

On Some New Models of Instruction for Overcoming Fossilization in English Learning

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Abstract—This paper expounds the implication and classification of fossilization and it focuses on presenting some new models of instruction for overcoming fossilization in the course of foreign language teaching so as to provide some guidance to college English teaching and learning.

Index Terms— fossilization, foreign language teaching, model of instruction

Fossilization has been one of the obstacles in the process foreign language teaching and learning. So it is necessary for language instructors and learners to lay emphasis on this issue.

I. WHAT IS FOSSILIZATION?

Fossilization, or the cessation of learning, which was coined by Selinker(1972), is recognized as a widespread phenomenon in second language acquisition for linguists and language learners have been aware that that it is extremely rare for the learner of a L2 to achieve full native-like competence.

“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 amount of explanation and instruction he receives in the target language” (Selinker,1972). Later Selinker (1996) defined fossilization as “the process whereby the learner creates a cessation of interlanguage learning, thus stopping the interlanguage from developing, it is hypothesized, in a permanent way....”

Ellis (1985: 48) regarded fossilized structures as errors or as correct target language forms. He believes: “If, when fossilization occurs, the learner has reached a stage of development in which feature X in his interlanguage has assumed the same form as in the target language, then fossilization of the correct form will occur. If, however, the learner has reached a stage in which feature Y still does not have the same form as the target language, the fossilization will manifest itself as error.”

Zhao Hong-Han (2003: 99) analyzes fossilization from both cognitive and empirical levels: fossilization involves those cognitive processes, or underlying mechanisms that produce permanently stabilized interlanguage form; fossilization involves those stabilized interlanguage forms that remain in learner speech or writing over time, no matter what the input or what the learner does.

Brown holds the view that “... adults who achieve nonlinguistic means of coping in the foreign culture will pass through Stage 3 (of acculturation) and into stage 4 (adaptation / assimilation) with an undue number of fossilized forms of language, never achieving mastery.” (Brown, 1994: 180-1).

Brown’s definition of fossilization differs from that of Selinker and Ellis as he sees it as a reversible condition. He uses the metaphor of “cryogenation”; the process of freezing matter at very low temperatures; to depict the reversibility of fossilization. His concept of how fossilization may be reversed centers around Vigil and Oller’s (1976) ‘account of fossilization as a factor of positive and negative affective and cognitive feedback’ (Brown, 1994: 217). Brown’s summation of Vigil and Oller’s model is that fossilization may be overcome if the learner is given the necessary positive affective feedback, meant to encourage further attempts at communication, together with neutral or negative cognitive feedback which, Brown (1994: 218) states would:

...encourage learners to “try again”, to restate, to reformulate or to draw a different hypothesis about a rule.

Brown also points out, however, that Vigil and Oller’s model has been criticized for its reliance on extrinsic feedback and for not taking account of learners’ internal factors.

It can be seen that different researchers interpret the term fossilization from different perspectives. Fossilization is interpreted as a process, a cognitive mechanism, or as a result of learning. And it is necessary to find approaches to overcoming fossilization so as to help language learners achieve native-like proficiency in the process of language learning.

II. THE CLASSIFICATION OF FOSSILIZATION

According to Selinker, fossilization can be divided into two broad categories, namely, individual fossilization and group fossilization. Individual fossilization can be shown from two aspects. One is error reappearance in which certain errors that have been considered as corrected and ruled out occur repeatedly. The other is language competence

fossilization, that is, the fossilization of interlanguage in speech sounds, syntactic structures and vocabulary. Group fossilization refers to the emergence of a new dialect when the fossilized language competence tend to be universal and becomes a normal phenomenon of a society, such as Hinglish.

And fossilization can also be categorized as temporary fossilization and permanent fossilization on the basis of its nature. This distinction has immense significance in China's foreign language teaching for fossilization among Chinese foreign language learners, especially among non-English majors, goes to the first category, that is, temporary fossilization. So it is probable for such language learners to achieve greater proficiency if they can get access to optimal input (Krashen,1982) or can be exposed to natural target language environment.

The author of this thesis will come up with some models of instruction for overcoming fossilization in the course of foreign language teaching on the basis of the above-mentioned points.

III. SOME NEW MODELS OF INSTRUCTION FOR OVERCOMING FOSSILIZATION IN THE COURES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

There are five curriculum processes in the implementation of foreign language teaching, including needs analysis, curriculum design, material development, classroom instruction, and course evaluation. The author of this thesis presents a unique pattern of foreign language classroom teaching to overcome fossilization existing among students in terms of speech sounds, grammar and pragmatic sense on the basis of his own study. The pattern encompasses five operational aspects.

First, conducting needs analysis among the language learners. To understand the needs of students can be regarded as the primary task of the research of subjects in learning and as one of the fundamental starting points in the study of teaching strategies in College English. It can serve both the language instructors and the language learners. Knowing the needs of the language learners may enable language instructors to select appropriate teaching materials, to adopt corresponding teaching strategies and to make other relevant preparations. Language learners can have definite goals after they know their own needs and they can study with certain purposes so as to enhance their own autonomy of learning English.

Second, testing the language learners' proficiency of the target language. Proficiency tests may comprise speech sounds, syntax, pragmatics, and several other aspects. The main purpose of proficiency tests is to know the level of the learners, especially, their present problems in language learning. Language instructors may have clear targets in teaching and guiding language learners.

Third, fostering a positive learning attitude in language learner. In recent years, an increasing number of foreign language teaching studies have shown that the role of learner's emotional factors in foreign language learning can not be ignored. The emotional state of language learner's may directly affect the learner's learning behavior and the results. The positive attitude of language learners can be conducive to their learning, while the negative attitude of language learners may affect their learning potential. The majority of educators and experts reach the agreement that it is quite necessary for language instructors to motivate language learners in their inner steady impetus. Language learners may make steady progress if they learn a foreign language with positive attitude which is also beneficial for them to overcome fossilization in English learning.

Fourth, cultivating language learners learning strategies. Chamot(1987): Learning strategies are techniques, approaches or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning, recall of both linguistic and content area information. It is the combination of attitude, style, approaches and techniques preferred and habitually employed by language learners. Learning strategies can be internal system of rules and external procedures and steps, and they can be certain conscious or unconscious actions. Learning strategies can be roughly classified into five categories depending on the level or type of processing involved: metacognitive, cognitive, social/affective, communication and resources strategies.

Studies show that successful language learners are those who can take advantage of learning strategies successfully. Thus more and more importance has been attached to the research of learning strategies in terms of foreign language learning. And it is crucial for language learners to learn to select certain strategies in their own study to overcome fossilization and make new progress.

Learning strategies can be instructed directly or indirectly from four aspects to improve students' language learning, that is, the students' meta-cognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, affective strategies and resources strategies. Different ways should be adopted for various individuals in terms of the development of English language learning strategies.

Fifth, developing language competence and pragmatic strategies among language learners. From the perspective of developing learners' language competence, learners are supposed to learn new knowledge of the target language without stopping. In order to cultivate learners pragmatic strategies, cultural knowledge of the target language should be introduced to enable learners to know the different ways of expressions in Chinese and English. And at the same time, certain communicative strategies and skills should be instructed in oral English teaching. Only in this way can language learners make steady progress in language learning and language use and consequently can they overcome fossilization to the largest extent.

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