



SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT FOSSILISATION ERRORS: A CASE STUDY OF UNIVERSITY OF SIALKOT

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate about the awareness of undergraduate ESL learners at the University of Sialkot. This research paper will not only explore the types of fossilisation errors but also second language (L2) learners' perceptions about fossilisation errors in their English language use in daily life during learning. Grounded in Selinker's (1972) Interlanguage Theory, this research employs a mixed method design combining structured questionnaires and semi structured interviews to explore learners' awareness, beliefs and attitudes toward persistent errors in grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. Quantitative findings reveal that most participants recognise repeated and long term errors with first language interference, lack of practice and limited corrective feedback identified as key contributing factors. Thematic analysis of qualitative interviews further highlights the roles of reduced teacher feedback, insufficient communicative practice and low learner confidence in the stabilization of erroneous forms. Overall, the study demonstrates that fossilisation is a multidimensional issue involving linguistic, instructional and affective variables. The results provide insight for ESL educators and curriculum designers seeking to enhance corrective strategies and teaching practices in similar educational contexts.



Keywords: *Second Language Acquisition, Fossilization Errors, Interlanguage Theory, Learner Perceptions, L2, ESL Learners.*

1. Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is a complex and multidimensional procedure through which individuals acquire a language other than their native language. It involves cognitive, social, psychological and linguistic factors that interact to shape language development (Ellis, 1997). Unlike first language acquisition adult learners often struggle to achieve native like proficiency. One of the major phenomena explaining this difficulty is fossilisation.

The concept of fossilisation was introduced by (Selinker, 1972) within the framework of Interlanguage Theory. Fossilisation refers to the stabilization of incorrect linguistic forms that persist despite sufficient exposure, instruction and corrective feedback. The fossilisation errors may occur at various linguistic levels such as syntax, morphology, phonology, semantics and pragmatics.

Fossilised errors pose a significant challenge in the process of teaching and learning of the second language because they hinder learners from achieving higher levels of accuracy and fluency. For instance, learners may repeatedly misuse verb tenses, articles, prepositions or pronunciation patterns influenced by their first language (L1). (Corder, 1967) emphasized that learner errors are systematic and meaningful reflecting underlying linguistic competence rather than random mistakes. However, when such errors persist over time, they may become fossilised and resistant to correction.

Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) argue that fossilisation may result from factors such as first language interference, limited input, insufficient feedback, communicative pressure and psychological factors like lack of motivation. Ellis (1997) further suggests that fossilisation may be influenced by age, cognitive constraints, and social identity factors.

While previous studies have examined fossilisation from a linguistic perspective, limited research has focused on learners' perceptions of fossilised errors. Understanding learners' awareness, attitudes and beliefs about fossilisation is essential for designing effective pedagogical strategies. However, this study aims to investigate the perceptions of undergraduate ESL learners at the University of Sialkot about fossilisation errors.

1.1 Background of the Study

The notion of fossilisation was first proposed by Selinker (1972) as part of Interlanguage Theory which describes a learner's evolving linguistic system influenced by L1 and L2. Fossilised errors are those that remain stable across developmental stages and resist correction.

Researchers such as Corder (1967) highlighted that learners' errors are systematic and reflect underlying competence. However, when these errors become permanent, they hinder further language development.

Although fossilisation has been widely discussed in SLA research, but learners' perceptions about persistent errors, their causes, and corrective strategies remain underexplored particularly in the Pakistani ESL context. This study addresses this gap by focusing on what undergraduate students at the University of Sialkot perceive about this issue.



1.2 Statement of the Problem

Many undergraduate ESL learners at the University of Sialkot continue to make persistent grammatical, lexical and pronunciation errors despite years of English instruction. While fossilisation has been studied theoretically, with little attention which has been paid to the types of fossilisation errors and learners' perceptions about those persistent errors.

This study aims to explore how second language learners perceive fossilised errors and what factors they believe contribute to their persistence.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Identify learners' perceptions about fossilisation errors.
2. Examine the types of errors learners believe are fossilised in their language use.

1.4 Research Questions

This research study will answer the:

- Q1. What are the perceptions of USKT ESL learners about fossilisation errors?
- Q2. What types of errors do learners perceive as fossilised in their language use?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is important for ESL teachers, learners, curriculum designers and researchers. It will help teachers understand learners' awareness and attitudes toward fossilised errors enabling them to design more effective corrective strategies. The findings will also contribute to SLA literature by providing insights into learners' perspectives about fossilisation in a Pakistani university context.

2. Literature Review

The concept of fossilisation originates from Selinker (1972) under Interlanguage Theory. Interlanguage refers to a learner's transitional linguistic system that evolves during language acquisition. Fossilisation occurs when incorrect forms become permanently embedded in this system.

AISSAT et al., (2024) explain that a point where no further learning appears possible and the learners cannot make any progress in their learning and it starts turning to impervious level of knowledge.

Corder (1967) emphasized that learner errors are systematic and meaningful. However persistent errors may indicate developmental stagnation. Marefat & Nushi (2012) tend to critically define fossilisation as L2 learners' interlanguage features with implicit and explicit corrections.

Dulay, Burt and (Krashen, 1982) attributed fossilisation to factors such as L1 interference, limited input, communicative pressure and insufficient corrective feedback. (Ellis, 1997) further identified cognitive constraints, age, motivation, and social identity as influential factors. Han (2003) defines fossilisation as no longer a monolithic concept of language learning but a constant failure in L2 learning which becomes integral in language use specifically for non-native learners.

While these studies focus on linguistic and theoretical explanations, fewer studies explore learners' subjective understanding of fossilisation making this research contextually significant.



2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Interlanguage Theory proposed by Selinker (1972) with its unique theoretical perspective that learners develop an independent linguistic system influenced by both L1 and L2. Fossilisation represents a permanent or semi-permanent stage where incorrect forms stabilize. The theory provides a framework for analysing both the persistence of errors and learners' awareness of their interlanguage development.

3. Methodology

This section comprises research design, population and sample size, data collection method, tools and procedure.

3.1 Mixed Method Research Design

This study used mixed method research. It combines both quantitative and qualitative research methods. This design is suitable because it involves measurable trends as well as subjective interpretations (Ostlund et al., 2011).

3.2 Population & Sample Size

The population consists of undergraduate ESL learners at the University of Sialkot. A sample of 50 undergraduate ESL learners has been selected through purposive sampling.

3.3 Data Collection Tools and Procedure

The structured questionnaire is used to collect the quantitative data. On the other hand, semi-structured interviews used to collect the qualitative data. The whole data was collected in two phases over a period of two weeks. The participants have responded the questionnaires to show their perceptions, beliefs and attitudes toward fossilised errors. Selected participants participated in the semi-structured interviews.

3.4 Brief Overview of Interlanguage Theory

Interlanguage theory explains that second language learners develop a separate linguistic system that is neither their first language nor their target language. This system is dynamic but may become stable or "fossilized" due to certain psychological and social factors such as:

1. Limited feedback
2. Lack of practice
3. Affective factors (confidence, anxiety)
4. Transfer from first language

4. Data Analysis, Results, Discussions & Findings

The data has been analyzed in two ways; quantitatively and qualitatively.

4.1 Quantitative Data Analysis, Results & Discussion

This quantitative data analysis will help to find out the learners' perceptions using self-structured questionnaires through frequencies and percentages which have been found with descriptive statistical analysis to identify trends in learners' perceptions.

The quantitative data has been collected through a self-structured questionnaire and analysis has been run using descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies and percentages to examine L2 learners' perceptions of fossilisation errors.



Table 1
L2 Learners' Perception Frequencies & Percentages about fossilisation errors

Questions	Yes (Freq)	Yes (%)	No (Freq)	No (%)
Permanent Mistakes	35	70%	15	30%
Repeated Grammar	32	64%	18	36%
Pronunciation Hard	30	60%	20	40%
Vocabulary Long Time	33	66%	17	34%
L1 Influence	38	76%	12	24%
Translate from L1	36	72%	14	28%
Causes Mistakes	34	68%	16	32%

The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that a majority of learners perceive fossilisation as a significant issue in second language acquisition.

A substantial proportion of respondents of 70% agreed that fossilisation leads to 'permanent mistakes' while 30% disagreed which shows that the most learners are aware of the long-term persistence of certain language errors.

Similarly, 64% of participants identified 'repeated grammatical errors' as a common feature of fossilisation, whereas 36% disagreed to this view which reflects that the grammatical fossilisation is widely recognised but not universally experienced.

Regarding pronunciation, 60% of learners responded that 'pronunciation difficulties' contribute to fossilisation while 40% disagreed. This comparatively lower percentage indicates that pronunciation is perceived as a challenge, though less dominant than other factors.

In terms of vocabulary acquisition, 66% of respondents agreed that 'vocabulary takes a long time to develop' which may result to fossilisation and 34% disagreed which highlights the role of lexical limitations in stabilizing incorrect language forms.

The most significant result reveals to 'L1 influence' with 76% participants acknowledging it as a major factor in fossilisation, compared to only 24% who disagreed which makes L1 interference the most strongly perceived contributor among all variables.

However, 72% of learners responded that they tend to 'translate from their L1', reinforcing the impact of L1 transfer in L2 learning.

Lastly, 68% of respondents agreed that fossilisation causes 'persistent mistakes', while 32% disagreed confirming learners' awareness of the phenomenon.

results in percentages demonstrate that the identified strongest contributing factors are first language interference with 76%, lack of practice with 74%, translation habits with 72% and reduced feedback with 62% which shows that fossilisation is a prevalent issue among second language learners. The majority of participants acknowledged experiencing repeated and long-term errors.

These findings suggest that fossilisation is influenced by linguistic, instructional and psychological variables. The results provide empirical support that persistent errors are not accidental but systematic and influenced by identifiable factors.



In short, the quantitative data confirms that fossilisation remains a significant challenge for second language learners. The high percentages across most items indicate that both classroom related factors and learner related factors contribute to the stabilization of errors.

4.2 Qualitative Data Analysis/ Thematic Analysis, Results & Discussions

For this method, Interlanguage Theory proposed by Selinker in 1972 has been used. The qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and it helps to gain deeper insights into learners' beliefs and experiences with thematic analysis which has been run to interpret interview responses.

Theme 1: Reduced Teacher Feedback and Stabilization of Errors

Many participants stated that when teachers do not provide consistent corrective feedback, they continue repeating the same mistakes. According to Selinker (1972) fossilisation occurs when incorrect linguistic forms become permanently embedded in the learner's interlanguage system. Without corrective feedback learners lack "negative evidence," which is essential for restructuring their linguistic system. Similarly, Ellis (1997) argues that feedback plays a crucial role in interlanguage development by helping learners to notice the gap between their production and the target language norms. This finding aligns with the view that insufficient teacher correction contributes to stabilization of erroneous forms.

Theme 2: Lack of Practice and Interlanguage Stagnation

Most students agreed that limited practice leads to permanent mistakes. They reported that without regular speaking or writing practice their English does not improve. Interlanguage development depends on meaningful input and output opportunities. According to Selinker (1972) fossilization may result when learners stop modifying their interlanguage due to reduced communicative use. Swain (1985) also emphasize the importance of output in language learning. She argues that producing language helps learners test hypotheses and restructure their interlanguage system. Without practice errors remain unchallenged and become fossilized. Thus, lack of practice prevents interlanguage from progressing toward target language norms.

Theme 3: Lack of Confidence as an Affective Factor

Students also reported that low confidence prevents them from speaking English and correcting their mistakes. Selinker (1972) highlighted psychological processes as one of the central mechanisms in interlanguage formation. Affective variables such as anxiety and low self-confidence can limit learners' willingness to communicate. Krashen (1982) explains this through the concept of the "affective filter," suggesting that emotional barriers reduce language acquisition by blocking input processing. Therefore, low confidence contributes indirectly to fossilization by limiting participation and risk taking in communication.

4.3 Quantitative & Qualitative Findings

The quantitative findings answer the first question of this research study such as:

Q1. What are the perceptions of USKT ESL learners about fossilisation errors?

The quantitative findings reveal that many learners are aware with 70% perception of fossilisation as persistent and permanent mistakes, and associate it primarily with L1 interference with the highest 76%, indicating it a primary cause of fossilisation. A



significant number of 72% respondents rely on translation from L1 which emphasizes on the fossilised structures, and around 64% of learners associate fossilisation with repeated grammatical errors highlighting structural challenges of the L2 undergraduate learners of university of Sialkot. The responses of 66% participants believe that slow vocabulary acquisition contributes to fossilisation, 60% respondents perceive pronunciation as less influential compared to grammar and L1 interference and 68% of learners agree that fossilisation results to long-term recurring mistakes and slow vocabulary development. These insights emphasize the importance of targeted instructional strategies, such as communicative language teaching and corrective feedback to minimize fossilisation and enhance second language learning and proficiency. The findings quantitatively demonstrate that fossilisation is a multifaceted phenomenon, primarily influenced by:

- L1 interference
- Translation habits
- Repetition of errors
- Limited vocabulary growth

This shows that the study strongly supports ‘Interlanguage Theory’ and ‘L1 Transfer Theory’ emphasizing the need of pedagogical interventions such as:

- Communicative language teaching (CLT)
- Reduced reliance on translation
- Increased exposure to the target language input

The persistent errors may lack strategies to overcome them and this further shows that learners perceive L1 interference, limited feedback and lack of practice as major causes of fossilisation. The findings may provide practical recommendations for improving corrective feedback and instructional strategies in ESL classrooms.

The qualitative findings answer the second question of this research study such as:

Q2. What types of errors do learners perceive as fossilised in their language use?

The thematic findings demonstrate that fossilization among learners is influenced by insufficient corrective feedback, lack of communicative practice, and psychological barriers such as low confidence. These findings strongly support Interlanguage Theory which explains fossilization as a result of cognitive, linguistic and affective factors (Selinker, 1972).

The findings suggest that fossilisation affects multiple linguistic levels such as grammatical errors, pronunciation errors, vocabulary errors, L1 interference errors, and above all repeated and permanent errors across language use.

The findings of thematic analysis reveal that fossilization among second language learners is not merely a linguistic issue but a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by feedback practices, learner engagement, the classroom environment and learners’ psychological variables. Through the lens of Interlanguage Theory, the findings confirm that reduced teacher feedback, lack of practice and low confidence significantly contribute to the stabilization of erroneous forms within learners’ interlanguage systems.



5. Conclusion

This study explores the perceptions of undergraduate ESL learners at the University of Sialkot regarding fossilized errors in their English use. The findings indicate that most learners recognize the persistence of certain grammatical, pronunciation and vocabulary mistakes and attribute these issues mainly to first language interference, limited corrective feedback and lack of consistent practice. Qualitative thematic analysis further showed that insufficient teacher feedback, limited opportunities for communicative practice and affective factors such as low confidence contribute to the stabilization of these errors. Overall, the research confirms that fossilization is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by both classroom and psychological variables. The results underscore the need for more targeted corrective feedback, increased communicative practice and strategies to build learner confidence in ESL settings. Future research should expand the participant pool, include longitudinal observations and investigate additional error types to deepen understanding of fossilization in SLA.

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