

Do Learners Notice Recast?

Masako Ishikawa

Abstract

Second language acquisition researchers unanimously find that recasts are the most frequently used corrective feedback type. Nonetheless, their opinions are not monolithic regarding the effectiveness of recasts. While some researchers find recasts effective, others imply that recasts have little impact on second language learning, pointing to their ambiguity. Thanks to their unobtrusive nature, recasts enable language teachers to give feedback without worrying about interrupting the flow of the lesson and also to control the discourse. However, because of this very nature, some researchers doubt the efficacy of recasts, arguing that learners do not notice recasts as they are too ambiguous. This paper examines four empirical studies on recasts and investigates learners' noticing of recasts so that they can be used more effectively in classrooms.

1. Introduction

Recast is the most frequently used form of feedback; however, there are mixed opinions as to its effectiveness. Some people have positive ideas, saying recast can be used without obstructing the flow of a classroom lesson. Others say it is too ambiguous, since learners may not notice this implicit negative feedback. Another opinion is that it is not effective for teaching certain features of the target language, such as grammar because they feel that learners might need more explicit feedback. Also, not just recast itself, but the level of learners that recast is provided to is often discussed. It seems that beginners are thought to be less likely to notice recast. Here, four empirical studies—Mackey, Gass, and McDonough (2002), Mackey and Philp (1998), Nabei and Swain (2002), and Philp (2003) —about this “controversial” but common form of feedback, recast, are reviewed. The goal of this paper is to answer the following questions

that are often discussed among the teachers: “Do learners notice recast?”, “If so, to what extent?”, “Is it an effective form of feedback?” and “What is an effective recast?”

First, each of the four studies is considered in the review of empirical studies section. Following that is the discussion section where the studies and their ideas and the results are compared as well as discussed under the above mentioned questions. Finally, some thoughts are given in conclusion.

2. A review of four empirical studies

In Nabei and Swain (2002), recast is defined as “either an isolated or expanded rephrasing of learners’ non-target-like utterances provided by the teacher immediately after the non-target-like utterances” (p. 49). In this study, the researchers focus on the relationship between the learner’s awareness of recast feedback and its effect, examining a Japanese college student’s second language learning through her teacher’s recasts in an EFL classroom. The class examined (English Discussion course) was composed of 28 students and most activities were assigned as group work. Emphasis was put on developing fluency in English and the students were expected to improve their communication skills. First the class was videotaped and the relationship between the student’s awareness of recast and her L2 learning was investigated. Then stimulated recalls were used to elicit the student’s awareness of the feedback, and grammaticality judgment (GJ) tests were used for measuring learning.

The teacher feedback was unexpectedly infrequent and there were only 25 instances of feedback in 420 minutes (the average was 4.2 in a lesson) and 23 of them were recasts (six for the subject). As the number shows, Nabei and Swain (2002) report recast is the most-used feedback and that it is used mostly for morphosyntactic errors. They also report recasts end in one of three patterns: ‘student uptake’, in which students, either successfully or unsuccessfully, repair their utterances; ‘no student uptake’, in which students does not make a repair despite the opportunity for it, or ‘no-opportunity’, in which students are not given opportunities to repair their mistakes. They do not give the exact number if the subject noticed each recast or not, as that is not their goal. However, from the interview excerpts, it could be inferred that the subject noticed most, if not all, the recasts given to her (only one of them ended with uptake and the others ended with no-opportunity). Also, she was more aware of the recasts given in the group contexts than in the teacher-fronted contexts and this is reflected in the GJ test results. She was 93% correct with the group recast

items, whereas 62% with the teacher-fronted ones.

Mackey et al. (2000) focus on learners' perceptions about interactional feedback. Their goal is to find out "the extent to which learners do in fact recognize or perceive feedback provided through interaction and the target of the feedback, that is, what feedback is being provided about" (p. 477). They examine the way English as a second language and Italian as a foreign language (ESL and IFL) learners perceive the feedback in conversational interaction with NSs who provide feedback in response to most of the nontargetlike utterances. (To avoid interrupting flow of interaction or learner irritation, excessive feedback was avoided.) The feedback includes negotiation, recast, or both techniques. Stimulated recalls are used here as well. Immediately following completion of the task-based activities, the videotape was played for the learners, and their original perceptions were elicited by the researchers. All the feedback used is categorized according to the error types: morphosyntactic, phonological, semantic, and lexical. The authors compare these error types with the learners' perceptions they obtained from the stimulated recalls to see if the subjects accurately perceived their feedback.

According to the data, the subjects did not perceive 17 % of the feedback as feedback both in ESL and IFL. The feedback here is not limited to recasts, yet it can be said that the learners noticed the feedback most of the time even though their perception of the target was not always accurate. Mackey et al. (2002) note a much higher proportion of accurate reports about lexical and phonological feedback than of reports about morphosyntactic feedback, which was often perceived as being about semantics for the ESL learners and about lexis for the IFL learners. In ESL, 53 (47%) of the feedback (both recast and negotiation) episodes were morphosyntactic. However, in linguistic content of stimulated-recall comments, there were only 9 (7%) comments for morphosyntactic feedback. Also, of the 53 morphosyntactic feedback episodes, the learners accurately recognized that morphosyntactic feedback was about morphosyntax only 13% of the time. In terms of lexis and phonology, the ratios were 83% and 60%, respectively. Similar phenomenon was observed in IFL as well.

Following these results, Mackey et al. (2002) further examine why this is the case by carrying out post hoc analysis. Examining the distribution of feedback type and error type, they recognize recasts were mostly provided in response to morphosyntactic errors (75%), whereas only 7% of negotiation occurred in response to them. None of the combination of recast and negotiation episodes involved morphosyntactic errors.

Mackey and Philp (1998) also examine the effect of recast in

conversational interaction. In contrast to the studies of Nabei and Swain (2002), and Mackey et al. (2000), the researchers measure delayed effects, that is, “a longer-term perspective on learner development” (p. 342) instead of uptake which is the immediate response of the learner to recasts, and they focus on the use of recasts beyond the third turn instead of immediate turns. Their two research questions are: “Do learners who participate in task-based interaction with intensive recasts show an increase in developmentally more advanced structures? And, what is the role of the learners’ response to the recasts?” (p. 343).

The effect of recasts was examined through production and development of question forms that were chosen as the measure of development in delayed posttests, and learners’ IL development was assessed through changes in question formation. Responses to recasts were categorized into four groups: continue, repeat, modify and other. In “continue”, a learner just continues task without modifying or repeating a recast. In “repeat”, a learner repeats a recast either fully or partially. In “modify”, a learner modifies a recast or an original utterance after the recast. “Other” means no opportunity for a learner to respond.

Thirty-five adult ESL learners from beginner and lower intermediate intensive English language classes participated in this study. They were assigned as “readies” (intermediates) or “unreadies” (beginners) according to their levels and were divided into 5 groups: two recast groups, two interactor groups, and a control group. Recast groups received intensive recasts as they performed the tasks, whereas the interactor groups performed the same tasks without intensive recasts. The control group took pre- and post tests only. The result of the posttests shows 7 of the 9 participants (78%) in the recast ready group increased in developmental level as opposed to only 1 of the 6 (17%) in the interactor ready group did. With the “unreadies”, 2 of the 9 participants (25%) in the recast group showed stage increase, whereas nobody in the interactor group did. In terms of responses to recasts, no big differences were seen between the readies and unreadies overall. 53% of the responses were classified as “continue” in both groups, whereas 5% in the readies and 4% in the unreadies were classified as “modifies”. The ratios of “repeats” and “other” were 22% and 19% for the recast ready group and 20% and 22 % for the recast unready group respectively. As for content of recasts, there was very little difference in the type of question forms between the two groups regardless of their level. Questions at stages 4 and 5 formed the content of most of the recasts for both groups. More than half of the recasts were of stage 4 for both groups, and stage 5 type questions accounted for 41% for the unreadies and 33% for the readies.

Similarly, Philp (2003) also investigated the extent to which learners notice recasts of their nontargetlike utterances. Unlike Nabei and Swain (2002), and Mackey et al. (2002), her focus is not if learners notice recast itself, but the content of recast. Accurate immediate recall of recasts, that is, the subject responds to a cue to repeat or modify what was heard at a particular point in the input, was used as evidence of noticing of recast by the learners. Her goal is to examine if the ability to recall a recast is constrained by the level of the learner, the length of the recast or the number of changes made by the recast from their original utterances.

Thirty-three ESL learners with different proficiencies and various L1 backgrounds took part in five NS-NNS dyadic interaction sessions over 2 weeks. As with Mackey and Philp (1998), question forms were chosen as the targeted form and used as the measure of development. The learners were divided into three groups- low, intermediate, or high- according to their level as well as their readiness to acquire stage 4 and stage 5 question forms, and they fell within four of the six stages. The learners in the low group were at stage 2 or 3, the intermediate group at 4, and the high group at 5. In treatment sessions, the tasks that required the learners to ask questions were given and NSs provided recasts in response to any nontargetlike utterance, particularly question forms. In response to hearing a cue (the sound of two knocks on the table) that followed recast, the learners were asked to repeat the recast. Accuracy of recall was categorized as; “correct”, “modified”, or “no recall”.

According to the result, the average number of recasts each learner received was 54 in the low group, 49 in the intermediate and 44 in the high. Of these recasts, all groups received over 60% of recasts of stage 4 questions and around 30% of stage 5 questions. In terms of the level of the learner, higher level learners showed greater accuracy than lower level learners as predicted. High and intermediate learners recalled over 70% of recasts accurately, whereas the low learners recalled 60%. As for the length of recast, it had a significant effect on the accuracy of recalls of the learners of all the groups. For the high and intermediate groups, over 80% of recalls were accurate for short recasts and about 15% less for longer ones. As for the number of changes, all groups recalled recasts with multiple changes much less accurately than the ones with fewer changes. Irrespective of level, all the groups performed better when there were fewer changes in the recast from their original utterances.

3. Discussion

While recast is the focus of the four papers reviewed here, their approaches

and settings are different. However, some of their findings overlap. In Nabei and Swain (2002) and Mackey et al. (2002), recast is the most frequently used feedback as it has been shown in the SLA literature (Long, 2007). Also recast is mostly used for morphosyntactic errors, which is also in line with the literature. The relationships between noticing of recast and its effectiveness, and also the effectiveness and learners' level are discussed in each paper. Further, in the study of Philp (2002), factors that make recast effective are analyzed. In this section, the questions raised in the introduction section will be examined.

3.1. Do learners notice recast?

It could be said that learners notice recast at a quite high ratio. In Nabei and Swain (2002), although the exact number is not given, it could be inferred that the subject noticed most, if not all, the recasts given to her. Also, they found out through the stimulated recalls that the student noticed many of the recasts provided not just to her, but to her peers as well. They state it is consistent with the finding of Ohta (2000) that students are most likely to react to teacher recasts even when they are not addressees of the recast feedback. In their study of learners' perceptions about interactional feedback, Mackey et al. (2002) also report that the subjects perceived 83% of the feedback as feedback although their perception of the target was not always accurate and the feedback in their study was not limited to recast.

3.2. To what extent do learners notice recast?

Although noticing of recast is the focus of Mackey et al. (2000) and Philp (2003), their approaches to examine the degree of noticing are different. In Mackey et al. (2002) study, stating that learners do notice recast considerably, they focus on learners' perceptions about recast to measure the degree of noticing. They point out the extent to which learners notice recast depends greatly on the targets of recasts. Their data reveal that the learners did not generally perceive morphosyntactic recasts as such even though recasts were provided in response to morphosyntactic errors the most (75%) whereas only 7% of negotiation occurred in response to them. As the reason for this gap, they point out that morphosyntactic errors, such as agreement or plural formation, cannot be as crucial to comprehension as other errors that might need negotiation. As for the finding that morphosyntactic feedback was rarely perceived accurately and that they were often provided in the form of recast, the authors suggest the possibility that recasts may be perceived by learners as another way to say the same thing because they do not always make participatory demands on the learner, unlike negotiation which requires more learner involvement.

They also give another possibility that perceiving the recasts correctly and noticing all the morphosyntactic changes would result in a cognitive overload for learners.

On the other hand, Philp (2003) focuses on the accuracy of immediate recall of recasts to measure noticing. In her study, the learners were asked to repeat recasts in response to a cue that followed them. The learners did notice they received recasts because of the cues, however, the level of noticing about content of recast varied greatly depending on the following variables: learners' level, the length of recasts and the number of changes that were added to the learners' original utterances.

3.3. *Are recasts effective?*

As mentioned above, measuring to what extent learners notice recast is not a simple process. Also the definitions of effectiveness of recasts seem to vary among the researchers. Using uptake is thought to be as one way of judging effectiveness, and it is used in the studies of Nabei and Swain (2002), and Mackey et al. (2002), although the researchers admit the fact that uptake may not reflect the long-term learning.

In their study that focus on the effect of recast using one subject in the classroom setting, Nabei and Swain (2002) analyze the effectiveness of recast is dependent on three factors. The first factor is the way teachers provide recasts. They present the relationship between the student reaction for recast and the subject's GJ test result, giving the example of the three similar recasts, two of which led to student uptake and the one that led to no-opportunity (none of them was for the subject). For the two items with uptake, the subject answered correctly on the test, whereas for the one item with no-opportunity, she did not.

Nabei and Swain (2002) state evaluating the effectiveness of recast based only on uptake is problematic because it does not necessarily mean that long-term learning has occurred and it is also possible that learners' uptake does not fully represent their cognitive processing of the feedback, however, they still claim uptake is important for understanding the impact of the feedback. As the test result shows, it is reflected in the subject's learning. Pointing out the fact that more than half of the recasts led to no-opportunity for repair, they maintain recasts can become explicit and effective depending more on recast-providers than on linguistic elements. Admitting the effect of recast, they comment, "In general, the teacher's recasts did not contribute a great deal to the subject's *immediate learning* [italics added] of the language" (p. 58).

The second factor occurs when discourse context recasts are provided. Giving the data that the subject did better on group-related items than

teacher-fronted ones on the test, Nabei and Swain (2002) stress the importance of communicatively meaningful interaction.

The third factor is how learners make use of recast. Calling a learner “an agent”, they stress that effect of recast is influenced not only by the linguistic elements, but also by the learner’s autonomous utilization of the learning opportunities provided by the feedback. The researchers maintain that “the recasts were ‘opportunities for learning’ and what was learned from it depended on the learner” (p. 59).

As Nabei and Swain (2002), Mackey et al. (2002) state uptake of feedback does not necessarily mean constituting learning or development. However, they also state “uptake may be related to learners’ perceptions about feedback at the time of the feedback” (p. 492) and investigate the relationship between uptake and learners’ perceptions about feedback. They closely examine learners’ perception with a wider variety of subjects in conversational interaction. Whether the learners perceive the target of feedback accurately or not is one area of focus to find out the effectiveness of feedback. The feedback they examine includes both recast and negotiation.

The learners’ stimulated recall reports generally reveal accurate perceptions about feedback for which they had uptake at the time of the interaction. According to the reports, the learners accurately perceived the target of the feedback for 66% of the feedback episodes with uptake. Accordingly, as for the feedback episodes that did not result in learner uptake, the learners did not report perceiving the target of the feedback for 89% of them. Attending to the relationship between the accuracy of perception and uptake, Mackey et al. (2002) further investigate the relationship between the frequent use of recast for morphosyntactic errors and the high rate of inaccurate perception of it. Of the 66% of the accurately perceived feedback with uptake, the ratio was 33% for the morphosyntactic feedback. It should be noted that the morphosyntactic feedback occurred in the form of recast 75% of the time.

Following these data, Mackey et al. (2002) admit to the limited effectiveness of recasts, “Using recasts to provide morphosyntactic feedback may have been suboptimal” (p.493). Nicholas, Lightbown and Spada (2001) follow the same line of thought and point out that “the effectiveness of recast has been found to differ, depending on the area of language (e.g., pronunciation or grammar) or on the specific feature (e.g., articles or personal pronouns)” (p. 752). Nabei and Swain (2002) claim effective recast depends more on recast-providers than on linguistic elements, however it seems linguistic elements are as important, if not more so.

Although uptake is used in the above mentioned two studies, Mackey and Philp (1998) point out that uptake may be the wrong criterion to use as it can measure only immediate effects of recast but not delayed ones. They examine the effects of intensive recasts on the acquisition of English questions not by uptake, but by measuring the posttest results.

In terms of the response to recasts, there was very little difference between the performance of the recast ready group (intermediate level) and the recast unready group (beginner level). In both groups, more than half (53%) of responses to recasts were “continue”, that is, the learners carried on the discourse without focusing on the recast. Although, “modify” was thought to be the key in judging the effectiveness of recast, the learners modified only 4 – 5 % of the recasts they received in both groups. In terms of “repeat”, Mackey and Philp (1998) point out that it is difficult to identify whether the learners who repeated the recast were actually perceiving the recast as feedback or simply another way of saying the same thing. Unlike the similar performance of the responses to recast, the result of the posttests revealed a significant difference between these two groups. The higher level learners outperformed the beginners greatly. In the recast ready group, 7 of the 9 participants (78%) increased in developmental level as opposed to only 2 of the 9 participants (25%) in the recast unready group. In the inercator ready group which did not receive intensive recasts, the figure was only 1 of 6 (17%) even though the learners’ level was as high as the level of the recast ready group.

From these results, Mackey and Philp (1998) claim that recast has positive effects, however, they further claim, if learners are not ready to receive recast, that is, if recast is not level-appropriate for learners, it does not benefit them. Analyzing the gap of the posttest result between the readies and unreadies, they argue it is related to the content of recasts, which is consisted of mainly stage 4 and 5 questions. The researchers point out that the recasts the beginners received were beyond their level, which is stage 2 or 3, and they also point out the possibility that the beginners might have performed differently with the recasts appropriate to their level. Referring to the fact that stage 4 and 5 questions consisted of around 90% of the recasts in both groups regardless of the learners’ level, they maintain content of recast is influenced more by the task rather than the level of learners, calling the task, “a greater predictor of the content of recasts than developmental level” (p. 351).

Mackey and Philp (1998) also refer to the relationship between the high ratio of “continue” and high increase of stage level of the readies and argue that continuing the task without modifying or repeating a recast, that is, without uptake, does not necessarily mean they did not notice recast,

explaining their interest in the task might have overridden their concern for form. As Nabei and Swain (2002) have noted, they also suggest the immediate response of the learner (uptake) may not predict whether the learner will subsequently make use of the recast. From the data, the researchers assert that the test result illustrates the positive delayed effect of recast and its relationship to the level of learners, stating “provided the level is appropriate, recasts may be used eventually by some learners, regardless of their immediate response to the recast” (p. 352).

Though recast is generally thought to be a form of implicit negative feedback, Leeman (2003) points out it also provides positive evidence, enhancing the salience of target forms. If this is so, effectiveness of recast would have to be measured from wider points of view.

3.4. What is an effective recast?

In her study, Philp (2003) focuses on three independent variables that might affect noticing of recasts: the level of the learner, recast length and the number of changes between the recast and the learners’ initial utterance that triggered it. She examines the NS-NNS interaction using the tasks that elicited question forms after a cue. Accuracy of recall was categorized as; “correct”, “modified”, or “no recall”. According to the result, the high and intermediate groups showed greater accuracy than the low group as predicted. Referring to the result, she states it illustrates the relationship between the noticing of recasts and the learners’ level, which is consistent with the findings of Mackey and Philp (1998).

Philp (2003) also reports correlations between accuracy of recall and variables such as recast length and the number of changes in the recast. As for these two variables, significant effect was observed with all the learners irrespective of their levels. Although more advanced learners recalled more accurately than the learners in the lower level, the longer the recasts became, the less accurate the learners’ recalls became across all levels. The same thing could be said with the number of changes in recasts. Philp maintains working memory is a big contribution to this result. If the recast is too long or if it has too many changes for learners to process and reconstruct with working memory, as Mackey et al. (2000) have noted, it might end up in a cognitive overload for learners. Consequently, learners may have to rely on long-term memory or their own IL system because working memory is limited in capacity.

Philp (2003) also points out familiarity with form in the input is another key. If the form is familiar to the learners, they would have more attentional resources that allow them to assimilate other new forms. She argues that advanced level learners scored higher than the lower level

learners because of their larger store of more advanced IL system and greater automaticity in comprehension and production that originates from familiarity with form in the input. From these findings, she claims shorter recast may be more effective to learners of all levels because they can be accurately retained in working memory and processed without taxing attentional resources.

In terms of the number of changes, Philp (2003) also claims recast with fewer changes should be more effective to learners so that their working memory can retain and process the new forms accurately. She supports the claims of Gass (1991) and Ellis (1994) who maintain if the mismatch between the learner's utterance and the recast is too great, it will not be perceptible to the learner. Stating the fact that the three variables (level of the learner, recast length and the number of changes in recast) affect noticing of recasts, the author stresses recast can be effective if it matches the learners' readiness (level), because "unfamiliar input, multiple corrections, complex changes, and long utterances all pose high demands on learners' attentional resources"(p.119).

4. Conclusion

Each study has provided valuable insights on recasts and more specifically to their effectiveness. It could be claimed that learners do notice recast at a high rate. However, depending on the factors, such as level of learners, the length of recast, the particular error types and the context where recast is provided, the degree seems to vary and it would be impossible to measure the extent to which learners perceive recast without taking these factors into consideration. Also the effectiveness could not be evaluated one-dimensionally. Whether effect of immediate learning (uptake) could be used as well as delayed effects to measure effectiveness of recast seems to have been under discussion that is yet to be solved. Although uptake may not be sufficient to measure long-term learning as the researches point, as the test results in the studies of Nabei and Swain (2002), and Mackey et al. (2002) illustrate, it seems that uptake could be used as one of the elements of measurement.

Nabei and Swain (2002) stress "the complexity of recast" (p. 58), and these four studies seem to have underlined how complicated it is. These studies are all short-time research, and further longitudinal ones would be useful for a better understanding of recast and an improvement in the quality of teaching. Although there are many questions remaining in the field, these studies have shed some useful light on our growing knowledge of recast.

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