

Subcategorization of Recasts: Examining different features

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Abstract

This observational study was conducted to analyze different types of recasts used by teachers in communicative language lessons and to classify them so that subcategories may be established for what have hitherto been classified into several broad categories. Error treatment sequences involving recasts were detected and analyzed using a model developed for the study. As in some previous studies, the results reveal that recasts possess different features which make it possible to classify them into six types. These features were subcategorized on the basis of length, degree of emphasis, intonation, number of focus, and number of corrections. As a result of this subcategorization, a new type, what one may call a ‘cue plus recast’, was identified. This study seems to indicate that recasts are potentially susceptible to closer analysis and more minute classification than previous research may have suggested.

Keywords

feedback, recasts, subcategorization, types, length, segmentation, emphasis, intonation, cue

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

It has been reported that recasts are widely used in many second language classrooms as well as in naturalistic contexts. In fact, observational studies have revealed that recasts are by far the most frequently used feedback type in language classrooms (Lyster and Ranta, 1997 for example). Many definitions of recasts have centered around the notion that they are generally provided implicitly in the course of meaning-focused interaction in response to nontarget-like learner utterances. Researchers (Long, 1996 for example) that have investigated the effect of recasts have found recasting promising as an EFL classroom technique for the following reasons: It 1) is implicit, 2) is

unobtrusive and learner centered, 3) has the dual function of providing both positive and negative evidence simultaneously, and 4) facilitate learners’ noticing the gap.

Earlier research has revealed that recasts come in all “shapes and sizes” and that recasts of different types perform different functions (Philp, 2003; Loewen and Philp, 2006; Egi, 2007), although adequate empirical studies have yet to be made to identify factors that may influence their saliency.

1.2 Present Study

The research question of the present study is: What types of recasts can be identified in the feedback provided by the teacher in the EFL classroom beyond the six categories that have been identified in previous research? This question assumes that a close analysis of data collected in the classroom will show that recasts in fact have a number of features which may contribute to a more detailed classification of recasts than has been reported so far.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The data were collected at a private language school in Tokyo, Japan. The classes were conducted either as one-teacher-one-student dyads or one-teacher-two-students groups. Seven teachers, all native speakers of English with varying levels of teaching experience, participated in this study. The school administered a placement test and the individual students were assigned to classes that were appropriate for their level. Data on students’ utterances will not be presented here as this study is intended to investigate the characteristics of recasts arising in communicative language lessons, and individual learner differences are thus beyond the scope of the study.

2.2 Observation

Ten 40-minute lessons were recorded on an IC recorder and a total of 1001 turns were coded and transcribed. The types of interaction included role-plays, discussions, information gap activities, reading and listening comprehension activities, summarizing, and free conversation, all of which focus primarily on meaning. The classes proceeded in accordance with a predetermined manual and textbook, but no fixed ways of teaching were prescribed.

2.3 Coding

Error sequences occurring in the lessons were delimited so that they fit the definition provided by Ellis, et al. (2001, p. 294): “the discourse from the point where the attention to linguistic form starts to the point where it ends, due to a change in topic back to message or sometimes another focus on form.” The categories for the variety of recasts were coded by a method based, in part, on research by Loewen and Philp (2006). The categories can be found in Table 1.

Table 1 *Recast Characteristics*

Length of Recast	
Fewer than five morphemes	Length of the entire recast utterance contains fewer than five morphemes
Five or more morphemes	Length of the entire recast utterance contains five or more morphemes
Segmentation	
Segmented	The recast provides a partial recast of the learner's utterance
Whole	The recast is an entire recast of the whole trigger utterance
Emphasis	
Unstressed	Linguistic item that is recast is not given atypical stress
Stressed	Linguistic item that is recast is given atypical stress, through pitch, additional pausing and emphasis
Cue plus recast	The recast is provided with an additional signal
Recast only	The recast is provided without an additional signal.

Intonation	
Declarative	The recast is provided with falling intonation as a declarative statement
Interrogative	The recast is provided with rising intonation as a question
Number of Corrections	
One correction	Recast includes one correction to the learner's trigger utterance
Two or more corrections	Recast includes two or more corrections to the learner's trigger utterance
Number of focuses	
Recast only	Utterance from the teacher that only involves recasts.
Recast plus other types of feedback	Recasts provided with a combination of other types of feedback moves

3. Results and discussion

Table 2 shows the distribution for all the coded categories. A total of 202 recasts were coded and classified into six types. It must be noted that teachers did not always adhere to a single type of recast but rather combined multiple types of recasts in a single turn.

Table 2 *Number and percentage of recast types*

Characteristic	n	Percent
Length of Recast		
Fewer than five morphemes	139	68.8%
Five or more morphemes	63	31.2%
Segmentation		
Segmented	98	48.5%
Whole	104	51.5%
Emphasis		
Unstressed	167	82.7%
Stressed	35	17.3%
Recast only	179	88.6%
Cue plus recast	23	11.4%
Intonation		
Declarative	182	90.1%
Interrogative	20	9.9%
Number of Changes		
One change	156	77.2%
Two or more changes	46	22.8%
Number of Feedback		

Recast only	177	87.6%
Recast plus other types of feedback	25	12.4%

As can be inferred from Table 2, recasts that appeared in this study tended to be short recasts (68.8%) targeted towards one error (77.2%) with declarative intonation (90.1%). See Example 1. This is consistent with the finding by Loewen and Philp (2006) and Egi (2007).

Example 1

S	We got together with my friend's house
T	AT my friend's house.
S	At my friend's house and eating lunch and playing with her son and daughter.

However there was a difference in the distribution of segmentation. Whereas half (51.5%) of the instances were those of a 'whole' correction, Loewen and Philp (2006) found most recasts (69.3%) to be 'segmented'. This difference may have been due to the timing of recasts. In this study, most of the teachers provided spontaneous recasting immediately after the error. In Example 2, the teacher intrudes the student's utterance exactly at the point when the student has made a mistake. The correction continues until the student has been able to express the full utterance without any error. The extended sequence may have a positive effect on the learner by highlighting the error and by allowing production practice by repetitive correction.

Example 2

S	Do you have time for drinking?
T	Do you have time
S	Do you have time for drinking tonight?
T	For A drink
S	For a drink
T	Do you have time for a drink tonight?
S	Do you have a time
T	Do you have time
S	Do you have time for a drinking
T	For A drink tonight.
S	Do you have time for a drink tonight?
T	Good.

One new type of recasts which one may call "cue plus recasts" was found from this study. In some instances recasts were made more overt by using some kind of cue to signal the learner that an error has been made before providing a recast. See Example 3. By making an additional sound ("Ah!" or "Oh" for example) before a correction, attention is brought to the subsequent utterance involving feedback. For this reason, this feature was categorized under "emphasis". However the finding must be interpreted with caution as the raw frequencies and percentage of this kind of feedback are quite low. Whether this type of emphasis needs a separate categorization needs to be investigated.

Example 3

S	Three pizza.
T	Three pizzas? For two people? Who did you go with?
S	Go with colleagues
T	!!! Went with
S	I went with colleagues

4. Limitations and future implications

The present small scale study was designed to examine the variety of recasts used by teachers and the functions they perform in the language classrooms. Although the number of recasts coded was not sufficient and some aspects of feedback (e.g. the number of focuses) were not taken up, it provided some evidence of how teachers draw on different types of recasting techniques. For future research, experimental studies that test the benefit of individual recast types through observation of uptake and/or administration of pre- and post-test may be of interest as such studies may suggest how the quality of recasts can lead to language development.

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Appendix

Transcription Key

Symbol	Meaning
S	Student
T	Teacher
CAPITALS	Emphasis
?	Rising intonation
!!!	Cue