

Dealing with Fossilized Errors while Teaching Grammar

გამყარებულ შეცდომებთან გამკლავება გრამატიკის სწავლებისას

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Abstract

The article is dedicated to the grammatical error fossilization: history of study, definition, classification, and treatment. A survey of Georgian (non-native-speakers of English) teachers' opinions on the issues of error fossilization is offered. The author comes to conclusion that grammatical error fossilization is a serious problem which should be treated on a regular basis, however, in case of effective teaching methods this is a soluble problem.

Keywords: fossilized errors, stabilized errors, grammar teaching

რეზიუმე

სტატია ეძღვნება გრამატიკული შეცდომების გამყარებას: ამ ცნების შემოღების ისტორიას, განსაზღვრებას, გამყარებული შეცდომების კლასიფიკაციასა და ამ სახის შეცდომებთან გამკლავებას. შეთავაზებულია ინგლისური ენის ქართველი მასწავლებლების გამყარებულ შეცდომებზე შეხედულებების გამოკვლევა. ავტორი იმ დასკვნამდე მიდის, რომ შეცდომათა გამყარება სერიოზული პრობლემაა, რომლის გადასაწყვეტად საჭიროა რეგულარული სამუშაოების ჩატარება. თუმცა, ამ პრობლემის გადაწყვეტა შესაზღვრებელია, თუ სწავლების ეფექტურ მეთოდებს გამოვიყენებთ.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: გამყარებული შეცდომები, სტაბილიზირებული შეცდომები, გრამატიკის სწავლება

Introduction

Attitude to errors in contemporary grammar teaching is contradictory. On the one hand, from the viewpoint of learning theories, errors are a natural part of learning and there is no special sin in making them. Besides, from communicative viewpoint, as long as one communicator can understand another, there is no big problem in mistakes. On the other hand, not only proponents of outdated, non-communicative, methods of teaching languages, but also teachers holding quite contemporary views, are worried by the number of such mistakes, which language learners tend to make insistently and which, eventually, do impede communication – sometimes reasonably, but sometimes making the utterance either almost incomprehensible or wrongly understood. Selinker (1972) coined the term ‘fossilization’ to refer to the phenomenon when non-target forms become fixed in the interlanguage. For a Georgian student of English, for example, it is so typical to substitute Present Perfect Simple or Present Perfect Continuous for Past Simple. However, such utterances are often misinterpreted by native speakers of English (e.g., “He played in 20 movies” □ Is he dead?). Certainly, dealing with fossilized

errors is an important issue of grammar teaching, that is why the article is dedicated to it.

Theoretical Background

Several issues have to be viewed in this section of the article: definition of fossilized errors, their causes, classification, their treatment, and types of grammatical errors being fossilized. They will lead us to compiling a questionnaire concerning fossilization of grammatical errors by Georgian students.

Definition

The term “fossilization” derives literally from “fossil” which refers to a kind of stone turned from a buried piece of soft wood because of the steady drip of calcium-containing water. By fossilization in language acquisition the rigidity of mind and habit is meant, induced by the steady drip of wrong and harmful methods in learners.

Selinker (1972) says that fossilizable linguistic phenomena are linguistic items, rules and subsystems which speakers of a particular Native Language (NL) will tend to

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keep in their Interlanguage (IL) relative to a particular Target Language (TL), no matter what the age of the learner or the amount of explanation and instruction s/he receives in the TL. The concept of Interlanguage sees learners as constructing their own grammatical systems. These systems are learner-driven rather than teacher-driven - the learner progresses through employing a number of different strategies, some of which are based upon her/his Native Language, some of which are based upon her/his desire to communicate, and some of which may be rooted in the Universal Grammar, using the term coined by Chomsky.

There is one more term used in connection with keeping making the same mistakes – stabilization. In addition to the term fossilization, Selinker and Lakshamanan (1992) introduce the term stabilization. They state that stabilization is the first sign of presumed fossilization. The difference between the two is defined in terms of permanence. Errors become fossilized when they have become permanently established in the IL of an L2 learner in a form that is deviant from the TL norms and that continues to appear in performance regardless of further exposure to the TL. Meanwhile, stabilized errors are not permanent; they are maintained in the learners' L2 production at a given level of IL development. It is just a momentary halt. According to Wang Cui-lian (2003), fossilization is the result of acquisition, but stabilization happened in the process of language learning. Stabilization is the prelude to possible fossilization. So it is necessary to avoid stabilization before fossilization happens. Thus, stabilized errors are the ones that eventually disappear as the learner makes progress, whereas fossilized errors are those which do not disappear entirely regardless of the input and exposure given to the learner. On the stage of stabilization teachers should and still can do something to prevent fossilization. It is much harder to fight fossilized errors than stabilized and chance ones.

Han (2005) and some other authors believe that there is a critical period for second language acquisition (SLA); adult L2 learners cannot attain complete TL grammar level. Their IL errors are fossilized (while younger learners can learn the target language on a level which does not include native language interference). Meanwhile, the opposing view comes from White and Genesee (1996), Bialystok and Miller (1999), and Steinberg, Nagata, Aline (2004), believing that there is no critical period for learning syntax. My experience of teaching shows that beginner learners of both young and adult age tend to fossilize their errors. Besides, L1 isn't the only reason for fossilized errors (see in the next section), so I believe it is quite a universal category.

So, what are fossilized errors?

- Mistakes that students know is wrong but keep mak-

ing.

- Errors from force of habit which students no longer notice they are making.
- Something that students learnt wrong and now need to change.
- Errors that students may correct when focused but still make on their own.
- Mistakes that recur despite constant correction.
- Errors based in Native Language interference or Target language overgeneralization that is made by many speakers.
- Mistakes that teachers may not any longer “hear” after a number of years teaching in a particular context (and therefore do not any longer correct).
- Mistakes that has been repeated so that it sounds right to the learner.

Causes

Nowadays, fossilization has been paid much attention to by many researchers in the field of applied linguistics, because it is an inevitable topic in the study of second language acquisition. Based on Selinker and Lamendella's conclusion, Ellis (2008) has summarized the possible causes of fossilization as internal and external factors. Larsen-Freeman and Long (2000) attribute fossilization to communication adequacy. Chen Huiyuan (cited in Wang Cui-lian, 2003), in her discussion of the sources of fossilization, summarized the theories in this field, and classified these theories into theories of internal sources, theories of external sources and theories of interactive sources. Thus, to sum up, fossilization is due to:

- L1 interference
- Lack of correction
- The connection between interlanguage and errors
- Method of instruction (too much based on the native language)
- Errors that come from previous stages of learning (especially with older students)
- Affective, cultural, cognitive and environmental perspectives of a language
- Lack of motivation to correct oneself
- Lack of strategies
- Lack of learner autonomy – reliance on correction by teacher.

Classification

According to Selinker (1972), interlanguage fossilization falls into two categories, namely individual fossilization and group fossilization. The former is the persistence of individual learner's IL development, while the latter is the plateau in the diachronic development of a community language. Usually, individual fossilization consists of two

types: error reappearance, and language competence fossilization. Error reappearance refers to the inappropriate interlanguage structures that are thought to have been corrected but continue to appear regularly. It can be found in IL of beginners or learners with low proficiency. Language competence fossilization refers to the plateau in the development of L2 learners' phonological, grammatical, lexical and pragmatic competence. It is found in L2 learners who have been learning TL for a long period of time and arrived at a relatively high level. In fact, repeated errors are often the demonstrations of competence fossilization.

If fossilized language competence becomes pervasive in a community, group fossilization comes into being. Such pervasion often leads to a new dialect (pidginization). Indian English and Singapore English are good cases in point.

Fossilization may occur not only on interlanguage, but also on intralanguage level (overgeneralization dealing with L2 which is further fossilized).

Fossilization occurs at all levels, from phonological to pragmatic layer. In this article grammatical fossilization is viewed.

- *Morphological fossilization*

English has got a variety of changes in morphology and therefore has various grammatical morphemes. The most common problems lay in two aspects, inflectional morpheme (e.g., -s for plural) and article. Georgian students, for example, often use singular instead of plural for combinations "numeral + noun" under the influence of L1.

- *Morphological Syntactic fossilization*

Different languages have their own syntactic rules. The most typical manifestation of syntactic fossilization among Georgian students is presented in tense.

- *Semantic fossilization*

Semantic fossilization refers to the use of language forms that exist in TL but do not represent the meanings L2 learners intend to express in the context. It mostly deals with vocabulary, however, some grammar aspects may be also involved.

- *Pragmatic fossilization*

Due to the close relationship between pragmatics and semantics, fossilization in the two aspects is interrelated and overlapping. A pragmatic deviance is also termed "pragmatic failure" by Thomas (1983). In her view, pragmatic failure takes place in the cross-cultural communication and refers to the "inability to understand what is meant by what is said". Inappropriate language use results in misunderstanding, embarrassment, and even insult. An example may be the acceptable in Georgian expression of a request "Imperative + please", while in English it sounds rather rude.

How to deal with fossilized errors?

Yanping Zheng (2010) offers the following ways to deal with stabilized and fossilized errors:

- 1) Holding analysis of typical errors in order to pay a special attention to these phenomena in the process of teaching;
- 2) Diagnosing through testing;
- 3) Fostering a positive learning attitude in language learner;
- 4) Cultivating language learners learning strategies;
- 5) Developing language competence and pragmatic strategies among language learners.

By what kind of practical measures can we fight fossilized errors in an effective way? Below find some more applicable recommendations of what Wang Cui-lian (2003) offers:

- Recording students – you could play the recording, ask for general impression, give them the tape script, have them correct their own or peer's errors.
- Having students self-correct and peer-correct (especially in writing), which is more effective than teacher correction.
- Playing games with individual mistakes or common errors.
- Focusing on one error at a time, stopping students and having them correct it before moving on.
- Giving students a funny look when they make a fossilized error – they will realize something is wrong and correct themselves (not to be tried with new or very shy students!).
- Prevention is more significant than defossilization (an apple a day...).
- Discovering and clarifying why and how errors occur.
- Keeping personalized "fossil" diaries and dictionaries where students record their particular errors.
- Using fossil journals in pairs – each student tries to get his/her partner to make the errors in his/her journal.
- Focusing on fossilized errors at the end of a communicative activity.
- Saying "I don't understand what you're saying".
- Writing answers/problems on the board to discuss as a class.
- Having a wiki – each student has his/her own page for errors.
- Avoiding correction of individual students on the spot, but saving errors for class correction at the end.
- Asking some students to be monitors and write down what they hear during speaking activities.
- Using humour to point out errors e.g. "I'm talking to the phone, not to a student", act out talking to your phone!
- Using more drills to form correct and strong skills.
- Explaining the consequences of mistakes, especially

embarrassing ones.

- Students as teachers – note down errors for constructive feedback in groups.
- Bringing in guests (who ideally doesn't speak L1) for students to interview. They may not understand the "fossils".
- Mixing correct and incorrect sentences on the board and asking students to spot those with errors.

Types of grammatical errors being fossilized

It is theorized that stabilized errors can be good candidates for fossilization; nevertheless, this can only happen under the condition that learners stop learning the language or have inadequate input and exposure to the TL. Fauziati (2011) in his research found that, in case of adequate treatment, almost all of learners' grammatical errors could be eliminated. He collected the data on grammatical errors from learners' free compositions prior and after one-semester instruction and two months afterwards. The data were analyzed qualitatively.

Diagram according to Fauziati (2011: 34): The Behavior of the Learners' Grammatical Errors

Persistent	Persistent →Stabilized Non Persistent →Fluctuating Errors Eradicated →(Destabilized)
Non persistent	Eradicated →Destabilized

Hughes and Lascaratou (1982) conducted a study of judgments of error gravity. They used three groups of judges: Nonnative students/Nonnative EFL teachers, Nonnative students and Native EFL teachers not educated in the field of EFL and Nonnative students and Native EFL teachers educated in the field of EFL. The student errors they selected for the study fell into eight very general categories: vocabulary, prepositions, pronouns, plurals, word order, agreement, verb forms other than agreement, and spelling. The researchers found that, except for spelling, the Nonnative teachers were significantly stricter when judging the students' errors than their Native counterparts and the Native non-teachers. One of the explanations they offered for this mismatch is the fact that native speakers have a more comprehensive knowledge of the language, which enables them to readily accept a wider variety of possible structures.

Hasbún (2001: 257) reported similar findings. Using a grammatical and pragmatic judgment task based on a series of messages written by university students, she found that Nonnative teachers were stricter in both accuracy and appropriateness more frequently than Native teachers. Another important difference highlighted in Hughes and Las-

caratou's research study is that the three groups of judges differed in the criteria they used to establish the seriousness of the errors. While the nonnative teachers argued that the most serious errors were those that infringed grammar rules that they considered basic or that were taught early on, the Native non-teachers were more concerned about whether the error in question made the sentence difficult to understand or not. As might be expected, the native teachers used both criteria but valued intelligibility the most. In addition, Hughes and Lascaratou found that some language samples that were perfectly grammatical such as "Neither of us feels quite happy" were judged ungrammatical by members of the three groups.

Research questions

The goal of the research was to find out, what the peculiarities of grammatical error fossilization are for the teachers and students of English in Georgia. The research questions, correspondingly, were:

- what sources of error fossilization are viewed as essential by Georgian teachers of English (for Georgian students of English)
- and how they try to fight fossilization. The literature review presented in the section above helped us to select questions for the questionnaire.

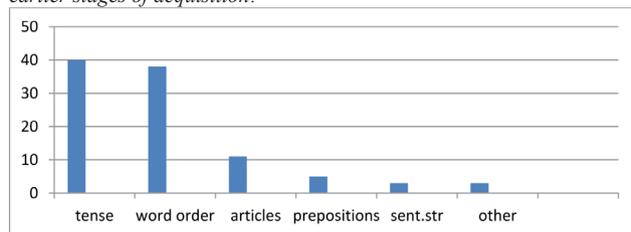
Method

To find out, which types of grammar errors are more typical for Georgian students of English and what are the most effective ways of treating them, a questionnaire was made up and distributed among English teachers working at 3 universities in the capital of Georgia - Tbilisi - and having the experience of grammar teaching to university students. The questionnaire was anonymous and filling it in was on a volunteer basis. Out of 35 distributed questionnaires (the number corresponds to the number of language teachers in these universities) – 25 questionnaires were filled in and returned. This response rate (71 %) is reasonable. The questionnaire was made up of multiple choice questions. The respondents had to tick the answer appropriate for them, but also had an option "other", which they could fill in.

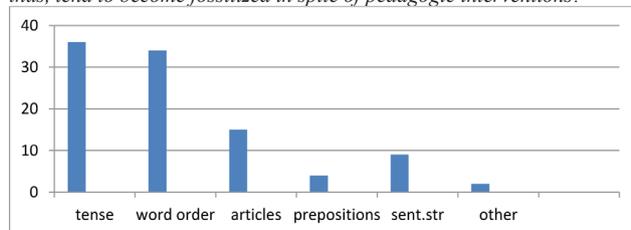
Results

Results are presented graphically below.

Question 1: What types of grammatical errors tend to occur on the earlier stages of acquisition?

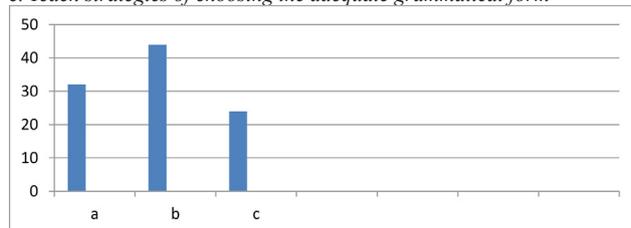


Question 2: What type of grammar errors are persistent over time, and thus, tend to become fossilized in spite of pedagogic interventions?

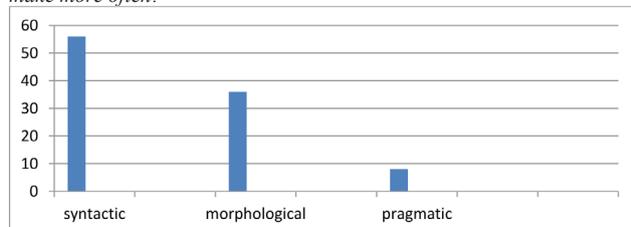


Question 3: How do you try to fight fossilization of grammatical errors?

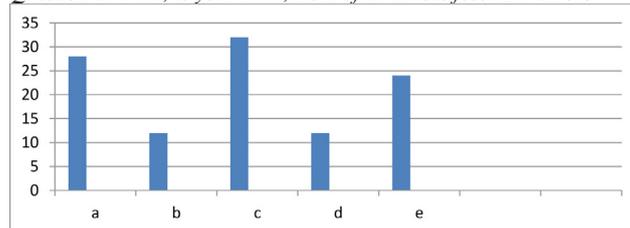
- a. From the very beginning create strong and correct skills
- b. Provide many comparison drills between the forms causing interference (e.g., Past Simple and Present Perfect)
- c. Teach strategies of choosing the adequate grammatical form



Question 4: What types of fossilized grammar mistakes do students make more often?



Question 5: What, to your mind, more often causes fossilized errors?



- a. Lack of attention
- b. Interference of native language
- c. Lack of knowledge
- d. Overgeneralization (L2 interference)
- e. Lack of practice

Discussion

It can be seen that verb tenses are the major source of fossilized errors for Georgian students of English on any stage (40% at initial stage and a little less – 36% - at later stages) of language learning. Word order, which is practically free in the Georgian language, also keeps being important (38 and 34%, respectively). Problems with articles, though not as grave, however, tend to increase with time, when context become more complicated (11 and 15%, respectively). This means that they require more efforts and better strategies while teaching and learning.

Teachers mostly treat these errors by providing comparison between the forms causing skill interference, which basically is an adequate approach, however, probably more subconscious acquisition through grammar games, songs, etc. might also help solve the problem. Had the comparison attitude been really effective, there would have been no problems with error fossilization – only error stabilization.

Both syntax and morphology need attention (56 and 36% of answers, respectively), however, syntax is more often the reason for problems, so it should be treated with a special care.

Practically all causes in the table are named by teachers as influential, lack of knowledge being the most “weighty” (32%). This emphasis on knowledge instead of skills does not totally correspond to contemporary view on language teaching, this is why practice and attention (or content-focused grammar activities) should be stressed more. More communicative practice should be offered, not just form-focused drills.

Lack of attention (28%), knowledge (32%) and practice (24%) seem to be the main causes of error fossilization, which means teachers need to provide more practice, while students need to be more attentive (probably, more emphasis should be on self-correction).

Conclusions

Grammatical error fossilization should be treated with adequate attention, as it may impede the development of language skills to a higher level as well as the effectiveness of communication. Therefore, typical grammatical errors (for instance, which tenses cause special difficulties) should be found out and treated actively till disappearance, not only when the corresponding morphological or semantic form is taught, but throughout the whole course of language teaching. Of course, Georgian students in general have their own typical grammatical errors which tend to fossilize, however, teachers shouldn't rely only on others' research concerning error types, but also analyze their students' mistakes, which can happen unique enough.

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