RESEARCH ARTICLE

FOSSILIZATION OF INTERLANGUAGE AND ITS ENLIGHTENMENT TO ORAL ENGLISH TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Fossilization is a term used to describe the permanent cessation of interlanguage learning, occurring when a learner is unable to attain target language norms at all levels of linguistic structure and in all discourse domains, despite having positive ability, opportunity, and motivation to learn and acculturate into the target society. This phenomenon is common in second language acquisition and poses an inevitable problem for language learners, particularly in the case of oral English. As such, it is of significant importance to analyze and understand the causes of fossilization in interlanguage in order to develop effective countermeasures. This paper aims to introduce the concept of fossilization of interlanguage, explore the reasons behind it, and elaborate on its manifestation in Chinese students' oral English. Additionally, practical suggestions will be provided to help learners overcome fossilization of interlanguage. By identifying the root causes of fossilization and providing effective strategies to address it, language learners can improve their proficiency in the target language and better integrate into the target society.

Keywords: fossilization; interlanguage; spoken English; second language acquisition

I.   Introduction

English is a mandatory subject for Chinese students from primary school to university, and most Chinese individuals can speak a few basic words in English. However, overall, the English proficiency level of Chinese people is not high, particularly in terms of spoken English. Fossilization of interlanguage is a recognized phenomenon in the process of acquiring a second language. It is evident in various aspects of English learning, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, among which the most significant issue is encountered in the oral learning process. Fossilization is a major challenge in language teaching as it can impact learners' motivation and hinder their learning progress. This is a common problem in language education that requires the attention of educators.

In view of Selinker and Lamendella (1978:187), fossilization refers to a permanent cessation of interlanguage learning before the learner has attained target language norms at all levels of linguistic structure and in all discourse domains in spite of the learner's positive ability, opportunity, and motivation to learn and acculturate into target society. According to different classification standard, Selinker (1972) has divided fossilization into individual fossilization and group fossilization, and permanent fossilization and temporary fossilization. Individual fossilization refers to the phenomenon that second language learners make the same

kinds of mistakes, such as in phonetics, grammar and vocabulary, after being corrected for many times. There are two cases of individual fossilization in language learning. The first situation occurs when fossilization eventually disappears as second language learners' abilities improve over time. The second scenario is when permanent errors persist in the learning process despite the continued improvement of the learner's language skills. Group fossilization, on the other hand, refers to the phenomenon where individual fossilization affects other language learners in a society, leading to their fossilization. This can result in the emergence of a new dialect when the fossilized foreign language becomes widespread and accepted as a normal phenomenon in the whole society, as seen in the case of Indian English.

Fossilization is an inevitable occurrence in the learning process of second language learners. Initially, learners may experience temporary fossilization. However, with continued learning and improvement, such as in grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, or through professional foreign language training, learners can overcome fossilization and master the second language. On the contrary, if second language learners do not continue to learn and improve after experiencing fossilization, it may become permanent and difficult to eliminate in the long run. According to Dai Weidong and Niu Qiang (1999), most non-foreign language majors experience temporary stabilization in their interlanguage for various reasons, rather than fossilization. With intensive foreign language training, they can achieve significant improvement and reach the level of foreign language majors. Even foreign language majors may experience temporary fossilization, which can be overcome with optimal inputs, such as living or studying in an English-speaking country for a period of time. After that is permanent fossilization.

In terms of the reasons of fossilization in interlanguage, Selinker (1972) summarized its causes into five aspects: language transfer; transfer of training; strategies of second language learning; strategies of second language communication; and overgeneralization of target language linguistic material.

(1) Language transfer

The process of transfer in language learning can be divided into two categories: positive transfer and negative transfer. Negative transfer, also known as language interference, is responsible for language fossilization. This occurs when deep-rooted expressions from the learner's mother tongue are transferred to the interlanguage, interfering with the acquisition of the second language. Pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar are all areas where native language transfer can cause interference, but pronunciation is the most significant. Despite studying a foreign language for an extended period, the majority of second language learners are unable to achieve a native accent. For instance, Chinese students often struggle to differentiate between long and short vowels when learning English, and may even substitute similar sounds from their native language for English pronunciation (Gao Yun & Zhu Jingmei, 2005).

(2) Transfer of training

The transfer of training is primarily caused by incorrect language usage or unidiomatic interlanguage by foreign language teachers, leading to a misunderstanding of the foreign language by learners. This issue is most common during the initial stages of language learning, and its effects can be long-lasting. Furthermore, the selection of inappropriate language teaching materials can also contribute to the transfer of training. Many textbooks tend to idealize language, which can create a gap between what is taught and what is actually used in communication. As a result, foreign language learners may only learn formal grammar and have limited exposure to informal grammar used in daily life, leading to inflexible and rigid oral English. Additionally, inappropriate pragmatic errors may occur, resulting in pragmatic fossilization (Jesus Romero, 2002).

(3) Strategies of second language learning

Learning strategies encompass the methods, management techniques, and language application activities used during the learning process. These strategies include cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies. According to Selinker (1974), a learner's culture can limit their learning strategies. For instance, Chinese foreign language learners often rely on dictionaries or peers to overcome difficulties, rather than consulting teachers directly, which is related to Chinese culture. Fossilization, a common phenomenon among

learners, also occurs when learners simplify the target language during the learning process. The most noticeable simplification occurs in the syntax (Gao Yun & Zhu Jingmei, 2005).

(4) Strategies of second language communication

In regards to communication strategy, Niu Qiang (2000) has proposed four aspects: avoidance, prefabrication, seeking help from authority, and changing language. Additionally, Kasper and Faerch (1983) have categorized communication strategy into two groups: reduction strategy and achievement strategy. However, they believe that learners do not generally acquire the language by adopting the reduction strategy. Research has shown that when foreign language learners reach a certain level, they tend to use avoidance and simplification strategies when communicating. Unfortunately, this can weaken their motivation to learn, and some may even stop learning altogether, only acquiring the necessary vocabulary. Although learners may be aware of their shortcomings, they continue to use these strategies because they believe that their mistakes will not affect the meaning of their message. In the long run, this can lead to fossilization in their use of language (Gao Yun & Zhu Jingmei, 2005).

(5) Overgeneralization of target language linguistic material

According to Ellis (1999:301), the overgeneralization of the target language is a common issue among second language learners, where they tend to apply grammar rules or language items inappropriately by using words or structures in a more regular pattern than necessary. That is, this occurs when learners apply what they have learnt to new knowledge, resulting in mistakes. In the process of acquiring a second language, learners tend to generalize the rules of the language system. While this may decrease the difficulty and enable quicker understanding of the language, learners cannot truly comprehend the grammatical principles and semantics of the second language, leading to fossilization. Although learners may be able to chat with others in the second language as if it were their mother tongue, their understanding of the language remains incomplete.

II.   Fossilization in Chinese students' oral English

"Dumb English" is a common problem among Chinese students of all ages who struggle with expressing themselves in English. The fossilization of interlanguage is a reflection of this challenge, with significant impacts on their oral English learning. There are five main aspects of fossilization in Chinese students' oral English: phonetics, morphology, semantics, syntax, and discourse. These areas require special attention to help Chinese students overcome their communication difficulties and improve their English proficiency.

1.   In phonetic aspect

Phonological interference is a common cause of speech fossilization. Chinese students often struggle with distinguishing between long and short vowels in English due to the lack of strict differentiation in Pinyin (Chen Jiliang, Tan Xiuzhu, 2006). This leads to common errors such as misspelling [iː] as [i]. Additionally, Pinyin consists of initials and finals, with corresponding phonemes for each final. However, some English letters in the end of a word are silent. Students may add certain phoneme in their English pronunciation due to the influence of Pinyin, such as pronouncing "please" as [pliːsi]. Chinese students also often mispronounce English diphthongs, such as pronouncing [ei] as "ai" or "ei" as in Pinyin. Rhythm is another significant difference between English and Chinese, particularly in stress, length, and speed of each syllable in a sentence (Chen Jiliang, Tan Xiuzhu, 2006). Stress is crucial in English for distinguishing word meanings, but Chinese students often struggle with the correct stress placement, resulting in stress dislocation. For instance, "record" can be pronounced as /rɪˈkɔːd/ and /ˈrekɔːd/ for its verb form and noun form separately, but Chinese students always confuse the two. Chinese rhythm is timed by syllable, while English is timed by stress, which causes Chinese students to try to pronounce every syllable and word clearly, disrupting the rhythm of English and creating a foreign accent (Zhong Qiquan, 2003:102).

2.   In morphological aspect

Chinese students often struggle with various aspects of English grammar, including tenses, possessives, subject-verb agreement, person and number agreement, predicate verb changes, passives, plural nouns,

indefinite and definite articles, etc. These difficulties can persist throughout the entire process of second language acquisition. For instance, when the subject is the third person singular, the verb typically ends with "s", while "es" is added when the verb ends with "s, z, sh, ch, tch, o". However, some Chinese students may make mistakes such as saying "He always catchs a ball and falls over". These errors are pervasive in Chinese students' spoken English, with examples including using "gooses" instead of "geese" or saying "pennies" instead of "pence". Additionally, they may add "-ed" to verbs like "teach" and "run" to indicate the past tense or say sentences like "I don't can paly the piano". If these mistakes are not corrected promptly, they can become fossilized and persist even after extensive language learning.

3.   In semantic aspect

According to linguistic theory, cross-cultural knowledge plays a crucial role in second language acquisition. Differences in historical, cultural, and social backgrounds can significantly affect semantic understanding and expression. In the context of English learning, students often face challenges in comprehending common English proverbs, idioms, and slangs. Similarly, when Chinese students use Chinese idioms without considering the English semantic context, they may make errors. For instance, the Chinese idiom "好好学习，天天向上" is often translated as "Good good study, day day up", which is not an accurate representation of its intended meaning. Similarly, the phrase "一个善意的谎言" is often translated as "a kind lie" instead of "a white lie". Such negative transfer of mother tongue can lead to fossilization over time. Many students tend to rely on a "word-to-word" translation approach when speaking English, which hinders their cross-cultural awareness. However, cultural differences between English and Chinese mean that many words are not equivalent in terms of their semantic meaning. This can lead to the fossilization of interlanguage, which is a common phenomenon encountered by English learners.

4.   In syntactic aspect

The Chinese language places a strong emphasis on parataxis, which highlights the intrinsic logical relation of words, sentences, and language expression. On the other hand, English focuses on hypotaxis, which emphasizes the expression of the grammar of the sentence itself. When Chinese students apply the sequence of their mother tongue to English expression, it often leads to mistakes. For instance, the phrase "because...so..." is forbidden in English, while "因为. . . 所有. . . " is a fixed conjunction structure in Chinese, even though they have the same meaning. There are significant differences between English and Chinese grammar. When learning English, students may be influenced by their first language and tend to apply its grammar to speaking English. This can result in syntactic confusion, which is a common manifestation of the fossilization of interlanguage phenomenon in Chinese students' spoken English.

5.   In discourse aspect

The difference in thinking patterns between English and Chinese is significant. Michael Hoey (1983) categorizes the thinking models of English discourse into three types: problem-solution, general-particular, and the matching pattern. Research indicates that Chinese discourse lacks the general-particular pattern and instead has a tendency towards implicit and euphemistic expression, also known as "hiding" (Wang Moxi, 1993). However, learners often struggle to resist the negative transfer of their native language's thinking mode, resulting in awkward English expression despite good syntax and rhetoric. This can lead native English speakers to perceive the learner's speech as nonsensical or gibberish. For instance, in China, people greet each other by asking "吃了吗" ("Have you eaten") or suggesting "改天一起出去吃" ("Let's go out to eat sometime"), while in London, British people often initiate small talk by discussing the weather. If a Chinese student were to greet a foreigner on the street with "Have you eaten", the latter may feel confused or perplexed.

III．Solutions to fossilization in oral English teaching

Through analyzing Chinese students' oral English performances, it becomes evident that fossilization is caused by various oral problems. In order to effectively address this issue, it is essential to consider the underlying causes while also taking into account the students' real-life challenges. To minimize the negative

impact of fossilization during the process of second language acquisition and speaking English, several coping strategies can be implemented.

1.   Increasing standard teaching discourse

The teaching of oral English in China is increasingly focused on communicative competence, with many educators advocating for a reduction in teacher talk time and an increase in student talk time. While it is widely recognized that practice is crucial for developing oral English skills, it is important to note that the phenomenon of fossilization can also be caused by a lack of correct language input (Chen Huiyuan, 1999). Therefore, an excessive amount of student discourse in the classroom can lead to incorrect vocabulary and grammar being reinforced, as well as difficulties in understanding each other and using native pronunciation and intonation. Additionally, without a strong understanding of the cultural background of the target language country, negative transfer of pragmatics can easily occur, leading to the occurrence of fossilization (Yang Wenxiu, 2000). According to Zhao Xiaohong (1998), it is crucial to establish a sufficient standard for teacher discourse in language teaching classes. This approach can benefit both the organization of classroom teaching and students' language acquisition. The use of standard English by teachers is essential to achieving the desired teaching effect. Additionally, it serves as an example of the target language, which is another crucial way to provide students with language input. In general, teacher discourse can take on various roles, such as setting up tasks and requirements for students before practice or summarizing and inducing discussion afterward. Teachers can also participate directly in student communication activities as a member. However, it is important to note that some students with excellent oral English skills and language ability can provide correct input during oral English teaching. When arranging pair or group work, teachers should avoid putting students with poor language ability in the same group and consider the differences in students' levels. It should reflect clear hierarchy in personnel arrangement (Yang Wenxiu, 2000). Additionally, teachers should provide timely feedback and assessment to their students to prevent errors from becoming permanent. In oral English teaching, teachers should focus on developing both communicative ability and language proficiency. This can be achieved through proper arrangement of classroom tasks, accurate assessment of language competence, and effective use of communicative strategies. By doing so, students can avoid temporary fossilization and achieve maximum development of their interlanguage before permanent fossilization occurs.

2.   Optimizing teaching materials

To prevent the phenomenon of fossilization in second language acquisition, it is crucial to optimize and compile the teaching materials. The first step is to enhance the learning and teaching conditions of oral English, which can be achieved by using original oral English textbooks, authentic English videos, and catchy English songs. Additionally, it is essential to cultivate an English-speaking environment that is on par with that of native speakers. Teachers should utilize English as the primary language of instruction, encourage students to actively participate in class discussions in English, and prompt them to respond to questions in English. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to engage in various English activities, such as English corners, English drama parties, and English radio programs (Tang Yiming & Zhang Yi, 2020). Teaching materials are essential in second language learning, and they can be optimized in terms of interest, motivation, and practicality. English textbooks, authentic English videos, and English songs are among the main ways to learn a second language. The content of these materials must be attractive to learners, so they are likely to be interested in it and understand its essence. In addition, the teaching of oral English in class must be motivating. Learners need to understand why certain sentences are expressed in a particular way to prevent the fossilization of interlanguage. Finally, English tapes or videos should be practical by combining conversation, news, speeches, and lectures. This approach ensures that learners can speak accurately in various situations. By considering interest, motivation, and practicality in teaching materials, second language learners can effectively learn and apply new language skills.

3.   Teaching based on the semantic background of interlanguage

Miao Zhiqiang (2019) argues that students may have a basic understanding of the semantic meaning of words, but they often lack a deeper understanding of the semantic background of interlanguage. To address this issue, teachers should divide the semantic boundary of interlanguage output and provide clear guidance on what

meanings can be expressed using certain words in specific contexts, as well as the limitations of using these words. This approach can help students to master the extended meaning of words. Additionally, teachers should distinguish between spoken and written English to avoid the pragmatic fossilization of interlanguage. For example, while many Chinese people may be familiar with the various meanings of the word "figure" such as "数字；人物；图表" in standard English, they may not be aware that it can also be used as a slang to mean "to think or decide that something will happen or is true". When Chinese students want to express the sentence "我觉得明天要下雨了" in English, "I figure it'll rain tomorrow" is a proper and native expression. However, most Chinese students do not use the word "figure" to express "think" in their daily conversations. Additionally, when Chinese students want to express the sentence "我将要出去", they often write "I will go" or "I am going to go". However, some words in written English are different from their spoken counterparts. For example, "I gonna go" is a more native and colloquial way of expressing this sentence in spoken English. Another example is the expression "忍受", which can be expressed as "put up with" in oral English and "tolerate" in written English. Students should write "I can't tolerate that noise" on their writing test answer sheet, but in daily life, it would be better to say "I can't put up with that noise". It is clear that the semantic background of interlanguage is important for Chinese students' oral English learning. They should pay attention to the different meanings of words in both written and spoken forms, and develop the habit of accumulating these usages. In this way, the fluency and accuracy of their interlanguage can gradually approach the standard of the target language.

IV.　Conclusion

The problem of fossilization in oral English teaching is deeply ingrained among Chinese students, and as a result, more and more attention is being paid to this issue. However, some approaches to solving this problem have been misguided and have even exacerbated the issue. It is crucial to address this problem at its root and from its causes. This paper aims to explore the manifestation of fossilization in Chinese students' oral English, and provide practical suggestions to help them overcome this issue. Firstly, the paper provides a clear introduction to fossilization, which can be categorized into individual and group fossilization, as well as permanent and temporary fossilization. The five reasons behind fossilization of interlanguage are also discussed, including language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of second language learning, strategies of second language communication, and overgeneralization of target language linguistic material. The paper then analyzes fossilization in Chinese students' oral English in five aspects: phonetic, morphological, semantic, syntactic, and discourse aspects. Finally, three solutions are proposed to address this issue, including increasing standard teaching discourse, optimizing teaching materials, and teaching based on the semantic background of interlanguage.

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