

An Analysis of the Phenomenon of Fossilization in College English Writing

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Abstract:

As a topic is inevitably discussed in the field of second language acquisition, the phenomenon of fossilization has been closely watched by many linguists, and as a major difficulty in language teaching and learning, it often hinders the learning process of language learners without enough attention. Writing is a crucial skill that reflects the overall language proficiency of college students, and due to various factors that affect English learning, fossilization in writing often occurs among college students. This paper is based on a study of the writing ability of English majors in Qujing Normal University with using a combination of questionnaires and interviews to analyze the causes of the phenomenon of fossilization in writing, and it proposes many suggestions for improvement with the aim of better improving the English writing ability of college students.

Keywords:

Fossilization, College English, English Writing

1. Introduction

In this part, the writer expounds on the background and purpose of the research, as well as the theoretical and practical significance of the research, and puts forward the research methods and basic framework.

1.1. Research Background

It is said that listening, speaking, reading, and writing are the comprehensive elements of language learning. It is necessary for us to lay a solid foundation in these four areas for learning a language well. English majors in college have more chances to listening, speaking, and reading, but often encounter many obstacles in language communication and writing. As we all know, writing is a crucial skill that reflects one's overall language proficiency, and it is the process of expressing one's own ideas, providing us with an opportunity to improve the process of language learning. After entering university, the curriculum for English majors has been refined. After a long period of study, there is often significant improvement in listening and speaking, but there is no upward trend in reading and writing abilities, especially in writing abilities, which instead remain stagnant. Therefore, this paper analyzes and explores the

reasons for the errors in writing among English majors at Qujing Normal University from the perspective of fossilization, as well as proposing countermeasures and aiming to improve the English writing level of English majors.

1.2. The Introduction of Fossilization

Selinker argues that perhaps 95 percent of second language learners do not eventually reach the level of the target language, that is to say, the majority of second language learners' interlanguage do not reach the end of their continuum. Selinker divides fossilization into two main categories, including individual fossilization and group fossilization. Individual fossilization can be divided into two aspects: error reappearance and language competence fossilization in second language learning. The former is the recurrence of errors that have been corrected many times and are considered to be cleared, while the latter is the fossilization of the interlanguage in terms of phonology, syntactic structure and vocabulary. Fossilization in interlanguage can also be classified as temporary fossilization or permanent fossilization according to its nature. Temporary fossilization, also known as stabilization, is a precursor to fossilization.

1.3. Purpose and Significance

The phenomenon of fossilization is a very common and unavoidable problem in English language learning, which is something we should pay more attention to. College English majors are affected by various factors in the process of English learning, leading to frequent fossilization in writing, which is detrimental to language learning. In order to improve the writing level and ability of English majors at Qujing Normal University, this paper analyzes the phenomenon and causes of fossilization in English writing based on researches about the writing ability of English majors at Qujing Normal University, and puts forward suggestions to solve the phenomenon of fossilization in English writing among college students, which brings many benefits to English writing. Firstly, it has an important impact on English teaching in universities, especially writing teaching. Secondly, it is of significance to both the theoretical and practical levels, which not only helps to enrich and develop the theory of fossilization in language learning, but also puts forward suggestions on the causes of fossilization in English writing among college students. In addition, it not only helps to improve the quality of English teaching and learning in university, but also avoids the occurrence of fossilization. What's more, it will help English teachers in universities improve teaching methods and promote the development of English subject areas. Last but not least, the research of this topic is also conducive to enriching the literature on the phenomenon of fossilization in writing.

1.4. Basic Framework of the Paper

The study is divided into six parts. First is the introduction. It includes three parts: the background of the study, the introduction of writing fossilization, purposes and significance of the study. Chapter 1 is mainly about the literature review. This part includes a definition of fossilization and a review of the current status of researches on the phenomenon of fossilization in English writing at home and abroad. Chapter 2 is mainly about the theoretical framework. This chapter points out the representative theories of fossilization research, which include the Error Analysis Theory. Chapter 3 is mainly about research design. This chapter contains the following three main aspects, namely, research questions, research instruments and research procedures.

And the research instruments include questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Chapter 4 is mainly about data analysis and discussion. According to the data collected from the composition texts, questionnaires and interview results, this section will sort out the frequency and distribution of linguistic fossilization in English writing among college students in terms of vocabulary, grammar and discourse, and analyzes the reasons for producing such linguistic fossilization in writing. Finally, there is a conclusion. This section includes the main findings of the study, recommendations, and research gaps and puts forward suggestions.

2. Literature Review

This chapter mainly introduces the origin and research status of fossilization at home and abroad.

2.1. Studies on Fossilization at Home

Foreign scholars' research on fossilization was earlier than domestic scholars'. Domestic scholars' research on fossilization mainly started from the perspective of writing among college students, and investigated the language fossilization of English majors and non-English majors (such as minority preparatory students) by analyzing causes and specific manifestations. Wang Shunling investigated the fossilization in English writing among college students based on the theory of interlanguage, she also analyzed the subjective and objective factors of the fossilization in writing through questionnaires and interviews, as well as putting forward corresponding improvement methods [3]. Starting from the perspective of language meme theory and guided by psycholinguistics, Zhang Fusheng implemented "meme-style" writing teaching in college English among non-English major students in three universities. His research results show that language meme theory has an important impact on improving college students' English writing, and it also can effectively reduce the phenomenon of fossilization in the process of English writing. Wang Chuanli finds that explicit teaching activities are a double-edged sword in the process of studying the fossilization in college English writing, which can have both positive and negative effects on college students' English writing. But he believes that teachers should try to play the role of explicit teaching to better promote students' language development and improve the phenomenon of fossilization in English writing among college students. Li Kang mainly starts from the perspective of the causes of fossilization in writing, she conducts effective training for non-English majors by taking targeted measures to conduct in-depth research on the problems. Based on the error analysis theory, Zhu Xiaohuan collects the English writing texts of non-English majors among college students at the beginning and end of their freshman year for in-depth research. Studies have shown that writing errors in cohesive sentences and incomplete sentences are on the rise at the end of the school year, and the phenomenon of fossilization in writing has emerged [2]. Niu Hongwei adopts the error analysis method to further classify the errors in the text by collecting the English composition texts among college students majoring in English at two-time points before and after, and then conducts further research based on this, which shows that English majors have fossilization in writing, and he also puts forward corresponding solutions [1]. Yangliu aims at minority preparatory students, focusing on analyzing students' mistakes in the writing process, and he studies the main causes according to the problems, mainly including writing motivation as well as language input and output[6]. Wang Ya analyzed the phenomenon of fossilization in writing from the

perspective of errors in verb forms[4]. She believes that errors in writing are mainly errors in verb forms, and divides errors in verb forms into two types: default errors and addition errors. Ma Huilian's research topic is the analysis of fossilization in college English writing, focusing on the reasons for the phenomenon of fossilization, including language transfer and language input[5]. Chen Liao starts the topic from the perspective of English speech among college students, and studies the phenomenon of fossilization in writing. By discussing the four classifications of speech writing when middle school students use Cliché, and using the corpus analysis software Power Conc to observe the sample data, as well as summarizing the reasons and providing suggestions. Song Xiaohuan mainly studies the phenomenon of fossilization in writing from the perspective of improving the ability of English writing among college students[2]. Through empirical research, it is concluded that compared with the syntactic level, students have already experienced fossilization in terms of vocabulary and syntax, and tend to be rigid in grammar.

2.2. Studies on Fossilization Aboard

Foreign research on fossilization originated from Han Zhaohong. She focused on analyzing the development of fossilization in the past thirty years by introducing and discussing some basic theories about fossilization, and she finally put forward corresponding development suggestions. Zhang X F, Li Y, Department F L. and Shi F, Yan L (2012) all believe that fossilization in language is a common phenomenon in the process of second language learning, and they focus on analyzing the current situation of fossilization in writing, sorting out the reasons for it, and finally put forward a rationalization suggestion. Huang Y (2013) starts from the perspective of the phenomenon of fossilization in English writing, and believes that writing teaching should be different from oral English teaching. Writing teaching needs more comprehensive language output, and it is necessary to pay more attention to language output in the process of writing teaching, so as to better avoid fossilization in language. Lic. Venecia Tejada Reyes (2013) mainly compared the two languages from the phonetic, lexical, and grammatical levels, and comes to the conclusion that there are huge differences between the two languages in these three aspects. Through investigation and research, it is concluded that under normal circumstances, students will not rewrite their compositions, and even if they do, students will not realize the importance of rewriting words and language structures. However, if students approve of each other's compositions, students will discover the problems existing in their writing, and then discover their own problems. Therefore, it is vital to allow students to analyze their own mistakes in their writing in the process of second language learning, which is conducive to eliminating the phenomenon of fossilization. Aini N A, Mufid M K, Sari E (2011) mainly analyze whether there is fossilization in writing by investigating the situation of students in the writing process. Based on the collected data, the author concludes that the fossilization in writing among students can be divided into two types: grammatical fossilization and syntactic fossilization.

3. Theoretical Framework

Chapter three mainly provides the theoretical framework of this thesis. Then, it briefly introduces Error Analysis Theory.

3.1. Error Analysis Theory

Error Analysis Theory states that the process of language learning involves the process of making mistakes that do not need to be avoided, but instead can be used to benefit second language learning. Error analysis is mainly a method for language learners to analyze errors in the process of second language acquisition, which is not a process of learning errors for learners, but instead a process of continuous improvement. Error analysis describes the frequency of different errors, which can help language learners master the rules of second language learning. Error analysis theory is mainly used to identify, describe, and explain various types of errors to understand how native learners master language, then how to find the source of errors, and finally how to use these errors to help themselves in second language learning. Therefore, students' mistakes in the learning process should be considered an integral part of language learning, which is crucial to the development of error analysis. The theoretical study of error analysis mainly includes five steps. First, collecting the corpus, which is mainly derived from the student's composition text. Secondly, carefully analyzing the errors that appear in the corpus. There are mainly grammatical errors and communicative errors. From the grammatical point of view, it is necessary to analyze whether the sentences written by students have grammatical problems, and further analyze whether the sentences meet the communicative demand on the basis of correct grammar. Furthermore, it is necessary to reclassify the errors analyzed in the composition text. There are two main methods for misclassification: one is to establish error categories based on the error presuppositions made by the most common problems of most language learners, and then classify the errors in the corpus that need to be analyzed one by one according to the error categories established in advance. Another method is to collect errors first, then group the collected errors according to different language areas, and then further group the errors collected in various fields several times before determining the error category. Fourth, explain the reasons for the analysis error. We should carefully analyze the causes, consider them from multiple dimensions and propose reasonable countermeasures in view of the problems that arise. The final step is to evaluate the error. This is also the ultimate goal of error analysis, which is mainly to assess the severity of each error and find out countermeasures to correct it in order to advance language teaching.

In this paper, we collect data and study the characteristics of fossilization in composition texts among college students, and investigate the current situation of linguistic fossilization in English writing among college students at three levels: vocabulary, grammar and discourse.

The sample material selected for this study is an English essay written by sophomore and junior students at two different times with the following essay topic: In your essay, you are to comment on the phenomenon described in the passage and suggest measures to address the issue. You should write at least 300 words. Nowadays star chasing is prevalent among many teenagers. They take pop stars as their idols, imitating their way of talking, following their style of dressing, and seeking every chance to meet them in person at great expenses. There is no doubt that for an English composition, content and form are equally important. However, in the case of English majors, since they do not have any advantages over the English majors in terms of content, the form is the best criterion to distinguish the majors from the non-majors. With the guarantee of content, English majors should have stricter requirements of form, otherwise it will be difficult to achieve English majors worthy of the name. The writing errors in this study are summarized as follows: unreasonable structure of the

essay, grammatical errors, spelling errors, and errors caused by Chinglish. For example, firstly, “Star chasing has become a common social phenomenon”. we can say the phenomenon belongs to spelling errors. Secondly, “To prevent teenagers from falling into blind idolatry, efforts should make in more ways than one”. In this place, “should make” need to be corrected into “should be made”, which belongs to grammatical errors. Thirdly, “I think chasing a star for someone is very important”. We can transform it into “I think it is important for someone to chase stars”, which belongs to errors caused by Chinglish. Fourthly, “people have a duty to act as positive role models and guided their fans to rationally express affection”. In this place, “guided” should be corrected into “guide”, which belongs to errors in structure. The results show that although sophomore and junior English majors have received several years of the formal classroom in English study, the author has repeatedly corrected students on certain errors, and students seem to remember all of them, but some grammatical errors and technical details in English writing do not appear to change significantly, which show a steady state in which temporary fossilization in language occurs.

4. Research Methodology

This chapter mainly discusses the research methods used in this article. First, the research problems and data collection are described. Then it introduces the analysis tools and specific analysis steps.

4.1. Research Questions

In this study, students are asked to answer the following questions:

Firstly, what is the extent of college student’s awareness of the phenomenon of fossilization in English writing?

Secondly, what are the subjective factors that influence the phenomenon of fossilization in writing among college students?

Thirdly, what are the objective factors that affect the phenomenon of fossilization in English writing among college students?

Fourthly, what are the suggestions on how to eliminate the phenomenon of fossilization in English writing?

4.2. Research Method

This study consists of two parts: a questionnaire survey and an interview on the phenomenon of fossilization in college English writing. Firstly, a questionnaire survey has been conducted, which refers to previous experience in writing to design a questionnaire on “factors influencing the phenomenon of fossilization in college English writing”, which is divided into five parts, including personal learning experience in English writing, knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon of fossilization in English writing, subjective factors influencing the phenomenon of fossilization in English writing, and objective factors influencing the phenomenon of fossilization in English writing. The fifth part is an open-ended questionnaire. The fifth part is an open-ended question in which students can make suggestions to eliminate the phenomenon of fossilization in English writing in college according to their personal situation. Secondly, interviews are conducted with 100 English majors in their second and third years of college, and 25 English majors from each of their

second and third years of college are interviewed about the factors affecting writing level in the questionnaire after the survey.

4.3. Research Process

By distributing 100 questionnaires to the sophomore and junior students the teachers of the English Department of Qujing Normal University, 15 minutes are used to fill in the questionnaires, while the interviews are conducted in a one-question-and-answer style. In the later stage, the questionnaires are carefully analyzed and the interview data are sorted, with the emphasis on the five main parts of the questionnaires, especially the subjective and objective factors of fossilization in writing, and then put forward some improvement measures.

5. Results and Discussion

In this part, the data collected will be analyzed to provide answers to the questions put forward in the Methodology chapter. Firstly, we discuss whether the phenomenon of fossilization in writing among college students does exist? Secondly, the factors affecting the phenomenon of fossilization in writing among college students.

5.1. College English Learners' Knowledge and Understanding of Fossilization in Writing

The phenomenon of fossilization often occurs in language learning for students from the sophomore and junior classes, which mainly manifests a stagnation or hesitation in language ability. This phenomenon can occur at any stage of language acquisition and is an inevitable natural phenomenon. The phenomenon of fossilization in language for university English learners is mostly temporary. With considerable language input and output, this phenomenon can be avoided as much as possible. However, if this temporary phenomenon lasts for about five years, it will become a permanent phenomenon. According to the surveys, the phenomenon of fossilization in writing is common among university English learners, whose understanding and awareness of this phenomenon are insufficient, which to some extent hinders the improvement of their writing ability.

Table 1. College English Learners' Knowledge and Understanding of Fossilization in Writing.

Contents	Percentage
My English skills in writing have been improving since my freshman year, and I have not experienced the phenomenon of fossilization.	18%
I will make mistakes in language that recur and persist when I am writing in English.	72%
I believe that the fossilization in English writing is a natural part of the writing process.	55%
I believe that the fossilization in English writing can be avoided in the process of learning.	70%
I think it will take long and tireless efforts to eliminate the fossilization in English writing.	37%
My English writing is in current state of fossilization and I can't get rid of it.	16%

The survey in Table 1 shows that only 18 percent of the learners are sure that their English writing has improved in their freshman year, and 72 percent of the learners think that some linguistic errors recur in their English writing. 55 percent of the learners think that fossilization is not a natural phenomenon in the process of writing learning, and 70 percent of the learners think that fossilization in writing can be avoided. Only 16 percent of the learners do not have subjective confidence in

eliminating fossilization, and only 37 percent of the learners think that fossilization can be eliminated through long-term and persistent efforts.

5.2. Subjective Factors

English writing for learners is an evolving system of interlanguage, a neutral language that is unique to the learner. The emergence of fossilization in English writing is complex and insidious, and there is no internal factor that can adequately explain it. The subjective factors involved in the questionnaire include learning strategies, negative transfer of mother tongue, learning attitude, basic knowledge of English, and age.

Table 2. Subjective Factors.

Subjective Factors	Percentage
Learning Strategies	89%
Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue	87%
Learning Attitude	90%
Basic Knowledge of English	60%
Age	12%

Firstly, generally speaking, if learners have strong learning motivation and emotional willingness, they can overcome their own problems in writing learning well, and actively learn knowledge related to writing. In interviews, many college English learners express that they are unwilling or think it unnecessary to do a lot of writing exercises, and most of them just perfunctorily complete the assignments given by the teacher, or just want to pass the exam to learn writing. Negative transfer of mother tongue frequently appears in the phenomenon of fossilization in writing, and many English learners believe that they are subconsciously influenced by the thinking mode of their mother tongue or the interference of their mother tongue expression habits during the process of English writing, resulting in “Chinglish” and other problems. In addition, basic knowledge of English is also an important factor, it means that we always do not attach importance to reviewing grammar knowledge, frequently make grammar errors, and English learners do not lay a solid foundation to learn writing, all these lead to the phenomenon of fossilization in writing. Age and language talent are also subjective factors that many learners consider will have a negative effect on improving their writing level. Many learners believe that as they get older, their memory is in a stage of decline, which is one of the factors that lead to the inability to improve their writing level.

5.3. Objective Factors

In addition to the complex and diverse internal attributions, many objective factors also contribute to the phenomenon of fossilization. There are several aspects in the questionnaire, including language input, methodological guidance, language environment, writing training, and error feedback.

Table 3. Objective Factors

Objective Factors	Percentage
Language Input	33%
Methodological Guidance	86%
Language Environment	29%
Writing Training	74%
Error Feedback	96%

Besides the complex internal reasons, many external objective factors have also led to the occurrence of fossilization. The survey mainly involves several aspects, including language input, methodological guidance, language environment, writing training, and error feedback. In the current environment for English learning in university, we have not individual classes on writing, and the writing course is only a part separated from other English courses. Learners say that they have not received timely methodological guidance in writing learning, and there is more emphasis on intensive reading of articles, while paying less attention to the post-class writing guidance in their interviews. Many English learners in college find it difficult to actively participate in writing training. Even if there is writing practice, they will be likely to complete the task perfunctorily and not take it seriously, which leads to insufficient language input. It can be seen that writing is a very practical course, which requires a further increase in language input, diversified writing guidance, and effective writing practice, all these have a positive effect on improving the writing knowledge of English learners and eliminating the phenomenon of fossilization in English writing. In their interviews, the vast majority of interviewees stated that feedback is rare for them, and they mostly receive grammar corrections from teachers without peer evaluation. There are individual differences in writing learning for English learners, and different forms of timely feedback are needed to promote the continuous development of writing ability. In the interview, many learners agree that due to the limited learning environment and the lack of proficiency in mastering language structure, there is a serious lack of language input in English, and it is difficult for them to output written language that meets the demand of English language norms.

6. Conclusions

6.1. Main Findings

Based on Error Analysis Theory, this paper focuses on analyzing the writing texts among college students in English majors, synthesizing questionnaires and interview data, conducting an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of fossilization in writing among college English majors, and finally drawing the main conclusions.

(1) The phenomenon of fossilization in writing among college students does exist. The majority of learners do not understand the influence and characteristics of the phenomenon of fossilization in writing, and they are not aware of the persistence and resistance of fossilization. They do not take the phenomenon of fossilization in their writing seriously and do not pay enough attention to it, which causes them to invest not enough energy in writing practice or writing guidance, thus affecting the improvement of their writing level.

(2) The causes of linguistic fossilization in English writing among college students are complex, and the investigation of the causes through questionnaires and interview outlines reveals that teachers' feedback on errors and learning motivation have the greatest influence on the fossilization in English writing learning among college students. Secondly, the influence of insufficient study time on the fossilization of English writing among college students is in third place. In addition, negative transfer of mother tongue, quantity and quality of language input, and learning strategies also tend to have a significant impact on the fossilization in English writing.

6.2. Suggestions for Future Research

6.2.1. Raising Teachers' Awareness of the Fossilization

In fact, the phenomenon of the fossilization that appears in the process of English writing for college students is a relatively common problem. Therefore, when facing the phenomenon of fossilization, teachers should first recognize its unique characteristics, otherwise it is difficult to propose perfect solutions. As for some students' fossilization in writing, it is temporary and mild. If teachers and students can understand the phenomenon of fossilization as early as possible and adopt targeted strategies to solve it, it can be avoided from being transformed into permanent fossilization. It also requires teachers to share the phenomenon of fossilization encountered by students in the teaching process by analyzing them together with students, and finally enable students to overcome difficulties.

6.2.2. Boosting Students' Input in Comprehensible Language

The reason why students may have the phenomenon of fossilization in English writing is that the number of understandable languages is relatively small for students, which leads to the insufficiency of the current students' language abilities that cannot meet the requirements of English writing tasks, in doing so, the phenomenon of fossilization is very easy to occur. Therefore, we need to strengthen the input of the target language for college students, improve their language abilities and enhance their writing abilities. In response to this situation, teachers can use the content in textbooks to increase students' input of the target language, and on the other hand, teachers should also create an enabling language environment for students, strengthen the learning of language knowledge, and weaken the negative transfer effect of mother tongue as much as possible.

6.2.3. Enhancing the Basic Knowledge of English

Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are the four essential elements that English learners are supposed to be equipped with, and each element is closely related to their own language foundation. Therefore, students not only need to have basic communication skills through English writing, but also need to comprehensively develop their own language foundation. At present, both teachers and students need to pay attention to vocabulary and grammatical errors in English writing for many university students in China, and the error rate is very high. On the one hand, teachers should clarify the connotation characteristics of each learned vocabulary and its fixed collocation in vocabulary teaching. On the other hand, teachers should pay attention to the learning of various grammar, continuously strengthen and deepen the learning of the learned grammar, and lay a solid foundation for students' English language in grammar teaching.

6.2.4. Heightening Students' Output in Written Language

Enhancing the ability of students' written language can enable students to effectively combine their accumulated language foundation and logical thinking in the English writing process, and accurately express the meaning of the content. Strengthening the ability of written language inevitably requires special activities that need to be carried out for training. Teachers can consider using the method of writing article summaries to train students, avoiding the phenomenon of fossilization caused by the traditional Chinese way of thinking.

6.2.5. Paying Attention to Students' Feedback in the Writing Process

Feedback not only plays an important role in teachers' teaching, but also has a great impact on students' learning process. In the process of teaching English writing to college students, teachers should also pay attention to students' feedback in the writing process. If teachers can help students recognize the phenomenon of fossilization, sort out their problems, and then correct students' mistakes in a timely manner, which can enable students to avoid the phenomenon of fossilization as much as possible in the writing process and make students aware of their own shortcomings.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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