

Measuring the Effects of Recasts According to Grammatical Difficulty

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Abstract

The recast is the most frequently used feedback method across a spectrum of classroom settings (Lyster, 2007). Previous research has shown the potential advantages of the recast, although some problems have also been suggested. Previous studies reported that recasts to learners' grammatical errors were more frequently provided than to any other error types, but that the success rate in grammatical recasts was the lowest. After categorizing grammatical structures as either early developmental (easy) or late developmental (difficult), this study attempts to examine the effects of recasts according to grammatical difficulty by using an established measurement based on careful analysis of recasts and students' responses. We discuss the effects of recasts for Japanese high school students, and then further explore the pedagogical implications.

Key Words : recast, grammatical difficulty, Japanese learners

1. Recast

The recast is defined by Long (1996) as "an utterance that rephrases an utterance by changing one or more of its sentence components while still referring to its central meanings"(p.436). The following is an example of a recast from the present study:

Example 1

Student 1 : I study English very hard tomorrow.

Teacher: Oh, you will study English tomorrow.

(*recast*)

Student 1: Yes. I will study English, and I will watch TV.

Teacher: What TV program?

A number of previous experimental studies have provided positive reports on the impact of recasts in L2 acquisition. In a study which examined the effects of recasts provided for learners' past or conditional errors, Doughty and Vareala (1998) found that an experimental group that was given recasts showed greater

improvements in accuracy and a higher total number of attempts at pastime reference than the control group, which did not receive the recasts. Loewen and Philp (2006) examined the provision and the effectiveness of recasts with adult learners in an ESL classroom, throughout 17 hours of interaction. The study compared the incidence of recasts, elicitation and metalinguistic feedback with the learner responses or successful uptake, after these types of feedback. The results revealed that recasts were widely used and beneficial at least 50% of the time. Muranoi (2000) in a quasi-experimental study focusing on college-level students in Japan, investigated how recasts benefit the acquisition of English articles. He found that recasts helped development of learners' interlanguage, both in written and oral tests.

However, some problems with recasts have also been suggested. One of the most noted problems with recasts as corrective feedback is ambiguity, which may lead learners to perceive recasts not as modifications but merely as alternatives (Chaudron, 1988). Learners can also perceive recasts as confirmation, paraphrase or correction (Lyster, 1998a, 2007). In the study conducted

by Lyster and Ranta (1997), it was reported that only 18 % of teacher recasts were immediately noticed and followed by a student repair. They argued that recasts were not as effective as other types of feedback such as clarification requests, repetition, metalinguistic feedback and elicitation in obtaining student-generated repair. Sato (2006) examined the effects of recasts with low-level Japanese high school learners without high motivation for learning English, and found that only 16% of recasts were followed by students' repair.

As for the distribution of recasts, previous studies reported that recasts to learners' grammatical errors were more frequently provided than to any other error types, such as lexical, phonological errors and L1 use (e.g., Kim & Han, 2007; Lyster, 1998b; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Oliver, 1995; Zyzik, & Polio, 2008). Despite the high distribution, the success rate in grammar was the lowest (e.g., Kim & Han, 2007; Williams, 1999). Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) compared the effects of explicit correction and implicit correction (recast) according to grammatical difficulty by coding structures as either early developmental or later developmental, regarding the former as easy, and the latter as difficult. They found that recasts are more effective than explicit feedback on difficult structures. They concluded that easy structures are learned better with explicit correction and difficult structures learned with implicit correction (recast). However, whether recasts are more effective on easy grammatical structures than on more difficult ones, or vice versa, has yet to be examined.

This study is designed to examine whether there is a difference of effects in recasting according to grammatical difficulty with intermediate high school students with relatively high motivation for learning English.

2. Method

2. 1. Participants

The participants of the study were: 32 second-grade Japanese high school students (15 males and 17 females, aged 16 or 17), most of whom were college bound with relatively high motivation toward learning English; a native English teacher from Australia who had been teaching English as an ALT (assistant language teacher) for five and half years in Japan.

2. 2. Procedure

An interview test of each of the students was conducted by the ALT, David (this name is fictitious) for the study. In the interview, David and a student had a free conversation, which mainly took the form of David asking questions and the student answering about his or her daily life—such as hobbies, study, family, future dreams and so on. There were no target structures for the study as this was a natural communication-based task. David had not been given any instruction on which types of feedback should be given to students. All recordings were transcribed and re-checked by the researcher to ensure their accuracy and in a limited number of cases where there were still unsolved transcription difficulties, the original participants were invited to interpret. The database includes 32 interviews totaling 362 minutes.

2. 3. Data analysis

Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) coded structures as either early developmental or later developmental, regarding the former as easy, and the latter as difficult. Their categorization (p.5), based on previous empirical studies, is as follows.

Early developmental (easy):

1. Definite article (the)
2. Irregular past tense
3. Plural 'S'

Late developmental (difficult):

1. Indefinite article (a, an)
2. Regular past tense
3. Relative clauses
4. Active & passive voice
5. Third person singular S

We decided to use this categorization, and termed it as "Categorization A".

Krashen (1982) proposed ranks for structures from early-mastery to later mastery: Progressive (-ing), Plural S, B copula → Be auxiliary, Articles (a/the) → Irregular past tense → Regular past tense, Third person singular S, Possessive -s.

However, as it is generally observed that Japanese learners acquire possessive -s earlier than articles (e.g., Shirahata, 1988), we decided to change the positions of the two structures: Progressive (-ing), Plural S, B copula → Be auxiliary, Possessive -s → Irregular past tense → Regular past tense, Third person singular S, Articles (a/the). We divided the structures into two groups as either early developmental (easy) or late developmental (difficult) and termed it "Categorization B" :

Early developmental (easy):

Progressive (-ing), Plural S, B coupla, Be auxiliary,
Possessive – s

Late developmental (difficult):

Irregular past tense, Regular past tense, Third person
singular S, Articles (a/the)

Categorizations A and B were used for the analysis. The following are examples of grammatical recasts according to early (easy) or late (difficult) development.

Example 2 Irregular past tense

(early in A, late in B)

Student 2 : I go to Okinawa two years ago.

David: Oh, you went to Okinawa before. ←*recast*

Student 2 : I was very happy. (Failed)

Example 3 Third person singular S (late in A and B)

Student 3 : My sister like English very much.

David : Oh, she likes English. ←*recast*

Student 3 : Yes. She ... she ... likes English.

(Successful)

Although a recast was provided to student 2, she did not repair her original utterance and continued talking. She did not have the opportunity to use “went” later, and was coded as failed. On the other hand, student 3 noticed her mistake and repaired it after the recast, which was coded as successful.

2. 4. Two Issues

In analyzing the results, two crucial issues emerged that could affect the interpretation of the effects of recasting. Previous studies counted learners’ correct reformulation of an error occurring immediately after recasts as a repair in measuring the effectiveness of recasts (e.g., Lyster and Ranta, 1997; Lyster, 1998b, Sato 2006). However, this procedure should be reconsidered.

2. 4. 1. Acknowledgement

In the present study, student acknowledgements—a response to the recast by saying “yes,” “mm”, or nodding—were found 14 times. In Lyster and Ranta (1997), these acknowledgments were categorized as “needs-repair” not “repair”. However, we have to reconsider this categorization. Acceptance of the teacher’s correct version means indication of what the learner really wanted to say, and understanding that the teacher’s

version is better than the learner’s erroneous utterance. Even though the learner fails to repeat the correct form provided by the teacher, he or she must have made a cognitive comparison between the utterances, or at least the learner understood the feedback given. When acknowledgment occurs, it can be regarded as effective from the point of view of comprehension. In addition, as Pica (1988) and Oliver (1995) have suggested, agreeing with or replying to a recast by simply saying “yes” can be more appropriate than repairing in the conversation.

2. 4. 2. Later incorporation

In seven cases, students produced a reformulated version of their errors, not just after recasts but in later turns which they self-initiated to produce correct forms. This type of self-initiated, modified repair, which came several turns after recasts in the current study, can be regarded as evidence for acquisition. Shehadeh (2001) argues that self-initiation means the native speaker has realized that he/she needs to reformulate or modify output toward comprehensibility for successful transmission of the message. Lyster and Ranta (1997) argue that this attempt to produce more accurate and more comprehensible output will push learners to reprocess and restructure their interlanguage toward modified output. Ohta (as cited in Long, 2006) regards this type of later private speech from learners as evidence of the mental activity of cognitive comparison between their ill-formed output and recast. Sato (2008) found that it is difficult for low-level Japanese learners of English to self-initiate to correct their own errors. Thus, it seems that we have to code students’ later incorporation as successful uptake.

3. Results

In total, 59 recasts were recorded with 29 of those recasts provided to grammatical errors: The number of recasts to lexical errors was 13; Phonological errors, 10; L1 use, 7. For the present study, we focused only on the data on grammatical recasts. We recorded 5 repairs, 9 times of “acknowledgement”, and 4 times of “later incorporation” after grammatical recasts. We calculated the effectiveness of the grammatical recasts as $(7 + 9 + 4) \div 29 = 62\%$. The term “success rate” may not be the best one to use here, as acknowledgement may not always show the effectiveness of recasts, and the degree to which recasts have enhanced learning can differ by

the three moves (i.e., repair, later incorporation, acknowledgement). However, success rate is meaningful enough to distinguish the three moves from failures (i.e., recasts ignored or unnoticed), so we felt it was an appropriate term to use for the study.

Among 29 grammatical errors, 22 were in Categorization A. Table 1 shows the number of recasts, successful moves and success rates for early developmental or easy structures, Table 2 shows the same for late development or difficult structures. Among 29 grammatical errors, 23 were in the categorization B. Table 3 shows the number of recasts, successful moves and success rates for early development or easy structures, Table 4, for late or difficult structures.

Table 1 Categorization A

(early development or easy structures)

The number of recasts, successful moves and success rates

Type	Recast	Repair	Acknowledgement	Later in- corporation
Definite				
article (the)	2		1	1
Irregular				
past tense	4	1	1	1
Plural S	5	1	1	
<i>Total</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>2</i>

Success rate=64%

Table 2 Categorization A

(late development or easy structures)

The number of recasts, successful moves and success rates

Type	Recast	Repair	Acknowledge- ment	Later in- corporation
Indefinite				
article(a,an)	1			
Regular				
past tense	5	1	1	1
Reflective				
clauses	2		2	
Active & passive voice	2		1	
Third person				
singular S	1	1		
<i>Total</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>1</i>

Success rate=64%

Table 3 Categorization B

(early development or easy structures)

The number of recasts, successful moves and success rates

Type	Recast	Repair	Acknowledgement	Later incorpora- tion
Progressive				
(-ing)	2			1
Plural S	5	1	1	
B copula	0			
B auxiliary	1		1	
Possessive -s	2	1	1	
<i>Total</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>1</i>

Success rate = 60%

Table 4 Categorization B

(late development or difficult structures)

The number of recasts, successful moves and success rates

Type	Recast	Repair	Acknowledgement	Later incorpora- tion
Irregular				
past tense	4	1	1	1
Regular				
past tense	5	1	1	1
Third person				
singular S	1	1		
Article (a, the)	3		1	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>3</i>

Success rate = 69%

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In measuring the effects of recasts, two measurements were used for the study (categorizations A, B). In the categorization A, success rates of recasts to easy structures and more difficult ones were the same (64%). In categorization B, which has taken some account of Japanese learners' developmental progression, success rate was higher in more difficult structures (69%) than in easy ones (60%). Among the three successful moves, namely, repair, later incorporation, and acknowledgement, the degree to which recasts have enhanced learning can be different. In addition, as the sample size is very small, "success" is still a matter of speculation so far. However, recasts can be effective for Japanese high school students' learning, irrespective of the degree of difficulty of grammatical features. To respond successfully to grammatical recasts, students use existing explicit knowledge, as is the case with elicitation—feedback that does not provide a learner with correct form but instead elicits a correction from a learner. However, as recasts can function as positive evidence as well as negative feedback, by showing a model of what is grammatical and acceptable, recasts may have been beneficial in the development of new language. That is to say, even when students did not have explicit knowledge on some structures they may have responded successfully after being provided with a model. As a pedagogical implication it can be argued that teachers can provide recasts irrespective of the degree of difficulty of the grammatical structures. If students already have explicit knowledge on the structures, they would notice their ungrammatical utterances immediately after the recasts and repair them. If not, they may learn the correct form of the original utterance, and repair it.

A 62% success rate may not be high enough to be convincing as to the positive effects of recasts for Japanese high school learners, but even among failed moves we could observe the optimal effect of recasts. The following is an example of an erroneous reformulation.

Example 4

Student 4: I didn't know what did she like.

David: Oh, you didn't know what she liked.

Student 4: Yes. I didn't know what ... um

Muzukashi ("difficult" in Japanese).

David: OK. So your mother liked...

Student 4 tried to produce well-formed output, but finally gave up. However, she seems to have noticed that her original utterance was incorrect and tried to produce a correct one. In this situation, even though the student did not successfully produce well-formed output, presumably because of grammatical difficulty, she was in the process of acquisition. As Mackey (2007) argues, recasts might "sensitize" (p.22) learners to produce well-formed output in future output. These erroneous reproductions after recasts occurred 6 times in the study.

This small-scale study, as the first study to attempt to examine the effectiveness of recasts with particular focus on grammatical difficulty, should be seen as preliminary. To confirm the findings of the study, further research on learners' cognitive reaction to recasts, with more samples, is needed.

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