

# The Effects of Recasts on the Acquisition of Pragmatic Competence in the Communicative Act of Complaining

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**Kim, Boyoung, 2014. The Effects of Recasts on the Acquisition of Pragmatic Competence in the Communicative Act of Complaining.** *SNU Working Papers in English Linguistics and Language 12*, 31-51. Drawing on the finding that EFL learners can improve in their pragmatic knowledge and their ability to use it (Wildner-Bassett, 1984), and that recasts promote 1<sup>st</sup> language acquisition (Bohannon et al, 1990; Farrar, 1992), this study investigates the effect of recasting on the acquisition of pragmatic competence of L2 learners in the communicative act of complaining. Subjects in the experiment were provided with positive evidence through an edited video clip, and only the experimental group received implicit corrective feedback on their pragmatic failures during the follow-up role-play activity. The results suggest the positive effect of recast even without overt uptake and of classroom tasks which actively engage learners in social interactions. (Seoul National University)

**Keywords:** pragmatic competence, interlanguage pragmatics, positive evidence, negative evidence, recast, uptake

## 1. Introduction

The rise of the concept of communicative competence marked a shift in the view of successful second language learning (L2) from mastery of grammar items to acquisition of usage of socially appropriate forms. Accepting this view, one cannot deny that pragmatic competence holds a significant position in communicative competence. Indeed, an L2 speaker cannot be expected to carry out a successful communicative act if (s)he has not achieved some mastery of grammar, phonology, and vocabulary in the target language. Yet, as many of them have already experienced first-hand, even a perfectly grammatical, phonologically correct speech sometimes fail, either because their pragmatic

competence is undeveloped or is not properly met in the target culture. What, then, is pragmatics Kasper (1997) defines pragmatics as the study of how a speaker uses language in social interaction and its effect on other participants in the communicative event. Crystal (1985) defines it as "the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication" (p. 240). Interlanguage pragmatics, then, is the study of non-native speakers' use and acquisition of L2 pragmatic knowledge (Kasper, 1996).

The following scenario illustrates the importance of interlanguage pragmatic competence: Two English learners approach a native speaker of English, with whom they are unacquainted. While one student says, *Tell me what time it is*, the other one asks, *Excuse me, do you mind telling me what time it is?* Both requests are quite straightforward and easy to understand, and will likely bring about the desired response from their interlocutor. However, the native speakers would respond more favorably to the second learner over the first one, simply because it was more appropriate. As we can see, pragmatic *in*competence of L2 learners leads them to utter socially inappropriate or unacceptable expressions, which often result in misunderstanding and misinterpretation. This, in turn, may leave the impression of being rude or ignorant to the native speaker interlocutor. If pragmatic competence is vital, not only to successful communication, but also to successful integration to the target culture and community, then it is also vital that English teachers help their learners develop this important feature of language competence.

The recent years saw the blooming interest in interlanguage pragmatics and its teachability. Majority of the previous work have focused on the positive effect of explicit instruction on the acquisition of pragmatic competence (Billmyer, 1990; Bouton, 1994; Wildner-Bassett, 1994); yet, there has been relatively little attempt to link implicit instruction to

interlanguage pragmatics. Thus, it is the motivation of this paper to examine the effect of implicit corrective feedback, i.e. recasts, on acquiring pragmatic competence, particularly, in the communicative act of complaining. This paper is organized as follows: First, the previous work on this subject is covered. Second, the method of the experiment is explained. Third, the results of the experiment are discussed qualitatively. Finally, limitations of the study, along with concluding remarks, are considered.

## **2. Previous Studies**

### **2.1 Teachability of Interlanguage Pragmatics**

The question, *Can pragmatics be taught?* has intrigued numerous researchers into exploring the effect of instruction on the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge. Bouton (1994) and Billmeyer (1990) found that ESL learners showed improvement as a result of instruction in pragmatics. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) compared ESL teachers and learners to the EFL counterpart, and found that whereas ESL learners and their teachers ranked pragmatic errors as more serious than grammatical errors, EFL learners and their teachers showed the opposite pattern, consistently identifying and ranking grammatical errors as more serious than pragmatic errors. Their findings receive support from other studies (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990, 1993) which saw the imbalance of grammatical and pragmatic competences in even advanced EFL learners.

Although such findings appear to argue that pragmatic competence can only be achieved through the exposure to the target language community and that the disadvantage that EFL learners show with regard to pragmatic awareness is inevitable, other researchers came up with rather encouraging findings for them, which suggest that it is possible to improve interlanguage pragmatics through instruction, even

in EFL classrooms. For example, Wildner-Bassett (1984) found that EFL learners have improved in their use of gambits to manage conversation and modify illocutionary force, in response to instruction. With the observations made from the study, the author urges the educators of EFL teachers to educate pragmatics, so they can, in turn, educate their learners with pragmatics.

Some researchers (Martínez-Flor & Soler, 2007; Takahashi, 2001; Tateyama, 2001) set on to compare the effect of explicit instruction with an implicit one in EFL settings. Although most of the studies have shown some advantage of explicit instruction over implicit instruction, Martínez-Flor and Soler (2007) among these studies have shown that both explicit and implicit approaches to develop pragmatic awareness in L2 learners were equally beneficial.

A closer look at the previous studies including an implicit condition, however, reveals that the pragmatic implicit instruction is a somewhat underdeveloped area. Implicit group learners in Takahashi (2001) simply read NS-NS role-play transcripts to answer the comprehension questions; in Tateyama (2001), they merely watched video clips – implicit condition was conceptualized as simple exposure to pragmatic example data while an explicit counterpart received the metalinguistic information in addition to such data. Examinations of such empirical studies in interlanguage pragmatics show the fundamental flaw in their research design: The research seems to have been designed to argue for an explicit instruction from the start, and the adequate operationalization or definition of implicit instruction was neglected.

To respond to the weakness of previous studies, the present study employs, among the various corrective feedback types, recasts as the tool for implicit instruction, to compare its effects against the control group which is provided with positive evidence alone, a condition which was typically thought of as implicit condition in the previous studies. This research intentionally focuses on the speech act of complaining, because of the unique characteristics of this kind of

speech that according to Brown and Levinson (1978) involve a “face-threatening act” and considered as conflictive acts (Leech, 1983) that should be avoided because they show the negative feelings of the speaker and tend to threaten the hearer. Among the few researches done on the complaints is a study conducted by Murphy and Neu (1996). They compared complaints produced by American and Korean speakers of English and found that, in making complaints, the American subjects produced a complaint in each instance, i.e., *I think, uh, it's my opinion maybe the grade was a little low*, whereas most Korean subjects tended to produce a criticism, i.e., *But you just only look at your point of view and uh you just didn't recognize my point*. Such criticism was reported to have the potential of offending the interlocutor or shutting down the interaction in an American context. Because of the confrontational nature of complaining, the complainer must endeavor to minimize the friction, and to do this in a socially acceptable way requires substantial amount of pragmatic knowledge, even for native speakers.

## **2.2 Recasts as Attention-Drawing Cue**

Kasper (1996) cites three conditions for the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge: “There must be pertinent input, the input has to be noticed, and learners need ample opportunity to develop a high level of control” (p. 148). Schmidt (1993) also argues that attention to linguistic forms, functional meanings, and the pertinent contextual features are required for the learning of L2 pragmatics. He (2001) also claims that since many features of L2 input are likely to be non-salient, intentionally focused attention is a necessity for successful language learning. From this perspective, other studies have examined the role of input enhancement in developing L2 competence. In this regard, Sharwood Smith (1993) suggests that input enhancement techniques, such as stress and intonation in teacher talk and color enhancement in printed

texts, can be effective ways of directing learners' attention to form without explicit teaching. Following empirical investigations provide evidence that attention-drawing activities are more helpful than simple exposure to positive evidence. For instance, in Takahashi (2001), different degrees of input enhancement were set up to measure Japanese EFL learners' learning of target request forms. The author found that several learners under implicit input conditions also noticed the target request forms and used them in the post-test. All of the findings above agree that selective attention and awareness of language facilitate the process of language learning. Although Schmidt (1993) argues that the form to which the learners attend could be any target feature, including pragmatics, the issue of how pragmatic awareness can be activated remains controversial.

The present study pursues this inquiry further and seeks to investigate the role of corrective feedback in making L2 learners notice the pragmatic errors they make. The kind of implicit corrective feedback chosen is recast, following the assertion in Bohannon, MacWhinney, and Snow (1990) and Farrar (1992) that recasts in child-directed speech promote children's language acquisition because when a child produces ungrammatical utterances, to which an adult immediately responds with a grammatical form, the child may perceive the adult form as a correct alternative to the child form. On the basis of the findings regarding the effect of recasts on first language acquisition, second language researchers have successfully demonstrated that recasts are more effective than positive evidence with the L2 learners as well. For instance, Mackey and Philp (1998) found that most ESL learners who experienced recasting in their formation of question forms progressed by at least one stage of the developmental scale. Nevertheless, as Oliver (1995) demonstrated in her study, uptake of recasts occurs only when the linguistic structures in focus are within the learners' morphosyntactic ability to do so. Moreover, as brought by Nicholas, Lightbown, and Spada (2001), recasts seem to be the most actively

operated when the learner clearly understands that “the recast is a reaction to the accuracy of the form, not the content, of the original utterance” (p. 720). Thus, the applicability of recasting, or the corrective feedback as a whole, to the pragmatic level still remains a mystery. The present study, therefore, sets out to solve the very mystery of the accessibility to pragmatic awareness by means of recast. Response of participants to recast on the *content* of their utterance will be of particular interest and will be examined in detail.

## **2.3 Research Questions**

This study seeks to give answers to the following questions:

- (1) Assuming that the learners notice the mismatch between their interlanguage pragmatics and the pragmatics of the L2 upon receiving recast by the instructor, do they formulate immediate uptake?
- (2) Does the rate of uptake formulated by the learners reflect their acquisition?
- (3) Is a difference in the improvement of pragmatic competence observed between a group which received positive evidence alone and one which received both positive and negative evidence?

## **3. Experiment**

### **3.1 Subjects**

Eight Korean college students who have had no prior experience of living in English-speaking countries were collected as participants. They were randomly assigned to two groups, each of which respectively received both positive and negative evidence (experiment

group, n=4) and positive evidence alone (control group, n=4) to their pragmatic knowledge. Their standardized English test scores obtained from TEPS ranged from 548 to 710. Although they were placed in the same class according to their English test scores, in order to further ensure that the two groups were homogenous, the scores were compared with independent samples T-test. Results from the T-test showed that the two groups were not homogeneous in terms of their general English proficiency ( $F=.389$ ,  $p=.550$ ), probably due to the small sample size.

### 3.2 Design

The experiment employed a video clip as positive evidence, and role-plays as the setting for providing recasts – and the following situations were covered in both types of evidence: in a + *Power* situation, complaints are made to a person with a greater social power, in a – *Power* situation, to a person with a less social power, and in a 0 *Power* situation, to a person with an equal social power. The particular situation in focus is + *Power*, where the complainer has to use polite expressions to arrive at the pragmatically appropriate target form. Analyses were primarily made with regard to + *Power* situations.

The kind of recasts used by the researcher during role-plays was focused recasts, which are considered as *implicit* corrective feedback, following the operationalization by Erlam and Loewen (2010), where explicit feedback was operationalized as a single repetition of the incorrect utterance with interrogative intonation, followed by a single recast with declarative intonation and implicit feedback was operationalized as a single recast with interrogative intonation. Henceforth, recasts with interrogative intonation given by the researcher will be marked with at the end.

### 3.3 Procedures



This study adopted pre- and post-tests in the form of Discourse Completion Test (DCT). Pre-test items were adapted from Moon (1998). Each item consisted of a description of the situation, and a blank space for respondents to fill in (See Appendix I). They were asked to respond in a fairly short time so they would not aim at trying to get the 'right' answer. And they were encouraged to write responses as closely as possible to what they might actually say.

The researcher showed a video clip, edited from the popular TV series, *The Big Bang Theory*, to provide pragmatically appropriate models of complaints. Through such positive evidence containing complaining expressions used in the real world, they were led to pay focused attention to the pragmatic target form and were implicitly encouraged to draw inferences as to why the particular expression was used to complain in that particular situation.

As a follow-up activity after receiving positive evidence, the students individually engaged in role-plays with the researcher. Each student received a cue card describing three different situations, which cover + *Power*, - *Power*, and 0 *Power* (See Appendix II). They were allowed to briefly think about what they will say and make short notes, but were not allowed to write down the whole script. When the researcher decided that they have had enough time to practice, the role-play started. During the conversation, the researcher gave recasts to pragmatic failures of the experiment group only. For example, when a participant belonging to the experiment group said, *Keep your voice quiet*, in a situation where the speaker as a waiter has to let one of his guests know that she is being too loud, the researcher provided recast by using a target form, such as, *Would you mind keeping your voice quiet?* The researcher's recast adds or modifies only part of the learner's utterance, rather than offering a whole new sentence. The conversations were audio-recorded with their consent and were transcribed. Following the treatment, the post-test was conducted in much the same way as the

pre-test (See Appendix III).

### 3. Results and Discussion

Due to the sample size which is too small and the nature of pre- and post-tests, the results gathered were analyzed qualitatively, not quantitatively. This study was designed to investigate the three research questions: (1) whether the learners formulate uptake, (2) whether the rate of uptake formulated by the learners reflects their acquisition, and (3) whether any differential improvement of pragmatic competence is observed between experiment and control group.

To address the first question, the rate of uptake was analyzed. Out of the four participants who received both positive and negative evidence, only one formulated uptake, as shown in the following conversation between the researcher and participant G<sup>1</sup>:

Learner (Hereafter, L): Other people are complaining because they can't hear the song, you're so loud.

Researcher (Hereafter, R): I'm sorry to bother you, but other people are complaining?

L: I, I'm sorry to bother you, but other people are complaining that you're so loud and they can't hear the music.

The recast and immediate uptake formulated by participant G seems to have tapped into her pragmatic awareness, for she showed improvement in the post-test, in terms of showing politeness to a person with a higher social power. In the pre-test, in a situation where she had to make a complaint to a police officer (+ *Power*), G said, *I would say*

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the participants are in the order of the Korean alphabets, but for the sake of the anonymity and for convenience, their names were replaced with English letters in its alphabetical order.

*nothing because that is my fault but I have to say something. I'll not drive faster than the speed limit again so don't give a ticket, please.* In the post-test, in a situation where G had to complain to a boss (+ Power), G wrote, *Would you please keep my payday?* The fact that the politeness marker used in the newly formulated complaint was not identical to the politeness marker provided through the recast implies that such target forms may have already been present in the learner's L2 system, and that pragmatic functions and relevant contextual factors were made salient to the learner to be noticed through recasts (Schmidt, 1993), eventually leading to improvement in pragmatic skills.

Among the participants in the experiment group who did not follow up with an uptake, one of them – participant A – showed improvement in the post-test. In the pre-test, participant A complained to the parents (+ Power), *Father, someday, I'll get a independence from you. I think it will be a great chance for me to make a good memory and to learn the way living myself.* During role-play, he did not appear to have paid attention to the recast, as can be seen from the following conversation:

L: Can you speak a little bit quietly?

R: I would appreciate it if you could speak a little bit quietly?

L: ...

In the post-test, however, he used exactly the same politeness marker provided by the researcher, *I need money now, so I would appreciate that you pay my fee at the right time.* In fact, it is acknowledged that whether or not learners repeat a recast may be inconsequential with respect to L2 learning, as suggested by Mackey and Philp's (1998) study. The low percentage of learner uptake in the experiment group lends support to a previous study by Panova and Lyster (2002) which found that teacher recasts and explicit correction by providing target form were the least likely to draw out uptake, whereas clarification requests, elicitation, and repetition led learners to produce uptake

without exception<sup>2</sup>.

An interesting observation was made with the control group as well. The complaints participant C made during the pre-test did not show signs of politeness in + *Power* situations. During the treatment session, surprisingly, he made use of a variety of polite forms:

L: Madame, can I ask you a favor?

R: Yes?

L: I think here is the common facility, so I feel that, a little inconvenience to you because of a loud voice.

R: Was I being too loud? Sorry, my friends and I haven't seen each other for ages.

L: Okay. So if you can decrease your voice down, then I will be happy, happier, other people will be happier to listen to this music, the beautiful music.

When giving responses to + *Power* items in the following post-test, he employed polite forms, such as, *Boss, I'm sorry to bother you, can I ask you a favor? I think my payday is 17<sup>th</sup> of every month, but you had paid me a week after day. If you didn't know about it, I would ask you to pay me on 17<sup>th</sup>*. Even though not all of the participants in the control group made such a progress, the case of participant C again suggests that the pragmatically required target forms may already be in the L2 systems of the learners, and simply having conversations which require of them to adapt to different social situations can be more effective in raising pragmatic awareness than simple exposure.

With respect to improvement, only two from experimental group and one from control group displayed observable improvement. Thus, the answer to the question whether or not there is any differential

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<sup>2</sup> In Panova and Lyster's study, *uptake* refers to different types of student responses immediately following the feedback, including responses with repair of the nontarget items as well as utterances still in need of repair (Lyster & Ranta, 1997).

improvement with regard to the different treatments cannot be generalized.

#### 4. Conclusion

The present study has examined the effects of recasts on the acquisition of pragmatic competence of Korean college students. Although there were few instances of immediate incorporation of recast, the gathered data suggest that recast can still be effective. The results also imply that implementing tasks, such as role-play and simulation, into classrooms can prove to be much more effective than simple exposure in developing pragmatic competence.

At this point, some limitations of the study merit discussion. First and foremost, the findings from this study cannot be generalized, due to the small number of participants. More insightful findings and pedagogical implications might have been reaped with a larger sample size. Second, being the researcher, but not the instructor, may have influenced the way participants reacted to recasts. Consider the following conversation with participant H who received negative evidence:

L: Others are said to me that they are having difficulty listening to the music, because of your loud voice.

R: I'm afraid that others are saying that they are having difficulty listening to the music?

L: Par, pardon?

R: I'm afraid that others are saying that they are having difficulty listening to the music?

L: ... You need to consider about other people. They want to listen to the music.

The participant seemed to have been confused by the recast. If the

researcher had been the instructor at the same time, he might have sensed that, as the teacher, the researcher was trying to teach him something by giving him repair of what he had just said. Instead, he was left to wonder why his interlocutor suddenly tried to correct what he said. Third, positive evidence was insufficient. Expressing politeness in English is quite different from the way it is done in their L1, i.e. Korean. To add to that, pragmatic incompetence is such a tricky and intricate part to acquire that “even fairly advanced language learners’ communicative acts regularly contain pragmatic errors, or deficits, in that they fail to convey or comprehend the intended illocutionary force or politeness value” (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). Considering the challenge that pragmatics poses upon learners, positive evidence should be followed by further activities or instructions on pragmatic skills to properly serve its purpose of drawing focused attention.

As mentioned earlier, prompts, including clarification requests, metalinguistic clues, repetition, and elicitation, were found to be highly more effective than recasts to produce learner uptake. In the same vein, Lyster and Ranta’s (1997) study in a Canadian immersion context found that the teachers were much more likely to respond to lexical errors with some kind of negotiation (e.g. clarification requests), while they typically responded to both grammatical and phonological errors with recasts. Therefore, future studies on the pragmatic awareness of L2 learners may investigate the differential effects of prompts and recasts.

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## APPENDIX I

1. You were driving 60 miles per hour where the speed limit was 55 mph. You got caught by a police officer and now he is trying to issue a ticket. You say,

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2. Your close friends are taking a trip and they invite you to come along. You asked your parents' permission, but they refuse to let you go. What would you say?

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3. You have a son who is in elementary school. You have told him several times to do his homework, yet, he is still watching TV. You would tell him,

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4. It's cold outside. You are on the bus. The passenger sitting next to you has the window open. You feel extremely cold and other people also seem irritated by the situation. You turn to the person and say,

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5. It is midnight. The person living next door, whom you are acquainted with, is having a very loud party. This is a frequent occurrence. It is a work night for you and you have to get up early in the morning. You knock on the door and say,

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## APPENDIX II

### Two examples of role-play scenarios

**Scenario #1:** You are a waiter in a fancy Italian restaurant. An orchestra is playing Beethoven in the hall. A lady walks in with a group of friends, and sits at the table you are in charge of. She starts to talk very loudly, laughing her head off from time to time. Diners from other tables complain, saying that they cannot enjoy the beautiful music because of her. You are the one who has to walk up to her and complain about the fact that she is being very loud.

**Scenario #2:** You are the director of an advertising project. A newly hired assistant, John, handles office supplies for your team. Today you came to work and found out that the needed supplies have not been ordered yet. It seems that John has not been checking the supplies cabinet for several days. You ask John to take care of the problem immediately.

**Scenario #3:** You had made an appointment to meet your friend the other day. But s/he had said something came up and cancelled the appointment. S/he had promised to make it up to you by treating you to dinner next time. You were supposed to meet your friend tonight. The appointed time was 30 minutes from now and you are about to leave your house. Your friend then calls you up and says s/he is too sick to go out. You want to tell your friend that you are not happy with your friend's habitual cancelation of appointments at the very last minute.

### APPENDIX III

1. Your new cell phone, the latest model, was so expensive that it cost you three months' wages. However, on the very first day you bought the phone, you noticed that key functions do not work. You are very upset that your brand new phone does not function properly. How would you complain to the customer services?  
\_\_\_\_\_.
2. You share your computer with your younger brother. Today, you came home to find out that the powerpoint file that you are supposed to use tomorrow for your presentation in class was accidentally deleted by your brother. Although you have safely retrieved it from the trash can, you still want to complain to him about his careless use of the computer. What would you say?  
\_\_\_\_\_.
3. The person living next door always leaves the food trash out in front of the door for too long. It stinks, not only in the hallway, but in your apartment, too. How would you complain about the matter to the neighbor?  
\_\_\_\_\_.
4. Despite the unfavorable work hours to your schedule as a university student, you work night shifts at a convenience store because it pays better. The pay day is every 17<sup>th</sup>, but your boss habitually pays you about a week after that. The same thing happened this month, too. This time, you want to make complaints to your boss so as to assure that this won't happen again. What would you say?  
\_\_\_\_\_.
5. You've finally bought an ice cream maker that you wanted to buy for so long on your way home. You got home and found

your aunt visiting your family. It was too late to make ice cream, so you decided to make one as soon as you get up the next morning. When you woke up, however, you found out your aunt stuffed something into the ice cream maker and jammed it. You fixed the problem yourself, but you want to complain about the way she handled your stuff. What would you say in this situation?

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