The Effect of Metalinguistic Feedback and Recasts on Learners' Uptake and Subsequent Production of Past Simple

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Abstract
This study aims to investigate the effect of metalinguistic feedback and recasts on learner uptake and subsequent production of past simple while engaging in controlled oral tasks. Firstly, related articles on corrective feedback on oral errors are reviewed and the effects of the two feedback types on learners' accuracy of past simple are discussed. A small scale laboratory experiment was carried out to examine learners' uptake as responses to metalinguistic feedback and recasts provided by the teacher to direct their attentions to the wrong forms in their utterances. The data on
teacher- student interactions during the controlled oral production tasks were recorded, transcribed and coded for analysis purposes. Further investigation on learners' awareness of corrections received from the teacher was conducted using semi-structure interviews. Finally, a brief conclusion and pedagogical implications are drawn from the findings.

Keywords: corrective feedback, uptake, noticing, interaction

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Introduction

According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, exposure to comprehensible input or positive evidence is significant to language learning and acquisition; whereas: error correction is viewed as unnecessary and may block learning development. However, the acquisitional value and the role of corrective feedback (CF) in communicative classroom settings, particularly in L2 instructional context, have always been investigated. The main reason is because exposure to input may not be sufficient for L2 learning to take place. Moreover, views on learners' errors and corrections have changed according to the changing trends in language learning and teaching. Error correction was once viewed as punishment that may cast negative effects on language learning and should be avoided. After communicative language teaching approach had prevailed language classrooms, meaning and communicative skills are primarily focused on. Consequently, error correction has been utilized in order to promote form focus or accuracy while interaction process is least interrupted. Interactionist researchers argue that feedback needs to be contextualized and it works best when it occurs in context at the time the learner makes the error (Ellis, 2009, p.5). Interactional feedback as responses to learners' error or 'corrective feedback' (i.e., a form of negative evidence informing learners that a particular utterance is problematic in relation to target language norms,) is highly regarded as a technique that might facilitate grammatical acquisition during meaningful interaction particularly in an EFL learning environment where linguistic input is limited. Nevertheless, research findings on the effectiveness and the efficacy of CF remain inconclusive. This paper reports on the effective of metalinguistic feedback and recasts on learners' subsequent product of past simple tense and learners' attitudes and preferences on the two techniques

Literature Review

Corrective feedback refers to teacher's responses to learners' utterances containing linguistic errors. Corrective feedback episodes are comprised trigger, the feedback move and optionally uptake (Ellis,2009).

T:	When were you in school?	
L:	Yes. I stand in the first row?	trigger
T:	You stood in the first row.	corrective feedback
L:	Yes, in the first row, and sit, ah, sat the first row.	uptake

Lyster and Ranta (1997) introduced a taxonomy of CF which consists of 6 different types of CF; explicit correction, recast, clarification request, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation and repetition. Figure 1 illustrates error treatment sequence proposed by Lyster and Ranta.
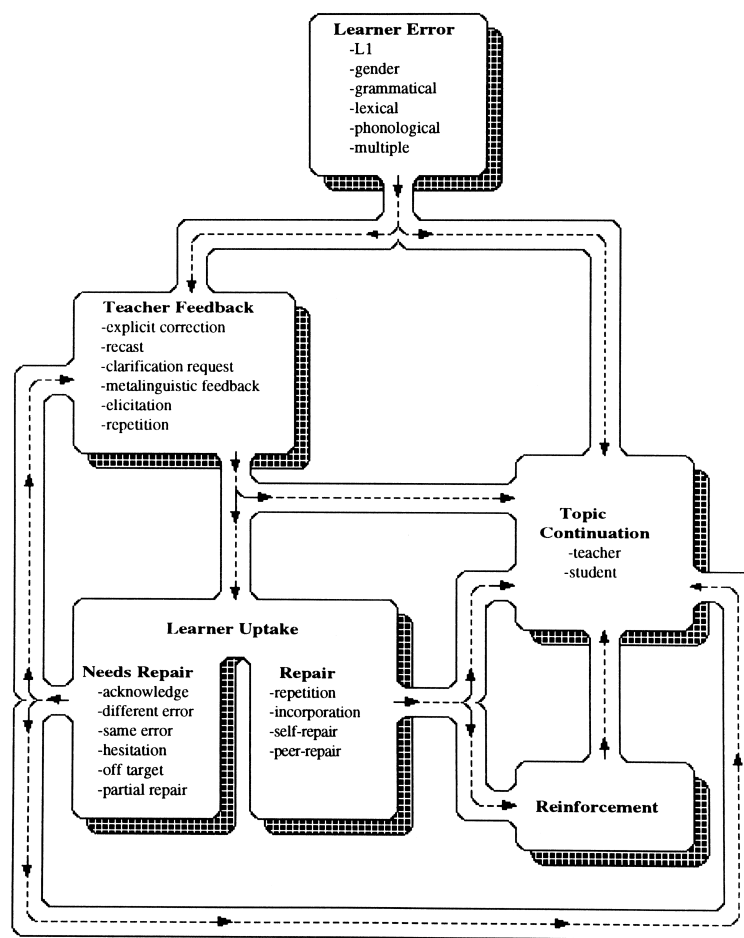
Figure 1. Error treatment sequence (Lyster & Ranta, 1997)

Uptake is learner responses to feedback. Uptake can take different forms including needs (unsuccessful) repair and (successful repair). Studies on CF and uptake regard needs repair uptake as evidence of no noticing which can be assumed that the speaker may not be aware of the error and the target form provided in the feedback. CF that triggers successful repairs, on the other hand, is viewed as effective as it help generate an internal process that may lead to interlanguage system development.

In the past few decades, researchers have examined how corrective feedback facilitates language acquisition in order to find the most effective ways for teachers to treat errors including phonological, lexical, and syntactical. Different types of corrective feedback have been examined as treatments to different types of errors to find out if there are any relationships between types of feedback and types of error. A number of classroom research reveals that teacher feedback is often inconsistent, unfocused and unsystematic leading to unsuccessful learning development. Survey and observation studies also reveal discrepancy between teachers' and students' attitudes about corrective feedback. While teachers think corrections are likely to discourage students from speaking and can be a threat to fluency, students have positive attitudes toward teacher corrections and express strong needs for corrective feedback from their teachers English (Chenoweth et al., 1983; Katayama, 2006). In the past few decades, numerous studies on CF have been conducted in different learning settings including immersion, laboratory, EFL/ ESL classrooms and using

different designs such as surveys, observation, and empirical designs by means of pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test to measure learning outcomes. Research on CF covers a range of various topics such as characteristics of CF, CF patterns in relation to errors, relationship between CF and uptake, explicit and implicit CF, and factors of CF efficacy and effectiveness.

A sheer amount of studies have examined the characteristics of different types of feedback, their relationship with different types of errors, and their effect on learner uptake. The ultimate goal is to discover correction techniques that can facilitate language development. In this present study, metalinguistic feedback and recasts were selected as the two feedback types to treat errors on past simple tense.

Metalinguistic Feedback

Without providing the correct form, the teacher poses questions or provides comments or information related to the formation of the student's utterance (for example, "Do we say it like that?" "That's not how you say it in French," and "Is it feminine?"). Metalinguistic questions also point to the nature of the error but attempt to elicit the information from the student.

Learner:	He kiss her.	*trigger*
Researcher:	Kiss - <u>You need past tense</u>.	*metalinguistic feedback*
Learner:	He kissed	*repair uptake*

(Ellis et al. 2009, p. 319)

S:	I went to the train station and pick up my aunt.	*trigger*
T:	<u>Use past tense consistently</u>.	*metalinguistic feedback*
S:	I <u>went</u> to the train station and <u>picked</u> up my aunt.	*uptake*

(Sheen, 2004)

Some researchers categorized metalinguistic feedback as 'explicit' when it involves the explanation of a formal aspect when an error has been detected.

Recasts

This CF technique involves the teacher's reformulation of all or part of a student's utterance, minus the error (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p.46). Following Doughty (1994), Lyster and Ranta (1997) have adopted this widely used term from the L1 acquisition literature. Chaudron (1977) included such moves in the categories in "repetition with change" and "repetition with change and emphasis". Recasts are generally viewed as implicit CF technique. Yet, according to Lyster and Ranta (1997), the technique can be utilized in a salient manner. Without directly indicating that the student's utterance was incorrect, the teacher implicitly reformulates all or part of a student's utterance, minus the error.

S: when I was soldier, I used to wear the balaclava
T: and why did you wear it? for protection from the cold or for another
      reason.
S: just wind, uh protection to wind and cold   *lexical error*
T: protection from   *recast*
S: uh, from wind and cold   *uptake*
T: right, okay, not for a disguise

(Loewen, 2005)

While narrating a story, the student misused the preposition 'to' that came after 'protection'. The teacher provided a partial or focused recast by reformulating the erroneous phrase and replacing 'to' with 'from'.

Past Simple

For L2 learners of English, tense/aspect marking is considered one of the most difficult areas to acquire, especially for learners whose first language is categorized as 'tenseless', such as the participants in this study. Generally, past tense –ed, is known to be problematic for Asian L2 English learners, leading to errors (e.g., Doughty & Valera, 1998; Ellis et al. 2006) especially evident in communicative context. When communicating in English, learners tend to have problems with pronunciation in their oral production because of the difficulties in pronouncing /t/ and /ed/. Studies have found that–ed and other morphological features such as –es, and –s are problematic to acquire for Asian learners despite long years of explicit instruction of tenses and pronunciation in schools. Results from oral production tests demonstrated that the learners made many errors on verb form regarding tenses and were inconsistent in producing –ed ending appropriately, where it was obligated. As research findings suggested Thai learners are inconsistent in the use of tense and in some instances, demonstrate an accurate use of tenses. However, more often than not they use incorrect tenses. Sometimes it is obvious that learners know what is the correct tense and what form they need but they just fail to inflect the verb. At other times it is not quite clear if one can infer that the phonological omission of the inflected verbs is due to the fact that they do not know the form they needed or that they had not acquired the concept.

This paper reports on the effect of two different types of feedback (metalinguistic feedback v. recasts) on the subsequent production of past simple and students' attitudes and opinions toward teacher correction techniques and their effectiveness. The present study attempts to answer the following questions.

Research Questions

RQ1   How do metalinguistic feedback and recasts affect learners' subsequent product of past simple?

RQ 2   What do learners think about the feedback on their errors of past simple?

Methodology

Participants

Six 2nd and 3rd year students in a Thai university participated in the present study. They are non-English majors and prior to their participation in the present study, they had taken one or two basic English speaking and listening courses as required by their degrees. Therefore, they were quite familiar with oral production tasks. Three of them received metalinguistic feedback and three received recasts to correct the erroneous utterances they produced during the tasks.

Data Collection

Individually, participants were invited to the researcher's office to complete two oral production tasks. The first task is related to the participants' personal past experiences on their recent trip with their family or friends. While the task objective is to invite use of past simple in their responses, it is also important to use the topic that makes them feel relaxed and less anxious to speak. The second task is more controlled as the participants were asked to tell a story based on the pictures. The participants' oral production data were audio-recorded. After completing both tasks, the participants were interviewed about the correction technique they received. The interview questions focus on their attitudes and preferences toward the two types of CF and their benefits to language development. The interviews were also audio-recorded.

Task 1 A trip with my family
After greeting and a brief introduction, in order to create a relaxing atmosphere and reduce anxiety and stresses, the researcher asked the participants to talk about their family and the most recent trip or holiday they had with them. Some questions were asked to trigger the participants to think and produce more specific details. The instructions and questions are as follows:

Can you tell me about your recent trip or holiday with your family or friends?
Where did you go? What did you do? What did you enjoy most during the trip? What did you like least about the trip?

Task 2 Picture story
After completing Task 1, participants were asked to make up a story based on the given pictures. Unlike the first task, this task is more controlled and aims to push the participants to produce the target forms (i.e., past simple)
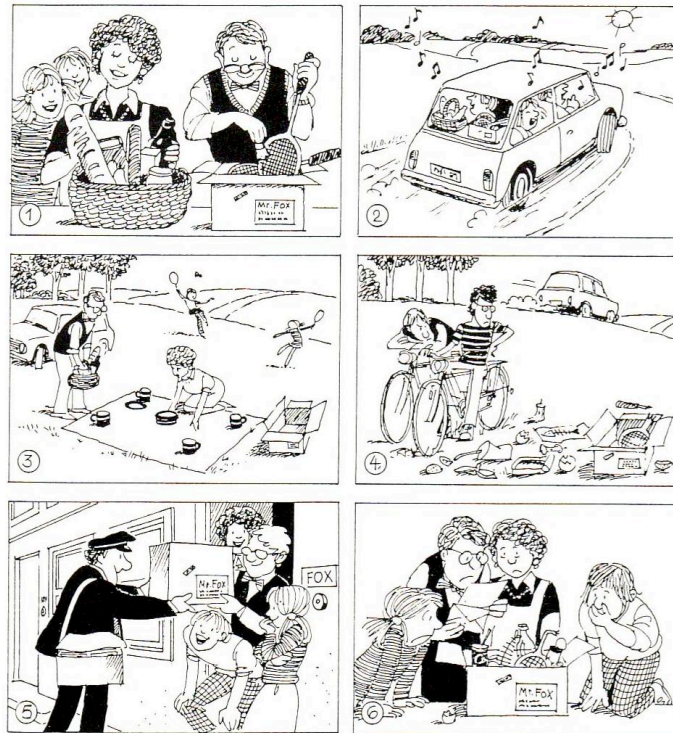
Figure 2. Picture story task

Interview questions

1. How did you plan your speech when you were asked to share your past experiences in Task 1?
2. Were you aware of the use of past simple tense when you were talking about your past experiences?
3. Did you notice that you were being corrected while telling your story?
4. What type of errors was corrected?
5. How did the researcher correct the errors in your speech production?
6. How did you feel when you were corrected?
7. Do you think the correction technique is helpful?
8. Do you think if you receive this type of feedback when the errors are spotted in your speech production constantly in the classroom, it can improve your accuracy in long term or not?

Data Coding and Analysis

The oral data were transcribed and the instances of episodes that contain CF were identified. The CF episode starts when the participant uttered a wrong form of the target structure (trigger) followed by teacher corrective feedback (i.e., metalinguistic feedback and recasts). Responses to teacher's correction or uptake were coded for successful, unsuccessful and repair. In this present study, metalinguisitic feedback is operationalised as a teacher's comments containing metalanguage whereas recasts are repetition some or all part of the erroneous utterance with emphatic intonation on the error. Example 1 to 4 illustrate the CF episodes consisting of trigger, feedback and uptake.

Metalinguistic Feedback

Example 1 (Task 1) P = Participant R = Researcher
P: When I <u>go</u> there by myself…   *trigger*
R: <u>It's past tense here</u>.   *metalinguistic feedback*
P: Ah. When I <u>went</u> there by myself,   *uptake (successful repair)*
         I think…I <u>thought</u>   *self-initiated self-repair*
         that it [was] like in the music video of
         Pee Bird that I like.

Example 2 (Task 2)

P   When they… they forget their things they
         prepare from home…   *trigger*
R: We are talking about what happened in the past. *metalinguistic feedback*
P: Ok… they <u>forgot</u> their things they <u>prepared</u> from   *uptake (successful repair)*
         home and then a lot of garbage on the ground

Recasts

Example 3 (Task 1)
L: I went to Hua Hin with my friends.
R: When was it?
P: Thai New Year Day , I think, with my friends.
         Ten people. <u>We are go to Hua Hin</u>…   *trigger*
R: We are go to Hua Hin…   *recast*
P: Ah no no no we <u>went to</u> Hua Hin. I'm sorry. *uptake (successful repair)*
         And…we …rent a one big house…to stay
R: Rent(?)
P: Yes , rent one big house. Like 10-12 thousand baht
R: How many rooms?
P: Almost 6 bedrooms.

Example 4 (Task 1)

R: What did you do last New Year holiday?
P: Last New Year…Oh I <u>go to</u>…   *trigger*
R: <u>You go(?)</u>   *recast*
P: Sa-Pan Taksin to watch the fire   *uptake (no repair)*
R: Fireworks.
P: Yes.

In Example 3 and 4, the participants wrongly use the present tense verb form in their utterances where past simple tense is more appropriate. The researcher repeats the error immediately with emphatic intonation to draw their attention to the error. The participants' responses indicate that they did not perceive the feedback from the researcher as a correction of form. As a result, they did not correct the error but continues on. It is reasonable to assume that they perceived the feedback as information checking or feedback on meaning rather than on form.

In order to answer research question 2, the interviews were transcribed and analysed.

Results and findings

The main results and findings from the analysis of oral production data are summarized as follows.

RQ1   How do metalinguistic feedback and recasts affect learners' subsequent product of past simple?

1. Students who received metalinguistic feedback noticed the correction and repaired the error in their utterance. Successful repair rates are significantly high after the first few corrections were given.

Example 5 (Task 1, Metalinguistic feedback)

P:	Ahh begin with the weather <u>is</u> similar with Thailand but a bit hotter.	*trigger*
R:	<u>So we are talking about the past event. You need to use past tense.</u>	*metalinguistic feedback*
P:	Ok I mean <u>the weather was…the weather was</u> about almost 30 degrees.	*successful uptake*
R:	Quite similar to the weather in Thailand.	
R:	Yes. The first day when we <u>arrive…arrived</u> at the airport, we went to the hotel. I actually don't remember the name of the hotel.	

In Example 5, after being corrected on the use of past simple when narrating past events, the participant repairs the error (is-was)and continues his talk. He seems to be aware of the problematic feature and monitor his production of past simple verbs in the utterances after being pointed out the grammar rule. Without correction from the researcher, he spontaneously repairs the error when he replaces 'arrived' with 'arrived' which he pronounces the –ed sound at the end of the word quite clearly.

2. Students who received recasts feedback noticed the corrections but less than their counterparts. This resulted in lower repair rates. The participants' responses in Example 6 and 7 illustrate no repair uptake

Example 6 (Task 1 , Recast)

P:	They <u>are</u> waiting for fireworks…like..	*trigger*
R:	<u>They are(?)</u>	*recast*
P:	Yes, a lot of people are there, like foreigners.	*no uptake*

Example 7 (Task 1, Recast)

R: How long did you stay there to watch the fireworks?
P: I arrive at 10 pm. but it <u>start</u> …around like 12.   *trigger*
R: <u>It start (?)</u>   *recast*
P: Yes, around 12 and about half or an hour or something.   *no uptake*
              Yes. I think it's not very special.
R: How did you go home…from there?
P: We <u>drive</u> a car.   *trigger*
R: You drive(?)   *recast*
P: Oh no, her boyfriend drive….
            my friend's boyfriend drive us.   *unsuccessful repair*

3. Some students did not notice or were not aware of being corrected. They perceived recasts as feedback on meaning rather than on form.

4. After students noticed the pattern of correction, they became more aware and produced less errors on past simple. It is also evident that the self-initiated self repair rates increased after they received feedback from the researcher.

RQ 2   What do learners think about the feedback on their errors of past simple?

The analysis of the participants' responses during the post-task interviews are summarized as follows.

1. Most of the participants explained that they focused on meaning more than form although they are aware that they need to use past simple when narrating past events. They think that even they do not use past simple verbs perfectly, the meaning is still clear.
2. The participants expressed positive attitudes toward teacher corrections during the tasks. They do not view corrections as interruptions but they are necessary for their language development since there is not much chance they will get corrected when they use the language to communicate outside the classroom.
3. The participants expressed their strong preferences on immediate feedback to delayed feedback. They reported that being corrected on the spot can help them notice the errors they had just uttered. Whereas, if the feedback is provided after they completed the tasks, they had difficulties to recall their own speech and the corrections will not be very useful.
4. After completing the task, the participants who received metalinguistic feedback could recall precisely how they were corrected by the researcher. However, those who received recasts had difficulties recalling what the researcher said or how they errors were corrected. Two participants who received recasts stated that the emphatic intonation in the researcher's comments together with the researcher's facial expression made them realize that they must have just made some error in their speech production. This stopped them from continuing their talk and deviated them to focus on the form and grammar in their speech.
5. All participants were aware of the requirement of past tense verb forms in the narration ;however, they did not monitor themselves to produce the final sounds of the inflected verb as they rather focused on meaning. Thus, even though they intended to narrate a story in the past, they failed to use the past forms of the verbs in their

utterances and failed to pronounce the correct sounds of the verbs that end with –ed.
6. All participants believe if they receive effective and consistent corrections from their teachers, they would gradually form a habit of close monitoring on their own speech. In other words, such corrective feedback provision promotes learner autonomy in a long term.

Conclusion

This present study investigated how metalinguistic feedback and recast has an effect on learners' subsequent production of past simple in their utterances. The results indicate that metalinguistic feedback could draw learners' attention to the wrong form in their utterances and push them to correct the errors. Moreover, it also helped learners to become more aware of their use of the past simple verbs when they produce sentences telling past events. For recast, although generally, it could trigger learners to correct the errors, the rate of successful repairs is slightly lower than those as responses to metalinguistic feedback. Therefore, it is less effective to help learners be aware of the errors. One possible reason why metalinguistic feedback may be more effective than recast is it is more explicit and thus more salient to learners. Recasts, despite of the emphatic intonation, could appear to the learners as responses to meaning but not to form due to its implicit characteristics. It is unclear to the learners whether they are being corrected on form. The results are consistent with previous studies claiming that explicit correction such metalinguistic feedback results in more successful uptake or repairs (Lightbown & Spada, 1990, 1991; Sheen, 2004).
Some useful pedagogical implications can be drawn from the findings on the effect of metalinguistic feedback and the positive attitudes towards teacher correction. Teachers should provide sufficient and consistent explicit feedback such metalinguistic feedback on grammatical errors in communicative classrooms. Ultimately, learners will gradually become autonomous and begin to monitor their production when using the target language in real life situations.

Limitations of the study

The results of this present study must be interpreted with caution due to several limitations that need to be addressed. Firstly, the sample size was very small (n=6). Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that the participants were at the exact same level of proficiency. Clearly, further classroom research is called for with a larger sample size. Another limitation is that the present study was not conducted in an actual classroom but a laboratory setting where factors were strictly controlled. The findings, therefore, should not be generalized.

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