

# The Impact of Reduction Recasts on the Improvement of EFL Learners' Speaking Ability

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## Abstract

*The present study attempted to discover the impact of reduction recasts on the improvement of the speaking ability and on the repaired grammatical uptake rates of Iranian intermediate level EFL learners. After administering a language proficiency test, 52 homogeneous students were randomly assigned to the experimental and control group. The comparison of the two groups on the speaking pretest confirmed the homogeneity of the subjects before the instruction. During 12 sessions of instruction, the experimental group received reduction recasts and the control group received non-reduction recasts. The whole sessions were video-recorded for further analysis of the students' errors, the teacher's feedback to such errors (reduction or non-reduction recasts), and the students' responses to the recasts (uptakes). After the treatment, both groups took part in the speaking posttest. The results indicated that the performance of the subjects in the experimental group was significantly better than that of the control group. Furthermore, the comparison of the repaired grammatical uptake means between the experimental and control groups revealed that the former group had outperformed the latter to a great extent.*

**Keywords:** reduction recasts, non-reduction recasts, repaired grammatical uptakes, speaking ability

## Introduction

Today the need for communication taps on the social aspect of human beings realized in the two channels of oral or written language, but the emphasis is on oral communication as the best manifestation of language

abilities (Celce-Murcia, 2001). From the viewpoint of teaching, speaking in a second or foreign language has often been looked at as the most demanding of all four skills (Bailey & Savage, 1994). Speaking as an important element of communication needs special attention and instruction in the domain of ELT. In order to provide effective instruction, it is necessary to examine the factors, conditions, and components underlying speaking effectiveness. Thus, away from approaches to improving the speaking skill which integrate the element of respect, such as finding a way to treat low status students and/or high status students who might take over the group (Cohen, 1996), or how to provide enough opportunities for students to become involved in different oral activities, the need for investigation in some areas like the types of the teacher's recasts in the classroom remains valid.

In recent years, recasts have generated considerable interest among L2 researchers. Some contend that recasts facilitate L2 development. For example, Long (1996) argues that juxtaposition recasts created between learners' erroneous output and target forms aid language acquisition. He argues that the negative evidence provided by recasts facilitates the process of cognitive comparison and is thus more effective than positive evidence in the form of models. In accordance with this theoretical position, researchers have investigated a number of different aspects of recasts, including: (1) whether recasts contribute to learning (Doughty & Varela, 1998; Han, 2002; Ishida, 2004); (2) the relative effect of recasts over models (Ayoun, 2001; Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998); (3) the extent to which recasts lead to learner uptake – learner's immediate response following teacher's error correction (Lyster & Ranta, 1997); (4) whether recasts provide positive evidence or negative evidence (Leeman, 2003); (5) the extent to which recasts are noticed by learners (Mackey, Gass, & McDonough, 2000; Philip, 2003); and (6) the relationship between recasts, uptake, and L2 development (Mackey & Philip, 1998; Loewen, 2005).

However, very few studies have been conducted on different types of recasts. Clearly, a careful examination of recast types is needed if ELT practitioners are to advance their understanding of them and also the role they play in language learners' speaking ability.

## **Recasts and Uptakes**

Over the past two decades, corrective feedback and learner uptake have been targets of investigation for researchers working in the field of classroom L2 acquisition. One of the researchers examining the effects of such teacher-

student interactional moves is Lyster who worked extensively on the observational classroom research in French immersion programs in Quebec, Canada (Lyster, 1994, 1998a, 1998b, 1999; Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Of particular interest is a study by Lyster and Ranta (1997), in which they identified different types of corrective feedback and student uptake. In their study, corrective feedback is described as the provision of negative evidence or positive evidence upon erroneous utterances, which encourages learners' repair involving accuracy and precision, and not merely comprehensibility. Also, learner uptake is defined as a student's utterance that immediately follows the teacher's feedback, and that constitutes a reaction in some way to the teacher's intention to draw attention to some aspects of the student's initial utterance (Lyster & Ranta, 1997).

Lyster and Ranta's study is significant in that it offered a systematic picture of patterns of interactional moves between teachers and students, such as the type of feedback arising from different types of errors, and the type of feedback that leads to more uptake. In addition, their analytical models facilitate further examination of the interactional sequences expected to occur between teachers and students. Based on the interactional patterns revealed in Lyster and Ranta's (1997) study and the research on the nature of specific types of corrective feedback (e.g. Han, 2002; Mackey et al., 2000; Ohta, 2000), it is possible to suggest ways for students to produce more output, which is considered to be effective for L2 acquisition (Swain, 1985). Also, Lyster and Ranta's findings could serve as a basis for L2 acquisition research that investigates whether feedback-uptake sequences indeed contribute to language learning.

Recasts are just one of several possible corrective strategies that teachers employ to deal with learner errors. Lyster and Ranta (1997) identified five corrective strategies other than recasts (i.e. explicit correction, clarification request, metalinguistic information, elicitation, and repetition), whereas Panova and Lyster (2002) added one more: translation. Although these other strategies have received attention from researchers, none of them has received the same intensity of attention as recasts.

One reason is that recasts generally occur with great frequency in interactions with second language learners, especially if they occur inside a classroom. Sheen (2004), in a study that compared the frequency of recasts in immersion, communicative English as an L2, and English in foreign language contexts, found that, on average, 60% of all the feedback moves involved recasts.

In their extensive study of corrective feedback in French immersion classrooms, Lyster and Ranta (1997) defined recasts as “the teacher’s reformulation of all or part of a student’s utterance, minus the error” (p. 46). This definition points to the fact that the reformulation can involve either the entirety or a part of the original erroneous utterance. The latter is what Roberts (1995) calls partial recasts, when the teacher only models the segment of the utterance in which the error occurs. Lyster (1998a) calls this type reduction recasts. According to Sheen (2006), in reduction recasts the reformulation is shorter than the learner’s erroneous utterance. This is the opposite to non-reduction recasts in which the reformulation repeats the learner’s entire utterance.

Other researchers have distinguished specific types/categories of recasts: e.g. isolated/incorporated recasts (Lyster, 1998b), corrective recasts (Doughty & Varela, 1998), and intensive recasts (Mackey & Philip, 1998).

Another controversial issue in the study of recasts is the significance of uptake and its role in acquisition. For the purposes of their study of corrective feedback, Lyster and Ranta (1997) defined uptake as, “a student utterance that immediately follows the teacher’s feedback and that constitutes a reaction in some way to the teacher’s intention to draw attention to some aspect of the student’s initial utterance” (p. 48). Uptake can constitute repair (i.e. the uptake move corrects the initial error) or be characterized as needs repair (i.e. the uptake move does not correct the initial error). Controversy centers on whether the learner’s uptake does or does not contribute to acquisition.

A few studies have examined the relationship between different types of recast and uptake with repair. Sheen (2006) found that mode (i.e. whether the recast was declarative or interrogative in form), linguistic focus (i.e. whether the recast targeted phonological, lexical, or grammatical features), and type of change (i.e. whether the change involved substituting an item in the learner utterance or some other kind of change) influenced repair. Repair was more likely to occur if the recast was declarative, directed at pronunciation and lexis rather than grammar, and involved substitution. Philip (2003) examined learners’ ability to recall recasts immediately after hearing them. She found that short recasts were recalled better than long recasts, especially by less proficient learners, and recasts with just one or two changes were recalled more accurately by all learners, irrespective of proficiency. These studies, thence, indicate which characteristics of recasts are more likely to promote noticing of the targeted features.

## **Speaking Ability**

Speaking has been regarded by many scholars (e.g. Levelt, 1989; Levelt, Roelofs, & Meyer, 2000) as a highly demanding and complex cognitive skill that involves several different mechanisms. Levelt (1989) proposes a model of L1 production that shows how speaking follows a series of processes, from the intention to speak to articulation of overt speech. In L2 acquisition research, scholars (e.g. De Bot, 1992; Poulisse & Bongaerts, 1994) have also given significant emphasis to the complexity of speaking in L2 and have highlighted the fact that, given learners' incomplete knowledge of the L2, it might be an even more demanding skill than it is in the L1.

Interested in the complexity of this skill in L2, various researchers (e.g. Skehan, 1998; Bygate, 1998, 2001; Ellis, 2003; McCarthy, 1998; Fortkamp, 2000) have studied the teaching of L2 speaking. Others have addressed issues of fluency, accuracy, and complexity in L2 speaking since these are viewed as important variables in the development of L2 speaking competence. The vast majority of the studies that investigate fluency mainly focus on determining what fluent speech is (e.g. Lennon, 1990; Riggensbach, 1991; Freed, 1995; Ejzenberg, 2000).

A number of empirical studies have also addressed the teaching of speaking strategies. Cohen, Weaver, and Li (1998), for instance, conducted an experimental study seeking to investigate the role of speaking strategies in the teaching of L2 oral competence. The results of the study suggested that the use of strategies enhanced speaking performance.

With respect to teaching L2 speaking, McCarthy (1998) analyzed the features of speech in context, distinguishing the act of speaking from the act of writing, and thus giving speech a new perspective with its own peculiarities. He described the spoken genre, stating that, "Spoken language has its own grammar and lexicon" (p. 47) and arguing that, "The best data for pedagogical theory of spoken language is everyday, informal talk" (p. 47). McCarthy argued that the spoken genre must be taken into consideration when the speaking skill is being targeted in the classroom and suggested that the first step in building teaching syllabuses and materials is to observe examples of real encounters by participants, thus focusing on real interactions and authentic language.

However, no study has yet been conducted on the impact of different types of teacher recasts on the language learners' speaking ability. Moreover, the effect of recast types on the learners' uptake rates has not been investigated. Accordingly, the present study attempted to discover the

impact of reduction recasts on the speaking ability and on the repaired grammatical uptake rates of EFL learners. To fulfill the purpose of the study the following research questions were formulated:

1. *Is there any significant difference between the English speaking ability of Iranian intermediate EFL learners corrected by reduction recasts and those corrected by non-reduction recasts?*
2. *Do reduction recasts compared with non-reduction recasts result in a greater amount of repaired grammatical uptake among Iranian intermediate EFL learners?*

## **Method**

### **Participants**

In order to conduct this study, 63 Iranian female adults were selected among intermediate level students of an English language school in Tehran. They were between 17 and 27 years of age. To ensure the homogeneity of the participants, a language proficiency test was administered to them. After analyzing the results, 52 students who scored within one standard deviation above and below the mean were included in the study. Later, the participants were randomly assigned to two experimental and control groups. The experimental group included 27 students, while the control group contained 25 participants.

It is worth mentioning that 41 other intermediate students, who were similar to the actual participants of the research, took part in the pilot study of the above-mentioned language proficiency test.

### **Instrumentation**

#### ***Language Proficiency Test***

A Preliminary English Test (PET) was used for homogenizing the subjects of this study in terms of their general English proficiency. It was published by Cambridge English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL, 2006). The PET test consisted of four sections: reading (35 items), writing (eight items), listening comprehension (25 items), and speaking (four subparts).

The writing section of the (PET) consisted of three subparts. The first subpart of the writing section included four items which were scored objectively. However, the other two subparts were scored utilizing the analytic scale for rating writing tasks (PET exam package, 2006). It should be noted that each paper was scored twice by the same rater within a 20-day interval.

### ***Speaking Pretest***

To make sure the participants in the two groups belonged to the same population in terms of speaking ability, the researchers utilized the speaking section of the PET as the pretest.

This section consisted of four subparts (a two-minute interaction on a general topic, a two-minute interaction on a visual stimulus, a three-minute speech on a verbal prompt, and a three-minute general discussion) which were scored by two raters using the analytic scale of the PET speaking test (2006). Based on this scale, the students were assessed on their appropriate use of grammatical forms and vocabulary, discourse management, pronunciation, and interactive communication.

### ***Speaking Posttest***

At the end of the instruction period, the speaking section of the PET was administered to the subjects of the study. To avoid practice effect, the speaking posttest was administered 75 days after the pretest exactly with the same procedure.

## **Procedure**

Since the researchers needed to select and homogenize the participants of the study, they first embarked on piloting the PET with 41 students at the intermediate level. Once the test was modified following the piloting (details of which appear in the results section of this paper), it was administered to the 63 target participants described above. The students who scored one standard deviation above and below the mean were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups. The experimental group consisted of 27 students and the control group included 25 participants.

To ensure that the two groups were homogeneous in terms of their speaking ability, the scores of the speaking section of the language proficiency test were used as the pretest scores of the subjects. As mentioned earlier, the speaking section of the PET consisted of four subparts. It started with a two-minute interaction of candidates with the interlocutor. Each interviewee had to respond to general questions about herself on topics such as job, family, sport, hobby, etc. during this part. Next, there was another two-minute interaction, during which the testees had to interact on a visual stimulus. They had to use functional language to make and respond to suggestions, make recommendations, and negotiate agreements. By the end of Part Two, a photograph was given to each of the candidates in turn as a verbal prompt to talk about a particular topic. During these three minutes, the subjects' speaking ability was assessed through describing photographs, managing discourse, and using appropriate vocabulary in a longer turn. All photographs used in this part were related to the same topic. The last three-minute discussion of the speaking part was a general conversation. The students interacted with each other in this phase on the topic established on the theme of Part Three. Their discussion was about their opinions, likes/dislikes, preferences, experiences, habits, etc.

The subjects' speaking performance on all parts of the pretest was recorded and subsequently rated by two raters.

The instructional intervention consisted of 12 sessions of 75 minutes each. Both groups were taught based on the same teaching method and activities. At the beginning of each session, 30-45 minutes were allocated to the short news (2-3 minutes long) each student had been required to prepare. When one student was giving her report, others listened to her carefully and benefited from the teacher's recasts. The students had to talk about their news by heart and with their own words. After a student was finished, others exchanged their opinions about what they had heard and they added their information related to the topic. The teacher provided comments on the erroneous utterances of the students through reduction recasts in the experimental group and non-reduction recasts in the control group during the treatment.

The teacher's reduction recasts included reformulated phrases shorter than the erroneous utterances produced by the learners. They were usually made up of a verb and a content word or a combination of two words in length. The teacher used non-reduction recasts through repetition of the reformulated error in the form of a statement, a tag question, a clarification request, a *wh*-question, or a confirmation check. In case there was more than one error in a sentence and the teacher could not focus to correct them all, it



was the first one which received a recast. It is worth mentioning that all the 12 sessions of instruction were video-recorded for further analysis of the students' erroneous utterances, the teacher's corrective feedback in reduction form for the experimental group and in non-reduction form in the control group in response to the students' errors, and the subjects' linguistic reactions to teacher's feedback (uptakes) in each class.

After the news, the teacher started to teach a structural point based on the related lesson plan; and finally an assigned part of the story book was retold by the students. While a student was speaking, the teacher mostly tried to act as a listener. Accordingly, she interrupted the students when there was a need for correction, which took place with the same procedure explained above.

At the end of the instruction period, the speaking posttest was administered to both groups to track any possible improvement in their speaking ability and in the rate of their grammatical uptakes with respect to the kind of correction they received throughout the treatment period.

## **Results**

### **Piloting the Language Proficiency Test (PET)**

At first, the objective sections of the PET were piloted with 41 intermediate level students whose language proficiency was similar to that of the participants of the study. Then, NRT item analysis including item facility and item discrimination was conducted for each item. After omitting 11 malfunctioning items, the reliability of the test was estimated using the KR-21 formula; and it came out to be satisfactory with an index of 0.78 (Table 1).

**Table 1 – Reliability of the objective sections of the PET**

<b>KR-21 r</b>	<b>K</b>
0.78	54

### **Administering the PET**

Following the piloting phase, the PET consisting of four sections (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) was administered to 63 intermediate level

students, the descriptive statistics of which are presented in Table 2. The students whose scores were within one standard deviation above and below the mean were included in the study. Out of the 63 subjects, 52, who met the aforementioned criterion, were randomly assigned to two experimental and control groups and thus 11 outliers were discarded from the analyses.

**Table 2 – Descriptive statistics of the PET**

N	Mean	V	SD	Range	Minimum	Maximum
63	64.21	118.97	10.90	47	41	88

### ***Intra-rater Reliability of Scoring the PET Writing Section***

The writings were assessed twice, once right after the administration of the PET, and once again some time later after the first scoring prior to the instruction. The assessments were done utilizing the PET rating scale (ESOL, 2006). The intra-rater reliability of the writing part was 0.90, showing a high degree of consistency between the two scorings (Table 3).

**Table 3 – Intra-rater reliability of scoring the PET writing section**

Ratings	Mean	SD	V	Pearson Correlation
Rating 1	12.90	3.26	10.66	.90
Rating 2	12.65	3.15	9.97	

### ***Inter-rater Reliability of Scoring the PET Speaking Section***

In this phase, each subject was assessed by two raters, the interlocutor and the assessor, utilizing the analytic scale of PET speaking test (2006). The inter-rater reliability of the speaking pretest was 0.76, showing an acceptable degree of consistency between the two sets of scores (Table 4).

**Table 4 – Inter-rater reliability of scoring the PET speaking section**

Raters	Mean	SD	V	Pearson Correlation
Interlocutor	12.92	2.58	6.66	.76
Assessor	11.25	2.20	4.85	

## Checking the Homogeneity of the Two Groups

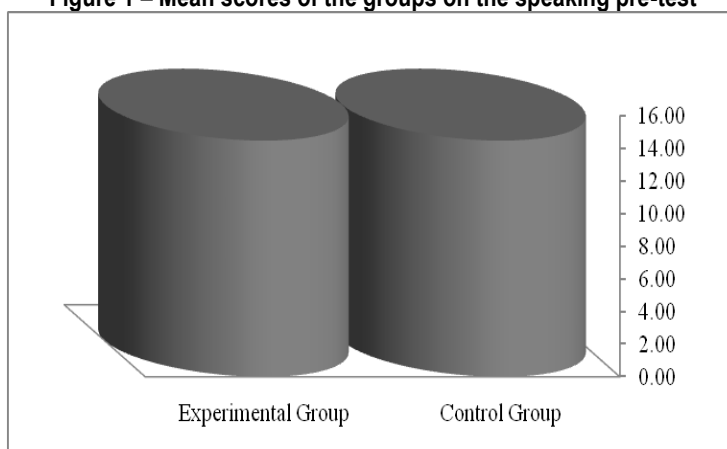
In the next phase of the study, the scores of the subjects on the PET speaking section were analyzed in isolation in order to make sure that the participants of the two groups bore no significant difference in terms of their speaking ability before the treatment. Table 5 below demonstrates the descriptive statistics of the speaking section.

**Table 5 – Descriptive statistics of the scores of both groups on the speaking pretest**

Groups	N	Mean	V	SD	Range	Minimum	Maximum
Experimental	27	14.48	10.02	3.17	13.00	7.00	20.00
Control	25	14.48	4.01	2.00	9.00	11.00	20.00

As indicated in Table 5, the two groups' mean scores were the same. And thus, one can conclude that there was no difference – let alone a significant one – between the means of the two groups at the outset of the study; thus running a further *t*-test was redundant in this case. The following figure represents the above mean scores of the two groups in a more readily understandable visual modality.

**Figure 1 – Mean scores of the groups on the speaking pre-test**



## Speaking Posttest

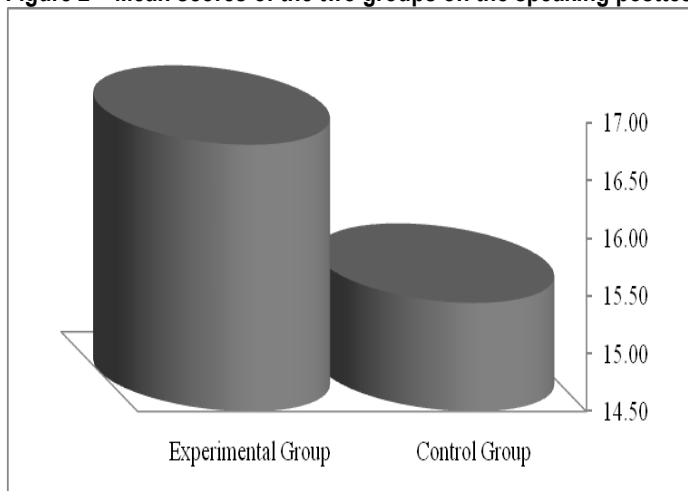
Following the 12-session instruction, the speaking posttest was administered to both groups. Table 6 demonstrates the descriptive statistics of the posttest of the two groups separately.

**Table 6 – Descriptive statistics of the scores of both groups on the speaking posttest**

Groups	N	Mean	V	SD	Range	Minimum	Maximum
Experimental	27	16.81	4.77	2.18	7	14	21
Control	25	15.44	5.84	2.42	11	10	21

Figure 2 below shows the mean differences of the experimental and control groups on the speaking posttest.

**Figure 2 – Mean scores of the two groups on the speaking posttest**



### **Inter-rater Reliability of Scoring the Speaking Posttest**

Since each subject was assessed by two raters independently – the interlocutor and the assessor – the inter-rater reliability was computed after the speaking posttest. The result of this statistic ( $r = 0.77$ ) indicated clearly a relatively high agreement between the two scorings of the two raters (Table 7).

**Table 7 – Inter-rater reliability of the scores of the speaking posttest**

Raters	Mean	SD	V	Pearson Correlation
Interlocutor	14.00	2.44	5.96	.77
Assessor	12.65	1.95	3.79	

### **T-test Analysis of the Speaking Posttest**

To answer the first research question, the scores of the two groups on the speaking posttest were used for the analysis. However, in order to legitimize running a *t*-test, the normality of the distributions of the scores for the two groups were checked (Table 8).

**Table 8 – The results of the normality check**

Groups	Skewness	Standard Error of Skewness	The Significant Value
Experimental	.327	.448	.729
Control	.378	.464	.814

As demonstrated in Table 8, the significant values for the groups fell within the range of -1.96 and +1.96; therefore, both distributions were normal and running an independent samples *t*-test was legitimized (Table 9).

**Table 9 – Independent Samples *t*-test of the means of the two groups on the speaking posttest**

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		<i>t</i> -test for Equality of Means			
	F observed	F critical	<i>t</i> observed	<i>t</i> critical	df	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	0.01	4.03	2.15	2.02	50	1.37

As indicated in Table 9, the *F*-observed value was 0.01, which was lower than the *F*-critical value (4.03) at 0.05 level of significance for 50 degrees of freedom. This meant that the variances of the two groups could be assumed not significantly different and the results for the equal variances assumed row should be reported here for comparing the mean of the achievement posttest scores for the treatment condition ( $M = 16.81$ ,  $SD = 2.18$ ) with that of the control condition ( $M = 15.44$ ,  $SD = 2.42$ ). The *t*-observed value was 2.15 at 50 degrees of freedom which exceeded the *t*-critical value of 2.02. This revealed that the treatment was effective enough to make a significant difference between the means of the experimental and control groups and that using reduction recasts did bring about significantly positive effect on EFL intermediate level students' speaking ability.

## Repaired Grammatical Uptakes of the Two Groups

In order to answer the second research question, the recorded tapes of 12 instructional sessions were watched by the researchers to analyze the amount of recasts and repaired uptakes. As mentioned earlier, repaired grammatical uptakes were the successfully repeated grammatical reformulations produced by the subjects. An example can clarify this point:

*S: You should go see doctor. (Grammatical error)*

*T: The doctor. (Reduction recast)*

*S: The doctor. (Repaired grammatical uptake)*

The results are summarized in Table 10.

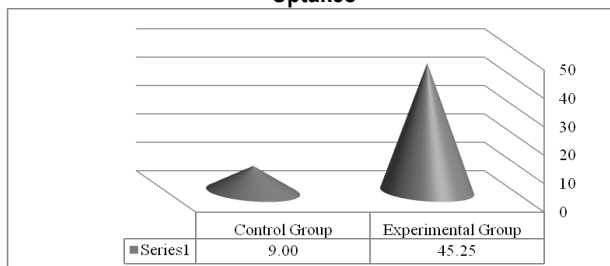
**Table 10 – Rate of the two groups' repaired grammatical uptakes**

Sessions	Number of repaired Grammatical uptakes in the Experimental Group	Number of repaired Grammatical uptakes in the Control Group
1	3	2
2	14	1
3	50	8
4	41	5
5	39	5
6	25	5
7	48	1
8	33	7
9	51	13
10	72	16
11	91	21
12	76	24
Total	543	108
Mean (Total divided by number of sessions)	45.25	9.00

As indicated in the Table 10 above, the average number of the repaired grammatical uptakes in the experimental group was 45.25, which was much higher than that of the control group (9.00). This revealed that employing reduction recasts did eventually result in a greater amount of repaired grammatical uptakes in comparison to non-reduction recasts among EFL learners.

As for the repaired grammatical uptakes, Figure 3 below shows the mean difference of the scores obtained by the participants in the two experimental and control groups on these uptakes during the 12 sessions of instruction.

**Figure 3 - The mean difference of the groups on the repaired grammatical Uptakes**



## Conclusion

There has recently been a proliferation of studies investigating recasts in different shapes and forms (see for example, Ellis & Sheen, 2006; Leeman, 2003; Lyster, 2004, Hauser, 2005).

In this study, the impact of reduction recasts, as one type of corrective feedback, on speaking ability was investigated. The results indicated that reduction recasts did significantly improve the speaking ability of the experimental group. This is in line with the findings of a study conducted by Iwashita (2003) who found that recasts are more salient to second language learners than other types of positive evidence from native-speaker interactional moves.

The two groups were also compared on the amount of their repaired grammatical uptakes. The results revealed that reduction recasts were effective on the rate of the repaired grammatical uptakes. This may be due to the fact that much of the pleasure of speaking lies in distinguishing our own errors and repeating the correct forms, which reduction recasts seek to establish.

Reduction recasts are advantageous since they build up communication and provide a rich environment for the learners in the classroom. They are mediums of increasing reflection in students although using them is not without drawbacks.

The characteristics of recasts, as meaningful and indirect repetition of the students' performances, make them good instruments for teachers to check the students' spoken errors in the classroom. They can also provide



the students with a critical eye to find out the difference between their own speaking and their teacher's; and this makes them sensitive to their errors (Long, 2006). Such characteristics lead the recasts, especially reduction recasts, to become important tools for the correction of the spoken errors. However, the successful integration of the reduction recasts into EFL classes is mainly dependant on the teacher's method. Furthermore, learner's needs, attitudes, and proficiency levels should be considered in this regard.

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