

Effects of Recasts in the Acquisition of English Language Prepositions among Filipino ESL Learners: A Comparative study

Abstract: *This study rests on Long's (1983, 1996) Interaction Hypothesis that forwards the facilitative role of interaction in second language acquisition. Recast is one of the interactional features that researchers have been investigating. It is said to be the most frequently used corrective feedback method in classroom settings (Lyster, 2007). However, there are inconsistencies in the conclusions of studies that examine the effectiveness of recasts. A number of studies attest to the beneficial role of recast in SLA (e.g., Doughy & Varela, 1998; Mackey & Philp, 1998; Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998; Muranoi, 2000; Ayoun, 2001; Iwashita, 2003; Han, 2002; Ishida, 2004; Zhuo, 2010) while others claim otherwise (e.g., Lyster, 2004; Ammar & Spada, 2006; Sato, 2006; Lyster & Izquierdo, 2009; Nassaji, 2009). Given the inconsistencies of the results which may be attributed to definitional discrepancy, this study attempts to examine the effects of recasts (in general) on the improvement of L2 grammar development, specifically on the acquisition of English language prepositions. This study is conducted within an experimental framework, providing recasts to 15 Grade 6 students (treatment group) and input without recast to the remaining 15 (control group) in picture-description tasks. The learning outcomes of these groups on a pretest-post-test basis were compared. Results reveal that students in the recast group show significant improvement compared to their control group counterparts, hence supporting the claim that recast holds a promising effect in a successful second language acquisition.*

Key Words: *recast, corrective feedback, SLA, interaction*

INTRODUCTION

The deep-rooted interest among SLA researchers in the effects of recast can be traced three decades ago when attention was drawn to the study of the role of interaction in L2 development. Long (1983), in his first version of Interaction Hypothesis, claimed the importance of interaction in facilitating comprehension that led to L2 development. It was then in the mid-1990s when empirical studies forwarding the facilitative role of interaction in SLA flourished. Consequently, Long (1996) reformulated his hypothesis by stressing "negotiation for meaning" which facilitated acquisition. This modified hypothesis further opened doors for researchers now investigating the effects of certain interactional features such as prompts, models, syntactic priming, and recasts.

Before the concept of recast converged with the area of L2 acquisition, it was first introduced in L1 acquisition referring to adults' responses to children's utterances (Nelson, Carskaddon, & Bonvillian, 1973, as cited in

Rezaei, Mozaffari, & Hatef, 2011). Long (1996) defined recasts as "utterances which rephrase a child's utterance by changing one or more sentence components (subject, verb, or object) while still referring to its central meaning" (p. 434). A year after, Lyster and Ranta (1997) defined recasts as reformulated version of all or part of an utterance without the error. A few years later, Ohta (2001, in Tatawy, n.d.) described recasts as immediate reformulation that contrasted with the learner's erroneous utterance phonologically, morphologically, syntactically, yet preserving the semantic contiguity of the learner's utterance.

While the above-mentioned definitions appear parallel with one another, Zhuo (2010) reviewed the definitional differences reported by Nicholas et al. (2001, in Zhuo, 2010) and Ellis and Sheen (2006, in Zhuo, 2010). Sheen (2006) considered recasts as "teacher's reformulation of all or part of a student's utterance that contains at least one error within the context of a communicative activity in the classroom" (p.

365). Long (2007) explained that corrective recasts, just like Sheen's (2006) definition, referred to teacher's reformulation, and the difference lay in making reference to the interlocutor's orientation in interaction, saying that "throughout the exchange, the focus of the interlocutors is on meaning not language as an object" (p. 77). Long's (2007) definition contradicted with Lyster and Ranta's (1997) explanation as the latter focused on form while the former seemed to highlight meaning. Another definitional discrepancy could be noticed in Doughty and Varela's (1998, in Zhuo, 2010) study which treated recasts as explicit corrective feedback, referring to the teacher's repetition of the student's erroneous utterance and putting prosodic emphasis or uttering the incorrect form with rising intonation. This implicitness-explicitness controversy can be accounted for by the various types of recasts such as corrective/non-corrective (Farrar, 1992, in Rezaei, Mozaffari, & Hatef, 2011), full/partial recasts, single/multiple recasts, single utterance/extended utterance recasts, and simple/complex recasts (Ellis & Sheen, 2006, in Rezaei, Mozaffari, & Hatef, 2011).

Despite the definitional differences and the problematic implicitness-explicitness dichotomy of recasts (Ding, 2012), Tatawy (n.d.) enumerates several factors as to why the role of recasts in SLA receives a great deal of attention: the inconspicuous characteristic of recasts in the flow of communication, the immediacy of recasts, and the widely-acknowledged significance of immediate feedback following an error in the acquisition of the target form (Nicholas, Lighbown, & Spada, 2001, in Tatawy, n.d.). Among the studies that empirically supported the positive impact of recasts on L2 learning was that of Doughty and Varela (1998, in Zhuo, 2010); they found that the group that received corrective feedback in the form of recasts significantly outperformed the group that received no feedback. In the same year, the results of Mackey and Philp's (1998) study favored the provision of intensive recasts whose corrective nature was understood by learners. The intensity of recasts, along with individualized attention, consistent focus, and learner's developmental readiness, was further reinforced by Han (2002) whose study looked into the effects of recasts in the acquisition of tense

consistency. Ishida (2004) likewise found recasts to be effective in the acquisition of a Japanese aspectual form. In a quasi-experimental study among college students in Japan (Muranoi, 2000), results revealed that recasts helped in the acquisition of English articles. Many other studies supported the beneficial role of recasts in L2 learning such as those of Ayoun (2001) which investigated the efficacy of recasts in the acquisition of *passé, composé, and imparfait*; Iwashita (2003) which explored negative and positive evidence in task-based interaction; Long, Inagaki, and Ortega (1998) which experimented on the effects of recasts and models in Japanese and Spanish; and Zhuo (2010) which examined the relative effects of recasts on the acquisition of English noun plural by Chinese EFL learners.

In contrast, some researchers saw the downside of recasts. Lyster (2004) explored the differential effects of prompts and recasts in form-focused instruction and found in the post-test scores that the prompt group did better than the recast group. This finding is supported by Ammar and Spada (2006, in Zhuo, 2010), Lyster and Izquierdo (2009, in Zhuo, 2010), and Nassaji (2009). The claimed ineffectiveness of recasts can be accounted for by its ambiguity as learners do not notice recasts (Lyster, 1998; Panova & Lyster, 2002, in Rezaei, Mozaffari, & Hatef, 2011); learners also consider recast as simply repetition of their answers/utterances, thus failing to see its corrective force (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Nicholas et al., 2001; Morris & Tarone, 2003; and Long, 2006, all in Rezaei, Mozaffari, & Hatef, 2011). Zhuo (2010) explained that recasts may be perceived as a confirmation of meaning, if not a repetition of the child's utterance, and concluded that recasts were less effective than prompts, elicitation, and metalinguistic explanations, all of which were explicit types of negative feedback. Similarly, Sato (2010) reviewed the early claim of Chaudron (1988, in Sato, 2010) that recasts may be perceived not as modifications but alternatives since they did not seem to invite repair (Loewen & Philp, 2006, in Rezaei, Mozaffari, & Hatef, 2011). Empirically, Sato (2006, in Sato, 2010), in his investigation on the effectiveness of recasts among Japanese high school students, found that only 16% of recasts obtained learner-generated repair.

It can be concluded that the various findings that have been reported in different

instructional settings invite more evidence from future research. The research gaps, therefore, lies not only in what results the studies yielded but also in how *recast* was operationalized. It is difficult to add to the growing body of studies whose results are always being compared, given that these studies may not be looking at the same thing. Given the inconsistencies on the conclusions of the cited literature which may be attributed to definitional discrepancy, the aim of the present study is not simply to add to the growing body of knowledge but, more importantly, to answer the same research question operationalizing recasts in general, hence irrespective of whether they are implicit or explicit. As suggested by Ellis and Sheen (2006, in Zhuo, 2010), it is better to apply a very general definition of recasts in conducting research. Besides, recasts can lie “at various points on a continuum of linguistic implicitness-explicitness” (Ellis & Sheen, 2006, p. 583, in Ding, 2012).

RESEARCH QUESTION

This research aims to answer the question:

Does exposure to input with corrective feedback (CF) in the form of recasts improve the acquisition of English language prepositions than exposure to input with no CF?

Hypotheses of the Study

Null: Learners exposed to recasts as CF (recast group) do not show significant greater gains over the learners not exposed to CF (control group).

Alternative: Learners exposed to recasts as CF (recast group) show significant greater gains over the learners not exposed to CF (control group).

METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

The quantitative design using the quasi-experimental method of research was employed in conducting the study since the primary purpose of the research was to discuss and show the role of exposure and non-exposure to

recasts as a form of corrective feedback in the successful acquisition of English language prepositions by L2 learners.

2.2 Participants and Sampling Procedure

The participants in the study consisted of 30 advanced pupils of English from the top Grade 6 class in one of the public elementary schools in Quezon province. They were purposively chosen because these students had been exposed to English instruction early on and their English aptitude was considerably high as revealed by their performance in some of the various English language tests and activities in the classroom. Therefore, they had a quite acceptable level of proficiency and had generally acquired enough English language skills to allow them to participate in the task-based interaction used as the treatment task in this study. This consideration was made following the suggestions of various researchers (Han, 2002; Ishida, 2004, in Zhuo, 2010) that recasts should be addressed to learners with high proficiency, for they might know these types of feedback were a response to the accuracy of their utterances. This, according to the literature reviewed, may spell success in the application of recasts as a form of corrective feedback in an English classroom. Because they were in the same class throughout their primary education, they were taught by the same English teachers. Thus, their learning experiences were highly similar, strengthening the internal validity of this study. They were randomly assigned to one of two treatment groups: 15 students for the recast group and another 15 for the control group.

2.3 Target Structure

The target grammatical item in this study is English spatial prepositions. This target form was chosen for two reasons. First, prepositions, in general, or spatial prepositions, in particular,

have already been introduced to the participants in third grade (expressions used to show locations) and in fourth grade (prepositions and prepositional phrases) as stipulated in the Basic Education Curriculum-Philippine Elementary Learning Competencies in English, June 2010 and as confirmed by their current adviser/English teacher. Thus, the participants in this study were already familiar with and had explicit knowledge of this grammatical item. The second reason for choosing this structure is that English prepositions are known to be problematic for Filipino ESL learners despite the fact that they are introduced in the primary grade, further taught at the secondary level, and even reinforced and extended in the tertiary years. The fact that one of the distinct characteristics of prepositions in general is their complexity has been pointed out by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983, in Bautista, 2000), saying that the use of prepositions is the second most difficult aspect in the English grammar. Masangya and Lozada (2009) claimed that Filipinos found using prepositions difficult since there was only one preposition in the Filipino language, *sa*. This difficulty may also be attributed to the encompassing explication of the semantic features of prepositions, not to mention their distinct syntactic features as they appear in utterances. Nevertheless, despite the difficulty associated with this grammatical form, prepositions occupy a significant role in expressing ideas or in conveying a message, thus the need to look closely into how Filipino ESL learners acquire and learn them.

2.4 Instruments

2.4.1 Treatment Task

A picture-description task was employed in the conduct of the study because it was widely used as instrument for data collection and analysis and as treatment in interaction research (e.g., Iwashita, 2003; McDonough, 2005). Another point that was considered by the researchers was the fact that activities that made use of pictures had been proven to arouse students' interests (particularly young learners) better than activities that did not. In the task, the participants were shown a picture that could elicit at least 20 descriptions which required the use of prepositions according to the specific

instructions.

2.4.2 Operationalization

In this study, recasts were operationalized as the researchers' reformulation of the student participants' erroneous utterances. In Zhuo's (2010) study, recasts were treated either as explicit or implicit, with the former being stressed, partial, and with only one change, and with the latter being unstressed, full, and with more than one change. As stated earlier, Ellis and Sheen (2006, in Zhuo, 2010) suggested that it was better to apply a very general definition of recasts in conducting research since it could lie "at various points on a continuum of linguistic implicitness-explicitness" (Ellis & Sheen, 2006, p. 583, in Ding, 2012). Thus, this research treated recasts in general—both explicit and implicit. The following extract from the actual conversation indicated how recasts were operationalized:

- Researcher: Where is the poster?
 Student 1: The poster...is in the wall.
 Researcher: **On** the wall. (*with emphasis on "on"*) What about the picture?
 Student 1: The picture is in the wall.
 Researcher: Yeah, the picture is on the wall. What about the English 1 book? Where is the English 1 book with reference to Math and History books?
 Student 1: English 1 book? (*pause/no answer*)
 Researcher: The English 1 book is **between** Math and History books. (*with emphasis on "between"*) What about the necklace? Where is the necklace with reference to the mirror and the brush?
 Student 1: Between mirror and comb.
 Researcher: Yeah. The necklace is between the mirror and the brush or comb.

2.4.3 Testing Instrument and Validation

In order to measure whether recasts made some considerable effects on the knowledge of the participants on English prepositions, a pretest-post-test design was employed. A 20-item pen-and-paper test was constructed for both tests (pre- and post-test). In this study, a grammatical judgment test was chosen by the researcher in

accordance with Ellis' (2005) observation that this test had high reliability in measuring explicit knowledge. The test before administration had undergone a series of validation for higher reliability of the results. First, the test was submitted for evaluation by two language experts, both of whom were language testing practitioners and had been in the profession for over ten years at the time of this investigation. Their suggestions were taken into account by the researchers during the test's revision. The second and final validation procedure was the pilot testing of the instrument. The test was pilot tested among ten Grade 6 pupils, after which the researchers conducted an item analysis. The item analysis consisted of two parts. First, a discrimination index was employed to reveal whether the items could be discriminated in so far as the higher group and lower group of respondents were concerned while the second one was the analysis of index of difficulty which aimed to reveal which of the test items seemed to be difficult, fairly difficult, and easy. After these analyses, the questions which appeared to be too difficult and too easy were rejected and revised respectively.

2.5 Procedure

After identifying the experimental and the control groups, each of the group's members was given the pretest. After this, the researchers conducted the picture-cued tasks in each group for three weeks. The experimental group (which in this research was referred to as the recast group) received and was exposed to recasts during the task while the control group was not. It is important to note that the kind of recasts employed by the researchers was a combination of both implicit and explicit recasts as identified in Zhuo's (2010) study.

Three days after the last picture-cued tasks were conducted, the post-test was then administered to the participants. Though the items in the post-test were similar to those in the pretest, the items were jumbled and rearranged to avoid familiarity, thereby achieving a better validity and reliability in terms of the test results. The tests were then checked, tabulated, and analyzed.

2.6 Statistical Treatment

In the analysis and interpretation of the data collected from the participants, the following statistical treatments were used:

Mean was used in both tests in which the scores obtained by the respondents were totaled and divided by the number of respondents.

A **two-sample t-test** (also called an **independent-samples t-test**) was utilized in the study, for there were scores for each test in two separate samples, and the study aimed to test the null hypothesis that learners exposed to recasts did not show greater gains over learners who were not exposed to recasts.

Since the analysis utilized a two-way t-test with 30 respondents in total, the researchers made use of 2.048 critical value under 28 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. This statistical benchmark is in congruence with the table of critical values in the percentage points of the T distribution, specifically, under the two-tailed probabilities in testing hypothesis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The goal of this study as stipulated in the research question section of this paper was to unveil the role of recast as a form of CF in the acquisition of English language prepositions by young learners in the Philippine context. This section presents the results of the pretest and post-test of the participants, both the control and the recast group. The data showed that recasts proved to be beneficial in the successful acquisition of English prepositions. These results suggest that exposure to recasts promises benefits for learners compared to no recasts at all. These are consistent with the data from various studies that claim that recasts play a significant role in SLA and are contrary to many findings that state otherwise. Taking into consideration the current debate on the real effects of recast as a form of corrective feedback in L2 classroom, this research (which is undoubtedly caught in the middle of these opposing stances) aimed at exploring which of the opposing claims this study will likely take.

Table 1 shows the mean scores of the two groups of participants in both the pretest and the post-test administered by the researchers. As can be seen in the table, learners from the recast group showed significant improvement compared to their control group counterparts. With a mean difference of 2.53, which when subjected to a t-test revealed a t-value of 4.709 which was way higher than the critical value of 2.048 at 0.05 level of significance or degree of freedom, this finding suggests that there is significant difference between the performance of the recast group in their pre- and post-test and that of the members of the control group. This simply demonstrates that recast as a form of corrective feedback plays a positive role in the acquisition of prepositions, a pronouncement consistent with the claims of various researchers in their studies (e.g., Doughy & Varela, 1998; Mackey & Philp, 1998; Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998; Muranoi, 2000; Ayoun, 2001; Iwashita, 2002; Han, 2002; Ishida, 2004; Zhuo, 2010) and contrary to others (e.g., Lyster, 2004; Ammar & Spada, 2006; Sato, 2006; Lyster & Izquierdo, 2009; Nassaji, 2009). This research may not mediate these opposing positions regarding the role of recasts in SLA but corroborates and joins the claim of many research studies that recast holds a promising role in successful second language acquisition.

Table 1. Mean Scores and Computed t-value in the Pretest and Posttest of the Participants

| Sample Groups | Test versions | Mean | Mean difference | t-value | Interpretation |
|---------------|---------------|--------|-----------------|---------|-----------------|
| Recast Group | Pretest | 10.33 | 2.53 | 4.709 | Significant |
| | Posttest | 12.86 | | | |
| Control Group | Pretest | 10.667 | 0.13 | 0.03589 | Not Significant |
| | Posttest | 10.53 | | | |

Meanwhile, the t-value obtained from the mean difference between the pre- and the post-test of the control group showed a zero relationship with a t-value of 0.03589 which was way below the critical value of 2.048 at 0.05 level of significance in a two-tailed t-test. This simply shows that input alone of the teachers will not suffice and will not fully account for successful second language acquisition; hence, there is a need for recasts to be employed in order to reinforce the input given by the teachers whenever students commit errors in their utterance since errors in ESL and EFL contexts are widely viewed as inevitable phenomena.

With this, the null hypothesis which states that learners exposed to recasts as CF (recast group) do not show significant greater gains over the learners not exposed to CF (control group) is hereby rejected. The alternative one is accepted following the finding that learners exposed to recasts as CF (recast group) show significant greater gains compared to learners not exposed to CF (control group).

The results of the study do not just contribute to the debate on the utility of recasts in SLA but likewise reveal several pedagogical issues. First, the results suggest that there is a high level of dependence of ESL learners on teachers' corrective feedback, thus underlining the need for teachers to give recasts whenever students commit errors in their utterances. This dependence of learners on their teachers' feedback is quite expected, for studies have proven students' reliance on someone whom they view as experts or knowledgeable in the field. In addition, despite the emergence of learner-centered approaches to language teaching which put emphasis on learners' independence and responsibility for their own learning, teachers are still viewed by many students as dispensers of knowledge and thus the epitome of truth and accuracy. Another pedagogical issue raised by the results of this investigation is that recast when used as a corrective strategy in ESL classroom increases learners' awareness of their utterances. Recasts of teachers draw students' attention to their incorrect utterance and the need to correct them, thus developing their metacognitive abilities in English. These metacognitive abilities are known in SLA as metalinguistic awareness-generally described as the ability to reflect on and manipulate linguistic structural features. It is a theoretical construct that pertains to being able to grasp the nature of language and thus treating it as an object of thought, in contrast to being able to use the language to express and communicate meaning (Tunmer & Bowey, 1984; Tunmer & Herriman, 1984, in Hill, 1999). Increasing learner metalinguistic awareness as suggested by numerous studies (Eviatar and Ibrahim, 2000; Dita, 2009; Bialystok, 1988) has been proven to be beneficial in preventing errors from occurring in an ESL student's utterance. Noteworthy as well is the issue of whether English language teachers have enough ability to use recast, and,

more bluntly, whether teachers know what constitutes recast. It is also a fact that some language teachers are still not aware of this corrective feedback strategy. It now becomes a question of whether teachers have the ability to employ recasts as an instructional strategy in their language classrooms. If not, then a suggestion will be to provide teachers with further training to enhance their skills in giving corrective feedback to their students. This, we believe, will be beneficial to second language learners because improvements in their skills in providing corrective feedback mean that their noticing and metalinguistic abilities will likewise be enhanced.

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the effects of recasts on the acquisition of English prepositions among ESL Filipino learners. The results revealed that learners who were exposed to recasts were at an advantage compared to their counterparts who were not exposed to recasts. Hence, this study is a clear empirical support to the claim that recast as a form of CF leads to greater L2 grammar development. This supports what Rassaei and Moïnzadeh (2011) mentioned in their study: “[W]hen learners are provided with recasts they have to acquire the rule inductively which in turn leads to higher level of processing” (p. 102). This superiority can also be explained by noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 2001, in Zhuo, 2010). Noticing hypothesis states that it is necessary to draw learners’ attention to the formal properties of language to help them notice L2 form so that they can successfully learn them. Therefore, recasts are a way of drawing the attention of learners to the target structure even within a communicative context. Because recasts allow teachers to maintain control over linguistic forms while not losing learners’ attention on meaning or on the conversation or interaction itself, recasts are considered “pedagogically expeditious” and “time saving” (Loewen & Philp, 2006, p. 537, in Ding, 2012). Overall, it is safe to argue that CF should not be neglected but be considered as an instructional strategy in improving learners’ language competence. CF should, therefore, earn its rightful place in ESL classrooms and should draw teachers’ attention in exploiting it as a positive tool for error

correction.

For further scrutiny, it is suggested that the benefits of recasts in the promotion of learning new language forms be considered in future research. The majority of studies, including this one, examined features of which learners already had partial knowledge. This study, for instance, targeted prepositions which, although considered difficult, were already known by the participants. It may be interesting to choose grammatical items that are yet to be taught to learners because as Ellis and Sheen (2006, in Ding, 2012) recommended it is possible that recasts will prove more effective in promoting acquisition of new linguistic features, and this idea has to be demonstrated empirically.

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