

## SOME PROPOSED EFFORTS TO OVERCOME GRAMMAR ERROR FOSSILIZATION

Wiwiet Eva Savitri and A. Effendi Kadarisman

Universitas Negeri Surabaya; Universitas Negeri Malang  
wiwieteve@unesa.ac.id; effendi.kadarisman@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** In second language acquisition, error fossilization refers to the rigidity of mind and habit which is caused by continuous false input and methods. Errors turn to be fossilized when they are permanently established in the IL of an L2 learner in nonstandard forms and keep appearing in performance regardless of further exposure to the TL. Ellis (2008) and Larsen-Freeman and Long (2000) state that fossilization might occur due to six factors: (a) lack of corrective feedback, (b) L1-based methods of instruction, (c) errors prevailing from previous stages of learning, (d) lack of self-correction motivation, (e) lack of learning strategies, and (f) students' total dependence on teacher correction. Stabilized and fossilized errors can actually be prevented and overcome. To prevent grammatical errors from getting fossilized, this paper proposes the following three efforts: (a) giving corrective feedback, (b) assigning the students to keep writing a grammar error diary, and (c) implementing extensive reading activities. It is expected that these efforts will help the students to keep appropriate grammatical patterns in their mind and activate their awareness of the patterns. Accordingly, they are able to identify whether the sentences they read or produce are erroneous; and they are eventually aware of their own errors and even able to eliminate their fossilized ones.

**Keywords:** errors, fossilization, prevention

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### INTRODUCTION

In language acquisition, error fossilization refers to the rigidity of mind and habit which is caused by continuous false input and methods. Selinker (1972) states that it is a linguistic phenomenon in which the speakers' linguistic items, rules and subsystems of his native language (NL) tend to keep appearing in their interlanguage (IL) and hence influence the target language (TL). It might occur at any age. Learners construct their own grammatical systems which are learner-driven. Selinker and Lakshamanan (1992) introduce the term "stabilization" besides "fossilization". Stabilization indicates symptoms of fossilization. Fossilization is permanent while stabilization is temporary. Errors turn to be fossilized when they are permanently established in the IL of an L2 learner in nonstandard forms and keep appearing in performance regardless of further exposure to the TL. In other words, stabilized errors will disappear as the learner learns more and makes progress, whereas fossilized errors will stay no matter how much input and exposure are given to the learner. Fossilization is the result of acquisition, but stabilization is a part of language learning process (Wang Cui-lian, 2003). Since stabilization precedes probable fossilization, it is necessary to prevent stabilization before fossilization occurs. Teachers can help learners to prevent themselves from getting fossilized when the learners are still in the stabilization stage.

Han (2005) believes that IL errors are fossilized during the SLA critical period when the learners cannot accomplish complete TL grammar level. On the contrary, White & Genesee (1996), Bialystok & Miller (1999), and Steinberg, et al (2004) believe that there is no critical period for learning syntax. Nozadze (2012) notices that beginner learners of any age in her class tend to fossilize their errors and L1 is not the only reason for their fossilized errors.

Selinker (1972) also states that interlanguage fossilization is classified into two categories, i.e. individual fossilization and group fossilization. Individual fossilization refers to errors made by individual learners while group fossilization refers to fossilized language which leads to

pidginization. Individual fossilization consists of two types, i.e. error reappearance and language competence fossilization. Error reappearance can be found in the beginners or learners with low proficiency whereas language competence fossilization is found in L2 advanced learners who have learned TL for a long time. Fossilization may occur not only at the interlanguage, but also at the intralanguage level, usually in the form of fossilized overgeneralization.

Grammatical structures which are fossilized can appear in both errors and correct forms of the target language (Ellis, 1985). The error fossilization occurs when the learner shows the erroneous use of the target language. It might exist in the form of repeated mistakes so that it sounds right and the learners eventually do not realize that they produce erroneous grammar. For example, many learners use erroneous form “It’s mean” instead of “It means”. They do not realize that they produce an error which is committed by many people. They can find people use this form in many places and it is used repeatedly not only by one person so that many people do not realize that this form is an erroneous form.

Theoretically, the beginning of fossilization is indicated by the existence of stabilized errors. This state occurs only if the learners stop learning the language and do not have proper input and exposure to the TL. Fauziati (2011) investigated the data on grammatical errors from learners’ free compositions and found that when learners’ errors were given proper treatment, almost all grammatical errors produced by the learners could be removed. This stands as evidence that it is possible to eliminate grammatical errors so that teachers should make efforts to find solution to fossilized errors. Ellis (2008) and Larsen-Freeman and Long (2000) state that fossilization might occur due to lack of corrective feedbacks, the use of L1-based methods of instruction, errors carried over from previous stages of learning, lack of self-correction motivation, lack of learning strategies, and students’ dependence only on teacher correction.

### **EFFORTS TO OVERCOME FOSSILIZATION**

Stabilized and fossilized errors can actually be prevented and overcome. Prevention is more significant than making efforts to eliminate unfossilized errors. To prevent grammatical fossilized errors, formal and functional practices which can improve the learners’ linguistic and communicative competence need to be implemented. The teachers can provide adequate and optimal input for the learners. The input consists of relevant, appropriate, and authentic language materials and target culture consisting of examples on how the target language is actually used by its native speakers. Such examples give the learners ideas on how they should use the language properly. In line with this, the teachers have to make sure that they are able to provide correct input and play roles as good models for their students as well. It means that the teachers must be able to use the appropriate forms of the target language, grammatically and culturally.

In order to overcome grammatical errors, teachers can make some efforts. In EFL teaching, the teachers should be able to identify fossilized errors that occur in class. Teachers should deal with fossilization by giving corrective feedback. Feedback should focus on common and impeding errors. Many experts believe that correction should not be given to every single error. Yet, if the purpose of learning the language is accuracy and overcoming fossilization, every single error correction will benefit the learners better; and it is worth implementing. Correcting every single error can be done when the same errors are made repeatedly by particular learners. To overcome and eliminate the errors, the teacher should focus on one error at a time. The teacher should stop the students and have them correct the error before moving on. In telling the students to stop and correct the error they make, the teachers should not say the instruction in a harsh and humiliating way which may cause anxiety on the part of the learners and wipe away their learning

motivation. It is crucial to highlight that the feedback from teachers should not decrease the learners' motivation in learning English.

Another effort that teachers can do is implementing error correction practice. The teacher can assign the students to do self-error correction exercises which will be good for learners to establish their awareness, especially in a writing class. Doing regular error correction exercises enables learners to self-monitor their own learning and to be more cognitively aware of their grammatical problems. Ellis et al. (2006); Bitchener (2008); and Sarvestani and Pishkar (2015) stated that written corrective feedback is effective to overcome particular grammatical errors. More specifically, Sermsook, K., Liamnimitr, J., & Pochakorn, R. (2017) found that teacher's direct and indirect feedback helps students to self-correct their grammatical errors.

The teachers can also have their students do a peer-correcting activity. This activity requires students to check and to correct each other's work. Self-correction and peer correction practice help the students to be aware of their grammatical problems and to learn not to be dependent on teacher correction. Yet, it is necessary that the teachers control the correcting process and the feedback given by the pairs because there is a possibility that the students share similar errors and misunderstanding of a concept; and none of them realize that they produce erroneous words, phrases, or sentences.

The individual and peer correcting activity can be done in the form of classroom discussion. In this discussion, typical and common errors produced by the students are listed and discussed to make the students aware that they actually produce errors. The teacher can ask some students to pay attention and take a note on any errors their friends make during speaking activities. The students' notes on their classmates' grammatical errors are then written on the board. Writing students' grammatical problems/fossilized errors on the board is a good start for such a classroom discussion activity. The teachers can also challenge the students to spot the incorrect grammatical forms in a list of mixed correct and incorrect sentences on the board. This technique enables teachers to help fighting against fossilized errors by showing the students the fossilized errors which are commonly faced by many people which might be the students' problem too. It helps the students to identify and clarify what, why, and how their errors occur as well as how to correct the errors. In this discussion, the teacher should also explain the consequences of the errors they make, especially the ones which might cause misunderstanding and embarrassment, such as, the use of *"I am very like monkey"* instead of *"I like monkey very much"*. The teacher may end the discussion with grammar drilling on the correction of the most frequently noticed error. If the drilling is done in a fun and meaningful way, the students with the errors will remember them; and this might help them to eliminate their fossilized errors.

The teachers can also direct the students to make and keep personalized "fossil" diaries which record their particular errors and their corrections. It is basically to be done individually. Each student simply writes down his/her grammatical error which is identified as fossilized, writes the correction given by the teacher, and notes important things related to the grammatical errors. Table 1 is a suggested form of an error diary, in which students may list their fossilized errors.

**Table 1** Empty Journal of Fossilized Errors

#	ERROR	CORRECTION	NOTES
1.			
2.			
3.			

Although this table is basically used individually, the teacher can ask each student to fill up the table together with his/her partner. In using fossil journals in pairs, each student gives and gets error correction from his/her partner. The errors and their corrections are noted in his/her journal. Table 2 is an example of fossilized journals filled up with errors, their corrections, and important notes.

**Table 2** Filled-up Journal of Fossilized Errors

#	ERROR	CORRECTION	NOTES
1.	<i>*It's mean</i>	<i>It means</i>	The subject <i>It</i> is followed by the verb <i>means</i> (in present tense, taking the suffix –s).
2.	<i>*They are difficult to use new idioms in speech</i>	<i>It is difficult for them to use new idioms in speech</i>	The pattern for adjectives such as <i>difficult</i> and <i>easy</i> is: <i>It is difficult/easy for X to Verb<sub>1</sub></i>
3.	<i>*The spaghetti are ready</i>	<i>The spaghetti is ready</i>	The noun <i>spaghetti</i> is uncountable. It takes a 3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular verb <i>is</i> .
4	<i>*Are the money on the table?</i>	<i>Is the money on the table?</i>	The noun <i>money</i> is also uncountable. It takes a 3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular verb <i>is</i> .
5	...	...	...

The filled-up journal exemplified in Table 2 serves as a reminder as well as a reference for the owner-student. When the same fossilized error reoccurs in his/her speech or writing, the teacher can remind the student to go back and take a look at the journal.

It should be noted that fossilized errors 1 and 2 in Table 2 are made by Indonesian learners (as observed by both researchers); and errors 3 and 4 are made by an Italian speaker who is quite fluent in speaking English (<http://www.icaltefl.com/fossilized-errors-in-tefl>). Referring to these errors, we the researchers suggest that teachers have their own journals containing “additional notes” on fossilized errors and how to treat them. Below are suggested additional notes given as illustrative examples:

1. Phonologically, the wrong clausal structure *\*It's mean* is easier to pronounce than *It means*. So, one reason why this error gets fossilized is due to easier pronunciation. In other words, the error is in part phonetically motivated. To help the learner get rid of this fossilized error, intensive drilling can be helpful.
2. As for *\*They are difficult to Verb<sub>1</sub>*, this error seems to be a transfer error. In everyday speech, it is common for Indonesians to say *Mereka sulit/kesulitan menggunakan ...* The teacher should explain to the student that adjectives such as *easy* and *difficult* have their own pattern: *It + is + easy / difficult + for X + to Verb<sub>1</sub>*. Occasional drilling and repeated correction should be helpful in eradicating this fossilized error.
3. Fossilized errors 3 and 4 are somewhat puzzling, considering that the speaker is quite fluent in using English and yet makes such an elementary subject-verb agreement error. The teacher should make the learner aware that nouns such as *spaghetti* and *money* are uncountable nouns; and therefore they take a 3<sup>rd</sup> singular person verb: *is*. Other nouns such as *information* and *equipment* should be mentioned too that they are uncountable nouns.

Notice that the suggested additional notes given above imply that EFL teachers should be highly proficient in English. That is, while presenting themselves as role models in using English for their students, they should also have excellent skills in three language components: vocabulary skill, grammar skill, and pronunciation skill. In addition, the terms such as “phonetically motivated” and “transfer error” suggest that they should be well trained in Applied Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition.

Now, going back to the pairing correction activity, the teacher should check the corrections provided by the students and correct them if they turn out to be wrong. Besides the above efforts, implementing many reading activities is a good effort to prevent and overcome errors. Reading a lot will enable learners feel the language they learn because reading a lot activates their mental grammar. It is in line with Chomsky’s belief that, much like human body organs, active mental grammar will grow in the learners’ mind (Chomsky, 1975). The growth will be better when they do a lot of reading in L2.

According to Krashen (1988), doing such practices will help improve the L2 system which is growing. Extensive reading is one activity which is recommended to activate mental grammar. It helps to improve grammar sensitivity. In extensive reading, students read for pleasure. They select the reading materials themselves to meet their interest. The use of graded reading materials is essential in extensive reading. The teachers play as role models for their students. Krashen (2004) proved that learners were actually engaged in their reading during Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) which is one form of extensive reading. It can be done anytime and anywhere the learners feel comfortable to do it. The more reading materials the learners read, the better their grammar will be. All sentences they encounter in the reading materials they read are embedded with grammar. Therefore, anytime they read the sentences, they actually learn how correct grammatical patterns are used in authentic context.

Lee, Schallert, and Kim (2015) suggested that extensive reading had different effects on learners' grammar knowledge depending on their L2 proficiency. It was found that extensive reading produced positive outcomes for high level students on linguistic measures. Khansir, A. and Delghany, N. (2015) and Sakurai (2017) found that the amount of reading made a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of grammar which was indicated by participants’ better grammar skill. In line with it, Aka (2018) found that an extensive reading program which was introduced in place of grammar classes resulted in better reading performance. It implies that extensive reading serves as a trigger for the students to automatically keep the grammatical patterns in their mind and activate their awareness of the patterns. Such students are able to identify if the sentences they read are erroneous. Later, they will be aware of their own errors, and even eliminate their fossilized ones.

## CONCLUSIONS

Grammatical error fossilization can be overcome and even prevented. Studies indicate that it can be done through some efforts. Applying teacher and peer corrective feedback, keeping a “fossil” diary, and doing an extensive reading program are considered best efforts which have proven effective for this purpose. Each should be done without demotivating students in learning English and might require patience. Corrective feedback should be given in proper and constructive language. “Fossil” diaries should be checked and reviewed regularly by the teacher. An extensive reading manager should be consistent since it requires longer time to apply. It surely takes time to succeed, yet it helps. When efforts to help learners to get rid of fossilized errors are

done systematically, appropriately, and patiently, the expected results will eventually come out: students will attain grammatical awareness and may probably stop making fossilized errors.

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