

UNDERSTANDING FOSSILIZATION AMONG GEN-Z: ANALYZING CONTRIBUTING FACTORS AND PATTERNS IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Despite persistent efforts, many second language learners struggle to achieve native-like proficiency, often due to fossilized errors. This study investigates fossilization in AB-English students at Isabela State University, offering novel insights for educators and researchers. Employing a multi-pronged approach, we examined creative writing outputs, administered grammar tests, and conducted interviews to unveil students' learning strategies and coping mechanisms. This qualitative case study, informed by Selinker's framework, allowed us to delve deeper into the phenomenon, uncovering previously unknown aspects of fossilization specific to this learner group. Our findings not only illuminate the complexities of fossilization but also reveal the intricate interplay between individual learning strategies and persistent errors. This deeper understanding empowers educators to design more targeted interventions and offers valuable research avenues for exploring fossilization across diverse learner groups and contexts.

KEYWORDS: Fossilization, Grammar, Interlanguage, Language Transfer, Second Language

INTRODUCTION

While the term "fossilization" often conjures up images of trilobites and tyrannosaurs, it also has a crucial role in language learning. Language fossilization, a concept explored by Larry Selinker, refers to the habitualisation of incorrect language use, making it resistant to correction. This phenomenon is observed when learners of a second language encounter increasing difficulty in improving their fluency, eventually reaching a plateau.

Recent studies, such as those by Azman and Razali (2024) and Azeez (2024), are actively analyzing and seeking solutions to this widespread phenomenon of language fossilization. These studies examine the factors contributing to fossilization in second language speakers and investigate fossilized writing errors among English Foreign

Language learners, respectively. It is a significant challenge faced by language learners globally, where despite extensive practice and exposure, learners' language proficiency stagnates. This stagnation hinders effective communication and academic progress, necessitating deeper investigation into its causes and potential remedies.

Despite recognizing the phenomenon, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of the specific instances and forms of fossilization among college students. The contributing factors, particularly within different educational contexts, remain under-explored. Addressing this gap is crucial for developing tailored strategies that can help learners overcome fossilization and achieve greater fluency.

Fluency typically refers to the ability to express oneself easily and articulately, both in

speaking and writing. While speaking fluency involves smooth, flowing speech with accurate pronunciation and appropriate intonation, writing fluency entails producing coherent, well-structured texts with minimal errors and effective use of language. The present research focuses on written work to reveal instances of fossilization because written samples provide a tangible and analyzable record of language use. Written texts allow for detailed examination of structural and grammatical errors that may indicate fossilization. Additionally, written work often reflects a learner's sustained language habits more clearly than spoken language, which can be influenced by immediate context and interactions.

The present study aims to describe the instances of fossilization among Bachelor of Arts English majors at ISU-CC. This research investigates these instances by identifying the various forms of fossilization and determining the contributing factors to fossilization. Data were gathered from five written pieces per participant, which were then categorized and analyzed. To further understand the contributing factors, a grammar test and an interview regarding learning strategies were administered after collecting the fossilized samples. According to Lauritzen (2014) of Xiamen University, awareness of fossilization can be a potential remedy. The findings from this study can benefit both students and teachers by contributing to the development of more effective learning and teaching methods, ultimately addressing the plateau in language proficiency.

Fossilization in students' written work was identified through a systematic analysis of recurring errors and language patterns across multiple writing samples. The researchers categorized the types of errors, such as grammatical mistakes, incorrect word usage, and syntactical issues, and tracked their frequency and persistence over time. This approach allowed for the identification of habitual errors that indicate fossilized language use, providing insights into areas where students struggle to achieve fluency and accuracy in their writing.

METHOD

The study employed a qualitative research design utilizing a multiple case study approach. This research aimed to investigate the presence of language fossilization among Bachelor of Arts English majors at Isabela State University Cauayan Campus, identify the contributing factors, and explore their learning and coping strategies.

The Bachelor of Arts English majors at Isabela State University Cauayan Campus were chosen as participants because they represent a group actively engaged in advanced English language learning. Their continuous exposure to English in an academic setting makes them an ideal group for studying language fossilization. This group is likely to exhibit varying degrees of language proficiency and fossilization, providing rich data for analysis.

Data collection involved a combination of methods. First, the researchers collected five written pieces from each participant's writing class to assess their English language proficiency. The decision to collect five pieces was based on the need for sufficient data to observe patterns and consistency in language use, ensuring a comprehensive assessment of proficiency and potential fossilization.

Proficiency was assessed using a rubric that evaluated several criteria, including grammar, vocabulary, coherence, cohesion, and overall fluency. The specific indicators suggesting fossilization included persistent grammatical errors, repetitive incorrect usage of vocabulary, and syntactical mistakes that did not improve over time. These recurring errors across multiple writing samples indicated habitual language use resistant to correction, characteristic of fossilization.

Additionally, a grammar test adapted from TESLaph with answer keys was administered to further ensure data validity and reliability. TESLaph, a comprehensive language assessment tool, includes various types of questions such as multiple-choice questions, fill-in-the-blank exercises, sentence correction tasks, and short essay writing. The test covers a wide range of grammar topics, including verb tenses, sentence structure, punctuation, and the usage of articles and

prepositions. The threshold for passing the grammar test was set at 70%, meaning participants needed to score at least 70% correct answers to pass.

To gain deeper insights, the researchers conducted interviews with participants who did not pass the grammar test. The semi-structured interview guide, developed by the researchers, consisted of 15 questions. The interview questions included both open-ended and closed questions. Ten questions delved into the factors perceived to contribute to second language fossilization, while the remaining five focused on their learning and coping strategies in second language acquisition. Examples of the ten questions focused on fossilization factors include: *Can you describe any recurring errors you notice in your writing? Do you find it challenging to correct certain mistakes even after receiving feedback? If so, which ones?* The participants' responses were then coded into themes to facilitate analysis and complement the other collected data.

The written work, grammar test results, and interview responses were analyzed using different methods. For the written work, a rubric-based evaluation allowed for a detailed analysis of grammar, vocabulary, coherence, cohesion, and fluency. Recurring errors and patterns were identified to highlight areas of fossilization. In analyzing the grammar test results, scores were calculated to determine the overall performance of the participants. A detailed analysis of incorrect responses helped identify common grammatical issues and areas resistant to improvement. The interview responses were transcribed and coded into themes to understand the factors contributing to fossilization and the strategies employed by students to cope with language learning challenges.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Types of Fossilization

This study identified several types of fossilization present among Bachelor of Arts English majors at ISU-CC. Fossilization in language learning refers to the process where incorrect language forms become fixed in a learner's interlanguage, making it resistant to change despite continuous exposure and

practice. The primary types of fossilization observed in this study include pragmatic, semantic, morphological, and syntactic fossilization. Each type is characterized by specific recurring errors in the participants' use of English.

PRAGMATIC FOSSILIZATION

They need to make has been like to cooked (R2)

I want to hard with you for your suffer and sacrifice (R5)

We have nothing regret and also to industrious (R1)

Best in serving you always as you can (R8)

This is not a good deserve for me I want to live you in your heart forever (R10)

(There are 6 pragmatic fossilizations found)

Pragmatic deviance, also termed "pragmatic failure" by Thomas (1983), refers to the inability to understand what is meant by what is said, resulting in misunderstanding, embarrassment, and even insult. For example, the sentence *"I want to hard with you for your suffer and sacrifice"* from a participant's curriculum vitae might have intended to express *"I want to work hard for you even if I might suffer and make a sacrifice."* The participant's lack of understanding leads to a confusing and incorrect statement.

SEMANTIC FOSSILIZATION

There are many looking glass like when your wearing something (R1)

Smile there, smile here we're desame In the darkness night (R9)

I wish I could be the star in the night becoming tar (R4)

The day I Baptist as a Christian (R7)

Little home was ruined as much as one's life search (R11)

I don't even know if whatreason why she's acting like we have dept (R15)

Semantic Fossilization refers to the use of language forms that exist in L1 but do not represent the same meanings in L2, and the misuse of words that sound alike but differ in meaning. For instance, in *"The day I Baptist as a Christian,"* the participant used "Baptist" instead of "baptized." Another example is *"Little home was ruined as much as one's life search,"* a literal translation from Filipino

"*Hanap buhay*" meaning "work" or "occupation."

MORPHOLOGICAL FOSSILIZATION

I wish I am tranquility (R4)

To be succeed, we want to be (R10)

I wish I will be the one who speaking to anyone (R7)

I wish I could lighten your darkness side (R3)

To be your fire on the loneliness night (R7)

You are the luckily like the almighty (R14)

Morphological Fossilization involves the misuse of word forms. For instance, "*to be succeed, we want to be*" should use "successful" instead of "succeed." Other examples include "*I wish I could lighten your darkness side*" where "dark side" is the correct collocation, and "*To be your fire on the loneliness night*" where "lonely night" is correct.

SYNTACTIC FOSSILIZATION

Looking at you reminds the memorable events and achievements that are unforgettable (R14)

What you'll do to save it, for your future life To sent people as his instrument for me to cope and to be cure from illness have (R14)

I wish I can read peoples mind (R6)

So that I'm not gonna left behind (3x) (R1)

I want to be a good model in other (R6)

Syntactic Fossilization is the most typical, involving tense differentiation, subject-verb agreement, and confusing words. For example, in the sentence "*I wish I can read peoples mind*" (R6), the participant incorrectly uses "can" instead of "could" and omits the possessive apostrophe in "people's." Another example is "*So that I'm not gonna left behind*" (R1), where the participant incorrectly uses "left" instead of "leave" and misuses "gonna" in a formal context.

Furthermore, syntactic errors were the most prevalent type of fossilization observed in the participants' written work. These errors often involved incorrect tense usage, subject-verb agreement, and the misuse of confusing

words. For example, participants frequently confused the Simple Past with the Past Perfect and Present Perfect tenses, indicating difficulty in understanding and applying the different forms of past tenses in English.

Syntactic Errors

The analysis of grammar test results further supported these findings, showing that errors in tense usage were particularly common. The test results were as follows:

ASPECT	RIGHT	WRONG
1. Subject-Verb Agreement	389	349
2. Tenses	201	243
a. Simple Present versus Present Continuous	49	41
b. Simple Past versus Past Perfect	28	79
c. Simple Past versus Present Perfect	83	96
d. Future Tense	41	68
3. Confusing Words	298	179

The frequent errors in tenses, especially in differentiating between Simple Past and Past Perfect or Present Perfect, and the use of Future Tense, indicate a lack of understanding of complex English grammar rules. This supports the conclusion that participants consistently made the same errors, demonstrating fossilization.

Syntactic fossilization, which encompasses persistent errors in tense usage, subject-verb agreement, and word confusion, was the most dominant form of fossilization observed in this study. The data indicates that despite continuous exposure to English and repeated practice, participants continued to make the same syntactic errors. This persistence suggests that their interlanguage had become fossilized, a state where learners' language use becomes static and resistant to further change.

One major factor contributing to syntactic fossilization is the significant difference in syntactic rules between English and Filipino.

In Filipino, verbs do not inflect for tense in the same way as in English, which leads to confusion when Filipino speakers try to apply these rules in English. For instance, the sentence "I wish I can read peoples mind" (R6) illustrates the absence of the necessary auxiliary verb "could" and the incorrect use of the possessive form "people's." Another example is "So that I'm not gonna left behind" (R1), where the participant incorrectly uses "left" instead of "leave" and misuses "gonna" in a formal context.

Discussion

The data supports Selinker's (1972) statement that the first language hinders the second language from progressing, as evident in the persistent errors in the participants' written outputs. The four instances of fossilization identified in the study—pragmatic, semantic, morphological, and syntactic—highlight how L1 influences L2 acquisition, causing interlanguage to stop the L2 from developing fully. This finding is consistent with other studies that emphasize the role of L1 interference in L2 fossilization.

The concept of interlanguage, as described by Han (2009), explains how learners' language use is influenced by their native language while incorporating elements of the second language. This "metaphorical halfway house" creates unique language forms that are neither fully L1 nor fully L2. The persistence of these forms over time, despite exposure to correct usage, is what characterizes fossilization.

The results of this research are consistent with findings from other studies focusing on fossilization in L2 learners. Similar studies have reported that L1 interference is a significant factor in fossilization, leading to persistent errors despite continuous exposure to and practice in the correct forms.

These findings underscore the need for targeted instructional strategies that address specific grammatical challenges and support learners in overcoming syntactic fossilization. This might include explicit teaching of tense differentiation, subject-verb agreement, and the use of auxiliary verbs, as well as increased opportunities for practice and feedback in these areas.

Contributory Factors of Fossilization

The analysis of interviews with participants revealed several key factors that contribute to the fossilization of their second language (L2) skills. These factors encompass a range of psychological, educational, and social influences that collectively impede their progress in mastering English. The identified themes include unawareness of language deficiencies, attention to detail, reliance on peer teaching, anxiety, practical motivations, slow progress in acquiring the target language, lack of functionality in language use, and reliance on rote memorization. This section elaborates on each of these contributory factors, providing insights into how they affect the participants' language learning journey and perpetuate fossilized errors.

Unawareness

The participants don't see that they need a lot of improvements to their second language. Participant 2 answered "*Yes I am confident*" when he was asked if he was confident with his English skills. He also stated, "*My intelligence in English language is 7 out of 10.*" Also, participant 3 and 4 rated themselves 7 out of 10. Participant 3 boasted "*Maybe 7 out of 10 because I only lack in vocabulary.*"

The participants are still far below the average level, yet they have rated themselves almost close to ten out of ten. They all seemed proud and satisfied with their L2; hence, they were also unaware that their L2 is fossilized.

Second Language Fossilization needs Consciousness Raising before it's corrected. Paul Butler-Tanaka even made a dissertation focused on the thoughts that Fossilization could be a chronic condition or *conscious raising* could be the possible cure. He stated that due to the unawareness, there's a possibility of being unable to permanently correct persistent errors. However according to Bill Lauritzen (2013) from Xiamen University, awareness could be the cure. The only thing to do is to make the person aware of this, so he can then set up a new (correct) competing network. "By frequently making the person say it wrong, try to say it right, say it wrong, try to say it right, back and forth a few times. This helps him to become aware of the network he has set up, and teaches him to

distinguish between the old neuronal network and the new neuronal network. For example, the person (in China) is pronouncing "bin' like "bean." So you write on a piece of paper both words and have him say both, demonstrating the difference (Lauritzen, 2013)."

Attention to detail

Some listen to the discussions, but they listen not to learn the language, but to remember details from the discussion to "pass" the subject on the other hand, some of them might have just mistaken "hearing" for listening.

When Participant 4 was asked about his attitude towards English class discussions, he answered *"Sometimes I listen because it's a must. But most of the time I'm just hearing what the professor is saying."* *"Most of the time, I couldn't understand anything"* Participant 3 explained.

According to Xueping Wei, "successful language learning involves attention (2008)." The reason why there's no input because there's nothing absorbed by the learner.

Peer Teaching

All the participants answered the questions "How do you do to assess yourself" and "What do you do to improve?" by saying that they always ask for their friends' help and feedback, but not their teachers or others who could've helped them even more.

When Participant 1 was asked if he consults his teacher, he answered *"I don't."* Participant 2 answered *"I ask my friends for feedbacks, especially when writing essays, when I'm unsure of the words or the grammar"* when he was asked how he assesses himself. Also, participant 3 answered almost the same statement with honesty saying *"I try to asses myself, but I don't ask a teacher's advice. I don't try to ask or even try to recite because I'm afraid that my grammar might be wrong. I only ask for my classmate's help."*

Understandably, students feel more comfortable and open when interacting with a peer, since students share a similar discourse, allowing for greater understanding. But that should be possible if they weren't asking for help from a person who also needs help. Since most of them in their class have their L2 fossilized; particularly in the Syntactic area, asking for each other's feedback would mean

a spread of fossilized errors. Having this peer teaching habit whilst all of them have a lot of improving to do would only worsen the state of their target language.

Anxiety

All of them are afraid to use the language for the reason that they might be criticized, just like Participant 2's answer *"Yes, because I don't want to be criticized."* Also, when Participant 3 was asked if he was afraid to use the language, he answered *"Most of the time I am, because I'm afraid that I might be wrong."* And because of that, they barely practice themselves to speak the language. A study by Elaine, et al., (1986) concluded that "teachers and students generally feel strongly that anxiety is a major obstacle to be overcome in learning to speak another language." They found that students often feel apprehension, worry, and even dread when attempting to speak in a foreign language. This anxiety can lead to difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, and physical symptoms like palpitations. The researchers also noted that anxiety is particularly pronounced in classroom settings, where students fear negative evaluation and test performance. This heightened affective filter reduces self-confidence and motivation, thereby negatively impacting the language learning process. Consequently, learners avoid practicing the language both inside and outside the classroom, which contributes to fossilization and impedes second language acquisition.

Practicality

When Participant 1 was asked if learning English was his choice and why, he answered *"Yes, because we need in when we apply a job."* Participant 2 also answered with the same point that it is for job opportunities, saying *"I'm learning English because it's important, I can use it to apply on a job."* Hence, they are learning the language for career purposes, but not to acquire the language of their own will, only because of the opportunities it might offer them.

Learning the target language became an obligatory task for them for the reason that it is used in almost every job that's offered.

In xiao “The Impact of Motivation on English Language Learning,” she indicated that motivation has a very important role in learning English as a foreign or second language successfully.

Motivation is a key factor in explaining the success or failure of any difficulty. We know that success in a task is because someone is motivated. Given the fact that the participants aren’t fully motivated, they are expected to experience more difficulty throughout the learning of the target language.

On the other hand, the participants are all Filipino citizens, and they were asked if they have tried to converse with others using English or perhaps to talk to a native speaker of the English language and they all answered “no” they haven’t, meaning to say that they haven’t practiced or used English language in the real-world situation.

In *Xueping Wei’s* Implication of IL Fossilization in Second Language Acquisition, he proposed some suggestions for foreign students to understand the phenomenon, where he said that Exposure to the Target Language and the Target Language’s culture would reduce fossilization.

He proposed that natural exposure to the target language is a factor that promotes L2 learning and therefore helps learners overcome fossilization. One way to expose learners to the natural target language is by allowing them to stay for some time in their native environment abroad. While this is not possible for the majority of L2 learners, they need to seek exposure to the target language and the target language culture in other ways.

Slow Progress of Target Language

The participants are all in their early 20s and started studying the English language at an early age. This means that the less or more than 15 years they have been learning English, they should have acquired their target language already.

Based on the samples of errors in their written outputs and grammar tests, their level of proficiency wouldn’t match someone learning English for more than 15 years.

The existing errors on their written papers are errors from basic syntactic rules that are

learned and acquired during Elementary education.

Xueping Wei called this Language competence fossilization which refers to the plateau in the development of L2 learners’ phonological, grammatical, lexical, and pragmatic competence.

Lack of Functionality

When Participant 1 was asked if he studies English on his own, he answered “No, just in class.”

Participant 2 and 3 answered that they seldom learn on their own, “Yes I do but seldom, because it is more difficult to know if my knowledge is really growing or it’s just going in circle because there’s no one to correct me. While in the classroom, there are more test measurements to see my progress.” Participant 2 explained.

They don’t try to study English on their own; they’re contented with just the classroom setup learning. When they were asked where and how they use the English language, most of their answers were “in reciting”; “in essay writing”, and those were only done in school.

They should find as many ways as they can to use English. It is like Metacognition, a “cognition about cognition”, “thinking about thinking”, “knowing about knowing”, becoming “aware of one’s awareness” and higher-order thinking skills.

There are many ways to use the English language, the learners shouldn’t box themselves and they should go beyond.

Rote memorization

“Yes, but only memorization of keywords.” Participant 1 answered when they were asked if they have learning techniques. Participant 3 also stated, “I often scan through my dictionary, because my teacher told me before that at least I should memorize two new words a day.”

They are confined to a limited learning strategy for the reason that they use memorization as their main learning strategy in the English language. Where in the process of learning a second language, fossilization is caused by the incorrect application of learning strategies, what more if there’s only a limited learning strategy? Having a learning strategy is to help second language students

become more aware of how they learn most effectively, ways in which they can enhance their comprehension and production of the target language and ways in which they can continue learning after leaving the classroom.

CONCLUSION

The study found that students exhibit pragmatic, semantic, morphological, and syntactic fossilization in their English language use. The data gathered supports Selinker's statement that interlanguage halts the development of L2, reinforcing the hypothesis that differences between English and Filipino contribute to this phenomenon. This hypothesis was implicitly tested throughout the research.

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