

## **RECASTING**

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### **Abstract**

Among the many corrective feedback techniques at ESL/EFL teachers' disposal, recasting has been identified the most frequent and preferred type of feedback in response to students' pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar errors. According to the extensive literature, recasts can be effectively used to help students improve their linguistic accuracy in meaning-oriented classrooms. However, it is noteworthy that students do not always succeed in identifying recasts as corrections when their linguistic errors do not directly cause communication breakdown and/or when they do not have much second language (L2) knowledge to notice and self-correct their non-targetlike production after teachers' recasts. To promote the continued growth of students' L2 abilities, it is recommended that teachers increase the saliency of feedback by providing it in the context of form-focused tasks with metalinguistic information; in this way, the pedagogical potential of recasts can be maximized.

### **Framing the Issues**

When classroom learners are encouraged to speak a second language (L2), they inevitably make a wide range of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar errors. How teachers should correct these linguistic errors to optimally enhance their students' speaking proficiency is thus an important question. On the one hand, in classrooms which focus on the accurate use of the language from the onset of learning (e.g., audio lingual methods), teachers can provide explicit correction via some form of metalinguistic explanation. On the other hand, it remains open to debate how teachers should correct students' linguistic errors in meaning-oriented classrooms (e.g., communicative language, content-based teaching methods). Most teachers let students talk freely without much concern for the errors they make, since message conveyance is prioritized. Teachers tend to provide interactional feedback only when their students' errors substantially hinder successful comprehension (Lightbown & Spada, 2012).

Among the many feedback techniques at ESL teachers' disposal, recasts have received by far the most attention in the field of L2 education studies. Recasts are defined as "the teacher's reformulation of all or part of a student's utterance minus the error" (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). One such example is as follows:

Example (Ellis & Sheen, 2006, p. 581)

Student: What do you spend with your wife? (← trigger)

Teacher: Ah, how do you spend? (← recasts)

Student: How do you spend? (← repair)

In this teacher-student interaction, the teacher had difficulty understanding what the student intended to say due to his/her linguistic error (i.e., trigger). Subsequently, the teacher reformulated the student's non-targetlike production (i.e., recasts). Finally, the student demonstrated some kind of noticing and learning by immediately repeating the teacher's recast (i.e., repair).

### **Making the Case**

In the first language literature, there is some evidence that babies tend to selectively repeat their parents' recasts (but not explicit corrections) (e.g., Farrar, 1992). Following this line of thought, some L2 acquisition scholars strongly advocate that recasts are the most ideal corrective feedback technique, precisely because of their *implicitness* (e.g., Long, 2007). Recasts are assumed to enable teachers to not only signal that their students have committed linguistic errors (i.e., negative evidence), but also to provide a model form (i.e., positive evidence) without interrupting the communicative flow of the meaningful teacher-student interaction. This entire conversational move is believed to promote students' noticing and awareness of the gap between their current linguistic level and the target language—the first step towards successful L2 learning (Goo & Mackey, 2013).

In addition to their potential benefits, many classroom observational studies have identified recasts as the most frequent type of corrective feedback in a wide range of instructional settings all over the world (e.g., Sheen, 2004). There is also some research evidence showing that students likely prefer recasts to other types of corrective feedback because they create a supportive, meaning-focused environment where students can work on their linguistic errors (Yoshida, 2008).

However, other researchers have argued that recasts might not always lead to successful L2 learning due to their *ambiguity*. That is, it has been highly contentious to what degree

classroom learners who are mainly focused on communication can actually succeed in perceiving recasts as corrections (e.g., Ellis & Sheen, 2006). Importantly, it is even possible that recasts can mistakenly lead L2 students to fossilize non-targetlike forms, since they might appear to be identical or alternative ways of saying the same thing in order to confirm message comprehensibility (Lyster, 1998a). Subsequently, L2 education studies have been conducted in order to descriptively and experimentally examine when and how teachers can enhance the noticeability and saliency of recasts, and thus maximize their pedagogical potential.

First and foremost, the nature of classroom discourse takes on an important role. For example, recasts can be highly salient when they are used in a tutored setting, where students receive individualized attention from teachers (Li, 2010). Lyster and Mori (2006) also found that the pedagogical and organizational features of L2 instruction relate to the effects of recasts on eliciting students' uptake and repair (i.e., self-correction). In this comparison study, while young French immersion students' attentional focus was exclusively on meaning, young Japanese immersion students were more analytically orientated due to a number of repetition and read-aloud activities, even during their content-based lessons. The emphasis on repetition and accurate oral production in the latter immersion program led to more uptake and repair of feedback (i.e., students' self-correction) than the former.

Second, the linguistic characteristics of recasts are significantly predictive of their degree of saliency. For example, reformulating only the erroneous parts of learners' linguistic errors (i.e., partial recasts) with a falling intonation (i.e., declarative recasts) tends to trigger learner noticing (Sheen, 2006). Furthermore, several empirical studies have confirmed the importance of adopting more pedagogically-oriented corrective feedback techniques. Sheen (2007) examined the pedagogical potential of metalinguistic correction (providing metalinguistic explanation while reformulating L2 learners' errors) on the use of English articles (e.g., "You should use the definite article *the* because you've already mentioned fox"). The results showed that the metalinguistic correction group significantly outperformed both the recast-only group and the control group. A great deal of research attention has also been directed towards the effectiveness of prompts as a feedback technique. When using prompts, teachers withhold correct forms and push learners to make self-corrections via clarification requests ("Pardon?" "I don't understand"), elicitation ("How do you say that in English?") and/or repetition of students' non-targetlike production. The relative efficacy of prompts over recasts has been confirmed, especially in classroom settings (Lyster & Saito, 2010).

Another crucial variable concerns the linguistic targets of recasts. Several observational studies have found that learners tend to generate more successful repair following pronunciation-focused recasts than morphosyntax-focused recasts (Sheen, 2006); and tend to perceive the corrective intention of these recasts (e.g., Mackey, Gass, & McDonough, 2000). In his descriptive study of French immersion classrooms, Lyster (1998b) noted that students showed a higher rate of successful repair in response to pronunciation-focused recasts than to grammar-focused recasts; similar patterns have been also observed in various L2 classroom settings (Sheen, 2006). In a laboratory setting, Mackey et al. (2000) found that, when asked to watch the video clips of their task-based interaction with native speaking interlocutors (i.e., stimulated recall sessions), two groups of learners (ESL and Italian as a foreign language) recognized pronunciation-focused corrective feedback more accurately than morphosyntax-focused corrective feedback. Importantly, Mackey et al. (2000) argued that the learners' sensitivity to phonological errors might be due to the fact that inaccurate pronunciation has "more potential to seriously interfere with understanding" than morphosyntactic errors do (p. 493). Indeed, several

quasi-experimental studies have empirically shown the amenability of recasts to L2 pronunciation development, owing especially to their perceived saliency (Saito, 2013).

The final affecting variable is learners' individual characteristics. In terms of language aptitude, some research has shown that students with high working and phonological memory, attention control, and analytic ability tend to demonstrate high sensitivity to recasts (e.g., Trofimovich, Ammar, & Gatbonton, 2007). Since it is difficult to precisely measure and change students' *innate* language aptitude through instruction, what is more directly relevant to pedagogy is the role of their differential L2 proficiency in determining the effectiveness of recasts. That is, recasts can facilitate the reinforcement and automatization of what learners already know rather than assist the acquisition of new knowledge. Following the well-established developmental sequence of English question formation, Mackey and Philps (1998) found that recasts positively influenced learners who almost mastered the target feature. In this regard, Nichola, Lightbown and Spada (2001) pointed out that "recasts can be effective if the learner has already begun to use a particular linguistic feature and is in a position to choose between linguistic alternatives" (p. 752). This in turn suggests that L2 learners need a certain amount of L2 knowledge in order to make the most of teachers' recasts and integrate what they relearn into their interlanguage system.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

As detailed in the preceding section, recasts have been identified as the most frequently-used as well as preferred corrective feedback technique in many communicatively-oriented L2 classrooms. This is because they enable teachers to draw students' attention to their linguistic errors while maintaining a primary focus on meaning conveyance. Yet, as alluded to earlier, the provision of recasts runs the risk of students not perceiving teachers' recasts as corrections. In communicatively-oriented classrooms, students are primed to process language for meaning and are unlikely to pay extra attention to their linguistic accuracy, unless their errors hinder successful communication. In this subsection, I would like to provide a set of pedagogical suggestions to ensure that recasts function as a useful pedagogic tool to promote students' interlanguage development in an efficient and effective way.

First of all, it is important to remember that the saliency and effectiveness of recasts is correlated with the extent to which the target structures impact perceived comprehensibility: The more important target structures are for successful communication, the more easily students notice and repeat teachers' recasts. It has been shown that native speakers' judgement of successful comprehensibility in L2 speech is related to certain linguistic errors, such as pronunciation errors (including segmentals and suprasegmentals) and the choice of contextually appropriate vocabulary items (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2012). When teachers see that students' linguistic errors clearly result in communication breakdown, they should provide recasts and elicit successful repairs. This whole sequence of the focus-on-form episode is thought to promote the interlanguage development of not only fluent but also accurate language use (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005). Importantly, teachers need to ensure that their students have enough linguistic knowledge (at least for target linguistic features) to understand why they made errors and how they should repair them in response to recasts. Research has shown that recasts can be effective for students to consolidate and automatize what they already know instead of helping them acquire completely new linguistic knowledge (see Ellis & Sheen, 2006).

However, the corrective message in recasts can be quite ambiguous when they are directed towards target linguistic structures which rarely cause communication breakdown. One such example is the English regular past tense, -ed. Beginning L2 learners, in particular, are

reported to overly rely on lexical items to signal the past tense (e.g., “yesterday” “two days ago”) rather than accurately using the morphological marker, -ed (VanPatten, 2007).

Although one may ask if it is necessary to correct these “minor” errors, teachers may still need to decide whether to provide recasts according to their students’ speaking proficiency and ultimate learning goals. Of course, attaining the appropriate use of pronunciation and vocabulary is a crucial characteristic of the initial stage of L2 speech learning (beginning to intermediate level proficiency). Yet, refining grammatical and morphological accuracy is a necessary condition for L2 learners to achieve more advanced L2 speaking proficiency (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2012).

As a remedy to increase the saliency of recasts on such unnoticeable linguistic features, teachers should highlight and recast a few linguistic errors only instead of providing correction on various linguistic errors extensively at the same time. Furthermore, research has suggested that recasts can be effective when form-focused instructional options need to be introduced in order to help students notice and practice target forms easily, even when their primary focus is on meaning. For example, teachers can create tasks wherein learners are required to produce certain linguistic features accurately for the purpose of successful task completion (i.e., form-focused tasks: Ellis, 2003). To increase the salience of the target structures, teachers can also highlight them by means of emphatic stress or visual changes, such as italics, to induce learners to notice the forms in oral and written L2 input (i.e., typographically enhanced input: Sharwood Smith, 1993).

A good case study is Doughty and Varela’s (1998) oft-cited classroom project, whereby a group of grade 8 ESL students were asked to write and present science reports, and compare their initial predictions with the actual results of the experiments. During their presentations, an instructor consistently provided recasts only on the errors which students made with the English conditional past tense. The pre- and post-test results showed that students who received recasts significantly improved on both the oral and written measures, and that their improvement was retained until 4 months after the instruction, especially on the written measures.

SEE ALSO: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Corrective Feedback, Correcting Errors, Effective Classroom Strategies, Error Analysis, Explicit Versus Implicit Grammar Instruction, Focus on Form Versus Focus on Forms, Form-Focused Instruction, Input Enhancement, Scaffolding Technique

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### Further Reading

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