The Use of Recast in the EFL Classroom through Action Research Approach

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Abstract

This study reflects upon the experience of using recast as a corrective feedback strategy in an English for specific purposes course for chemists and chemistry students in a university setting. Facilitated by action research, this study reports on how recast in the pre-task and the preparation stage prevent oral errors from happening during the main communicative stage. The effectiveness of recast is also discussed in this paper. One of the main findings is the significance of recasts in the language classroom as a feedback tool.

Key words: recast, action research, errors, English for specific purposes, feedback, utterance

Abstract

Este estudio reflexiona sobre la experiencia de usar la reformulación como una estrategia correctiva de retroalimentación en un curso de inglés con fines específicos para químicos y estudiantes de química en un entorno universitario. Basado en la investigación en acción, este estudio refiere cómo la reformulación en las etapas de pre-tarea y de preparación previene la comisión de errores en forma oral durante la etapa principal de comunicación. La efectividad de la reformulación es también abordada en este documento. Uno de los principales hallazgos es la importancia de la reformulación en la clase de idioma como una herramienta de retroalimentación.

Keywords: reformulación, investigación en acción, errores, inglés con fines específicos, retroalimentación, declaración

Introduction

Student: "Chemicals is part of our daily life." Professor: "I agree with you. Chemicals *are* part of our daily life." Error correction is definitely a relevant feature of language classrooms. It is one of the most important dilemmas for language teachers, especially when it comes to speaking (oral proficiency). One can say that it is always difficult to know when to correct learners and how to go about it. The danger of over-correcting is that students will probably lose motivation and the language teacher might end up interrupting the flow of the class or the activity by constantly correcting every single error. Language teachers want their learners to talk in order to convey meaning and constant correction of errors might discourage them from speaking. The other extreme is to let the conversation or the activity flow and not to correct any errors. It is true that there are times when this is appropriate but students do want to have some of their errors corrected as this gives them a basis for improvement in the learning process. It is true that errors are a source for language teachers to provide students with information about a specific linguistic feature (they provide teaching possibilities). At this point, it is relevant to mention that recast is, indeed, a common feedback technique used in the language classrooms (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). One of the many ways that language teachers attempt to guide learners is by giving feedback to them about their use of the second language. One can say that recast is the most frequent and common type of correction feedback in language classrooms. Learners may be exposed to several types of feedback depending on the teaching-learning context and teacher's beliefs, including elicitation, metalinguistic feedback, clarification requests, repetition of the error, modeling, recasts, and translation. Recasts, as any type of correction strategy, try to provide the learner with evaluative information to incorporate changes and make progress concerning their linguistic performance. Recasts tell learners that they have said something incorrect in the second language (English in this case), allowing them to correct their utterances towards a more comprehensible or native-like use of the second language.

The Problem

The researcher conducted an action research to find out how recast in the pre-task and the preparation stage prevent oral errors from happening during the task cycle. The study reported on here took place in the School of Chemistry, at the University of Costa Rica in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) environment. ChemCourse was a 15-week, ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course for chemists and chemistry students within a TBLT (Task-Based Language Teaching) approach. Classes were given on Mondays and Wednesdays from 5:00 p.m. to 6:45 p.m. in the school of chemistry. It is also relevant to mention that ChemCourse was team-taught. One professor was in charge of giving

the lesson, while the other professor acted as an assistant to both the students and the professor in charge of the lesson.

During the first sessions, it was clear that students were making an important amount of oral errors during the main communicative task, basically pronunciation, word-choice, and subject verb agreement errors. Recast was chosen as the way to prevent students' oral errors basically because of two reasons. The first one deals with students. Students were making significant oral errors when performing the main communicative task in class. One can say that they could communicate effectively, even though some oral errors still remained. The second reason is related to the researcher's personal interest in recast and how it can prevent oral errors, which is a significant strategy in a teacher's practice. Recast is paramount in a language class because it can help students to notice the gap in order to provide a correct utterance (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). In addition, the researcher also believes in preventing errors rather than fixing errors. It is definitely more time-efficient. The researcher also considers that this strategy is a cornerstone that can determine accuracy during the main communicative task because it helps students to produce correct structures.

Participants

This study focuses on two students who are Costa Rican and native speakers of Spanish. One of them is an undergraduate student of Chemistry in the University of Costa Rica. The other is a professor at the school of Chemistry in the University of Costa Rica. Their ages range between 23-36 years. Regarding their English proficiency level, both students are intermediate. In order to protect the students' identity, fictitious names were given to the subjects of this case study. Student number one is to be called Lord Rakim and student number two is to be called Mr. Tomnus.

Review of Literature

Several definitions of recast have been provided by different researchers and authors. Larsen-Freeman (2003) points out, "Recasting involves teachers reformulating all or part of what a student has just said so that it is correct" (p.135). Another specialist, Long (1998) states, "Recasts are utterances that rephrase a child's utterance by changing one or more sentences' components (subject, verb or object) while still referring to its central meanings" (p. 434). It is significant to notice how these authors focus on "reformulating" and "rephrasing" in order to maintain the original idea. According to Philp (2003), a recast is "a target like version" of a student's utterance (p. 100), and Sheen (2004) says, "Recasts refer to the reformulation of the whole or part of a learner's erroneous utterance without changing its meaning" (p. 278). Finally, it is relevant to mention that a lot of attention has been given to recast in the second language acquisition literature

(Larsen-Freeman, 2003). It is also important to define corrective feedback basically because this concept will be used during the action research. Sheen (2004) defines the concept as "implicit and explicit negative feedback occurring in both natural conversational and instructional settings" (p. 264). Recast is significant to the researcher basically because it is a very common tool in language classrooms. These are some important definitions of recast.

Is Recast Effective?

The effectiveness of recast as a correction feedback strategy will now be addressed in this article. The effectiveness of recasts is determined by relevant features. These include noticing the gap, personalized feedback, frequency, saliency, and intensity. Recasts might be quite effective if these elements are taken into consideration by language teachers. First, it is important to mention that noticing the gap is relevant for the success of recast. Larsen-Freeman (2003) says, "Of course no technique… is effective unless the student can perceive the difference between the recast and what he or she has just said" (p. 136). One can certainly say that it is important for learners to notice the gap between what they are saying and what it is correct (target like version). With regard to this, Philp (2003) says, "Arguably, noticing is fundamental to the potential that feedback can have for the learner… it is only what the learner notices about the input that holds potential for learning because intake is conditional upon noticing" (p. 101). Noticing the gap might lead to complex thinking or assessment about these utterances (Gass & Selinker, 2001).

Next, successful recasts are the ones where learners get individualized attention (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). One can say that personalized feedback is definitely more focused. Frequency and saliency of the recasts seem significant too. With regard to this, Larsen-Freeman (2003) says, "Where it appears that learners are developmentally ready to benefit from the evidence provided by recasts, and when there is a certain level of intensity to the recasts, therefore by heightening their frequency and saliency" (p. 135). It seems to be that the most successful recasts are the ones that deal with a consistent focus – for example, recasts could deal with pronunciation, word-choice, or verb tense usage (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). One could say that perseverance and constancy work quite well when it comes producing learner uptake, a response that indicates that the feedback has been noticed.

The effectiveness of recasts is somewhat difficult to determine basically because sometimes there is no immediate change or reaction by the learners. Larsen-Freeman (2003) also says, "For one thing, the learning process is non-linear, and so a shift in performance may not immediately follow the recast. For another, the learner may find the recast useful for his or her own purposes…" (p. 135). This researcher agrees with the author in the sense that the effectiveness of recast is somehow difficult to determine when there is no answer or reaction. It is also true that learners might use a different structure or phrase. Next, in some learners recasts promote critical thinking.

It is important to know that ambiguity needs to be avoided when using recasts. Recasts are definitely more effective when they are not ambiguous, that is, when learners perceive that the recast is in reaction to the form, not the content, of their sentences (Long, 1998). Therefore, it is relevant for language teachers not to use recasts ambiguously so students can easily notice the gap. It is significant to mention that recasts are not to be completely implicit (Sheen, 2004). Language teachers are to include explicit features that make recasts stand out in a way for students to notice the gap. One has to recognize that it is true that some learners may fail to recognize recasts as error correction. The effectiveness of recasts has also been defended – that is, language teachers can provide corrective feedback about learners' utterances without changing the content of the message. It is also discussed that recasts might provide long-term benefits when it comes to second language acquisition (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). These are significant considerations of the effectiveness of recast.

Plan of Action

In order to help students to not commit errors during the main communicative tasks, the following plan of action was designed. During the pre-task and the preparation stage, students were given time to prepare what they actually had to say before getting engaged in the communicative tasks (TBLT). The researcher took advantage of this time to provide students with recast. Since this action research focuses on two learners, one can say that it was relatively easy to circulate in order to provide recast. As soon as learners formulated an incorrect utterance, it was reformulated so that it was correct without changing its meaning and without interrupting the student. This is an implicit, corrective type of feedback. It is important to mention that recast was done only with the subjects of the project and that the researcher waited for a change or reaction (corrected version). Predicting is also an important part of planning. It was expected that students would not commit the errors during the main communicative task (after providing the recast). Furthermore, it was expected that learners would notice the gap as well as the fact that they were being implicitly corrected by the researcher.

Instruments for Data Collection

Three instruments were constructed to collect data and offer validity and reliability to the action research. Instrument number one: The first instrument to be used was basically an observation form in which the researcher indicated the students' errors, the type of error, the provided recast, and if the error was repeated during the main communicative task. This is definitely the most important source of information for this action research. The researcher wanted to record the students' errors and see if they were still making the error during

the main communicative task (after the recast). This was a simple and effective instrument to collect the necessary data (please refer to appendix A for a copy of the instrument). Instrument number two: The second instrument is a questionnaire for a guest professor (outsider). The idea was to have a neutral and unbiased opinion about the examples of recast in the classroom (please refer to appendix B for a copy of the instrument). Instrument number three: The third instrument is a questionnaire for students (subjects of the action research). This questionnaire was answered by students in their L1 (Spanish) to foster confidence. Students provided their ideas and thoughts about the effectiveness of recast (please refer to appendix C for a copy of the instrument).

Procedures

This is how the information was collected using the instruments previously described. Instrument number one: First, the researcher wrote the students' errors. Then the researcher focused on the type of error and the number of times these errors were commited. Later, the researcher wrote the provided recast. Finally, the researcher checked if the errors were repeated during the communicative task. It is relevant to mention that during the main communicative presentations, the researcher refrained from recasting students' utterances so as not to embarrass and interrupt them (CLT). The researcher basically completed the instrument when students were performing the main communicative task in order not to forget or alter the information (week number seven to week number eleven). Instrument number two: A guest professor was invited to the class to complete the instrument. The guest professor completed the instrument as the class progressed in an unobtrusive way. These ideas were discussed in a feedback session at the end of the class (week number thirteen). Instrument number three: This instrument was completed by the subjects of the project during the last ten minutes of the class (week number twelve). These ideas were also discussed in a feedback session at the end of the class.

Results of Action Plan

Instrument number one provided relevant information. Pronunciation and subject-verb agreement were the most common types of errors made by Lord Rakim. A total of seven errors in pronunciation (vowel 1, consonant 3, stress 1, ed ending 2) and five errors in subject-verb agreement were made. These results are illustrated in figure one.

Figure 1
Most frequent types of errors by Lord Rakim
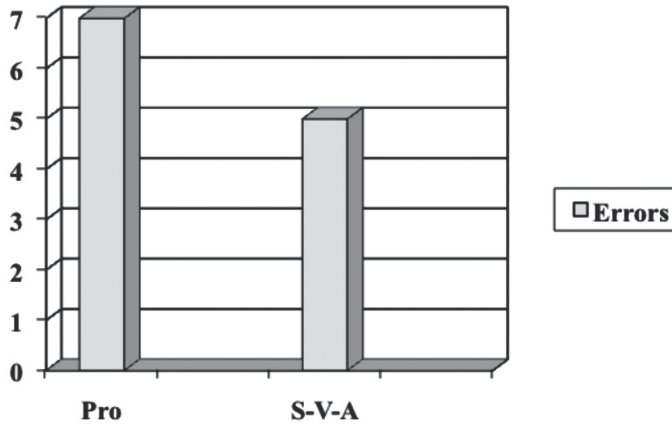
Word choice and pronunciation were the most common types of errors commited by Mr. Tomnus. A total of five errors in word choice and four errors in pronunciation (stress 4) were made. These results are illustrated in figure two.

Figure 2
Most frequent types of errors by Mr. Tomnus
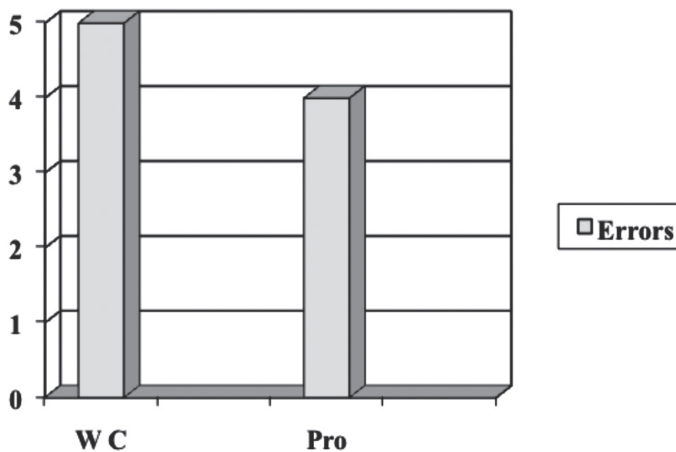
Pronunciation was the most common type of error commited by the students (11 errors). Subject-verb agreement (5 errors) and word choice (5 errors) were also common errors. This information is also confirmed by the results from instrument number two. Even though both students are intermediate, it is clear that pronunciation is a common error.

A total of thirty-one examples of recast were provided to students. Seventeen examples of recast were provided to Lord Rakim and fourteen examples of recast were provided to Mr. Tomnus. This can be seen in figure three.

Figure 3
Number of recasts provided by the researcher
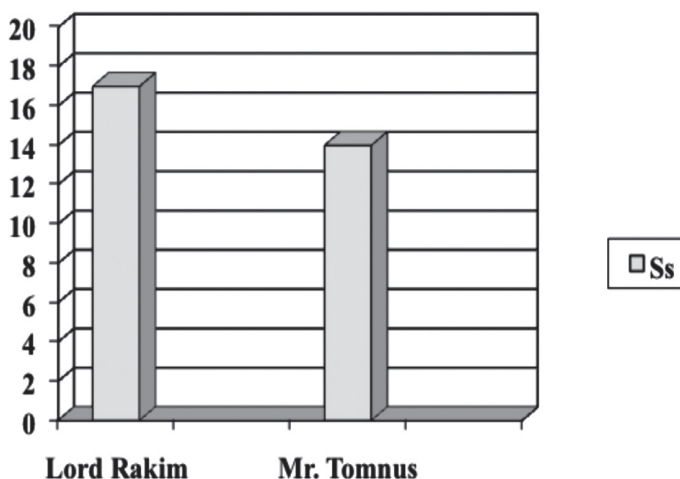
The students did not commit any errors during the main communicative task after receiving recast a total of sixteen times, Lord Rakim nine out of seventeen examples of recast and Mr. Tomnus seven out of fourteen examples of recast. These results are summarized in figure four.

Figure 4
Number of times the students did not commit
the error during the communicative task
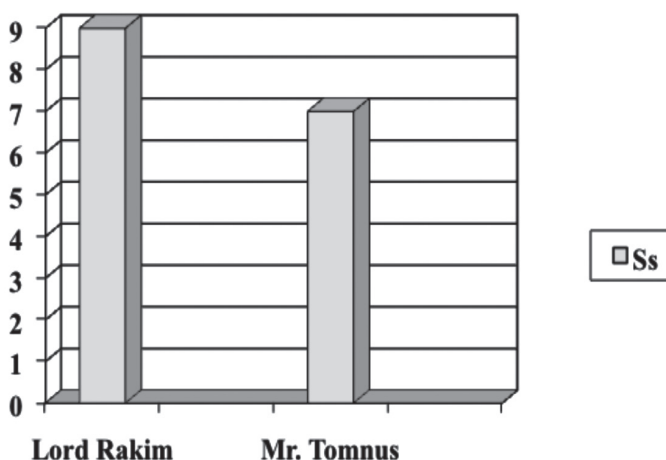
The students commited the error during the main communicative task after receiving recast a total of twelve times, Lord Rakim seven out of seventeen and Mr. Tomnus five out of fourteen. These results are summarized in figure five.

Figure 5
Number of times the students commited the error
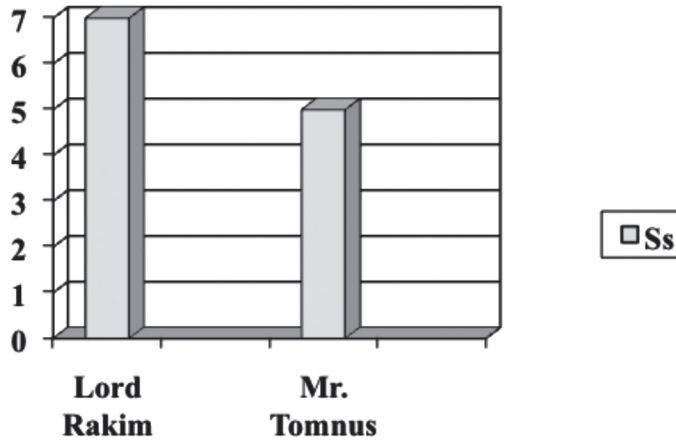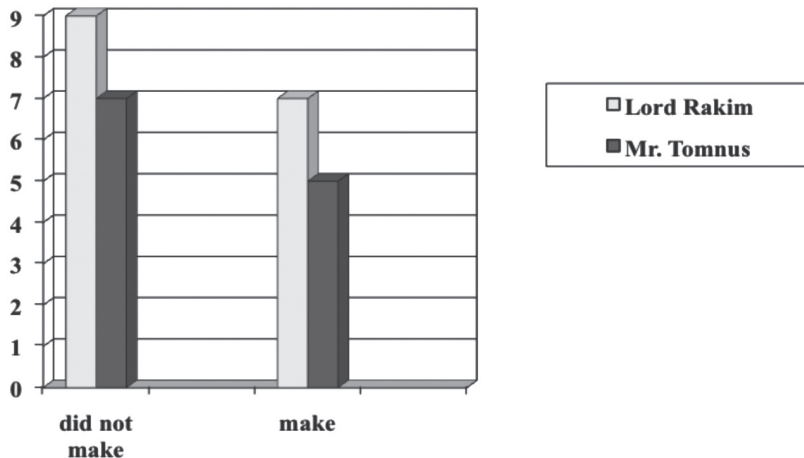**during the main communicative task**

Figure six compares the number of times the students committed and did not commit an error during the main communicative task after receiving recast.

Figure 6
Comparison between the number of times
the students did not commit and committed the error
**during the main communicative task**

There were nine errors in pronunciation (LR 7 and MT 2), one error in word choice (MT), one error in subject-verb agreement (MT), and one error in the past participle, and one error in the passive voice (MT). This is shown in figure seven.

Figure 7
Type of errors the students committed
during the communicative task
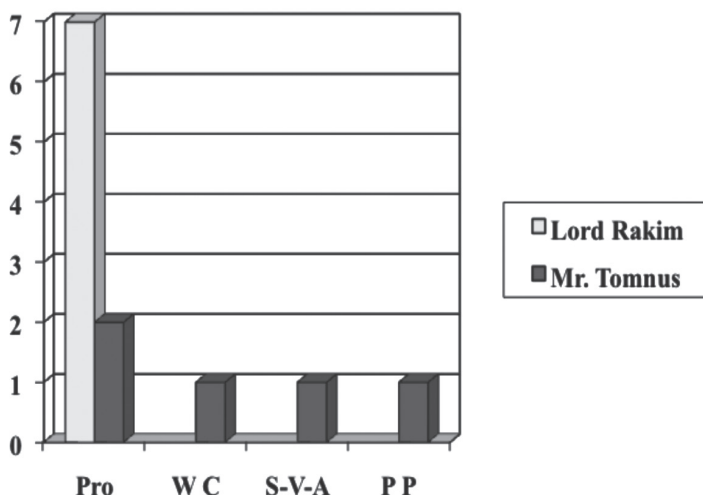
Finally, figure eight indicates the effectiveness of recast. In the case of Mr. Tomnus, recast was effective seven times out of fourteen (50%). In the case of Lord Rakim, recast was effective nine times out of seventeen (53%).

Figure 8
Recast effectiveness (relative percentages)
Lord Rakim 9/17, Mr. Tomnus 7/14
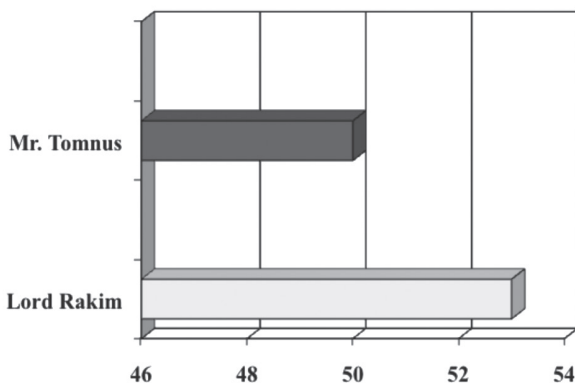
Instrument number two also provided important information. This instrument was completed by an external observer. For question number one, the observer mentioned that recast is a "tactful way to correct students". Question number two dealt with the most common types of errors. These were subject-verb agreement, final consonants sounds and word order. For question number three, the observer mentioned that the recast during this lesson was "ok" and that students did not feel stressed when being corrected. Next, for question number four, the observer answered that students did notice the correction and that this helps other students to be aware of these errors. For question number five, the observer mentioned that students committed an error during the communicative task. Finally, recast was considered to be an effective strategy in providing feedback to students.

Finally, instrument number three also provided significant data. Concerning question number two, both students noticed that the professor was correcting them. Mr. Tomnus said that it was a "subtle" type of correction. For question number three, both students considered recast to be an effective type of feedback. As for question number four, Lord Rakim indicated that he felt "fine" and Mr. Tomnus said "It did not bother me". Finally, for question number five both students considered that recast might prevent errors during the communicative task. These are relevant results from the plan of action.

Analysis of Results

It is true that an important amount of recasts were provided during the five weeks of the application of instrument number one. An average of 6.2 examples of recasts were provided by the researcher. During the main communicative tasks, the students did not commit an error a total of sixteen times and they commit the error a total of twelve times. If one is to add these figures, it will be clear that they do not match the total of recasts provided. It is relevant to mention that this mismatch is due to the fact that the students sometimes used a different structure during the communicative task or did not use the structure at all. This is closely related to the effectiveness of recast. One can say that the effectiveness of recast was positive (MT 50% and LR 53%) taking into account that the learning process is usually nonlinear and that there is usually no immediate reaction to the recasts. It helped students to not commit the error during the main communicative tasks. The researcher believes that when students did not commit errors, they were able to notice the gap. This information is also corroborated by the data collected in instruments number two and number three which indicate that the students did notice the gap. It is relevant to mention that the examples of recasts were the only type of corrective feedback provided by the researcher. It also true that when students committed the errors during the communicative tasks, the examples of recasts were very implicit. This might have created a degree of ambiguity for students, making it more difficult for them to notice the gap in order not to make the mistake. Besides, one can say that the ef-

fectiveness of the recasts was due to the fact that the students were receiving individualized feedback. The researcher also believes that personalized feedback is more focused and promotes deeper and complex mental processes. Next, the fact that these examples of recasts dealt with a consistent focus (basically pronunciation, subject-verb agreement and word choice) was determinant for the success of recasts. This is also related to the degree of consistency of the recasts which let students notice the gap. The researcher considers that the recasts that were effective were the ones where students felt that the reaction was to the form, not the content, of their utterances. Finally, it is also discussed that recasts might provide long-term benefits for students.

Final Conclusions

Some conclusions are discussed in this part. These can be summarized as follows. Recasts might not produce immediate changes or reactions. It does not necessarily indicate that it was not effective (long-term benefits). The effectiveness of recasts might be difficult to measure basically because the learning process is a nonlinear process and also because the students do not use the same structure or used a different one. It is true that more formal observational and experimental studies are required to determine the effectiveness of recasts and its impact in the language classrooms (operationalized ones). On the other hand, recasts can be very effective if the learners are able to notice the gap between what they are saying and what is correct and appropriate.

The fact that students sometimes used a different structure or simply did not use the structure or phrase at all was a limitation in measuring the effectiveness of recasts. Providing examples of recasts during the first session was also challenging basically because the researcher needed full concentration on students' utterances.

Recasts are a useful tool for language teachers in the classroom. These professionals must take in to account and fully understand recasts' significant features when using this strategy. Since recasts are the most common type of corrective feedback, language teachers need to be aware of this fact in order to make it more effective and useful for students and their learning process. Finally, recasts allow language teachers to provide implicit feedback to students. Teachers can focus on the form of the students' utterance without changing the content of the message.

This action research was a revealing one in terms of the researcher's own teaching style and how action research can actually help students to overcome specific problems.

Ambiguity is to be avoided when it comes providing students with examples of recasts. Language teachers need to develop a specific strategy so that the learners do not get confused with the professor's response (recast).

Action research is an effective tool for language teachers to conduct investigations within the classroom. This type of investigation can really have

a positive impact on students and the classroom. It is also true that action research is an important method when it comes to professional development. Language teachers should be concerned about finding out what works best for students, their problems, and their interests (students' learning process and student-centred classrooms).

Based on the analysis of the results, one can certainly say that recasts in the pre-task and the preparation stage did prevent oral errors from happening during the task cycle (MT 50% and LR 53%). It is quite evident that Mr. Tomnus and Lord Rakim benefited from this corrective strategy.

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bridge University Press.

Appendix A

Instrument #1: Observation
Date _____

Student 1: Lord Rakim

Student's error	Type of error	# of times	Recast	Error during the task?

Student 2: Mr. Tomnus

Student's error	Type of error	# of times	Recast	Error during the task?

Appendix B

Instrument #2: Observation
Date _____

Professor: _____

INSTRUCTIONS: Carefully study and answer the following questions. Thank you for your thorough responses.

1. What is your position with regard to recast? Explain.

2. What were the most common errors? List them.

3. What is your opinion about the professor's recast during this lesson? Were they effective / appropriate? Explain.

4. What were students' reactions? Did they notice that the teacher was correcting them? Explain.

5. Did the students make the error during the communicative task? Explain.

6. Based on this lesson's experience, do you consider recast to be an effective feedback strategy? Explain.

Appendix C

Instrumento #3: Cuestionario
Fecha _____

Nombre: _____

INSTRUCCIONES: Responda cuidadosamente las siguientes preguntas. Gracias por la información proporcionada.

1. Considere las siguientes oraciones. Las de la primera columna fueron producidas por usted. Las de la segunda columna fueron producidas por su profesor.

El estudiante	El profesor

2. ¿Notó usted que el profesor lo estaba corrigiendo? Explique.

3. ¿Considera usted que esta fue una forma efectiva de corregirlo? Explique.

4. ¿Cómo se sintió usted cuando era corregido por su profesor? Explique.

5. ¿Considera usted que esta forma de corrección puede prevenir errores durante la fase comunicativa? Explique.