Recasts from a Sociocultural Perspective

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ABSTRACT: The present article is an attempt to study the routine activities of two EFL classes from an alternative perspective, namely sociocultural theory (SCT). The unconventional lenses through which the data (conventional EFL classes) are analyzed can hopefully provide an insight into common classroom practice. The data lend further credibility to SCT. In essence, it is a demonstration of how a theory can be applied to the micro events of classrooms. Ellis and Sheen (2006) note that recasts have invariably been viewed in cognitive terms. Lantolf (2006) also alludes to the possibility of viewing recasts from a sociocultural perspective. In the spirit of these two associations of recasts and sociocultural theory, recasts in the two classes observed are scrutinized from a sociocultural perspective. A very interesting finding of the study is the meditational tool of sentence making employed by the EFL teachers in the two classes. This indicates that teachers use sentence making by students as a meditational tool to create implicit knowledge. The article demonstrates the close affinity between feedback in general and recasts in particular with reference to SCT.

Keywords: recast, sociocultural theory (SCT), feedback, EFL

Recasts are a common feature of classrooms (Lyster, 2004). Any language teacher will attest to how common they are. The fact that they tend to happen in the course of interaction means they also happen outside classrooms in so-called authentic contexts where the purpose of the interaction might not be exactly learning. Recent years has literally seen an explosion of research on language learning and teaching from a sociocultural perspective (Lantolf, 2006). In this study, the potential of recasts in sociocultural terms is discussed with the help of classroom data. The present study can be seen as one of a series of studies examining phenomena relating to second language learning in light of SCT (see for example, Frawley & Lantolf, 1985; McCafferty, 2008). Before the data analysis section, it is deemed necessary to review what recasts and sociocultural theory are.
Recasts
There has recently been a proliferation of studies investigating recasts in different shapes and forms (see for example, Ellis and Sheen 2006; Leeman, 2003; Lyster, 2004; Hauser, 2005). Recasts are target-like reformulations of ungrammatical utterances that maintain the central meaning of the original utterance (Long, 1996). An example of a recast can be seen below (Loewen & Philp, 2006, p. 541):

S: some people have racism.
T: some people ARE racist.
S: are racist.

For a comprehensive review of recast studies and the different kinds of designs used in studies of recasts see Ellis, Lowen and Erlain (2006).

Feedback, largely due to the prevalence of certain theoretical perspectives for instance the generativist one, was viewed as peripheral to language development (Schachter, 1991) and so was the practice of providing recasts. There is a host of reasons why feedback has become an intensely investigated research area. For obvious reasons, their frequency in language classrooms makes them an interesting object of scrutiny. Theoretically, in the context of the intensely raging debate about the role of negative evidence in language development (Carroll 2001; Leeman, 2003; Long, 1996), evidence pointing to the effectiveness of recasts and other kinds of feedback would mean that negative evidence is associated with language development. However, as has been noted by many, recasts can be both a source of positive and negative evidence (Nicholas, Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

Recasts have also been associated with interaction (Leeman, 2003) for the simple reason that they invariably happen in the course of a conversation or some other type of interaction. It is the last point that will set the stage for what is to come in the remainder of the article. Ellis and Sheen (2006) point out quite aptly that researchers have exclusively looked at recasts from a cognitive standpoint preferring to leave aside their social and sociocognitive aspects. As Lantolf (2006) suggests, the issue of uptake in the study of recasts could be viewed from the perspective of SCT. The fact that feedback in general and recasts in particular come up in the context of interaction and considering the importance of interaction in SCT coupled with the note of caution by Ellis and Sheen make the idea of viewing recasts from the perspective of SCT an appealing one. That is what we will turn to in the analysis of relevant data.

Before this, a basic grounding in SCT would be necessary to understand the rest of the study.
Sociocultural Theory, the Basic Tenets

Mediation

Probably the most important tenet of Vygotsky's theory is mediation. There are relationships between all species and the physical world; however, there seems to be a fundamental difference between the way the relationship between human beings and the natural world is organized and the way animals act on the environment. Humans use symbolic artifacts to establish mediated relationships with the world and others (Lantolf, 2000).

Lantolf (2006) gives the example of humans telling themselves to delay acting until they have developed a workable solution that he considers instrumental in avoiding potentially dangerous situations. In this example, the activity encountered by the human being is what triggered the thinking process that in turn led to the decision not to act immediately. As is evident from the example, the activity mediated the attention and the decision made by the human being.

To make it easier to comprehend, it would be effective to consider one of Vygotsky's experiments called the Forbidden Colors cited in Wertsch (2007). In studies involving dual stimulation, Vygotsky’s basic procedure was to encourage subjects to use a set of artificial stimuli, or signs that are overtly introduced into a subject’s activity by an experimenter. For example, in the Forbidden Colors Task, subjects were engaged in a task that required them to remember a list of color terms. They were given a set of colored cards and told that these cards could help them remember what color terms they had already mentioned and, according to the rules of the game, were not to mention again. In this case, the first set of stimuli, which fulfill the function of the object on which the subject’s activities directed, was the set of color terms used by the subjects as they responded to the experimenter’s questions. The second set of stimuli that were to function, as signs that facilitate the organization of this activity were the colored cards introduced by the experimenter. The basic aim of the experiment was to document how children used the cards (the mediating tool) to mediate the task. It was shown that the 5-6 year olds seemed not to understand that the signs had anything to do with the task but 10-11 year olds were able to successfully exploit the cards to mediate the activity. This example of an experiment done by Vygotsky demonstrates how the encounter with tools, activities, and artifacts can change the nature of the activity "qualitatively." In this respect, take the fact that human activity qualitatively changes when he uses a hammer, just the same happens when human beings use language.

In educational terms, the idea of the mediated mind conjures up the image of a mediator (Feurestein, Klein & Tannenbaum, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). The mediator, who is usually a more knowledgeable interactant but does not have to be (see Sullivan, 2000), helps the learner construct his
Zone of Proximal Development (defined below) where development is made possible by the contribution of the mediator. Looked at from the point of view of SCT, feedback and recasts provide a perfect setting for development to occur. When learners have a sentence or item recast, they could construct the reformulated item or sentence again without the help of the teacher sometime later in the course of the interaction.

Activity Theory
Activity theory was expounded by Wertsch (1985) and Lantolf (2000). According to Lantolf when something is done, it is not done only for the sake of doing it but is motivated by a need whether it be biological like hunger or cultural such as the need to be educated. When these needs become directed at certain objectives, they become motives. These motives are, in turn, realized in specific actions and carried out under certain spatial and temporal conditions. Activity theory is evoked when the same activities are carried out in different ways by participants or when the same activity given to learners is interpreted in different ways and therefore enacted differently (Wang, 1996 as cited in Donato, 2000). From an educational perspective, Activity Theory points to the importance of making sure the activity is carried out the same way as it is intended or that the educational benefits of the activity are not jeopardized by the idiosyncratic ways adopted by individuals.

Internalization
In Vygotsky's psychology (Wertsch, 2007) individuals engaged within social interaction come to gradually form higher modes of mental activity. So it is the social activities which create the human psychological system. First, symbolic artifacts are used in communicative contexts and then they are transformed into psychological artifacts that can be used not only for social activity but also for psychological activity and to mediate humans' own mental activity. Vygotsky (1978) maintains that every psychological function first appears on the social plane between people and then it appears on the intrapsychological plane. According to Lantolf (2000), internalization assumes that the source of consciousness is outside the head in the social activity. When an activity is said to have been internalized, it means it has been reconstructed by the individual on the intrapsychological plane after seeing it used interpsychologically (e.g. between participants).

The last assertion has important implications for education in general and language pedagogy in particular. It represents a departure from the widely held perception in the psycholinguistically driven field of SLA. The benefit of considering alternative metaphors (Donato, 2000) is that for a few moments, however brief, they allow us to see the same phenomenon
through different lenses and even go so far as to question the foundations upon which the field of inquiry has been built.

**Private Speech**
The use of speech which does not serve a social function in the sense of not being addressed to others when trying to solve a task has been documented in several studies (Wertsch, 1985; Diaz and Berk, 1992). Wretch in Lantolf (2006) showed how children (ages two to seven) first were medially controlled by the parents but gradually gained better mastery over the task as they appropriated the language used by parents as a way of mediating their own mental activity. Speech that has a cognitive function rather than a social one is referred to as private speech. It has been shown to be a stage in the development of control over initially hard tasks before changing into inner speech. As Lantolf (2006) asserts this “self-talk” is a means to regulate mental functioning in addition to serving to facilitate internalization. Piaget's concept of egocentric speech seems to be related at least to some extent, even though he used the term in a different context for a radically different purpose (Piaget, 1967).

**Zone of Proximal Development**
This is probably the most well known part of Vygotsky's theory. As has been defined by many, ZPD is a term to capture the dynamics of development (not necessarily related to language) in the joint context created by interaction when one of the interactants is helped by the other. It is the difference between what a person can do on his own and what he can accomplish with the help and support of somebody else or an artifact (Lantolf, 2000).

If the reader recalls the last sections on the other tenets, the theory starts to sink in. The affinity between the zone of proximal development and internalization imbues the theory with scientific integrity and coherence. Participants in the interaction construct a zone of proximal development in which they can perform above their level of individual competence and as internalization goes, with the help of meditational tools at their disposal for instance the so-called expert they can reach beyond their individual capability and in this way construct the ability on the intrapsychological plane. The result would be that participants can perform better in interaction than they would otherwise and then after the interaction what occurred between them and their superior performance can become an object of reflection and be integrated in their individual performance.

**The Study**
As was indicated earlier recasts have been viewed exclusively in cognitive terms. However, in light of the close affinity of feedback and recasts with
the tenets of SCT, a viable alternative would be to expand the theoretical perspective and see them from a more socially oriented standpoint. With this in mind, the present study attempts to interpret common everyday classroom activities from a sociocultural perspective. In so doing, it paves the way for future applications of SLA theory to classroom practice. Throughout the course of the data analysis, an effort is made to show that sociocultural theory has explanatory power even when classroom activities are concerned. To this end, twenty hours of two English classes were observed and the feedback and recast related parts identified. Later a sociocultural analysis was conducted on the feedback related transcribed parts.

**Method**

**Participants and Context of the Study**

Twenty hours of classroom interaction were video recorded and later analyzed for feedback related parts. In addition, one of the researchers was present during 10 hours of the classroom time to make notes, which could be exploited for the analysis. There were two teachers, one of whom was observed for seven two-hour sessions and the other for three two-hour sessions making up a total of twenty hours of class observation. The students were intermediate learners who were studying in an FCE preparation course at the time of the study. Questionnaires were distributed to establish how long the participants had been attending EFL classes. It turned out that their length of study of English varied from a minimum of three to five years.

**Data Analysis and Results**

Because the study was intended to be as ecologically valid as it could be, it was decided to use the data from the entire classroom and not to restrict it to communicative, meaning focused activities unlike the practice in some recast studies (Loewen & Philp, 2006). However, the classroom interaction included plenty of recasts and communicative activities. We now turn to the analysis of classroom events including recasts.

**Example 1**

S: My father bans me from going out with my friends.
T: Why?
S: Because my father don't allow me to go out with my friends
T: Doesn't
S: doesn't allow me.
Before this episode, one of the students got the preposition used with “ban” wrong and the teacher made a few students make sentences with ban.

S: We are banned to leave the country before we do military service
T: Banned from leaving the country…

The example above illustrates a meditational tool the teacher used to make sure students learnt what one of the students did not know. The meditational tool of making students make sentences was common practice in the classes observed. Lantolf (2007) points out that notwithstanding the fierce debate on explicit - implicit knowledge, there has been very little attention given to the meditational means that can help explicit knowledge become implicit. This practice by the teacher provides an example of such a means in the natural context of an ESL classroom.

Example 2:
S: I didn't need to go to the stadium but I went
T: No no no
S: Oh I needn't have gone to the stadium we say needn't have gone when…

Here in this example there is a prompt not exactly a recast and the context was students providing examples of the structure just taught (need not have done and did not need to). The example is of interest since it constitutes an example of the teacher mediating learning through a simple cue (no no no). The meditational tool of providing examples was what helped the learner after the prompt learn the structure. The learner used the cue given by the teacher to construct the sentence that was said later. The episode highlights the importance of meditational tools like prompts and recasts to foster learning.

Here a very interesting issue is why the learner provided an explanation of what he said when he had not been asked to. It appears that his providing an explanation of the meaning of the sentence was an effort to gain better mastery over the structure. This represents the use of language to gain control over tasks.

Example 3:
S: one thing is that you don't have to use a cell phone in class
T: can't use
S: you can't?

Then the teacher goes on to explain the difference between the two. The appeal of this example lies in the illustration of a cognitive role the
sentence the student makes, plays in directing the attention of the teacher to the linguistic problem the learner has (Donato, 2000). In consequence of this sentence by the learner and because of the role of language as a cognitive tool, the teacher after explaining the difference between the two, goes on to ask learners to make sentences to ensure the structure in question has been learnt. Here is another example in which the language used by learners functions as a cognitive tool for the teacher to realize what problem the learner has.

Example 4:

S: In the place that I studied there were two secretar
T: Secretary
S: Secretary
Ss: Secretary

Here again the mispronunciation signals to the teacher what the learner cannot pronounce well and so gets the whole class to repeat the word. So a word on the interpsychological plane leads to a meditational tool used by the teacher namely repetition not only for that student but for every one. The word then hopefully transfers to the intrapsychological plane.

Example 5:

T: Are you obedient? (addressed to S1)
S2: of course he is.
S1: I think yeah
S2: (laugh)

The episode shows the active participation of the learners even when the question was not intended for them and was obviously meant for another student. It happened because the topic was of great interest to the learners.

There were several conversations between students without the teacher being involved in the course of the classes which looked at from a sociocultural perspective means learners do not need the teacher in an interaction or an expert to build a zone of proximal development.

Example 6:

S: I was made to writing a letter
T: To write
S: I was made to write.

After this episode, learners made sentences with "make" in passive but not a single one of them made a mistake in the part following "make" like the sentence that had been recast. This indicates that there is far more to
recasts than the uptake usually investigated in recast studies. Students, who heard the recast item, learnt it even though it was not directly addressed to them. Every one present in class could benefit from the recast. This was a point made by Lantolf (2006) in a tentative way.

**Example 7:**
- T: And what did you do?
- S: I was embers
- T: Embarrassed
- S: embers
- T: Embarrassed
- S: Embarrassed

Imitation is an important way people gain mastery over activities according to Vygotsky. In keeping with him, in Example 7 imitation following the recast because of the learner's mispronunciation was a meditational tool used for the sake of better control of the word. Sometimes the teacher introduced a new word and students without being told, repeated the word. It was then when they, themselves, used imitation as a meditational tool without the teacher telling them to repeat the word.

**Example 8:**
- S: I had done exercise for three minutes before he
- T: Had been doing or had done
- S: Yes yes
- T: had been doing exercise
- S: Yes I had been doing exercise before he came home

The episode above constitutes an example of a collaborative dialogue in which the learner was scaffolded by the teacher and came to the point that she could make a correct sentence on her own (Swain 2000).

Another feature that emerged in the course of analysis was the selective nature of recasts. Example 9 demonstrates the point:

**Example 9:**
- S: I was sleeping I just get up
- T: Got up
- S: got up
- S: went to kitchen I dreaming in my sleeping

As the above example shows, the teacher prefers to correct only the first mistake and does not concern himself with the other mistake. There could be a host of reasons behind this preference. It could be that the teacher simply did not want to further disrupt the flow of talk by the learner. The
teacher could not have taken developmental readiness of learners into account because the learners obviously knew past progressive. It could have been that the teacher simply failed to hear what the learner said which is unlikely considering the clarity of the learner's sentence. From an alternative perspective, it could be the perception of the teacher at play here. According to activity theory, different activities could be performed in different ways and conditions depending on the preference of the people involved. Here the activity of correcting learners was interpreted in a certain way by the teacher. Therefore, the activity of correcting will happen differently depending on what the teacher perceives to be proper error correction. While the motives are all the same, promoting learning, the activities are realized in different conditions (Lantolf, 2000).

**Example 10:**

S: I gave a lecture the teacher shook shook shook
T: shook
S: I started laughing

What is of interest here is the mechanism of repetition that was used by the learner which is another meditational tool exploited to have better control. The word that came up in interaction in the class became the object of reflection and repetition by the learner and apparently became internalized by them. She first used the word tentatively but then had her confidence boosted by the teacher's repetition of the word. The repetition of the word “shook” constitutes imitation rather than mimicry. Lantolf (2006) makes a very intriguing distinction between imitation and mimicry. Imitation is when a learner repeats an action and recognizes the goal whereas mimicry is when the action is repeated without recognizing the goal of the action. Here the student was for obvious reasons repeating a word to master its pronunciation. Since the learner knew why she was doing what she was doing and had a clear purpose, it could be said to be an example of imitation.

Classroom objects, the teacher, and other learners can become tools to mediate internalization. Several times in the data, it was observed that the teacher wrote a sample sentence on the board to illustrate a given grammar point. There the board was used to mediate learning. The board changed the quality of learning in a way that would have been impossible given the limited memory capacities of learners. It has been noted that limited capacity of the memory of learners when they hear something makes it difficult to exploit the item for learning purposes (Wells, 1999).
Example 11
S: He went to a room and I just want to make a laugh
T: Wanted to
S: So I locked the door and we were going out and we were going out and I said them
T: said to them

The context was students recounting experiences of their past. Here the student was corrected once on a past tense verb in the excerpt and once again on past tense in the same account which does not appear in the excerpt. The learner was evidently creating his zone of proximal development with the help of the teacher. The learner performed better in terms of past tense verbs with the help of the teacher. The above examples all illustrate how learners fared better with the meditational help of the teacher.

Discussion and Conclusion
The above analysis of feedback-related events in two EFL classes demonstrated important points worth revisiting. A very interesting pattern was the meditational tool of making sentences employed by the experienced EFL teachers used in these two classes. Lantolf (2007) asserts that the field has been characterized by a debate surrounding implicit/explicit knowledge distinction but efforts to provide solutions as to how to transform explicit into implicit knowledge have been surprisingly scarce. This analysis provides some evidence that teachers use sentence making by students as a meditational tool to create implicit knowledge. It was also demonstrated that student speech in class is a cognitive tool to guide a teacher as to what learners experience difficulty with. Another significant finding was the transference of what was first used socially in the context of recasts to the so-called intrapsychological plane when learners used what had been recast without the help of the teacher. Imitation also emerged as a meditational tool by learners.

Another very noticeable pattern in the classes was the use of gesture on the part of the teacher. Gesture was used more often by the teacher in these two classrooms than it would be outside a classroom in interaction with higher proficiency speakers. This excessive use of gesture by the teacher is consistent with the argument that physical demonstration plays an important role in lower level classes. In spite of the level of students, the use of gesture served to mediate comprehension for learners.

As the above data analysis reveals, everyday classroom practice including feedback and especially recasts could be viewed in broader terms than has usually been the case in SLA research. The analysis illustrated the application of sociocultural theory to the micro events of two classrooms.
The data analysis started with the assumption that recasts would provide a perfect setting for a socioculturally-oriented explanation but as the analysis bears witness, it transpired that SCT could serve us well in providing explanations for not just feedback and recasts but also all the micro events of the classroom. The study is an example of the explanatory power of a theory that has achieved enormous popularity in spite of its unfair exclusion in some accounts of the field.

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