The Effectiveness of Oral Corrective Feedback in Second Language Acquisition

**Introduction**

Corrective feedback is defined as a correction to a learner’s non-target-like linguistic utterance and serves to draw a learner’s attention to the correct form of language use through negative evidence. For decades, the practice of error correction, or corrective feedback, has been a controversial topic in Second Language Acquisition literature due to disagreements regarding its effectiveness (Long, 1996; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Sheen, 2010; Ammar & Spada, 2006, Carroll & Swain, 1993). Despite the ongoing debates, the majority of academic literature suggests that there is empirical and theoretical evidence to support the effectiveness of oral corrective feedback in restructuring a learner’s interlanguage (Long, 1996; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Sheen, 2010; Ammar & Spada, 2006, Carroll & Swain, 1993). Consequently, there has been a growing body of theoretical and empirical literature seeking to examine the effectiveness of different types of corrective feedback in Second Language Acquisition. The literature principally addresses and discusses corrective feedback based on its degree of explicitness and implicitness. Despite the expanding topic of corrective feedback in relation to Second Language Acquisition, there is still great debate since researchers cannot come to a consensus regarding the most effective forms of correcting feedback, how it works, when it works in correcting learners, and when teachers ought to use it in classroom contexts (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). As a result, there are still many gaps in the literature and many ambiguities. This literature review will explore the ways that implicit and explicit corrective feedback restructures a learner’s interlanguage system by examining (a) the effectiveness of oral recasts and oral metalinguistic corrective feedback, (b) learner differences that contribute to the effectiveness of recasts and metalinguistic corrective feedback, and (c) by examining the effectiveness of recasts and metalinguistic corrective feedback in the process of acquiring second language knowledge.

The Effectiveness of Recasts as Oral Corrective Feedback

The seminal literature by Lyster & Ranta (1997) has demonstrated that within educational contexts, there are six types of feedback frequently used by teachers in language classrooms and academic literature, which vary according to their degree of implicitness and explicitness. According to the researchers, recasts are the most frequently used form of corrective feedback by teachers in Second Language contexts and as such, recasts have received the most attention in academic literature (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, Sheen 2010). Recasts are defined as an implicit method of error correction, which relies on the interlocutor to reformulate a learner’s sentence while excluding the learner error (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Ammar & Spada, 2006). Although widely used, the effectiveness of recasts as a form of corrective feedback in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in promoting learner correction is disputed in the literature (Sheen, 2008). The observational classroom studies conducted by Lyster & Ranta (1997) and Lyster (1998) examined the ways that elementary-aged French Immersion students reacted to various types of feedback immediately following corrective feedback. They found that recasts resulted in the lowest rate of uptake by students and that it led to the lowest rate of repair among students. Moreover, Panova & Lyster (2002) and Sheen (2010) confirm the previous findings in their study of adult ESL students: recasts consistently result in low levels of learner uptake and repair because they lacked salience. Therefore, they went largely unnoticed by learners who perceived recasts as reformulations for communicative purposes instead of correctional purposes. Consequently, the studies determined that recasts were not effective as a correction to untarget-like utterances and thus, cannot aid in language development (Lyster, 1998; Panova & Lyster, 2002).

Although demonstrating the ineffectiveness of recasts with regards to their use as corrective feedback, these studies demonstrate methodological limitations that could skew their results. Lyster & Ranta (1997) define uptake as a learner’s reaction to the teacher’s attempts of correction of the student’s original utterance. None of the studies were longitudinal and therefore, the researchers only evaluated the students’ immediate uptake to the corrective feedback. However, it is possible that learning can occur following the immediate study.

In contrast to the position denying recasts as an effective means of corrective feedback, there are researchers who support the use of recasts as a way of facilitating second language correction. Studies suggest that recasts are beneficial because they present corrective feedback to the learner while allowing for the continuation of the flow of communication while also allowing students to notice the gap between their own erroneous utterances and the target linguistic form (Long, 1996). Furthermore, in a longitudinal laboratory study directed at a specific grammatical structure of tense consistency, Han (2002) reported that recasts actually served to promote acquisition. Six learners in the study engaged in self-correction and improved their use of English regular past tense as a result of recasts.

A possible explanation for the dichotomy between the two judgments regarding the overall effectiveness of recasts can be explained by the saliency of the recasts used. In the studies conducted by Lyster & Ranta (1997), Lyster (1998), Panova & Lyster (2002), & Sheen (2010), recasts were used as a type of implicit corrective feedback which was unnoticed and ambiguous to the majority of learners. However, in the study by Han (2002), recasts were more designed to be more explicit – the recasts were focused on a single linguistic feature and were signaled as a correction to an untarget-like utterance due to the use of emphatic stress. Furthermore, the study by Han (2002) was small in scale, only consisting of eight learners, which could have skewed the results. Moreover, another factor to consider within the dichotomy is the difference in environment. The studies by Lyster & Ranta (1997), Lyster (1998) and Panova & Lyster (2002) were all classroom-based studies while the study by Han (2002) was a laboratory setting. Thus, the laboratory setting could serve as a way of alerting the test subjects to notice even the most minute forms of corrective feedback (Ammar & Spada, 2006). In contrast, within a classroom setting it is far more difficult to make recasts salient, particularly without the use of emphatic stress, since there are many activities happening at once and it is a less controlled environment. Overall, recasts demonstrate mixed evidence regarding their impact on second language acquisition and their ability to aid in language development. In sum, the effectiveness of recasts as a form of corrective feedback for second language learners depends on the degree of implicitness or explicitness of the recast.

**The Effectiveness of Metalinguistic Oral Corrective Feedback**

Several studies have found that explicit forms of oral corrective feedback are more effective than implicit corrective feedback in fostering Second Language Acquisition. Currently, more studies are delving into the topic of explicit feedback and focusing on the effectiveness of metalinguistic feedback in correcting learners’ oral errors. The laboratory study by Carroll & Swain (1993) investigated and compared the effects of implicit (in the form of recasts) and explicit (in the form of metalinguistic feedback) negative feedback in facilitating adult ESL students in the acquisition of the English dative alternation rule. Their operationalization of metalinguistic feedback consisted of alerting the speaker that an error had been committed and then giving the speaker the correct linguistic feature and an explanation about the grammatical feature. The results illustrated that the group receiving explicit corrective feedback in the form of metalinguistic feedback outperformed all the other groups, including the group receiving recasts, in acquiring the target linguistic structure. This result is echoed in the classroom-based studies conducted by Ellis, Loewen & Erlam (2006) and Sheen (2010), which also compared the effects of recasts to metalinguistic feedback on adult subjects. The researchers found evidence that oral explicit feedback in the form of metalinguistic explanations had beneficial effects in the acquisition of English grammar because it is more salient and is therefore noticed and assimilated by learners (Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006; Sheen, 2010).

Although none of the studies were longitudinal Carroll & Swain (1993) tested over the course of one week; Ellis, Loewen & Erlam tested their subjects over two days; Sheen tested subjects over the course of two weeks), the results are valuable because the posttests conducted by both Ellis, Loewen & Erlam (2006) and Sheen (2010) revealed that the groups in both studies receiving the oral metalinguistic corrective feedback outperformed the control groups in terms of accuracy. Furthermore, these studies present interesting conclusions: the studies were carried-out in different environments (either in a classroom or in a laboratory setting), yet the results from the studies suggest that oral explicit corrective feedback in the form of metalinguistic feedback are effective than recasts and implicit forms of error correction. Thus, oral metalinguistic feedback is effective regardless of environment, unlike recasts. Furthermore, since environment does not impact the effectiveness of explicit correction, these results confirm that the saliency of corrective feedback and the promotion of learner noticing are factors that influence the effectiveness of corrective feedback on learner acquisition (Sheen, 2010; Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006). Despite these results, longer-term studies would be beneficial in order to confirm the benefits and efficacy of metalinguistic feedback. However, in sum, these findings suggest that oral explicit corrective feedback is more effective than oral implicit feedback.

**The Effects of Individual Differences and Corrective Feedback**

Recent studies within the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) investigating external factors affecting the process of corrective feedback have come to the conclusion that the efficacy of corrective feedback depends on many individual factors. A study conducted by DeKeyser (1993) highlights the importance of individual factors in corrective feedback. The study compared students in a high school French as a Second Language course and found that corrective feedback had little impact on improving oral language proficiency among students, except when individual learner differences were taken into account. The study suggests that students with low extrinsic motivation (more intrinsic motivation), performed better on post-test results after receiving corrective feedback and students with high extrinsic motivation performed better orally without error correction (DeKeyser, 1993). Despite these findings, there are several limitations to DeKeyser’s (1993) study: there was a very small group of test subjects which could have skewed results and furthermore, DeKeyser (1993) failed to address and test the effects of specific types of corrective feedback which could have resulted in a better understanding of how individual differences interact with specific types of corrective feedback.

More recent research regarding oral corrective feedback has focused on the effect of recasts and individual learner differences. Studies demonstrate that some learners appear to be more receptive to recasts than others. A study conducted by Sheen (2008) targeting recasts and their effects on individual learner differences revealed that recasts are only beneficial to learners who have a low level of anxiety. Sheen (2008) mentions that this result is surprising considering that recasts are often categorized as an implicit form of corrective feedback and is thus less evident and less likely to arouse anxiety in language learners (Sheen, 2008). However, Sheen explains that the anxiety experienced by language learners in response to recasts is due to the oral communication tasks that students are required to perform. Therefore, the anxiety experienced by students is a response to the act of communicating orally in front of a large group of people instead of being a reaction to the correction that they receive (Sheen, 2008). However, the anxiety that students feel hinders their ability to process the corrective feedback and consequently learn from the recast (Sheen, 2008). Therefore, recasts are essentially useless to learners with anxiety.

Additionally, studies by Ammar & Spada (2006) and Han (2002) have revealed that the effectiveness of recasts greatly depends on the proficiency level of the learner. Both studies revealed that recasts are only effective as a form of oral corrective feedback if the recast was reformulated to a high proficiency learner. The quasi-experimental study by Ammar & Spada (2006) examining grade six students in a ESL classroom context noticed that low proficiency learners have a much more difficult time noticing recasts as a form of oral corrective feedback. Moreover, the researchers determined that recasts presented to low proficiency resulted in more uptake when corrective morphosyntactic errors as opposed to lexical errors (Ammar & Spada, 2006).

Although the saliency of recasts in this study is attributed to the proficiency of the learner, this is a tenuous link. The researchers concede that even low proficiency learners are able to identify a recast as a form of corrective feedback when addressed at a morphosyntactic error, whereas a lexical error could be simply perceived as a reformulation of an utterance in the conversation. Therefore, this suggests that the proficiency level of the learner has no bearing on the uptake of recasts and instead, learner uptake of recasts depends more on the saliency of the target linguistic feature.

The study by Han (2002) echoes a similar finding to Ammar & Spada (2006). Learners benefitted from the use of recasts as a form of oral corrective feedback when they were developmentally ready to benefit from the effects of the recast. Han (2002) states that recasts were useful in the study when the linguistic feature that was targeted by the recast was one which the subjects had knowledge of and one that learners were currently developing. However, this study presents many inconsistencies: this was a small-scale study consisting of eight test subjects (Han, 2002). Consequently, the size of the study might have skewed the results and in order to determine the actual effect of developmental readiness, this study ought to be replicated on a much larger scale in the future.

A study conducted by Trofimovich, Ammar & Gatbonton (2007) reveal that the effectiveness of recasts principally relies a learner’s cognitive abilities. Overall, their study revealed that recasts had a beneficial effect on linguistic improvement, but this depended on on the learner’s phonological memory, working memory, analytical ability, and attention control. A large phonological memory, ability to control attention, and strong analytical ability proved to be crucial in order to be able to make corrections to their own oral production after hearing a recast (Trofimovich, Ammar & Gatbonton, 2007). The researchers suggest that after hearing an oral recast, learners rely on their phonological memory in order to maintain the form of the recast in their short-term memory in order to be able to analyze it further for processing at a later time. Therefore, phonological memory aids in processing and storing the recasts for future reflection and retrieval. Moreover, the researchers suggest that there is a positive correlation between strong analytical ability and the successful uptake of recasts because with analytical ability, a learner is able to engage in deeper processing of a recast, which will result in greater understanding of the correct linguistic form (Trofimovich, Ammar & Gatbonton, 2007).

Several studies have evaluated and researched the link between recasts and individual learner variables with regards to learner uptake and correction of target linguistic features. However, research regarding more explicit forms of oral corrective feedback is lacking. Research should be conducted to evaluate individual learner characteristics and their relationship to the use of more explicit forms of oral corrective feedback, such as metalinguistic feedback.

**Oral Corrective Feedback and Second Language Learning**

Over the decades, there has been ongoing debate and uncertainty regarding the use of corrective feedback in fostering Second Language learning. Within the context of language learning there are two types of learning: implicit and explicit learning. According to N. Ellis (1994), implicit learning is the acquisition of knowledge about structures by a natural and unconscious process whereas explicit learning is a conscious process undertaken by a learner (in R. Ellis, 2015). In short, implicit learning the unintentional learning of a target language while explicit learning is an intentional and effortful attempt to learn the target linguistic features (R. Ellis, 2015). Language learning is known as an implicit process and Second Language learning has been argued to rely most on implicit learning. However, the use of corrective feedback and error correction in Second Language Acquisition has been viewed as an explicit learning process which has consequently led to many disputes and disagreements among theorists and researchers regarding its efficacy in language acquisition.

Krashen (1981) believes that corrective feedback has little impact on Second Language learning since he believes that language acquisition is an inherently innate and unconscious process. Consequently, he believes that only unconscious language learning can result in true acquisition. Therefore, according to Krashen (1981), explicit learning and the correction of errors in speech will never result in language learning and acquisition and input alone can affect language learning. In contrast to this position, many researchers have empirical evidence that contradict and disprove Krashen’s theory regarding language learning. One example is the classroom study conducted by Ammar & Spada (2006). The researchers investigated the effects of prompts and recasts as a means of oral corrective feedback, and the results from the oral data showed that in the immediate and delayed post-tests, both the prompt and recast group had better results than the control group which did not receive any oral corrective feedback (Ammar & Spada, 2006). Therefore, this study proves that input alone does not lead to learning and that explicit error correction impacts language learning.

Another theorist and researcher, Schmidt, posits that noticing is essential in language learning (Schmidt, 1990). In his Noticing Hypothesis, he suggests that awareness and conscious attention is necessary when receiving language input in order to learn specific linguistic features in a second language (Schmidt, 1990). Moreover, he acknowledges the effectiveness of explicit learning in the form of corrective feedback – Schmidt (1990) posits that it is essential since learners are better able to identify their mistake and engage in the process of alternating their erroneous linguistic feature to make it more like the target linguistic feature (Schmidt, 1990). Moreover, the researcher Long supports the notion of explicit learning by advocating for the importance of corrective feedback in supporting language learning (Long, 1996). According to Long’s Interaction Hypothesis (1996), oral communication leads to language learning, therefore, communication is essential, even when correcting errors in language use (Long, 1996). Consequently, Long advocates the use of implicit forms of corrective feedback, specifically, recasts which supply a learner with negative evidence that an utterance was erroneous while also maintaining the flow of conversation, as well as the meaning of the conversation, which thereby promotes second language development through meaningful interaction (Long, 1996). Within the literature, there are empirical research to support for Schmidt’s Noticing Hypothesis (1990) over Long’s Interaction Hypothesis (1996) regarding corrective feedback and second language learning. As discussed earlier, the studies demonstrate that recasts, although beneficial in advancing conversation, do not promote learning because learners fail to notice the corrective force of oral recasts (Panova & Lyster, 2002; Lyster 1998; Sheen 2010; Ammar & Spada, 2006). In contrast, oral metalinguistic feedback generate greater repair because they are more salient and learners notice the error made (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Ellis, Loewen & Erlam, 2006). Therefore, there is considerable evidence in support of corrective feedback as a means of promoting Second Language learning. Notably, within the literature focusing on oral corrective feedback in SLA, studies have demonstrated that noticing is essential to language learning. Therefore, the role of more explicit forms of corrective feedback, such as metalinguistic feedback, is greater than implicit feedback, such as recasts, in fostering Second Language learning.

**Oral Corrective Feedback and Second Language Knowledge**

Within the field of Second Language Acquisition, there have been debates regarding corrective feedback and its role in the development of linguistic knowledge. Similarly to language learning, there is a distinction between implicit and explicit knowledge. According to Han & Ellis (1998), implicit knowledge is the intuitive awareness and easy accessibility of language whereas explicit knowledge about the structures of language which are managed through conscious effort. Currently, there has been some empirical evidence of a positive correlation between corrective feedback, specifically in the form of recasts and metalinguistic feedback, and acquiring knowledge in a Second Language context. The study by Ellis, Loewen & Erlam (2006), which tested the effectiveness of explicit feedback, in the form of metalinguistic corrective feedback, and implicit feedback, in the form of recasts, on the grammatical past-tense structure of –ed, suggest that explicit corrective feedback can convert explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge. The researchers posit that the noticing effect of explicit error correction, the metalinguistic corrective feedback, leads to greater awareness regarding the gap between the erroneous utterances and the target linguistic form, thus resulting in unconscious awareness and reformulation which leads to the formation of implicit knowledge (Ellis, Loewen & Erlam, 2006). Moreover, the researchers claim that due to awareness generated as a result of the metalinguistic feedback, leads to interaction between explicit and implicit knowledge (Ellis, Loewen & Erlam, 2006). Therefore, corrective feedback, specifically explicit metalinguistic feedback, fosters implicit knowledge and aids in the process of Second Language acquisition. Another study by Rassaei, Moinzadeh & Youhanaee (2012) exploring the effects of recasts and metalinguistic corrective feedback demonstrated similar results. Their findings in the post and delayed post-tests demonstrated that both metalinguistic feedback and recasts contributed to the acquisition of both implicit and explicit Second Language knowledge, however, metalinguistic knowledge resulted in more enduring effects (Rassaei, Moinzadeh & Youhanaee, 2012).

While both of these studies are notable and valuable, they are limited because it remains unclear how implicit and explicit knowledge is formed or how explicit or implicit corrective feedback is converted into knowledge. Both studies refer to previous research on implicit and explicit knowledge to validate the testing procedures and methods that they used, however, it is not clear to what extent the testing procedures allowed for the interaction between the different types of feedback and the different types of knowledge. Therefore, more research needs to be conducted into this particular area in order to fully understand the ways that corrective feedback directly influences knowledge.

**Conclusion**

This paper has provided an overview of the literature regarding the effectiveness of two specific types of oral corrective feedback: implicit corrective feedback in the form of recasts and explicit corrective feedback in the form of metalinguistic feedback. It has analyzed the effectiveness of the two types of feedback on learner uptake, reviewed theoretical and experimental research on the topic of oral corrective feedback, examined the literature regarding the effects of different individual differences that help or hinder corrective feedback, investigated the effectiveness of recasts and metalinguistic feedback on Second Language learning and on the acquisition of linguistic knowledge. After reviewing the literature, it can be stated that explicit oral corrective feedback in the form of metalinguistic feedback is more effective than implicit corrective feedback in the form of recasts because metalinguistic feedback garners more learner uptake and because the literature has demonstrated that metalinguistic feedback has durable effects since it leads to the acquisition of implicit knowledge. Despite the growing literature on the effects of oral corrective feedback, there remain some ambiguities in the literature. More research is needed in order to clarify and explain the exact link between corrective feedback and the acquisition of linguistic knowledge and research needs to adopt better means of testing and evaluating the effects of feedback on knowledge. Furthermore, although there is a significant amount of research published regarding individual differences and corrective feedback, the majority of the research has discussed the individual differences in relation to recasts and less attention has been paid to individual differences and metalinguistic feedback. Therefore, despite the significant amount or empirical research already published regarding corrective feedback in the context of Second Language learning and acquisition, there are still areas within this topic that merit further investigation.

Works Cited

Ammar, A., & Spada, N. (2006). One Size Fits All?: Recasts, prompts, and L2 learning.

*Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 28*(4), 543-574.

doi:10.1017/S0272263106060268

Carroll, S., & Swain, M. (1993). Explicit and Implicit Negative

Feedback. Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 15, pp 357-386.

doi:10.1017/S0272263100012158.

Dekeyser, R. M. (1993). The Effect of Error Correction on L2 Grammar

Knowledge and Oral Proficiency. *The Modern Language Journal*, *77*(4),

501–514. http://doi.org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/10.2307/329675

Ellis, R. (2015). *Understanding second language acquisition*.

Ellis, R., Loewen, S., & Erlam, R. (2006). Implicit And Explicit Corrective Feedback

And The Acquisition Of L2 Grammar. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition,*

*28*(2), 339-368. Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/224060449?accountid=14771

Han, Y., & Ellis, R. (1998). Implicit knowledge, explicit knowledge and general

language proficiency. *Language Teaching Research, 2*(1), 1-23.

doi:10.1177/136216889800200102

Han, Z. (2002), *A Study of the Impact of Recasts on Tense Consistency in L2 Output*.

TESOL Quarterly, 36: 543–572. doi: 10.2307/3588240

Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Oxford:

Pergamon.

Long, M. H. (1996) The role of the linguistic environment in second language

acquisition. In W. Ritchie & T. Bhatia (Eds.), Handbook of second language

acquisition (pp. 413-468). New York: Academic Press.

Lyster, R. (1998). Negotiation of form, recasts, and explicit correction in relation to error

types and learner repair in immersion classrooms. *Language Learning, 48*(2),

183-218. doi:10.1111/1467-9922.00039

Lyster, R. & Ranta, L. (1997). Corrective Feedback And Learner Uptake. *Studies in*

*Second Language Acquisition*, pp 37-66. doi:

http://dx.doi.org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/

Panova, I. & Lyster, R. (2002). Patterns of Corrective Feedback and Uptake in an Adult

ESL Classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36(2), 573-595. doi: 10.2307/3588241

Rassaei, E., Moinsadeh, A., & Youhanaee, M. (2012). The Effect of Corrective

Feedback on the Acquisition of Implicit and Explicit L2 Knowledge. *The Journal*

*of Langauge Teaching and Learning*, 2(1), 59-75. doi:

http://www.jltl.org/index.php/jltl/article/view/64/25

Sheen, Y. (2010). Differential Effects Of Oral And Written Corrective Feedback In The

Esl Classroom. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 32*(2), 203-234.

doi:10.1017/S0272263109990507

Sheen, Y. (2008). Recasts, language anxiety, modified output, and L2 learning. *Language*

*Learning, 58*(4), 835-874. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9922.2008.00480.x

Trofimovich, P., Ammar, A., & Gatbonton, E. (2007). How effective are recasts? The

role of attention, memory, and analytical ability. In A. Mackey (Eds.),

*Conversational interaction in second language acquisition: A series of empirical*

*studies* (pp. 171-195). Oxford: Oxford University Press.