

Interlanguage fossilization in second language acquisition and its implications for foreign language teaching

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Abstract: In the process of second language acquisition, the phenomenon of interlanguage fossilization is inevitable. This phenomenon hinders the advancement of language learners' proficiency in a foreign language. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the definition, characteristics, and manifestations of interlanguage fossilization, exploring its underlying causes. Based on a synthesis of previous research, it also offers corresponding insights for foreign language teaching, aiming to provide valuable references for English teaching practices.

Key words: second language acquisition; interlanguage; fossilization phenomenon; foreign language teaching

1 Introduction

Interlanguage fossilization hinders fluency and accuracy of second language acquisition, yet its mechanisms remain unclear. This study explores its causes, characteristics, and teaching implications, providing theoretical insights and practical strategies while identifying research gaps for future studies.

2 Theoretical basis

2.1 The theory of interlanguage

2.1.1 The concept and characteristics of interlanguage

The concept of interlanguage hypothesis was proposed by the American linguist Selinker in 1969 [1]. Interlanguage refers to a dynamic language system that learners create during second language acquisition, using certain learning strategies [2]. It is formed based on the input of the target language, and it is different from both the learner's first language and the target language. As the learning progresses, interlanguage gradually transitions toward the target language [3]. Interlanguage has the following characteristics:

- 1) Uniqueness: At any stage, interlanguage is a unique system existing between the first and target languages, varying among learners.
- 2) Dynamicity: It is not fixed but constantly evolving, gradually moving toward the target language.
- 3) Error features: Errors are persistent and may reoccur, making interlanguage development non-linear and sometimes convoluted.

2.1.2 The causes of interlanguage

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Interlanguage formation results from cognitive and language learning factors. Mother tongue transfer plays a key role, with both positive and negative effects — facilitating learning or causing errors [4]. Overgeneralization leads learners to apply rules too broadly, affecting accuracy and complexity [5]. Improper learning strategies, such as simplification and avoidance, may aid communication but hinder long-term language development. Psychological factors, like motivation and anxiety, also influence interlanguage — high motivation enhances learning, while anxiety suppresses output [6]. Understanding these factors helps optimize second language teaching [7].

2.2 The theory of fossilization

2.2.1 The concept and characteristics of fossilization

Interlanguage fossilization occurs when learners' language systems stagnate, making certain errors persistent and difficult to eliminate [8]. Most second language learners struggle to achieve full native-like proficiency, encountering fossilization [9]. Selinker first introduced this concept in 1972 to describe the stagnation in second language development [10].

Fossilization exhibits the following features:

- 1) Persistence and stability: Once errors solidify in interlanguage, they persist over time and resist natural correction.
- 2) Extensiveness and systematicness: Fossilization affects not only individual errors but also grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, forming systematic patterns [11].
- 3) Resistance to correction: Fossilized errors are difficult to correct despite conscious learning and repeated practice, hindering language output improvement [12].

2.2.2 The classification of fossilization

Fossilization can be individual or group-based. Individual fossilization includes biased fossilization (persistent errors despite corrections) and language ability fossilization (development stagnation) [13]. Group fossilization occurs when common errors spread, influencing dialect formation.

By duration, fossilization is temporary (overcome with practice and effective teaching) or permanent (resistant to correction, influenced by factors like native language and learning age) [14].

2.2.3 The causes of fossilization

Negative transfer, emotional factors, social and cultural influences, and ineffective learning strategies contribute to fossilization. Errors persist due to L1 interference, low motivation, limited L2 exposure, and over-reliance on translation or avoidance strategies [15]. Effective strategies should promote diverse language use to prevent fossilization.

3 Relevant studies at home and abroad

3.1 Relevant studies at home

Domestic research on interlanguage fossilization has expanded since the 1990s, refining definitions and incorporating diverse theories. Studies now analyze fossilization from biological, social, and linguistic perspectives, shifting from macro descriptions to micro case analysis, examining age-related differences and refining classifications for targeted teaching applications.

3.2 Relevant studies abroad

Foreign research on interlanguage fossilization began early, establishing strong theoretical foundations. Selinker (1972) introduced key concepts, while Cook, Ellis, Long, and Cummings explored social factors, interaction, and teaching strategies. Larson-Freeman's DST provided a dynamic perspective, enriching fossilization prevention research.

4 Summary and comment based on previous research

4.1 The main results of existing research

Interlanguage fossilization research has developed a systematic framework. Selinker introduced key concepts, while Ellis and Schumann expanded studies on linguistic, social, and cultural influences. Multi-dimensional analysis has led to targeted teaching strategies, emphasizing rich input, diverse methods, and teacher training to prevent fossilization and support sustainable language development.

4.2 Existing problems and deficiencies

Despite progress, interlanguage fossilization research has limitations. Studies focus on causes but lack depth in classifications and coping strategies. Empirical research remains limited, often relying on foreign theories. Practical application is weak, requiring diverse samples, innovative methods, localized frameworks, and systematic evaluation to enhance relevance.

5 Implications for foreign language teaching

5.1 Emphasizing cultural knowledge in teaching

Interlanguage fossilization often stems from cultural misunderstandings. Teachers should integrate cultural knowledge into instruction, explaining vocabulary origins and comparing linguistic structures to enhance comprehension. Understanding cultural distinctions improves language accuracy and fluency.

5.2 Developing effective learning strategies

Interactive activities like discussions and role-playing encourage real-world language use. Observing sentence structures and cultural influences strengthens comprehension. A structured evaluation system should assess learning strategies, reinforcing effective methods and adjusting ineffective ones to enhance proficiency and prevent fossilization.

5.3 Strengthening teachers' teaching ability

Teachers' proficiency directly affects students' ability to overcome interlanguage fossilization [16]. Incompetent instruction hinders error correction and progress. Educators should deepen their knowledge of linguistics, stay updated on grammar and phonetics, and enhance cross-cultural communication skills. Participating in linguistic seminars, academic reading, and international exchanges can improve teaching quality and cultural integration, reducing fossilization.

5.4 Emphasizing quality teaching resources

Textbooks should be optimized with progressive content, real-life language contexts, and dedicated sections for interlanguage error analysis. Cultural integration, such as festival explanations, enhances language accuracy and flexibility, improving learning outcomes.

6 Conclusion

Interlanguage fossilization is a key challenge in second language acquisition. Understanding its causes and solutions is crucial. Teachers should leverage interlanguage, enhance learners' autonomy, and facilitate effective first-to-target language conversion, helping students master the target language and advance foreign language learning.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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