DOES FOSSILIZATION REALLY HAPPEN TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS?

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Abstract: In the process of learning English, foreign or second-language learners produce a type of language that is different from both the mother tongue and the target language. The basic assumption in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research is that the learners create a grammar out of their available linguistic data, a new and unique system, called interlanguage (IL). Interlanguage can be seen as a continuum made up of the first and the second language at either end, and the learners are travelling along this continuum while learning the target language. Tollefson and Firn (1983) hold the view that almost all adult L2 learners fail to achieve native-like competence and will 'fossilize' somewhere along the IL continuum. The issue of fossilization is still debatable among SLA researchers. Some claims that fossilization is inevitable for all learners, but some doubt the existence of fossilization and claim that it is only theoretically possible and empirically impossible. This paper addresses some study findings by raising and discussing three issues of SLA: (1) Is fossilization merely a temporary plateau or is it really a permanent learning-cessation? (2) Does fossilization happen globally or locally? (3) How to differ concept of stabilization in a language learning development as it is opposed to fossilization?

Keywords: interlanguage, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), fossilization, stabilization

INTRODUCTION

In the process of learning a language, foreign or second-language learners produce a type of language that is different from both the mother tongue and the target language. More precisely, the learners create a grammar out of their available linguistic data, a new and unique system, called interlanguage (IL). Interlanguage has certain features and characteristics which distinguish it from the language spoken by native speakers of a language. The term IL was first introduced by Selinker in 1972. He hypothesizes that IL is a natural language, systematic throughout its development. It reflects learners' attempts at constructing a linguistic system that progressively approaches the target system. Interlanguage can be seen as a continuum made up of the first and the second language at either end, and the learners are traveling along this continuum while learning the second language (L2). Tollefson and Firn (1983) argue that almost all adult L2 learners fail to achieve native-like competence and will fossilize somewhere along the IL continuum.

Researchers note that fossilization is one of noticeable characteristics of SLA. Towell and Hawkins (in Han 2005, p.13) state that "even after many years of exposure to an L2, in a situation where the speaker might use that L2 everyday for normal language, it is not uncommon to find that the speaker still has a strong foreign accent, uses non-native
grammatical constructions, and has non-native intuitions about the interpretation of certain types of sentences”.

I consider following sentences (in my personal corpus) produced by Indonesian college students which contain of a great number of grammatical errors.

(1) *My dreams after graduate from the college are be a professional teacher in english education.  
(2) *I am come from Pembuang Hulu, Hanau district.  
(3) *I am just want to mastering English and other languages, not other  
(4) *My father work as employer in the wood factory of Pangkalan Bun

The data above show that the learners are confronted with a lot of grammatical problems in their attempt to express the intended meaning in English. They seem rely on the linguistic knowledge they have known either from their native language (NL) or target language (TL). The above sentence examples indicate that the learners’ IL system clearly contains linguistic elements of both from English as well as Bahasa Indonesia (their native language).

With regard to such deviant English grammar, Mukkataash (1986), Thep-Ackrapong (1990), Schachter (1990), Sorace (1993), and Han (2005) confirm that non-native speakers cannot attain complete TL grammar; the errors will become permanent features of their IL. In other words they are fossilized. Pedagogical intervention to learners’ IL has a very little or no value; learners cannot take benefit from instruction provided by teachers. These researchers believe that the fossilized IL exists no matter what learners do in terms of further exposure to the TL. In contrast with this view, some researchers argue that classroom instruction such as explicit grammatical explanation and corrective feedback are necessary (e.g. Van Patten, 1988; Truscott, 1999). There is also enough evidence to support this idea (e.g. Schmidt & Frota, 1986); and this becomes clear in Lyster, Lightbown & Spada (1999: 457) which also states “that corrective feedback is pragmatically feasible, potentially effective, and, in some cases, necessary”. In regard to this, corrective feedback lets the learners compare their output with the target language norms. Feedback focuses the learners’ attention on more formal aspects of the language and allows the learners to be aware of the discrepancies between the target language norms and their own language output.

The next headings of this paper review the definition, the causes, and the areas of fossilization. The review also includes arguments on stabilization (a term opposing to fossilization) since some views keep arguing whether fossilization really exists.

FOSSILIZATION
Definition and Its Nature

Fossilization is a concept in SLA research central to interlanguage and it is of such a great importance that Selinker (1972) believes it is a fundamental phenomenon of SLA. A term fossilization in SLA is so well-recognized that it has an entry in the Random House Dictionary of the English Language (1987) with a linguistic definition as follows.

“fossilize5. Ling. (of a linguistic form, feature, rule, etc.) to become permanently established in the interlanguage of a second-language learner in a form that is deviant from the target-language norm and that continues to appear in performance regardless of further exposure to the target language.” (p.755)

Fossilization was first introduced by Selinker (1972) who believes it is the failure of the learners to achieve a native-like state. It is assumed that fossilized learners have a different grammar from that of the native speakers. They made up in part of deviant forms and rules which are permanently incorporated into their interlanguage despite the fact that they have opportunities to make improvements.

Brown’s definition of fossilization uses the metaphor of “cryogenation”; the process of freezing matter at very low temperatures; to depict the reversibility of fossilization. In addition, Brown holds the view that “… adults who achieve nonlinguistic means of coping in the foreign culture will pass through a phase of
accluturation and into a phase of adaptation/assimilation with an undue number of fossilized forms of language, never achieving mastery.” (Brown, 1994: 180-1). This is in line with Selinker and Lamendella (1978) who point out that fossilization can be found even with learners who have the ability, motivation and opportunity to learn and successfully acculturate into the target-language society.

Vigil and Oller (1976) view account of fossilization as a factor of positive and negative affective and cognitive feedback. This is to say that fossilization may be overcome if the learner is given the necessary positive affective feedback, meant to encourage further attempts at communication, together with neutral or negative cognitive feedback.

Of all explanations above, it is considered that different researchers interpret the term fossilization from different perspectives. Fossilization is interpreted as a process, a cognitive mechanism, or as a result of learning. And it is necessary to find approaches to overcoming fossilization so as to help language learners achieve native-like proficiency in the process of language learning.

**Causes of Fossilization**

Numerous researchers have tried to explain causes or reasons of a permanent endstate of learners’ interlanguage. For example, Schmidt (1983) chose external factors such as insufficient written input or instruction as a main reason for the learning-cessation while Han (2000), Kellerman (1989), or Selinker and Lakshmanan (1992) chose internal factors such as learners’ first language (L1) interference to explain the cessation.

To review the causes of fossilization in brief, I refer to Selinker (1972) that hypothesizes five psycholinguistic processes lead to fossilization, namely, “native language transfer, transfer of training, inappropriate strategies of SLA, inappropriate strategies of L2 communication, and the overgeneralization of TL rules” (p. 217).

**Language Transfer**

Selinker (1972) believed that some language rules in the learner’s IL are transferred from his/her L1. The errors in the use of L2 result mainly from L1, and the difference between L1 and the L2 is the reason for the occurrence of errors. That’s why the transfer of L1 rules can lead to fossilization. The transfer of L1 can be positive or negative. Positive transfer refers to that the similarities shared by the L1 and L2 help second language acquisition. Likewise, negative transfer refers to the differences between L1 and L2 that interfere second language acquisition. The negative transfer of L1 is what the behaviorists believe to be proactive inhibition; that is to say, the influence of what has been previously learned appears in the context of and interrupts what is learned afterwards.

Then Selinker and Lakshmanan (1992) examined adult and child L2 learners that illustrate aspects of TL that are candidates for fossilization (e.g., clauses with no tenses, IL morphological forms). In all cases, language transfer seems to be either the main factor or a cofactor. Their study clearly shows that there is a link between fossilization and language transfer.

**Training Transfer**

Graham (1981) suggested that one of the major causes for fossilization of incorrect language forms is the lack of formal instruction in English. This researcher argued that “learning simply by contact has led many students to devise IL or idiosyncratic languages with rules often wildly different from those of Standard English”. A similar position was voiced by Valette who made a distinction between “street” learners and school learners. She claimed that “fossilization often occurs among ‘street’ learners who have had extensive opportunity to communicate successfully albeit with inaccurate lexical and syntactic patterns. As a result, their errors have become systematized and are almost impossible to eradicate” (Valette, 1991). “Street” learners are never corrected, nor do they correct themselves.
Higgs and Clifford argued that "contemporary approaches to second language teaching...place a premium on communication, often at the expense of accuracy; under such methodologies, learners will tend to fossilize at relatively low levels, because systematic errors in their IL will usually go unpremeditated" (Sims, 1989: 65). In conclusion, they argued that in the absence of formal instruction, some areas of L2 learners' IL appear to be at least stagnant if not necessarily fossilized. Likewise, they claimed that particular L2 structures can be candidates for fossilization, while others are not. Incorrect teaching method can prevent successful second language learning in the sense that the use of inadequate teaching methodologies has also been suggested as an explanation for the occurrence of fossilization.

**Learning Strategy**

In the process of learning a second language, fossilization caused by the incorrect application of learning strategies is the most common. Sims (1989) suggested that "someplace along the IL continuum, inappropriate or misapplied learning strategies could lead to fossilization of some features (phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, psycholinguistic, or sociocultural)."

The appropriate application of learning strategies helps process the TL input and therefore improves L2 learning quality. Some learners, however, may turn to learning strategies to such an extent as overgeneralization, simplification, incomplete rule application and inadequate declarative knowledge of L2. According to Sims, the repeated use of unsuccessful strategies, i.e., those strategies which do not enable competition of a given language learning task, could impede a learner's progress. Finally, Sims concluded that the "proposed relationship of fossilization and learning strategies... could be a key to the remediation of systematized errors, as the role of the learner information processing in the second language acquisition process becomes more clearly understood" (Sims, 1989).

**Communication Strategies**

In real communication, learners may turn to communication strategy, a systematic skill that a speaker resorts to while having difficulties in expression to keep the communication going on. Unfortunately, sometimes such "successful use of communication strategies will prevent acquisition", Ellis (2002) said, for the learner may become so "skillful" in making up for lack of linguistic knowledge by the use of various communication strategies such as avoidance or paraphrase.

Also, the learner inclines to simplify the target language, especially to simplify the grammatical rules, for instance, the use of the articles, plural forms and the use of tenses. And this reflects the unsatisfactory effect of communicative teaching methods. If the learner pays too much attention to the fluency but neglects the accuracy, some language errors can be easily fossilized. If the learner only stresses the cultivation of communicative competence but neglects the language competence, his/ her language competence can also be easily fossilized.

**Overgeneralization**

Overgeneralization (Ellis, 2000) involves the use of existing L2 knowledge by extending it to new IL forms. It happens when people apply a grammatical rule across all members of a grammatical class without making the appropriate exceptions. In fact, language overgeneralization always indicates the ignorance of rule restrictions, including semantic restrictions of lexis or other linguistic items. For instance, using the -ed suffix to indicate past tense for verbs like "go" and "think."

The reason for which overgeneralization is important in L2 acquisition is that it leads to failure bears the errors for language learners. The phenomenon always occurs unconsciously. Without timely instruction and correction, the errors will stay for as long as it can do.
Areas of Fossilization

Researchers have not reached an agreement on areas of fossilization either. Selinker (1993), and Tarone, Frauenfelder and Selinker (1976, cited in Han, 2004) claim that fossilization occurred in a whole language system, “globally”, yet Coppiters (1989), Han (2004) and Lardiere (1998) insisted local fossilization which occurred in some areas, “locally”. For example, Lardiere (1998) provided evidence of dissociated acquisition procedures among linguistic features, syntax and morphology. In her study, she analyzed the acquisition of inflectional morphology and the usage of pronominal case of a Chinese participant. The participant’s morphology was fossilized, showing 34% of correct usage while her acquisition of syntax on pronominal case was perfect, 100% of correct usage. Lardiere claims that this result demonstrates syntactic development and morphological development are independent of each other.

Meanwhile, Coppiters’ (1989) study also shows us that fossilization occurs locally. He interviewed both near-native speakers of French and French native speakers in order to examine a hypothesis about whether there were differences among actual language usage, proficiency, and their intuition on grammar. The results indicate that near-native speakers’ intuition is significantly different from French native speakers’, especially about past tense, while their language usage and proficiency levels were similar. It seems that near-native speakers do not have native-like intuition regardless of their proficiency. On the basis of this finding, Coppiters (1989) concludes that fossilization can affect either knowledge or performance which means that fossilization may occur locally.

In addition, Han’s (2004) local fossilization theory sounds persuasive since many learners easily learn one feature such as the third person singular while they have difficulty in using another feature, a perfect tense. They also make fewer errors when they answer grammatical questions about the third person singular while they tend to drop the -s when they speak. Considering this, fossilization only hits certain linguistic features in certain subsystems of the interlanguage of individual learners, while other linguistic features in the same subsystems are successfully acquired or continue to evolve. More precisely, global fossilization is only assumed rather than established.

Fossilization or Stabilization?

Some characteristics of fossilization are still controversial, but the key characteristic which researchers who advocate the existence of fossilization agree on, is impossibility of eradication of errors. Even if learners seem to learn a feature, in given certain circumstances such as a high anxiety or exciting situation, they would make errors again on the feature (Selinker, 1972).

A hallmark of fossilization research is that it conflates stabilization and fossilization. Fossilization, a permanent learning-cessation, is different from stabilization which is defined as a temporary learning-cessation. However, there are researchers such as Long (2001) who believe that fossilization does not exist. “While fossilization may yet turn out to exist, there is little evidence that it does thus far, and hence, there is currently little or nothing to explain” (Long, 2001: 37). Washburn (1994) also seems to hold the view that what we are witnessing is not fossilization but plateauing, by which she means that target language development has been inhibited. The plateauing level can be overcome by further instruction and changes in the learners’ attitude or motivation. In line with this, Washburn (1994) also believes that all of definitions of fossilization imply the view that adult learners fail to acquire the second language at least temporarily.

Tarone (1994) claims that fossilization is inevitable for all learners, so their end state of language learning is forever interlanguage and can never be a target language. Han’s (2000, 2004) definition is the same as Selinker’s (1972) except the age-related issue. Han claims that full attainment of L2 acquisition among adult learners is impossible regardless of both internal
reasons such as motivation and external reasons such as quality of input. Therefore, Han (2004) presumes that fossilization is a characteristic among adult language learners not among children.

In contrast, Long (2003) doubts the existence of fossilization and claims that it is only theoretically possible and empirically impossible to differentiate stabilization from fossilization. Some researchers who agree with Long question this issue how to ensure that learners confront permanent fossilization of learning, not temporary long-term stabilization. According to Long (2003), stabilization is a common phenomenon which can occur during a language learning process. Stabilization can be overcome as language developments proceed even though it can take a long time. According to Selinker (1972), stabilization is often a precursor of fossilization; he claims that fossilization is permanent stabilization of learning.

As we have seen, two views exist on the nature of fossilization, one being that it is temporary, the other that is permanent. There are researchers such as Tollefsen and Finn (1983) who believe that both temporary and permanent fossilization exist, and that we have to recognize both. However, SLA researchers make a distinction between them by using different terms for each. The first type, of a permanent nature, researchers refer to as fossilization, and the second type they call stabilization. Errors become fossilized when they have become permanently established in the IL of an L2 learner in a form that is deviant from the TL norms and that continues to appear in performance regardless of further exposure to the TL. Meanwhile, stabilized errors are not permanent; they are maintained in the learners' L2 production at a given level of IL development. It is just a momentary halt. Thus, stabilized errors are the ones that eventually disappear as the learner makes progress, whereas fossilized errors are those which do not disappear entirely regardless of the input and exposure given to the learner.

A study related to this was carried out by Hasbun (2001) in a cross-sectional study to eight groups of EFL students ranging from beginners to advanced learners. In her study, she determined that the use of prepositions and articles as well as the utilization of verb forms seems to be persistent over time, and thus, tend to become fossilized in spite of pedagogic interventions. Hasbun's finding is grounded on the fact that not only are these errors still present in the written work of students in the most advanced composition courses, but they are also the most frequent. This implies that the EFL college students' development is inhibited by a temporary plateau of non-TL grammar of the misuse of preposition, articles, and verb forms. If this condition is let longer, the learners will come to the stage of permanent learning cessation regardless of the amount of exposure to a target language; high motivation to learn or to correct errors; and many chances of practicing a target language.

In relation to Indonesian learners of English, Fauziati (2011) conducted a study of error fossilization in interlanguage performed by Indonesian students. In her study, she attested 30 secondary school students in learning English whether their errors in interlanguage were just a momentary halt or become permanently established. She collected the data on grammatical errors from learners' free compositions prior and after one semester instruction and two months afterwards.

That some classroom events were believed to have contribution to the error destabilization, since classroom activities could be seen as language learning or language acquisition opportunities. From the activities, the learners got adequate input, feedback, frequent exposure, explicit grammar explanation, and the opportunity to practice the target language. She also argued that these five aspects gave contribution to the error destabilization. Further, in relation to the final students' composition with a new topic, the persistent errors tended to stabilize just temporarily since they would change their nature as a result of the pedagogical intervention.

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1 The term stabilization is introduced by Selinker and Lakshamanan (1992). They state that stabilization is the first sign of presumed fossilization.
Fauziati (2011) strongly argued that the learners' grammatical errors are "not fossilized". They may get stuck (stabilized) temporarily due to the learners' individual differences or due to the nature of the grammatical features themselves. From her research findings, Fauziati concluded that grammatical errors are dynamic not static (fossilized). They can be eradicated (de-stabilized) through external pedagogical interventions such as grammar instruction. Grammar instruction contributes to the error destabilization since it provides the learners with input, feedback, grammar explanation, and the opportunity for the learners to practice.

CONCLUSION

Summing up, interlanguage is the result of the learners' attempts to produce the target language norms. This is to say, errors are the product of the cognitive process in second language learning along the interlanguage continuum. Errors in interlanguage tend to fossilize when those nonnative-like forms are persistent over times. Some linguists argue that incorrect TL systems in IL are only a temporary or are not permanent. Those deviant TL forms can be eradicated through intensive language instruction and they will disappear as the learners make progress. They name this case as stabilized errors. Opposing to this, when the learner creates a cessation of interlanguage learning, thus stopping the interlanguage from developing in a permanent way, or the learner has no input and exposure along the cessation, fossilization is inevitable. More precisely, stabilization is a 'momentary' cessation of learning whereas fossilization is a 'permanent' cessation of learning. Besides, fossilization is a characteristic among adult language learners not among children.

Some researchers have viewed fossilization as occurring globally to the entire interlanguage system; others have maintained that fossilization could only happen locally in parts of the subdomains of the interlanguage system. Han (2004a: 220) uses the term of "fossilized error", on the one hand, to determine local fossilization, but the terms of "fossilized competence" and "fossilized learner", on the other hand, are precisely used to refer to global fossilization.

REFERENCES


