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An ESL Teacher's Perspective on Recasts: A Qualitative Exploration of "When" and "How"?

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Recasts, which are defined as implicit types of corrective feedback, have been the focus of numerous SLA researchers for more than a decade. A range of classroom-based observational and experimental research studies have explored how and when language teachers provide recasts to learners' ill-formed utterances and aimed to understand the role of recasts in language acquisition or learning. On the basis of previous studies on recasts, our study investigated when an ESL teacher provided recasts and how recasts were provided in his class. The research questions were as follows: (1) When does an ESL teacher provide recasts? (2) How does the teacher provide recasts? The data came from observations of one ESL classroom as well as consecutive-semi structured interviews with the teacher. The data analysis included transcriptions of teacher-student interactions in the target setting and categories of recasts according to the linguistic phenomena, which prompted recasting. Based on the findings, practical suggestions for ESL teachers were provided.

[error correction/interaction/corrective feedback/recast]

I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of first language acquisition, recasts are defined as "utterances in which the caretaker produces an expanded grammatically correct version of a prior child utterance" (Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 162). For the second language learning context, which will be the focus of this paper, the *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (2002), defines recasts as "a type of negative feedback in which a

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more competent interlocutor (parent, teacher, native speaker interlocutor) rephrases an incorrect or incomplete learner utterance by changing one or more sentence components (e.g. subject, verb or object) while still referring to its central meaning" (p. 446). Other scholars also provide several definitions for recasts. For instance, Spada and Fröhlich (1995) describe a recast as "one's reformulation of a previous incorrect utterance" (p. 24), and Chauron (1977) defines it as "teachers' simply adding correction and continues to other topics" (p. 39). Considering such definitions proposed by several scholars, the underlying common thread is that the feedback is given while the original utterance is maintained.

Later, Nicholas, Lightbown, and Spada (2001) illustrate that recasts are different than other types of feedback in three ways: "recasts are not explicit, they do not isolate the features of language form that are the focus of the feedback, and they do not interrupt the learners during the flow of discourse" (p. 734). As can be seen, such diversity in defining and characterizing recasts makes it a more complicated phenomenon to understand. In this paper, we aimed to further explore this complex feedback type. More specifically, within the light of related literature, our study explored the following research questions: 1) When does an ESL teacher provide recasts? 2) How does the teacher provide recasts?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A string of classroom-based observational and experimental studies have investigated the recasts in second and foreign language classrooms, with emphasis on its influential role to learner performance, types of errors over which recasts are provided, the effectiveness of recasts, learner responses, and perceptions toward recasts. The present section will provide literature with a focus on types of errors and the effectiveness of recasts as these are the major areas investigated with regards to recasts.

The primary focus of a large number of recast studies has been on the types of errors upon which recasts were provided. Several studies indicated that grammatical errors are likely to receive recasts mostly (Lyster, 1998b; Mackey, Gass, & McDonough, 2000; Oliver, 1995). For instance, Lyster (1998b) observed the frequency rate of types of errors that elicited recasts from language teachers in French immersion programs. According to the results of the study, grammatical errors received approximately 72 % of recasts. Similarly, Oliver (1995) showed that native speakers are likely to offer recasts to nonnative speakers' grammatical errors such as subject-verb agreement. A study by Yoon (2008) further supported that it was ESL learners' grammatical errors which mostly elicited recasts from the teacher. Similar findings were reported by Kim and Lee (2009)

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who illustrated that language teachers in EFL classroom provided recasts mostly to learners' grammatical errors. However, it should be noted that recasting does not only occur with grammatical errors. Learners can be corrected for their phonological, morphological, or lexical mistakes (Panova & Lyster, 2002). For instance, Mackey et al. (2000) found that although grammatical errors received most of the recasts, phonological errors also elicited recasts from native speakers. Similarly, Lyster's earlier study (1998) and the one conducted by Yoon (2008) demonstrated that along with grammatical errors, a number of phonological and lexical errors by nonnative speakers were also recasted.

Considering such findings, it can be summed up that recasts seem to be provided to three major errors which are – grammatical errors, phonological errors, and lexical errors. Among these, recasts in second or foreign language classes are provided more often in respond to grammatical errors.

As can be seen, recasts are a common type of feedback in second or foreign language classrooms. Such frequent use of recasts in language classrooms has inevitably led a number of researchers to question the effectiveness of recasts. A range of theoretical articles and classroom-based observational and experimental research studies were conducted with this aim. Numerous studies provided strong support for the claim that students benefit from recasts. More specifically, with the nature of recast – maintaining learners' original language production while providing feedback (Saxton, 1997) – it is known that language learners will be able to create a systematic map between forms and meanings (Doughty & Williams, 1998). At the same time, along with viewing corrective model from native speakers, learners are given an opportunity to compare their ill-formed utterances to correct ones provided by their interlocutors (Long, 1996).

Additionally, recasts are known to play a positive role in increasing language learners' test performance (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Doughty & Varela, 1998; Mackey & Philp, 1998; Ortega & Long, 1997). For instance, Ortega and Long (1997) applied recasts as the type of feedback to learners in the treatment group and offered the pre-emptive model condition to their counterparts.

To measure the effectiveness of feedback, learners in both groups were asked to participate in picture-description oral performance tests with a focus on grammatical features that were instructed through recasts and pre-emptive model. Findings indicated that learners in the treatment group outperformed those in the control group, showing that recasts are also effective in one's language performance test. Similarly, ESL learners whose errors were corrected through recasts performed well on their recall tasks (Carroll & Swain, 1993). Later, Doughty and Varela's experimental study (1998) attributed to this finding by showing that learners who were exposed to recasts were likely to be more accurate in language production than those without recast feedback.

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On the other hand, various studies and theoretical articles claim that recasts are not as effective as other forms of feedback, or that they do not have a positive impact on second language learning or acquisition. For instance, some scholars criticized that recasts are less beneficial compared to other types of feedback since recasts decrease learners' opportunities to recognize and correct their own errors (Lyster, 1998b; Panova & Lyster, 2002). Lyster and Ranta (1997) also claimed that ambiguity might be problematic because recasts can imply several interpretations such as one's confirmation check or desire to continue the conversation. The underlying reason for this concern originates from the commonly observed phenomena that language teacher often repeats not only learners' ill-formed utterances but also well-formed ones. Eventually, this ambiguity would lead to different interpretations which would in turn negatively influence language learners' uptake (Naebi & Swain, 2002). Lyster and Ranta (1997) also found that although recast is one of the common types of feedback in language classes, it elicited least learner uptake. Similarly, Lochtman (2000) showed that although native speakers showed strong preferences towards recasts as feedback, the rate of learner uptake was low. Besides these, several other studies reached to a similar conclusion that little learner uptake is one of the problematic matters of recasts (Havranek, 1999; Lochtman, 2000; Slimoni, 1992). Moreover, even though learner uptake from recasts occurs frequently, it is uncertain whether input gained from uptake remains in the long term (Naebi & Swain, 2002).

Another concern toward recasts is whether learners' response to recasts indicates their developmental progress of foreign or second languages (Naebi & Swain, 2002; Oliver, 1995). According to Gass (2003), learners' immediate responses to recasts should be examined carefully because it is possible that the learners might simply be "mimicking or repeating without true understanding" (p. 236). Loewen and Philp (2006) later claimed that a recast's effectiveness depends on various factors such as the level and age of learners, intonation of interlocutors, or the types and context of discourses recasts are provided.

As can be seen from the studies above, there has been a growing amount of research investigating the effectiveness of recasts in foreign or second language learning. Yet, the results of those studies are contradictory and still controversial. This controversy has led us to revisit the nature of recasts and therefore conduct this study. We hope that exploring when language teachers see the necessity of providing recasts and how they actually provide them in language classes will improve our understanding of recasts and shed light on controversial areas. Furthermore, such a thorough investigation of recasts will not only add to the related limited literature on "when" and "how" recasts are provided, but also enable us to better understand its role in second language learning.

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III. RESEARCH DESIGN

1. Participants

The participants of this study were 12 students taking a grammar class in a southern university in the U.S, and an ESL teacher, Mike (pseudonym). Mike has been teaching English for more than six years. He taught English at all levels for three years in Spanish-speaking countries and holds a PhD degree in Foreign Language Education. He has been teaching every language-specific course except reading, and he particularly likes to teach grammar since he has been teaching it for several years. Mike also works as a tutor. In his opinion, teaching requires more time than tutoring for class preparation. It also causes more pressure than tutoring, since he has to ensure whether everyone in the classroom follows his lecture. Mike thinks that tutoring causes less stress because the instructor engages with one student all the time. Based on his experiences, he believes that teaching and tutoring have been useful for him to build teaching skills and develop strategies for teaching in ESL context.

The student participants came from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Their nations of origin included Korea, Spain, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Taiwan, China, Africa, and Iran. Among them, the Hispanic and Asian students constituted the largest portion of the student population. There were seven male and five female students in the class. All students had been learning English for more than six years at the time of the study. They already hold at least an undergraduate degree and have definite academic goals. Their main purpose for taking this grammar class was to prepare for the TOEFL so that they could get admissions from the universities in the States.

2. Setting

The study was conducted in an Academic English Program (AEP) at a southern university. The program is designed for students who plan to enter a Master's or Ph.D. program at a university in the United States. AEP serves people with low-intermediate, intermediate, high-intermediate, and advanced English proficiency. Classes meet five days a week with daily homework. Classes meet for a total of 18 hours weekly. AEP courses concentrate on the areas of academic writing, listening/speaking, reading/discussion, and grammar/idioms. Classes have an average of 11 to 12 students.

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The class observed for this study is a high intermediate level grammar class. The classroom is designed as a semi-circle. The class meets three days per week for a total of approximately four hours of instruction a week.

3. Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected for this study. Data included interviews, observations and field-notes. The purpose of collecting qualitative data from different multiple sources was to have more convincing and accurate findings and conclusions through triangulation (Glesne, 2006). While Mike, the participant teacher, was lecturing in classes, giving explanations or engaging in various activities, he was observed to determine when and how he provided recasts to students' errors.

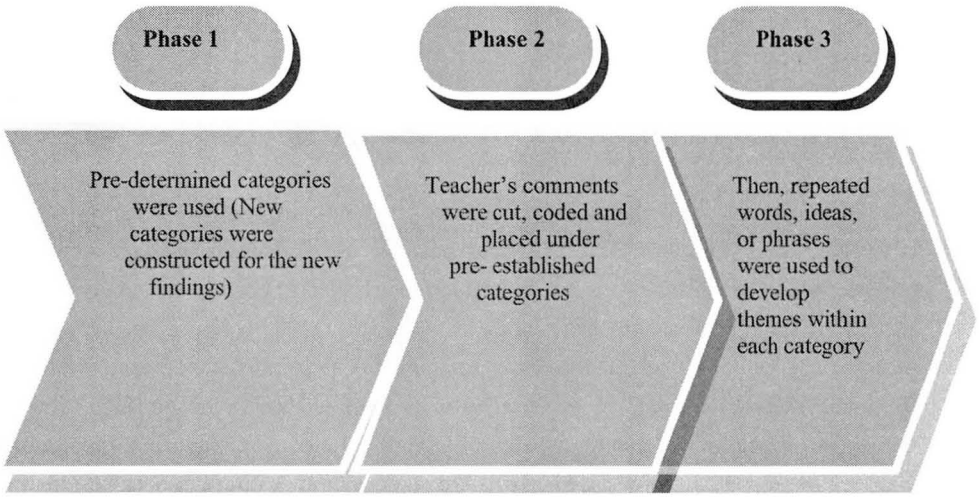
Only notes were taken during the observations. Each observation took approximately 2-3 class hours and the class was observed three times. After each observation, the teacher was interviewed with the same purpose. Semi-structured interviews were administered three times and were audio taped. For interviews, time commitment was no more than 45 minutes. To maintain confidentiality, the teacher participant was assigned a pseudonym. When conducting the interviews, a specific location and time appropriate for the teacher and investigators were chosen.

4. Data Analysis

This is a case study consisting of interviews (Appendix A), observations and field notes. It is descriptive and exploratory. Therefore, the data analysis included noting teacher-student interactions in the target setting and then categorizing the recasts according to the linguistic phenomena, which prompted the recasts. In other words, data analysis took place in three phases. In the first phase, pre-determined categories were used such as 'recasts on grammatical errors' or 'recasts on phonological errors'. In the meantime, new categories were constructed for the new findings. In the next stage, the teacher's comments were cut, coded and placed under pre-established categories. Then, in the last phase, repeated words, ideas or phrases were used to develop themes within each category. Findings from observations were analyzed in the same way. The data analysis is shown in figure 1 in the following page.

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FIGURE I



IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The present study was an attempt to understand why and how recasts are provided in an ESL setting. The data for this study are based on observations of student-teacher interactions with a specific focus on recasts as well as informal interviews with an ESL teacher. The result of this study is categorized into three headings for the first research question and four headings for the second research question.

1. When does an ESL teacher provide a recast?

Based on our observations and interviews with the participant teacher, recasts are provided when learners make grammatical, phonological or lexical errors in the target language. During the three observations, recasts were provided six times by the teacher. It should be noted that the teacher's recasts toward these types of errors correspond to the pre-determined categories that were discussed by the researchers in the beginning phase of the present study.

1) Grammatical errors

During three observations, the teacher was observed to recast students' ill-formed grammatical utterances four times. Recasts in this group were provided either as part of

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negotiation or meaning-making sequences or as confirmation checks including an interrogative intonation (e.g. Do you mean this?) as in the first example.

Recast 1

S: I don't mind write (ill-formed utterance)

S: Oh, you don't mind writing on the paper? (recast)

In the recast episode 1 above, the student does not add '–ing' suffix for the verb 'write' when he has to. The teacher recasts him, but it is not very clear whether the teacher provides recast because he does not understand the student or because he simply wants to correct the error. In some other instances, as in the second example, the teacher provides recasts only with the aim of correcting ungrammatical utterance. For example, in the following excerpt (Recast 2), even though the meaning is clear in the student's sentence, the student seems to lack the knowledge of adverbial time and/or the use of subordinate clause. Consequently, the teacher corrects the student by repeating her original utterance by slightly changing the structure and adding the time adverbial.

Recast 2

S: I go there. They ask same question, same question. (Ill-formed sentence)

T: They ask you the same question every time? (Recast)

S: Yeah

Similarly, the next sample (Recast 3) from our third observation includes another grammatical error. The student does not use the bare form of the verb when the structure is a question in simple present tense. In addition to the grammatical error, his utterance also includes a phonological error. By repeating the original utterance in a syntactically correct way and emphasizing the correct pronunciation by a rising intonation, the teacher repairs the ill-formed utterance. In this case, the recast might have let the learner know that although the utterance is comprehensible, it is still non-target like:

Recast 3

S: What does exit meaning? (Mispronouncing the word "exceed")

T: What does exceed mean? Well....

In our last sample (Recast 4) in this category, another student means to say that they need to write as many sentences as they can. Although her sentence is syntactically correct, it is semantically ambiguous in that specific context. In order to avoid

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misunderstanding and ambiguity, the teacher corrects the student by adding an adverbial component.

Recast 4

S: We need many sentences (ill-formed utterance)

T: Yes, you need to write as many as you can.

2) Pronunciation errors

The other two recasts were provided when learners made a phonological error in this target setting. One of those instances was already explained in the second recast example above. In another example, the fifth excerpt below, the recast is delivered as a form of question with rising intonation when the student mispronounces the word 'edonomy'.

Recast 5

S: idonomi. (Mispronouncing the word "edonomy")

T: ida:nəmə? (Recast)

S: yes, :ida:nəmə

However, in this conversation sequence, the recast is ambiguous because it could be either interpreted as a corrective feedback or a request to confirm an intended meaning. In another example (Recast 6), the aim of recast is clearer. The teacher provides it mainly because there is a communication break-down due to mispronunciation which results in misunderstanding, and the teacher recasts the mispronunciation.

Recast 6

S: sveli:d (mispronouncing the word "swallowed")

T: Oh, swallowed. (recast)

3) Inappropriate lexical items

Although we have not observed any instances of recasts provided on lexical errors, the participant teacher made it clear that he also recasts students when they make lexical errors. During the interviews, we asked Mike when he thinks that recasts should be provided and when he provides recasts in interactional contexts in his teaching. First of all, he said that most of the time his recasts depend on the interactional context, which means that they are not pre-planned. Although he does not plan when to correct students, he strongly believes that obvious errors should be recasted. For him, it is difficult to define

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"obvious errors", but he says that he generally refers to errors which might put his students into trouble in real life. For example, when his students pronounce the word "bitch" when they actually intend to say "beach", he says:

> *"I definitely correct them, because I know that if I do not correct them... I know that that... they may be in trouble. Sometimes explicitly, but most of the time implicitly, I correct them... implicitly because I do not want them become embarrassed you know..."*

Apart from those obvious errors, he believes that the use of inappropriate lexical items should be recasted as well. The confusion of "he" and "she" is one of those. When we ask him about the reason, he says:

> *"I correct it because this type of mistake sounds offensive when... hmm... calling people by inappropriate gender".*

However, Mike thinks that not every error should be recasted or corrected. As long as the message in students' speech is clear, he tends not to recast or correct every error. He further adds:

> *"As far as I understand them, I would not correct it, because this error-correction also influences the flow of the class. If I am doing too much correction, students usually get bored or tired of receiving it. For example, I wouldn't correct their use of articles."*

2. How does the teacher provide recasts?

In responding to the second research question about how the teacher provides recasts, the findings were categorized into four headings – opportunity for repair, explicit purpose, using body language, and personal beliefs. Among them, the first two headings correspond to pre-determined categories whereas the rest were the new emerged themes from the present study.

1) Opportunity for Repair

First of all, the teacher believes that students should take his correct forms and repeat after him for the effectiveness of recasts to take place. Therefore, he is aware of the

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importance of repair-opportunity for learners to practice, increase their awareness, and, as a consequence, internalize correct forms. He says:

> *"If they repair it, I feel they understood the model that I provided. When students know exactly what I am doing and they would imitate me, then, they are starting... their own making... their intonation pattern, word proposition, whatever. Once they start their own, I don't have to do it."*

However, we observed that his providing student with an opportunity to repair ill-form sentences depends on the flow of the lecture. Among six recast examples, he provided a repair chance to students only twice. The rest of the recast data shows that the teacher moved on to another topic immediately after providing a correct form. Therefore, even though he sees the necessity of providing repair opportunity to students, how he provides it depends on the particular situation.

2) Explicit Purpose

Another finding regarding how the teacher provides recasts is that he sometimes states the purpose of recasts explicitly while providing it. This is a significant finding given the fact that an essential feature of recast lies in its implicit nature. He believes that learners' awareness is important when receiving error-corrections. If learners become aware of their errors, they will be more cautious when they use it in the future. Therefore, in order to make learners aware of their errors, he provides an explicit statement of a reason why he uses a recast. He says:

> *"I think recast is a very efficient form for some students especially those who know what it is for. It's effective when students aware that I am correcting their grammar. But lots of times, I don't know whether recast is effective or not because I don't know what goes on in their minds. That's my problem."*
> *"In order to make them aware of their errors, I usually tell students like this, I will repeat what you said, but you have to know it because you are saying it incorrectly. If I say it directly, they can pay more attention on it."*

3) Using body language

Along with stating the purpose of recasts explicitly to learners, the teacher also implements his hand gestures appropriately while recasting pronunciation. The teacher

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mentioned that, at one of our interviews, he likes to incorporate body language. He adds that he uses his hands mostly when providing recasts on pronunciation. He says as the follows:

> *"Especially, when I am working with idioms, many of them make pronunciation errors. In this case, I usually correct them. If it's the syllable stress, I use my hand gesture to indicate long vowels or short ones. It's good to emphasize the length of the stress."*

4) Personal Beliefs

While aiming to understand how Mike provides recasts, we also investigated his pedagogical beliefs towards recasts. According to him, he provides recasts because he believes that students expect him to correct their errors, especially on their pronunciation. Being aware of this expectation from students, he considers himself as one who can provide authentic pronunciation to students. As noted earlier, most of his students have at least six years of English learning experiences with a focus on grammar and reading. It leads him to place a strong emphasis on pronunciation rather than other language-specific skills. The following is what he said in the first interview:

> *"They cannot get their pronunciation correction from a Starbucks! I have to correct them. I have to provide them authentic pronunciation. Students already experienced a lot of writing and grammar in their home countries. Therefore, I like to focus on speaking, especially on accuracy."*
> *"I find that most of my students already experienced writing and grammar sufficiently in their home country, and the biggest opportunity for them of staying here is speaking. Being able to say is important. Therefore, I tend to focus speaking especially on accuracy and speed."*

Lastly, he also believes that some of his students might benefit from his constant error-corrections including recasts if they put more attention to their speaking and are aware of the teacher's error-correction. He further adds that students' attention on error-correction might be helpful in developing their accuracy. The following is what he says:

> *"I had noticed that some of them pick up corrections. However, some other students might pick correction later, or at the end of the semester, or it never happens."*

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"Error-correction makes them think about what they are going to say before they are actually saying it."

V. CONCLUSION

This study shows that our participant ESL teacher provides recasts both on grammatical and phonological errors including obvious errors, inappropriate lexical items, mispronunciation, and structures that might cause miscommunication between speakers. As an ESL teacher, he has a strong belief that a recast is the most efficient type of error-correction and he uses it more often than other types of feedback. However, he also places a great emphasis on a learner's awareness. Although the main goal of his current class is to improve accuracy, he considers pronunciation correction as a priority for him since he strongly believes that his students expect him to correct their mispronunciation.

Regarding his ways of providing recasts, he believes that providing students with an opportunity to repair their ill-formed utterances is needed in order for them to be aware of their errors. According to him, it is only this way that, and hence, students can benefit greatly from his recasts. At the same time, he considers that the constant flow of the lecture is also important. Therefore, how he provides a repair chance depends on the context. He sometimes states the purpose of recasts explicitly while providing them so that the students are become aware of it. Moreover, he likes to combine his hand movements to indicate length of the stress while providing recasts on pronunciation.

The findings of this study differ from the findings of other observational studies on recasts in terms of the infrequency of teacher recasts. The number of recasts provided in the class observed for this study was lower than the ones in the former studies. One possible explanation for the lack of recasts in this setting is the teacher's focus on fluency rather than accuracy. Consequently, it can be concluded that the specific teaching contexts determine the teacher feedback to a great extent.

The findings of this study suggest that further research should be conducted in order to better understand the use of recasts by having larger samples, different measurement tools, and persistent fieldwork. In our study, the observations were relatively short, and, consequently, it would be interesting and helpful to carry out longer term studies for more reliable findings. Also, it should be noted that since the main focus of the lectures was on English grammar, eliciting objective data about when and how the ESL teacher provides recasts were somewhat complicated. Another limitation of the present study is on the data analysis process. In qualitative study, peer debriefing – an outsider's reviewing emerging codings and their systematic relations – is often used to enhance the credibility of the study (Heigham & Croker, 2009). In the present research, however, only those

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participating researchers reviewed the codes and did not attempt to check their systematic relations from outsiders of the study. Thus, employment of peer debriefing technique would make the future studies more reliable. Also, it would strengthen the validity of the study if learners' perspectives toward recasts as well as their reactions to them were provided

Furthermore, the current study was conducted in an ESL program and the results might not be easily transferable to other learners and settings. However, despite these limitations, the present study has contributed to the interesting puzzle about the nature of recasts by showing that recasting is not mostly about grammatical errors and that there are numerous factors, which affect when and how a teacher provides recasts.

The study not only suggests implications for researchers but also for language teachers. First of all, this study suggests that teachers should take the proficiency level of learners into account while providing recasts. Based on our findings, we recommend that in lower level classes the number of recasting should be minimized in order to foster self-confidence in learners. The goals of the class and the language learning purposes of learners are other important factors that need to be considered for recasts. If the primary focus is on accuracy rather than fluency, recasting may be an effective way of correcting errors. However, in order not to disrupt the flow of the class and to place emphasis on fluency, teachers should be careful about the amount of recasts that they provide. In addition to this, when language teachers provide recasts to learners' ill-formed utterances, it is recommended that they provide learners an opportunity to uptake the correct forms. Also, as the participating teacher suggested, offering an explanation of his/her providing recasts to learners might be useful because learners can see the necessity of taking the correct forms instead of considering recasts as a part of natural discourse.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Do you correct students' mistakes? Why?

2. When do you generally correct students?

3. What kinds of mistakes do you generally correct?

4. As an ESL teacher, which types of error-correction do you generally prefer in order to develop student's oral proficiency? (e.g. clarification request, request, extra)

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5. When you are providing recast to student's non-target-like utterances, do you tend to provide recasts more on grammatical errors or pronunciation errors? Why?

6. When you correct your students, do you let them repair their well-formed utterances just after you? How about with recasts?

7. Do you believe that recasting is an efficient type of feedback? Why?

8. When do you think recasting is the most effective?

9. Do you think your students feel comfortable in receiving recast in front of classmates?

10. Do you think recast is an effective way to develop one's oral accuracy? What about fluency? (Some students might feel uncomfortable in receiving recast and if this feeling accumulated, they might be extra careful in speaking, in extreme case, they might not want to speak if they are not sure whether their utterance is correct or not)

11. When providing recast, do you tend to provide it to ill-formed utterances, which are advanced structures or simple structures? (single recast, complex, and compound recast)

12. When you are providing recast, are you aware of it? Or do you provide it naturally, without realizing?

13. When do you provide recasts the most? Do you tend to provide recasts in students' interactions with each other or with you?

14. Your class is focusing on teaching grammar. Do you think the textbook you are using is an effective and well-organized book in teaching grammar to intermediate students? Is there any particular reason why you choose this book to teach grammar?

15. In your classroom, we noticed that you also make students into groups and let them work together. What do you think about teacher's role in the cooperative working situations? Do you correct them when they are engaged in group-activities?

16. As an ESL teacher, do you place more emphasis on developing one's fluency or accuracy? In your teaching, which one do you think is more important?

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Applicable Levels: Secondary/College

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