

ON THE EFFECT OF RECAST IN TASK-BASED GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION ACROSS TWO AGE GROUPS: ADOLESCENTS VS. ADULTS

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Abstract

In order to address the issue of age differences in feedback reception, this study investigated the effect of recast in task-based grammar instruction on Iranian adolescent and adult EFL learners' learning of conditionals and relatives. The data were collected from 114 adolescent (aged 15-18) and adult (aged 30-35) EFL learners. Of the two adolescent classes, one class was assigned as the experimental and the other as the control group and the same procedure was followed for the two adult classes. The two experimental groups were provided with recast. The analysis of the participants' performance on the posttest demonstrated that the experimental groups outperformed the control groups, and adults more than adolescents benefited from recast. As a result, the efficacy of recast in establishing new grammatical knowledge was proved. Further, the age of the learners did affect the degree of the utility of recasts in developing grammar knowledge.

Keywords: age, corrective feedback, recast, task, grammar instruction

1. Introduction

Error correction, especially in grammar instruction, is an area which has been constantly under investigation due to its prominence and occurrence in EFL contexts. With the changing of the trends in second language teaching from traditional methods to the communicative approach, attitudes towards learner errors and the roles of error correction have evolved dramatically. During the days of audiolingualism from the 1950s to the 1960s error correction was stressed at all costs. Then, in the late 1960s error correction was condemned due to its harmful effects (Krashen 1981a & b, Terrell 1982, Truscott 1996) and in the 1970s, with the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which focused on meaning over form, the correction of grammatical errors became less prominent, and in some cases, was abandoned (Harmer 2001, Richards and Rodgers 2001). Later on, with the birth of the early versions of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) thorough attention was given to meaning with little or no attention to form which later became a weak point in task-based grammar instruction.

Current research in SLA has revitalized the role of grammar, error correction, and/or focus on form in L2 classrooms. This renewed attention to 'form' in SLA has made the issue of providing corrective (written or oral) feedback in L2 classrooms the topic of a large number of studies. Many researches have been led to investigate and compare the effect of different types of corrective feedback on different aspects of language including grammar, pronunciation, and writing accuracy (e.g., Bitchener and Knoch 2008, Ellis et al. 2006, Gass et al. 2005). Some studies supported the efficacy of corrective feedback in improving L2 learners' proficiency (e.g., Carroll and Swain 1993, Ellis 1994, Fotos 1994, Long 1996, Lyster 2004, Schmidt 1993) while some others questioned the efficacy of grammar error correction (Truscott 1996).

In a comprehensive review of research on error correction, Hendrickson (1978) attempted to provide answers to five relevant questions:

- (1) Should learner error be corrected?
- (2) If so, when should learner errors be corrected?
- (3) Which learner errors should be corrected?
- (4) How should learner errors be corrected?
- (5) Who should correct learner errors?

Despite the numerous studies that have been conducted on corrective feedback in the last decade, these questions have remained largely unanswered to date and as Hendrickson himself points out, most answers provided to these questions by teachers and linguists have been speculative and non-empirical. Hence, error correction is an area where research can inform and improve practice. In order to assist practicing foreign and second language teachers in a meaningful way, SLA research should attempt to answer Hendrickson's (1978) questions with a combination of qualitative and quantitative studies.

In order to provide answers to some of the above questions, this age-related study investigates the effect of one of the most frequently used type of oral correction technique, i.e. recast, with adolescent and adult EFL learners' learning of new grammatical structures. In particular, it tries to discover whether recast has any significant differential effect on EFL learners' grammatical accuracy as far as their age is concerned. It addresses the issue of age differences in feedback by investigating and comparing the utility of recast, as 'the most frequently used type of feedback' (Panova and Lyster 2002: 571), in task-based grammar instruction across the two age groups. The findings on the differences in the provision and use of (negative) corrective feedback by ESL/EFL learners of different age groups may provide an explanation for the differential learning rate and long-term success of these age groups.

1.1. Research questions

1. Is task-based grammar instruction more effective with or without recast in the learning of conditionals and relative clauses with Iranian EFL learners?
2. Does teacher corrective recast have any significant differential effect on adolescent and adult EFL learners' learning of conditionals and relative clauses?

2. Background

2.1. Recast

The definition of an element as recast in SLA varies among studies. Some studies simply consider the implicit reformulation, yet some other studies add other additional elements in the definition of recasts, such as length (Lyster and Ranta 1997), stressed intonation (Doughty and Varela 1998), and number of reformulations (Philp 2003). According to Lyster and Ranta (1997: 46) 'recasts involve the teacher's reformulation of all or part of a student's utterance minus the error.'

In addition to different definitions, As Ellis and Sheen (2006) argue, recasts can be of various types including corrective recasting, corrective/non-corrective recasts, full/partial recasts, single/multiple recasts, recasts occurring in one-signal negotiated interactions or in extended negotiated interactions, and simple/complex recasts.

Recast has been the focus of a large number of studies (e.g., Ammar 2008, Ammar and Spada 2006, Doughty and Varela 1998, Ellis et al. 2001, Ellis et al. 2006, Han 2002b, Iwashita 2003, Leowen and Philp 2006, Lyster 2004, Lyster and Izquierdo 2009, Lyster and Mori 2006). These studies rendered different results some in favor of and some against the efficacy of recasts. In interpreting the research on recasts, it is important to keep in mind that there are differences between the findings of laboratory and classroom studies, between primarily structure-focused and primarily content-focused classrooms, and between observational studies of naturally occurring feedback patterns in classrooms and experimental studies that focus on specific linguistic features and feedback types.

One factor that has led to apparently different findings is that the operational definition of recasts has varied considerably. In addition, the effectiveness of recasts may depend in part on learner variables such as their proficiency level or interlanguage variety (Nicholas et al. 2001). Previous research findings on recasts suggest that recasts can be effective if the learner has already begun to use a particular linguistic feature and is in a position to choose between linguistic alternatives. There is also evidence that there is a point beyond which recasts are ineffective in changing stabilized interlanguages. In addition, the effectiveness of recasts has been found to differ, depending on the area of language or on the specific linguistic feature

(Nicholas et al. 2001).

This is a particular challenge for studies of recasts. Future research is needed to explore the exact conditions, including learner factors (Ellis and Sheen 2006), under which recasts-as well as other types of feedback- are likely to be effective in L2 acquisition.

So far, few studies have examined the moderating effects of these individual difference variables, including the age factor (Oliver 2000), on the acquisitional worth of recasts. Hence, research is yet to be undertaken to examine more closely how individual learners react to and benefit from corrective feedback.

2.2. Task-based grammar instruction

Task-based approach to grammar instruction involves the use of tasks that engage learners in meaningful interaction and negotiation focusing on completion of a task. Learners' grammar needs are determined on the basis of task performance rather than through a predetermined grammar syllabus. However, such a weak point at the early days of task-based instruction, i.e. its negligence of focus on form, instigated researchers to integrate form and meaning through a number of approaches. Ellis (2003), for example, introduced three types of structure-based tasks namely: structure-based production tasks, comprehension tasks, and consciousness-raising tasks. The first two attend to implicit grammar while the last one views grammar as the content of the task.

Further, a distinction was made between focused versus unfocused tasks. Focused tasks prompt the learners to apply a particular structure while unfocused tasks leave the learners to pick and choose in their language repertoire (Nunan 2004).

In his thorough review on focused and unfocused tasks, Ellis (2003: 16) points to the two aims of focused tasks: 'one is to stimulate communicative language use (as with unfocused tasks), the other is to target the use of a particular, predetermined target feature.' Therefore there are mainly two ways in which a task can achieve a focus. One is to design the task in such way that it can only be performed if learners use a particular linguistics feature. The second is by making language itself the content of the task which is called consciousness raising (CR) task.

A task-based lesson consists of three phases or stages 1) pre-task phase; 2) during-task phase; and 3) post-task phase (Ellis, 2003). Willis (1996) puts forward the following task-based framework (Table 1) especially where focus on form is crucial.

1. Pre-task

The teacher introduces the topic and gives the students clear instructions on what they will have to do at the task stage and might also highlight useful words and

phrases but would not pre-teach new structures. This phase is mainly a preparatory stage for task-cycle stage.

2. Task-cycle

This stage consists of three elements: task, planning, and reports.

2.1. Task

The task is done by students either in pair or groups using whatever language they can recall. The teacher monitors the learners but do not intervene to correct errors of form.

2.2. Planning

Students prepare a short oral or written report to tell the class how they did the task and what the outcome was. Meanwhile the teacher can polish and correct their language.

2.3. Report

Here the students give their oral or written report to the class and meanwhile the teacher comments on the content of their reports, rephrases perhaps but gives no overt public correction.

3. Language Focus

In the first two stages, students put their emphasis on the meaning of their language; while in the third stage, they focus their attention on the form. This stage includes two steps:

3.1. Language Analysis

Here the teacher sets some language-focused tasks based on the texts students have read. Students analyze the language with a primary focus on form.

3.2. Language Practice

Students consolidate their mastery of the language form through some activities. Practice activities include memory challenge games and sentence completion.

Table 1. A framework of task-based language teaching (adapted from Willis 1996: 58)

In their investigation of the effect of task-based grammar instruction, Fotos and Ellis (1991) indicated that grammar tasks encouraged communicating about grammar and enabled EFL learners to increase their knowledge of dative alternations. However, they argued that grammar tasks did not result in the same level of longer-term learning as did the traditional approach. The main reasons they mentioned for this lack of long-term durability were the absence of teacher feedback and the learners' unfamiliarity and lack of experience in performing group/pair work.

2.3. Age and corrective feedback

The role of age in SLA is intrinsically related to an issue of time, which can be understood as 'time to start learning a language' -Age of Onset (AO)- or as 'hours required to learn a language'(duration). Regarding the question of AO, it is a popular belief that the earlier one starts learning a language, the better (Scovel 2000). Regarding the question of time as 'duration', a distinction has to be made between *rate* (how fast the language is acquired)

and *ultimate attainment*, which is the final level of proficiency achieved. That is, although older learners progress more rapidly in the initial stages of L2 morphosyntactic acquisition, children's ultimate attainment is greater (Krashen et al. 1979).

Corrective feedback studies have predominantly focused on adult L2 learners, the only exceptions being the studies published by Lyster (1998), and Oliver (1995). Lyster (1998) examined various types of corrective feedback provided by four primary school teachers. They found that some types of feedback were of greater utility than others, in terms of student-generated repair. Oliver (1995) also examined the process of negative feedback (NF) used by primary-aged school students, but in this case it was the native speaker (NS)-nonnative speaker (NNS) conversational interaction of eight dyads. She found that the NNSs incorporated the feedback into the interlanguage systems.

Preliminary research on implicit negative feedback, and specifically recasts, indicates some similarities and some differences according to age in the percentage provided by interlocutors and used by their non-native speaker (NNS) partners (Mackey and Philp 1998, Oliver 1995). For example, Mackey et al. (1997, cited in Oliver 2000), in a comparison of the interaction between adult and child NNS-NNS dyads, found that children used more of the negative feedback than adults. When negative feedback was provided, and when it was possible and appropriate to use it, children did so 55% of the time, whereas for adults the figure was 28%.

What can be inferred in light of the review is that, to date, most feedback studies have been mainly concerned with the differential effects of different types of corrective feedback with the same learners (Lalande 1982, Semk 1984) and very few studies have made a direct comparison of the provision and uptake/use of (negative) corrective feedback by learners of different ages. Few studies reflected exclusively on the issue of age differences in feedback (e.g. Mackey et al. 1997, and Oliver 2000) were mainly concerned with patterns of interaction, the type of negative feedback (NF) provided to learners according to their age, the opportunity for them to use it, and the appropriateness of their using it. Furthermore, learners' uptake of the NF was considered as an outcome measure. Therefore, further research is still required to investigate the relative existence and utility of each feedback type and give priority to them according to the age of the learners as one of the crucial and challenging learner variables.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

To accomplish the objectives of this study, 184 female EFL learners of different ages (aged 15-35) from two language institutes in Rasht (one of the

main provinces in Iran) were given a homogeneity test, i.e. the Nelson Test. From among these learners, 156 learners, whose scores were within one SD above and below the mean (Mean=36.66; SD= 6.91) were chosen as learners of similar language proficiency. These learners were entering the pre-intermediate level of language instruction based on the screening system used by the institute authorities.

These participants were also matched on the basis of their age. Learners whose age ranged from 15-18 were considered as adolescents and learners whose age was between 30-35 were considered as adults (older adults). Young adults, i.e. learners who aged between these two age ranges were not taken into account in order to make the age differences more tangible. The resultant sample was four groups. From among 70 learners (aged 15-35 years), 29 (aged 15-18 years) were put into one class as adolescent class and 27 (aged 30-35 years) were put into another class as adult class. Similarly, from among 86 participants, 30 (aged 15-18 years) were put into one class as adolescent class and 28 (aged 30-35) were put into another class as adult class. Finally, of the two adolescent classes one class was randomly assigned as the experimental group and the other one as the control group. The same random assignment was done for the two adult classes.

The total number of participants reached was 114 in four classes (see Table 2), two adolescent and two adult classes (one in each as the experimental group and one as the control group).

| Group | N |
|---|----------|
| Group 1 (Adults, Experimental group: Receiving recast) | 27 |
| Group 2 (adolescents, Experimental group: Receiving recast) | 29 |
| Group 3 (adults, Control group: Receiving no recast) | 28 |
| Group 4 (adolescents, Control group: Receiving no recast) | 30 |
| Total | 114 |

Table 2. Distribution of the participants in each Group

3.2. Instrumentation

3.2.1 Proficiency test

Initially, Nelson English Language Test (version 200 A) was used as a language proficiency test in order to assure the homogeneity of the participants. Nelson English Language Test consists of fifty items, fourteen items of which were cloze tests of reading comprehension and thirty six were multiple-choice tests of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

3.2.2 Pre-test/post-test

To examine the impact of recast as a means of error correction, a teacher-

made test consisting of multiple choice items testing conditionals and relative clauses was administered. These structures were new to the learners and thus they had little familiarity with them. This pretest which also served as post test was in the form of two parallel tests (Form A and Form B). Both forms were piloted with 10 learners similar to the sample in the current study and the poor items in them were discarded from both forms.

A counterbalanced test administration was employed to minimize as much as possible the test-retest effect, practice effect, and ordering effect. The reliability of the two tests was calculated through KR-21 method which turned out to be 0.81 and .82 respectively.

The two target structures, namely conditionals and relatives were chosen for several reasons. First, they were chosen due to their salience and usefulness in EFL textbooks and discourse. Second, in the students' main course book (New Cutting Edge), which was used during the treatment period, many parts together with useful tasks were allocated to these two grammatical structures. Finally, the purpose of this study was to examine whether teacher corrective recast assisted the learning of new structures.

3.3. Procedure

The study was conducted in the summer of 2010 at two language institutes. In these two institutes, each term lasts 6 weeks (18 sessions of 105 minutes) and the classes meet three times a week. The treatment phase of the study took place over 3 weeks (9 sessions) of the whole 6 weeks for a term and 30 minutes of each of these 9 sessions were allocated to the treatment. From among different grammatical structures, two grammatical structures, i.e., conditionals (3 types) and relative clauses (who/whom/whose/which/that) were chosen as the measure of grammatical knowledge. The participants had almost no familiarity with the two aimed grammatical structures namely conditionals and relatives. During the nine-session treatment period one researcher, who was also the instructor of all the four groups, taught the target grammatical structures, i.e. conditionals and relative clauses through focused tasks (opinion-gap and picture-description tasks) following Willis's (1996) framework (See Table 2) in all the four groups. Picture-description tasks required the learners to describe some pictures and opinion-gap tasks to exchange opinions on some controversial issues, express personal preferences, feelings, ideas, and attitudes (Ellis 2003, Prabhu 1987), using conditional sentences (three types) and relative clauses (who/whom/whose/which/that). In teaching these two grammatical structures, punctuation rules were not the main focus and thus not tested.

The only difference between the two experimental groups and the two control groups in this study was that in the former the participants were provided with teacher's corrective feedback in the form of recast to their errors, once during their pair or group work by the researcher, who was

walking around the class and eavesdropping on them, and also at the time of the oral production to the class. Further, in many cases the learners had the opportunity to respond following the teacher's recast. In this study, recast was operationalized as the teachers' reformulation of all or part of a learner's problematic utterance in which the learners' errors were corrected without changing the central meaning of the utterance. The teacher's corrective recasts to learners' erroneous utterances using conditionals and relative clauses were sometimes in the form of reformulation of all of the learners' problematic utterance (Example 1) and sometimes in the form of reformulation of part of the learners' erroneous utterance (Example 2).

Example 1

Learner: ... *I have hunted a big polar bear if I had been in the arctic.*

Teacher: *You would have hunted a big polar bear if you had been in the arctic.*

Example 2

Learner: ...*I met a fat man who T-shirt was brown...*

Teacher: *whose T-shirt was brown?*

Contrary to the two experimental groups, the two control groups did not receive any teacher corrective feedback in the form of recast to their erroneous utterances using conditional sentences and relative clauses.

Care was taken not to use non-corrective repetition following well-formed learner utterances during the treatment period at all because most teachers use recasts following learners' ill-formed utterances in the same way that they use non-corrective repetition following well-formed learner utterances which makes the corrective nature of recast ambiguous to be noticed by learners (Lyster 1998).

After the three-week treatment period, those learners who had taken Form A in the pretest took Form B in the posttest and vice versa. The posttest was administered 30 days after the pretest.

4. Results and discussion

The results of the participants' performance in the four groups on the pretest are presented in Table 3 below.

| Group | N | Mean | SD |
|--------------|----------|-------------|-----------|
| ex_adult | 27 | 22.2593 | 4.9969 |
| ex_adol | 29 | 21.3448 | 4.1341 |
| con_adult | 28 | 22.1786 | 5.2072 |
| con_adol | 30 | 19.9667 | 4.7378 |
| Total | 114 | 21.4035 | 4.8055 |

Table3. Descriptive statistics on the performance of the

groups on the pretest

The differences in the mean performances of the groups was examined thorough ANOVA. The Levene's Test shows the Equality of Error Variances which shows minimal differences in the variances of the performance of the groups.

| | F | df1 | df2 | Sig. |
|----------------|----------|------------|------------|-------------|
| Pretest | 1.073 | 3 | 110 | .364 |

Table 4. Levene's test of equality of error variances

As can be seen (see Table 5), the differences in the means of the four groups on the pre-test is not meaningful.

| Factor | Group(I) | Group(J) | Mean Difference | Std. Error | Sig. |
|---------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| Pretest | ex-adult | ex- adol | .914 | 1.278 | 1.000 |
| | | adol | 8.069 | 1.289 | 1.000 |
| | | con- adult con- adol | 2.293 | 1.267 | .439 |
| ex-adol | con- adult | con- adol | -.834 | 1.266 | 1.000 |
| | | adol | 1.378 | 1.244 | 1.000 |
| con-adult | con- adol | adol | 2.212 | 1.255 | .485 |

Table 5. Comparison of the groups on the pretest.

To answer the questions of the study, Multivariate Analysis of Variance was conducted (See Table 6).

| Source | | Type III Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|--------------------|----------|-------------|
| Treatment | Sphericity Assumed | 17339.283 | 1 | 17339.283 | 1190.044 | .000 |
| | Greenhouse-Geisser | 17339.283 | 1.000 | 17339.283 | 1190.044 | .000 |
| | Huynh-Feldt | 17339.283 | 1.000 | 17339.283 | 1190.044 | .000 |
| | Lower-bound | 17339.283 | 1.000 | 17339.283 | 1190.044 | .000 |
| Treatment* GROUP | Sphericity Assumed | 1526.098 | 3 | 508.699 | 34.913 | .000 |
| | Greenhouse Geisser | 1526.098 | 3.000 | 508.699 | 34.913 | .000 |

| | | | | | | |
|------------------------|--------------------|----------|-------|---------|--------|------|
| | Huynh-Feldt | 1526.098 | 3.000 | 508.699 | 34.913 | .000 |
| | Lower-bound | 1526.098 | 3.000 | 508.699 | 34.913 | .000 |
| <i>Error (FACTOR1)</i> | Sphericity Assume | 1602.731 | 110 | 14.570 | | |
| | Greenhouse-Geisser | 1602.731 | 110 | 14.570 | | |
| | Huynh-Feldt | 1602.731 | 110 | 14.570 | | |
| | Lower-bound | 1602.731 | 110 | 14.570 | | |

Table 6. Test of within-subjects effects among the four groups with or without feedback

As can be seen, the instruction during the treatment period was effective in the adolescent and adults' learning of the two targeted grammatical structures. Regarding the age factor, Table 7 shows that there is also a significant difference between groups with different age levels.

| Source | Type III Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|------------------|-------------------------|-----|-------------|----------|------|
| <i>Intercept</i> | 207139.585 | 1 | 207139.585 | 7481.111 | .000 |
| <i>AGE</i> | 2156.515 | 3 | 718.838 | 25.962 | .000 |
| <i>Error</i> | 3045.718 | 110 | 27.688 | | |

Table 7. Tests of between-subjects effects on the posttest

The main concern in the first research question was to examine whether teacher corrective recast accompanying task-based grammar instruction assisted significantly the learning of the targeted grammatical structures. Therefore, post hoc analysis was conducted to discover the loci of the differences. The results are shown in Tables 8, and 9 below.

| Group | Test | Mean | Std.Error |
|-----------|----------|--------|-----------|
| ex-adult | pretest | 22.259 | .919 |
| | posttest | 46.926 | .848 |
| ex-adol | pretest | 21.345 | .887 |
| | posttest | 41.483 | .819 |
| con-adult | pretest | 22.179 | .903 |
| | posttest | 33.893 | .833 |
| con-adol | pretest | 19.967 | .872 |
| | posttest | 33.267 | .805 |

Table 8. Descriptive statistics of the four groups' performance on the pre and posttests

As can be seen in Table 8, the four groups' mean scores on the post test are higher than those on the pretest. Moreover, the posttest mean scores of the two experimental groups are higher than those of the two control groups. The multiple comparisons on the post hoc test are shown in Table 9 below.

| Factor | Group (I) | Group | Mean Difference | Std. | Sig. |
|--------|-----------|-------|-----------------|------|------|
|--------|-----------|-------|-----------------|------|------|

| (J) | | Error | | | |
|-----------|----------|-------|---------|-------|------|
| Posttest | ex-adult | ex- | 5.443* | 1.179 | .000 |
| | | adol | 13.033* | 1.189 | .000 |
| | | con- | 13.659* | 1.169 | .000 |
| | ex-adol | adol | | | |
| | | con- | 7.590* | 1.168 | .000 |
| | | adult | 8.216* | 1.148 | .000 |
| con-adult | con- | | | | |
| | adol | -626 | 1.158 | 1.000 | |

Table 9. Pairwise comparisons on the performance of the four groups on the post test

Contrary to the findings on the pretest, the mean performances of the four groups' on the posttest show significant differences except between the two control groups, i.e. adult control group and adolescent control group. Hence, it can be concluded that the two experimental groups outperformed the two control groups on the post-test. As a result, teacher recast in task-based grammar instruction was found to be significantly effective in improving learners' grammatical accuracy of the two aimed target structures. In other words, recast had a significant effect in establishing new grammatical knowledge of conditionals and relatives. This finding underlines the worth of recast in facilitating language learning, especially in learning new grammatical structures. Such a finding is comparable and in line with previous empirical findings (e.g., Ayoun 2001, Braid 2002, Doughty 2001a and 2001b, Iwashita 2003, Leeman 2003, Long 1996, Long et al. 1998, Mackey and Philp 1998, Oliver 1995, and Oliver and Mackey 2003) in that teacher's corrective feedback in the form of recast is used by learners and facilitates L2 learning especially when compared to a purely communicative program in which no corrective feedback is provided. The main thrust of these studies, as Han (2002b: 546) states, is that 'recasts have a positive yet selective impact on learning; that some learners appear to be more receptive to recasts than others, and that some structures seem more amenable to recasts than others'.

However, the current finding is in contrast with some other studies that shed doubt on the utility of recasts. For example, some researches (e.g., Nicholas et al 2001) found that recasts were ambiguous and hence were sometimes perceived as synonymous in function as mere repetition for language learners. Lyster (1998) and Panova and Lyster (2002) believe that

recasts usually pass unnoticed by the learners and hence are not facilitative for interlanguage development. According to Loewen and Philp (2006) recasts do not elicit repair and learners are simply provided with the correct form without being pushed to modify their interlanguage.

Despite these differing viewpoints, there is general agreement among SLA researchers that recasts are the most common form of oral error correction employed by teachers in second and foreign language classrooms. It is of course true that recasts are complex discourse structures that can sometimes be difficult for learners to notice.

In this study, regarding the two aimed target structures, teacher recast in task-based grammar instruction proved to be effective in establishing new knowledge, a proof for the positive effect of recast in a classroom setting in which structures were new to the adolescent and adult learners and in which task-based grammar instruction was used.

In a broader sense, the positive effect of recast, as one type of corrective feedback technique, can somehow highlight the importance of teachers' correcting learners' errors. Lack of teacher corrective feedback might lead to the fossilization of the errors and that teachers should not deprive their students from corrective feedback. It is recommended that language teachers should employ appropriate corrective feedback techniques and take learners' characteristics into account in order to minimize the inaccurate structures in the learners' interlanguage. Therefore, it seems what matters more is not the question 'To correct or not to correct?', but 'How to correct?'

In order to provide a reliable answer to this question, i.e. 'How to correct?', many parameters, including learners' characteristics (age, gender, proficiency level, readiness), input quality, context, etc. should be taken into account and the utility of each type of corrective feedback regarding these parameters should be investigated (Ellis and Sheen 2006, Oliver 2000).

This was the main concern of the second research question, which from among different learners' variables focused on the age factor, and from among different types of corrective feedback chose recast as the most frequently used type of oral correction. More specifically, it investigated the differential effect of recast across two age groups as an attempt to render further insight into the issue of age differences in feedback. The interaction between age and feedback was found to be significant.

As the results show of the two experimental groups show, the adult group (G1) took more advantage from recasts. Consequently, regarding the age factor, recast does have a significant differential effect on adolescent and adult learners' grammatical achievement of conditionals and relatives in this study, and this significant effect was in favor of adults, i.e. from among adults and adolescents, adults benefited more from recast in their learning of

conditionals and relatives.

The advantage of adults over adolescents in making use of recast in learning the targeted L2 structures (conditionals and relatives) implies that the general proved advantage of corrective feedback types in previous researches does not necessarily warrant their being ideal for learners of different ages or, in Ammar and Spada's (2006: 566) own words, 'one size does not fit all'.

Further, such a difference in the use of one type of corrective feedback (recast) by adolescent and adult EFL learners may provide an explanation for the differential learning rate of these age groups, that is, older learners progress more rapidly in the initial stages of L2 morphosyntactic acquisition (Krashen et al. 1979). However, regarding 'children's greater ultimate attainment' (Krashen et al. 1979), the current study does not provide any explanation for long-term success of these age groups the requisite of which is continuous and extended investigation together with the use of delayed post-tests.

It is important to note that in this study learners' uptake was not considered as an outcome measure because immediate uptake of a recast does not necessarily equate to L2 learning as noticed during the treatment period. During the treatment period the researcher noticed that adolescents' immediate uptake of recast was more noticeable than that of adults who were silent most of the time after the teacher's recast. Yet, the adult learners outperformed the adolescent learners on the posttest. This finding confirms the idea that learners' immediate responses to recasts (uptake) may in fact be red herring (Ellis et al. 2001, Long 2006, Mackey and Philp 1998) and a learner's ability to repeat a teacher's model utterance is 'notoriously unreliable as an indication that the structure involved has really been learned' and 'it is all too often no more than 'language-like' behavior' (Long 2006: 99).

5. Conclusion

The results of this study can provide a partial answer to Hendrickson's (1978) first question ('Should learner error be corrected?') and more indirectly, by taking learners' age into account and examining the degree of recast effectiveness for learners of different ages, an answer to his fourth question ('How should learner errors be corrected?').

The current study, using opinion-gap and picture-description tasks for grammar instruction, revealed that teacher's corrective recast was significantly effective in removing erroneous structures from the learners' language. Therefore, the answer to the question 'to correct or not?' is affirmative. That is, leaving learners' errors unnoticed might result in the fossilization of erroneous structures; hence, they should not be neglected,

instead learners' errors should be corrected either on the spot as in this study or with delay.

However, the positive outcome observed cannot be assumed to transfer to other tasks such as role-play, games, simulations, etc., nor can one assume that recasts would have an equally positive impact on other linguistic features. Indeed, as Han (2002b) states at the core of an understanding of the role of recasts are two questions: under which conditions and on which aspects of L2 development would recasts have a positive effect? As for the question of which aspects of L2 development would benefit from recasts, L1 research has generated some evidence showing that grammatical morpheme acquisition is susceptible to the influence of recasts (Farrar 1990, 1992, cited in Nicholas, et al. 2001). Long (1996) summarizes aspects of L2 development that are theoretically amenable to corrective feedback as the following: vocabulary, morphology, language-specific syntax, and certain specifiable L1-L2 contrasts.

Regarding the age of the learners and suitability of recast for learners of different ages, the study revealed that recast was more beneficial for adults than adolescents, an important factor to be considered by teachers when deciding on the appropriate type of corrective feedback according to their students' age. Nonetheless, while suggestive, this finding should be interpreted with caution because factors other than the age factor could have contributed to the reported outcome. The target features could be one of those factors. The grammatical features and teaching or learning context are two additional variables that require consideration.

The dominant atmosphere in most classes, especially in Iran, is either teachers' haphazard and/or excess use of error correction while ignoring the communicative nature of language classes or using corrective technique(s) inappropriate for all learners. Accordingly, most teachers need to be made aware of different new corrective feedback techniques (both explicit and implicit) and the degree of suitability of each type of corrective technique for different learners (e.g., with different ages).

This study looked at the utility of recasts across two age groups, namely adolescents and adults, at pre-intermediate level, similar studies can be conducted with other types of error correction techniques, both implicit and explicit, in order to offer further insight into age differences in feedback.

Further, interested researchers can investigate the impact of other learner variables as Ellis and Sheen (2006) mention, such as gender (an influential factor in the process of interactional feedback), proficiency level (Sheen 2007), developmental readiness, language aptitude, personality factors, motivation, anxiety, attention, memory and analytical ability, and attitude toward correction in the utility and usefulness of recast or other corrective feedback techniques.

The effectiveness of recasts is partially dependent upon the target structure under study. Hence, similar studies can examine the accuracy gains in terms of other structures in English or any other languages, both new structures and structures that the learners have already begun to acquire, in order to lend more credence to the findings obtained in this study and the previous ones and cast away all the doubts regarding the potential effect of different types of corrective feedbacks for different target structures.

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