

Original Paper

Conversational Interaction and Second Language Development:

Recasts, Responses and Red Herrings? Alison Mackey and

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1. Overview

Recasts are a frequently used technique in second language teaching and also one of the focuses in second language research. Drawing upon a wide variety of literature on negotiated interaction, Mackey and Philip examine the effects of conversational interaction with recasts on the development of question forms in English as a second language, by comparing groups of learners who received interactionally modified input with learners who received intensive recasts of nontarget-like forms. The results show that interaction with intensive recasts may be more effective than interaction alone for the learners' interlanguage development although very few learners' responses were modified immediately.

2. The Research Questions and Their Context

This research aims to investigate whether learners who participate in task-based interaction with intensive recasts will show an increase in developmentally more advanced structures and whether learners will show an increase in producing more advanced structures if their responses to the recasts of these structures are modified. Recasts, in this research, are defined as utterances which are used to correct child's sentence by changing one or more components while still retaining its central meaning, which is mainly based on the definitions of Farrar (1992) and Long (1996). The anticipated results are made very clear in this research, for two hypotheses are presented as well to explain what the authors expected to find before they started to collect data. Moreover, the theoretical basis of this research is Long's interaction hypothesis which claims a positive effect of interaction on interlanguage

restructuring. The authors concur with Long's cognitive-interactionist approach to SLA—no mention of individual learner differences or of the social-cultural context is made.

The authors provide a broad context for these research questions. First of all, many previous studies of interaction have been reviewed in this research. For example, Sato (1988) suggested that second language development might be selectively facilitated by interaction. Gass and Varonis (1994) pointed out that later language use might be influenced by interaction with the opportunity for modifications. Loschky (1994) found a positive effect for interaction on learner comprehension, while no effects have been observed on the retention and acquisition of vocabulary and grammatical structures. Ellis, Tanaka, and Yamazaki (1994) stated that comprehension and lexical acquisition could be improved by interactionally modified input. Mackey (1995, 1997a) found that participating in interaction led to the increase in developmentally more advanced structures which did not happen immediately and that interactional modifications and conditions played a positive role in L2 learning.

From these studies, it can be seen clearly that interaction has drawn considerable attention of many researchers in SLA and relevant research focusing on different types of interactions have examined the effects of interaction on learners' second language development. It would be true to say that the authors sufficiently illustrate interaction is an important area worth exploration and reveal their interest in investigating the relationship between some aspects of conversational interaction and L2 development.

In addition, some recent studies specifically focusing on the effect of one individual interactional feature--recasts on second language development have also been mentioned. For instance, Doughty (1993) found that in classroom context, NS teacher responded to non-native speakers' nontarget-like utterances with recasts very often. Oliver (1995) said that non-native speakers integrated over one-third of recasts when they had opportunities to respond. Lyster and Ranta (1997) noted that teachers tended to use recasts frequently although recasts were ineffective at eliciting student-generated repair. Long (1996) claimed that recasts could draw learners' attention to mismatches between input and output.

Compared with the studies on recasts mentioned above, this research seems to go a step further because it is an attempt to explore learners' use of recasts beyond their immediate turns by using delayed posttests, while almost all of the previous studies simply investigated the immediate effect of recasts. It can be seen that the authors paid more attention to the research design in order to fill the gap between current studies and longitudinal studies that do not exist yet.

3. Limitations of the Data Collection Methods

With regard to data collection, we can see that the subjects in this research are thirty-five adult English second language learners from beginner and lower intermediate intensive English classes from two private English language schools in Sydney. No ethical problems are shown in this research because all of the subjects voluntarily agreed to participate in this research. The whole process of data collection lasted five weeks, and during this period the participants were paired with a native speaker and performed three tasks. The utterances produced in these tasks are transcribed as data.

It would be true to say that it is small-scale research because the number of participants is not large. However, it seems more reliable, as compared to some previous studies, such as Sato (1986, 1988) examining only two Vietnamese brothers. Nevertheless, the data collection methods seem to have the following problems.

Firstly, considering that some personal factors may influence individual learners' language learning outcome, such as personality, motivation, attitudes and aptitude for second language learning, comparing two different groups of participants to examine the effect of recasts seems not very reliable. Therefore, this research probably can be improved if the same group of participants can be used as both interactor unready and recast unready or both interactor ready and recast ready to observe their production of developmentally more advanced structures when receiving recasts. So it is probably better to divide the participants into three groups including a ready group, an unready group and a control group rather than five groups.

Secondly, the learners' behaviors were possibly affected by their awareness of being tested, especially at the beginning of doing this research. For example, when noticing they were observed, the learners were very likely to ask fewer questions and avoid using unfamiliar words and structures that they were not very sure about even if they could produce some of the structures correctly, especially introvert learners and those who were not very confident in performing speaking tasks. Thus, the results of pretests might be influenced. The reliability of the results probably can be improved if great importance can be attached to creating a relaxed environment for conversations and spending time to get familiar with learners before starting to collect data.

Thirdly, the fact that the native speaker of British English did not participate in the recast groups may also influence the results, because native speakers may differ in their speeds of speaking, in their accents and in the degree of sentence complexity when recasting learners' nontarget-like utterances. For instance, some of native speakers tend to respond with full recasts while others may prefer to respond with partial recasts which may be more easily internalized by low-proficiency level learners.

4. Limitations of the Data Analysis Methods

During the process of analyzing data, question forms were used as the measure of development in this research and the model of question forms and developmental stages based on Pienemann and Johnston (1987) and Pienemann et al. (1988) was adopted to assess learners' developmental level. It would be true to say that the results of data analysis seem very clear in this research for eight tables and two figures were used to help illustrate how the data were analyzed. However, these methods still have some limitations.

One problem is that the researchers chose questions forms as the measure of L2 development. Although question forms are easily elicited and present at all stages of L2 learning, this feature may not be the best measure of second language development. Some other features can also serve as important indicators in second language morphosyntactic complexity and accuracy, for example, the length of utterance, the rate of error-free utterances, the use of a wide range of vocabulary and the use of a variety of tenses.

Another problem is that in this research participants were considered to obtain a stage increase only when they used two higher-level questions forms for at least two times in more than one of the posttests. No doubt that the criterion for judging whether learners achieved a higher stage seems to be somewhat subjective and arbitrary. This research probably can be improved if a more appropriate criterion is used.

5. The Research Findings

Based on quantitative and qualitative data analysis, the findings seem to be very clear: higher proficiency learners who participated in interaction with intensive recasts showed a greater increase in structures at higher developmental levels than learners who participated in interaction without intensive recasts; no increase in structures at higher developmental levels were found when learners' responses to the recasts were modified.

The first finding has to some extent confirmed what the authors expected to find before doing this research. However, there is a slight difference between them because only high-proficiency level learners who participated in interaction with intensive recasts have shown a greater increase in producing developmentally more advanced structures than those who participated in interaction without intensive recasts. It can be seen that learners' developmental level is an important factor that should be considered when examining the effects of recasts. Based on this finding, teachers need to take learners' proficiency level into serious consideration when using recasts in classroom context, because not all learners can benefit from recasts and probably explicit correction can benefit some learners more than recasts, especially low-proficiency level learners.

The second finding suggests that recasts were rarely repeated and modified by the learners in the context of task-based interaction, which seemed to be inconsistent with the hypothesis. The authors argue that learners may eventually make use of the recasts and therefore immediate responses may have limited value in terms of predicting whether or not recasts will be used. However, this research does not explain why not all learners use recasts and which factors may affect their decisions.

6. Conclusion

Overall, this experimental research gives us a true if not complete picture of the relationship between recasts and interlanguage development, by using both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Although imperfect, question forms remain the best tool to measure L2 development. Although it is not detailed longitudinal work, this research used delayed posttest design to examine a long-term effect. Based on the findings of a positive role of recasts in the production and development of questions in ESL, it also provides recommendations for future study, such as considering factors influencing learners' responses to recasts.

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