

Investigating the interlanguage fossilization of English writing in foreign language acquisition

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Abstract

Interlanguage fossilization is a persistent phenomenon in second and foreign language acquisition, reflecting the stabilization of non-target-like linguistic forms in learners' interlanguage systems. This study investigates the occurrence and types of interlanguage fossilization in EFL students' writing compositions. A descriptive research design was employed, and data were collected through a diagnostic writing test administered to 20 sixth-year preparatory school students during the 2023–2024 academic year. The findings reveal two major types of fossilization: morphological and syntactic. Morphological fossilization accounted for 85.63% of the total errors, while syntactic fossilization represented 14.37%. Among morphological errors, spelling was the most dominant category, followed by errors in prepositions, articles, verbs, and pronouns. Syntactic fossilization was identified in the use of passive voice, relative clauses, and direct and indirect speech. The persistence of these errors indicates that learners experience difficulties in mastering both basic and complex linguistic structures. The findings also suggest that low language proficiency, first language transfer, and insufficient corrective feedback contribute to the occurrence of fossilization. This study highlights the importance of targeted pedagogical interventions, including explicit grammar instruction and continuous feedback, to reduce fossilization and enhance students' writing proficiency.

1. Introduction

Interlanguage fossilization has long been recognized as a central issue in second and foreign language acquisition. First introduced by Selinker (1972), fossilization refers to the cessation of interlanguage development before learners attain target language norms. It has since been conceptualized as a permanent state in which non-target-like linguistic forms become stabilized in a learner's interlanguage system despite continued exposure to the target language (Benati & Angelovska, 2016).

Fossilization reflects underlying cognitive processes that result in persistent deviations from target language norms. These deviations may occur across multiple linguistic domains, including grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and discourse structure (Han, 2004). As a result, fossilization is widely regarded as a major barrier to achieving native-like proficiency, particularly in formal language learning contexts.

Previous studies have shown that language learners often continue to produce recurring errors even after years of instruction. Such persistence suggests that certain linguistic forms become resistant to change, even when corrective feedback and instructional input are provided (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Consequently, learners' interlanguage systems may stabilize at a non-target-like level, limiting further language development (Richards, 2015).

The phenomenon of fossilization is particularly evident in writing. Writing in a second or foreign language requires the integration of grammatical accuracy, lexical knowledge, and coherent discourse organization. However, many EFL learners demonstrate persistent grammatical and structural errors in their written production. Fossilization in writing can be identified when learners show minimal improvement despite repeated practice, revision, and exposure to the target language (Lang & Yan, 2019).

In academic settings, fossilization poses a significant challenge, as students are expected to produce accurate and coherent written texts. Learners may reach a developmental plateau at which their grammatical competence ceases to improve, and certain errors become entrenched in their language use. Yorio (1985) distinguishes between two major types of fossilization: control failure, in which learners possess the necessary knowledge but fail to apply it consistently, and competence fossilization, in which incorrect forms become permanently embedded in the learner's interlanguage system.

Despite the extensive theoretical discussion on fossilization, empirical research focusing on its manifestation in EFL students' writing—particularly in specific local contexts—remains limited. Many previous studies have addressed fossilization at a general level without providing detailed analysis of its types and distribution in students' written production. Furthermore, there is a need to examine the contributing factors that lead to fossilization in classroom settings, especially in contexts where English is learned as a foreign language.

Addressing this gap is important for improving language teaching practices, particularly in writing instruction. A clearer understanding of how fossilization appears in students' writing can inform the development of more effective pedagogical strategies, including targeted feedback, instructional intervention, and error correction techniques.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the occurrence of interlanguage fossilization in EFL students' writing and to identify its types and possible causes. Specifically, the study focuses on sixth-year preparatory school students in Tikrit City, Salah al-Din Governorate, Iraq, during the 2023–2024 academic year. By examining students' written compositions, this study seeks to provide empirical evidence on fossilization patterns and contribute to the improvement of EFL writing instruction.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive research design to investigate interlanguage fossilization in EFL students' writing. It focused on identifying fossilized linguistic forms and analyzing error types that indicate fossilization. A diagnostic writing test was employed as the primary data collection instrument.

2.2. Participants

The participants were sixth-year preparatory school students in the scientific branch in Tikrit City, Salah al-Din Governorate, Iraq, during the 2024 academic year. A total of 20 male students were selected, representing approximately 90% of the target population. Two additional students were involved in a pilot study and were excluded from the final sample. All participants were learning English as a foreign language as part of their formal curriculum.

2.3. Instrument

Data were collected using a diagnostic writing test adapted from the sixth-year preparatory English textbook. The test consisted of two writing prompts: *Cigarette Advertising Should Be Illegal* and *Studying English in Britain*.

Participants were instructed to write approximately 100 words for each prompt. The test was designed to elicit written production and identify recurring linguistic errors associated with fossilization.

2.4. Validity and Reliability

Face validity was established through expert review by specialists in linguistics and language teaching methodology. Based on their feedback, minor revisions were made to improve clarity and task suitability.

Reliability was assessed using the test-retest method. The test was administered twice with a two-week interval (March 4–5 and March 18–19, 2024). The Pearson correlation coefficient yielded a value of 0.86, indicating high reliability.

2.5. Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to evaluate the feasibility of the research procedures and the clarity of the instrument. Two students from different schools participated in this phase and were excluded from the main study to prevent bias.

2.6. Data Analysis

Students' compositions were analyzed using Wysocka's scoring model. Each writing task was scored out of 20 points. The analysis focused on identifying recurring linguistic errors indicative of fossilization, including grammatical errors, lexical misuse, and spelling errors.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

The findings of this study are presented based on the frequency and percentage of fossilized errors identified in students' writing. Two major types of interlanguage fossilization were found: morphological and syntactic fossilization.

3.1.1. Morphological Fossilization

Morphological fossilization was the most dominant type of error in students' writing. It includes omission of verbs, omission of prepositions, misuse of articles, omission of the pronoun *it*, and spelling errors, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Morphological Fossilization

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Omission of verb	39	8.07
Omission of preposition	120	24.84
Articles	51	10.52
Omission of pronoun <i>it</i>	5	1.04
Spelling	268	55.49
Total	483	100

a) Omission of Verb

Examples:

“Smokers must *smoking habit*”

“You should *attendance early*”

“I *play mobile phone*”

These examples show that students either omit verbs or misuse word classes (e.g., using nouns instead of verbs). The sentence “*I play mobile phone*” reflects inappropriate verb choice influenced by the first language, where the equivalent verb is used more broadly. This indicates incomplete mastery of verb usage in English. The percentage of this error type (8.07%) suggests that it has become fossilized.

b) Omission of Preposition

Examples:

“We can see many smokers *within road*”

“You should *listen English lesson*”

“He *goes to home*”

These examples illustrate omission, confusion, and overuse of prepositions. For instance, “*within road*” reflects confusion between *in* and *within*, while “*listen English lesson*” shows omission of the preposition *to*. The phrase “*goes to home*” demonstrates overgeneralization. These errors are likely influenced by first language structures. With a percentage of 24.84%, this category represents a significant source of fossilization.

c) Articles

Examples:

“They *give negative message*”

“You can see *amazing place*”

“We *begin to study English on the Sunday*”

“They *went to the Mosul*”

These examples show both omission and overgeneralization of articles. The absence of an article system in Arabic contributes to these errors. The use of “*the Sunday*” and “*the Mosul*” reflects overgeneralization of definite articles. With a percentage of 10.52%, article misuse is a common fossilized feature.

d) Omission of Pronoun *It*

Examples:

“*assists us to learn*”

“*smokers buy from shops*”

These sentences demonstrate omission of the pronoun *it*, which is often required in English but omitted in Arabic. This reflects first language transfer. Although this error type has the lowest percentage (1.04%), it still represents fossilized usage due to its recurrence.

e) Spelling

Examples:

“*wich*” → “*which*”

“*plae*” → “*play*”

Spelling errors constitute the highest percentage (55.49%). These errors involve omission, addition, or substitution of letters. Students tend to spell words based on pronunciation, reflecting the phonological influence of their first language. This supports the view that orthographic differences between languages contribute to fossilization.

3.1.2. Syntactic Fossilization

Syntactic fossilization was identified in three categories: relative clauses, direct and indirect speech, and passive voice, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Syntactic Fossilization

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Relative clauses	30	37.04
Direct and indirect speech	15	18.52
Passive voice	36	44.44
Total	81	100

a) Relative Clauses

Examples:

"English lesson learn ..."
"Smokers smokes ..."

These examples show omission of relative pronouns such as *who* and *which*. Students tend to simplify sentence structures by avoiding embedded clauses. The percentage (37.04%) indicates that this structure is problematic and fossilized.

b) Direct and Indirect Speech

Examples:

"We ask smokers to leave ..."
"I said my friend studies in ..."

Students tend to use direct structures and avoid indirect speech due to its grammatical complexity. The lack of tense shifting and reporting structures suggests limited mastery. This category accounts for 18.52% of syntactic errors.

c) Passive Voice

Examples:

"Some English lessons teach online"
"Cigarette can leave ..."

These examples show incorrect passive constructions. Students often fail to distinguish between active and passive voice or avoid passive structures altogether. With the highest percentage in syntax (44.44%), this indicates fossilization in complex grammatical forms.

3.2. Discussion

The findings reveal that interlanguage fossilization occurs at both morphological and syntactic levels. However, morphological fossilization (85.63%) is significantly higher than syntactic fossilization (14.37%), indicating that learners experience greater difficulty at the morphological level. This supports the notion that fossilization can occur at different linguistic levels depending on learners' exposure and cognitive processing (Han, 2004).

Spelling errors emerged as the most dominant category (55.49%), suggesting a strong influence of the learners' first language. This finding is consistent with Leung (2009), who argues that differences between first language and target language systems—particularly in orthography—can lead to persistent errors and eventual fossilization. The tendency of students to spell words based on pronunciation reflects reliance on phonological processing rather than orthographic competence.

Preposition and article errors further confirm the role of first language transfer. As noted by Lightbown and Spada (2006), learners often transfer linguistic features from their first language when equivalent structures differ or are absent in the target language. In this study, the absence of an article system in Arabic contributes to frequent omission and overgeneralization of articles. Similarly, confusion in preposition usage reflects structural differences between the two languages.

Verb-related errors and omission of pronouns indicate incomplete grammatical competence. According to Richards (2015), fossilization occurs when learners' interlanguage stabilizes at a non-target-like level, preventing further development despite instruction. The persistence of such errors suggests that students have not fully internalized English grammatical rules.

At the syntactic level, errors in passive voice and relative clauses indicate difficulties in producing complex sentence structures. This aligns with Yorio (1985), who explains that learners tend to avoid complex grammatical constructions and rely on simpler forms, leading to fossilization. The avoidance of indirect speech observed in this study also reflects limited confidence in applying advanced grammatical transformations.

Furthermore, the persistence of these errors despite instruction supports Selinker's (1972) original claim that fossilization represents a stage in which interlanguage development ceases before reaching target language norms. The findings also align with Han (2012), who emphasizes that fossilization is a cognitive phenomenon influenced by both internal factors (e.g., processing limitations) and external factors (e.g., instructional input).

In addition, insufficient corrective feedback and ineffective teaching practices may contribute to fossilization. As argued by Benati and Angelovska (2016), continuous exposure alone is not sufficient to eliminate fossilized forms; targeted instructional intervention is necessary to promote language development.

Overall, the results indicate that fossilized errors in students' writing are systematic and persistent. These findings highlight the need for more effective pedagogical strategies, including explicit grammar instruction, focused corrective feedback, and increased opportunities for meaningful language use. Such interventions may help learners overcome fossilization and improve their writing proficiency.

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, two types of interlanguage fossilization were identified in students' English writing: morphological fossilization and syntactic fossilization. The results show that morphological fossilization accounts for 85.63% of the total errors, whereas syntactic fossilization represents 14.37%. This indicates that morphological fossilization occurs more frequently in students' writing.

The occurrence of interlanguage fossilization in students' compositions may be attributed to several factors, including ineffective instruction, inappropriate teaching methods, lack of feedback, carelessness on the part of both teachers and students, students' reliance on memorizing compositions rather than expressing their own ideas, and an unsupportive learning environment for teaching English writing.

Teachers should pay greater attention to providing effective and continuous feedback on students' writing to help them identify and correct their errors. In addition, teachers should create a more supportive and appropriate learning environment that encourages students to develop their writing skills. Furthermore, teachers should provide appropriate instructional support and corrective interventions for students who frequently make errors, so that these errors do not become fossilized in their language learning process.

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