

THE EFFECTS OF RECASTS ON INFORMAL WRITTEN DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

This study was concerned with students' ability to self-monitor and self-correct in an informal setting. It investigated the effect of corrective feedback on learners who aren't thinking that they're learning. The researcher chose text chatting as a communication method since chatting more closely resembles a casual spoken exchange. In our study, an advanced level speaker held four one-hour sessions of chatting with non-native speakers, once a week over a period of one month, and provided recasts targeting a particular error type. Results showed that the communicative feedback seemed to have no impact on the target errors, and by implication, on written accuracy, in an informal setting. A number of reasons for their lack of efficacy were put forward.

Keywords: recasts, informal, written, notice, errors, accuracy

One of the first definitions of corrective feedback is “any reaction of the teacher which clearly transforms, disapprovingly refers to, or demands improvement of the learner utterance” (Chaudron, 1977, p. 31). With second language interaction that happen outside the classroom, are students still receptive to corrective feedback and can they benefit from it? Corrective feedback (CF) is one of the most important types of interaction between teachers and learners, since it is through CF that teachers may demonstrate learners how to avoid their errors, in a range of ways, and to varying degrees of directness and transparency. In an informal context, is it still effective and does it produce the expected result?

In this experiment, the communication method chosen was text chatting, since it is as informal as conversation, with the added benefits that conversationalists don't have to be concerned with pronunciation accuracy, only on accuracy of form, and the results are much more easily transcribed for analysis. Since the emphasis was on informality in this research, the CF type which was selected was recasts, a corrective feedback type which is less obtrusive, or which is “implicit” (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998; Lyster & Mori, 2006; Ellis, Loewen & Erlam, 2006; Lee & Brusilovsky, 2009). This study sought to discover whether learners would be susceptible to recasts in situations where standards of accuracy may be relaxed, and

there are fewer consequences to making errors. The research was conducted with this research question in mind: are recasts an effective form of corrective feedback on students' writing in informal settings?

THEORETICAL ISSUES

Nabei and Swain (2002) state that there are two types of studies regarding recasts: 1) descriptions of recasts, especially their frequency, and 2) evaluation of recasts in a) observational classroom studies, and b) in experimental laboratory studies. Farrokhi (2007) holds that there are two types of study on error correction, the field which recasting falls into: a) investigating the effectiveness of error correction in English as a second language, and b) exploring the conditions where error correction may be effective. There are diverse opinions about recasts as a form of feedback. Some (Lyster and Ranta, 1997; Lyster, 1998a) hold that recasts are ambiguous and therefore are less effective, whereas others (Doughty & Varela, 1998; Leeman, 2003,) are an effective technique, and see their unobtrusive nature as beneficial. Some studies have concluded that intensive recasts are beneficial, comparing interaction with intensive recasts, and interaction without intensive recasts (Mackey and Philp, 1998, Han, 2002). Long, Inagaki, and Ortega (1998) refer to recasts as “reactive implicit negative feedback”, and note its effectiveness “in achieving at least short-term improvements on a previously unknown L2 structure.” (p. 357).

Roy Lyster has conducted extensive research into recasts in a classroom context in oral form (1998a, 1998b, 2001, 2004; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Lyster & Izquierdo, 2009; Lyster & Saito, 2010). Younghee Sheen has focused on written recasts in a classroom context (2007, 2010). This study may be categorized as evaluating recasts in an observational, non-classroom environment, and exploring the conditions where one particular type of error correction may be effective.

METHOD

I gathered three volunteers of varying nationalities, learning backgrounds, and proficiency levels. Their details are outlined below. Then, the participants and I scheduled four hour-long chat sessions, one per week, to be carried out through the communication software Skype. During the first session, I used no recasts, but simply allowed the participants to write, and later analyzed their responses and tallied their errors by type. During subsequent sessions, I used recasts on the errors which had been most numerous during the initial sessions, and recorded the number of those errors from transcripts of the conversations. With each instance of a target error, I recast the sentence to be free of the error. I used one recast per erroneous sentence, and did not repeat the recast, regardless of whether its corrective intent had been successful or not.

Throughout all of the chat sessions, I tried to prompt but not lead the conversations, providing some topics of conversation when necessary, but keeping the focus on the participants. I asked a large number of questions to keep participants talking. I gave no indication of what the target language flaws were, and discouraged participants from trying to guess, since this would have biased the nature of the conversations.

Table 1
Participant profiles

Name*	Age	Nationality	Gender	Proficiency level	Learning history	Target language flaw
Miss A	25	Korean	Female	Intermediate	From age 9, school, and from age 12, private tutoring	Prepositions
Mr. B	25	Uzbekistani	Male	Upper-intermediate	From age 14, school, university, from age 19	Articles
Ms C	24	Korean	Female	Upper-intermediate	From age 9, school and after school academies	Singular/plural; countable/uncountable

*Note: Participants' names are pseudonyms

RESULTS

Miss A made nine errors in the first session, six errors in the second session, nine errors in the third session, and eight errors in the fourth session. Mr. B made five errors in the first session, six errors in the second session, five errors in the third session, and five errors in the fourth session. Ms C made seven errors in the first session, three errors in the second session, nine errors in the third session, and three errors in the fourth session. The results are tabulated below.

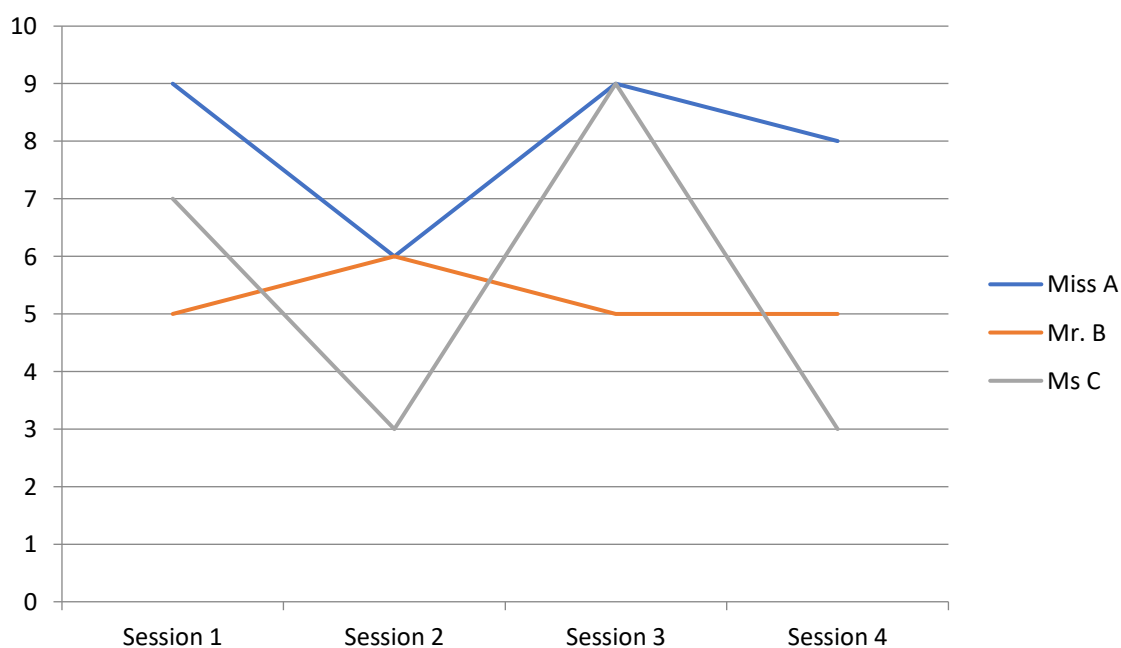
Table 2

Tabulated errors

Participant/ session	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4
Miss A	9	6	8	4
Mr. B	5	6	5	5
Ms C	7	3	9	3

The participants' error numbers are also shown on a line chart.

Figure 1

Line chart of participant errors

The transcripts were checked and the error totals verified by a native English speaker who I studied with in the same Tesol group.

DISCUSSION

One participant, Mr. B, performed relatively constantly, with his total number of errors rising only once during the second session, but his errors otherwise represented by a stable plateau. Miss A's number of errors rose and fell over the course of the four hours of chatting. Her number of erroneous uses of prepositions fell during the second session, before climbing in the third session, and falling during the final session. This erratic pattern mirrors Ms C's performance. Her initial number of errors dropped in the second session, rose during the third session, and dropped again in the fourth session.

The results show that the recasts were not useful in this experiment. Mr. B's steady performance suggests that the recasts had no effect on his produced language.

Furthermore, the fluctuating numbers of both Miss A's and Ms C's errors also suggest that there was no significant impact on their written discourse. It appears that Lyster (1998a) was right when he stated that recasts are too vague to be of significant benefit.

There could be many reasons for the recasts' inefficiency. The interviewer used many questions to keep the conversations moving, and keep the participants chatting, so the recasts could have been masked by the other questions in the conversations. Further, the researcher ensured that the participants were unaware of their target errors, since it was felt that this might give them the means to doctor their production to be error-free. Moreover, while the recasts were intended to draw attention to the participants' errors for self-monitoring and corrective purposes, the participants may have seen them as an attempt to clear up a discrepancy in understanding on the part of the interviewer.

Whatever the reason, it is clear that the students did not benefit from the corrective intention of the interviewer's recasts, because they were unaware of them. This supports Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990, 2001, 2012), which states that attention and awareness are necessary for learning to occur. In this experiment, the instructive nature of the discourse was minimized, the atmosphere was relaxed, and the participants' targeted errors were not brought to their attention. The interviewer had ensured that the participants focused on being relaxed, casual, and spontaneous. As Ellis (2009) notes, "Clearly, corrections can only work if writers notice and process them." (p. 105). Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) also refer to the crucial role of attention in learning, stating that explicit correction would induce learners' awareness more than implicit correction such as recasts.

The interaction environment could have played a significant part as well. The informal setting seems to have reduced the participants' anxiety and minimized their awareness of consequences, such as they would have felt in a classroom environment. The researcher played up the importance of continuing to respond and producing unprompted and natural language. Since the participants were urged not to think about the correctness of their language, or to try and detect the errors that the interviewer had targeted, the extent to which they were trying to self-correct was minimized. Analysis of the interview transcripts reveals instances of self-correction, both of target errors and other errors, but these were minimal and were not as a result of the interviewer's recasts.

CONCLUSION

This study implied that recasts were an unsuccessful form of written corrective feedback in informal written conversation. The learners didn't notice the prompts to amend their errors and as such the implicit nature of this form of corrective feedback

meant it was too subtle to be of use in this context. The atmosphere may have also played a part in making the recasts too difficult to pick up on, since the volition to improve and to be accurate were not a part of the setting as they would have been in a formal learning situation. The findings suggest that an element of anxiety and an awareness of consequences, such as students would have experienced in a classroom environment, would make recasts more effective, and also that other, more explicit, forms of corrective feedback, would have led the participants to notice their errors more and thus have been of greater value.

The study had several flaws which should be noted. Firstly, the nature of the discourse between the interviewer and the participants reduced their awareness of recasts. Furthermore, there was no control case, so the use of recasts cannot be contrasted with a lack thereof. This would elucidate the issue of their efficacy. In addition, the constraint of time played a large part. The researcher wished that it was possible to evaluate the impact of recasts over a longer period of time, such as a number of months, but with his own commitments and those of his participants, that would have been unfeasible. It may also have been beneficial to inform participants of their targeted errors, so they could be aware of their language deficiencies, and thus may have been more susceptible to the recasts.

Another design limitation was the lack of investigation into the participants' target errors in a learning environment. If their performance had been compared between the chatting and a classroom context, it would have more clearly elucidated whether the recasts had helped the learners notice their discrepancy and attempted to correct it.

Only one error was analyzed per participant, so this factor may also be worth examining more in future studies. If the same learner had been tested to produce responses to different error types, would the recasts have been more effective with one type over others?

Additional reflection on the design of the experiment would have yielded more conclusive findings. Increased interactions would provide clearer results; so, too, would the inclusion of a control group, to provide a contrast between the use of recasts and their lack, or the participants' awareness of their targeted errors. It may have been beneficial to distinguish the effectiveness of explicit and implicit corrective feedback, and so have different participants receive different types of corrective feedback, but that was not the focus of this study. A further study, with an expanded time frame, and clearer parameters for the participants may bear more unambiguous results.

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