# التحجر في تعلم اللغة الانجليزية : خصائص , تصنيفات , طرق تخفيف
# Fossilization in Foreign Language Learning: Factors, Types, and Reduction.

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## الملخص :

نادرًا ما يصل متعلمي اللغة الأجنبية إلى مستوى إتقان المتحدثين الأصليين لها بسبب عدة عوامل. من أهم هذه العوامل ظاهرة التحجر البيني للغات والتي تعيق متعلمي اللغة الاجنبية من تحقيق هدفهم. يُقصد بالتحجر أن يصبح استخدام اللغة الغير صحيحة عادة ولا يمكن تصحيحها بسهولة. يرى الباحثون والمعلمون في مجال اكتساب اللغات الأجنبية إن ظاهرة التحجر منتشرة على نطاق واسع بين متعلمي اللغات الأجنبية, حيث يمكن أن يظهر عدم التطور في جانب واحد أو أكثر من جوانب اللغة المستهدفة. في هذه الورقة ، يحاول الباحثون تعريف مفهوم التحجر ، وتوضيح تصنيفاته ، وعرض أنواعه مع التوضيح ببعض أمثلة التحجر الأكثر شيوعاً بين المتعلمين العرب. كما توضح الورقة أيضًا الأسباب الرئيسية للتحجر وتقترح بعض استراتيجيات التعليم لتقليل الآثار السلبية للظاهرة.

## Abstract

For a variety of reasons, foreign language learners rarely achieve the required level of native speakers proficiency. Interlanguage fossilization is a critical factor that prevented FL learners from achieving their goal. It refers to the process in which incorrect language becomes a habit and cannot easily be corrected. Researchers and educators in the field of FL acquisition claim that fossilization is widely spread among FL learners where arrested progress can occur in one or more specific aspects of the target language. In this paper, the researchers attempt to define the notion of fossilization, present its classifications, and support the types with the most common Arab learner's

errors. The paper also shows the major causes of fossilization and suggests some teaching strategies to minimize the phenomenon's negative effects.

**Key words:** Fossilization, Interlanguage (IL), Foreign Language (FL), Target Language (TL), First Language (L1), Second Language (L2).

# 1.Introduction

Learning a second language L2 is a non-linear and fragmented process marked by a mixed landscape of rapid progress in some aspects but slow progress, incubation, or even permanent stagnation in others. As a result of this process, a linguistic system known as "interlanguage" (Selinker, 1972) emerges, which approximates the target language to varying degrees (TL). Interlanguage is a stage between the first language (L1) and the target language (TL). The L1 is said to be the source language for the initial building materials, which are then gradually blended with materials from the TL, resulting in new forms that are neither in the first language nor in the target language. In other words, interlanguage fossilization occurs when FL learners keep taking rules and linguistics patterns from their native language and incorrectly applying them to the second language they are learning. Consequently, a new language system that differs from both the person's native language and second language emerges. When fossilization occurs, the learner has reached a stage of development in which feature X in his inter-language has assumed the same form as in the target language, then fossilization of the correct form will occur. However, if the learner has reached a stage in which feature Y still doesn't have the same form as the target language, the fossilization will manifest itself as an error. According to Selinker, fossilization is an undeletable mental mechanism in interlanguage, and it may occur in any phase of foreign language learning.

Fossilization is concerned with central characteristics of FL acquisition, as Selinker, 1972; Bley-Vroman, 1989; and Long (2003) noticed. Since its inception, the concept of fossilization has sparked a great deal of interest from both FL researchers and teachers, although the concept isn't always well understood or applied.

## 2. Definition and classification of interlanguage fossilization
## 2.1 Definition of fossilization

There are various definitions of fossilization. Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics puts it this way: fossilization (in second or foreign language learning) is "a process which sometimes occurs in which incorrect linguistic features become a permanent part of the way a person speaks or writes a language". Larry Selinker, a famous American linguist, was the first to put forward the interlanguage fossilization theory. Fossilizable linguistic phenomena are linguistic items, rules and subsystems which speakers of a particular native language will tend to keep in their interlanguage relative to a particular target language, no matter what the age of the learner or the amount of explanations he receives in the target language.(cited in Chen and Zhao 2013.p. 18) As is shown, interlanguage is intimately relevant to fossilization. From the above introduction, fossilization can be summarized as the phenomena whereby the learner creates a cessation of interlanguage learning before acquiring the standard target language.

**2.2 The Classification of Fossilization:** According to Selinker, fossilization can be classified into various ways based on different criteria. For instance, fossilization can be divided into two major types in terms of forms: individual fossilization and group fossilization. The former substantially has two subtypes: (i) error reappearance, those language phenomena whereby repeatedly corrected language errors occur frequently. (ii) language competence fossilization, i.e. fossilization of pronunciation, syntactic structures and vocabulary in interlanguage. The latter refers to the phenomena where fossilized language competence used commonly in a society, thus becoming a new dialect such as Indian English. Fossilization can also be classified into temporary fossilization and permanent fossilization, which is of great value in foreign language teaching. As their names show, the former is instable and changeable while the latter has been stabilized. Non-English major learners mostly belong to temporary fossilization, which can be improved when learners accept optimal input. In this paper, we mainly focus on this classification.

# 3. Causal factors of fossilization

Besides the causal factors presented by Selinker as will show below, the literature of fossilization reveals more different reasons such as:

## 3.1. Individual learning techniques

When language learners choose an inappropriate learning technique during the process of learning, fossilization may occur Qian & Xiao (2010). For example, extra focus on unfamiliar lexical items when doing reading comprehension tasks will not only affect the speed of reading but also the cultivation of English thinking ability .

## 3.2. Communication strategies

Regardless of corrective feedback and the optimal teaching factors, fossilization may occur when the learner uses inappropriate communication strategies perceived as adequate and effective. (Han, 2004).

## 3.3. Lack of motivation and interest

Motivation has the greatest effect on foreign language learning among various kinds of affection factors. Some learners are holding a utilitarian attitude toward English learning either for a job, or because they have to take part in examinations and get certifications. if learners have no such motivations, less efforts will be paid and fossilization is most likely occur (Han, 2004).

## 3.4. Age factor

Age of learner is an essential factor that affects English learning efficiency. The critical period of learning English as many researchers indicate shows that children learn faster and better than adults because they less sensitive toward English, and their learning ability reduces. Therefore, the older a learner is, the worse the learning efficiency is (Morford and Mayberry, 2000).

## 3.5. Personality

Many English learners might feel anxious or unconfident to express themselves fearing that their oral English is insufficient enough to make them understood. This regular feeling prevents anxious students from being involved in English conversation (Aldarasi, 2020).

## 3.6. Mother tongue

The excessive dependence on the mother tongue will lead to the fossilization of the learner. The negative influence of the mother tongue language includes

phonetic, phonological, semantic, and pragmatic aspects, etc. which are noticeable when we hear Arabic learners speak English .

### 3.7. Lack of language environment

Most domestic English teaching activities happen in class, and that is not a real language environment. In the class, due to variable reasons and stress to pass the examination, teachers are focusing on teaching grammar and explaining exam papers instead of paying attention to communication and interactive skills. So most language learners might pass a written exam but would find it difficult to communicate orally.

### 3.8. Selinker's Five Central Process (causal factors)

In 1972, Selinker (1972) explores the causes of fossilization from a pedagogical perspective. And he argued that interlanguage fossilization is the product of five central processes involved in second-language learning. He states that there are five central processes existing in the process of the fossilization phenomenon in second language acquisition, consisting language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of second language learning, strategies of second language communication, and overgeneralization. For Selinker, language transfer tops the five processes, regarded as the decisive factor resulting in fossilization.

### 3.8.1. Language transfer

It is a phenomenon that learners consciously or unconsciously adopt the rules based on the native language to attend to the information of the target language because they are not equipped with sufficient knowledge about the target language. In this way, learners' interlanguage systems are greatly affected by the native language, so they are not capable of producing correct second language output. Sometimes  rules, and subsystems of the interlanguage of second language learners are apt to be transferred from the first language.

### 3.8 2.Transfer of training

It is another factor listed on the five processes. Fossilization of certain interlanguage elements may come from excessive training. Transfer of training refers to that  application of the teachers not typical interlanguage or inappropriate language, making learners produce misinterpretations. Transfer of training focuses on the interlanguage that comes into being with the

teachers' teaching methods and materials effects. The influence of the transfer of training is deeply rooted because it often occurs at the initial stage of learning a second language. the excessive training on certain items stops learners from making any progress, so that they fail to continue to develop new structures. Therefore, they often apply mechanically and lack variety when using the target language, and finally, fossilization takes place.

### 3.8.3. Strategies of second language learning

It indicates the learning strategies applied by learners and all the activities of using the language. It shows the tendency that learners are inclined to simplify the target language in second language acquisition. Some errors produced by second language learners result from the specific strategies used by the learners. If the learners pay much attention to the fluency and ignore the accuracy, some language errors can be easily fossilized.

### 3.8.4. The communication strategies

When the learner's language competence reaches a certain level, the learner tends to employ some strategies to make the communications fluent and effective, such as simplification, avoidance, reduction, and transfer, to overcome the difficulties in communications. For the use of strategies for second language learning, the learners may reduce the target language system to a simpler system that deviated from the standard. To guarantee, the effect and the fluency of communications language learners tend to depend too much on communication strategies, and native speakers usually tolerate the inadequacy of the nonnative speech in the communications. Under such a circumstance, learners just desire to reach the communication purpose with the assistance of these strategies, so they do not care much about the rules of the target language.

### 3.8.5 Overgeneralization

There are errors caused by the improper usage of commonly occurring grammatical rules, and the learners apply structures of the target language that would not be used by the native speakers. That is to say, the learner has learned some rules of the target language and he tries to apply those acquired rules to similar situations in the following learning process. This is what Selinker calls overgeneralization.

However, every language has its own rules and structures, but almost no rule is omnipotent. The overgeneralization of the target language often reflects the negligence of rule restrictions. Therefore, a rule that the learners believe to be correct in certain situations is overgeneralized to other situations in which it is not suitable.

## 4. Types of fossilization

### 4.1. Phonological fossilization

Researchers such as Wei (2008) and Hismanoglu (2007) indicate that phonological fossilization occurs when language learners chronically repeat the same pronunciation errors which result from the false acquisition of the target language pronunciation which persists along the learning process and is mostly influenced by learner's mother tongue. For example, Arabic learners commonly pronounce the /p/ sound as /b/ for the reason the /p/ sound does not exist in the Arabic language. Therefore, the word 'people' is often pronounced /bibəl/ instead of /pibəl/.

### 4.2. Morphological fossilization

English and Arabic languages are somehow distinguished by their varieties in morphology, therefore the two languages have various grammatical morphemes. The most common problems in English as Nozadze (2012) explains, lay in two aspects, inflectional morpheme and article. One of the common errors that students make is with plural /s/, so it is widespread to hear Libyan students say (furniture's, moneys, and advices) for plural instead of (furniture, money, and advice).

### 4.3. Syntactic fossilization

Syntax is the arrangement of words in a sentence. Syntactic patterns are different among Languages, so each language has its own syntactic rules. However, syntactic patterns similarities sometimes exist between some languages. One pattern of the Adverbial phrase, for example, starts with a verb followed by an adverb in English as (arrived early). Arabic as well as the same pattern as in. (وصل مبكراً) Meanwhile, adjective phrase pattern in both languages is different. In English, the adjective precedes the noun as in ( long story), in contrast, the noun precedes the adjective in Arabic such as (القصة طويلة). Therefore, the English adjective phrase pattern is commonly disordered by Libyan learners.

## 4.4. Semantic fossilization

Semantics is the study of meaning, and meaning can be expressed orally or in written form. Learner's inability of sending meanings by using language forms that exist in the target language and do not represent the meanings s/he intended to express in the context is known as semantics fossilization Wei (2008). Owl, for instance, is the symbol of wisdom in western culture, yet it is a pessimism symbol in Arabic culture. Western listeners are more likely confused when heard that an owl is a bad omen.

## 4.5. Pragmatic fossilization

Pragmatics is defined as meaning in use or meaning in context Thomas (1995). Semantics and pragmatics both focus on studying the meanings of words in a language, but pragmatics looks beyond the literal meaning of an utterance or a sentence, taking into consideration how the context affects its meaning to be constructed as well the implied meanings. Fossilization in the two aspects is interrelated and overlapping. Thomas (1983) presents the term "pragmatic failure", which takes place in cross-cultural communication and refers to the "inability to understand what is meant by what is said". It can often lead to misunderstanding or confusion in cross-cultural communication.

## 5 . Fossilization reduction

As the former part has discussed the causes of fossilization, it arises a question that is how to prevent fossilization in foreign language teaching. Base on the causes of fossilization, the researchers put forward five teaching strategies to avoid fossilization into the following categories.

## 5.1 Adopting appropriate learning strategies

Learners can discover their own shortcomings and make significant progress in improving second language competence if they successfully implement an appropriate learning strategy. Fossilization, on the other hand, will occur if the wrong and ineffective learning strategy is used.

## 5.2 Designing effective teaching methods

To avoid cross-language petrochemical, teachers should tailor their instruction to the students' needs and stages of second language acquisition. A continuum that gradually approaches the target language is referred to as an interlanguage. Teachers should encourage these students to pay close attention to the features of the target language and emphasize its accuracy, as

they are in the early stages of learning a foreign language. Teachers should encourage advanced language learners to use new and advanced vocabulary and expressions when developing appropriate teaching strategies. Meanwhile, teachers should assist students in becoming acquainted with the target language's culture and society so that they will take the initiative to create interlanguage on the approach to the target language. This means that the process of fossilization can be slowed to some extent.

## 5.3 Guiding students' communicative strategies

A communicative strategy is a set of skills used by language learners with limited target language knowledge to achieve communication's goals. To clarify, language learners can use communicative strategies to communicate effectively. However, learners cannot improve their linguistic competence if they overuse communicative strategies (avoidance, paraphrase, etc.) in their communication. When teaching a foreign language, teachers should not only emphasize correct form and grammar, but also encourage students to use appropriate communicative strategies. Learners' linguistic competence can be raised to a higher level in this way.

## 5.4 Arousing students' intrinsic learning motivation

Learners' affective factors, particularly motivation, are critical in foreign language learning. Positive learning motivation can lead to successful learning and thus strengthen learners' learning attitudes, whereas negative learning motivation can lead to unsuccessful learning and thus create a vicious circle. Motivation is a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. The former is an internal drive to discover and learn something, whereas the latter is derived from external sources, as the names suggest. According to the findings, students who were given intrinsic motivation performed significantly better than those in a learning environment that emphasized extrinsic motivation. As a result, cultivating learners' intrinsic motivation to learn can help them avoid fossilization.

## 5.5  Improving teachers' quality

As is well known, the teacher plays an important role in the educational process. Teachers' incorrect or inadequate language input can lead to students making language errors and, eventually, fossilization. Teachers of foreign languages are obviously also language learners, so the language they use is

also interlanguage. Students' foreign language learning can be hampered if the teachers' interlanguage is not standard or even incorrect. For example, if an English teacher's pronunciation is incorrect, his or her students will not be able to pronounce words correctly. As a result, teachers should focus on improving their language skills, including correct pronunciation and a broad range of knowledge. Simultaneously, The Department of Education should make more efforts to train teachers and prepare them to teach foreign languages.

## 6. Conclusion

The term  "fossilization" or "interlanguage fossilization" is used in linguistics to refer to the process in which incorrect linguistic features become a permanent part of the way a person speaks and writes in a target language. In the classroom, errors in general take time to be corrected, but a fossilized error may never be corrected unless the learner sees a reason to do so. Factors of fossilization are various, some of them are internal and others are external.

On the basis of establishing definitions and causes of interlanguage fossilization, the researchers made suggested recommendations to lessen the occurrence of the phenomenon and it is well worth testing them in empirical study. In addition,  teacher's pedagogical practice may benefit from a better understanding of fossilization, and knowing which grammatical parts are prone to be fossilized. Teachers also become more sensitive to the differences between grammatical elements and set realistic expectations for the duration and outcome of teaching and learning.

**Table 1.1**

**Five Central Psycholinguistic Processes Underlying IL Behavior**

| *Process* | *Definition Example* | *Fossilizable items, rules, and subsystem that occur in IL performance as a result of* |
|---|---|---|
| *"Language Transfer "* | *...the native language (NL)* | *A native speaker (NS) of French placing the adjective after the noun in L2 English (*the car blue)* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| "Transfer-of-... Training"who did not distinguish between he/she in English because their textbooks and teachers almost always presented drills with he and never with she | identifiable items in training procedures | Serbo-Croatian speakers |
| "strategies of second widespread Language-learning" tendency for to reduce to a simpler system(he has cars ) | ....an identifiable approach (i.e. learning the strategy)by the learner to the material to be learned two | learners the TL |
| "strategies of tendency Second Language avoid communication" grammatical | ....an identifiable approach by the learner to communication with native speakers of the TL. | widespread for learners to troublesome Form |
| "overgeneralization of overgeneralization The TL linguistics to all vehicles | ...a clear overgeneralization of the TL rules and semantic | the of ' drive' |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Material" my bicycle | *features – a phenomenon well-* | *(\*I drive* |
| | *known to language teachers* | *to* |
| school ) | | |

*Note:* **Adapted from Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. International Review of Applied Linguistics, 10: 209-231.**

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