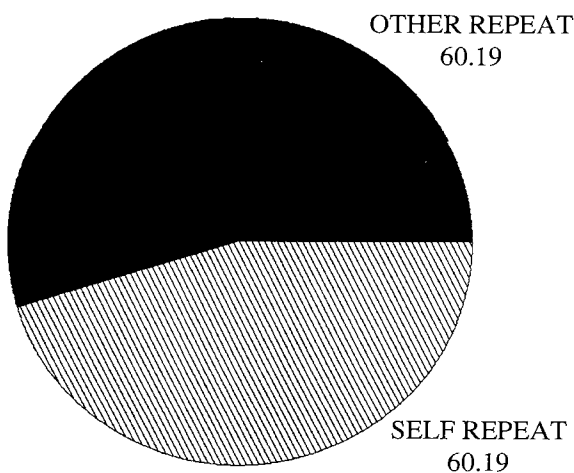


Fig. 4. *Teacher's self repeat & other repeat*

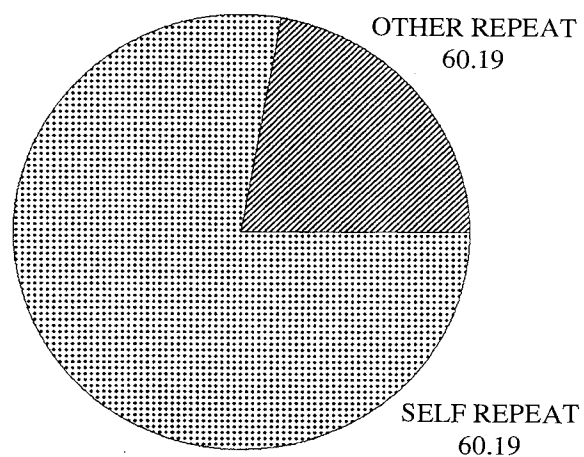


Fig. 5. *Student's self repeat & other repeat*

Figures 4 and 5 show the amount of teacher's and students' self-repeat and other repeat. We can see that students repeat others' utterances much more frequently than the teacher. As Tannen (1989) remarks, others' repetition may indicate an understanding of the other speaker, also a ratification and acceptance of the utterance.

One reason for the teacher's use of frequent self-repetition is to increase the amount of input, especially when giving information and correcting.

We were interested in examining whether the functions of students' self-repeat and other repeat were different. In our analysis, we have observed (figures 6 and 7) that students use self-repetition with the same purpose as native speakers in spontaneous conversation, Although it is quite obvious that students repeat words because they have a very restricted vocabulary, by means of self-repetition they also

repair their own speech, hesitate about what should be produced next and give emphasis to their utterances just as they would do when speaking in their mother tongue.

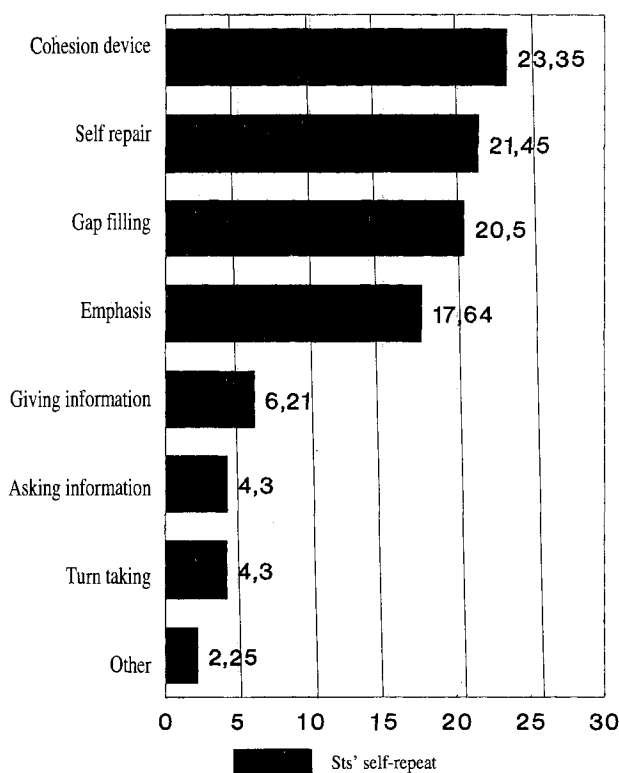


Fig. 6. *Students self-repeat. Functions*

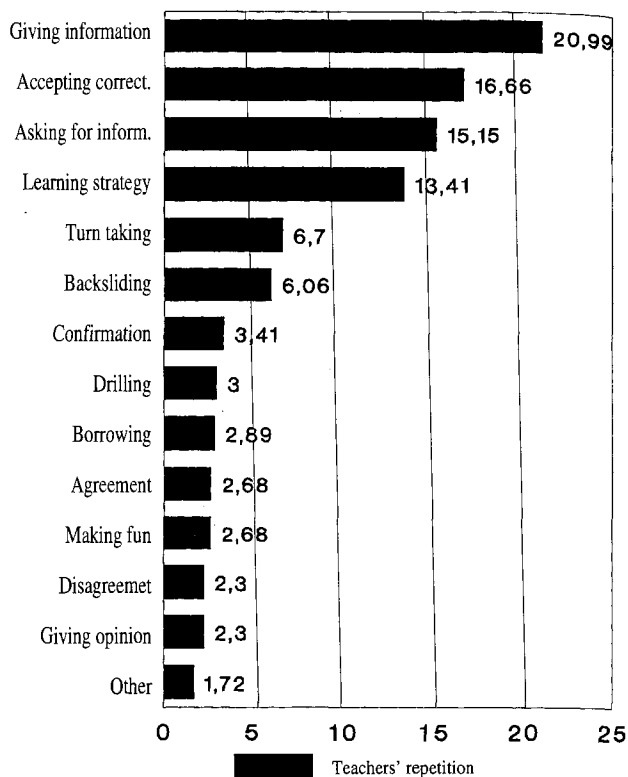


Fig. 7. *Students' other repeat. Functions*

In the functions of repetition of others' speech, we can observe students' ratification and acceptance of others' utterances, mainly the teacher's. Students accept the cue offered for giving information, and use it with an expanded repetition; they also repeat the correction provided by the teacher and show acceptance of this new version. Furthermore, they ask for information by repeating the words of the other participant. In addition, the use of repetition as a learning strategy shows an understanding of the utterances provided and an interest in acquiring them.

In the following extract of a practice task on the verbs *seem*, *look sound*, a student shows surprise at the teacher's explanation and asks for more information by means of other's repetition. After a short discussion, the same student shows acceptance of the teacher's correction. At the end of the extract, another student requires information about vocabulary by means of repetition.

Ernesto: It sounds as if the neighbours were celebrating a feast.
Teacher: are
Ernesto: are? What "are"? Why, why "are"?
Teacher: Because it is not hypothetical; it's something you notice.
Ernesto: But I don't understand; "suena como si la gente estuviera".

Teacher: como si está.

(Students laugh)

Teacher: It's not a hypothesis.

Ernesto: Entonces tendrça que haber allç un "should" o un "would".

Students and teacher: No, no.

Teacher: it's not a hypothesis; it's something you notice.

Ernesto: as if people are celebrating a party.

T: a party; "a feast" is too much.

(Students laugh)

Lola: what is the difference between a "feast" and a "party"?

Teacher: What do you think?

2.4. Repetition and levels of competence

In order to determine the relationship between levels of competence and repetition, we classified students into three levels, *upper-intermediate*, *intermediate* and *pre-intermediate*, according to their performance in the Oxford Placement Test and their previous grades in English.

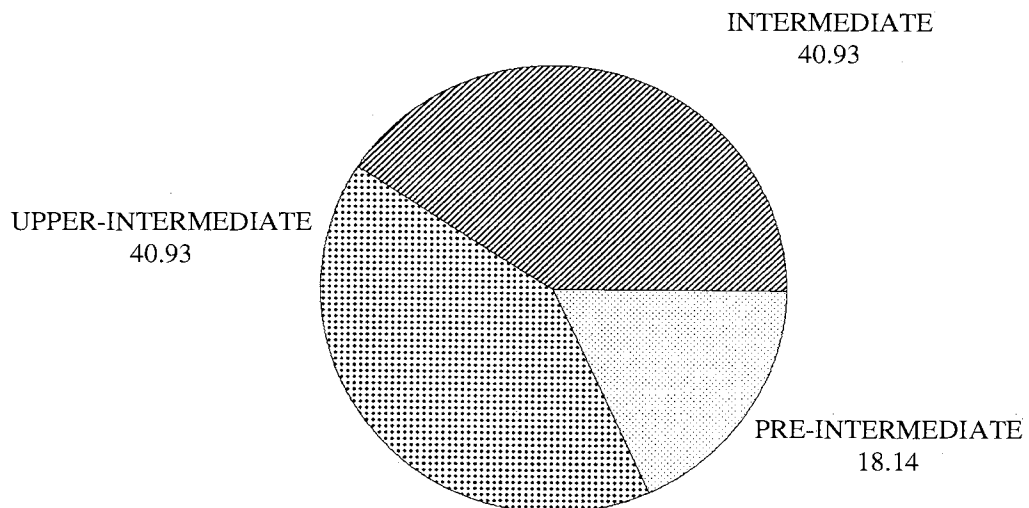


Fig. 8. Levels of competence and repetition

Figure 8 indicates that the two more advanced groups tend to repeat more than the less advanced one. We think that this is due to the fact that advanced students participate more in classroom interaction, as they are more confident of their production.

In relation to the functions of repetition, we have found that, on the one hand, pre-elementary students use repetition for a limited number of functions such as giving and asking for information, accepting correction, learning the language, as a cohesion device, drilling and turn taking. On the other hand, more advanced students show a wider variety of purposes in the use of repetition, approaching a native-like performance.

2.5. *Verbatim, expanded and reduced repetition*

In the analysis of verbatim, expanded and reduced repetition (figures 10 and 11) we have observed that most of the time both teacher and students use expanded repetition; the repeated words seem to be the basis for the production of new utterances.

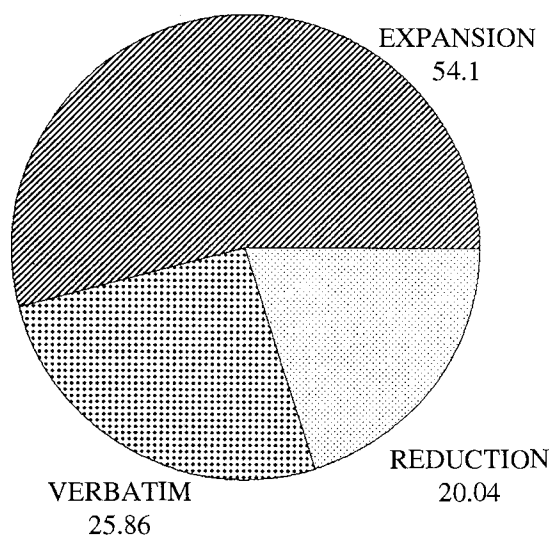


Fig. 9. *Types of teacher's repetition*

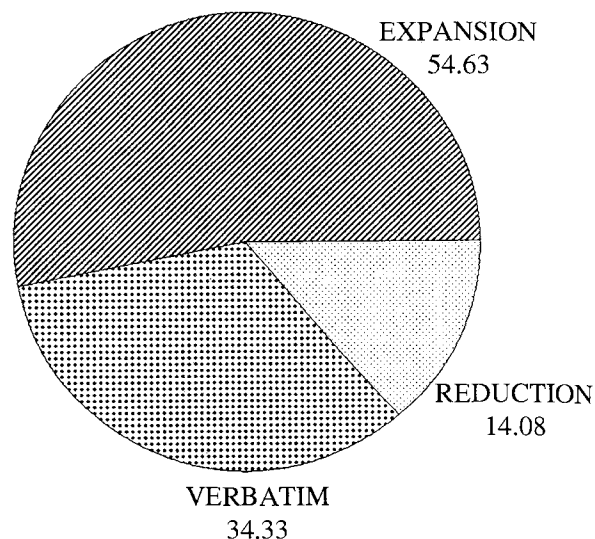


Fig. 10. *Types of students' repetition*

Most verbatim and expanded teacher's repetition is used for giving information; teacher's reduced repetition concentrates in eliciting specific utterances from students and correcting local errors in students' production.

Students use expanded repetition mainly for giving information; reduced repetition is applied to show acceptance of correction and to ask for information from the teacher. In both cases, they concentrate on an aspect of the information the teacher has provided, a local error or some part of the ideas or content that has been described. Verbatim repetition is used by students when they intend to internalize a construction or vocabulary they have heard without introducing any change.

2.6. *Task variation and repetition*

For the analysis of the relationship between the functions of repetition and task variation, we grouped our results on the functions into nine categories: information (giving and asking for information, eliciting language and confirming), repair (self-repair, other repair, acceptance of correction and learning strategy), instrumental (gap-filling, attention-attracting, topic-retaking and turn-taking), attitude (showing agreement and disagreement, giving opinion, evaluating, showing surprise, and anger and making fun), showing emphasis, giving instructions, borrowing and drilling.

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Figures 11-13 show that there is variation in the functions of repetition in relation to the task performed. In controlled tasks, repetition is associated with the categories of information and repair. In semi-controlled tasks, the goal of repair is more important than giving information, and the instrumental and attitude functions of

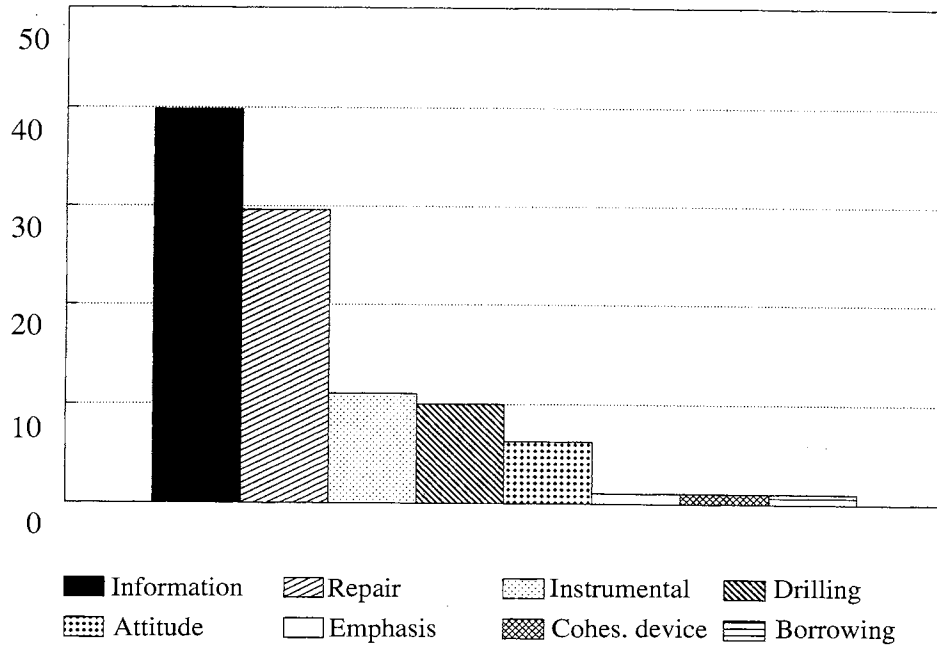


Fig. 11. *Controlled tasks and functions of students' repetition*

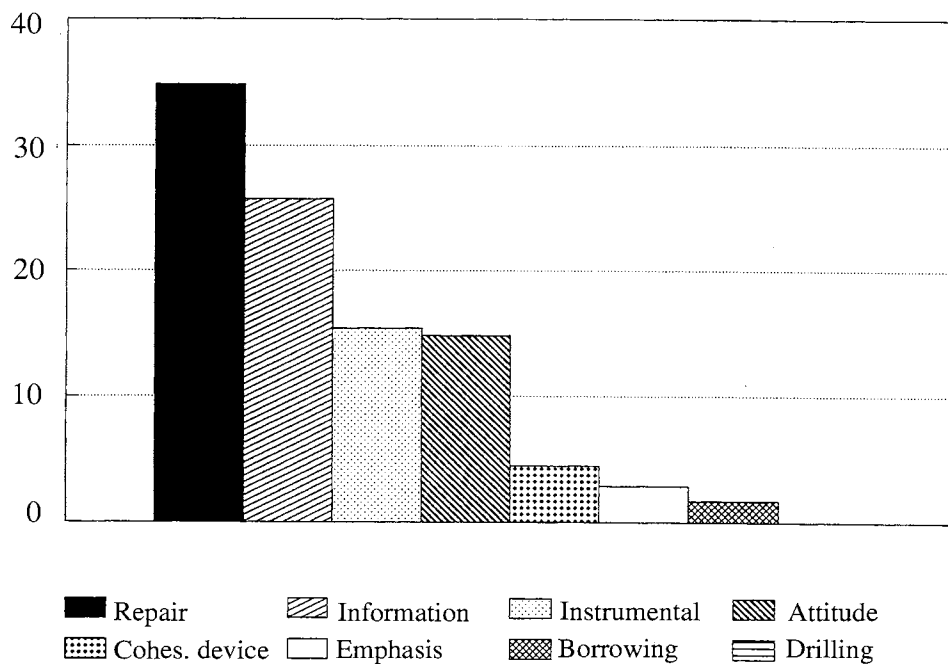


Fig. 12. *Semi controlled tasks and functions of students' repetition*

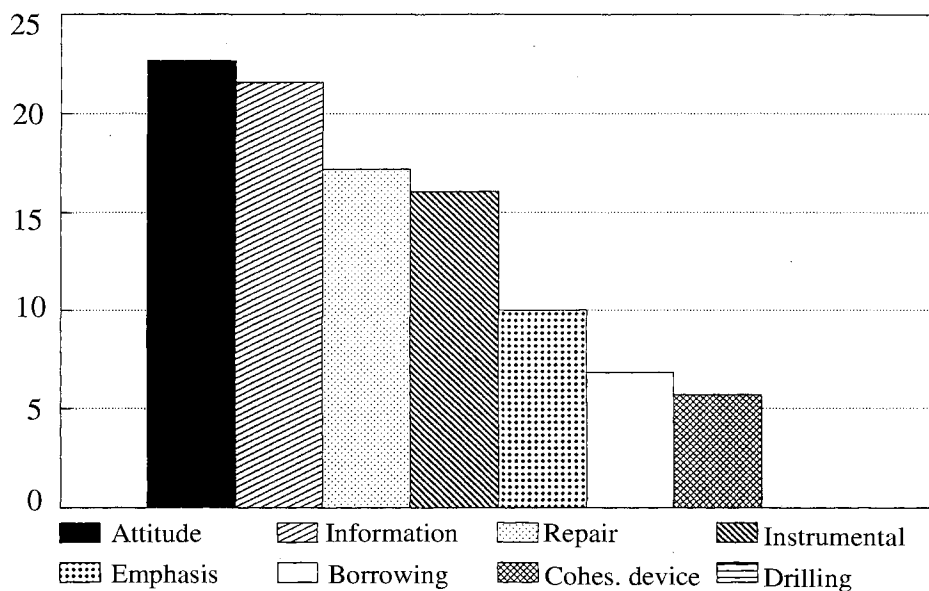


Fig. 13. Free tasks and functions of students' repetition

repetition are more relevant. In free tasks, the attitude functions of repetition are most relevant and the use of repetition for different purposes is quite balanced.

This variation of functions in relation to the task performed is not so evident in the analysis of the teacher's repetition, as we can observe in figures 14-16.

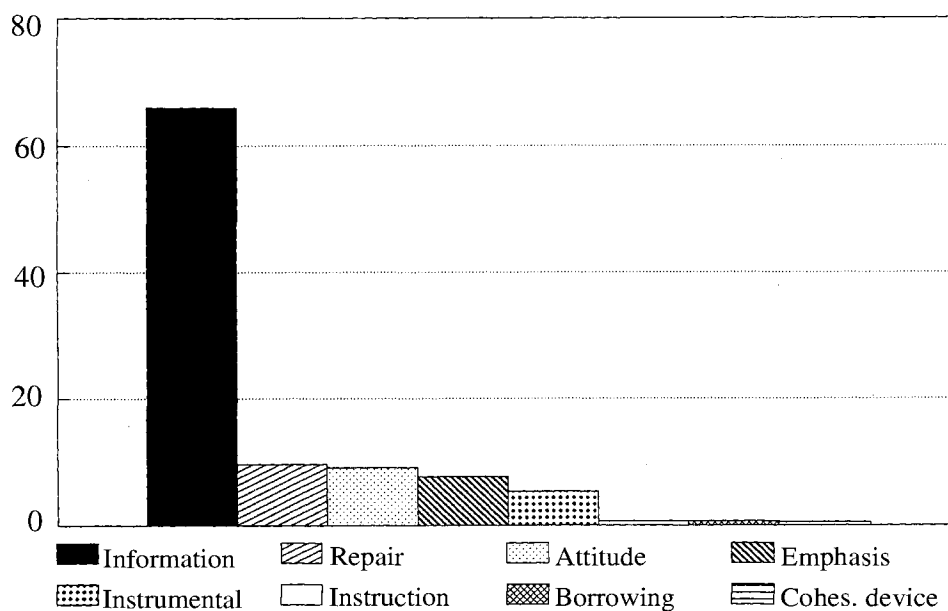


Fig. 14. Controlled tasks and functions of teachers' repetition

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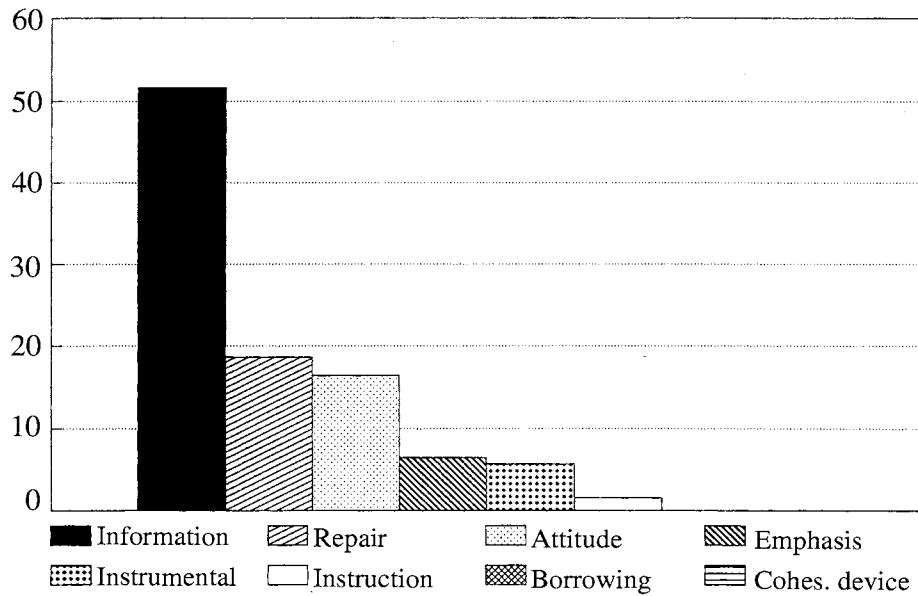


Fig. 15. *Semi controlled tasks and functions of teachers' repetition*

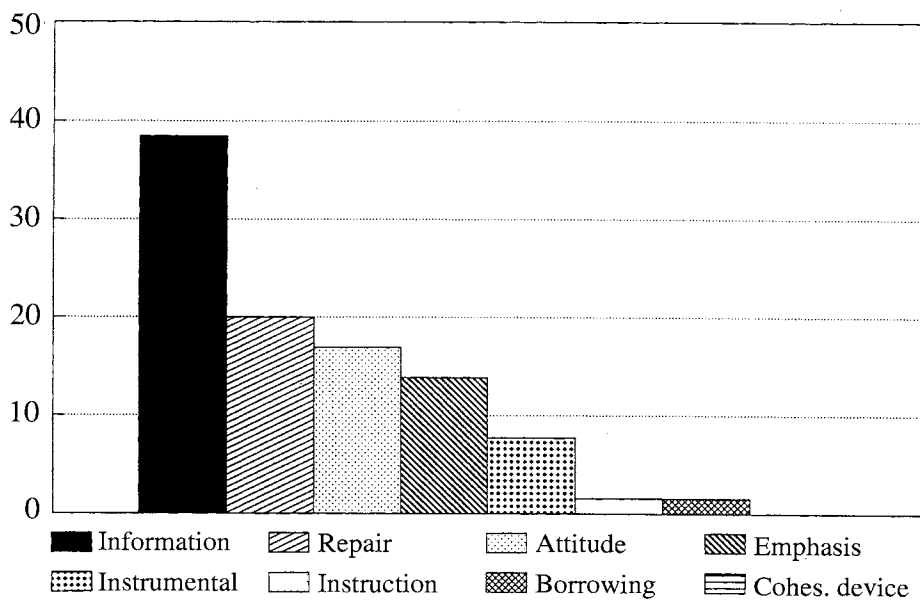


Fig. 16. *Free tasks and functions of teachers' repetition*

The main purpose of teacher's repetition is to provide information no matter what the context or the topic. Sinclair (1982) has distinguished two levels of interaction in teacher's talk that apply when the class is conducted in the foreign language:

- the *outer level* would include using the foreign language to talk about what is happening at the moment, what the students or the teacher intend to do in the near future, and so on.

- the *inner level* would be talking about the contents of the class - the foreign language itself-, giving explanations, doing exercises to acquire it, etc.

If we consider the teacher's use of repetition, we must point out that it stays in the inner level most of the time, conveying a monolithic image of interaction, while students' participation seems more varied and natural.

The following extract reflects this fact about teacher's and students' talk. The class is talking about the previous Christmas holidays. It is quite a free conversation. Students and teacher repeat language in a spontaneous way but the teacher never forgets the inner level and keeps correcting and giving information about language.

Teacher: And you, Gonzalo, how was Christmas for you?

Gonzalo: Oh! Well, better holidays.

Teacher (laughing): Better holidays? Did you stay in Valencia?

Gonzalo: No, I stayed in Madrid.

Teacher: Ah, in Madrid! And did you have a good time there?

Gonzalo: Well, with my family, with my friends. And nothing of study, nothing of work.

Jorge: Well, well.

Teacher: no study, no work.

Gonzalo: no, study, no work and a lot of sleep.

Teacher: a lot of sleep, good, and a lot of rest.

Jorge: And the weather in Madrid?

Teacher: And the weather in Madrid?

Gonzalo: Very cold.

Teacher: very cold.

Gonzalo: some degrees below zero /zero/

Teacher: below zero

Gonzalo: below zero.

3. CONCLUSION

Taking the above analysed and discussed data into consideration, we may conclude that repetition is very common in classroom interaction. It facilitates comprehension and production and it seems to have the spontaneity it does in real life discourse. We must also point out that, in the context of the class, repetition functions as a very useful learning strategy. This observed functionality differs considerably from the former conceptions of repetition as a mechanical, non-communicative device. However, we believe that further research on the subject could throw some light on the role of spontaneous repetition in second language acquisition.

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