

# RECASTS AS CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN CHINA S ENGLISH CLASSROOM INTERACTION

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## Abstract

This paper reports a study on the effectiveness of recast as corrective feedback in China's English classroom interaction. The database is drawn from a corpus, which contains 30 periods of classroom interaction. The findings indicated that recast was not a frequently used corrective feedback type in China's English classes, but when the teachers provided the students with recasts they intended to use them following the students' grammatical errors and recasts tended to invite very few students' uptake.

## Key words

recast ;corrective feedback ;classroom interaction

## 1 . Introduction

The teachers who are trained to use communicative language teaching method ( CLT ) believe that language errors are evidence of learners' creative attempts to use target language. Making errors is an inevitable stage in the process of learners' interlanguage development. If learners are given ample input they will pass through this stage. They do not need teachers' direct corrective feedback. Some teachers even argue that error corrections should be avoided. However, one of the corrective feedback types — recast, is widely used in second language classroom. This phenomenon has drawn the attention of second and foreign language teachers and researchers. This paper will, based on 30 periods of classroom teaching, investigate how teachers in China use recasts in their classes.

## 2 . Literature Review and Research Questions

### 2 .1 Definition of Recast

The term "recast" was firstly used in the studies of first language acquisition. Nelson et al. (1973) were the first to use it to refer to responses by adults to children's utterances. After being introduced to second language acquisition research, the term "recast" has been redefined. For instance, referring to the L1 literature, Long (1996 :434) defines recast as "utterance that reappraises a child's utterance by changing one or more sentence components (subject, verb or object) while still referring to its central meanings". This definition is consistent with Lyster & Ranta's (1997 :46) recast category of corrective feedback, "the teacher's reformulation of all or part of a student's utterance, minus the errors". To sum up, in L2 literature, recast can be defined as utterances that repeat learners' incorrect utterances, making only the change necessary to produce a correct one without changing the meaning.

### 2 .2 Previous Studies of Recasts in ESL or FL Classroom Interaction

Observational studies of the effects of recasts on L2 acquisition and performance have been conducted in L2 /foreign language classrooms. Classroom studies provide insight into the way in which recasts may be perceived and used by the students.

Doughty (1994) observed teacher feedback in a beginner level class for university students of French as a foreign language. His analyses were based on transcriptions of 6 hours of audio and videotapes of the interactional activities in the classroom. Doughty observed a variety of types of teacher feedback and analyzed learners' response to that feedback. He reported that the most frequently used feedback types were clarification request, repetition and recasts, with recasts representing nearly 60% of the teacher's feedback. Of the three most frequently used feedback types, the one which is most likely to lead to learner repetition was recasts.

Lyster & Ranta (1997) studied the feedback behavior of four teachers in Canada's French immersion classes as they taught science, social studies, mathematics and language arts lessons to students who were 9 or 10 years old. The instructional focus of the classes was on subject matter, not language form. Lyster and Ranta analyzed 18.3 hours of audio recorded classroom interaction. They reported that on average for the four classes, recasts were the single most frequent feedback types (55%). In addition to examining the teachers' feedback, Lyster and Ranta classified the students' uptake in response to that feedback. Uptake was defined as a student's utterance that immediately followed the teacher's feedback and that constituted a reaction in some way to the teacher's intention to draw attention to some aspect of the student's initial utterance. Uptake covered a range of responses, from a simple "yes" acknowledging that the students had heard the teacher's utterance to a repetition of the teacher's feedback utterance and self-repair, in which the students produced a more accurate utterance even though the teacher's correction did not provide the necessary information. Lyster and Ranta found that the most frequently used feedback type—recasts led to the least uptake, only 30% of teachers' recasts led to uptakes. They considered that it was in part because the teachers often continued with his/her turn after recasting the students' utterance, not waiting for student's response and not appearing to expect the students to provide a reaction to the feedback. Other classroom observation studies (e.g. Lochtman 2000; Panova 1999) have offered evidences to confirm that the patterns observed by Lyster and Ranta are widespread and typical in L2 classroom situations.

The frequency and distribution of recasts may also make it difficult for students to recognize them as corrective feedback. That is to say, the correction and modified input function of recasts may not be noticed by students. Long (1996) considered that recasts can be noticed as corrective feedback only when they were used systematically. Lyster (1998a), based on the same data of Lyster & Ranta (1997), reported that in the immersion classes, the observed frequency of recasts provided to ill-formed utterance was nearly identical to the frequency of repetitions in response to well-formed utterance. Lyster (1998b) examined his French immersion database to determine the effects of different types of feedback according to error types. He reported that teachers preferred recasts for grammatical errors and phonological errors, and recasts were not likely to lead to repair of the grammatical errors. Ellis et al (2001) found a different result from Lyster (1998b). They argued that phonological errors tended to follow recast, whereas grammatical and lexical errors tended to follow the negotiation of form.

### 2.3 Comments on the Previous Studies and Research Questions

The review of the previous studies of recasts in classroom interaction indicated that recasts were used frequently both in L2 and foreign language classes. But the previous studies also illustrated the controversial effects of recasts in different teaching contexts. For example, Doughty (1994) claimed that recasts invited comparatively more learner repetitions than other feedback types, but Lyster & Ranta (1997), Lochtman (2000), and Panova (1999) argued that recasts led to the fewest uptakes. Lyster (1998a; 1998b) found that recasts were more likely to follow grammatical and phonological errors; Ellis et al (2001) reported a conversed result. The present study will, based on a database of China English teaching, touch upon these controversial issues. It attempts to answer the following questions: 1) How frequently do English teachers in China use recasts in classroom teaching? 2) How do teachers use recasts in terms of language errors? 3) How does teachers' use of recasts lead the students to produce uptakes?

### 3. Research Method

In my previous study (Zhao 2005), I have investigated how teachers in different China's English classes used corrective feedback in terms of students' language errors. Recast was one of the corrective feedback types, but it was not the focus in the previous paper. In order to answer the above mentioned

two questions, the same database in Zhao (2005) was once again used by the present study. The database was a corpus which contained 30 English classes (18.3 hours) with three levels: primary school classroom teaching (PSCT), junior middle school classroom teaching (JMSCT) and senior middle school classroom teaching (SMSCT).

#### 4. Results and Discussion

A total of 222 students' language errors that received teachers' corrective feedback were identified. Among them, 68 or 30% of the total corrective feedback were recasts (see Table 1). This finding was quite different from the previous studies, which claimed that more than 55% of the teachers' feedback types were recasts. The result might show that recast was not the most frequently used feedback type in China's English classroom interaction. Did the teachers use recasts systematically in terms of the language errors? Table 1 listed the results.

Table 1. Distribution of feedback types across error types

	Grammatical errors n =122		Lexical errors n =71		Phonological errors n =29		Total n =222	
Recasts	49	40 %	15	21 %	4	14 %	68	30 %
Non recasts	73	60 %	56	79 %	25	86 %	154	70 %

Table 1 illustrated that the teachers did not prefer to use recasts to correct the three types of errors (the percentages are 40%, 21% and 14% respectively). But in contrast to lexical (21%) and phonological errors (14%), the teachers used more recasts to follow grammatical errors (40%). The database was drawn from three levels of classes; if students' language proficiency was taken into consideration, the results might be the other way around. Table 2 listed the teachers' use of recasts in terms of students' language errors and language proficiency.

Table 2. Distribution of feedback types across error types in three levels of classes

	Grammatical errors		Lexical errors		Phonological errors		Total n =222										
	Recasts	Nonrecasts	Recasts	Nonrecasts	Recasts	Nonrecasts	Recasts	Nonrecasts total									
PSCT	11	33 %	22	67 %	2	9 %	20	91 %	2	33 %	4	67 %	15	25 %	46	75 %	61
JMSCT	20	36 %	36	64 %	4	25 %	12	75 %	2	11 %	16	89 %	26	29 %	64	71 %	90
SMSCT	18	55 %	15	45 %	9	28 %	24	72 %	0	0	5	100 %	27	38 %	44	62 %	71

Table 2 revealed that recasts were not used as frequently as non-recasts in the three levels of classes (25% in PSCT, 29% in JMSCT, 38% in SMSCT). The results might indicate that recasts were not the most frequently used feedback types in different levels of China's English classes as they were in the previous reviewed L2 classes. As related to language errors, the teachers in three leveled classes did not prefer to use recasts to correct lexical errors (9%, 25% and 28% respectively) and phonological errors (33%, 16% and 0% respectively). However, the teachers' choice of corrective feedback types following grammatical errors varied in accordance with the students' proficiency: compared with PSCT (33%) and JMSCT (36%), the teachers in SMSCT used more recasts (55%) than non-recasts to correct students' grammatical errors. Table 2 also implied that when the teachers provided the students with recasts, they usually used them to follow grammatical errors (see Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of recasts in three levels of classes

	Grammatical errors		Lexical errors		Phonological errors		total	
PSCT	11	74 %	2	13 %	2	13 %	15	22 %
JMSCT	20	76 %	4	16 %	2	8 %	26	38 %
SMSCT	18	67 %	9	33 %	0	0	27	40 %

Table 3 showed that when the teachers in three levels of classes provided the students with recasts, they preferred to use recasts to follow grammatical errors (percentages are 74%, 76% and 67% respectively). The teachers did not prefer to use recasts to correct lexical errors because recasting of lexical errors, in contrast to recasting of grammatical errors, risked being perceived by students as alternative equally correct forms. As Marcus (1993) argued that recasts did not indicate whether the corrective reformulation was simply a stylistic variant or synonym, or whether the students' utterance was unacceptable, because ESL teachers frequently provided the students with synonyms as they strived to provide rich and varied input. Recasting of some words risks being ambiguously perceived by students as acceptable alternatives. Aware of such potential ambiguity in the case of lexical errors, the teachers may have tended to provide signals to prompt students rather than provide them with correct forms.

As far as uptakes are concerned, 68 tokens of recasts invited only 11 uptakes (16%). Table 4 lists the number of uptakes following the recasts that are used by the teachers.

Table 4. Numbers of uptakes following recasts

	PSCT	JMSCT	SMSCT	Total
Recast	15	26	27	68
Uptake	1 (7%)	6 (23%)	4 (15%)	11 (16%)

Table 4 revealed that the teachers' recasts invited few students' uptakes in the three levels of classes (7% in PSCT, 23% in JMSCT and 15% in SMSCT). The percentage of students' uptakes following teachers' recasts in China's English classes is lower than that of the previous studies (30% or above). After carefully examining the uptakes produced by the students, the author found that the students produced uptakes only when they were given waiting times following the teachers' recasts to their errors. But the fact that most of the teachers' recasts did not receive students' uptakes did not mean that the corrective function of recasts was not noticed by students, according to Ohta (2001), although students did not produce uptakes overtly, they might produce them covertly, for example, they murmured in their mind, which was very difficult to test. It seemed that some new methods were needed to test the effectiveness of recasts in classes.

So far, the present study has investigated how recasts are used in China's English classroom interaction. According to Tsui (1995), recast can be very effective because it avoids providing explicit negative evaluation and exposes students to the correct form. Sometimes students are then able to pick up the correct form. The results of the present study showed that recasts used by the teachers of China's English classes invited very few uptakes. After carefully examining the recasts which invited students' uptakes, we obtained the following suggestions to improve the effectiveness of recasts in classroom interaction:

1) To use some discourse markers or exaggerated gestures to attract students' attention. Recasts are implicit in nature. Sometimes it is difficult for students to notice the role of recasts as corrective feedback. A teacher can use discourse markers, such as "oh", "aha" to make students notice his following utterance. For example:

Student: I wants — I want read a book.

Teacher: oh, you want to read a book, you must be a very good girl, come here, please read your book, all right?

2) To give students more waiting time. Recast is the repetition of students' ill utterance with corrections. It usually follows a topic shift. Sometimes the students may notice their errors indicated by the teachers' recasts, but they do not have chances to make uptakes simply because the teacher does not give them time to do so. If a teacher waits one or two seconds after giving the students' recasts, the students will benefit from the waiting time.

3) To give students more opportunities to practice the correct form. That a student can pick up the correct form does not mean that the student has acquired the correct form, because it is possible that the production of the correct form is short-lived and not been internalized. A teacher can give the students

opportunities to practice the correct form . For example :

Student :because he can speak Germany .

Teacher :aha ,he can speak German . How about the girl ?

Student :she can speak German ,too .

In the above example ,the student makes an error "speak Germany " ,the teacher uses "aha " to attract the student's attention and recast the error ,and then give the student a chance to practice the correct form . The student produces the correct form .

## 5 . Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Studies

The data showed that recasts were not the most frequently used corrective feedback types in the 30 periods of China's English classes . But when the teachers provided the students with recasts they preferred to use recasts following grammatical errors . The recasts used by the teachers seemed to have invited few students' uptakes . The present study argues that the reasons may be 1 ) the teachers do not give the students waiting time to produce recasts ; 2 ) the students may have not noticed the role of recasts as corrective feedback . According to the previous studies (e. g. Doughty 1999 ;Doughty & Varela 1998 ) , noticing the role of recasts as corrective feedback has a positive effect on learning ;and uptake means the noticing of recasts . However ,uptake does not mean that learning has necessarily taken place . Before the findings of the present study are applied to classroom teaching ,more carefully designed experiments are needed to test the short term and long term effects of recasts on the development of students' interlanguage . In addition ,besides being as corrective feedback in classroom interaction ,recasts are also used as the interlocutors' responses that sustain the interaction and those that provide a means of focusing on the language used in the interaction . Further research is needed to explore the exact condition under which recasts are likely to be effective in L2 acquisition .

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