

Dissertation Title:

Focus on form in task-based language teaching:
Recasts, task complexity, and L2 learning

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Summary:

Task-based language teaching has received increased attention in second language acquisition research for the past decade, as has the role of focus on form. Yet, few empirical studies have investigated the relationship between tasks, focus-on-form techniques, and second language learning. To help address this gap, the present study examined the separate and combined effects of the task variable +/- *contextual support* and the focus-on-form technique *recasting* on L2 morphosyntactic development.

The study employed a pretest-posttest-delayed posttest design, with three treatment sessions between the pretest and posttest. The participants were 90 adult EFL learners, randomly assigned to one of four comparison groups and a control group. The comparison groups differed as to (1) whether they received recasts while describing photos, and (2) whether they could view the photos while describing them. The control group only participated in the testing sessions. A grammaticality judgment task, a fill-in-the-gap task, a written production task, and two oral production tasks were utilized to detect any changes in participants' knowledge of, and ability to use, the linguistic target – the English past progressive form. An exit questionnaire was also administered to tap into learners' perceptions regarding the role of recasts and task complexity.

Results from multi-faceted Rasch measurement and analyses of developmental changes yielded three main findings. First, participating in communicative tasks combined with recasts led to greater L2 gains than completing tasks where no feedback was available. Second, learners receiving recasts in the absence of photo support outperformed learners receiving recasts in the presence of photo support. Finally, the nonrecast treatment with photo support yielded some advantage over the nonrecast treatment without photo support.

These findings are in line with previous laboratory research on recasts, suggesting that recasts can facilitate L2 development if provided in a focused and consistent manner to developmentally ready learners. They also lend some support to the insight derived from Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis that decreases in task complexity along the resource-dispersing dimension may promote L2 learning. In addition, the results imply that the combined effects of task complexity and recasts may be modulated by the interactive conditions afforded by the task.

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