How to Effectively Provide Recasts in Foreign Language Classrooms

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Abstract

Recasts are a particularly useful corrective feedback (CF) technique for foreign language (FL) teachers to use in communicative language teaching classrooms. The present report provides a brief overview of (1) how different recasting techniques are effective; (2) how I implemented exercises in my class to increase the use of one specific type of recasts, viz. interrupting recasts; and (3) how students benefited from recasts of this type.

Keywords: corrective feedback, question forms, recasts

Name of the class	English IAb (Compulsory)
Number of students	44 freshman university students at Komazawa University, Tokyo (Faculty of Business Administration)
Goal of the class	To improve students' speaking ability through communicative activities (e.g., role plays and presentations)

1. Introduction

With a growing demand for interaction for foreign language (FL) classrooms, there has been an increasing attention on the role of corrective feedback (CF). According to work by researchers such as Long (1996) and Gass (1997), the main benefits of CF are that it triggers learners' noticing, allows learners to restructure their interlanguage (IL) when their original hypothesis has been rejected, and encourages pushed output through negotiation of meaning. As it has been widely reported that recasts are the

most frequently used type of CF used by foreign language instructors, this report will outline a teaching procedure centering on a specific kind of recasts which shall be called "interrupting recasts".

2. Theoretical Background

A variety of definitions of recasts have been put forth by researchers. For example, Sheen (2006) defined recasts as "the teacher's reformation of all or part of a student's utterance that contains at least one error within the context of a communicative activity in the classroom" (p. 365). In Long's (1996) words, recasts are "the teacher's implicit provision of a correct reformulation of all or part of a student's ill-formed utterance by changing one or more sentence components while still referring to its central meaning" (p. 434). The concept of a recast is delimited in slightly different ways depending on the researcher, but according to Long, CF is considered a recast if it possesses the following four fundamental properties: (1) it is a reformulation of the ill-formed utterance, (2) it expands the utterance in some form, (3) its central meaning of the utterance is retained, and (4) it follows the ill-formed utterance. Put more succinctly, "recasts are contextualized, semantically contingent upon the learners' own utterance, temporally juxtaposed with the utterance, and informationally redundant" (Mackey, 2012, p. 14). Below is an example* of a recast (Example 1).

> Example 1
> Teacher: What do you want to do ten years from now?
> Student: I want go to Hollywood and become an actress.
> Teacher: You want *to* go to Hollywood and become an actress.

When providing recasts, it is important for instructors to consider how to highlight the positive and/or negative evidence in recasts so that learners do not misinterpret or overlook the intended correction. Although adequate empirical studies have yet to be made to identify the features of different recasts that may influence the saliency of those recasts, previous studies (e.g., Chaudron, 1977; Doughty & Varela, 1998; Loewen & Philp, 2006; Sheen, 2006) have already detected some of the possible features. These features include acknowledgment, length, intonation, stress, segmentation,

timing, and the number of changes which learners are required to make in their utterances. The next section provides a brief summary of how some of these different features affect learners positively or negatively.

2.1 Acknowledgement

Recasts accompanied by acknowledgment (Example 2) should be avoided as it can confuse the learners. As a form of back channeling, acknowledgement may be perceived by learners as one of the following: (1) a sign inviting the learner to continue talking, (2) a display of comprehension, (3) agreement, and (4) emotional response (Maynard, 1993). Therefore, providing a recast with a sign of acknowledgment may signal the learner to continue his/her talk without particularly pointing out that a mistake has been made.

Example 2:
Teacher:　What do you want to do ten years from now?
Student:　I want go to Hollywood and become an actress.
Teacher:　**Ok, good.**　You want to go to Hollywood and become an actress.

2.2 Intonation

Declarative recasts, said with falling intonation, are more likely to be perceived as correction than are interrogative recasts, said with rising intonation. This may be a reflection of the challenges which learners are constantly experiencing. As they are pressured to have the content of their utterance understood, recasts that are provided with rising intonation, as in the example below (Example 3), can be misinterpreted as confirmation checks, that is, as responses to content rather than as feedback with corrective force (e.g., Lyster, 1998).

Example 3:
Teacher:　What do you want to do ten years from now?
Student:　I want go to Hollywood and become an actress.
Teacher:　You want to go to Hollywood and become an actress?(↗)

2.3 Emphasis

There is a general consensus that learners "notice" the negative/positive evidence in recasts if it is stressed in prosody as in Example 4 (Egi, 2007; Loewen & Philp, 2006; Sheen, 2006).   Because learners must process all the different language features and information in the input they receive during an interaction, stressed recasts help learners focus on features that need to be attended to if "noticing the gap" is to occur as a result.

> Example 4:
> Teacher: What do you want to do ten years from now?
> Student: I want go to Hollywood and become an actress.
> Teacher: You want **TO** go to Hollywood and become an actress.

2.4 Length

Learner's working memory capacity determines how successfully they are able to maintain the incorrect learner utterance and the positive evidence in recasts in order to execute IL/target language (TL) comparison.   The longer the recasts, the more likely that some of the positive evidence in recast will fade before it can be rehearsed.   Philp (2003) found that recasts consisting of fewer than six morphemes are far more manageable for learners than longer recasts.

2.5 Segmentation

The intervention for recasts occurs unexpectedly in the middle of a communicative interaction, and the double processing (semantic and syntactic processing) may be overwhelming for L2 learners.   According to Van Patten (1990), when the focal attention is on meaning, voluntary attention to form is highly limited for L2 learners at their early stages of learning.   This would explain why segmented recasts (Example 5), recasts which cover only part of the learner's utterance, are less onerous for learners than whole recasts.

Example 5

Teacher: What do you want to do ten years from now?

Student: I want go to Hollywood and become an actress.

Teacher: **You want to go.**

2.6 Timing

When provided with a recast, learners must shift attention away from meaning and toward a particular linguistic structure. The further away the correction is from the error, the harder it is for learners to scan what they said prior to the recast in order to identify (1) the locus of the error and (2) the mismatch between the error and what they should have said in its stead (Mackey, Adams, Stafford, & Winke, 2010). This is why recasts that may be called "interrupting recasts" (Example 6), which instructors provide by interrupting learners' utterances, are beneficial for learners.

Example 6

Teacher: What do you want to do ten years from now?

Student: I want go to…

Teacher: **I want to go to.**

Student: I want to go to Hollywood and become an actress.

2.7 Recasts that facilitate L2 development

The findings reviewed in this paper provide a valuable pedagogical implication: FL teachers equipped with a more comprehensive understanding of different enhancement techniques would be able to effectively promote learners' L2 development through recasting. Specifically, when providing recasts, learners may be better able to benefit from them if they are short, segmented, stressed, interrupted, provided with falling intonation, and not accompanied with a sign of acknowledgment. These recasts are particularly effective for facilitating all or part of the process whereby recasts lead to L2 improvement, that is, the process whereby learners (1) properly regard them as correction instead of perceiving them as confirmation, (2) realize exactly what error has been committed, and (3) notice the IL/TL gap more easily.

3. Setting and Procedure

For one of the English communication classes I teach at Komazawa University, Tokyo, I designed a few communicative activities that elicited question forms. I was particularly interested in targeting question forms because I have found that Japanese EFL learners have difficulties forming questions due to the L1-L2 syntactic difference. It also seems that FL teachers often give learners plenty of opportunities to answer questions but not enough time for them to *form* questions. This is problematical as asking questions is as important as answering questions in real life. Engaging students in question-and-answer interactions also helps minimize teacher talking time, which means that teachers can use their attention for detecting learners' errors and providing corrective feedback.

One of the simulated situation activities I created required students to interview each other with a task goal: finding a roommate or roommates. After putting seven to ten students in a group, I gave them a deck of cards that had key words such as "rent", "moving date", and "house or apartment". Using these cards, students took turns asking their peers questions such as "How much do you want to pay for rent?", "When do you want to move?", and "Do you want to live in an apartment or a house?" In the end they had to choose a person or people they would like to live with.

4. Observation

In this section, I present two points related to the benefit of interrupting recasts. An interrogative word or auxiliary assumes the initial position in English, which creates a perfect opportunity for the teacher to provide interrupting recasts. Example 7 is an interaction that took place between a student and me.

> Example 7
> Student: How price
> Teacher: How much do you (*recast*)
> Student: How much you
> Teacher: How much do you (*recast*)
> Student: How much do you pay?

Teacher: How much do you want to pay?
Student: How much do you want to pay?

First, interrupting recasts are advantageous for learners' L2 development. As can be observed in the examples above, the corrections through interrupting recasts continue until the student has been able to express the full utterance without any error. The extended sequence may have a positive effect on the student by focusing on a short segment of the student's utterance. This enables him to easily process the positive evidence in the recast and produce repair, viz., a type of uptake in which learners successfully correct the original erroneous utterance that triggered CF. Repair can be seen as a type of comprehensible output in which learners are pushed or stretched in their production. It is found beneficial to learners as it (1) encourages hypothesis testing, (2) strengthens existing knowledge representations, and (3) promotes automaticity (Swain, 1995).

Second, interrupting recasts are advantageous in terms of the affective aspects of L2 learning. Students' reluctance to speak English is one of the commonly found problems in EFL classrooms. During the activities, I tried to provide as many interrupting recasts as possible. This consistency in fact seemed to have encouraged the students to speak. For example, it was pointed out in the comments which one student made after class that she was not scared to try to speak as she knew that she would receive help immediately whenever she made an error in forming a question. Furthermore, because students were able to successfully utilize interrupting recasts by producing repair, they may have been able to clearly recognize the success that they had achieved, that is forming grammatically correct question forms.

5. Concluding Remarks

Interrupting recasts worked effectively for the students in my class. Students were able to notice the recast and utilize the positive evidence for IL restructuring. Although it has been reported that some FL teachers limit their use of CF in order to spare their students' feelings and to prevent their loss of confidence in using the target language, such negative effects of CF were not observed in the class covered in this report. Rather, it is important to consider the advantage of providing CF: it builds

students' confidence by making them feel a sense of accomplishment from attaining accuracy.

Finally, for FL teachers that are not accustomed to providing interrupting recasts, this technique may seem difficult as it requires automatized operation of detecting and correcting errors immediately. However, if activities are designed to elicit specific forms like the activity introduced in this report, it may be possible to develop teachers' sensitivity to specific errors so that spontaneous error identification can occur.

Although there is much more research to be done on interrupting recasts, my findings show that they are an effective CF technique, and I would encourage FL teachers to experiment different types of recasting in their FL classrooms.

*Notes

All the examples in the Theoretical Background section have been created for the purposes of the discussion therein.

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