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The Impact of Recast on the Development of the Intermediate Iranian EL Learners' Interlanguage Pragmatics Regarding Speech Act of Refusal

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Abstract

The study was designed to explore the effect of recasts as a form of implicit feedback on the development of interlanguage pragmatics in intermediate Iranian EL learners. To this end, eight participants were selected and randomly assigned to either the control group or the experimental group. The control group engaged in role-plays without any treatment, whereas the experimental group received recasts in response to their pragmatically erroneous utterances during role-plays. The treatment lasted eight sessions. A Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was used as both a pretest and a posttest. Self-report was also used. The findings showed that the recast group's post-intervention improvement was significantly greater than that of the control group. That is, using recasts as feedback improved EL learners' pragmatic proficiency in performing the speech act of refusal. The researchers also unexpectedly identified a new type of repair, which they called repair-plus. The results also indicate that teachers can use recasts as effective corrective feedback in language classes to improve learners' pragmatic competence.

Keywords: feedback, discourse, competence, DCT

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1. Introduction

Since communicative competence and its various forms were introduced into language teaching and learning, second language learning has no longer been viewed as gaining mastery over grammatical forms alone. The acquisition of the functional aspects of a second language is also paramount. As Leech (1983, p. 11) pointed out, linguistic knowledge includes both linguistic competence (i.e., knowledge of separate formal structures) and communicative competence (i.e., speakers' use of the most appropriate structures in a given context to make themselves understood). The latter has recently been a focus of attention in the field of second language acquisition.

EL learners develop a system called interlanguage as they internalize English. One part of this system is interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), which concerns learners' developing ability to communicate effectively in a given context. The current study focuses on how recasts, a form of implicit correction in which learners' utterances are reformulated using correct forms, influence EL learners' development of ILP. This relationship has received little attention. Therefore, the study aims to address this gap in the literature by examining the influence of this feedback on the development of ILP in intermediate Iranian EL learners.

2. Literature Review

Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) has received particular attention from scholars who focus on pragmatics. Kasper and Rose (1999, p. 85) explain that, in the field of second language learning, interlanguage pragmatics examines how second language learners develop the ability to understand and perform actions in a target language. Their definition highlights two significant aspects of research in interlanguage pragmatics. First, it emphasizes both production and comprehension in the development of L2 learners' general pragmatic competence. In other words, second language learners need to use structures that are appropriate to a given context and recognize what constitutes appropriate behavior in the second language. Second, their definition emphasizes the developmental nature of interlanguage pragmatics.

In a qualitative multiple-case study, Masrour et al. (2019) investigated Iranian English language teachers' perceptions of interlanguage pragmatics. Their findings showed that the limited attention paid to pragmatic competence in EL classes could be attributed to contextual factors. Asefi et al. (2019) investigated the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic development of Iranian EL learners when making requests in different situations. Analyses of written DCT responses and verbal reports suggested that, as proficiency increases, learners tend to shift from directness to conventional indirectness and expand their repertoire of both external and internal modification devices. Kreishan (2018) investigated the refusal and complaint speech act strategies employed by Jordanian undergraduate EL learners. The findings revealed that the respondents, who were nonnative speakers, preferred to use indirect semantic formulas.

As Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993, p. 2) state, "the study of speech act is to remain a central concern of pragmatics." For example, Rezvani et al. (2017) examined the refusal strategies most frequently used by English language (EL) students. The results suggested that the participants generally preferred indirect refusals. A considerable body of research has examined the influence of explicit pragmatic instruction on the development of L2 learners' pragmatic ability. Evidence of the positive impact of explicit instruction on pragmatics comes from studies of refusals (Jasim & Hamuoody, 2011; Silva, 2003), requesting, apologizing, and complaining (Eslami-Rasekh et al., 2004), requests (Liu, 2007), conversational implicature (Blight, 2002), requests and refusals (Mohammad, 2012), and apologies (Bagheri & Hamrang, 2013).

Some scholars have also explored the impact of feedback on the development of interlanguage pragmatics. For instance, recasts, a form of implicit feedback, have been found to help learners improve their L2 pragmatic proficiency. Fukuya and Zhang (2002) tested the influence of recasts on EL learners' acquisition of pragmalinguistic conventions for making requests. The results supported the use of recasts to address L2 learners' pragmatic errors. Fukuya et al. (1998) examined the influence of different kinds of corrective feedback on the development of ILP in EL learners. Their findings showed a positive effect of recasts on sociopragmatic development. Because recasts are considered the most frequently used type of corrective feedback among language teachers (Lyster & Ranta, 1997), they warrant further investigation. Although many corrective feedback studies have focused primarily on other aspects of language, such as speaking performance (Gholizade, 2013), researchers have called for further studies on the effects of different kinds of feedback on the development of ILP (Alcon & Codina, 2002; Lyster et al., 2013).

Yousefi and Nassaji (2021) provided a brief review of studies that used corrective feedback (CF) in instructed pragmatics. They found that most previous studies in L2 pragmatics had focused on the role of instruction in the acquisition of pragmatic competence, while relatively few had examined the link between corrective feedback and interlanguage pragmatics. As Gholamian and Aghaeib (2012) noted, it is important for ILP research to include a wider range of languages and cultures. Iranian EL learners are one group that has received limited attention. Few studies have examined ILP development among Iranian EL learners, particularly with respect to the speech act of refusal.

3. Methodology

The study aimed at investigating the effect of recast as implicit feedback on the intermediate Iranian EL learners' interlanguage pragmatic development concerning the speech act of refusal.

3.1. Research Question, Hypothesis and Design

The current study was conducted to provide response to the following research question:

- Does recast promote the intermediate Iranian EL learners' pragmatic proficiency in making refusals?

Based on the research question, the following null hypothesis was formulated:

- Recast does not promote the intermediate Iranian EL learners' pragmatic proficiency in making refusals.

To answer the research question, a mixed method including both quantitative and qualitative research method was employed. First of all, an experimental research using pre- and posttest design was utilized. Then, for triangulation of the data collected, self-report was also used.

3.2. Participants

The eight participants in the present study were Iranian EL students whose first language was Persian. They were majoring in English literature. They were randomly assigned to either the control group or the experimental group. Gender was not included as a variable. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 21 years and had intermediate English proficiency. The authors acknowledge that the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings to all Iranian English learners. The authors hope that the findings will contribute to the existing literature and encourage further research.

3.3. Instrumentation

A Discourse Completion Task (DCT) is a written questionnaire that presents a situation involving the speech act under study and specifies the social distance between the participants, their respective social status, their gender, and the setting. The situation is followed by a brief dialogue with a slot for respondents to provide a written response. Respondents are asked to write what they think they ought to say in the situation described. The type of DCT used in the current study was dialogue construction, "which may be commenced by an interlocutor initiation. However, the rejoinder is not present" (Nurani, 2009, p. 668).

Hudson et al. (1995) developed a rating manual to enable external raters to assess L2 learners' pragmatic performance in a language testing context. This rating scale was adapted to score responses to the DCT. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not appropriate*) to 5 (*completely appropriate*). In this study, the participants' responses were assessed by the two authors and one additional rater. The mean of the three ratings served as the final score for each response.

3.4. Self-report

Gass and Mackey (2005) introduced self-report as one of the introspective measures which encourages learners to communicate their internal perspectives on treatment. Such reports can be used as further verification for the results gained from quantitative analysis.

Some questions employed by the study for self-report were adapted from Duan (2008). Some of the questions are illustrated below:

- Have you noticed any changes in your performances when realizing refusals in English after role-play? If so, how do they change? Please specify.
- Do you think you can definitely use the refusal expressions you learned in the role-plays if you actually face a real conversation in an English-speaking context? Why? Please explain.

The questions were written in Persian, L1 of the participants, and participants were required to reply in Persian. L1 of the participants were utilized because English level of the participants did not guarantee that they would express themselves freely and correctly in English. Self-reports were analyzed qualitatively.

3.5. Procedure

Prior to the study, 23 first-year students majoring in English literature or English translation at Velayat University took the OPT. Their scores were cross-checked against the conversation instructor's ratings of their oral skills. Students with intermediate proficiency were selected to participate in the study. Before feedback on the pragmatics of the speech act of refusal was provided, a pretest was administered to assess the participants' initial pragmatic proficiency. The pretest consisted of a DCT with several prompts and was adapted from Duan (2008). All participants then took part in 15 role-plays across eight sessions. The same teaching assistant participated in all role-plays and used requests, suggestions, offers, or invitations as prompts to elicit refusals. The treatment lasted four weeks. During the role-plays, participants in the experimental group received recasts whenever their utterances deviated from English pragmatic norms. The framework for recasts, adapted from Fukuya and Zhang (2002), is shown in Figure 1. Participants in the control group completed the role-plays without corrective feedback. Both groups' performances were audio-recorded using a mobile phone. The day after the final role-play session, the participants took the posttest, which contained the same items as the pretest in a different order. After the posttest, the participants completed a written self-report.

Figure 1

A Framework for Recast Adapted from Fukuya and Zhang (2002)

	Correct form	Incorrect form
Correct usage	Type I: ignore it (no recast)	Type II: recast only the linguistic forms of refusals
Incorrect usage	Type III: recast it by using refusals conventions	Type IV: recast it by using refusals conventions

4. Results of Dct

The researchers aimed to determine whether providing recasts in response to Iranian EL learners' output improved their pragmatic proficiency in making refusals. Tables 1 and 2 present the pretest and posttest descriptive statistics and the *t* test results for the recast group.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Recast Group

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	3	24.0000	4.58258	2.64575
Posttest	3	48.0000	1.73205	1.00000

Table 2

Pretest and Posttest Comparison for Recast Group: Independent T-Test

	Levene's test for equality of variances		t-test for equality of means					%95 of difference interval of difference	
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig(2-talled)	Mean difference	Std error difference	Lower	Upper
Equivalence assumed	2.571	.184	-8.485	4	.001	-24.00000	2.82843	-31.86297	-16.14703
Equivalences not assumed			-8.485	2.560	.006	-24.00000	2.82843	-33.94311	-14.05689

As shown in Table 1, the recast group's mean score increased from 24 on the pretest to 48 on the posttest. As shown in Table 2, the observed *t* value for the first research question ($t = 8.485$) exceeded the critical *t* value of 4. The difference between the pretest and posttest scores was therefore statistically significant, and the null hypothesis was rejected. This improvement suggests that recasts may help learners develop their pragmatic proficiency in making refusals.

To corroborate these findings, a *t* test was conducted to determine whether the two groups differed in their posttest scores. The results are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Control Group and Recast Group on Posttest

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control group posttest	4	36.7500	4.34933	2.17466
Recast group posttest	3	48.0000	1.73205	1.00000

Table 4

Independent T-Test for Control Group and Recast Group Performance on the Posttest

	Levene's test for equality of variances		t-test for equality of means				%95 of difference interval of difference	
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig(2-talled)	Mean difference	Std Error difference	Lower	Upper
Equivalence assumed	42.908	.001	-4.158	5	.009	-11.25000	2.70670	-18.20523	-4.29477
Equivalences not assumed			-4.700	4.126	.009	-11.25000	2.39357	-17.81626	-4.88374

The data presented in Tables 3 and 4 indicate that the recast group's mean posttest score (M = 48) was significantly higher than that of the control group (M = 36.75), as the observed t value (4.158) exceeded the critical t value (4.126). Given the small sample size, the effect size was estimated using Hedges' g. The resulting estimate (g = 2.67) indicated a large difference between the groups. These findings suggest that recasts may facilitate pragmatic development.

5. Results of Self-Report

To provide further context for the quantitative findings, the results of the self-report and stimulated recall session are also presented in relation to the first research question. The first two questions in the self-report asked participants what changes or progress they had noticed as a result of the treatment. Three participants in the recast group reported that the instructor's intervention during the role-plays helped them be more polite and use more euphemistic language when refusing. For instance, one participant stated:

After taking part in role-plays, I understood that one can make use of ***politer*** *vocabulary for turning down a request in a way that one does not hurt the interlocutor's emotions and be indirect.*

The other two responses were similar to the one quoted above. The participants' accounts suggest that they perceived an improvement in their ability to make refusals in English after receiving recasts. These accounts are consistent with the quantitative findings for the first research question.

The control group's responses provide a point of comparison. In their written self-reports, participants in the control group described improvements in their speaking speed. One participant reported that she had made no progress as a result of taking part in the role-plays. She received no corrective feedback on her errors and used the same structure across role-plays. Other participants in this group reported that repeating situations in the role-plays and trying to use new vocabulary helped them improve. The improvements reported by the control group concerned speaking speed and vocabulary use, while participants in the recast group reported changes in how they made refusals. This pattern is consistent with the quantitative findings for the first research question.

6. Discussion: The Influence of Recast on Ilp Development

The results of the DCT and the self-reports indicate that learners who received recasts in response to pragmatically erroneous utterances improved their pragmatic knowledge more than learners in the control group, who received no corrective feedback. These findings are consistent with those of Fukuya and Zhang (2002), Dilan (2010), and Afshari and Orojlu (2012), who found that EL learners could benefit from recasts in developing their L2 linguistic ability.

The results of the study are also consistent with the Noticing Hypothesis. Schmidt (1993) applied the Noticing Hypothesis to pragmatics. He noted that mere exposure to sociolinguistically appropriate input was unlikely to be sufficient. He also emphasized that "for the learning of pragmatics in a second language, attention to linguistic forms, functional meanings, and the relevant contextual features is required" (p. 35). In the current study, recasts may have helped learners notice aspects of L2 pragmatics that were not yet part of their interlanguage. Noticing may help learners draw on English pragmatic norms when making refusals. Learners who received no feedback may have had fewer opportunities to notice these norms during the role-plays.

One participant in the recast group stated that she understood the researcher's intervention during the role-play as an attempt to correct her. Her account suggests that she noticed the implicit feedback and recognized an error in her own speech. Other participants interpreted the researcher's interventions as offers of alternative wording. They considered the alternatives better than their own utterances and tried to incorporate the researcher's suggestions into their speech. These accounts suggest that recasts, although a form of implicit feedback, may contribute to the development of explicit knowledge (Ellis et al., 2006). The participants noticed the recasts and interpreted them either as corrective feedback or as alternative ways to make refusals in English.

One reason the participants may have attended to recasts is that the study was conducted in a laboratory setting. Although participants in the recast group were not told the purpose of the supervisor's intervention, they recognized that the supervisor had interrupted their conversation with the interlocutor for a reason. This recognition may be attributable to the laboratory setting, where an intervention from outside the conversation can readily draw the interlocutors' attention. During whole-class interaction, learners may be less likely to recognize a recast as feedback. The learning context in this study may therefore have encouraged participants to attend carefully to the L2 features highlighted by recasts and to notice their corrective function. Participants in the control group completed the role-plays without this opportunity.

Another factor that may have contributed to the effectiveness of recasts in the present study is that the interlocutor did not immediately resume the conversation after the feedback provider's recast. This gave participants the opportunity to modify their utterances in the next turn. Because the conversation did not immediately move on, participants could repair their utterances in response to the recast if they wished. They thus had more time to rethink what they had said, retrieve relevant forms, and reformulate their utterances.

The developmental readiness of participants in the recast group may also help explain the effectiveness of recasts. The participants may have reached a stage in their interlanguage development at which they could recognize the corrective intent of the feedback. In other words, their interlanguage may have been sufficiently developed for them to incorporate the pragmatic norms implicitly modeled by the feedback provider. This interpretation is consistent with Philp's (2003) claim that learners may use recasts effectively when the feedback matches their developmental level.

Recasts may also help participants establish a cognitive mapping between linguistic forms, their function in expressing refusals, and appropriate pragmatic norms. The cognitive task for this group was to connect the contextual variable of interest, social status, which was implicitly embedded in the role-play situations, with L2 pragmatic conventions. The participants' accounts suggest that they accomplished this task. All participants in the recast group reported that they were aware that refusing a person of higher status differed from refusing a person of equal or lower status. Participants in the control group may also have developed some awareness through the role-plays, although it was less apparent in their accounts.

While most previous studies have demonstrated the benefits of corrective feedback in areas of language other than pragmatics, the findings of the current study suggest that corrective feedback can help EL learners develop their L2 pragmatic ability to make refusals. These results are consistent with the findings of Fukuya et al. (1998), Fukuya and Zhang (2002), and Nipaspong and Chinokul (2010) regarding language learners' pragmatic development.

On the other hand, the findings of this study differ from those of Rashidi and Babaie (2013). They explored the effects of three computer-mediated feedback modalities (elicitation, recasts, and metalinguistic feedback) on Iranian intermediate-level EL learners' acquisition of English participial, gerund, and infinitival phrases. Their experiment showed that recasts produced stronger immediate effects on learning than elicitation did, whereas their sustained effects were much smaller than those of elicitation and metalinguistic feedback.

One unexpected outcome also emerged. Uptake has been classified into two categories, *repair* and *needs repair*. Repair refers to uptake that results in correction of the error, whereas *needs repair* refers to uptake in which the error remains uncorrected (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 49). The researchers found that, in some cases, uptake produced by participants in the experimental group contained elements beyond those supplied by the feedback provider in the recast. The following examples illustrate this pattern.

Role-play 5

Requester: *Let's go shopping.*

Refuter: *I can't. I'm sorry.*

Recast-provider: *It's impossible for me. You have to go alone because I have a class.*

Refuter: *Ok. You have to go alone. I have a class now* ***and I have been absent for three sessions***.

Role-play 2

Requester: *I was wondering if you could change the time, could you?*

Refuter: *No, I can't.*

Recast-provider: *I'm very busy. It's really impossible.*

Refuter: *It's impossible for me. I'm very busy* ***at that time****.*

The underlined parts show additional elements in the learners' uptake. This observation led the researchers to call this type of uptake *repair-plus*. Repair-plus is defined as a type of uptake in which learners repeat what the recast provider says and add elements of their own. This preliminary finding requires confirmation in future research. Repair-plus is expected to occur in response to pragmatic errors because such errors involve negotiation beyond the sentence level, whereas grammatical or vocabulary errors typically concern a single word or phrase and rarely involve sentence-level elements.

7. Conclusion

The results of the study showed that corrective feedback in the form of recasts helped learners develop the pragmatic competence needed to refuse an offer in English. This finding suggests that recasts may be a viable form of corrective feedback in language classrooms. The positive effect is particularly noteworthy because it suggests that L2 pragmatic competence can improve through corrective feedback. EL teachers can use recasts to address students' pragmatic errors in EFL contexts where learners' exposure to the L2 is limited to the classroom. Future studies could replicate this study with larger samples and different groups of learners across a range of contexts. Sykes and González-Lloret (2020) also recommend using digital spaces to integrate L2 pragmatics more fully into classroom instruction. Future studies could therefore examine the use of pragmatic recasts in digital spaces.

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