Discuss the problems and solutions to maximize the effectiveness of recasts - the most popular type of corrective feedback

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Abstract: *This article looks further into recasts – the most popular type of oral correct feedback. Regardless of their obvious benefits to both teachers and learners in the classroom contexts, recasts in language teaching face two main issues including their lack of salience and limited learner uptake. The reason is that teachers often provide recasts with positive evidence, correcting errors without explicitly highlighting them or encouraging learners to self-correct, leading students to misinterpret corrections as conversational responses. To maximize the effectiveness of this type of feedback, several practical solutions are suggested including different ways to make recasts more salient in classroom contexts and providing more opportunities for modified output from students.*

Introduction

Several studies conducted in both classrooms and laboratories have proved the efficacy of oral corrective feedback (OCF) on L2 acquisition (Li, 2010; Goo & Mackey, 2013). Among six types of OCF which are classified by Lyster and Ranta (1997), recasts gain the highest popularity and favoured by teachers in classroom context (Vasquez and Harvey, 2010). However, their effectiveness has remained controversial compared to others. In this essay, firstly, varied factors impacting the effectiveness of recasts against relevant theoretical positions are analysed. Secondly, suggested guidance is presented to maximise their effectiveness.

Background information

Definition

A recast is a type of oral corrective feedback in language learning that involves repeating the learner's incorrect utterance with the correct form without changing its central meaning (Doughty, 1994). Recasts are often categorised as implicit as they do not directly point out errors and provide an explicit instruction (Long, 1996). However, research shows that depending on several factors such as contexts, instructional settings and linguistic targets, recasts can be explicit too (Nicholas et al, 2001). Another characteristic of recasts is that they tend to provide more positive evidence than negative evidence (Oliver, 2000).

Effectiveness

Several studies have confirmed the effectiveness of recasts, especially in an instructional context, where learners tend to pay more attention to form (Lyster & Mori, 2006). To be more specific, learners gain more advantages for the development of forms when they get recasts for grammatical features such as question forms (Mackey & Philp, 1998), adverbs (Long et al., 1998) or past tense (Yang & Lyster, 2010). The effectiveness of recasts can be explained by two factors namely semantic transparency and immediate juxtaposition (Long, 2015). Thus, learners have more attentional resources to focus on forms to facilitate form-function mapping, which is aligned with Doughty and Varela's (1998) study. Another advantage which makes recasts become one of the most frequently used types of CF among teachers is that recasts are time-saving and do not demotivate students compared to others (Asari, 2017).

Problems

The first problem is that recasts are not salient enough to learners. Regarding teachers, they tend to provide recasts with positive evidence, which includes target-like utterances without explicitly explaining what the linguistic errors are and where they are in utterances. After that, teachers carry on the conversation instead of providing learners with opportunities to produce correct forms on their own. Regarding learners, with positive evidence, they often do not notice that they are being corrected (Ellis & Sheen, 2006). Instead, they interpret recasts

as responses to content or communication problems (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). This ambiguity of recasts is confirmed in several studies (Nystrom, 1983; Lyster, 1998, 2001). Without being noticed and perceived as corrective function during interaction, recasts can lose their claimed benefits (Nicholas, Lightbown, & Spada, 2001).

To find out the second problem with recasts, a closer look at how corrective feedback happens in classroom context based on Lyster & Ranta's (1997) error treatment sequence is needed. The sequence starts with a learner's utterance including at least one error, followed by teachers' corrective feedback or not; if not, the topic continues. If corrective feedback is given from the teacher, it is then followed by uptake from the student, or not which means topic continuation. The feedback-uptake sequence is of great importance in L2 learning (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). However, the error treatment sequence of recasts often stops at the point that the conversation continues without uptake production from the part of the student. The topic continuation was provided 75% by the teacher (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). It means students miss opportunities to gain all advantages discussed above. However, it should be noted that not all learner responses are equally valuable. Several researchers found that certain responses, such as repair and modified output, which are not frequently identified in recasts are strong indicators of L2 development (e.g., McDonough, 2004, 2005; McDonough & Mackey, 2006; Shekary & Tahririan, 2006). Therefore, different strategies should be applied to encourage students to give more successful uptake, including repair and modified output.

Improvement of effectiveness of recasts

Salience-enhanced recasts

Often, learners must expose themselves to more input than they are capable of dealing with. Therefore, to avoid overloaded processing capacity, some available mechanisms need to be provided to help learners focus on parts of input which matters the most as they have chances to create and test different hypotheses (Gass et al., 2003). To increase the salience of recasts, characteristics of recasts are manipulated in different ways. Based on Kucer's (2005) categorizations, there are three characteristics of recasts, namely linguistic, paralinguistic, and extralinguistic elements.

Linguistic characteristics

Several linguistic characteristics can be manipulated to increase the salience of recasts,

including the length of utterances, segmentation, mode, word positions and types of change. To be more specific, shorter recasts (less than five words) are proven to be equal or more effective than longer ones (Loewen & Philp, 2006; Philp, 2003; Sheen, 2006). Segmented recasts are more noticeable than whole recasts (Asari, 2012; Lyster, 1998; Sheen, 2006). In addition, segmented recasts in the declarative mode are more likely to lead to uptake and modified output than ones in the interrogative mode (Asari, 2017). Beginning and ending positions seem to be particularly salient positions to words and utterances. One suggested reason for the effectiveness of these elements is that they ensure that the learners' processing capacity is not overloaded. Instead of coping with excessive input at the same time, these elements allow learners to allocate adequately attentional resources to important linguistic forms which are made salient. Other factors that are closely linked to the salience are semantic complexity and grammatical complexity (Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2008). For example, free morphemes are inherently more noticeable than bound morphemes. Finally, Sheen (2006) found that recasts involved substitution instead of deletions and additions were positively related to learners' production of repair.

Paralinguistic characteristics

To increase the effectiveness of recasts, positive evidence needs to be made salient with the use of emphasis (Asari, 2017). In particular, when learners have to handle more input than their capacity, stressed recasts can help them to isolate structures and forms that require immediate attention from other structures and forms (Leeman, 2000, 2003; Takahashi, 2014). Furthermore, reformulation of erroneous utterances was identified with significantly higher rate when recasts were given with a falling tone rather than a rising tone (Asari, 2017). This finding is aligned with Lyster's (1998) study. He found that learners tended to misinterpret recasts with rising tone as response to content rather than corrective feedback. Similarly, a signal of approval is also counter-productive to recasts. When recasts went with signals of approval, learners less succeeded in producing modified output (Asari, 2017). It seems that students understood the teachers' signal as a signal for back-channelling which meant students should keep talking. Besides, teachers tended to give signals of approval randomly, either students' utterances were correct or not. Lyster (1988) reported that this inconsistency probably made recasts with signals of approval ambiguous to

learners and consequently, the corrective force went unnoticed.

Extralinguistic characteristics

A series of studies have indicated the advantages of using gestures in educational contexts, including their positive impacts on L2 vocabulary learning (Kelly, McDevitt, & Esch, 2009; Macedonia et al., 2011; Macedonia & Klimesch, 2014; Tellier, 2008), L2 comprehension (Sueyoshi & Hardison, 2005). However, studies examining the effectiveness of gestures combined with oral CF are extremely limited and produced mixed results. One study examining the effectiveness of gestures-enhanced recasts, for the development of English locative preposition belonged to Nakatsukasa (2016). The researcher found that linguistic development of learners who received recasts with pedagogical gestures that described the concepts of locative prepositions remained the same in delayed post-tests, however, that of learners who received oral recasts only diminished. Another study on the same subject was conducted by Kamiya in 2021 with regular past tense. The researcher found no significant difference between two groups of learners, who received recasts with incorporated gestures and who received verbal recasts only. One possible reason is that gestures may be more effective for item-based learning (e.g., locative prepositions) than rule-based learning (e.g., regular past tense). To confirm the relation between gestures and recasts, further studies need to be conducted including different linguistic forms to see what linguistic elements benefit from recasts with or without gestures.

Increased opportunities for modified output

Repair and modified output are confirmed to be strongly predictive of subsequent L2 development (Loewen, 2005; McDonough, 2004, 2005; McDonough & Mackey, 2006; Shekary & Tahririan, 2006). Therefore, more initiatives are needed to promote learners in giving successful uptake. Kartchava (2009) suggested that teachers should draw learner attention to the corrective intent of recasts so that they are more likely to notice and repair errors through training. Several empirical studies partially supported this claim by showing that with training, learners were better at recognizing grammatical feedback and resulted in more modified output. Teachers also need not be worried about using recasts to learners (Ellis et al., 2006) if students are committed adult learners.

It is acknowledged that for acquisition to happen, both learning of new forms (for which recasts are effective) and increased control of partially acquired forms (for which prompts are effective) are needed. Pica et al. (1989) found that modified output was highly likely to be followed by a request for clarification or repetition. Lyster & Ranta (1997) explained the reason is that these types reduce the level of ambiguity by allowing students to either self-correct or correct their peers. Combined these two together, another type of recasts called 'corrective recasts' was proposed by Doughty and Varela (1998). They consist of an initial prompt (it can be clarification requests or repetition), which is followed by a recast in case the learner is not successful in recognising corrective force and produce the correct forms.

Conclusion

The essay outlines the effectiveness of recasts as well as two factors diminishing their effectiveness, namely the lack of saliency of corrective action and the absence of uptake or modified output in the next utterances. To clarify the decreased effectiveness, two relevant theoretical positions related to noticing and output are analysed so that several suggested guidance is given to optimize the effectiveness of recasts. Furthermore, multiple factors that may impact the saliency of recasts, ranging from external factors such as interactional contexts, nature of the tasks to individual factors such as aptitude, learner proficiency, motivation and working memory capacity (Philp, 2003; Mackey, Philp, Egi, Fujii, & Tatsumi, 2002). These factors need to be considered as well when teachers decide to apply recasts in classroom contexts.

Reference

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