

A Study on Fossilization of Students' Lexical Pragmatic Uses in the Oral English Teaching

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Abstract

Oral English teaching is a weakness in English teaching because of its strong practicality, interactivity and situationality. There are some problems especially in the senior high school. Fossilization was firstly presented by Selinker in 1972. Most second language learners stop developing when their language arrives a specific level, thus learners cannot completely acquire the target language. The study examines the student's oral English fossilization in lexical uses in senior high school from the five aspects of the third person singular form of verbs, the past tense form of verbs, the singular and plural form of nouns, articles and prepositions. The study examines the causes of students' oral English fossilization in the senior high school from the three aspects of environmental factors, teachers' factors and students' factors, namely the influence of negative transfer of native language, scarcity of output opportunities, teachers' limited level, inappropriate assessment methods and students' few motivations.

Keywords

Second language acquisition; Fossilization; Oral English teaching.

1. Introduction

In modern times where technology is so developed, oral English communication is undoubtedly very important. However, we maybe find that when we reach a certain stage, our linguistic knowledge and ability no longer grow, which is the phenomenon of fossilization of interlanguage.

During forming interlanguage, fossilization is a crucial process (Selinker, 1972). Most second language learners would stop their development when their language proficiency reaches a certain level, which makes it impossible for learners to acquire the target language completely. And since 1972, there have been many discussions about fossilization. The relevant research involves many aspects, about the definition, classification and causes of fossilization. The fossilization is defined by Selinker (1972); the fossilization is classified by Selinker (1972); the causes of fossilization are discussed by Selinker (1972), Schumann (1975) and Ellis (1999).

Previous research on interlanguage has obtained numerous achievements. However, most researches only stay on theoretical descriptions. Therefore, this paper uses the experimentation to research the causes of oral English fossilization for senior high school students, hoping to provide some opinions on senior high school English teaching.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Fossilization

American linguist Selinker first used the term interlanguage in 1972, seeing it as a structured system which the Second Language Acquisition learner builds at any particular stage of his second language development. A person's interlanguage involves five main processes: 1) language transfer; 2) transfer of training; 3) over-generalization of target language rules; 4)

second language learning strategies; 5) strategies of second language communication (Selinker, 1972).

In cognitive level, fossilization is regarded as a cognitive mechanism including some processes. In the empirical aspect, fossilization is regarded as stabilization during using interlanguage. Therefore, fossilization is a cognitive process and an empirical product. There is now a tendency to see fossilization as a local but not a global phenomenon. Because fossilization only affects a part of a person's interlanguage system and people tend to treat fossilization as a process, they think that fossilization can be relieved (Dai & Cai, 2001; Fang, 2010; Jiang, 2012).

2.2. Features of Fossilization

Fossilization is equal to the break of development. Fossilization occurs in phonetic, morphological, syntactic and pragmatic level. Fossilization is characterized by a long-term problem, which is unalterable and non-reversible, and exists in the second language process, including adults and children. A remarkable feature of the interlanguage fossilization theory is obtained by analyzing the English-speaking ability of second language learners (Ellis, 1985).

In brief, interlanguage fossilization has the following characteristics: First of all, adult second learners often use their native language accents to speak target language. This is the most prominent feature of interlanguage fossilization. Secondly, vocabulary of second language learners is limited. Thirdly, language errors will be born to every learner. However, more scholars are trying to improve the problem of interlanguage fossilization.

2.3. The Causes of Fossilization

From Selinker's research and Lamendella's research, there are two causes of fossilization. The first cause is internal cause. The second cause is external cause.

Internal causes include age, negative transfer of native language and overgeneralization of target language. Age theorists explain the fossilization of language from biological growth angle. For mother tongue acquisition, Lenneberg (1967) proposed a "critical period" hypothesis. The critical period ends at around 5 years old, during which the brain can be easily learned in the mother tongue. If it is missed, it will become fossilization (Xiao, 2003). The negative transfer of the native language hinders the development of the second language learning, and to a certain extent, the second language ability of learners is in a stagnant state, thus forming fossilization. Overgeneralization of target language refers to the learner extending the use of certain grammatical features to other contexts.

External causes include input hypothesis, socio-educational model and feedback mode. According to Krashen, a typical cause of the fossilization is that the learner does not get enough language input, and the inappropriate (too easy or too difficult) language input or the wrong language input will also lead to fossilization. The idea of socio-educational model is that learners' attitudes on the target language community can influence the capability of foreign language learning. The feedback model theory explains the reasons for language fossilization by the difference in the form of feedback received by learners.

In summary, there have been a serious of fruits in studying fossilization. But almost all of the studies just stay the theoretical discrimination and causes of fossilization from the macroscopic view. Therefore, this paper just studies fossilization in terms of the lexical pragmatic uses in the oral teaching to examines the causes of students' oral English fossilization in the senior high school.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Questions

This paper was mainly meant to research these two questions: 1) Do middle senior high school students show oral fossilization in using words they have already learnt previously? 2) What are the causes of this phenomenon?

3.2. Participants of the Research

The research was conducted in a senior high school in Fenyang, Shanxi Province. In the research, 53 students were discretionarily chosen as participants. These students are very good participants because they are all from typical Chinese-English teaching environment and teaching model.

3.3. Instruments of the Research

In order to study the fossilization of senior high school students' oral English, this paper relied data collection from two aspects: an oral test and a questionnaire.

The purpose of the oral test is to research the specific errors in lexical uses of senior high school students' oral English fossilization. The participants were asked to have a short dialog with the study. The conversations are limited to the following topics: 1) yourself; 2) senior high school life; 3) computer; 4) friends and friendship; 5) animals; 6) going on vacation; 7) your family; 8) dream; 9) favorite food; 10) favorite season. All tests for each participant last for 15 minutes.

The purpose of the questionnaire is to research causes of students' oral English fossilization in senior high school. This questionnaire was amended by the study in the premise of a previous one. The previous questionnaire was from a paper in Shanghai Normal University on the fossilization of oral English. Therefore, the study uses the questionnaire, but due to the different scope of the research, the study revised the original questionnaire. Therefore, a suitable questionnaire is generated.

3.4. Data Collection

Before the oral test and questionnaire begins, in order to make the test results more realistic, students knew that the oral test and questionnaire were to investigate some basic situation of their English oral fossilization and the result of the oral and questionnaire would not affect their English scores.

In the oral test, data were collected from 53 randomly selected students who were asked to finish an oral test. Participants are supervised when they preparing oral materials so that they cannot exchange information and consult the dictionary. Participants had 10 minutes to prepare for the oral test and then they did a brief conversation with the study about 5 minutes. In the questionnaire, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire within 10 minutes individually according to their own true situation, and then the study collected the questionnaire and statistically analyzed the results.

Because some students have limited ability, their responses in the oral test and in the questionnaire are inconformity to the purpose of this test, so there are three results are invalid.

4. Results and Data Analysis

4.1. Results of the Oral Test

To determine if there is a fossilization phenomenon, the study counted the number of students who made errors in each spoken material. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Lexical Fossilization in Oral English Test

Error items	Examples	Number of errors	Percent of errors
The third person singular form of the verbs	He like (likes) singing songs.	26	52%
The past tense form of the verbs	I readed (read) books last evening with my father.	21	42%
Plural form of nouns	There are many peoples (people) in the zoo.	22	44%
Articles	She is a (an) old woman.	29	58%
Prepositions	In (On) the morning of last Friday, my family went to Beijing.	27	54%

In Table 1, students' lexical errors in the oral English fossilization can be mainly embodied five aspects: verb form (including the third person singular form of the verbs and the past tense form of the verbs), plural form of nouns, articles and prepositions. All percentages are from the number of participants who have made errors divided by the all participants. According to Table 1, 52% participants commit the third person singular form of the verbs, 42% participants misused the third person singular form of the verbs, 44% participants did not use correctly plural form of nouns, 58% participants made errors of articles and 54% participants are confused with prepositions.

4.2. Results of the Questionnaire

In order to find out the causes for the students' oral English fossilization, the study collected and counted the results of the questionnaire. There are 19 questions in following Table 2. These questions can be divided into three aspects, which are investigated the causes for the students' oral English fossilization from the learning environment of students from Q1 to Q7, the teacher's perspective from Q8 to Q15, and the student's perspective from Q16 to Q19. The results are shown in Table 2.

According to Table 2, in the first aspect, more than 50% participants consider Chinese learned have a negative influence on learning English from Q1 to Q4, even in Q3, the number of participants who accept this view reaches 90%.

From Q5 to Q7, only 14% participants have chances to practice oral English. Even in Q7, the chances that participants communicate with foreign English teachers are zero.

In the second aspect, only 26% of the participants consider that the oral level of their teachers is standard from Q8 to Q10. The chances that participants chat with teacher in English are only 18% at break.

From Q11 to Q15, it shows that the teacher excessively concerns the grammar and writing of the students. In Q11, all students consider their English teacher requires them to be centered on grammar exercises. In Q15, the number of students who think their English teacher makes regular tests on their oral English and tells them where their oral English has problems is zero.

In the third aspect, 76% students think they do not need to learn oral English and only 30% think they try to learn more about cultures pertinent to English-speaking countries in order to improve their oral English from Q16 to Q19.

Table 2. Questionnaire Results

No.	Questions	Number of participants		Percent of participants	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
1	I can feel some negative influence of Chinese on my oral English with regard to overall idiomaticity.	43	7	86%	14%
2	I can feel some negative influence of Chinese on my oral English with regard to third person singular-s.	29	21	58%	42%
3	I can feel some negative influence of Chinese on my oral English with regard to the correct use of plural forms.	45	5	90%	10%
4	I can feel some negative influence of Chinese on my oral English with regard to the correct use of a/an/the articles.	31	19	62%	38%
5	I have opportunities to practice oral English at home.	5	45	10%	90%
6	I have opportunities to practice oral English in school.	7	43	14%	86%
7	Our school has foreign English teachers, and we can communicate with them frequently.	0	50	0%	100%
8	Our English teacher often teaches us English idioms.	11	39	22%	78%
9	I think our English teacher speaks very good English.	13	37	26%	74%
10	Our English teacher often talks with us in English during class intervals.	9	41	18%	82%
11	Our English teacher requires us to do a lot of grammar exercises such as MCQs.	50	0	100%	0%
12	Our English teacher pays great attention to our oral English proficiency.	4	46	8%	92%
13	Our English teacher pays great attention to our written English performance.	48	2	96%	4%
14	Our English teacher often assesses my English through written grammar test.	49	1	98%	2%
15	Our English teacher makes regular tests on our oral English and tells us where our oral English has problems.	0	50	0%	100%
16	I don't think it necessary to take after British or American accent. It is normal for Chinese English speakers to speak with some Chinese accent.	38	12	76%	24%
17	I learn English in order to score better in the test.	35	15	70%	30%
18	I think the main purpose of learning English is to read English materials. Oral English is not that important.	32	18	64%	36%
19	I try to learn more about cultures pertinent to English-speaking countries, which I believe is helpful to my oral English.	15	35	30%	70%

4.3. Analysis on Causes of Oral English Fossilization

4.3.1. The Environmental Causes

(1) Negative Transfer of Native Language

There are some cores about the specific causes of negative transfer of native language. First, there are inflectional symbols in the plural nouns in English while there is no symbol in Chinese. Because Chinese students are accustomed to thinking in this way, it is easy for them to make errors in the plural form of English countable nouns when they speaking English. Second, there are sixteen tenses in English, while there is no verb that has inflectional changes in Chinese.

Therefore, this kind of rule in Chinese will be unknowingly transferred to oral English. Third, because Chinese has no inflectional changes in verbs, the subject-predicate consistency is not emphasized in Chinese. Therefore, when communicating with other people in English, Chinese often forget to make sure that the subject-predicate consistency in English.

As can be seen from the above analysis, many students' oral English is influenced by Chinese, so negative transfer of native language is an important cause that affects students' oral English fossilization. According to Q1 to Q4 in Table 2, the transfer of native language affects many aspects of oral English: the proper use of articles, plural forms of nouns and third-person singular forms of verbs.

(2) Scarcity of Output Opportunities

The importance of language output to second language learners is manifested in three sides. First, language output promotes second language learners to tend to use replaceable means when they encounter obstacles in the communicating process in order to express themselves with precise and fluent words. Second, language output forces learners to remove from semantics to syntactics, thus this can trigger their attention to formal features. Third, learners can prove hypotheses about the second language (Ellis, 1999).

The above analysis shows that language output is very beneficial for students. However, through the results of Q5 to Q7 in Table 2, students have very few opportunities for English output, not only at home, but also in school.

4.3.2. The Teachers' Causes

(1) Teachers' Limited Level

The oral competence of native language learners is slowly developed through practice in daily life. Without sufficient language input, there is no numerous language output to improve the learner's oral capacity. Most of the students in China are completely dependent on teachers, hence teachers' English levels is very crucial. Inadequate language input can lead to oral English fossilization. Some teachers may have poor English proficiency, especially in middle schools. If teachers' English level is not high and they do not have good oral English ability, they cannot provide good help to students in spoken English. Then the students' oral English level will not improve.

Analysis above indicates that teachers' English level is of great importance to students. However, from Q8 to Q10 in Table 2, it can be seen that the level of teachers is not high, and most students think that the level of teachers' spoken English is not too high.

(2) Inappropriateness of Assessment Methods

According to the National English Curriculum Standards for Common Senior High School, assessment should aim at promoting the long-term development of students. Assessments should not only evaluate students' final grades, but should assess their progress in the learning process. Students should be evaluated in different ways, such as written tests, oral tests, and English competition.

Analysis above indicates that students can be not evaluated only by the final grades of students. It can be seen from Q11 to Q15 in Table 2 that the teacher evaluates the students only according to the final written test scores. In this way, it causes the students to focus on the written knowledge, but ignores the importance of spoken English.

4.3.3. The Students' Causes

From Schumann, learners first use the second language for communication. With they continue to learn English, some people go to the next stage to pursue integrative functions, but few people can achieve the highest function, that is, expressive function. However, most Chinese middle school students tend to be motivated instrumentally rather than integratively, which makes it difficult for them to get rid of the situation that students satisfied written test

performance. Therefore, they cannot make further progress towards better oral expression. This is also one of the reasons for the fossilization of spoken English, that is, students lack integrative motivation to seek oral improvements.

From the above analysis, students' incentive is very crucial for them to learn oral English. From Q16 to Q19 in Table 2, it can be seen that very few students consider that oral English is very crucial, so few students have the motivation to learn spoken English.

In summary, there are three main causes of oral English fossilization: the environmental causes including negative transfer of native language and scarcity of output opportunities, the teachers' causes including teachers' limited level and inappropriateness assessment methods and the students' causes including include lack of integrative motivation.

5. Conclusion

This paper studies that senior high school students really exist in oral fossilization in using words they have already learnt. Oral English fossilization in lexical uses mainly embodies the third person singular form of the verb, the past tense form of the verb, plural form of nouns, articles, prepositions. The causes of students' oral English fossilization in the senior high school from the three aspects of environmental factors, teachers' factors and students' factors, namely the influence of negative transfer of native language, scarcity of output opportunities, teachers' limited level, inappropriate assessment methods and students' few motivations.

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