

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 12. Issue 3. 2025 (July-Sept.)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

Impact of Family in Overcoming Interlanguage Fossilization: A Syntactic Study of Malayali Graduates' English

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[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.12.3.152](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.12.3.152)



Article information

Article Received:11/08/2025
Article Accepted:02/09/2025
Published online:07/09/2025

Abstract

In Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Target Language (TL) is not acquired via a quick transfer from First Language (L₁) to Second Language (L₂). It can be acquired only via a state of Interlanguage (IL). While IL as such is not a deterrent to SLA, the possibility of fossilization poses a serious threat. The current paper is the product of a syntactic study conducted among Malayali graduates aged 20-24 to prove the presence of IL in their English language acquisition despite prolonged years of education in the Target Language (TL). To this end, the study employs Selinker's theory of Interlanguage, Corder's methodology of error analysis, and tools of descriptive statistics to identify patterns in the respondents' Interlanguage in correlation to predetermined socio-economic and educational variables concerning the family of the respondents.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, Interlanguage, fossilization, error analysis, syntactic study, socio-economic and educational variables.

Introduction

A good majority of the Kerala society is bilingual, if not multilingual, and in most cases the second language is English. The trend is on the rise owing to the fact that a sound knowledge in English is deemed a sure passport to opportunities. As a result, the language curriculum of Kerala's educational system is structured to feature English as a compulsory course till the completion of the graduate programme; the belief being that the learners will have achieved the Target Language (TL) after such a prolonged period of instruction in English.

However, what is desired is not always been what is achieved. Most learners find their English language acquisition fossilized at some stage of Interlanguage (IL). The learner builds up the Interlanguage by using a series of strategies that help him/her to learn the language and communicate in it. This linguistic system is distinct from both the TL and the learner's First Language (L₁) and carries a potential threat of fossilization. Many cognitive and sociolinguistic factors are decisive in the process

of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) via IL. Of these factors, the present paper focuses on the impact of the learner's family in overcoming Interlanguage fossilization.

Theoretical Framework

According to Griffiths & Parr (2001), the implication of the Interlanguage theory is rooted in the fact that for the first time, the learners' conscious attempts to control their learning is given due consideration. Though the concept of Interlanguage, with its current implications in SLA was first introduced by Weinreich when he spoke of "interlingual identifications" (1953, p. 7), the term first appeared in print in Selinker's article in *General Linguistics* (1969) on the experimental portions of the language transfer study. In the article, Selinker describes 'interlanguage' with the aid of the observable data gathered when a speaker attempts to produce a foreign norm. To this end, he proposes the study of both the errors and non-errors of the learners. He maintained that in a comprehensive language transfer study, the existence of an Interlanguage has to be recognized as being inevitable and has to be acknowledged not as an isolated collection of errors but as a system.

However, the term Interlanguage gained currency only with the publication of Selinker's influential article in the *International Review of Applied Linguistics* (1972).

[The] utterances which are produced when the learner attempts to say sentences of a TL....for most learners of a second language is not identical to the hypothesized corresponding set of utterances which would have been produced by a native speaker of the TL had he attempted to express the same meaning as the learner. Since we can observe that these two sets of utterances are not identical, then in the making of constructs relevant to a theory of second-language learning, one would be completely justified in hypothesizing, perhaps even compelled to hypothesize, the existence of a separate linguistic system based on the observable output which results from a learner's attempted production of a TL norm. This linguistic system we will call 'interlanguage' (IL). (p. 213-14)

Furthering the concept, Adjemian (1976) highlights the universal aspects of IL. He identifies three main characteristics of IL: (i) systematicity, (ii) permeability, and (iii) stability. He believed that Interlanguages are in a state of flux and as such considered them incomplete. His third key feature of IL – stability – is evidenced by the observable phenomena of fossilization; a concept introduced in SLA by Selinker in 1972. It was the product of his SLA studies where he observed that a vast majority of Second Language (L₂) learners fail to achieve native-speaker competence. However, the notion of fossilization can be found even in Weinreich who talked about "permanent grammatical influence" (cited in Selinker, 1992, p. 41) and Nemser who referred to "permanent intermediate systems and subsystems" (ibid, p. 174).

Selinker views fossilization as a key concept in IL because it proves the existence of the latter. He is of the opinion that in the discourse of the second language speakers there exist phonological, morphological, and syntactic features that are different from the TL norm. This, he posits, can be found even after years of exposure to the TL and instruction in it. Selinker & Lakshmanan (1992), define fossilization in terms of persistent non-target-like structures, thereby acknowledging long-term persistence as a major attribute in its empirical discovery. In Selinker's (1996) view, such structures result in ultimate fossilized competence. This is perhaps why Han (2004) uses the term 'failure' to denote this phenomenon, and she identifies it as "the permanent lack of mastery of a TL despite continuous exposure to adequate input, adequate motivation to improve, and sufficient opportunity to practice" (p. 4).

Studies in fossilization characterize it as a noticeable feature of SLA. In the words of Ellis (2004), fossilization is part of the IL process which occurs at a certain point in the IL development. Towell & Hawkins (1994) observe that even after several years of exposure to a second language, even if the L₂ is used for everyday communication by the speaker, it is not uncommon to find that the learner still uses

non-native grammatical constructions, has a strong foreign accent or has non-native intuitions about the interpretation of certain types of sentences.

Here, a distinction has to be made between error and mistake as the conscious errors that the learners make reveal their state of IL. Mistakes are performance errors, such as slips of the tongue, where as true errors are markers of where the learner is in terms of L₂ competence. The errors are indicative of the state of the learner's underlying knowledge of the language or his/ her transitional competence. In Interlanguage the errors could be interference errors, developmental errors or both at the same time. The errors made by the learners is thus crucial in Interlanguage research because when these errors become permanent features of the learner's IL, they result in its fossilization.

Methodology

The present study is the product of a cross-sectional syntactic analysis of the Interlanguage sentences produced by the Malayali graduates aged 20-24 years. The particular age group was selected because they constitute the youth population waiting to be absorbed by the employment sectors. The data collection and analysis employed both qualitative and quantitative techniques. The qualitative data was later quantified to analyse the influence of the predetermined socio-economic and educational variables on them. To elicit the data for the analysis a language test sheet supplemented with structured interview, personal data sheet, and a three-point Likert frequency scale questionnaire were used.

For error analysis Corder's (1973) method of classifying errors into overt and covert errors was employed. Overt errors were subsequently classified as those made by the processes of addition, omission, substitution, and misordering. The conscious errors that the learners make reveal their state of IL. The result of the error analysis was converted into quantitative data and analysed against the socio-economic and educational variables identified beforehand; the chief of them being the family's annual income, and educational qualification and employment status of the parents; especially the mother.

Data Analysis

The language test sheet was used to elicit a total of 25 sentences each. To minimize the occurrence of 'mistakes,' as opposed to 'errors,' the sample was promised confidentiality so as to reduce mistakes caused by stress. They were also given an opportunity to edit their responses to do away with any mistakes they came across. The sentences the sample returned after these measures are deemed to represent their level of competence in English. The following figure depicts the percentage of errors made by the sample under the various error types.

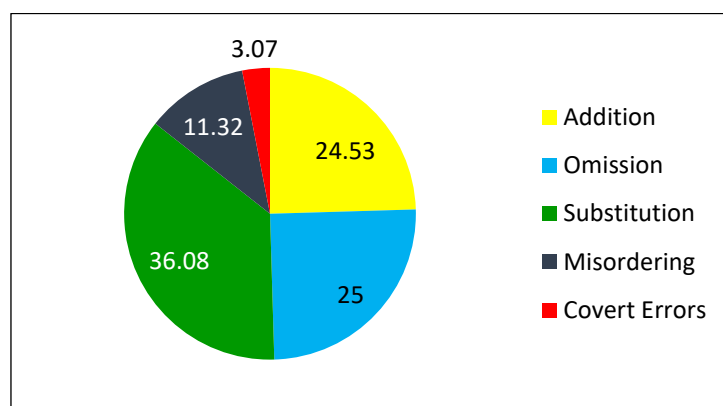


Figure 1: Percentage of error types

On analysing the sentences, it was found that the sample made both overt and covert errors (in some cases both simultaneously). They were prone to all four processes of overt errors, viz addition, omission, substitution, and misordering; both in isolation and in all possible combinations. This is a disheartening state of affairs. On an average, 12 out of the 25 sentences constructed by each respondent have fallen short of the TL. The number would have been higher if the morphemic errors were also considered. The implications get way more significant when the error statistics are analysed against the socio-economic and educational variables identified for the study like annual income of the family, and educational qualification and employment sector of the parents; especially the mother are taken into consideration.

Annual Income of the Family: The most decisive variable in a socio-economic study of a sample is perhaps income. While the mean number of errors made by sample belonging to families with an annual income of INR one lakh and below was 14, that made by sample from families with annual income of more than INR one lakh was 7. The entire spectrum is depicted in the chart below.

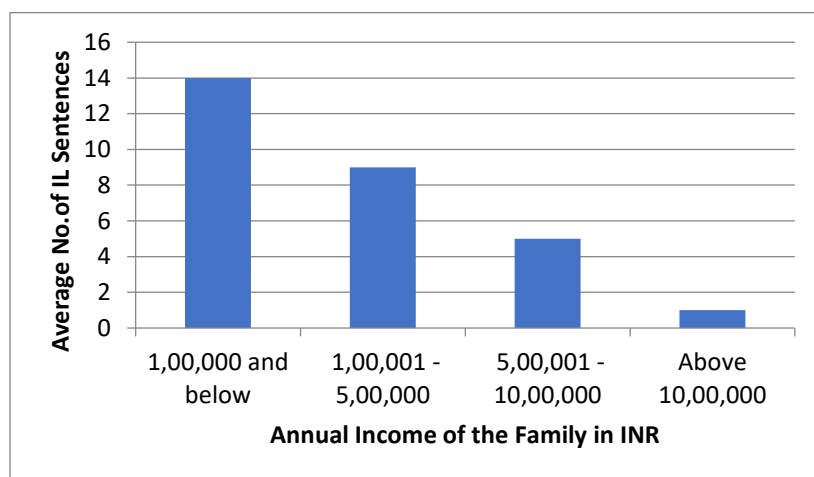


Figure 2: Average number of IL sentences by annual income

By juxtaposing the average number of IL sentences produced by sample from the extremities of the annual income range, it can be found that annual income of the family is a crucial variable.

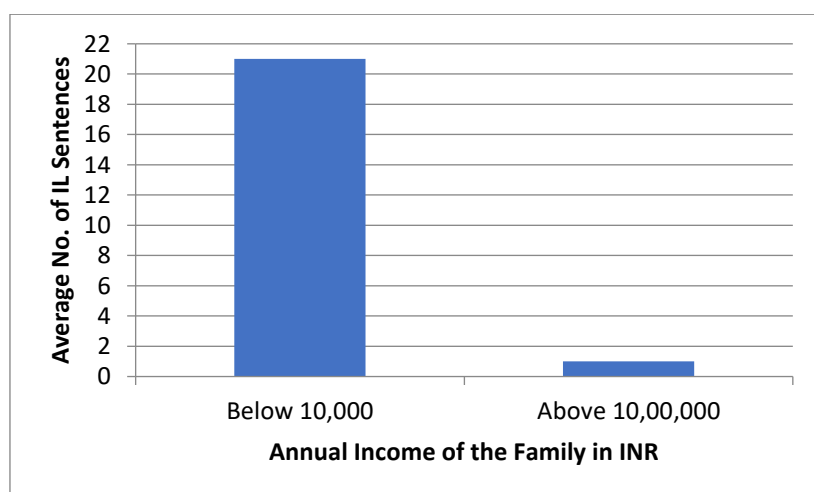


Figure 3: Average number of IL sentences by annual income from the extremities of the range

The low average of errors among the high income groups might not be a direct product of the availability of high income, it could possibly be the result of the access such income provides to media like the Internet, television, smart phones, etc. that offer better exposure to English. The lower income

groups, on the other hand, might not possess access to all or some of the aforementioned media. Also, they might have to devote any time they can spare to engage in one or more jobs that will earn some additional income. The differences between the haves and the have-nots impinge on their aptitude for English language learning as well. In general, while the lower income groups perceive English as an added encumbrance; to the higher income groups, it is the language of corporate liaisons, Hollywood movies, and tweets.

Educational Qualification of Parents: To analyse the impact of this variable, the highest completed educational qualification was considered. Accordingly, they were categorized into 4 by taking into account the highest educational qualification between the father and mother. The analysis of data revealed that when at least one parent had an educational qualification of UG or above, the respondents on an average produced 7 IL sentences, and when both the parents had education below SSLC, they made 16 IL sentences. It can be seen from the chart below that the error rate increased with the drop in the parents' education.

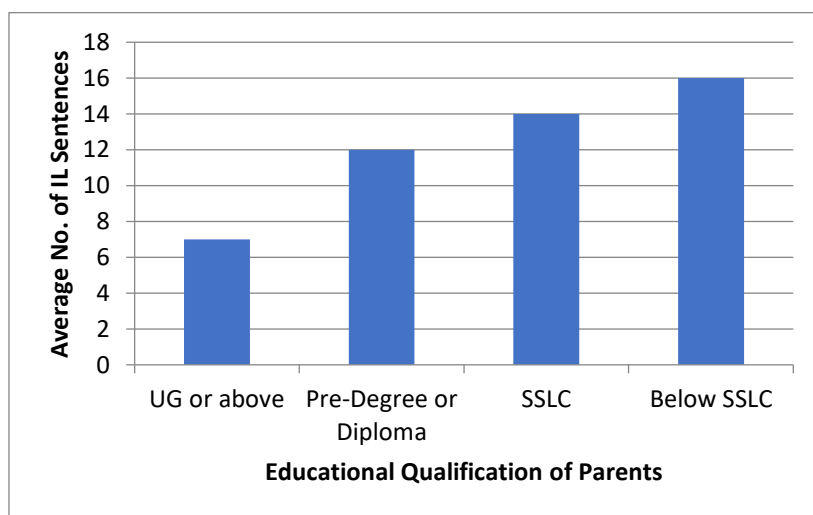


Figure 4: Average number of IL sentences by educational qualification of parents

The educational qualification of the individual parent was also taken into account and the extremities of this data revealed something curious. In cases where the father had an educational qualification of PG and/or above the mean error was 6 but in cases where the mother had the same educational qualification, the error mean dropped to 3. At the other end of this spectrum the story goes in the reverse. Where the father's educational qualification was below SSLC the mean error was 15, but those with mothers with educational qualification below SSLC made 2 errors more on an average.

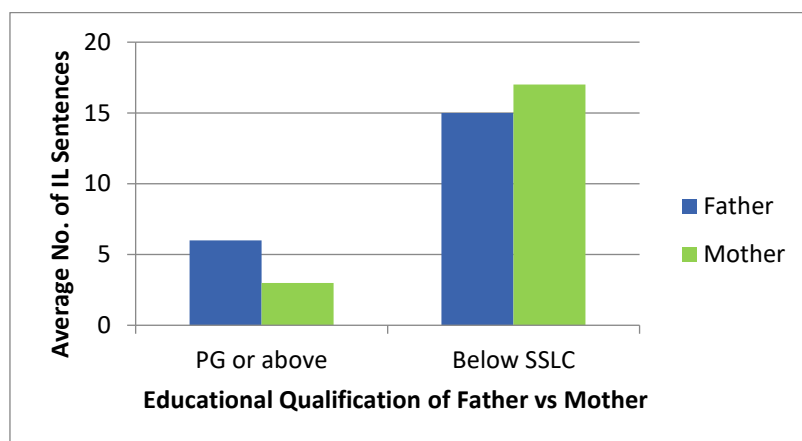


Figure 5: Average number of IL sentences by highest and lowest educational qualification of individual parent

Employment Status of the Parents: The study observed that the employment status of the parents plotted a predictable pattern in the average number of IL sentences produced by the sample. The sample made fewer errors when at least one parent was employed and even fewer when both were employed.

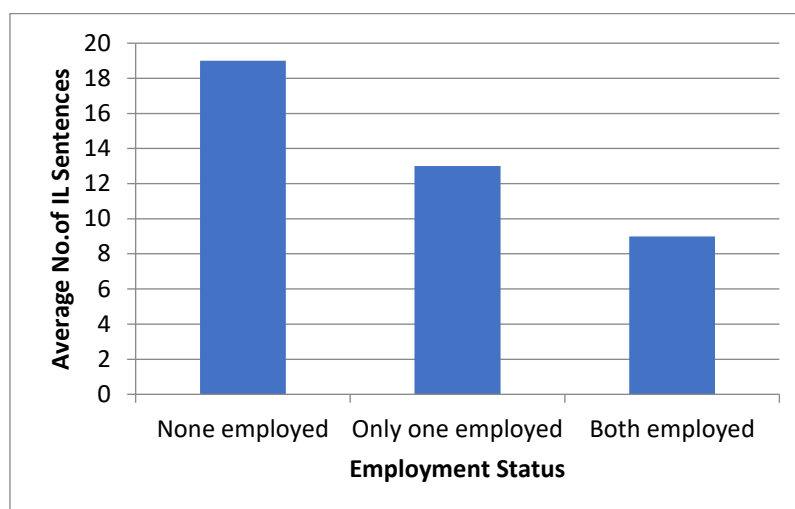


Figure 6: Average number of IL sentences by employment status of parents

The sector in which the parent(s) was employed in also appeared to influence the number of IL sentences produced. To identify the pattern in this regard the parents' occupation was classified into four sectors of economy:

- Primary (extracts or harvests raw materials or food from the earth),
- Secondary (manufactures finished goods from the raw materials),
- Tertiary (provides services), and
- Quaternary (concerns with intellectual activities).

In cases where only one parent was employed, the following pattern was observed.

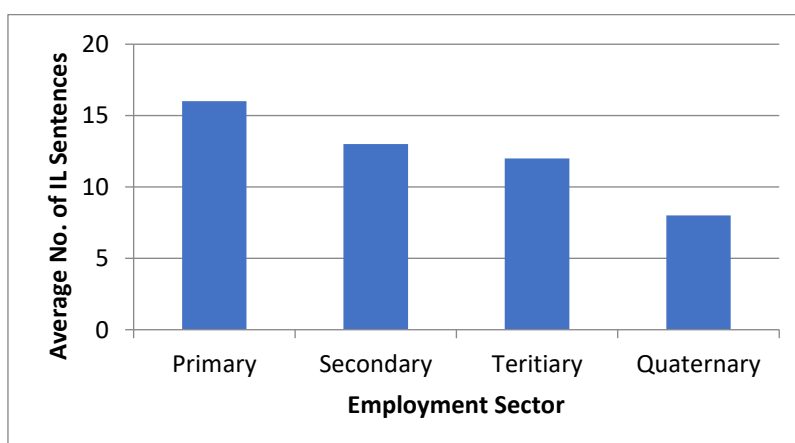


Figure 7: Average number of IL sentences by employment sector (when only one parent is employed)

The employment sector seemed to influence even in cases where both the parents were employed. On an average, when both the parents were employed, the respondents produced 9 IL sentences. But the mean value of those with both parents employed in the primary sector and those with both parents employed in the quaternary sector was found to be 15 and 4 respectively. This is a pretty significant difference.

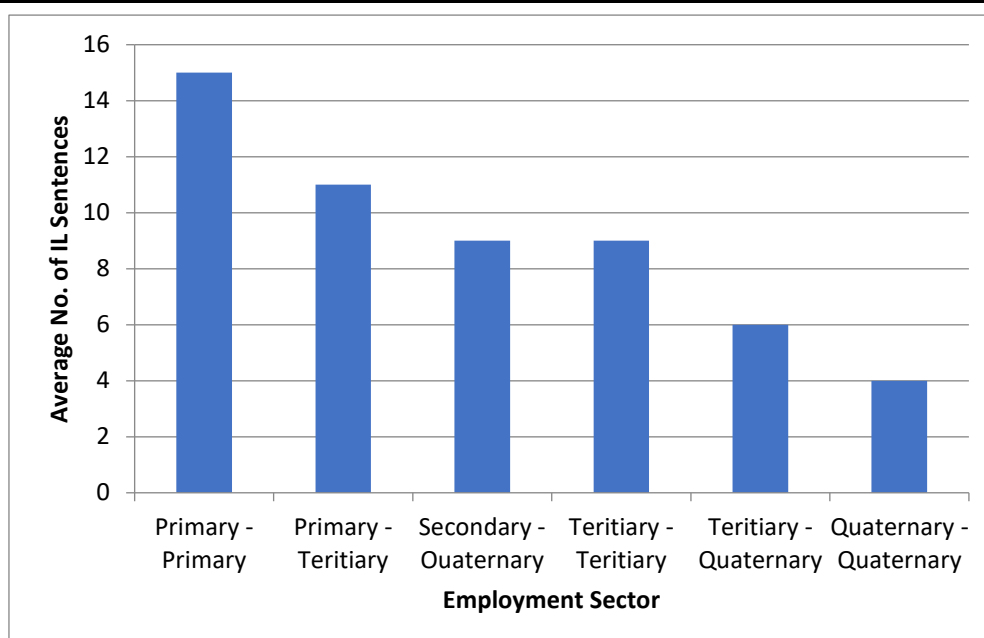


Figure 8: Average number of IL sentences by employment sector (when both parents are employed)

Employment Status of Mother: The study showed that the employment status of the parents and their sector of employment in general did indeed influence the number of IL sentences produced. However, the pilot study also revealed that the occupational status of the mother had an effect on the sample's IL sentence count. This was a remarkable piece of information since most of the mothers were unemployed. In a patriarchal society, it is usually expected of the mother to stay back home and look after the household and she is the first person to be blamed if the child underperforms. The study observed that in cases where the mother was employed, the sample on an average produced 6 IL sentences fewer than when the mother was unemployed.

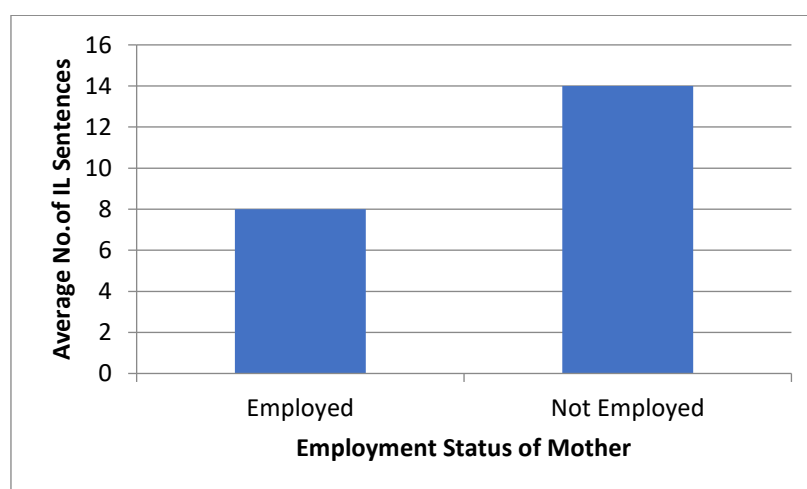


Figure 9: Average number of IL sentences by employment status of mother

The mean error value is slightly lower than that in the scenario where both the parents were employed. Moreover, as with the sample data concerning the employment status of the parents, when the mother was indeed employed, the sector of employment seemed to influence the number of IL sentences the sample produced. In cases where the mother was employed in the primary sector the mean stood at 15, whereas when she was employed in the quaternary sector the mean dropped to 6.

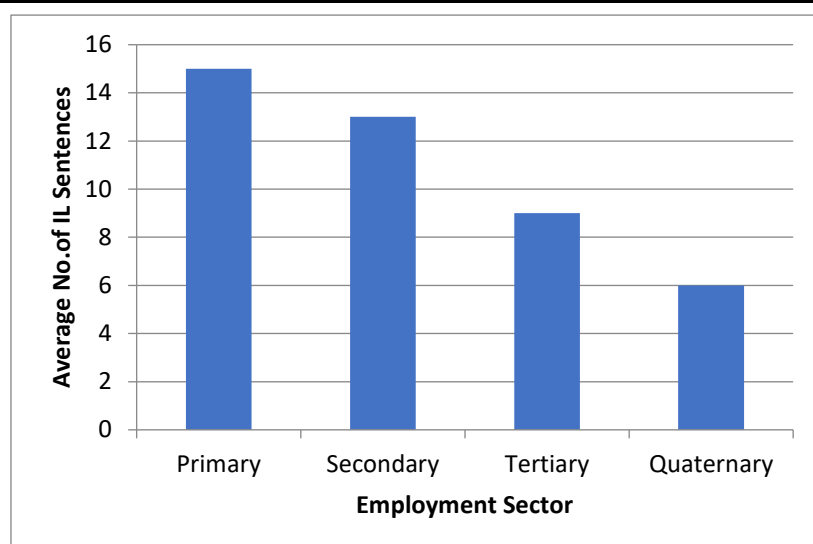


Figure 10: Average number of IL sentences by employment sector of mother

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

The present study being a cross-sectional one, could make only general observations on the Interlanguage produced by the sample. More studies, especially longitudinal ones could provide a better view of inter and intra learner IL and fossilization. Such studies might also be better equipped to observe and explain the stabilization-fossilization dichotomy. Moreover, the study concentrated only on the syntax of the English sentences produced by the sample, albeit with due consideration to semantics and pragmatics. It is hoped that further studies will be undertaken to analyze the level of IL fossilization in the other domains of the language. Also, the study focused exclusively on a few predetermined socio-economic and educational variables, which by no means constitute the full list of influential variables. More studies are required to analyse the full spectrum.

Conclusion

The study found that a good majority of the educated native speakers of Malayalam are at some stage of fossilized Interlanguage. They have failed miserably in L₂ acquisition which in turn points at the inadequacy of our language curriculum. Realising the growing demand for mastery in English, the language curriculum, catering to a bilingual society, has been so framed as to facilitate the acquisition of English as an L₂. Unfortunately, the truth remains that most students, even after graduation find it difficult to communicate in English. The alarming fact is that in many cases the utterances are not slips of the tongue but conscious and premeditated articulations. The truth is, their L₂ acquisition has fossilized at an Interlanguage state: they are stuck in between two languages.

The patterns found by the study in the IL of the respondents is highly significant. The support offered by the family in terms of time, facilities, and a refined environment fostered by the educational qualification and employment status and sector of the parents; can scaffold the learner in overcoming Interlanguage fossilization and advance towards better TL acquisition. The support of the family, not just in terms of encouragement, but in providing an innate impetus to the learner by virtue of the parents being well educated and employed hence cannot be overlooked. Apart from ensuring material facilities, this implies a persistent refinement in the learners' learning environment and outlook. It is hence hoped that the findings of the study get translated into the socio-educational structure of the society where one's educational and employment status can shape not just the present, but future generations as well.

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