The Recast: Frequency and Effectiveness in EFL Communicative Language Schools in Thailand

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Abstract

This research investigates the types, frequency and effectiveness of various methods of corrective feedback used by English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in their communicative language classes. A review of prior research in the area of corrective feedback, along with a focus on the various types or methods of corrective feedback that educators consistently use, reveals that *the recast* method is of particular interest. The recast is a common, yet controversial, method of error correction that has been used extensively by EFL teachers for many years. However, the recast has recently lost favor among language acquisition researchers and language teaching experts. In order to investigate this, the corrective feedback techniques of four native speaking English teachers working in Thailand were recorded to discover if the recast is used with more or less frequency than other types of corrective feedback by EFL teachers, and in addition, whether or not it proved to be more or less effective than other forms of learner error correction. The results revealed that the recast was neither the most frequently used nor the most effective method of EFL learner correction. The results also showed that a combination of repetition, clarification requests, and elicitation could well yield better learner uptake results than either the recast used exclusively or combinations of feedback that include the recast. The paper concludes with recommendations for further research.

Keywords: Recast, CF (corrective feedback), SLA (Second Language Acquisition), CLT (Communicative Language Teaching), EFL (English as a Foreign Language)

Introduction

The use of corrective feedback in the field of foreign language teaching has been widely researched since the late 1960s. Corrective feedback is the way in which teachers facilitate or guide learners to repair errors that are made in either language form or language meaning. Chaudron (1977) defines corrective feedback as “any reaction of the teacher which clearly transforms, disapprovingly refers to, or demands improvement of the learner utterance” (p. 31). The corrective feedback of teachers often prompts an interaction which is referred to by researchers as the communicative approach and this methodology lies at the

core of communicative language teaching (CLT). According to Scrivener (2005), CLT "is based on the belief that learners will benefit more when they participate in meaningful communication" (p. 38). Since effective communicative language teaching emphasizes interaction between teacher and student, the use of corrective feedback is worthy of continued investigation.

In the early years of second language acquisition research, the most debated topic was *whether or not* corrective feedback should be implemented in EFL classrooms. However, more recent research has steered away from whether or not errors should be corrected, and has steered towards *which* corrective feedback techniques are the most effective and which are the least effective.

Whether or not to give feedback

Hendrickson (1978) conducted early research into corrective feedback and concluded that the teacher must consider five areas for error correction: whether to correct, when to correct, what to correct, how to correct, and who to correct. Scrivener (2005, p.298-299) uses these same five points in a different order in his language teaching text, *Learning Teaching:*

Five teacher decisions have to be made when working with oral errors in class:

1. What kind of error has been made (grammar, pronunciation? etc.).

2. Whether to deal with it (is it useful to correct it?).

3. When to deal with it (now? end of activity? later?).

4. Who will correct (teacher? student self-correction? other students?)

5. Which technique to use to indicate that an error has occurred to enable correction.

When reviewing Scrivener's (2005) argument that "Five teacher decisions have to be made when working with oral errors in class" (p. 299), it could be implied that Scrivener feels *it is not always* necessary by any means to correct the learner. Other language researchers also have mixed views regarding whether or not to give error correction.

Krashen (1982) is firm that while corrective feedback is unnecessary, some form of comprehensible language input will be needed. In Krashen's view, corrective feedback is of little or no importance in a communicative language teaching environment. Krashen's (1981) *comprehensive input* and *monitor hypotheses* are centered on the idea that, like first language learners, second language learners only require understandable language input and will naturally acquire the second language on their own. Allen et al. (1990) conducted a study which revealed that only nineteen percent of all grammar errors were corrected by teachers. This could indicate that some teachers view learner error correction as a hindrance to the communication flow in the classroom and may even tend to avoid correction to maximize communication flow.

Other researchers, in contrast, believe that corrective feedback is a critical part of the teacher's responsibility. While Krashen (1982) appears to be staying fast with his theories, later research by Crookes and Chaudron (2001) shows that even in strictly student-centered classrooms, where the teacher plays a limited role and interferes as little as possible, students still need some form of corrective feedback to notice whether or not they are reaching an acceptable language target in both form and meaning. Gass et al. (2013) point out that "Feedback is an important source of information for learners. Most generally, it provides them with information about the success (or, more likely, lack of success) of their utterances and gives additional opportunities to focus on production or comprehension" (p. 359). Zhai and Gao (2018) conducted a recent study in China with EFL university students and concluded that, "In current EFL classroom in China, the CF is eagerly required to be used in an efficient way in order to promote Chinese students' speaking skills." (p.11). Lynch (2009) cites Harmer's (2001) view that the process of corrective feedback from beginning to end is unfinished until the students themselves have followed through with active ways of repairing the errors that have been pointed out to them by the teacher. Harmer (2001) suggests that students could use dictionaries or grammar books outside the class to make mental notes of the corrections to avoid the same errors. Harmer is possibly implying that once the teacher points out the error to a learner, and the learner notices the error, it is the learner's responsibility to realize what went wrong, why, and how to avoid the error later. Interestingly, Oberli (2003) argues that giving feedback, especially to correct form is one of the greatest obstacles for ESL teachers.

The types of corrective feedback

Within the nomenclature of foreign language acquisition there are several terms used to identify the types of corrective feedback techniques used by teachers in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in communicative teaching classrooms. According to past research in the field, the types of EFL corrective feedback include explicit correction, elicitation, recasts, metalinguistic feedback, clarification requests, and repetition. Lyster (2002) cites from an earlier study (Lyster & Ranta, 1997) defining the corrective feedback techniques as follows:

> 1. Explicit correction: teacher supplies the correct form and clearly indicates that what the student had said was incorrect.
>
> 2. Recasts: teacher implicitly reformulates all or part of the student's utterance.
>
> 3. Elicitation: teacher elicits a reformulation from the student by asking questions such as *"Comment ca s'appelle?"* or *"How do we say that in French?"* or by pausing to allow the student to complete the teacher's utterance or by asking the student to reformulate their utterance.
>
> 4. Metalinguistic clues: teacher provides comments, information, or questions related to well- formedness of the student's utterance such as *"Ca ne se dit pas en francias"* (It does not say in French.) or *"C'est masculine?"* (Is it masculine?)

5. Clarification requests: teacher uses phrases such as *"Pardon?"* and *"I don't understand."*

6. Repetition: teacher repeats the student's ill-formed utterance, adjusting intonation to highlight the error.

(Lyster, 2002, p. 272)

The degree to which corrective feedback should be applied

In addition to the decision on whether or not to initiate feedback, and which type of corrective feedback would be more effective, the degree of or amount of corrective feedback is also worthy of study in the field of SLA. Lynch (2009) cites Harmer's (2001) belief that corrective feedback should be as unobtrusive as possible, and cites what Harmer calls "gentle correction". Lynch (2009) also cites Rinvolucri (1984) who states that teachers should avoid "hamfisted feedback". Byrne (1987) goes as far as saying that teachers should not correct errors instantly, but should note them down and re-teach the errors in a future lesson. It could be that Byrne feels this method would be less intrusive on the learning process.

While some of the cited researchers advocate corrective feedback, they feel that the teacher should perform it in such a way that it interferes as little as possible with the interactive flow of the lesson. In their study from Lyster and Ranta (1997) investigate the types of corrective feedback and the effectiveness of each type and argue that if recasts are used, will they be noticed, unnoticed, or ignored by learners? If explicit correction is used, will it disrupt the lesson too much or cause the learner to feel discouraged? If elicitation is used, will it confuse the learner or cause ambiguity? These questions, along with the arguments regarding the degree to which corrective feedback should be applied, still cause debate among researchers and educators in the field of second language acquisition. Nonetheless, one point that most researchers and educators do agree on is that there should be *some* kind of corrective feedback.

The benefits of providing corrective feedback

From a pedagogical aspect, feedback is a technique that can be a useful tool to promote acquisition. Gass, et al. (2013) pointed out, "Feedback is an important source of information for learners. Most generally, it provides them with information about the success (or, more likely, lack of success) of their utterances and gives additional opportunities to focus on production or comprehension" (p. 359). Feedback from teachers also gives the learners a chance to engage in what Swain (1985) terms "negotiation of meaning". Swain (1985) notes that negotiation of meaning is a meaningful exchange of language between teacher and learner, or learner and learner, to resolve an error or fill a gap in understanding of form, meaning, or pronunciation. Swain (1985) claims that negotiation of meaning is essential for learners and teachers, or learners and learners, to engage in because it gives the learners a

chance to produce meaningful language output, or what he terms "comprehensible output" that benefits their language acquisition progress. If a teacher gives a learner effective corrective feedback, the process itself of figuring out the nature of the error or resolving the misunderstanding of the error helps the EFL learner to progress to a higher level. This in turn leads a learner to produce the comprehensible output which forms the basis of Swains' Output Hypothesis. This is the act of teachers pushing or encouraging learners to produce spoken or written language through corrective feedback methods. If no corrective feedback is provided by the teacher, or the feedback is ineffective, the learner misses out on the opportunity to practice the communication exchange that is necessary to avoid making the same errors indefinitely (Swain, 1985).

As well as benefitting the learner, effective error correction enables teachers and learners to determine the level of the learner. Scrivener's (2005) discussion on error correction highlights that making errors during the learning process is natural for humans, and learning a language is no exception. Errors show that the learner is experimenting with new language forms, using new vocabulary and grammar, taking risks, and progressing. When teachers analyze these errors and point them out to the learners in a constructive manner, the teachers and learners can gauge at which level the learner should be aiming for next to help the learner progress and set realistic goals. Benati et al. (2004) point out that from a pedagogical point of view, feedback is a technique that is useful for nurturing language acquisition.

Effectiveness of various types corrective feedback

A group study by Narciss (2013) stated an interesting point regarding the effectiveness of feedback. They said, "Even the most sophisticated feedback is useless if learners do not attend to it or are not willing to invest time and effort in error correction" (p. 13). Assuming then, that the teacher is willing to engage in giving corrective feedback, and the student is willing to engage in error correction, the effectiveness of various forms of corrective feedback can be investigated.

Farahani and Mirsharifi (2008) conducted research examining how teachers in an L2 classroom use questions and feedback effectively. Their research is of particular interest to the authors as it provides both a basis for the research hypotheses for this study and a foundation for continued research on the recast method of correction. In their study, Farahani and Mirsharifi (2008) focused on the recast, repetition, and explicit correction. Four teachers were evaluated and rated as either 'effective teachers' (two teachers) or 'less effective teachers' (two teachers). The labels were based on the amount of learner uptake for each type of teacher. Farahani and Mirsharifi (2008) hypothesized that effective teachers would use corrective feedback more frequently than the less effective teachers. The results confirmed their hypothesis that more effective teachers use more feedback than less effective teachers. The types of feedback varied, but the more effective teachers used feedback 54 times whereas the less effective teachers used feedback 23 times. Effective teachers had higher rates of learner uptake than the less effective teachers. Their data also indicates that some less effective teachers tend to ignore learner errors or feel it is unnecessary to correct the errors, but effective

teachers took the time to use more corrective feedback. The researchers' results showed that effective teachers use more corrective feedback, but more research was needed to determine which types or combinations of corrective feedback were most effective (Farahani and Mirsharifi, 2008). This presents an opportunity to fill a gap in knowledge for the authors of this paper.

The recast versus other feedback methods

Although the recast is often found to be popular in EFL teaching environments, the recast is also arguably the most controversial of the six types of corrective feedback under investigation in this paper. Corrective feedback research by Lyster and Ranta (1997) shows that 55% of the participants in one of their studies used the recast as the favored technique for error correction while just 14% used elicitation, 11% clarification requests, 8% metalinguistic feedback, 7% explicit correction, and 5% repetition. Han and Kim (2008) cite Seedhouse (1997) who suggests that many teachers prefer recasts because they are implicit and do not interrupt the communicative flow of the classroom meaning-based learning. The same data cited above by Lyster and Ranta (1997), however, shows that the percentage of learner uptake and error repair from recasts is low compared to that of other types of feedback. Ellis, et al. (2001), on the other hand, point out that teachers initiate types of corrective feedback depending on whether there is a focus on form or a focus on meaning. In addition, the level or age of the learners should be taken into consideration. They suggest that teachers should not be overly concerned with the use of recasts if the learners are adult, more advanced learners.

Much research has focused on the recast as a form of corrective feedback, and for the most part, data has shown an unfavorable view of the recast. The typical recast is a reformulation of the learner's utterance with the error(s) corrected for the student. As Lyster and Ranta (1997) point out, the learner uptake for recasts is low compared with other types of corrective feedback The recast even goes unnoticed in many instances, but as Perdomo (2008) states, "the recast seems to benefit more of those students with more previous knowledge of the language" (p. 161).

Some studies have not used the recast singularly or in its purest form. This makes any comparisons against other studies difficult. Doughty and Varela (1998), in their study, incorporated the recast with repetition, rising intonation, and stress. Muranoi (2000) used clarification requests with recasts, and in a study by Philp (2003), knocking noises were used with recasts to make them more noticeable to the learners. Nassaji (2007) points out that further research is needed to indicate whether or not these combinations of methods used with recasts increases the notability that has been lacking in the use of recasts.

The recast has seen little support among researchers in the field of second language acquisition, but there is still evidence that the recast has a useful place if it is used at the right time and in the right situation. Sheen (2004) points out that if recasts are short, direct, and focus on phonology or pronunciation, then they can be effective. Research also indicates that

if the recast is used in the right context and in conjunction with other methods, it can be effective. However, if the recast is used as the sole means of corrective feedback for all areas of teaching, including meaning and pronunciation, then studies reveal that the levels of learner uptake are lower (Lyster & Ranta, 1997).

Hypotheses

There are two research hypotheses for this study:

H1: Effective teachers (those with higher rates of learner uptake) employ other types of corrective feedback more frequently than they do the recast.

H2: Less effective teachers (those with lower rates of learner uptake) employ the recast more frequently than effective teachers (those with higher rates of learner uptake).

Methods

Four native English speaking teachers of English as a foreign language were recorded to observe the presence of corrective feedback used in their communicative English language teaching classrooms. The types of corrective feedback, the frequency of corrective feedback, and the presence or lack of learner uptake were recorded, transcribed, and tabulated on a data observation checklist adapted from the *Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching observation scheme* COLT constructed by Spada and Frohlich (1995). The data from the data observation checklist were subsequently transferred to statistical analysis software to perform a quantitative analysis on the frequency and effectiveness of the six methods of corrective feedback.

Population and sampling

- Four native English teachers teaching English as a second or foreign language in communicative classrooms in Thailand
- All the students were Thai learners of English as a second language
- 1125 minutes of recorded material and data were captured
- 181 total instances of corrective feedback were observed
- Thai learners aged from 5 to 16 years old from elementary to upper-intermediate level English competency
- Class sizes containing less than 20 students in both private language schools and government institutions
- Six forms of corrective feedback methods used by teachers under the above conditions: The recast, elicitation, clarification request, metalinguistic feedback, explicit correction, and repetition.

Results

The data collection for Teacher A in Table 1 shows that Teacher A used the recast the most frequently (10 times; 29.4%). The next most frequently used methods of corrective feedback, in descending order, were the clarification request (8 times; 23.5%), explicit correction (7 times; 20.6%), elicitation (5 times; 14.7%), and repetition (4 times; 11.8%). There were no instances of metalinguistic feedback from Teacher A.

There were 34 total instances of corrective feedback by Teacher A and 25 instances of learner uptake or attempted repair of errors (73.5% uptake). The 9 instances of no learner uptake (26.5%) were 3 recasts, 1 elicitation, 4 explicit corrections, and 1 repetition. A total of 300 minutes was recorded for Teacher A.

Table 1: Corrective Feedback by Teacher A

Teacher A					
Feedback Type	Count	% Frequency	No Uptake	Uptake	% Effective
Recast	10	29.4	3	7	70.0
Elicitation	5	14.7	1	4	80.0
Clarif. Request	8	23.5	0	8	100.0
Metalinguistic	0	0.0	0	0	
Explicit Corr.	7	20.6	4	3	42.9
Repetition	4	11.8	1	3	75.0
TOTAL	34	100.00	9	25	73.5

The data collection for Teacher B in Table 2 shows that Teacher B used the clarification request the most frequently (24 times; 39.3%). The next most frequently used methods of corrective feedback, in descending order, were elicitation (12 times; 19.7%), the recast (11 times; 18%), explicit correction (8 times; 13.1%), and repetition (6 times; 9.8%). There were no instances of metalinguistic feedback from Teacher B.

There were 61 total instances of corrective feedback by Teacher B and 37 instances of learner uptake or attempted repair of errors (60.7% uptake). The 24 instances of no learner uptake (39.3%) were 4 recasts, 5 elicitations, 11 clarification requests, 3 explicit corrections, and 1 repetition. A total of 330 minutes was recorded for Teacher B.

Table 2: Corrective Feedback by Teacher B

Teacher B					
Feedback Type	Count	% Frequency	No Uptake	Uptake	% Effective
Recast	11	18.0	4	7	63.6
Elicitation	12	19.7	5	7	58.3
Clarif. Request	24	39.3	11	13	54.2
Metalinguistic	0	0.0	0	0	
Explicit Corr.	8	13.1	3	5	62.5
Repetition	6	9.8	1	5	83.3
TOTAL	61	100.00	24	37	60.7

The data collection for Teacher C in Table 3 shows that Teacher C used the clarification request the most frequently (6 times; 37.5%). The next most frequently used methods of corrective feedback, in descending order, were elicitation (5 times; 31.3%), explicit correction (3 times; 18.8%), and the recast (2 times; 12.5%). There were no instances of metalinguistic feedback or repetition from Teacher C.

There were 16 total instances of corrective feedback by Teacher C and 9 instances of learner uptake or attempted repair of errors (56.3% uptake). The 7 instances of no learner uptake (43.7%) were 1 recast, 1 elicitation, 3 clarification requests, and 2 explicit corrections. A total of 235 minutes was recorded for Teacher C.

Table 3: Corrective Feedback by Teacher C

Teacher C					
Feedback Type	Count	% Frequency	No Uptake	Uptake	% Effective
Recast	2	12.5	1	1	50.0
Elicitation	5	31.3	1	4	80.0
Clarif. Request	6	37.5	3	3	50.0
Metalinguistic	0	0.0	0	0	
Explicit Corr.	3	18.8	2	1	33.3
Repetition	0	0.0	0	0	
TOTAL	16	100.00	7	9	56.3

The data collection for Teacher D in Table 4 shows that Teacher D used the clarification request the most frequently (23 times; 32.9%). The next most frequently used methods of corrective feedback, in descending order, were the recast (17 times; 24.3%), explicit correction (16 times; 22.9%), elicitation (8 times; 11.4%), metalinguistic (3 times;

4.3%) and repetition (also 3 times; 4.3%). Teacher D was the only teacher of the four who used all six types or corrective feedback, and the only teacher to use metalinguistic feedback.

There were 70 total instances of corrective feedback by Teacher D and 30 instances of learner uptake or attempted repair of errors (42.9% uptake). The 40 instances of no learner uptake (57.1%) were 14 recasts, 5 elicitations, 6 clarification requests, 3 metalinguistic feedbacks, 10 explicit corrections, and 2 repetitions. A total of 260 minutes was recorded for Teacher D.

Table 4: Corrective Feedback by Teacher D

Teacher D					
Feedback Type	Count	% Frequency	No Uptake	Uptake	% Effective
Recast	17	24.3	14	3	17.6
Elicitation	8	11.4	5	3	37.5
Clarif. Request	23	32.9	6	17	73.9
Metalinguistic	3	4.3	3	0	0.0
Explicit Corr.	16	22.9	10	6	37.5
Repetition	3	4.3	2	1	33.3
TOTAL	70	100.00	40	30	42.9

The total data collection for all teachers in all lessons is shown in Table 5. The clarification request was used the most frequently (61 times; 33.7%). The next most frequently used method of corrective feedback for all teachers, in descending order, were the recast (40 times; 22.1%), explicit correction (34 times; 18.8%), elicitation (30 times; 16.6%), repetition (13 times; 7.2%), and metalinguistic feedback (3 times; 1.7%). Metalinguistic feedback was by far the least favored method of corrective feedback recorded across all teachers in all lessons.

There were 181 total instances of corrective feedback by all teachers collectively and 101 instances of learner uptake or attempted repair of errors (55.8% uptake). The 80 instances of no learner uptake (44.2%) were 22 recasts, 12 elicitations, 20 clarification requests, 3 metalinguistic feedbacks, 19 explicit corrections, and 4 repetitions. A total of 1125 minutes of recorded material was captured across all events.

Table 5: Corrective Feedback by All Teachers

TOTALS ALL EVENTS					
Feedback Type	Count	% Frequency	No Uptake	Uptake	% Effective
Recast	40	22.1	22	18	45.0
Elicitation	30	16.6	12	18	60.0
Clarif. Request	61	33.7	20	41	67.2
Metalinguistic	3	1.7	3	0	0.0
Explicit Corr.	34	18.8	19	15	44.1
Repetition	13	7.2	4	9	69.2
TOTAL	181	100	80	101	55.8

Discussion

The results show that Teacher A was the most effective of the four teachers. Teacher A had 25 instances of learner uptake out of a total of 34 instances of corrective feedback (73.5% effective). The next most effective teacher was Teacher B with 37 instances of learner uptake out of a total of 61 instances of corrective feedback (60.7% effective). The third most effective was Teacher C with 9 instances of learner uptake out of a total of 16 instances of corrective feedback (56.3% effective). According to the results, Teacher D was the least effective of all with 30 instances of learner uptake out of a total of 70 instances of corrective feedback (42.9% effective).

Using the methodology of Farahani and Mirsharifi (2008), the four teachers were evaluated and rated as either 'effective teachers' (two teachers) or 'less effective teachers' (two teachers).

Teacher A, the most effective teacher (73.5% uptake), used the recast more frequently than other type of corrective feedback (29.4% frequency). As a result, for Teacher A, H1: Effective teachers (those with higher rates of learner uptake) employ other types of corrective feedback more frequently than they do the recast is not supported.

Teacher B, the second most effective teacher (60.7% uptake), used the clarification request more frequently than other type of corrective feedback (39.3% frequency). As a result, for Teacher B, H1: Effective teachers (those with higher rates of learner uptake) employ other types of corrective feedback more frequently than they do the recast is supported.

Teacher C, one of the two less effective teachers (56.3% uptake), used the clarification request more frequently than other type of corrective feedback (37.5% frequency). As a result, for Teacher C, H2: Less effective teachers (those with lower rates of learner uptake) employ

the recast more frequently than effective teachers (those with higher rates of learner uptake) is not supported.

Teacher D, the least effective teacher (42.9% uptake), used the clarification request more frequently than other type of corrective feedback. As a result, for Teacher D, H2: Less effective teachers (those with lower rates of learner uptake) employ the recast more frequently than effective teachers (those with higher rates of learner uptake) is not supported.

Regarding the question posed by Farahani and Mirsharifi (2008) as to which types or combinations of corrective feedback were most effective, the results revealed that repetition was the most effective method of corrective feedback overall (69.2% effective). The second most effective method of corrective feedback was the clarification request (67.2% effective) followed by elicitation as the third most effective method (60.0% effective). The recast, which has been the subject of debate among previous researchers regarding its use and effectiveness, proved to be just 45% effective while explicit correction yielded a result of 44.1% effective. There were no instances of learner uptake through metalinguistic feedback. Thus, it returned a result of 0% effective.

Conclusion and recommendations

There is evidence to support the argument that the use of corrective feedback in the EFL communicative language teaching environment has a direct impact on learner acquisition of the target language. The types and frequency of such feedback are likely to be deciding factors in determining the rate at which learners can advance to more proficient levels of comprehensible output.

The research has revealed that a combination of repetition, clarification requests, and elicitation may well yield better learner uptake results than combinations that include the recast as a method of learner correction. The results of the most effective teacher overall in the research also reflected this combination, however, more research is needed.

It is recommended for future researchers to investigate qualitative factors that can also have an impact on learner uptake. These factors could include whether the teachers are consciously aware of the effectiveness of different types of corrective feedback and how saliently they use each one. The relationship between the teacher and learner, the attitudes to teaching and learning, and the age, experience, and general behaviors of both parties are also worthy of further investigation. The ultimate goal being to harvest knowledge which can then be applied by teachers in the ESL environment to make communicative English language classes more effective.

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