

Linguistic Input, Recasting, and Their Effects on a Focused Communication Task for Adult Beginners

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成人初心者レベルの学習者のための暗黙の是正フィードバックと集中通信タスクへの影響

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Abstract : This paper describes a small-scale study involving a focused communication task designed to teach the present progressive verb tense to a small group of adult beginner learners in Japan. Linguistic input during an initial comprehension-based portion of the task, without the use of formal explicit instruction, was examined for its effectiveness in aiding acquisition and accurate use of the target language feature. Recasts were then employed as corrective feedback during a subsequent production-based stage of the task. The study found that the listening-comprehension portion of the task, which employed linguistic input in an attempt to get the learners to notice the language feature, did not foster acquisition as much as corrective feedback did; only after recasting was employed during the task did acquisition and production of the present progressive tense take hold.

Key words : focused communication task, recasts, corrective feedback

1. Introduction

1.1 Communication tasks

The study summarized in this paper employed a *focused communication task* (Ellis, 1994), which is designed to elicit a certain target feature while keeping learners' attention more on meaning than on form – as opposed to an *unfocused task*, which seeks to elicit “natural” language rather than a specific feature.

Tasks may be used to support traditional approaches to instruction; this method is known as *task-supported language teaching* (Ellis, 2003; Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-von Ditfurth, 2011) and is part of the “PPP” (present-practice-produce) approach (Gower & Walters, 1983). In other cases, the tasks themselves are used as teaching and language-acquisition tools (Ellis, 2003) and involve *task-based language teaching* (Oxford, 2006). The task examined in this study employed the task-based approach.

1.2 Corrective feedback

Lightbown and Spada (1999) define corrective feedback as any type of response to learners that indicates they have used the target language incorrectly.

In *explicit corrective feedback*, an instructor responds to a student's error by pointing out what the error is, telling the student what he/she should have said instead, and in some cases by explaining the applicable grammar rule (Dabaghi, 2008; Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006).

In *implicit corrective feedback*, a teacher may employ *negotiation of form*, which is similar to negotiation of meaning in discourse; the teacher indicates that an error is present but does not explicitly correct it, with the intent of prompting the learner to self-repair. A teacher may also employ *recasting* (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Russell, 2009); the teacher restates the student's utterance with the error corrected. The feedback sounds like a confirmation request; it does not have the "feel" of a corrective act.

The aim of recasting, the corrective feedback method employed during the task examined in this study, is to get the learner to notice the difference between his/her utterance and that of the teacher in order to self-repair.

2. Literature review

Attitudes toward error correction have shifted over the years to parallel the changing perspectives on language instruction. The Audiolingual Method that dominated language teaching prior to the 1970s (Richards, 2001) stressed explicit error correction immediately after an error (Brooks, 1960; Russell, 2009). Later on, a "hands off" approach advocated by Krashen (1982) posited that error correction was an impediment to acquisition.

Many questions have concerned researchers over the years regarding corrective feedback, such as: Should learners' errors be corrected, and if so, which types of errors? How should they be corrected, and when? By whom? By the teacher, the learner who made the error, or other learners? These questions all lead back to the most fundamental question of all: Does corrective feedback aid learners in acquiring a second language?

In short, the answer is that according to recent research, corrective feedback does promote second language acquisition. In addition, the research shows that some methods of corrective feedback are more effective than others in different settings and with different language features.

Lyster and Ranta (1997) found that recasting, though by far the most common form of corrective feedback, was not highly effective in French-language immersion classes in Canada. In their uptake (utterances immediately following teachers' feedback), students repaired errors less than 20% of the time and nearly 70% of the time produced no uptake at all. These findings suggest that learners perceived recasts not as corrective acts but as another way to express the same meaning, or as a confirmation request.

Other researchers such as Long (2006), however, suggest that immediate uptake does not necessarily signify language acquisition, and that recasts can be effective in contexts besides second-language immersion settings. Lyster and Mori (2006) found that recasts were effective for learners in a Japanese-language immersion program in the United States. This finding suggests that recasts may be more successful for foreign language learners than for second language learners, such as the French-immersion students in Canada.

Another factor highlighted by Lyster and Mori (2006) is the greater linguistic difference between Japanese and English – as opposed to French and English, which have more etymological and structural similarities. Instruction in the French immersion setting was more meaning-focused, while instruction was explicit and form-focused for the students learning the “more distant from English” language of Japanese. Therefore, according to Lyster and Mori (2006), the explicit, form-focused instructional setting in the Japanese program enabled learners to notice differences between their utterances and the implicit corrective feedback (the teachers’ recasts) that they received.

In contrast, because the learners in the French program received instruction not focused on form, they were not equipped to notice differences between their utterances and the teachers’ recasts – in other words, the learners were being asked to self-repair language forms that they may not have been explicitly taught. For them, Lyster and Mori (2006) suggest, explicit corrective feedback would work better. Their findings – that implicit corrective feedback in the form of recasts is effective for learners in form-focused instructional settings, while explicit corrective feedback works better for learners in meaning-focused learning environments – serve as the basis for their Counterbalance Hypothesis (Lyster & Mori, 2006).

Recent research also suggests that different forms of corrective feedback are more effective for the acquisition of different language features. Ellis, Loewen, and Erlam (2006), for instance, found that explicit corrective feedback was significantly more effective than recasts when it came to the acquisition of past-tense forms by intermediate-level ESL learners. These findings suggest that metalinguistic explanation can play a major role in acquisition, particularly of grammatical forms, in environments where learners may be prioritizing meaning over form. Other research efforts suggest that although recasts are commonly used by teachers in correcting grammar errors, other forms of implicit feedback such as negotiation of form – which prompts production, through which learners can notice (and internalize) gaps between their errors and the correct forms (Lyster, 1998; Swain, 1985) – should be tried first, particular in second-language learning settings. As mentioned previously, however, at least some research supports the view that in foreign-language learning environments, recasting is often effective.

3. Research question

This study addresses the following research question: “During a focused communication task, does linguistic input aid learners to acquiring and producing the present progressive tense, and if not,

does implicit corrective feedback in the form of recasts help them reach this goal?"

4. The learners

The class, taught by myself, consisted of four adult beginners at the “lifelong learning” center of a small town in northern Japan:

- a) **Ruiko**, female, housewife, early 80s in age; takes English lessons to “keep my mind fresh”
- b) **Harumi**, female, retired teacher, early 60s; takes English lessons out of personal interest
- c) **Midori**, female, housewife, late 30s; wants to improve her ability to communicate with native English speakers
- d) **Kaori**, female, building custodial staff, early 30s; has native English-speaking friends; is interested in U.S. movies and television shows

5. The task

5.1 Design

The task consisted of two pairs of “spot the differences” pictures, shown below in Figure 1. In the first pair (“Baseball Game”), the only differences between the two pictures involve colors. In the second pair (“The Teacher”) there are several differences in actions as well as colors. For instance, the teacher is teaching English in one picture but math in the other.

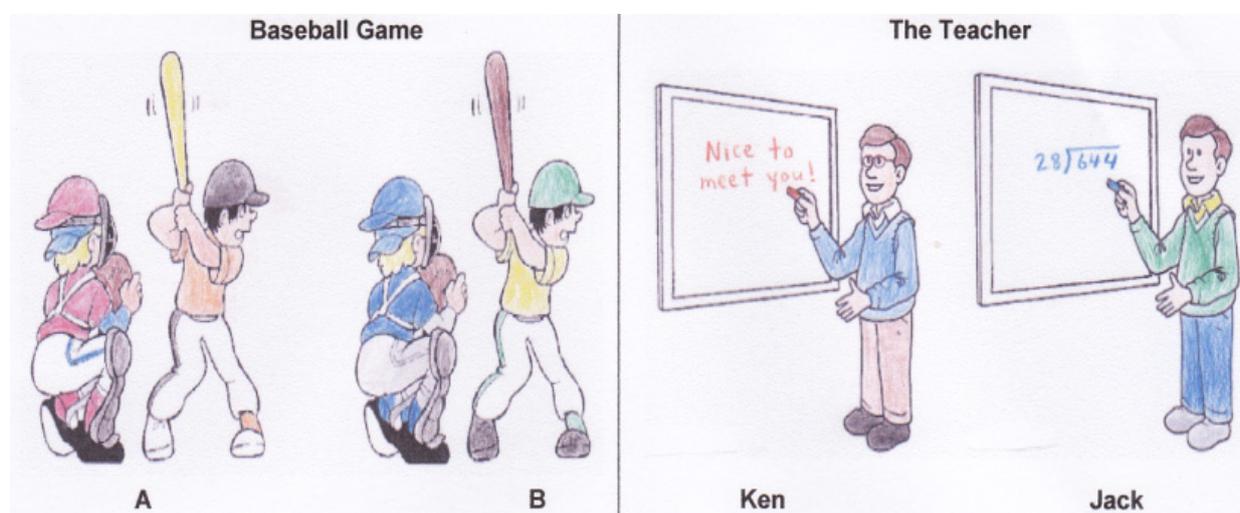


Figure 1. Pictures used in linguistic input portion (“Baseball Game”) and production-based portion (“The Teacher”) of the focused communication task.

Each student was first handed a copy of the “Baseball Game” picture pair, and given about 15 seconds to look at it. Then I said to the students, “Please listen, and then choose ‘A’ or ‘B’.” Next, I produced a present-progressive sentence describing one picture (e.g., “The batter is wearing a yellow shirt – A or B?”), and asked each student to indicate which picture I was describing.

Next, we moved on to the production-based element of the task (Ellis, 2003; Loschky &

Bley-Vroman, 1993), using the picture pair entitled “The Teacher.” With this part of the task, there was no listening-comprehension component as with the “Baseball Game” picture. After giving the students 15 seconds to examine the picture pair, they took turns describing a difference they noticed between the teachers in the picture. If a student described an element of the picture without using the present progressive form (e.g., “Ken, glasses”), I provided corrective feedback in the form of a recast (e.g., “Oh, Ken is wearing glasses?”).

5.2 Rationale

Because the differences in the first pair of pictures (“Baseball Game”) involved only colors, I was concerned prior to the class that the students would avoid using present progressive, opting instead for a possibly “easier” way to describe them (e.g., “In A, the batter’s helmet is black”). The idea behind starting the task with a listening-comprehension component was to provide the students with linguistic input utilizing the present progressive tense without explicitly teaching it. This was done so that the students would hopefully notice my use of the present progressive and “store” it in short-term memory, to access it when it was time for them to speak.

In employing recasts during the second (production-based) portion of the task, I attempted to have students notice the difference between the language they used and the present progressive form that I used in describing the same aspect of the picture. Coupled with (and following soon after) my use of the present progressive form in the listening-comprehension task, my recasts were intended to make the students conscious of this particular language feature as a “describe the difference” tool, so that they could use it themselves in production.

In sum, my goal was to design a simple communication task that is a “hybrid” of the comprehension, production, and consciousness-raising tasks described by Ellis (2003).

6. Analysis

When the students first started describing differences in the second pair of pictures, they were not using present progressive right away. This suggests that the first part of the task – when the students were listening to the present progressive sentences I read, in the hopes of getting them to notice my use of that verb tense – did not build their explicit knowledge in any real way. As the task transcript (see Appendix) shows, it was not until I had performed three recasts using the present progressive (utterances 16-25) did the students “catch on” to the present progressive tense as the lesson’s main language point. Shortly after that (utterances 27-35), the learners began using basic present progressive sentences on their own to describe the pictures, without further need for recasts.

This result suggests that for these learners, recasting was an effective form of correction; it seemed to facilitate acquisition and empower them to produce sentences using the language feature. In the end, the first part of the task (the listening portion using the baseball pictures, where learners’ noticing of the target feature was the aim) did not support their explicit knowledge of the present

progressive tense. If it had, the learners may have begun using that language feature a bit earlier than they did.

7. Conclusion

This focused task, in short, was at least moderately successful in helping the learners grasp and produce the present progressive language feature. Such a spot-the-differences task fits into what Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) define as a “task-utility” approach to focused task design. It was not absolutely necessary for the learners to use present progressive to describe the pictures, but as the task went on, the learners eventually realized that using present progressive made the task easier.

That being said, designing a structure-based production task that results in the target feature actually being used is not easy (Ellis, 2003; Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993), and judging from the task transcript, this group of learners may have avoided the present progressive tense altogether if not for my use of recasts during the task’s second phase. This factor indicates that teacher participation and the provision of corrective feedback (particularly recasts) during the task are effective teaching strategies.

8. Study limitations and possibilities for further research

The most glaring weakness of this task was almost undoubtedly the first phase (the baseball picture listening portion), which added little pedagogical value; although it did not hamper the students’ learning, it did not seem to help it either. The learners seemed more focused on listening for colors than on noticing the target grammar feature. The use of recasts, not the linguistic input provided in the listening portion of the task, led the learners to notice the present progressive form – as the task transcript strongly suggests.

This task was performed at the beginning of the lesson, following a brief warm-up; no formal grammar instruction was given prior to the task. Fotos (2002), among others, supports the view that explicit grammar instruction, particularly at the start of a lesson, plays a vital role in grammar instruction. With this task, however, my concern was that providing formal instruction prior to the task would cause the learners to focus more on form than on natural use of the target feature. Thus, formal instruction coming before the task would deprive the learners of the opportunity to make cognitive comparisons between the language they produced and the feedback they received (Ellis, 2003). If the students had not eventually produced the present progressive feature through the linguistic input and the recasts, the option of providing explicit grammar instruction would have been available. This “as the need arises” approach to explicit instruction seems similar to the alternative PPP approach put forth by Brumfit (1979), who suggested that lessons begin with production and, if the learners struggle with that stage, move on to presentation and practice.

Because the group of learners was small, and because the focused task described in this paper was both simple in design and brief in terms of time, it would be good to repeat the task with other

learners to get a fuller picture of its worth as a teaching tool. In addition, utilizing additional focused tasks with this same group of learners would better reveal their effectiveness as aids in acquisition of grammar features in the long term.

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APPENDIX: Transcript of teacher and student utterances during focused communication task.

(After teacher passes out baseball pictures and a brief ice-breaker mainly dealing with "Do you like baseball?")

- [1] Teacher: Please tell me "A" or "B." First, the batter is wearing a yellow shirt.
- [2] Kaori: B.
- [3] Teacher: Yes, very good. Next, the catcher is wearing a red shirt.
- [4] Harumi: A.
- [5] Teacher: That's right. Good! Next, the batter is using a yellow bat.
- [6] Ruiko: A.
- [7] Teacher: Ping-pong! Okay, next one ... the batter is wearing a green helmet.
- [8] Harumi: B.
- [9] Teacher: Yes, good! Next one, the catcher is wearing a red helmet.
- [10] Midori: A.
- [11] Teacher: Perfect! Okay, next, the batter is wearing green socks.
- [12] Kaori: B.
- [13] Teacher: Right. Okay, last one. The batter is using a brown bat.
- [14] Ruiko: B.
- [15] Teacher: Yes.

(After passing out the teacher pictures):

- [16] Teacher: Okay, next is a picture of Ken and Jack. Tell me what's different.
- [17] Kaori: Ken, glasses. Jack, no.
- [18] Teacher: Oh, Ken is wearing glasses?
- [19] Kaori: Yeah.
- [20] Teacher: And Jack isn't wearing glasses?
- [21] Kaori: Yeah.
- [22] Teacher: Great. Any more?
- [23] Midori: Ken write orange, Jack write blue.
- [24] Teacher: Oh, Ken is using an orange marker?
- [25] Midori: Hai, yes, Ken is using orange.
- [26] Teacher: Very good. Any more?
- [27] Harumi: Ken teach English, Jack is teaching, ah, nani? (Japanese for "what?")
- [28] Teacher: Oh, Ken is teaching English?
- [29] Kaori: And Jack teaching math.
- [30] Teacher: Yes! Jack is teaching math. Good, Kaori.
- [31] Ruiko: Ken is wearing white shirt, Jack wearing yellow.

- [32] Teacher: Yes! Great. Jack is wearing a yellow shirt.
[33] Midori: Ken is wearing black shoes. Jack is wearing grey shoes.
[34] Teacher: Perfect, Midori! Okay.
[35] Harumi: Ken is wearing a blue sweater, but Jack is wearing green.
[36] Teacher: Nice catch, Harumi! Any more? Pants?
[37] Kaori: Jack is blue pants. Ken brown.
[38] Teacher: Oh, Jack is wearing blue pants?
[39] Kaori: Yes.