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Recasts in the L2 classroom: A meta-analytic review

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ABSTRACT

In order to examine what we know and understand about the effectiveness of recasts in the second language classroom, this paper presents the results of a meta-analytic review of the current research on recasts. Initial analysis showed an average weighted effect size of 0.38. A *Q*-statistic test revealed that the studies contain heterogeneous data, where significant difference occurred in the type of treatment given to the participants, the type of grammatical structure studied, and in the difference in the second language being studied.

1. Introduction

Language learning is a complex system with many components that affect the effectiveness of second language acquisition (SLA). Although SLA researchers are more or less striving to answer the same questions, the research itself is complicated, especially with an increase in the types of methodologies that researchers are now implementing in their studies to address the fundamental questions of SLA (Norris & Ortega, 2006). The case of corrective feedback is no exception, where the body of literature includes studies examining the influence of a variety of factors on the effectiveness of corrective feedback (Russell & Spada, 2006). The result of this research is conflicting findings as to the effectiveness of corrective feedback, and this is no exception when specifically considering recasts (see Long, 2007). In order to examine what we know and understand about the effectiveness of recasts, and to sort out these conflicting results, this paper presents the results of a meta-analytic review of the current research on recasts.

1.1. What is a recast?

A recast is a form of implicit feedback that replaces at least a portion of a learner's utterance (typically immediately preceding the recast), while keeping the focus on meaning and not form. An advantage to recasts, some argue, is that it keeps the speaker's intended meaning and does not break down the flow of communication, making the correction incidental, unlike more explicit types of corrective feedback (Long, 2007). What is more, long added, is that this type of feedback seems

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to have a lot of potential for a variety of instructional purposes, such as task-based, project-based, and content-based classrooms. Although Farrar (1992) identified two types of recast, corrective and noncorrective, other scholars have labeled these noncorrective forms as another variety of corrective feedback called modeling (Carroll & Swain, 1993), and for the purpose of this study, we define a recast as solely a form of corrective feedback. An example of a recast is as follows (the actual recast is underlined):

Teacher: What did you do this weekend?
Student: I *goed to the movies.
Teacher: Ah, you went to the movies. And what did you see?
Student: I *seed *Spiderman*.
Teacher: Oh, you saw *Spiderman.* And did you like it?
Student: Yes, very much.

This example of a recast demonstrates how communication is sustained as the teacher talks with the student about her weekend. The focus remains on what happened over the weekend, and not on the obvious difficulty that the student has with irregular forms of the past tense.

2. Literature review

2.1. Communication and corrective feedback

Over the last several decades, second language pedagogues and instructors have pushed for a more communicative approach to language learning in the classroom, without giving up the focus on form (Long, 1991). Communication is also at the heart of the *Standards for Foreign Language Teaching* set forth by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) (1996) and the expectations for the certification of modern language teachers have recently risen to new levels, notably with an increased emphasis on oral proficiency (see NCATE, 2008). These more stringent requirements for becoming a language teacher and for the instruction of modern languages suggest that the ultimate objective of learning a language should be the ability to communicate effectively in the target language.

In order to achieve this communicative goal, interaction among speakers of the second language is needed, and this interaction requires the consideration of several important points that impact what takes place in a communicative language classroom. One of the central arguments in favor of communicative language teaching is that exposure to examples of correct language use (i.e., positive evidence) alone is not sufficient for acquiring all forms of the language (White, 1991), because language learners do not always notice the correct form simply from exposure to the language. Instead, research suggests that students need opportunities to produce language and to modify their language based on these interactions (Swain, 1985, 1989). Some studies (Ellis, 1994; Long, 1983, 1988) suggest further that a naturalistic approach of exposure to only positive evidence may be less advantageous than an instructional approach to language learning. As a result, more "pervasive" varieties of instructional practice that incorporate both communication and focus on form (e.g., corrective feedback) have become a regular part of the language teaching approach of many language teachers (Long, Inagaki & Ortega, 1998), and that recasts are significantly more common in the L2 classroom than any other form of corrective feedback (Long, 2007).

In a communicative approach to language learning, which obviously requires both input and output, it is inevitable that the learner will make errors along the way, raising the question as to whether error correction is effective and necessary, and if so, which methods of addressing these errors are most effective. This question is not easily answered, especially when considering the many factors that are believed to affect the impact that error correction may have (see DeKeyser, 1993; Long, 2007). Some scholars have even argued that error correction has no impact on L2 learning (see Carroll, 1999; Truscott, 1999), while others, like Schmidt (1990), have suggested that corrective feedback may at a minimum help learners *notice* errors. What happens when errors are noticed is still unclear.

2.2. Research on recasts

Despite the conflicting arguments discussed in the previous section, Long (2007) has presented a thorough review of what we know about recasts in particular, where he has highlighted a great number of studies that have confirmed both the *usability* and the *use* of recasts (e.g., Braidi, 2002; Doughty, 1994; Doughty & Varela, 1998; Ishida, 2002; Izumi, 2000; Leeman, 2003; Loewen & Philp, 2005; Long et al., 1998; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Mackey & Oliver, 2002; Mackey & Philp, 1998; Moroishi, 2001; Oliver, 1995; Ortega & Long, 1997). For example, Long et al. (1998) found recasts to have a positive effect and that they may be more effective than positive evidence alone. Doughty and Varela (1998) also found recasts to be effective, although their findings suggest that recasts might be more effective on oral production than on written. Oliver (1995) found positive results, as well, but several questions were also raised. First, the findings indicate that the level of complexity as well as the number of errors in an utterance may determine how one responds to the error(s). Additionally, Oliver maintains that there must be opportunities for the learner to self-correct (i.e., repair) in order for recasts to be effective. Mackey and Philp (1998) found positive results as well, but noted that recasts may only be effective in the short term, and that the learner's linguistic level may also play a role in how recasts are processed.