

The Effects of Explicit and Implicit Recast on the Acquisition of English Grammatical Agreement System by EFL Students

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Abstract: The aim of the present study was to investigate the role of implicit and explicit recasts as two kinds of feedback on the acquisition of English grammatical agreement system by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Two intact groups (Group A 27 students and group B 34 students) of university students were selected as the participants of the study. To see if there was any significant difference between the performances of the students on the target structure, a pre-test was given on the focused structure. The results obtained indicated no significant difference. A six session duration period of class time was devoted to teach the two groups using the two kinds of recasts. Group A was the explicit group and group B was the implicit group. After the treatment, a post-test was given on the target structure. A t-test was run on the results obtained from the post-test. The results indicated that the group receiving explicit recasts on their errors on the target structures outperformed the group receiving implicit recast on the same structures. The superiority of the explicit recast implied a beneficial role for negative evidence in SLA.

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1. Introduction

Second or foreign language errors have been the focus of analysis since at least 1957, the time when Lado proposed the idea of Contrastive Analysis (CA), as a way of systematically comparing and contrasting two or more language systems in order to find both their similarities and differences mainly for pedagogical purposes. However; because of many drawbacks found with the theoretical foundations based on which Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis emerged, the whole idea of CA suddenly fall out of favor. But because the learners, errors are indeed a fact of their language learning carrier, then to justify their importance the learners' errors were supposed to be analyzed from a different perspective. This rather new view was referred to as Error Analysis (EA). Based on Gass & Selinker (2008: 102) EA is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on errors learners make. Based on the ideas of the proponents of EA feedback on error has been found to be an extremely effective pedagogical practice in developing learners inter language. According to the SLA literature, feedback is either positive or negative. Positive feedback is acceptable or target – like utterances in the target language, whereas negative feedback stands for and includes information about what is not acceptable in the target language. Traditionally negative feedback was mostly provided explicitly by the teacher. Yet, by the emergence of communicative and content – based teaching approaches to language teaching, there is now a shift

from explicit negative feedback, which may cause negative affective reactions on the part of the learners, to implicit negative feedback.

There are some ways to provide implicit negative feedback to students. One of these is the recast - referring to those instances in which an interlocutor rephrases an incorrect utterance with a correct version, while maintaining the integrity of the original meaning.

In recent years, there have been a number of studies in which recasts, as a form of implicit negative feedback, have been the focus. Leyster and Ranta (1997) collected data from grade 4-6 children in French immersion programs. Their research considered recasts by teachers following errors and, importantly, the reaction by the students (uptake, in their terminology) in subsequent turn. Their results showed that, despite the preponderance of recasts in their data base, recasts were not particularly effective. However; Later, Mackey and Philp (1998) point out that uptake, as defined by Lyster and Ranta, maybe the wrong measure to use in determining effectiveness. There are many other researchers in recent years supporting the idea that recasts are effective in SLA. For example, Long & Robinson (2001) indicate that the recast is significant in showing learners how their inter language differs from the target language. To elaborate the theoretical foundations of this paper it seems necessary to mention that two explanations are possible for beneficial role of recast in SLA. Each is dependent on a major theoretical paradigm in SLA. The first is related to what is known

as the 'noticing hypothesis.' In this hypothesis, Schmidt (2001) suggests that SL learners must first notice the linguistic items in the input in order to be able to acquire them. Because the recast represents some sort of immediate reaction to a learner's incorrect utterance, it then draws the learner's attention to certain linguistic features when the learner compares the ones in the recast to those already existent in the produced incorrect utterance. The second theoretical frame is derived from some interpretation of a Universal Grammar Model. In this model, Schwartz (1993) illustrates that it might be hypothesized that the effectiveness of recast is not due to its role as 'negative evidence' (information about what is not acceptable in the target language). Rather it simply provides 'positive evidence' (examples of acceptable or target like utterances).

To sum up, then the role of recast as a way to help SL learners develop their inter language has been found to be highly efficient in the literature. Therefore, the researcher is better motivated to test if providing explicit or implicit negative and positive feedback in the form of written recast is beneficial to improve Iranian EFL university students' written production.

2. Review of related literature

Over the last few years, the role played by corrective feedback in language acquisition has become a highly controversial issue. In the field of First Language Acquisition (FLA), researchers express strong reservations concerning the effect that negative evidence (information about what is not acceptable in the target language) has on FLA, if there is any at all. In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), however, there appears to be a growing consensus among the majority of researchers concerning the significance of the role played by negative evidence in the process of SLA. Feedback on errors has been a traditional pedagogical practice in EFL/ESL classroom; feedback provision allows Second Language Learners to make progress in their ability to use the target Language appropriately. Feedback is either positive or negative. Positive feedback is usually presented in the form of examples of acceptable or target-like utterances, while negative feedback includes information about what is not acceptable in the target language. Negative feedback may be explicit or implicit. One widely used implicit negative feedback technique in instructed SLA is the recast-the teacher's correct restatement of a learner's incorrect utterance. Numerous studies have examined the occurrence and nature of recast, learner's response to recast and their noticing and interpretation of recasts. Philp (2003) found that learners noticed over 60 – 70 % of recasts. However, learners' accurate recall was constrained by the level of the learner and by the length and number of changes of the recast. Car punter, Jean, Macgregor and Mackey (2006) showed that

learners were significantly less successful at distinguishing recasts from repetitions. Egi (2007) found that when recasts were long and substantially different from their problematic utterances, learners tended to interpret them as responses to content. So, the researcher suggested that the length of recast and number of changes might partially determine the explicitness of recasts and thus effected the learner's interpretation. Leyster (2004) in the same line, investigated the differential effects of recasts and prompts. The results of the study indicated that the recast group was inferior to the prompt group at post test. This limited effectiveness of recasts and the superiority of prompts was further reported by Ammar and Spade (2006) and Leyster and Inquired (2009). One of the major explanations they proposed for the superiority of prompt over recasts was its explicitness. In the same line, Ellis, Lowe, and Elam (2006) showed a clear advantage for metalinguistic explanation over recast. Likewise, Nassaji (2009) also found explicit feedback, i.e., elicitation, led to higher rates of immediate and delayed post interaction correction than recast.

It can be concluded from these studies that recasts are less effective than explicit types of negative feedback such as prompt, elicitation, and metalinguistic explanation. Its inferiority is acknowledged to be due to its ambiguous corrective force and the overt corrective nature of explicit negative feedback. Therefore, it is possible that if recast is made more explicit, it could lead to greater interlanguage development. However, to date few studies has addressed this issue. The present study makes an attempt to answer this question. Therefore, question it seems that one of the main reasons why recasts may be less effective than explicit negative evidence in improving EFL/ESL students inter language is that they are not taken as a serious feedback technique on the part of the students. The prevailing view is that recasts constitute and implicit form of negative feedback. To put the same point forward, long (2007:76) asserted that "implicit negative feedback in the form of recasts seems particularly promising". In Ellis et al. (2006), the implicit corrective feedback in their study takes the form of recast. So is the case with Ammar and Spada (2006), Long et al. (1998), and so on. Based on the above mentioned studies and probably many more others, in order to make recasts as more effective as possible in the development of EFL/ESL students, teachers ought to try their best to make recasts as explicit as possible. In Eliss and Sheen's (2006: 583) words, "recasts can lie at various points on a continuum of linguistic implicitness-explicitness". The terms "explicit recast" and "implicit recast" were first used by Sheen (2006: 388) after his study of the characteristics of recast.

Based on the related literature including the studies

reviewed, it is revealed that learners experience difficulty in interpreting recast as being corrective. However, when recasts of different kinds have features that make their corrective force explicit, learners are more likely to interpret recasts as being corrective, so it seems that recasts which are combined with explicit features are more effective in leading L2 development than those which are merely implicit, feedback. Also numerous studies claiming that recasts are less effective than explicit types of negative feedback. Based on Chen Zhuo (2010) *their inferiority is due to their ambiguous corrective force* (italics added) and the corrective nature of explicit negative feedback. It can also be inferred that contrary to their nature of recasts are made more explicit to overtly indicate their corrective purpose, they may be more effective in EFL interlanguage development.

However; to date there have been few if not any studies conducted to satisfy this issue. The purpose of the present study is to fill the research gap to compare the acquisition benefits of explicit and implicit recasts.

3. Method

3.1 Research question

The aim of the present study is to investigate the effects of explicit and implicit recasts on the acquisition of English grammatical agreement system. So the following research question is addressed. Does providing corrective feedback in the form of explicit recasts rather than implicit recast lead to greater L2 grammar development?

3.2 Participants

The subjects of this study consisted of two intact groups of English students. There were 27 students in the first group (group A) and 34 students in the second group (group B). They were second semester students studying at Payame Noor University (PNU) of Andimeshk, Iran. The students had 2 English grammar and writing class sessions a week. They were considered to be at the intermediate proficiency level in terms of English. Group A was called the explicit recast treatment group and group B as the implicit recast group.

3.3 Target structure

As the grammar system of English is extremely vast, it is impossible to conduct a study to deal with the whole system. Based on this fact the researcher selected only one area to be the focus of the study, i.e., the English agreement system. As it is the case with many subparts of the English grammar system, agreement is known to be problematic for EFL students in general and Iranian students in particular. This has been revealed by many standard tests and tasks given to the students where EFL students have had to either produce oral or written structures containing agreement

or expressing their judgment about the correctness of sentences containing the agreement structures.

3.4 Instruments

The participants of the study were required to take two versions of a standard grammar test comprising different elements. The test was adapted from the Barron's TOEFL examination samples. One version of this test on agreement structures was used as the pre-test of the target structure. A second version of the same test was used as the post test. This was done to compare the students' performance in both implicit and explicit groups on the target structure both before and after instruction. The tests comprised of 60 items. In the first part 30 sentences were given to the subjects to judge if they were grammatical or not. The purpose of this part of the test was to see if the subjects are aware of the agreement of noun-pronoun, subject-verb, subject and possessive pronouns, etc. The second 30 items were in the form of multiple choices items testing the same target structures.

4. Procedures

The present study was a pre-test, treatment, post-test type of research. That is to say, the two groups (A and B) of participants were given a standard test on grammatical agreement system of English to see if they are homogeneous in terms of their ability to use the target structures. The subjects were in two intact grammar and writing classes. There were 17 female and 10 male students in class A and 14 male and 20 female students in class B. They were taught the target structures in a six session duration of time. Each session lasted about 60 minutes. For group A which was the implicit group the researcher was supposed to provide the correct form of the probable errors the students made on the target structure. However, the way their errors were corrected was supposed to be in the form of implicit recasts as the participants were not supposed to be informed of why they had made an error. But they themselves might infer the correct form. For group B (Explicit group), however, the researcher provided not only the correct form of the probable errors on the target structures on agreement but also he tried to inform them on the reason why they have committed errors. That is to say, they were sometimes even provided with a type of explicit meta language to focus their attention on the error. In this way the participants in group B were provided with explicit recasts immediately after they made errors on the target structure.

Of course, in order not to give the purpose of the study away, all other structures rather than agreement structures which were thought to be the students in both classes were treated the same way. This was done in order to care for the Hawthorn effect. In other words

the researcher did his best to keep the purpose of the research as hidden as possible so the students' performance might not be improved simply by their being informed of the purpose of the research.

After the treatment, the participants were given a post-test. As it was mentioned above, the test was a standard one. It was adapted from that of Barron's TOEFL examination Samples. The test was comprised of 60 items. In the first part the students were supposed to find grammatical errors in 30 sentences given. Of course, all these sentences were not erroneous. Some were well-formed. In addition to the target structures other sentences containing structures rather than the target structures of the study were given. In the second part of the test there were 30 multiple choice items.

The participants were required to mark their chosen options on an answer sheet provided. This part of the test also contained not only items on the target structures but also items on other aspects of English grammar.

A t-test was run on the results obtained from both the pre-test and the post test. This was done to compare the performance of both groups to see if the different feedback they received in the form of either explicit recasts (Group A) or implicit recasts (Group B) had performed significantly differently from the pretreatment session of the study and if there is any significant differences between the performance of both groups

5. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Group statistics for the scores on pre-test

	N	Mean	SD	t	df
Group A	27	7.81	2.67	0.38	59
Group B	34	8.08	2.81	—	

The results given in table 1 indicate that the difference between the means obtained by the explicit and implicit group is 0.27. As $t=0.38$ and $df=59$ and because P is greater than 0.05 ($P>0.005$) the assumption that the means of the scores obtained on the pre-test by both groups are not statistically significantly different is accepted. That is to say, one can conclude that in terms of their ability on the use of the grammatical agreement system which was the target structure of the study, the students in group A and B as they were named the explicit and implicit group respectively were not significantly different. To put it another way, it is highly likely that the two different kinds of treatment utilized by the researcher have made the participants perform significantly differently on the post-test.

Table2. Descriptive statistics for test scores by group A (Explicit group)

Group A (Explicit)	Pre-test			Post-test			
	N	M	SD	M	SD	t	df
	27	7.81	2.67	10.29	2.67	-6.192	26

The statistical results obtained from the paired t-test run on the performance of group A (Explicit group) before and after the treatment have been provided in table 2 above. The mean obtained from the performance on pre-test is 7.81 and the mean obtained from the post-test is 10.29. The difference between the pre and post-test means is 2.48. Based on descriptive statistics given in table2 ($t=-6.192$) with a degree of freedom which is 26, and p less than 0.005 ($P<0.005$) the difference between the mean of the pre-test and that of the post-test (2.48) is statistically significant. That is to say, the treatment provided was highly likely to have a positive effect on the students' learning of the agreement structures. Based on the results of the pre and post-test we can conclude that providing the EFL intermediate students with some explicit guidance on their erroneous production on specific aspects of English grammar in general and agreement system in particular is probably positively effective in their interlanguage development.

Table3. Descriptive statistics for test scores by group B (Implicit group)

Group B (Implicit)	Pre-test			Post-test			
	N	M	SD	M	SD	t	df
	34	8.08	2.81	7.44	2.42	1.004	33

The means of the scores obtained by group B (Implicit group) on pre-test is 8.08, and that of post-test is 7.44. The difference between the pre-test mean and post-test mean for group B is 0.64. As P is greater than 0.5 ($P>0.005$), the difference between the mean of

pre-test and that of post-test is not statistically significant. Based on the descriptive statistics provided in table 2 we can conclude that it is possible that the students in group B have experienced no significant improvement in their performance on the target

structure, i.e., the grammatical agreement system of English.

6. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This study investigated the role of implicit recast and explicit recast in SLA and their relative effects. To narrow down the scope of the study, the researcher selected the English grammatical agreement system as the target structure. The results indicated that explicit recast was more effective than implicit recast in leading to L2 grammar development with a focus given to the grammatical agreement system. That is to say, an occasional explicit focus on form is supported. Put it another way, the less facilitative role of implicit recast compared with explicit recast provided further empirical evidence to the noticing hypothesis and other theories which claim a beneficial role for learner attention in language learning.

The superiority of explicit recast over implicit recast implies a beneficial role for negative evidence in SLA and it also further implies that pedagogically, explicit recast is a better choice for L2 teachers than implicit recast in an L2 classroom. Of course, the researcher believes that to know more about the role of recast in SLA more studies are needed. It is suggested that further more future studies take the limitations of this study into consideration and investigate other characteristics of recast, and its influence on the acquisition of various linguistic structures.

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