

# A Study of Fossilization in Chinese College Students' English Learning

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## ABSTRACT

The study aims to investigate the causes of fossilization in Chinese college students' English learning with the help of questionnaires and interview with some subjects. The results show that some factors may cause the fossilization of many Chinese college students' English. They include the students' lack of interest and strategies in English learning, English teachers' lack of good teaching methods, the negative transfer of the students' mother language and some problems in English textbooks and Chinese education system. Both the students and their English teachers should make great efforts to find useful strategies to overcome the fossilization.

**Keywords:** Fossilization, Chinese College Students, English Learning

## INTRODUCTION

The term "fossilization" was first used by Selinker<sup>[5]</sup> to describe the phenomenon of stagnation in second language learners' learning. Fossilization is a common feature of second language learners' interlanguage. It is an obstacle to second language study because it may stop learners from enhancing their abilities of learning a second language. Many researchers pay attention to this phenomenon in language teaching field and they try to explore the reasons for it.

Many scholars have got their research results about fossilization (Selinker<sup>[5]</sup>; Vigil and Oller<sup>[7]</sup>; Schumann<sup>[4]</sup>). They put forward some different theories to explain why learners may have fossilization in learning a second language. Researchers in China have also conducted various studies of fossilization which happen to Chinese English learners at different stages.

Based on the previous researches, this study aims to analyze fossilization in Chinese college students' English learning with the help of questionnaires and interview with some subjects.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Selinker<sup>[5]</sup> presents the term of fossilization in his Interlanguage Theory in which fossilization is regarded as a necessary process in the formation of interlanguage. According to Selinker, fossilization means that some linguistic rules and systems of a learner's mother language tend to be kept in the interlanguage that is related to the target language. They are unchangeable and have no relations to a learner's age and the explanations given to him. He thinks that fossilization may be in many learners' (about 95%) second language, making it unable to reach the level of the native speakers' language.

Some researchers investigated the causes of fossilization in many people's second language learning. One explanation was made by Lamendella<sup>[3]</sup> from the perspective of biology. According to this theory, a learner needs to develop an infrasystem of a second language after he grasps his mother language. If the infrasystem is not perfect, he has to depend on his mother language system to learn the second language, which may lead to fossilization in the interlanguage related to the second language. In Vigil and Oller's<sup>[7]</sup> theory, the feedback that second language learners get in their learning and communicating process may have effect on their performance in second language learning. Negative emotional feedback and positive cognitive feedback may cause fossilization in the learners' second language. Teachers and students should try to create good interactive atmosphere, which may promote their emotional communication and stimulate the students' interest in learning a second language. In Schumann's<sup>[4]</sup> viewpoint about pidginization, second language learners tend to use simple sentence structures to communicate, so repeated use of these language forms may cause fossilization of the learners' interlanguage. Stauble<sup>[6]</sup> thinks that some external factors like a person's living environment and cultural atmosphere may influence his second language learning and cause fossilization.

In China, there have been some studies about fossilization in English learning. Zhou Hongyun<sup>[8]</sup> conducts an empirical study of fossilization. The results show that English learners in China often use their Chinese knowledge and the English knowledge they have learned to understand and integrate the new English information. The negative transfer of Chinese and the improper use or overuse of their learned English may prevent their English from getting improved, so fossilization occurs. She also finds that fossilization can be easily found in the learners' English cultural knowledge which is different from Chinese culture. Another researcher named Fang Lingling<sup>[2]</sup> thinks that cultivating the awareness of using lexical chunks is helpful for students to reduce their language fossilization. English learners may facilitate their language output automation through input, absorption and output of English lexical chunks.

There are many causes of fossilization. Different researchers have different ideas about them, but they still have something in common. First, language transfer is a cause of fossilization. Language transfer is a phenomenon in which a second language learner uses the rules of his mother tongue to learn the second language. Language transfer can be divided into two kinds. One is positive transfer and the other is negative transfer<sup>[1]</sup>. Obviously, what leads to fossilization in second language learning is the negative language transfer.

The second cause of fossilization is students' lack of learning strategies. As we know, using correct learning strategies may help learners study a second language well. But many learners can't apply some necessary learning strategies to overcome their difficulties in language learning, so fossilization happens to them.

Third, when a second language learner uses the language to communicate with others, the learner may not correct the mistakes in his language immediately if they do not hinder communication. This habit will lead to his second language fossilization to some extent.

Another thing that influences the second language study is the negative evaluation given by other people. When a learner receives some negative evaluation from other persons, he will have a feeling obstacle that makes him dislike the study of the second language, which may lead to fossilization.

## RESEARCH REPORT

With the help of questionnaires, the researcher analyzes the causes of fossilization in Chinese college students' English learning.

### Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the reasons for Chinese college students' English fossilization and find out some practical strategies to help them overcome it in order that they may improve themselves in English learning.

### Subjects

The subjects who participate in the study are 180 freshmen including 95 boys and 85 girls in the University of Jinan in China. They are from different departments of the university, such as School of Law and School of Physics. They range in age from 17 to 20, with an average age of 18.5. The students have learned English for about 9 years and all of them learn English in traditional classroom setting.

### Instrument

Based on the previous studies of fossilization in second language learning, a questionnaire "Chinese College Students' English Fossilization Scale" (CCSEFS) is designed by the researcher in order to investigate the causes of Chinese College students' English fossilization. The questionnaire consists of 15 items about English learning. When compiling these items, the researcher pays much attention to the characteristics of Chinese College students in English learning. For the subjects to get their scores in the 15 items about their English Fossilization, each item is on a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" (point 5) to "strongly disagree" (point 1), the middle point being neutral (point 3).

### Data Collection

On September 23 of 2014, the researcher distributed 180 questionnaires to the subjects in their classroom and asked them to finish the questionnaires within 10 minutes. Before they gave their scores for the 15 items, the researcher explained the items carefully in Chinese in order to avoid misunderstanding. After they finished, the questionnaires were collected immediately and all of the 180 questionnaires were found to be valid.

### Results and Analysis

In order to effectively investigate the causes of fossilization in the subjects' English learning, the researcher adopts the way of analyzing the means of the subjects' scores for the 15 items of the questionnaires, which are shown in Table 1.

From the statistics in this table, we can see that 14 means of the subjects' scores for the items are beyond 3.00. It can be said that fossilization does exist widely in Chinese College Students' English learning.

**Table 1**

<b>Items</b>	<b>Number of the subjects</b>	<b>Means of the subjects' scores</b>
Item 1	180	3.57
Item 2	180	3.65
Item 3	180	3.46
Item 4	180	3.74
Item 5	180	2.88
Item 6	180	3.92
Item 7	180	4.05
Item 8	180	3.37
Item 9	180	3.84
Item 10	180	3.56
Item 11	180	3.79
Item 12	180	3.48
Item 13	180	3.15
Item 14	180	3.62
Item 15	180	3.29

The first cause of Chinese college students' English fossilization is their lack of interest and strategies in English learning. We can get this point from items 1 to 4. The items are "I think that lack of interest in English has influenced my English learning." (Item 1, M=3.57), "Poor English scores I sometimes get in English tests may reduce my enthusiasm in English learning." (Item 2, M=3.65), "Improper learning methods often prevent me from improving my English level." (Item 3, M=3.46), and "I don't know what strategies I can use to improve my abilities of listening, speaking and writing English". (Item 4, M=3.74). The subjects' mean of scores for Item 5 is below 3.0. It is "Sometimes lack of motivation influences my English learning." (Item 5, M=2.88). In the interview with the subjects, some of them told the researcher that they had some motivations to study English, such as passing the CET 4 and CET 6 (college English tests Band 4 and Band 6 in China). They said that they knew the importance of English learning, but they didn't have much interest in it for various reasons and they didn't have some effective methods to improve their abilities of listening, speaking and writing English. So it can be concluded that many Chinese college students lack interest and strategies in English learning, which greatly influences their improvement of English level. It is widely accepted that a learner is willing to apply many useful strategies to overcome difficulties in learning only when he has great interest in it. If a student doesn't like English, he may not want to make efforts to study English and he is not active to use strategies to improve his English level. So these students do need to cultivate their interest in English learning and they should actively participate in the training of learning strategies.

The second cause is many English teachers' lack of good teaching methods. Items 6 to 8 are involved here. Item 6 is "My English teacher teaches in English all the time, which influences my comprehension of some difficult language points." (M=3.92). Item 7 is "My English teacher's teaching methods are not very effective so that I am not very active to participate in the learning activities in English class." (M=4.05). Item 8 is "My English teacher spends little time correcting my mistakes in English speaking and writing, which influences my improvement in English learning." (M=3.37). In the interview with the subjects, some of them told the researcher that some teachers couldn't arrange classroom activities very well. Many students did some things that were not related to English learning, which indicated that they were not attracted by their teachers' words or the classroom activities. It can be seen that many students are not satisfied with their teachers' teaching and they hope to see some improvement in their

teachers' teaching methods. Good teachers should have some ideas about how to teach their students well. They should use some Chinese to help them explain the difficult sentences in order that the students can understand them better. They must be patient to correct students' mistakes in English writing and speaking, otherwise the students would be puzzled and they may lose confidence in studying English.

The third cause of Chinese college students' English fossilization is the negative transfer of their mother Language. We can get this conclusion from the items below: "I always use some Chinese to organize what I want to say in English, which influences my expression in oral English." (Item 9, M=3.84), "I usually organize sentences in Chinese before I write a paper in English, which influences the improvement of my English writing ability." (Item 10, M=3.56). In the interview with the subjects, some of them told the researcher that they were not used to organizing sentences or texts in English, so they had to use Chinese to do the job. It can be seen that Chinese college students have difficulty in adopting English way of thinking when they organize what they want to express in English. These students' English learning may be affected by the negative transfer of their mother Language. The mother tongue transfer is an important factor that leads to fossilization in Chinese students' English learning<sup>[8]</sup>. It is very difficult for Chinese students to use English way of thinking, so most of them tend to organize sentences in Chinese before they speak or write English. In doing so, the students inevitably have some improper English expressions, which may result in fossilization of their English.

The fourth cause is about some problems in English textbooks and other materials. We can get this point from Items 11 to 13. Item 11 is "Some texts in English textbooks are so outdated and boring that I don't have interest in reading them." (M=3.79). Item 12 is "Some materials in English textbooks are so difficult that they influence my motivation of studying English." (M=3.48). Item 13 is "Sometimes I can not follow English teachers' teaching because there are so many materials in the textbooks, which influences my English learning." (M=3.15). When interviewed, some subjects told the researcher that they were dissatisfied with their textbooks and some other materials and they hoped to see some improvement in their English textbooks. So, it is clear that many Chinese college students are not content with their English textbooks. The education authority and English teachers should try to adopt new and interesting materials in English teaching in order to stimulate the students' interest in learning English.

The fifth cause is about some problems in the current Chinese education system. We can get this point from Items 14 and 15. Item 14 is "There are too many students in my class and some of them don't work hard in English learning, which influences my enthusiasm in it." (M=3.62). Item 15 is "There are not many opportunities for me to express my ideas in English in class, for my English teacher is very busy with explaining the important language points in the book, with little time left for students to practice their English in classroom activities." (M=3.29). When interviewed, some subjects told the researcher that they were dissatisfied with something in the current education system and they hoped that it should be improved a lot. Usually college students want to communicate with their classmates or teachers in English, talking about some topics that they are interested in, but in the current Chinese education system, teachers have so many materials to explain in class, so they can not set aside much time for their students to take part in some classroom activities and practice their English. Therefore this situation needs to be changed and improved to meet the needs of students in English classroom.

### **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Based on the above analysis, some pedagogical implications may be given. They are as follows.

Firstly, Chinese college students should cultivate their interest in English learning. Only when a learner has great interest in learning English will he exert every effort to do well in this job. Such learners may try to apply some helpful strategies to improve their English level. There are many things they can do to cultivate their interest in English, like watching some interesting English films or TV plays, listening to some good and attractive English songs, etc.

Secondly, English teachers should try every means to stimulate their students' interest in English learning. They should use various teaching methods and devices in English teaching, taking advantage of both traditional and multimedia teaching approaches. They may let students read some interesting and humorous English essays or enjoy some famous English movies, from which the students may get much pleasure and gradually improve their interest in English learning. Another important thing is that English teachers should integrate training of learning strategies into the classroom English teaching. Only in this way may the students foster the good habit of using strategies in English learning. This is of great importance for them to deal with fossilization and enhance their ability of learning English.

Thirdly, English teachers should consider the degree of difficulty of the materials used in English teaching. If the materials are too difficult, the students will have the sense of frustration and lose their interest in English learning when they study these materials. If the materials are too easy, the students don't need to make efforts to study them and they will not get the sense of success. English teachers should also consider the number of students in each class. Usually in a small class teachers may be easy to arrange some interactive learning activities, which is helpful for students to enhance their abilities of learning English and overcome their English fossilization.

Fourthly, teachers should try their best to create a harmonious and relaxing classroom atmosphere, which is useful for students to actively participate in classroom activities and study English well. In these English classes, students may get many opportunities to express their ideas in English, which is beneficial to their improvement of English proficiency and dealing with their English fossilization.

Fifthly, teachers should be patient when helping their students correct mistakes in their English speaking or writing. It is inevitable that many students make mistakes when they speak or write something in English because of many different factors. So teachers should be tolerant towards students' mistakes in their English and try to correct those mistakes at appropriate time, encouraging the learners to make more efforts to study English. Moreover, teachers should be clear that their evaluations have much influence on their students' English learning. In most cases, teachers should give their students some praise for their good performance or progress in English, which may encourage the students to do better and improve themselves in English learning.

### **CONCLUSION**

The findings of the study show that fossilization does exist widely in Chinese college students' English learning. The researcher has found some main causes of fossilization of Chinese College Students' English. They include students' lack of interest and strategies in English learning, English teachers' lack of good teaching methods, the negative transfer of the students' mother language and some problems in English textbooks and Chinese education system. Some

effective strategies should be applied by teachers to help their students overcome fossilization in English learning. Meanwhile the students should try to cultivate their interest in studying English and make efforts to reduce the influence of the negative transfer of their mother language. Only when the teachers and the students exert their every effort can they become successful in overcoming fossilization of the students' English.

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