



RESEARCH PAPER**Impact of Recasts in Improving English Essay Writing Skills of Pakistani College-level EFL Learners**

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ABSTRACT

The role of feedback is considered positive in improving English writing skills. The article aims to examine the impact of recasts on the essay-writing skills of Pakistani L2 learners and ascertain the perception of the learners towards using recast-based feedback on their essay writing skills. The study employed an experimental research design, with 50 college-level students divided into two groups: experimental (n = 25) and control (n = 25). For eight weeks, the experimental group received both traditional and recast-based linguistic feedback on their essay writing tasks, while the control group received just traditional input. Pre and post-tests were conducted before and after eight weeks' (24-hour) treatment to determine differences between the mean scores. A subset of participants was selected for semi-structured interviews to discuss their perceptions and experiences with the recast feedback. The outcomes indicated that the treatment group outperformed the control group and that the subjects of the study perceived recast-based feedback as a positive activity that enhances motivation, confidence, and autonomy. The study has pedagogical and academic implications.

KEYWORDS English Essay Writing, Pakistani EFL Learners, Recasts, Writing Skills

Introduction

Learning English language, specifically for EFL/ESL learners, is a herculean task as they have to achieve commendable linguistic competence for writing good English. Writing correctly in English is extremely difficult at the higher education level since students must participate in a considerable quantity of academic writing at this level. Linguistic precision demonstrates good writing skills. It is critical for L2 students to utilize proper grammar, vocabulary, and sentence formation in their write ups. Nevertheless, this is quite hard for many learners to gain this proficiency. According to Baily (2018), L2 learners find writing in English as much more difficult because it involves mastery of various skills such as ability to write accurately, clearly, cohesively and coherently. As a result, offering feedback is critical for students, particularly when they make faults or errors in their work. The feedback supports the trainees by providing explicit instructions on how to correct their errors. In addition, feedback can increase pupils' self-confidence (Martin & Alvarez Valdivia, 2017), self-cognizance (Miller et al., 2017), and impetus (Taskiran & Yazici, 2021) in learning English as a target language.

Lyster and Ranta (1997) state that recast-based feedback, one of three types of feedback direct feedback (overt error correction), prompt (metalinguistic hint, elicitation,

reiteration, and amplification appeal), and recast (covert feedback), is a method used by educators to improve L2 learners. There is debate over the effectiveness of recast-based feedback on EFL/ESL learners' works (Hamonda, 2011). However, a burgeoning number of related investigations indicate that recast-based feedback improves learners' usage of English as an L2 (Philip et al. 2008). Conversely, several polls investigating the best ways to teach written recast to L2 learners have been quite broad in terms of the mistake types evaluated.

The previous research studies concerning recasts claim their positive role in improving writing skills. Fatemi and Harati's (2014) study found significant improvements in grammatical accuracy in Iranian university EFL classrooms with corrective feedback. Similar to this, Ghahderijani (2021) found that corrective feedback improves the Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency (CAF) of Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' writing and concluded that it is useful. According to Subon and Ali's (2022) study, 50 Malaysian ESL students' writing abilities increased considerably as a result of implicit written corrective feedback (WCF) from instructors, which the students perceived to be beneficial. Nusrat et al. (2019) found that oral metalinguistic feedback enhances English language learning. Hassan et al. (2022) found rural students have greater influence on written corrective feedback uptake and retention. In order to assess the impact of recasts and ascertain the perception of Pakistani EFL learners towards recasts, a study is deemed necessary.

As a part of classroom activities, Pakistani BS English college-level students write English essays and face several difficulties. Anwar et al. (2023) indicated several difficulties for Pakistani undergraduates in English essay writing. They struggle with a lack of ideas, a lack of vocabulary, poor syntax, poor spelling, and a lack of cohesiveness and consistency. The problems they have when writing essays push them to get their work reviewed by their professors. Teachers typically assess and offer comments subjectively. Furthermore, it has been noticed that the majority of teachers' input focuses on fixing grammatical problems or errors, with little attention paid to other aspects of structure, vocabulary or word choice, competency, and fluency. In response to the problems stated above, namely, the lack of knowledge of organization, word choice, proficiency, and fluency in composing English essays in classrooms, this study aims to assess the influence of recasts, with reference to all aspects of essay writing, on improving the overall performance of college-level English language learners' English essay writing skills.

The objective of the present study is to examine the influence of recast-based feedback on enhancing the English essay writing skills of Pakistani BS English college-level undergraduates. Another goal is to determine the learners' attitudes regarding using recast-based feedback on their essay writing abilities.

Literature Review

The goal of Fatemi and Harati's (2014) quasi-experimental study in EFL classes at Iranian universities was to find out how effective corrective feedback (CF) is in helping students' speech improve in grammatical correctness. 96 individuals were selected from a group of 169 first-year students and divided into three groups based on the grammatical errors they had. While the control group received no CF at all, two groups had continual CF, recast, and error prompts. Significant differences were seen between the recast and prompt groups, as well as between the two experimental groups and a control group, according to the post-test analysis results. Although all CF kinds increased accuracy in syntactic agreement and present tense use, the prompts group did better than the others.

Ghahderijani (2021) looked at how corrective feedback affected the Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency (CAF) of writing produced by Iranian Intermediate L2 pupils. The study engaging thirty novices were distributed into two groups of fifteen students each using random sampling procedures. The two groups were referred to as the control group and the experimental group. Teachers and fellow students provided comments on the works of the experimental group by crossing out and clarifying certain parts of them. Alternatively, the novices of control group did not get thorough feedback. Both groups' pre- and post-tests were managed prior to and during the course of therapy. We assessed their writings in order to provide an analysis. According to the study, when it came to writing productivity, the pupils in the treatment group fared better than those in the control group. According to the study, Iranian Intermediate L2 novices' writing complexity, correctness, and fluency were significantly impacted by corrective feedback.

The impact of a lecturer's implicit written corrective feedback (WCF), or indication of faults, on the writing abilities of fifty Malaysian ESL learners were studied by Subon and Ali in 2022. The research also sought to determine how students felt about using WCF in their essay writing. The purposive sampling approach was used to choose the study's participants. The subjects were instructed how to self-correct their essays over the two-week treatment period based on their lecturer's implicit WCF notification of faults. There were pre- and post-tests given in between. Students were questioned following the tenth experiment. The patients' ability to write essays improved following the therapy, according to the data, but not much. The students thought WCF was beneficial.

The impact of oral feedback from peers and instructors on the accuracy of written English by ESL learners is examined by Nusrat et al. (2019). Three different kinds of writing errors were assessed in ninety participants. Learners who received indirect textual input and oral metalinguistic feedback from instructors outperformed those who got no feedback at all in two of the three language varieties. The results show that giving oral metalinguistic feedback might enhance English language acquisition and may even raise success rates and academic achievement.

Hassan et al. (2022) investigated how students' beliefs affected their application of writing correction feedback in Pakistan. There were 163 Khwaja Fareed UEIT university students who were divided into two groups – direct and indirect CF (rural students) and three groups – direct, indirect, and metalinguistic CF (urban students). Information was gathered through writing assignments and questionnaires. The results showed that students in urban and rural areas had slightly different opinions, and that the two groups' preferred forms of writing communication differed. The adoption and retention of written CF was more influenced by pupils in rural areas.

Hence, the literature reviewed so far suggests that a lesser number of research studies triggering recasts or corrective feedback have been conducted in an EFL context. Fatemi and Harati's (2014) study found significant improvements in grammatical accuracy in Iranian university EFL classrooms with corrective feedback. Likewise, According to Ghahderijani (2021), corrective feedback has a beneficial impact on the Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency (CAF) of Iranian Middle English pupils' written work. Subon and Ali's (2022) study found that implicit written corrective feedback (WCF) from lecturers significantly improved the writing skills of 50 Malaysian ESL learners, with the learners finding it fruitful. Nusrat et al. (2019) found that oral metalinguistic feedback enhances English language learning. Hassan et al. (2022) found rural students have greater influence on written corrective feedback uptake and retention. A study is deemed important in order to evaluate the impact of recasts and ascertain their effects on the motivation of Pakistani English language learners.

Materials and Methods

The researchers employed a mixed-methods experimental study design, collecting quantitative data using pre-test and post-test designs and qualitative data using semi-structured interviews. This approach combination produced greater data and more trustworthy outcomes. The study was done in a realistic classroom setting, with samples remaining in their class rooms throughout the intervention. The combination of both strategies resulted in rich and consistent outcomes.

Participants

The participants of the study consisted of 50 college-level students. The samples of the study were selected from two different public sector colleges, i.e., Government Shalimar Graduate College, Lahore, and Government Graduate College, Township Lahore, of the Higher Education Department, Punjab, Pakistan. In order to have a homogenized group of participants, the learners took an online placement test, namely the Cambridge Assessment Test. The test was administered because it is cost-effective and easy to administer. According to the placement test, the level of general English proficiency of the students was intermediate. Initially, the participants were selected through the purposive sampling technique because the researchers had to get access to specific subjects (college-level Pakistani English language learners) for ascertaining the impact of recast-based feedback and subsequently for constituting experimental and control groups. However, after selection, the sample of 50 students was distributed into two equal groups: one experimental group ($n = 25$) and the other control group ($n = 25$). However, only ten students from the experimental group were selected for semi-structured interviews. The students were selected through a random sampling technique. In addition to the students as participants, two independent raters with more than 15 years of essay writing teaching experience and MPhil qualifications participated in the study. Prior to rating the learners' written essays, the researchers informed the raters of their duties as raters and the contents of the rubrics.

Instruments

The current research utilized research instruments like the Cambridge Assessment Test, samples of English essays written by the participants as a pre-test, post-treatment writing samples as a post-test, and semi-structured interviews for the conduct of the experiment and the collection of desired data. The Cambridge Assessment Test was conducted for homogenizing the participants. The test was in the form of multiple-choice questions (MCQs). It included sections on grammar, vocabulary, and tenses. Besides, placement test English essay writing samples of the participants were used as research tool to collect data for pre-test. The third instrument was again post-treatment English essay writing samples of the students, which were considered post-tests. The last research instrument used for the study was a semi-structured interview. The interviews gleaned data from a subset of the samples treated in the intervention group.

Data Collection Procedure

The participants of the research study were initially selected through a purposive sampling technique from two public-sector colleges. Later on, they were distributed into the experimental group ($n = 25$) and the control group ($n = 25$). In order to assess the subjects' performance, as a pre-test in English essays, they were asked to write an essay on 'Female Education'. The experimental group received both traditional and recast-based language feedback on their essay writing tasks throughout the course of the eight-week'

(24-hour) treatment period, while the control group only received traditional feedback. Immediately after the treatment, post-tests of both the groups were taken. Subsequent to pre- and post-tests, the written scripts were graded by two independent raters for the purpose of evaluation. Independent and paired t-tests were run to see if there were substantial variances between the mean scores on the post-tests between the two groups. Subsequent to the post-test, a subset of participants ($n = 10$) from the experimental group were designated through random selection techniques for semi-structured interviews to glean their responses regarding their perceptions and experiences with reference to the recast feedback they had received.

Data Analysis Procedures

The collected data were analyzed in two phases. Two raters scored the participants' essays written during pre- and post-tests in light of the rubrics adapted from Zahid et al. (2023). The components of the rubrics were organization, coherence, cohesion, and writing mechanics. The awarded marks were calculated in terms of average and calculated by means of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), and paired sample t-tests were employed to determine the noteworthy change. In the second phase, the data from semi-structured interviews was recorded and later transcribed. Using the same theme analysis methodology as Maguire and Delahunt (2017), the researchers examined the transcriptions of the interviews. The topics were categorized into codes and themes throughout the analysis of the opinions expressed. Aside from that, this process was meticulously adhered to in order to examine the qualitative information gleaned from semi-structured interviews.

Results and Discussion

Examining how recasts affected Pakistani L2 learners' essay-writing abilities was the study's primary goal. To achieve the study's goal, the subjects were split up into the experimental group and the control group. English essays worth 20 points were used to evaluate the research groups both earlier and later to the therapy. The SPSS was utilized to examine the pupils' obtained marks.

Table 1
Mean and SD Comparing Experimental and Control Groups' Scores

	Pairs	Groups	Mean	N	Std. D
Pair 1		Experimental Group (Pre-test)	9.1200	25	1.50886
		Experimental Group (Post-test)	13.3600	25	1.28712
Pair 2		Control Group (Pre-test)	9.3600	25	1.55134
		Control Group (Post-test)	10.2800	25	1.56844
Pair 3		Experimental Group (Pre-test)	9.1200	25	1.50886
		Control Group (Pre-test)	9.3600	25	1.55134
Pair 4		Experimental Group (Post-test)	13.3600	25	1.28712
		Control Group (Post-test)	10.2800	25	1.56844

Table 1 reflects the mean score and standard deviations of marks obtained by the participants of both experimental and control groups during pre- and post-tests. The mean of the scores of pre-tests obtained by the experimental group (9.1200) and control group (9.3600) showed slight variation. Likewise, the standard deviation of both groups (1.50886 and 1.55134, respectively) suggested a slight difference. However, the mean scores of the post-tests of the experimental group (13.3600) and control group (10.2800) indicated a significant difference. Similarly, the standard deviations of both groups (1.28712 and 1.56844, respectively) showed slight improvement.

Table 2
Paired Sample T-test Comparing Performance of Experimental and Control Groups

Groups	Mean Difference	S.D	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Experimental Group (Pre & Post test)	-4.24000	0.72342	-29.305	24	0.000
Control Group (Pre & Post test)	-0.92000	1.22202	-3.764	24	0.001
Experimental Group (Pre-test) - Control Group (Pre-test)	-0.24000	2.12681	-0.564	24	0.578
Experimental Group (Pre-test) - Control Group (Post-test)	3.08000	1.97737	7.788	24	0.000

Table 2 characterizes the fallouts of the paired sample t-test, which was performed to glean the difference between the performances of both groups during the pre- and post-tests. The results of the experimental group turned out to be significant. The p-value of $0.000 < 0.05$ reflected a marked difference between the pre- and post-treatment scores of 25 learners belonging to the experimental group. Hence, it can be concluded that the training session with the marked feature of recast-based feedback had an impact on the English essay writing skills of BS English college-level undergraduates.

Finding out how students felt about recast-based learning feedback in relation to their development of English essay writing abilities was the study's second goal. The study involved a subset of 10 respondents from the experimental group, whose semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed manually. Maguire and Delahunt's (2017) method of theme analysis was used to the transcriptions.

The respondents were asked about the recast-based feedback practices during the treatment. The majority of the respondents said that the teacher of the treatment group used to give them feedback. However, some of them said that sometimes the teacher asked intelligent students to give feedback. *An experienced and educated person like the teacher was authorized to give feedback (S2)*. According to S3, *if the teacher or instructor allowed our classmates, they would also give us feedback*. Most of the respondents believed that the errors identified in the result of recast-based feedback must be corrected immediately because they helped internalize the structures or correct forms of the target language. *We used to internalize the correct forms of our errors instantly because we did not want to miss anything (S8)*. *We corrected the errors and let our teacher check again (S9)*. *I used to correct my mistakes immediately because, at that time, I had a chance to discuss the mistakes with my teacher (S5)*.

During interviews, the majority of the participants revealed their improvements as a result of recast-based feedback. *I improved my reading and writing abilities through the feedback of the teacher (S3)*. *In light of the teacher's feedback, I, along with my classmates, first discussed the correct forms and then improved myself (S6)*. *As the teacher emphasized the importance of the present simple tense, I improved the use of this tense (S7)*. *Through feedback, I improved my vocabulary, use of tenses, word choice, and cohesiveness (S1)*. The participants of the study, during interviews, indicated their self-development as a result of recast-based treatment. *Through the teacher's feedback, I learned that I am slow at doing work, so I developed myself (S1)*. *I improved myself through feedback. I learned how to write an introduction with a focus on the thesis statement (S7)*. *I used to digress while writing. Through feedback, I started to write relevant supporting sentences (S10)*. The samples also shared their views regarding deep or overall understanding of the language as a result of the recast. *In the very beginning, we were not proficient in English. However, gradually we learned grammar, sentence formation, and writing*

essays in the target language (S3). I improved my grammar through the teacher's feedback (S5). Error identification is very important for language learning (S10).

The samples of the study also shared their suggestions regarding feedback practices. The respondent (S10) says *the feedback should be given in a friendly environment. It should be discussion-oriented. It should not be given in such a way that the students feel a direct attack on their self-esteem. Major errors by the learners must be pointed out, and they should be asked to remove them through practice (S3). The teacher should give activities to the students on the errors frequently committed by the learners (S7).* Hence, the learners' expressed their suggestions regarding feedback practices and emphasized that it must be given in a constructive, motivating, and friendly way.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to determine how recast-based feedback affected Pakistani college-level students' ability to write English essays. The pupils in the experimental group showed improvement as a result of the recast-based treatment, according to the quantitative research data. In the post-test, the experimental group's performance differed markedly from the performance of control group. The results of the investigation are consistent with those of Ghahderijani (2021), Fatemi and Harati (2014), and Nusrat et al. (2019), who reported a noteworthy enhancement in treatment outcomes through corrective feedback. However, the fallouts of the investigation partially agree with the outcomes of Subon and Ali (2022) and Hassan et al. (2022), which show marginal improvement in EFL learners. The study has added fresh insights to the body of knowledge on recasts in the Pakistani context, as there haven't been many investigations in this area. Recast-based feedback techniques have shown to be quite successful in helping EFL beginners become more proficient essay writers.

The outcomes of the qualitative segment of the study revealed that most of the samples perceived the recast-based feedback as positive practice. They were convinced that feedback practices had contributed to their improvements in English essay-writing skills. Moreover, it helped them record their self-improvement and contributed to their overall language learning. The results of this segment of the study are consistent with Ghahderijani (2021); Hassan et al. (2022); Martin & Alvarez Valdivia (2017; Miller et al. (2017); and Taskiran & Yazici (2021) who claimed that feedback has a positive effect on L2 learners as it improves their writing skills, boosts their confidence, and enhances their motivation.

Conclusion

The current study aimed to investigate how Pakistani L2 learners' ability to write essays was affected by recast-based feedback and to find out how the learners felt about applying the feedback to their essay-writing abilities. The participants were divided into two groups—the experimental group and the control group—in order to achieve the study's goals. For eight weeks, the experimental group received feedback based on recasts. The pre- and post-tests of both the groups revealed the difference in their learning. The experimental group showed better performance in English essay writing than the control group. Later on, a subset of the study population was interviewed to know the perceptions of the learners regarding recast-based feedback. The interviewees perceived the feedback practices as positive and beneficial. They were of the opinion that recasts helped them not only identify their errors but also correct them. The recast-based feedback practices also helped them record their own development.

The study's outcomes have academic and educational ramifications. The findings of the study make L2 learners realize the importance of feedback. The students should get feedback from their teachers. Getting feedback is synonymous with getting a diagnosis of the errors. They should also seek help from their teachers about the correction of their errors to compose error-free writings. English language instructors are encouraged to employ this practice for directing recasts for their students' improvement in English essay writing. The recasts help in creating a congenial L2 classroom learning environment because giving and getting feedback enhances the interest and motivation of both the teachers and students in the classroom activities. In the future, the research scholar may conduct similar research with a different, representative, and comprehensive sample of participants from different levels of education.

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