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CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL



FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Teaching Implications and Fossilization in the Field of Second Language Acquisition

Alumno: Jesús Semedo Rodríguez

Tutora: María del Carmen Diego Amado

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Tutora: María del Carmen Diego Amado

Vº Bº

Signature

Abstract

Correcting and providing feedback to avoid committing errors is nowadays not deemed by many researchers as relevant as it indeed is. These advocate both interesting and risky theories about corrections' ineffectiveness on students. Accordingly, research have established a probable connection among the inexistence of correction and feedback by teachers and the notion of fossilization. The term, belonging to the SLA (second language acquisition) field was appropriated to refer to the cessation of learner's acquirement of a second language. The aim of this paper is to review the notion of fossilization since its beginnings in correspondence with correction and feedback, displaying research that may accentuate the importance of both to avoid learners' stagnation of further acquirements in a second language.

Key words: Fossilization, feedback, correction, SLA, L2, interlanguage, native language, target language, stagnation.

Resumen

Las correcciones ofrecidas por los profesores a sus alumnos no son actualmente consideradas tan importantes por parte de algunos investigadores. Estos defienden teorías a las vez interesantes y arriesgadas sobre la ineffectividad de las correcciones en los estudiantes. En este sentido, muchas investigaciones han establecido una probable conexión entre la inexistencia de correcciones y *feedback* por los profesores y la noción de la fosilización. Este término, perteneciente al campo de la adquisición de una segunda lengua fue apropiado para referirse a la cesación de avances en el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua. El objetivo de este ensayo es ofrecer una visión del término fosilización desde sus comienzos en correspondencia con la corrección y el *feedback*, mostrando para ello diferentes investigaciones que pueden acentuar la importancia de ellas para evitar el estancamiento de futuros avances en una segunda lengua por parte de los estudiantes

Palabras claves: Fosilización, *feedback*, corrección, adquisición de una segunda lengua, segunda lengua/segundo idioma, *interlanguage*, idioma nativo, lengua materna, idioma objetivo, estancamiento.

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1. Introduction

Committing errors is a fundamental and inevitable constituent of any learner's path to acquire a L2 (second language). In this context, the role of the teacher can be deemed to be of major relevance. Correcting and providing feedback may be a demanding task for teachers, and perhaps for learners an imperative one. Nonetheless, researchers have attempted to refute and diminish this practice introducing investigations which endeavoured to verify the futility of its effects on students.

Similarly, several studies have established a connection amidst correction, feedback and the stagnation of learners' improvement in a second language. In the area of SLA (second language acquisition) the term fossilization was appropriated to refer to the cessation of learners' acquisition of L2. Since this hypothesis was postulated, a number of reviews and critiques has been put forward and the notion has never ceased to broaden in scope.

The aim of this paper is to provide a critical review of the construct of fossilization and accentuate the relevance of correction and feedback for L2 improvement. Simultaneously, research that endeavoured to validate the fossilization hypothesis attending to the absence of correction and feedback to refer to the stagnation of L2 learners' progresses will be yielded.

2. Correction and Feedback in L2

One of the most controversial areas in the field of language pedagogy is to correct students' mistakes and furnish adequate feedback. According to Larsen-Freeman: "Providing feedback is an essential function of teaching. In fact, research has shown that students want to be corrected more than teachers generally feel is necessary" (126). In

this context, students committing errors is an obvious and inner constituent of learners' acquisition of the L2; correction and feedback may aid them to progress.

2.1. Against Grammar Correction in L2.

Nonetheless, several studies have attempted to demonstrate the ineffectiveness and harmful effects of correction and feedback. In this context, the writer will briefly address Truscott's perspective concerning grammar correction.

Truscott's article advocates the unsuccessfulness of written grammar correction in L2 classrooms. Exposing previous research on first language acquisition (L1A) and comparing them with literature on L2, Truscott defends the position that correction is futile: "The studies discussed above show that the situation for L2 is the same as for L1: Grammar correction in writing courses is not helpful." (Truscott, *The Case Against Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes* 333). Thus, Truscott argues that these conclusions about L1A might be translated into similar results in L2A. Some of the reasons Truscott exposes to advocate the futility of grammar correction is timing and also the role of the teacher. Time limitation is usually a flaw in L2 classrooms, and thus, correction would hinder the proper development of the lesson. On the other hand, teachers, prior to correcting, must be familiar and conscious with students' errors. Moreover, instructors must elicit a straightforward explanation so as to save time and facilitate learners' understanding (350). Another important aspect Truscott alludes to is that there is no fear for *fossilization*. This hypothesis assumes that those students who do not receive correction would become unable to progress (357). Therefore, advocates of the fossilization hypothesis may deem correction and feedback as a crucial part in the development of learners' capacities.

Truscott continues his defence of the abandonment of grammar correction extending his theory to oral grammar correction. Truscott presents similar claims but

incorporates other aspects. For instance, the case that teachers are not experts of grammar (Truscott, *What's wrong with oral grammar correction* 438) or are inconsistent in grammar correction (440). Perhaps Truscott's main disagreement is against the relationship between correcting maintaining a communicative focus. Correction obstructs the pace of the classroom, and thus, communication ceases when teachers need to explicate errors in learners' utterances (442). Notably, Truscott considers that his thesis should not be expanded to providing feedback (438). At this point, it may be of some importance to note that the writer will refer to this aspect on section 4 and throughout the paper will conceive correction and feedback as part of a continuum.

Overall, Truscott considers that in view of the enormous difficulties teachers face while delving into grammatical errors in class and student capacities to understand the grammatical explanation, oral grammar correction should be alienated. Indeed, Truscott asserts: "oral grammar correction should be abandoned" (453).

3. Interlanguage Fossilization: a Review.

Fossilization is a term obtained from the palaeontology field as Banerjee (41) describes. Selinker's *Interlanguage* introduced the notion of fossilization to refer to certain aspects of the interlanguage (hereinafter IL) of second language (herein L2) adult learners which remained immovable. This stability of the learner's IL results in the cessation of language acquirement. The term interlanguage may be described as the learner's knowledge of a target language (herein TL) on his or her path to acquire it. The IL is an evolving system, and thus, it is composed of features from the native language (hereinbelow NL) and the TL (Corder 67). The next figure attempts to illustrate what IL might represent in L2 acquisition as described by Selinker:



In light of the above, the construct of fossilization presupposes that a learner's development of any L2 petrifies at some stage, leading to the failure of progression. In addition, Selinker had estimated a mere 5 per cent, or less, of proficient L2 learners with native-like competence (212).

Prior to Selinker's hypothesis, authors such as Nemser, had likewise denoted some temporal stages in which learners' acquisition seemed to be detained: "the speech of long-time users . . . have yet obviously reached a *plateau* in their learning" (117 emphasis added). Hence, the notion has repercussions for second language acquisition (SLA), as Banerjee suggests: "[t]he metaphor . . . refers to earlier language forms that become encased in a learner's IL and . . . cannot be changed" (41).

The scope of the concept of fossilization has been expanded since Selinker first proposed it. Initially, Selinker incorporated the term "backsliding" to refer to some errors which were thought to be eradicated but re-emerged in the learner's production (215). These repetitive errors, might lead to the fossilization of some elements of the learner's IL. In Selinker's words: "fossilizable linguistic phenomena are linguistic items, rules, and subsystems which speakers . . . tend to keep in their IL" (215). From that regressing stage named backsliding, Selinker and Lamendella (187) progressed to relate fossilization with *permanent* cessation of development in the learner's IL.

Selinker postulated the fossilization hypothesis conceiving the term as a product and a process in itself. That is to say, fossilization was perceived as an element of a latent psychological structure which would determine the grade of the learner's acquisition. This cognitive aspect might explain why fossilization does not hit the whole IL of the learner or why fossilization does not affect all learners in the same way. On the other hand, it was also deemed as an inner constituent of the learner's performance. This

conception of fossilization as a product is what causes the reappearance of elements presumably eradicated (Selinker 211).

3.1 Debate.

Since the hypothesis was postulated the literature concerning fossilization has created a miscellanea of heterogeneous researches. Accordingly, Han underlines: “fossilization – in the eyes of many – is a product as well as a process; it affects the entire IL system as well as its sub-systems; it is literally permanent as well as relatively permanent; it is persistent and resistant” (Han, *Fossilization: Five central issues* 218). Nonetheless, the trend seems to favour the incorporation of the fossilization theory. Evidence of this is the fact that a dictionary incorporated an entry for the construct only five years after its birth. In this context, Long asserts: “a feat apparently accomplished by no other SLA term before” (488).

3.1.1 Criticisms

The literature available on fossilization degenerates into defensive research of the hypothesis as well as critiques. Regarding the latter, the writer will illustrate Birdsong’s and Long’s claims, as they represent significant authoritative voices in the field.

Briefly, the former criticizes the connection of fossilization with the non-attainment of native-like competences. Birdsong deems as obvious the non-attainment of native-like skills in L2 learners (175). Moreover, Birdsong considers the term fossilization as “a label in search of a referent” (172), alluding to the varied conceptions of the construct. Birdsong maintains that merely fossilization cannot explain the failure of learners to achieve native-like grammars, as diverse several factors are involved.

Nonetheless, Long is a notable critique to Selinker’s fossilization notion. Whilst Long defies some of Selinker’s main claims, he does not negate the existence of fossilization, “fossilization of IL grammars may occur” (487). Rather, Long rejects the

methods employed, as well as the lack of adequate empirical research. Moreover, Long criticizes Selinker's view of petrified learners' ILs, as he affirms that ILs fluctuate and vary over the time.¹ This is relevant to the hypothesis inasmuch as this variability might be indicative of stabilization and not fossilization. Stabilization might be deemed as a stage in language acquisition in which the IL of the learner may seem to be stagnated, but it is certainly not. Therefore, attending to Long's claims, both fossilization and stabilization might, at first sight, appear to be somewhat clashing conceptions.

Another aspect to be taken into account is the matter of age to which Selinker makes reference. Indeed, Selinker asserts: "no matter what the age of the learner" (215). Therefore, Selinker did not deem age as a crucial factor, whereas Long asserts "learners first exposed before the offset of one or more sensitive periods for language development can reach nativelike levels" (491).

Long's most noteworthy contribution might be that of refuting several studies which had assumed to discover fossilized subjects. Attending to four main principles - assuming but not demonstrating fossilization, selecting inadequate candidates for the researches, incomplete data and findings, and using inappropriate methods of analysis - the majority of these investigations failed to fully and empirically demonstrate the existence of fossilization (501).

One of the major conclusions drawn from Long's contribution is that fossilization is still a vague conception which might collapse with stabilization. It also lacks a homogeneous conception, and the methods employed to validate the construct do not furnish empirical data. Long concludes describing fossilization in the following terms: "Left to stand on its own, it is a 'black box', no more revealing than saying that learners

¹ Larsen-Freeman (85) also mentions the variability of learners' ILs.

cannot progress any further because of ‘Force X’. . . . the more relevant object of study for researches becomes *stabilization*” (521).

3.1.2 Current Situation of Fossilization

One of the most recent reviews of fossilization is Han’s. Han provides a different insight into the construct depicting favourable and adverse aspects. Han bestows the responsibility of fossilization’s existence to a mechanism stored in the brain (Han, *Forty Years Later: Updating the Fossilization Hypothesis*, 136). Moreover, fossilization would only hit the subsystems and not the gestalt of learners’ ILS, as had been previously debated. Another important element to be taken into account is the influence of the students’ NL in their ILS. The combination of NL interference and other elements might produce fossilization (137).

Importantly, Han refutes some of Long’s statements against fossilization. Overall, Long’s conclusion in regards with fossilization is that the term clashes with the experimentally demonstrated conception of stabilization. In this context, Han negates the clash amid stabilization and fossilization and distinguishes them as two different conceptions (144). According to Han: “Fossilization is permanent, and thus, by definition, cannot be reversed, unlike stabilization” (140). In addition, Han distinguishes three types of stabilization, being solely one harbinger of fossilization. In Han’s words: (1) a natural slowdown in learning, (2) covert restructuring of mental representation, and (3) a prelude to fossilization (144).

In sum, Han’s statements shed light into some vague aspects of the construct based on empirical research. For instance, fossilization should no longer be confounded with stabilization. Importantly, a cognitive process appears to be responsible for its existence. Furthermore, fossilization hits the subsystems of learners’ ILS rather than the whole

structure. Moreover, L1 influence and its combination with other elements make structures of the IL vulnerable to fossilization.

3.2 Major Studies: Advocates of Fossilization

For the purpose of this paper, the writer will briefly illustrate one of the major investigations on fossilization, whose findings might corroborate the existence of the notion.²

In this context, one of the most renowned names in the area of fossilization is Patty. Patty is a Chinese immigrant married with a native English speaker who resides in America for more than twenty years. Moreover, Patty earned a bachelor's and a master's degree in a US institution (Hellman 1). Apart from that, Patty may potentially be one of the first empirically demonstrated cases of fossilization, and the subject of study of Lardiere. Even detractors of fossilization assert that Patty represents an adequate subject to demonstrate the hypothesis. According to Long: "sample collected constitute a legitimate basis for a potential fossilization claim" (504). Several aspects of Patty's English command are almost nativelike, however, other aspects seem to have stagnated, as Lardiere points out: "her English . . . appears to have fossilized" (36).

Findings drawn from data collected throughout more than twenty years might reflect fossilized aspects of Patty's English. For instance, Lardiere's investigations underline some evidence of Patty's IL: the omission of verbal inflection for regular past tense marking (a); nonpast third singular agreement (b); absence of past participle forms (c); overuse or absence of *-ing* forms (d); omission of copula and auxiliary verbs (e); to name but a few. Importantly, Patty supplied accurate utterances in only the 6 per cent and 4 per cent of obligatory contexts for structures (a)-(b) (36-7). The following samples correspond to data yielded (37):

² Consider to see White (2002)

- (a) I call Bill this morning and nobody answer
- (b) because he understand better now
- (c) yeah but we haven't look at it carefully
- (d) so he make me spending money
- (e) he around adult a lot

In addition, there are more aspects that seem fossilized. Lardiere points out: “Patty’s near-total absence of agreement marking on thematic verbs” (41). Furthermore, based on the ensuing utterances from Lardiere’s research, Han describes: “Patty had fossilized grammatical functors such as articles and plurals” (Han, *Forty Years Later: Updating the Fossilization Hypothesis* 141).

- (f) China also send a lot of boat to the refugee who want to go back to China
- (g) So there is seven #seven opera you can only listen to
- (h) There are book club in Hawaii you may like to join

Overall, notwithstanding the fact Patty has lived for more than twenty years in the US, she lacks accuracy in many aspects of her English. In spite of ample opportunity, motivation and instruction in the TL, Patty’s IL seems detained in some aspects of English. The immovability of those elements of Patty’s English might lead to postulate that her language is indeed fossilized. Hence, Lardiere’s research might have discovered in Patty one of the finest subjects for the ascertainment of the fossilization hypothesis.

3.3 Correction, Feedback and Fossilization.

Divergences at the time to address the theme of fossilization have degenerated into diverse methodological criteria. However, there are five main approaches that researchers have explored to demonstrate the construct. These five criteria are, in Han’s words: “(1) longitudinal; (2) typical-error; (3) advanced-learner; (4) *corrective-feedback*; (5) length-of-residence” (Han, *Fossilization in adult second language acquisition* 89

emphasis added). For the purpose of this essay, the writer will highlight investigations which attempted to explicate fossilization attending to the results of the appliance of corrective feedback in learners.

It is worth remarking, however, that Fossilization is a product of different factors, and thus only corrective feedback cannot explain its existence. (Han, *Forty Years Later: Updating the Fossilization Hypothesis*, 8). Nonetheless, research on the area might denote a relationship between feedback and fossilization, and thus, it should be of considerable relevance for the pedagogical field. Accordingly, findings from researches conducted by Mukkatash; Vigil and Oller and Washburn will be outlined.

Mukkatash's research concerned *adult* Arabian students and attempted to examine the importance of error correction and grammatical explanation. Exploring some of the most recurrent errors in his students – verbal errors, erroneous tenses, *BE*-deletion, relative clauses, to name but a few- Mukkatash drew some conclusions based on the data collected. Perhaps the most relevant aspect of Mukkatash's investigation is that grammar correction and feedback did not significantly influence his students. Mukkatash describes: “in spite of all this teaching of explicit grammar, the subjects continued to produce basic and elementary grammatical error” (202).

Consequently, Mukkatash concluded that the subjects of the research demonstrated fossilization and remained unable to progress. Simultaneously, an erroneous conclusion might be drawn from Mukkatash's findings. The researcher alleged that correction and feedback appeared futile, albeit Mukkatash did not conduct the same experiment with any other groups. This is of importance, as comparing results might have better substantiated Mukkatash's main statements.

In the meantime, Vigil & Oller's study concerns feedback and the reaction of learners to it. The data yielded a marked contrast with Mukkatash's claims inasmuch as

they identified a clear connection between the lack of feedback and vulnerability to fossilization. According to Vigil & Oller: “If the corrective feedback . . . drops below some minimal level or disappears altogether, the grammar . . . will tend to fossilize” (285). They established two diverse conduits to measure the effects of expected and unexpected feedback on the audience: an affective and a cognitive channel. An affective channel denotes the relationship between the source of the feedback and the audience, whereas cognitive implies information such as suppositions or beliefs (283). One of the most important findings collected is that if the unexpected feedback is negative in the cognitive channel but positive in the affective channel, the speaker will tend to change his grammatical utterances. For instance, a father indicating to his son that he has said something erroneous in a friendly manner resulting in the boy modifying his utterance. Therefore, the learner may de-stabilize the previous grammatical form and might impede stagnation (293). In sum, this research casts light on some aspects of the importance of feedback both as a method for learners’ improvement, and as possible factor for fossilization if absent. Vigil & Oller suggest: “unless learners receive appropriate sorts of cognitive feedback concerning errors, those errors can be expected to fossilize” (294).

At this point the writer will refer to some conclusions appointed by Long on the research of Washburn. Washburn divided eighteen informants into two groups, one presumably fossilized, and compared their performances after the experiment’s sessions. Preceding the sessions, each informant received *personal* and corrective feedback on his or her errors (Long 494). The non-fossilized group improved more quickly and accurately, meeting the 52 per cent of the structures. On the other hand, the presumably fossilized group regressed to commit the same errors and achieved the 36.5 per cent of the target constructions. Importantly, the allegedly fossilized group appeared to be less sensitive to negative feedback, yet they slightly improved from feedback (495).

Accordingly, Thornbury notes that several studies have demonstrated that lack of negative feedback might have been a factor in fossilized ILs. If learners merely receive positive accounts on their utterances, they will not modify and restructure their grammars (116-7). Overall, notwithstanding a minimum improvement, Washburn's findings attempted to advocate the presence of fossilization in his students as they did not significantly benefit from correction and feedback.

Overall, Mukkatash's research presumably identified fossilized subjects, failed when concluding that correction and feedback is ineffective. Consequently, Washburn and Vigil & Oller did verify the importance of correction and feedback in that presumably fossilized subjects slightly benefited from them. Nonetheless, the subjects still committed the same mistakes repeatedly, and thus, they appointed that lack of feedback in previous learning stages might be a precursor of fossilization.

4. Conclusion

The writer has attempted in this paper to expose a review of fossilization and illustrate the relevance of correction and feedback in L2 acquisition. Several authors bestow to the three conceptions close bonds as section (3.3) demonstrates. Accordingly, findings yielded from these investigations point to the absence of correction and feedback as one of the promoters of fossilization. This aspect reinforces the relevance that correction and feedback possess for the proper acquisition of any L2 and shatters most of Truscott's claims. On the other hand, the literature concerning fossilization has conferred an arduous topic to the SLA field which should be expanded to the language pedagogy area. Lardiere's research on Patty purported in section (3.2) demonstrates the stagnation of Patty's grammars. Undoubtedly, Lardiere's investigation furnishes one potential subject whom might serve to verify the hypothesis. If the thesis is ultimately confirmed,

as the evidence indicates, it would be interesting to witness the impact fossilization would inflict to SLA methodologies.

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