

A Study on Chinese Students' Oral English Fossilization

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ABSTRACT

Fossilization is an unavoidable feature in a learner's interlanguage. How to reduce the onset of fossilization is a great challenge in foreign language teaching and learning. By explaining the phenomenon of Chinese students' oral English fossilization, analyzing one typical error of oral fossilization, exploring its causes, the author finally put forward some tentative methods to prevent oral fossilization and improve Chinese students' English oral proficiency.

KEYWORDS

Oral fossilization; Causes for oral fossilization; Solutions to oral fossilization

English has a significant role in China and penetrates the whole educational system. Accordingly, Chinese students have been learning English for at least 9 years. However, after the long lasting learning span, in consideration of language proficiency, especially oral proficiency, many students are far away from what is called the native-like proficiency. They could not express their thoughts in mind thoroughly and comprehensively. Some of them just wonder whether they are doomed not to be able to learn English well.

Fossilization, in Second Language Acquisition, which was proposed by Selinker in 1972, deals with the seeming failure of language learning and discusses its reasons.

1 Definition of fossilization

According to Larry Selinker, an American linguist, "interlanguage" refers to the "the existence of a separate linguistic system based on the observable output which results from a learner's attempted production of a target language norm" (Selinker, 1972:35). In other words, interlanguage is an interim grammar that a second language learner builds on his way to the target language competence, which is independent of both learner's first and the target language. And fossilization is an important feature of interlanguage.

Selinker first noted fossilizable linguistic phenomena, which, in his proper words, 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 amount of explanation and instruction he receives in the target language" (Selinker, 1972:36). He suggests that there is psychological mechanism that he calls "fossilization", which underlines the production of fossilized items, including both target and non-target forms. More recently, the term "fossilization" has been used by researchers including Selinker to label the undesirable phenomenon in second language learning that the second language learner fails to reach target language competence or that non-target forms become fixed in interlanguage.

Language fossilization can be classified according to its form and property. In form, fossilization

falls into two major categories, namely individual fossilization and group fossilization. As its name implies, individual fossilization refers to different fossilized items or different degrees of fossilized language competence that occur to different individuals. Group fossilization comes into being when fossilization occurs to a whole language community instead of different individuals, or even to a larger society such as a nation. Group fossilization may elicit a new language dialect. Indian English is a good case in point. In property, fossilization can be divided into temporary fossilization and permanent fossilization. Temporary fossilization means that the fossilized items last comparatively a short period, usually less than 5 years as Selinker puts it, and are possible for further development of target-like forms. Permanent fossilization refers to that the learner's errors in his interlanguage have remained for a pretty long period (usually more than 5 years according to Selinker's time standard) or even life long. These errors seem to have already become fixed.

2 Definition of oral fossilization

Fossilization in second language acquisition has many manifestations among which written fossilization and oral fossilization are placed on the top. Written fossilization means that foreign language learners' writing ability has fossilized for a long period. Oral fossilization refers to the fact that foreign language learners' oral construction and expression abilities have fossilized for a long time, which they can't overcome. That is so-called "Grade Two Phenomenon" or "Plateau Phenomenon". Oral fossilization takes place in the following three aspects: accuracy, fluency and proficiency. With regard to accuracy, it means grammatical errors in oral communication. As to fluency, it mainly refers to the case that learners usually use short sentences and their discourses are not coherent in oral communication. And proficiency is that foreign language learners usually stop or have a lot of oral repetition in their oral communication.

3 Manifestations of oral fossilization for Chinese students

The college English teaching syllabus of 2020 has set a criterion for college students' oral English level that they could use English to communicate with each other in the learning process, to have discussion on a certain topic, or to communicate with native speakers on daily topics.

In China, students usually learn English since the elementary school at grade 3, so when they come into college, they will have learned English for 9 years. Through they have learned English systematically for many years, most of them cannot change English knowledge into the corresponding output skill timely. It is extremely rare for language learners to achieve full native speaker competence, especially oral competence. And some researches have revealed the fact that oral fossilization is prevalent in non-English majors. Concrete representations are: their oral English is not fluent, most of them cannot express their thoughts when they speak English; their expression scope of English is narrow and expression means is limited to the past learned vocabulary and sentence patterns; new learned knowledge cannot be used in practice; accuracy and decency is not good enough, so there are a lot of repeated errors; a lot of language learners are lost in a stopped situation for a long time, which makes some learners lose their confidence and give up oral study.

4 Description of one error in oral fossilization

Oral fossilization is a common phenomenon for students, thus there exist many kinds of fossilized errors in students' oral communication. Here the author examines one type of errors in oral

fossilization, the errors caused by the omission of some sentence parts.

Omission involves the deletion of the third singular present tense final “-s”, the plural final “-s”, articles, conjunctions, relative pronouns and head-nouns before relative clauses. The most frequent error among omission is thought to be the deletion of the plural final “-s”.

For example:

(1) a. The more friend(s) we have, the more chance (s) we have to be successful.

It should be pointed out that the omission of the plural final “-s” is related to Chinese conventional usage of plurals. Generally speaking, Chinese nouns have no strict “number category”. Influenced by no strict “number” restriction of Chinese nouns, students commit such a type of errors persistently.

Due to no strict “number” restriction of Chinese nouns, the “number” does not restrict the predicate of a nominal subject. Moreover, Chinese verbs themselves are not restricted by the “number” concept. Thus the primary cause of the deletion of the third singular present tense final “-s” and articles is the same as that of the deletion of plural final “-s”.

For example:

(2) a. She often go(es) to school on foot.

(3) a. I am (a) college student and I like my college very much.

The deletion mentioned above is the category morpheme. That is to say, the absence does not affect sentence structure. However, the deletion of conjunctions and relative pronouns before relative clauses influences the structure of a sentence. Without conjunctions or relative pronouns before relative clauses, sentences will become ungrammatical and confused.

For example:

(4) a. People (who) love music have less pressure.

This error-type involves the usage of relative clauses. At first glimpse of sentences, we may conclude that the students produce each sentence with two predicates. And such errors are very common among students. It is an obvious case of first language interference. Regarding example (4), it is related to the acquisition of relative clauses. In case of English, first they must learn that relative clauses can modify noun phrases. Second, they must learn various functions that the relative pronoun can serve. These two tasks are a substantial learning burden for second language learners. They did attach a relative clause to a noun phrase, but omitted relative pronouns, because they did not master functions that the relative pronoun can serve.

5 Possible causes for oral fossilization

The causes for oral fossilization are complicated. Based on the previous analysis of errors in oral fossilization, the author presents three possible causes.

5.1 First language interference

Generally speaking, differences between first language and target language are the root of first language interference. Any foreign or second language learner who has acquired a first language is likely to receive first language interference. Knowledge systems and thinking patterns that he has already acquired in his native language are always ready to impact his target language learning. First language interference seems to be deep-rooted and impossible to be eradicated completely.

From the previous analysis of errors, it is concluded that first language interference is an important factor leading to the oral fossilization. The omission of the plural final “s”, and the third singular present tense final “s” is most probably due to no strict “number” restriction in Chinese language. The reason of omissions of relative pronouns is that there is no concept of relative clauses

in Chinese. As it is known, Chinese attribute is usually put down before the modified word no matter how long the attribute is. These differences make it difficult for Chinese students to acquire English and to some extent increase the chance of oral fossilization.

5.2 Deficient input

There are three processes in language study—input, intake and output--- in which input is the precondition. Without adequate and optimized input, output is impossible. The college students, compared with middle school students, whose English classes are reduced from 4 to 2 every week. Opposite to the reduced class period, the amount of information is increased sharply so teachers cannot repeat and emphasize the learnt knowledge, while most of new college students are lack of self-determination to study, which leads to the conflict between the large amount of input and the lack of acceptability. Their input knowledge cannot be absorbed and internalized which makes information storage stand in an inadequate situation.

The two input ways are visual input and aural input. The language learners' oral level also lies in the large amount of input of aural language materials. There are several reasons. First, aural input plays an important role in learning sound and intonation. Second, aural input can cultivate language learners' acute identification of sound, which is the basis of language imitation. The acute identification of sound depends on language learners not teachers. Last but not least, aural input can construct the relationship between sound and meaning fast. Because of certain reasons, most of language learners mainly depend on visual input and there are a little of aural input. The inadequacy of aural input makes language learners poor sense of language and bad identification of sound, so they cannot understand or speak out.

5.3 Lack of output

According to Swain's research (Swain, 1985: 25), intellectual input is indispensable to the language study but intellectual input itself cannot improve the language competence. If learners want to reach the exact level of native speakers, they should use linguistic materials to carry out the conscious output. The linguistic output has many functions such as causing more efficient input; promoting grammatical treatment; inspecting hypotheses; fostering natural and fluent linguistic expression; training abilities to have discourse conversation; breeding individual linguistic style. While, there are many disadvantageous phenomena in traditional language study such as the lower demand of linguistic output or total absent output. In class, teachers usually put an emphasis on transmission of linguistic knowledge and after class students usually recite words and do a lot of exercises to make a good preparation for examinations, therefore they neglect oral exercises. In examinations, there are a few of oral tests or there are no oral tests. Sometimes translation exercises have taken place of oral output process. The linguistic study is a kind of skill study, which has three steps: recognition, association and automatization. The skill study needs a large amount of exercises, only through which the skill can be proficient and then reach to the automatization. Under the condition of lacking output and a little of practice of the linguistic knowledge, it is hard to foster college students' linguistic competence.

6 Solutions to Oral Fossilization

After we have explored causes of oral fossilization, we will certainly ask "how to prevent oral fossilization and improve students' oral competence?" Although oral fossilization is a very common phenomenon in foreign language learning, we are still able to take some effective measures to

prevent or at least to delay oral fossilization. So here the author just make an attempt to put forward some tentative methods based on previous study.

6.1 Reducing the chance of first language interference

First language interference is one of the most important reasons leading to oral fossilization of students. We have got to know that many persistent interlingual errors, such as omission of the third singular present tense final "s" and of relative pronouns, etc. are concerned with first language interference. Considering the situation, the teacher should attach importance to the influence of first language interference on the students' English oral study. For example, when teaching students to learn certain grammatical rules or sentence structures which are related to first language interference, teachers could use intensive techniques such as repetition or drills to overcome the interference and establish necessary new habits. Although the method is not adequate and perfect for learners to acquire a second language, it does work to some extent, for most students in foreign language school are trained in this way and their performances are much better than those who never go to a foreign language school.

6.2 Emphasizing the quantity and quality of foreign language input

As we all known, the oral fossilization has a close relationship with language input. The large quantity of language input can help to reduce oral fossilization, so we should increase quantity of foreign language input. As mentioned above, there are two ways of input, visual input and aural input. Based on the conventional visual input orientation, Chinese foreign language teachers should also pay enough attention to students' aural input to increase the quantity of input. Such listening materials as *family album USA*, BBC, VOA, and CNN should be fully utilized for the English oral study.

And the quality of language input should also be emphasized. A significant idea that has emerged in recent years is comprehensible input. Krashen's input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985:53) posits that language is picked up, or acquired, when learners receive input from "messages" which contain language a little above their existing understanding and from which they can infer meaning. So the importance of comprehensible input should not be ignored. And the "comprehensible input" also suggests that classroom materials should also be varied and many current course books should demonstrate a motivating range of situations and texts, for example, newspaper articles, posters, advertisements, maps, and invitations.

6.3 Increasing quantity of oral output

In order to develop oral skill, the English teacher could organize students to take part in English corner for 2 hours or so once a week. The purpose of English corner is to make students to provide prepared oral output and make up scant oral communication. There is a fixed topic in English corner every week, which usually has something to do with course book. Before coming to English corner, the teacher demands students to make adequate preparation for vocabulary, sentence structures, expressions and opinions. Because of adequate preparation and familiar topic, most of students can not only say something during their oral communication but also express their opinions fluently and obtain a feeling of achievement. In English corner the teacher should also demand students to write down new words and expression they obtain from it and look up new words and expressions they meet. In this way students can accumulate oral words and expressions gradually and make a solid foundation for the later successful oral communication.

6.4 Giving appropriate feedback to students' oral errors

Recently, some researchers and educators favor the communicative language teaching and allow the learners too much "freedom" without correction and explicit instruction, which in author's opinion will probably lead to the early fossilization of errors. If teachers don't correct the oral errors or give any effectual instruction to students, they not only make a large amount of errors but also repeat the same error again and again. In this sense, it is necessary for the teacher to give students timely and appropriate feedback to oral production errors, because if not, it's possible that students will make the same errors in future. The repetition of one's erroneous utterance is actually the symptom of one's oral fossilization.

7 Conclusion

Fossilization phenomena are unavoidable in the foreign language learning process and become an obstacle for learners to acquire the target language. On the basis of the studies of previous researchers on the fossilization phenomena, the thesis focuses on oral fossilization of Chinese students and analyses its three causes. At last, the author holds that by reducing the chance of first language interference, emphasizing the quantity and quality of foreign language input, increasing the quantity of oral output, and giving appropriate feedback to students' oral errors, oral fossilization could be prevented or at least delayed.

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