Analysing Oral Fossilisation in a Pre-Intermediate Business English Class: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study analyses the phenomenon of oral fossilisation in a pre-intermediate Business English class. The study examines six pre-intermediate Business English class participants to identify persistent language errors and evaluate the effectiveness of targeted instructional strategies. Fossilisation, defined as the persistence of incorrect linguistic forms despite exposure to correct usage, poses significant challenges in language learning, particularly in professional contexts. The data were gathered through class observations and field note-taking during six sessions or 12 hours. The findings revealed persistent grammatical errors such as incorrect verb tense usage, double verb usage, errors in subject-verb agreement and article omissions, and lexical challenges, including inappropriate word usage and pronunciation issues. While targeted instructional strategies—such as role-playing, contextualised grammar exercises, and pronunciation drills—resulted in modest improvements, many errors remained resistant to correction. The study underscores the importance of individualised feedback, extended practice opportunities, and authentic communicative tasks in addressing fossilisation. These findings have implications for designing more effective Business English curricula to foster greater oral proficiency in workplace communication.

Keywords: Oral Fossilisation, Business English, Pre-Intermediate Learners, Language Learning, Fossilisation Aspects

INTRODUCTION

The English language has been used as a means of communication in Business. Hence, employees need to be good language users. Even though learners have the basic concepts of the English language, many experience a stagnation in their writing and speaking skills during the learning process (Jiang, 2023). Fossilisation is very common in the language learning process. It occurs in an attempt to use language when communicating or expressing opinions. Therefore, identifying where fossilisation occurs throughout the learning process can help learners raise more awareness of the oral language production issue and improve the learners' ability of oral communication. In this paper, the author will explore the language

elements fossilised in the oral language learning.

Oral fossilisation, defined as the persistence of incorrect linguistic features in a learner's speech despite exposure to correct forms, poses significant challenges for language acquisition. Selinker (1972) introduced the concept of interlanguage, emphasising how fossilised forms become ingrained in a learner's speech as part of their transitional linguistic system. These errors persist despite learners' exposure to correct forms and are often attributed to first-language interference, insufficient corrective feedback, or limited practice opportunities (Han, 2004).

In the context of Business English, such fossilisation can significantly hinder professional communication. As Brown (2007) notes, "Language learning is not merely a process of accumulating correct forms but involves breaking deeply rooted habits." Fossilisation represents a key obstacle in this transformative process, particularly for adult learners who rely on well-established cognitive and linguistic frameworks.

Moreover, Thornbury (2005) highlights that oral proficiency requires consistent practice and feedback, noting that "fossilised errors often emerge in spontaneous speech where learners prioritize fluency over accuracy." This aligns with observations from Swan and Smith (2001), who argue that learner errors are frequently influenced by specific features of their native languages, such as phonological or grammatical structures.

Literature Review

The concept of fossilisation has been widely studied in second language acquisition research. Selinker (1972) first introduced the idea of interlanguage, describing it as a dynamic, intermediate linguistic system influenced by a learner's native language and their target language exposure. He emphasized that fossilisation represents a critical stage where errors become permanent, often resisting correction and learning interventions. This foundational theory has since informed numerous studies on persistent language errors.

Han (2004) expands on Selinker's theory, explaining that fossilisation is a result of both cognitive and environmental factors. She highlights that limited exposure to authentic language contexts and insufficient corrective feedback are significant contributors to fossilisation. Han also points out that adult learners are particularly prone to fossilisation due to their reliance on established cognitive patterns and first-language structures.

Brown (2007) discusses the psychological dimension of fossilisation, emphasizing the importance of breaking habitual patterns in language learning. According to him, "fossilisation reflects a plateau in the language learning process where learners fail to internalise advanced linguistic forms." This plateau often correlates with a lack of motivation or focus on fluency over accuracy in language use, particularly in adult learners.

Phonological errors, a significant component of oral fossilisation, have been extensively studied by Swan and Smith (2001). They argue that pronunciation difficulties stem from the learner's phonetic inventory in their native language. For instance, speakers of languages without certain English sounds may struggle with accurate articulation, reinforcing fossilised errors through repeated mispronunciation.

Thornbury (2005) contributes to the discussion by emphasizing the role of speaking activities and feedback in addressing fossilisation. He advocates for the use of contextualized, task-based learning to promote active error correction, noting that "errors are less likely to fossilise when learners are actively engaged in meaningful communication." He also underscores the importance of timely feedback to prevent errors from becoming ingrained.

The interplay between fossilisation and Business English learning has received limited attention, although its implications are significant. Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) argue that specialised contexts, such as Business English, require learners to develop both linguistic accuracy and context-specific vocabulary. This dual demand may exacerbate fossilisation as learners struggle to balance these priorities.

METHODOLOGY
This study explores fossilised errors among six pre-intermediate learners enrolled in a short-term Business English course. By identifying elements where the persistent errors occurred, it seeks to contribute to the understanding of how fossilisation can be addressed in a professional language-learning context. This study aimed to answer the following question: What language elements are fossilised in oral language learning?

Participants
The participants included six adults, aged 25 to 40, working for the same company in various business divisions. All participants were pre-intermediate English learners and sought to improve their English language skills, mainly fluency, for workplace purposes.

Course Design
The program consisted of six onsite sessions over five weeks, each lasting two hours. Sessions incorporated role-playing, discussions, and simulated business scenarios to encourage spoken interaction.

Data Collection and Analysis
Data were collected through observations of class interactions and field note-taking. Common error types and patterns were documented. Data were then analysed and errors were categorised into lexical, grammatical, and phonological types. Fossilised errors were identified as those persisting after explicit correction and practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
Common Fossilized Errors
According to Han (2013) "Research on fossilisation has established that fossilisation is local and selective; it

happens only selectively in certain domains and subsystems, while other parts of the learner system successfully converge on the target". Thus, the results showed some areas where persistent fossilisation occurred. First, fossilisation occurred in the grammar aspect of the language. There were some aspects of fossilisation within some grammatical aspects as the following suggested:

1. incorrect verb tense usage (e.g., "I am work here" instead of "I work here", "I am agree" instead of "I agree") omission of articles (e.g., "I need report" instead of "I need the report")
2. incorrect use of modal auxiliary usage (e.g., "we can getting the report instead of "we can get the report", "I must to make sure that we meet the deadline instead of I must make sure that we meet the deadline)
3. Subject-Verb agreement (e.g., "our products is limited" instead of our products are limited, "the company have some policy" instead of "the company has some policies")
4. double verb usage (e.g. "we are have some new policies" instead of "we have some new policies", "we are focus on the product development" instead of "we focus on the product development").

Despite the drills and exercises given to the participants, they still lacked consistency in using the proper forms taught especially during the less-controlled activities. Though similar activities were conducted in different tasks, the same errors still occurred, thus fossilisation.

Second, though there were not as many errors found as the grammar, fossilisation still occurred in the lexical area, for example, the use of the terminology "client" and "customer" which was used interchangeably without context awareness.

Finally, fossilisation occurred in the pronunciation aspect, particularly towards the words they used within the professional context, such as "colleague-college, different-difference, and purchase". Although feedbacks were constantly given, persistent errors still occurred throughout the oral outcomes of the language.

Patterns and Persistence

Fossilised errors were particularly pronounced when learners engaged in spontaneous, less-monitored speech, such as group discussions and role-playing scenarios. Errors linked to first-language interference (e.g., article omissions for speakers of article-less languages) were more persistent than errors arising from misinterpreting English rules. Pronunciation errors indicated the lack of proper concept on how to pronounce some words properly.

Targeted activities, such as pronunciation drills, contextualized grammar exercises, and role-playing scenarios, led to partial improvement. Explicit corrective feedback during tasks was effective in the short term, but some learners reverted to fossilized forms during subsequent sessions. Peer correction and group activities showed promise in raising error awareness, though their impact varied across individuals.

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The findings reveal that oral fossilisation in pre-intermediate learners occurs in some areas in some language elements such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, and it stems from a combination of factors, including first-language interference, insufficient exposure to corrective feedback, and limited opportunities for practical application in real-world contexts. Grammatical errors, such as incorrect verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, and article omissions, were particularly resistant to correction, likely due to structural differences between the learners' first languages and English. Lexical and phonological errors were influenced by the learners' limited vocabulary range and difficulty with English-specific phonemes.

While the instructional strategies implemented in the course provided some improvement, they were constrained by the program's short duration and the need to balance fluency and accuracy. The lack of individualized attention to each learner's specific challenges may have further contributed to the persistence of certain errors. Moreover, fossilization appeared to be reinforced in informal settings where learners relied on habitual, incorrect forms without corrective feedback.

Future courses might benefit from integrating more extensive error correction techniques, such as peer reviews, real-time feedback during activities, and using technology to monitor progress. Additionally, fostering a culture of self-awareness and reflection on language use could help learners actively identify and address their errors.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study analyses oral fossilization in short-term language programs. Persistent errors, particularly in grammar and pronunciation, underscore the need for targeted and sustained intervention. Key recommendations include:

1. **Individualized Feedback**: Incorporate personalized feedback mechanisms to address learner-specific fossilized errors.
2. **Extended Practice**: Offer supplementary sessions or extended program durations to provide more opportunities for reinforcement.
3. **Integrated Technology**: Leverage AI-driven tools and apps for pronunciation practice and error tracking.
4. **Enhanced Error Awareness**: Encourage learners to actively reflect on their speech and self-correct where possible.
5. **Real-World Application**: Design activities that simulate authentic business scenarios, enabling learners to practice accurate language use in context.

Further research should investigate the long-term effectiveness of these strategies and explore innovative approaches, such as virtual reality simulations, to create immersive learning environments. Addressing fossilisation requires a multifaceted approach that combines pedagogy, technology, and learner engagement to promote lasting improvement in oral proficiency.

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