*The Journal of Applied Linguistics Vol. 2, Issue 2*
*Fall 2009*

# The Impact of Recasts on the Syntactic Accuracy of Iranian EFL University Students' Oral Discourse

*Parviz Maftoon*
*Sholeh Kolahi*[*]
*Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch*

Among the major issues raised by classroom SLA researchers is the debate on the degree to which teacher's or learner's attention should be directed to linguistic features. However, one of the relevant variables in corrective feedback studies which seem to be less operationalized is the differential impact of different types of feedback on the accuracy of the oral performance of the participants. The merits of recasts as one type of feedback commonly used in the classroom have turned to be a controversial issue. The present study examined the impact of recasts in comparison to no-recast on the syntactic accuracy of Iranian EFL university students' oral discourse. One hundred and nine male and female students majoring in English Language Translation at Islamic Azad University (Central Tehran Branch) took part in the study. The participants were attending the listening and speaking classes. Ten sessions were devoted to the treatment of the experimental group (n=54) who received recasts as feedback to syntactic errors. The control group (n=55), received no recast. A posttest was administered in the 12th session. The teachers introduced a topic and the participants were required to talk about it in 60 seconds. A total of 6540 seconds of the participants' oral performance were observed and recorded. Analysis of individual participants' oral data revealed that the recast group outperformed the no-recast group. In other words, recasts were effective in reducing the frequency of syntactic errors of participants' oral discourse.

[*] Corresponding author. E-mail: shkolahi@gmail.com

Key*words:* Corrective Feedback, Recast, Syntactic Errors, Frequency of Errors, Oral Discourse

The last 10 years have witnessed a steady increase in the number of studies that have examined the effects of corrective feedback (CF) on second language (L2) learning. This includes both descriptive and experimental researches examining a wide range of variables: e.g., type and amount of feedback (Ammar, 2008; Lyster, 2004; Lyster & Ranta, 1997), mode of feedback ( Loewen & Nabei, 2007), learners' proficiency levels (Ammar & Spada, 2006; Panova & Lyster, 2002) error types (Ellis, 2007; Lyster, 1998b) and attitude towards feedback( Egi, 2007; Loewen, 2005; Sheen, 2007). One of the reasons for this increased interest in CF is related to the observation that although L2 learners in communicative classrooms attain relatively high levels of comprehension ability and, to some extent, fluency in oral production, they continue to produce inaccurate utterances, particularly in terms of morphology and syntax (Harely & Swain, 1984; Lightbown, Halter, White, & Harst, 2002; Lightbown & Spada, 1990, 1994; Schmidt, 1983).

These low levels of grammatical accuracy in terms of morphology and syntax have been interpreted as evidence against the sufficiency of comprehensible input and exclusively meaning-based instruction (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long & Robinson, 1998; Sharwood Smith, 1981, 1991; Spada, 1997; Swain, 1985; White, 1987).

Based on her observation that learners in Canadian immersion classrooms failed to achieve native-like proficiency, despite considerable exposure to comprehensible input, Swain (1985) argued that the comprehensible input provided to immersion learners might not be sufficient "to ensure that the outcome will be native-like performance" (p. 236). She speculated the immersion learners did not achieve grammatical competence because they had few opportunities to produce the target language. These observations led Swain to formulate the output hypothesis, which states "output that extends the linguistic repertoire of the

learner as he or she attempts to create precisely and appropriately the meaning desired is facilitative of L2 learning" (p. 252).

This view had been further emphasized by Schmidt (1990, 2001) in his noticing hypothesis. He pointed to the necessity of drawing learners' attention to the formal properties of language to help them notice L2 forms if they are to successfully learn them. Focus on form does not imply a focus on individual linguistic forms as a way of organizing language instruction. In fact, the primary focus of FoF instruction is never to be anything other than meaningful activity. As a result, form-focused instruction--both proactive and reactive--has been proposed as a way of drawing learners' attention to language form within communicative classrooms; there is evidence to support this approach from a large number of instructional studies carried out over the past 20 years (e.g., Doughty, 2001; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Lightbown, 1998; Long, 1991, 1996).

## Recasts: Some Considerations in Language Classrooms

Inspired by research results in first language (L1) acquisition (Baker & Nelson, 1984; Farrar, 1990, 1992), some L2 researchers posit that recasts are beneficial for SLA (Doughty, 2001; Doughty & Varela, 1998; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, 1996). Recasts are defined as "utterances that rephrase child's utterance by changing one or more sentence components…while referring to its central meaning" (Long, 1996, p. 434). Another general definition of recasts is presented by Lyster and Ranta (1997) stating that "recasts involve the teacher's reformulation of all or part of a student's utterance" (p. 46).

Recasts are thought to help L2 learners notice the discrepancy between their nonnative-like utterance and the target-like reformulation. As noted earlier, the process of noticing the difference between the ill-formed utterance and the correct utterance is considered to be essential to learning (Schmidt, 1990, 1993).

Recasts are also believed to be an effective technique in limiting learners' attention and making the attention to errors more selective and subject to voluntary control. VanPatten (1990)

argued that learners cannot attend to and process both meaning and form at the same time. He showed, however, that L2 learners can consciously focus on form if the input is easily comprehended. Given that recasts juxtapose the correct and incorrect utterances while keeping the meaning constant, they are thought to free up processing resources by allowing the learner to attend the form of the utterance.

Besides, recasts address some pedagogical concerns. For example, it has been argued that CF should be abandoned because it can have potential negative effects on learners' affect, thus endangering the flow of communication (Krashen, 1981; Truscott, 1999). However, because recasts are implicit, unobstrusive, and perform the dual function of providing a correct model while maintaining a focus on meaning, many L2 researchers consider them to be the ideal corrective feedback (CF) technique (Doughty & Varela, 1998; Long, 1996).

It should, however, be mentioned that recasts are not without problems. Based on an analysis of the functional properties of recasts used in content-based L2 classrooms, Lyster (1998) observed that recasts and non-corrective repetitions had similar forms and seemed to have the same function of reformulating the learner's utterance and were therefore used interchangeably, which led recasts to be rendered ambiguous. In other words, the corrective nature of recasts was obscured by their formal and functional overlap with repetitions. This might be particularly true of classrooms in which a teacher's reformulation can be mistaken for a confirmation or disconfirmation of the content of the learners' message rather than of its form. Similar concerns about the ambiguity of recasts were raised earlier by Fanselow (1997) and Chaudron (1997). These concerns were further strengthened by the finding that learners in content-based L2 classroom responded overtly to recasts less frequently than to other CF techniques (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). The limited uptake (in the form of repair or needs-repair) following recasts was treated as a sign that learners did not notice corrective intent of recasts.

## Researches on the Effects of Recasts

The majority of the studies on the acquisitional value of recasts have been carried out in laboratory settings (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Leeman, 2003, Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998; Mackey & Oliver, 2002; Mackey & Philip, 1998). This body of research has shown that recasts can aid interlanguage development and can do so especially when the moderating effects of the linguistic structure (Long et al., 1998) and learners' proficiency level/ readiness to acquire it (Mackey & Philip, 1998) are taken into account.

In a study investigating the effects of recasts and models on the acquisition of Japanese fronted locative constructions and adjective ordering and Spanish object topicalization and adverb placement, Long et al. (1998) reported no differences between the two experimental conditions with respect to the Japanese grammatical targets. As for the Spanish structures, analyses of gained scores showed significant short-term benefits for recasts over models for adverb placement only.

The view that recasts promote learning as sources of positive evidence and positive evidence in recasts is more than negative evidence is also presented by Leeman (2003). In her study, 74 first-year learners of Spanish engaged in native speaker (NS)-non-native speaker (NNS) dyadic interactions in one of four conditions: implicit negative evidence, enhanced positive evidence, recasts, and control. The results indicated that learners who received recasts and enhanced positive evidence (through phonological stress) significantly outperformed the control group who received simple models. In contrast, the implicit negative evidence group did not show significant improvement compared to the control group. This finding led Leeman to conclude that the benefits of recasts are primarily due to enhanced positive evidence.

Mackey and Philip (1998) also investigated the effects of recasts in a laboratory study by introducing another independent variable: proficiency level. The 35 participants assigned to the three different conditions (i.e., recasts, interaction, and control) were classified according to their developmental readiness to acquire the target feature: word order in English question

formation. This resulted in two proficiency groups, (readies and unreadies). The results showed that the readies in the recast group were able to produce more questions at higher developmental levels than the readies in the interaction group. However, with the less advanced learners (i.e., unreadies) there were no differences between the recast and the interaction groups. The differential effects of recasts in relation to learner proficiency level were treated as an indication that recasts might be effective only when a certain developmental readiness is attained.

Some researchers (Lyster & Ranta, 1997) have claimed that recasts might be ambiguous as feedback. Because recasts serve a dual function, as both feedback and conversational response, learners might not always interpret them as feedback Egi (2007) explored how learners interpreted recasts they noticed (as responses to content, negative evidence, positive evidence, or a combination of negative and positive evidence) and how recast features (linguistic targets, length, and number of changes) might affect their interpretations. Egi came to the conclusion that linguistic targets, recast length, and number of changes might individually and collectively affect the extent to which learners notice recasts and subsequently interpret them as feedback. Based on the findings in the study, Egi claimed that because a recast provides linguistic information that is semantically contingent to the learner's problematic utterance; its meaning might already be understood by the learner, at least partially. This might reduce the cognitive demands of processing meaning and thus might free up cognitive resources for allocation of attention to form, potentially facilitating form-function mapping. However, Egi further asserts that when a recast is long or substantially different from the trigger, it might lose its semantic continuity. It could thereby overburden the learner's attentional capacity and bias against the processing of form, particularly for low language proficiency learners. In contrast, when a recast is short and closely resembles the trigger, its semantic continuity might lighten the processing load, allowing learners to attend to form. Indeed, the learners in the Egi's study were more likely to report interpreting shorter

recasts and those with fewer changes as sources of negative and positive evidence.

It seems that research about the effectiveness of recasts has not yet provided clear-cut evidence to support the theoretical claims that recasts draw learners' attention to the formal properties of language. This lack of evidence is more apparent in classroom research indicating that further research is warranted. For this reason, the present study is carried out to determine whether recasts are more effective than no recast in reducing the frequency of the syntactic errors in the participants' oral discourse.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants of the study were 109 male and female university students majoring in English Language Translation at Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch. The subjects were chosen from 120 students according to their language proficiency test scores. They were freshmen attending the listening and speaking classes. The participants of the study were randomly assigned to two groups, i.e., a recast group (n=54), and a no-recast group (n=55). Two male and female teachers handled the classes.

### *Instrumentation*

To make sure that the participants in the two groups belonged to the same population in terms of language proficiency level, the researchers utilized the proficiency test PET (Preliminary English Test) which is a second level Cambridge ESOL exam for the intermediate level learners. The test consisted of four sections: The first section was a test of reading with 35 items. The second section included a test of writing with 8 questions. The listening and speaking sections each included four parts. Those participants who received less than 50 out of 65 were considered not to have the necessary proficiency level to take part in the study. One hundred and nine participants scoring between 50 and 60 out of the total score of 65 were chosen to take part in the study.

A posttest was run after ten sessions of treatment. The posttest was an oral test requiring the participants to answer the question raised by the teacher in 60 seconds (see Appendix A). The participants' answers were recorded, transcribed, and coded for syntactic errors. The rational for providing the participants with limited time to answer was derived from the discussion in Ellis (2007) about the necessity of establishing congruity between implicit knowledge and the tests measuring it. Ellis believed that tests which focus on discrete linguistic forms and allow unlimited response time may favor the use of learners' explicit L2 knowledge. In contrast, tests which involve spontaneous production focusing on meaning or which allow learners limited response time may encourage learners to draw on their implicit L2 knowledge.

*Procedure*

Prior to the study a workshop was held to clarify to the teachers the purpose of the study and provide them with practical guidelines on how to use recasts, on the one hand, and how to run the class with no-recast, on the other. The researchers' negotiation with the teachers maximized the feasibility of providing the learners with recasts and no-recast as it was planned. The researchers stayed in regular contact with the teachers to respond to their questions and to ensure that they were not having problems implementing the activities. The researchers were given the permission to observe the first two sessions in each class to make sure that the teachers were providing, as well as not providing, the corrective feedback as it was intended.

The typical listening and speaking course, offered as a four-credit course, at Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch is divided to two classes, The first one deals with text books providing learners with dialogues and real-like situations and gives learners the opportunity to follow some models and to take part in activities such as role playing, dramatizations, etc to develop their linguistic competence which is necessary for communication. In the second class, the teachers try to promote the learners' communicative competence. They usually choose a topic for

discussion and the students are to express their own ideas and take part in the class negotiation. The present study benefited from the second class.

The two homogeneous groups of participants were exposed to two different treatments. The recast group received recasts. Ten sessions were devoted to the treatment. Each session a new topic was raised and this was continued to the subsequent sessions. The topics included subjects such as marriage, advantages of higher education, computer and today's life and the like. The teacher asked the participants to talk about a topic for around 60 seconds. No textbook was used. The teacher reformulated the participants' utterances immediately when they committed a syntactic error, and there was no chance for the participants to reconsider their erroneous utterances by themselves. In case a participant committed a syntactic error, without a direct reference to the error, the teacher implicitly reformulated the participant's syntactic error or provided the correction. Syntactic errors were the target of this study because they have been shown to be problematic for English language learners (Harley & Swain, 1984; Lightbown & Spada, 1990, 1994; Schmidt, 1983).

Syntactic errors were defined as:

a. Errors in the use of closed classes such as determiners, prepositions, and pronouns.
b. Errors in grammatical gender (including wrong determiners and other noun/adjective agreements).
c. Errors in tense, verb morphology, auxiliaries, and subject/verb agreement.
d. Errors in pluralization, negation, question formation, relativization, and word order.

An example of providing the participants in the recast group with recasts is provided below:

L: I think co-educational schools are more enjoying.
T: Oh. You think co-educational schools are more enjoyable.
L: Yes. They are more enjoying.

The no-recast group participated in the traditional way of free speech classes. In this class, the topics similar to the topics of the recast group were raised. Then the members of the group

talked about each topic in each session for about 60 seconds. The participants in the no-recast group did not receive recast or any other definite type of feedback immediately after committing errors. On the other hand, the teacher provided the class with some comments when the participants ended their speech.

Session 12 was devoted to the posttest. The teachers in both recast and no-recast groups raised a topic in the same genre with those presented in the class and each participant was supposed to talk about the topic about 60 seconds. The time devoted to each participant (60 seconds) was the same as class activities. Nearly 6540 seconds of the participants' utterances about the proposed topics were recorded as the posttest for both experimental and control groups. Sample of the transcriptions of the posttest is available in Appendix B.

*Measures*

Measure of the syntactic errors was developed to evaluate the quality of the participants' oral production. In order to be able to use a reliable measurement, Bygate (2001) was used as a model. Accordingly, the number of T-Units was calculated for each participant's utterances produced in posttest. A T-unit refers to one independent clause plus any number of subordinate clauses that are attached to or embedded in it. So, clauses connected with coordinators like 'and', were considered two T-units. (I like baseball and she likes basketball), while (I like baseball although she doesn't) consists of one T-unit, where 'although she doesn't' is embedded in the main clause. The frequency of syntactic errors for each utterance was equal to the number of errors divided by the number of T-Units.

## Results

In order to increase reliability of the results given by statistical procedures, a one-sample kolmogorov-Smirnov test was run to make sure that the distribution of data was normal in the posttest. Tables 1 and 2 show the normal distribution of data.

Table 1
*One-Sample Kolmogorov- Smirnov Test*

| | Posttest Grammar |
|---|---|
| N | 54 |
| Normal parameter Mean | .1208 |
| Std. Deviation | .06047 |
| Most Extreme Absolute | .306 |
| Positive | .306 |
| Negative | -.230 |
| Kolmogorov- Smirnov | 2.231 |
| Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 |

a. *Test distri*bution is Normal.
*b. calculated from data*

Table 2:
*One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test*

| | Posttest Grammar |
|---|---|
| N | 55 |
| Normal parameter Mean | .1938 |
| Std. Deviation | .09780 |
| Most Extreme Absolute | .168 |
| Positive | .168 |
| Negative | -.125 |
| Kolmogorov- Smirnovz | 1.245 |
| Asymp. Sig (2 tailed) | .090 |

a. test distribution is Normal.
b. calculated from data

To compare the impact of recasts with the no-recast interactional move on the syntactic errors, the researchers ran ANCOVA. The difference of the means of the frequency of errors was meaningful, indicating that recast group (G1, n=54) had been committing fewer grammatical errors than no-feedback group (G2, n=55). The results of data analysis are indicated in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3

*Descriptive Data and ANCOVA Test for the Comparison of the Effect of Recast on Syntactic Errors*

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval for Mean | | Minimum | Maximum |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound | | |
| 1 | 54 | .1473 | .12405 | .01720 | .1128 | .1818 | .00 | .55 |
| 2 | 55 | .411 | .18253 | .2461 | -.0083 | .0904 | -.36 | .44 |

*Table 4*

*Post Hoc Tests: Multiple Comparisons Dependent Variable: DifGr Tukey HSD*

| (I) Groups | (J) Groups | Mean Difference (I-J) | Std. Deviation | Sig | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| 1 | 2 | .10622 | .02789 | .001 | .0402 | .1722 |
| 2 | 1 | -.10622 | .2789 | .001 | -.1722 | -.0402 |

**The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.**

Data analysis results indicated that recasts were more effective than no recast in reducing the frequency of the syntactic errors of participants' oral discourse.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the impact of recasts on the syntactic errors of the participants' oral discourse. Moreover, the research was an attempt to examine the differential effects of recasts and no-corrective feedback on the syntactic errors.

Analyses of the individual learners' performance on the oral tests indicated that learners who received recasts benefited more than those who did not. Recasts were more effective than no recasts in reducing the frequency of the syntactic errors of participants' oral discourse. The results of the present study are in line with the findings of Carroll & Swain (1993), Leeman (2003), Long, Inagaki, & Ortega (1998), and Mackey and Philip (1998) considering a beneficial role of recasts in classroom research.

Leeman (2003) compared the learning that resulted from three treatments: (a) recasts (i.e., providing a comprehension signal, a target like reformulation of the erroneous element of the learners' utterance without any emphasis, and an immediate topic continuation move), (b) negative evidence (i.e., indicating the source of a problem without correction), and (c) enhanced salience (i.e., using stress and intonation to make the target form salient. She found that recast group outperformed the other groups on the posttest and no benefit was found for simply indicating that an error had been committed.

It seems that the positive role of recasts in interlanguage development specially occurs in contexts where the moderating effects of linguistic structure (Long et al., 1998) and learners' language proficiency level/readiness to acquire it (Mackey & Philip, 1998) are taken into account.

The results of the present study may lead us to point out the limitations of the claim made by Lyster (1998a, 1998b) that learners indeed interpret recasts as conversational responses. Uptake and repair, based on which classroom researchers like Lyster have advanced their claim, have provided only limited supporting evidence because they do not offer any qualitative information about the functions learners assign to the recasts they

notice. Qualitative data might further substantiate the claim that learners interpret recasts in various ways.

The inconsistency of the results of the present research with those of Lyster and Ranta (1997) and Lyster (1998a) may be due to the fact that in spite of the implicit nature of recasts, high-proficiency learners participating in the present study whose errors were reformulated (i.e., recast) were able to benefit from reformulation of errors. In other words, since the high-proficiency learners of the present study were sensitive enough to corrective feedback and form-focused instruction, they might not need to be coached in to noticing the correct form.

The findings of the present study can also be considered as another evidence for the beneficial role of recasts in comparison to no corrective feedback (Doughty & Varela, 1998). However, more classroom research needs to be conducted to assess the impact of recast on interlanguage development taking in to consideration the role of recasts interacting with factors such as context of the study, learners' language proficiency level, target structures, and recast features including length or time of providing recasts.

## The Authors

**Parviz Maftoon** is Associate Professor of teaching English at Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch, Tehran, Iran. He received his Ph.D. degree from New York University in 1978 in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). His primary research interests concern EFL writing, second language acquisition, SL/FL language teaching methodology, and language syllabus design. He has published and edited a number of research articles and books. He is currently on the editorial board of some language journals in Iran.

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## Appendices

*Appendix A: Question raised in the posttest of the study*

T: Which one do you prefer? Travelling by train or by airplane?
S: Answered in 60 seconds.

*Appendix B: Sample of the transcription of posttest*

Travelling by plane is very exciting and is very easy and I went by plane. I'm very the comfortable and I like the sky. When I'm in plane, I like cloud, I like see the city the home and the country from the high. They are very small and very very beautiful and I like the view that is from the plane. But travel by train is good ut the speed with travel with plane very high and you can arrive to your point very soon. very sooner than train. But travel with train is more safe than travel by plane. Travel with train is more safe than travel by plane. I think just this.

Ammar. (2008). Prompts and Recasts, Differential Effects on Second Language Morphosyntax. *Language Teaching Research* , 163-210.

# بررسی تاثیر ری کست برصحت نحوی گفتار دانشجویان زبان انگلیسی

پرویز مفتون
شعله کلاهی
دانشگاه آزاد اسلامی واحد علوم و تحقیقات تهران

یکی از مهمترین موضوعات مورد بحث در بین محققان در زمینه فراگیری زبان دوم بررسی میزان توجه معلم یا زبان آموز به قواعد زبانی است. با وجود این یکی از متغیر های مربوط به این موضوع که ظاهرا کمتر مورد بررسی قرار گرفته است مقایسه ی تاثیر انواع بازخورد بر صحت گفتاری شرکت کنندگان در تحقیق می باشد. اخیرا بررسی تاثیر مثبت استفاده از ری کست به عنوان بازخورد اصلاحی در کلاس ها به موضوع بحث انگیز ی تبدیل شده است. تحقیق حاضر به بررسی تاثیر ری کست در مقایسه با تدریس بدون استفاده از ری کست بر صحت گفتاری دانشجویان پرداخته است. یکصد و نه دانشجوی مرد و زن رشته ی مترجمی زبان انگلیسی در دانشگاه آزاد اسلامی واحد تهران مرکزی در تحقیق شرکت کردند. آنها در کلاس های گفت و شنود حضور داشتند. فراگیران در گروه آزمایش به مدت ده جلسه بازخورد اصلاحی ری کست را در مقابل خطاهای دستوری دربافت کردند.درحالیکه گروه کنترل هیچ نوع ری کستی دریافت نکردند.در جلسه ی دوازدهم پس آزمون اجرا شد .معلم موضوعی را مطرح کرد و فراگیران حدود شصت ثانیه در مورد آن صحبت کردند.
حدود ٦٥٤٠ ثانیه از گفتار شرکت کنندگان ضبط شد. بررسی و تحلیل اطلاعات بدست آمده نشان داد که گروه ری کست بهتر از گروه بدون ری کست عمل کرده است. در واقع استفاده از ری کست در کاهش فراوانی خطا ها ی نحوی در گفتار دانشجویان موثر بوده است.

کلیدواژه ها: بازخورد اصلاحی،ری کست ، خطا های نحوی و فراوانی خطاها در گفتار