A Study of Interlanguage Fossilization in Second Language Acquisition and Its Teaching Implications

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Abstract - In the course of learning English, inter-language fossilization is a widely-present and inevitable phenomenon, which deserves to arouse the attention of language educators and learners. Through introducing the definition and classification of fossilization, this paper finds out the major causes of fossilization and implies some teaching methods to lessen its negative effects.

Index Terms **-** fossilization, interlanguage, teaching implication

1. Introduction

It is common that learners in the process of foreign language learning are always confronted with some intricate language problems. Those language phenomena that exist in the form of interlanguage for a long time and are difficult for learners to change constitute interlanguage fossilization. In Selinker's opinion, fossilization is an undeletable mental mechanism in interlanguage; it may occur in any phase of foreign language learning. Therefore, fossilization has been a major subject discussed by linguists and educators.

2. Definition and Classification of Interlanguage Fossilization

2.1 Definition of Fossilization

There are various definitions of fossilization. *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* puts it this way: fossilization (in second or foreign language learning) a process which sometimes occurs in which incorrect linguistic features become a permanent part of the way a person speaks or writes a language.

Larry Selinker, a famous American linguist, was the first to put forward the interlanguage fossilization theory. Fossilizable linguistic phenomena 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 the amount of explanations he receives in the target language.(Selinker, 1972) As is shown, interlanguage is intimately relevant to fossilization.

From the above introduction, fossilization can be summarized as the phenomena whereby the learner creates a cessation of interlanguage learning before acquiring the standard target language.

2.2 The Classification of Fossilization

There are different ways to classify interlanguage fossilization according to different criteria.

According to Selinker's opinion, fossilization can be divided into two major types in terms of forms: individual fossilization and group fossilization. The former mainly has two subtypes: (i) error reappearance, those language phenomena whereby repeatedly corrected language errors occur again. (ii) language competence fossilization, namely fossilization of pronunciation, syntactic structures and vocabulary in interlanguage. The latter refers to the phenomena where fossilized language competence become the natural phenomenon of the whole society, thus becoming a new dialect such as Indian English.

Fossilization can also be classified into temporary fossilization and permanent fossilization, which is of great value in foreign language teaching. As their names show, the former is instable and changeable while the latter has been stabilized. Non-English major learners mostly belong to temporary fossilization, which can be improved when learners accept optimal input. In this paper, we mainly concentrate on this classification.

3. Major Causes of Interlanguage Fossilization

There are a variety of factors causing fossilization. Dai Weidong points out that nearly all errors can lead to the emergence of fossilization. The author argues that the most fundamental causes is that foreign language learners are not able to acquire both functions and forms in natural language contact. Therefore, the author analyzes the causes from internal and external aspects.

3.1 Internal Factors

(1) Learners' age

As is proved, the age of foreign language learners can to some extent exert a great effect on second language acquisition, thus positively or negatively influencing fossilization. In the process of learning language, there is a critical period (mainly at the age of 2) when children can effectively and quickly acquire a language. If the critical period is missed, language learning become much difficult, thus creating fossilization.

(2) Learners' emotions

In second/foreign language learning, learners are prone to be influenced by emotional factors (motivation, interest, etc.). Krashen lists three kinds of emotions effecting SLA: motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. When those factors

occur in a negative way, interlanguage fossilization will take place in the vey early stage of learning language.

(3) Interference from learners' mother tongue

In the process of second language acquisition, learners tend to be interfered by their mother tongue, thus producing errors. Those interferences are mainly pronunciation, namely foreignese. That is, most of foreign language learners can not overcome the foreignese caused by interference from their native language. This makes learners' second language competence unchangeable, thus creating fossilization.

3.2 External factors

(1) Lack of Learning Opportunity

Owing to the restrictions from the external environment, language learners may don't have sufficient opportunities for contacting or receiving language input. Thus the lack of target language input and use of target language can lead to fossilization.

(2) Strategies of Second Language Learning

The strategies of learning second language refer to the learning and management method adopted by learners and all kinds of activities of using the language. Different language learners may choose different learning strategies. The successful learning strategies can make interlanguage approach the target language while the incorrect and inefficient learning strategies can lead to fossilization. For instance, some learners are inclined to over-generalize some grammatical rules of target language, thus making errors and finally becoming fossilized.

(3) Strategies of Second Language Communication

Language as a tool plays an important role in helping communication between people. Selinker put forward the strategies of second language communication in 1972. It can be summarized as a set of skills (avoidance, paraphrase, borrowing and word coinage) used by learners in communication. In oral communication, learners tend to avoid some complicated rules in order to make their expression simple and rapid. Thus, fossilization can be produced.

(4) The Role of Foreign Teachers

The important role of foreign language teachers in second language acquisition has been proved. If teachers can not teach learners some native linguistic forms, learners are more likely create fossilization. On the other hand, linguistic test is an important process in which learners' second language competence is evaluated. Thus the correct and effective tests can make learner acquire native target language while the form-oriented test may impair learners' second language competence, thus leading to fossilization.

From the above discussion, it is conspicuous that causes of fossilization are related to internal and external factors. It is the intersecting effects of those factors that result in interlanguage fossilization.

4. Teaching Implications

As the former part has discussed the causes of fossilization, there arises a question that how to prevent fossilization in foreign language teaching. Base on the causes of fossilization, the author puts forward five teaching implications to avoid fossilization.

4.1 Adopting Appropriate Learning Strategies

As has been discussed in the former part, whether the learning strategy is appropriate or not is an important factor influencing creation of fossilization. That is, if learners can successfully adopt appropriate learning strategy, learners can discover their own shortcomings and make great progress in improving second language competence. By contrast, if the incorrect and inappropriate learning strategy is adopted, fossilization will occur. In the process of formulating learning strategies suitable to them, students should learn how to use different learning strategies which are right for their learning stages under the guidance of teachers.

4.2 Formulating Appropriate Teaching Strategies

In order to prevent interlanguage fossilization, teachers should use the corresponding teaching strategies according to students in different phases of second language learning. As is known, interlanguage is a continuum gradually approaching target language. As for those learners at the initial stage of learning foreign language, teachers should guide student to pay special attention to the features of target language and stress its accuracy. As for the advanced language learners, teachers should encourage students to use new and advanced expressions. Meanwhile, teachers should make students acquainted with culture and society of target language, thus students will take the initiative to make the interlanguage to approach the target language. Therefore, fossilization can be decreased to certain extent.

4.3 Guiding Students' Communicative Strategies

Communicative strategy means a set of skills used by language learners of limited target language knowledge to realize the purpose of communication. Simply speaking, language learners can adopt communicative strategies to achieve successful communication. But if learners overuse communicative strategies (avoidance, paraphrase, etc.) in their communication, learners can not improve their own linguistic competence. In the process of teaching foreign language, teacher should not only stress the correct form and grammar of target language, but also direct students to use appropriate communicative strategy. Only in this way can learners' linguistic competence be elevated into a higher level.

4.4 Arousing Students' Intrinsic Learning Motivation

In foreign language learning, learners emotional factors, especially motivation is of critical significance. The positive learning motivation can make learners achieve successful learning, thus strengthening their learning attitude, while the negative motivation can lead to unsuccessful learning, thus

creating a vicious circle. As for motivation, Ryan put forward that it consists of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. As the names show, the former is an internal drive to discover and learn something, while the latter is derived from the external sources.

According to the research results, learners whose intrinsic motivation is created performed much better than those in the learning environment which emphasizes the extrinsic motivation. Thus it is clear that cultivating learners' intrinsic learning motivation can better help avoid the emergence of fossilization. There are the following ways to arouse students' intrinsic motivation. Firstly, cultivation of interest in learning foreign language is an effective way. Students can watch English movie and listen English songs to achieve this purpose. Besides, teachers can arrange some games while teaching, which also is able to make students more interested in learning English.

4.5 Improving Teachers' Quality

As is known, the teacher plays a vital role in teaching process. The wrong or inferior language input taught by teachers can cause students to make language mistakes and finally to create fossilization. It is apparent that foreign language teachers are also language learners, so the language used by teachers are also interlanguage. If the teachers' interlanguage is not standard or even incorrect, it can impair students' foreign language learning. For instance, if a English teacher's pronunciation is not correct, his/her students can not have standard pronunciation. Thus, teachers should pay special attention to improving their language competence including correct pronunciation, wide range of knowledge. At the same time, the education department should make more efforts to train teachers and make them qualified for foreign language teaching.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, the author has put forward several suggestions to prevent interlanguage fossilization on the base of introducing definition and causes of fossilization. It is hoped that this paper will be helpful to learn and teach foreign language. However, as this paper mainly analyzes interlanguage fossilization on the theoretical level, it is quite worthy being tested in the empirical study.

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