

Fossilized Writing Errors of EFL Students: A Case Study of the English Department at Cihan University, Erbil

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Abstract—This study endeavors to investigate the fossilized writing errors of students in the English department at Cihan University, Erbil. Furthermore, the paper seeks to discern the underlying causes for these persistent fossilized forms and outline potential strategies to mitigate them. Twenty-five students were selected from the fourth stage in the English department to partake in three assessments conducted over the course of two semesters. Each assessment required the participants to write essays spanning 120–150 words about any subject. Subsequently, the writing samples from the initial two tests were scrutinized and corrected by the researcher then feedback was given to the students. The researcher categorized errors committed by learners of English based on three aspects; insights gleaned from previous studies, the errors in the tests, and interviews with English language instructors in the English department. The last test aimed to find out the fossilized or the persistent linguistic inaccuracies that continued appearing regardless of correction and feedback. The analysis revealed that students' writing production is notably influenced by their mother tongue/first language and by faulty learning from the environment.

Keywords—Fossilization, Fossilized errors, Writing errors, Error analysis, Second language

I. INTRODUCTION

Being able to write is one of the important skills of language acquisition, In English as Foreign Language (EFL classes) at the English department, courses related to writing are introduced from the first stage such as composition and essay writing, and these courses are complemented by other courses such as phonology, grammar, morphology, syntax, and literature. Despite these comprehensive courses and instructional efforts, learners encounter different problems and make many errors throughout their learning process. Errors are unavoidable and inherent in the learning process and some of these errors are addressed and developed through time. However, there are other types of errors that are known as fossilized errors. These errors show consistency and reoccurrence despite corrections and given instructions. They reflect a kind of entrenched persistency within the learner's production of the second/foreign language. Some linguistic items are defective and fossilized and they fail to develop toward more accurate forms of the second language. The learner continues using these faulty forms regardless of further instructions.

The term "fossilization" was introduced by Selinker (1972). It has been a main concept in the research field of

second language acquisition. Fossilization is considered as an interaction of three systems or languages; the first language (L1), interlanguage, and the second (L2)/target language (TL) and it is a process in which the learner's language stops progressing toward the second language-like performance because of wrong or defective structures in the language (Tajeddin et al. 2017) Researchers followed many procedures to investigate the nature of fossilization, Han (2003) showed that it can occur at any point during the learning process. Moreover, it can occur at any level throughout the learning process starting from phonological fossilization to pragmatic fossilization and it can be of different types such as morphological and syntactic fossilization (Nozadze, 2012).

Writing fluently is not easy for EFL students since it includes many steps such as brainstorming, arranging ideas, writing the draft, revising and editing the language and punctuation, cohesion, and coherence. However, in this paper, the focus is on language errors such as grammar, morphemes, articles, sentence structure, and prepositions rather than content errors.

Despite undergoing extensive courses in writing throughout four academic years, students in the English department

demonstrate a persistent tendency to commit a variety of errors while writing in English. Remarkably, some errors reveal resistance to correction and discontinue development, ultimately solidifying fossilized errors. Hence, the main questions of this study are;

- a. What are the prevalent writing errors observed among EFL students in the English department?
- b. Among these errors, which ones demonstrate the characteristics of fossilization?
- c. What are the pedagogical methodologies that can be used to mitigate fossilized errors?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the pursuit of acquiring a second/foreign language, learners inevitably encounter a variety of mistakes and errors. Corder (1967) and James (1998) cited in (Murad, 2015) delineate the distinction between errors and mistakes is that mistakes can be corrected by the learner him/herself while errors cannot be. Errors are systematic and they are repeated unconsciously by the learner. Errors are studied from different perspectives according to their significance or their nature (Al-Jamal, 2017). Aljaf et al. (2021) outlined that errors are considered an evitable consequence of the language learning process. Al-Alhaysony (2012) states “EFL writing instructors need to remember that students are to be treated with sensitivity and consideration. Further, they should remember that they are not error hunters, but that their job is to create a non-threatening classroom by convincing students that they can write, that writing can be learned and that nobody’s writing is perfect. Thus, criticizing students’ composition should be avoided”. There are two types of errors committed by students through their learning journey: interlingual and intralingual errors. Interlingual errors are those that emanate from negative transfer. When the learner’s second/foreign language is influenced by his/her mother tongue/first language. It happens when the learner is using features and rules of the first language while speaking or writing in the second language. The impact of transfer varies depending on linguistic similarities between the languages forming either positive or negative representations in the target language. Conversely, intralingual errors occur due to faulty learning of the second language items or rules leading to the integration of flawed linguistic features into the learner’s language. These erroneous linguistics forms are called fossilization (Richards and Schmidt 1993).

The term fossilization was first elucidated by Selinker in his paper (interlanguage) in 1972. He defined fossilization as “a mechanism underlies surface linguistic material which speakers will tend to keep in their first language productive performance, no matter what the age of the learners or amount of instruction he/she receives in the target language” (Wei, 2008:27).

Wei (2008) in his paper entitled (implications of L1 fossilization in L2 acquisition) expounds on fossilization

assuring that fossilization may occur in different language levels and different learning stages regardless of age. Second, it can manifest in various forms such as structural or competence-based, and with a spectrum of severity that can range from soft to hard fossilization. Han (2009) characterizes fossilization as a phenomenon that occurs during the process of learning a second/foreign language in which partially developed forms or language production become permanent parts of one’s language and fail to progress toward more developed and accurate forms of the target language. Moreover, it can occur in many areas such as grammar, lexis, and pronunciation.

A. Causes of Fossilization

Scholars have delineated many reasons or causes of fossilization. Selinker has identified five processes that contribute to the emergence of fossilized forms in systems or subsystems of L2 production. These processes encompass “language transfer, transfer of training, second language learning strategies, second language communication strategies, and overgeneralization of L2 items”. Within the process of L2 learning, the learner carries over features of L1 to L2. It indicates using sounds, words, and grammatical structures from L1 while speaking or writing in L2. As mentioned earlier transfer can be negative or positive. Positive transfer occurs when the shared linguistic features between the languages facilitate the production of accurate forms. Whereas negative transfer “interference” arises due to linguistic differences between L1 and L2 resulting in erroneous language production (Yule, 2010).

Lack of formal training can cause fossilized forms. Some learners acquire the language through communication but without any formal grammatical or syntactic instructions. As a result, their errors may become systematized and it would be impossible for these errors to be eradicated (Wei, 2008). The third process mentioned by Selinker is the methods of L2 teaching. These methods may concentrate more on communication rather than accuracy which will lead to the appearance of fossilized errors. Abbasian (2022) said that following a student-centered method allows the students to commit errors since fluency is chosen over accuracy. faulty teaching is another reason. If the teachers are not qualified or if they are not using correct teaching methods, this can prevent successful L2 production or learning. Hence, the lack of formal guidance or inadequate way of teaching can lead to fossilized errors (Sims, 1989). Besides inadequate teaching methods, fault learning strategies might cause fossilized language errors. Incorrect or misapplication of some learning strategies by learners is another common reason for fossilization. Learners tend to apply grammatical rules incorrectly. Abdulwahid (2017) states that many errors related to incorrect word choices and literal translations have happened because students did not sufficiently consider the subtle differences in meaning between English words. They overgeneralize or oversimplify which in turn leads to errors in L2 production Sims (1989) cited in (Wei, 2008).

Being engaged in real communication, learners follow communication strategies which is a skill that the learner follows when he/she is facing difficulties in the L2. Communication focuses on fluency rather than accuracy so the difficulty or the lack of linguistic competence is compensated by paraphrasing or avoidance. The learner may oversimplify the target language rules and items. He/she might be inclined to simplify grammatical rules, articles, tenses, and plural forms; hence, some of these forms might be fossilized. Many other reasons were presented by scholars as mental, cognitive, environmental, and social (Han, 2003). Ellis (2000) indicates that another important factor that leads to fossilization is overgeneralization. Overgeneralization means applying a specific grammatical rule over all the items of the grammatical class without restriction such as ed- suffix or the plural form of nouns. By faulty learning, the learner will not be able to detect the error, it happens unconsciously regardless of instructions or corrective feedback which is the responses of peers and teachers to the flawed second language production of the learner (Mohammed and Mustafa, 2022). Aini et al. (2020) Outlined that fossilization occurs due to learners' lack of attention, incomplete knowledge of the target language, poor memory, or faulty learning from lecturers.

B. Types of Fossilization

Scholars delineated different types of fossilization encompassing individual fossilization and the classification of fossilization into temporary and permanent. Individual fossilization arises when the learner's language stops developing any features of the target language and can be divided into error reappearance and language competence. Error reappearance happens with beginners or students with low language proficiency, these errors are repeated regardless of correction. Language competence fossilization indicates an obstacle in the learner's development of L2 in areas such as grammatical, phonological, pragmatic, and lexical competence. Nevertheless, temporary fossilization refers to fossilized forms of language (phonological, grammatical). They are called temporary because they can be defossilized in later stages of L2 learning. However, permanent fossilization is the fossilized error due to social interactive or phonological variables and these errors cannot be defossilized.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

This study was conducted to investigate the fossilized writing forms of English Foreign Language learners in the English department at Cihan University-Erbil. The participants were 25 students from the fourth stage male and female and they were a mix of Kurds and Arabs. Their ages were similar with minor differences. The population was chosen from the fourth stage because they have been studying English for 4 years including many courses related to writing such as composition, comprehension,

academic writing, and essay writing in addition to many core subjects such as grammar, phonology, and literature which should help and enable them to master the writing skill in English.

B. Procedure and Data Collection

The present study followed a quantitative method of analysis. To identify the fossilized writing errors, three writing tests were assigned to the participants. The tests were conducted over two study semesters. Each test lasted 1 h and the participants were asked to write about any subject they liked. The writing task was between 120 and 150 words. After the first and second tests, the researcher corrected the participants' writings and provided feedback and instructions. Based on previous studies and the errors that were found in the first two tests, the writer categorized the errors into (morphological, syntactic, and mechanism errors). To check the validity of this categorization, the researcher interviewed the professors in the English department and asked them about the most common errors committed by their students, and their comments were taken into consideration. The last test was to discover the fossilized errors that were repeated by the learners despite feedback and correction in the first two tests. The fossilized errors were marked depending on reoccurrence and persistence.

C. Data Analysis

This study aimed to discover the fossilized writing errors of EFL students in the English department at Cihan University-Erbil. After conducting three tests through two semesters the main errors were related to grammar, prepositions, articles, punctuation, spelling, and content errors. Table I shows the overall number of errors committed by students in all three tests.

The results from the tests showed similarities with other studies conducted on errors committed by EFL students while writing in English. The highest number of errors was grammatical errors (150), including wrong structures, incorrect tense, subject-verb agreement, wrong auxiliary or modal verbs, morphemes, and relative clauses. Prepositional mistakes were very common as well; the participants had many prepositional errors in the tests. Ninety-five errors were found for missing prepositions or using the wrong prepositions. The second highest number of errors was in the use of articles (definite and indefinite) and countable and uncountable nouns. EFL participants seem to drop the article for many sentences or use the wrong article. Another problematic issue for the students was punctuation and spelling. 98 and 94 errors were found respectively regarding this issue. The last type of error was content errors related to the logical arrangement of ideas besides the coherence and cohesion of the sentences.

The last test took place after giving feedback to the participants about their errors and instructing them to correct these errors. Some errors were dropped off while others showed consistency and persistence. Each type of

TABLE I
OVERALL NUMBER OF ERRORS

| Error | Grammar | Prepositions | Articles | Punctuation | Spelling | Content | Other | Overall |
|-----------|---------|--------------|----------|-------------|----------|---------|-------|---------|
| #of error | 150 | 95 | 112 | 98 | 94 | 70 | 30 | 649 |

error was measured based on the frequency of occurrence to check its stability. The grammatical errors showed high consistency, as shown in Chart 1 60% of the errors remained again in the fourth test. This is due to interference with students' L1 and faulty learning of L2. Students seem to think in Kurdish and Arabic and then translate to English. This leads to the occurrence of many errors. For example, a student wrote "I did not study because I failed in the examination" or "I missed the bus so the alarm didn't work".

Another problem is the sentence structure for example, in Kurdish, the sentence starts with (subject-object-verb), and in Arabic, the sentence structure is (verb-subject-object). Hence, when the students think in the L1 and translate, they end up with faulty structures. Another grammatical error was the absence or the wrong auxiliary because of not having linking verbs in the L1, so the students always have errors in using auxiliaries such as "we not given enough information" and "Today they are given me the money". The absence of the third person singular in both Arabic and English leads to many errors, students tend to misuse or omit the 3rd person singular (s) for example, one of the participants wrote "she eat in restaurant" and "it's give our information".

Nevertheless, although students have been studying grammar for 4 years in the English department, still they are making many mistakes in reported speech and passive voice. Students fail to use the correct structure for both forms, they use the wrong auxiliaries and verb forms such as "Two hundred people are employed by the company last month" and "Paul said I am feeling ill". There were errors in word order as well due to negative transfer from Kurdish and Arabic. In both languages, nouns come before adjectives such as "كچه جوانه كه"/kicha jwanaka/which students translate literally to "the girl beautiful" and in Arabic "الطالب الذكي"/altalib althaki/which is means "the student clever". Hence, some errors are fossilized because the students use the structure of their L1. Errors in pronouns were also due to transfer and overgeneralization, the absence of counterparts in Kurdish paves the way to commit errors. Moreover, in Arabic, sometimes the pronoun is attached to the verb so students misuse the pronoun when they translate from Arabic to English.

Similar to grammatical errors, article errors also showed consistency 59% of these errors appeared in all three tests. Participants either misuse, add, or delete the article. One of the fossilized errors was the use of indefinite articles(a-an) with unique nouns like (sun-sky-moon-universe). A student wrote, "We are looking at a moon". another common error that showed high occurrence is the extra use of the definite article (the). Participants overgeneralize the use of "the" with

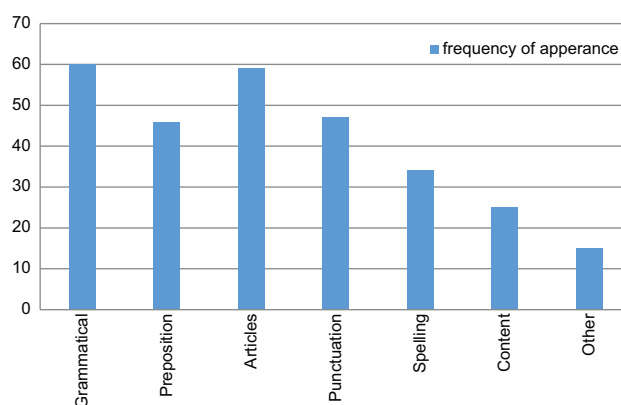


Chart 1: Frequency of appearance of errors.

all the nouns without restrictions for example adding it to abstract nouns such as "the confidence".

A wide range of punctuation errors was detected after feedback. Participants were instructed many times about the importance of correct punctuation. However, 47% of these errors were permanent. They tend to start the sentence and write proper nouns with small letters or use capital letters in the middle of the sentence such as "the solution That people don't go out" or "my name is ali". The use of commas and spacing is also problematic for the students. In addition to punctuation errors, some participants repeated the same informal words and contractions in their writing although they were notified many times about using formal language and full forms while writing. A participant wrote, "I study in Cihan uni cuz it is the best uni".

Similar to grammatical errors, there were various mistakes in the use of prepositions. Students continued using wrong prepositions, 46% of these errors were fossilized. Some errors were because of negative interference with the mother tongue. For example in Arabic and Kurdish, the lexical item "afraid" always comes with the preposition "from" "خائف من"/khaef min/, so the students keep using this structure instead of "afraid of". Other examples of fossilized prepositional errors were: the lecture is on Sunday; I am on the taxi and the book is over the table.

The last type of error was content and meaning errors. When students translate literally from their L1 to the L2, they fail to achieve the intended meaning. Literal translating leads to mistakes because words have different meanings in different contexts. This seems to cause a problem, especially with idioms and expressions. Other examples of fossilized errors are shown in Table II.

TABLE II
SAMPLES OF WRITING FOSSILIZED ERRORS

| Error | The correct form | Error type |
|--|---|----------------------------|
| I am trying to sell my car but no body is interested to it | I am trying to sell my car but nobody is interested in it | Punctuation+preposition |
| The doctor say that I should rest for a week | The doctor said that I should rest for a week | Tense |
| I'm gonna go to the uni | I'm going to go to the university | Formality |
| Two hundred people are employ by the company last month | Two hundred people were employed by the company | Tense |
| Essay is tall piece of writing | Essay is long piece of writing | Vocabulary |
| The internet have more impact for education | The internet has more impact on education | Preposition |
| Its give our information | It gives us information | Pronoun |
| The first paragraph called introduction | The first paragraph is called introduction | Auxiliary-spacing |
| My name is ali | My name is Ali | Punctuation |
| I study in Cihan uni cuz it is the best uni | I study in Cihan university because it is the best university | Formality-punctuation |
| I am loving english department | I love English department | Punctuation-tense |
| She eat in restaurant last neight | She ate in a restaurant last night | Tense-punctuation-spelling |
| We are looking at a moon | We are looking at the moon | Article |
| I am understand Arabic but not speak | I understand Arabic but I cannot speak | Wrong verb |
| All the students is studying for exam | All the students are studying for the exam | Subject-verb agreement |
| A lot of people did not worked yesterday | Many people did not work yesterday | Vocabulary-tense |
| Today they are give me the mony | They are going to give me the money today | Structure-spelling |
| At one o'clock her poster is ready and me | At one o'clock our poster will be ready | Pronoun |
| We worked it but we have mistakes | We worked on it but we have mistakes | Preposition |
| Miss Rozhin says us | Miss Rozhin told us | Grammar |

III. CONCLUSION AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Language learning is a process that undergoes many stages. The learner's language develops at each stage. However, some items or structures fail to develop and stop progressing. These language items are fossilized. After conducting this paper, the results showed an enormous number of fossilized errors. These fossilized errors were intense, word order, articles, prepositions, wrong structure, spelling, punctuation, subject-verb agreement, pronouns, and content errors.

The researcher found a great influence of the participants' L1 on their performance. The morphological and syntactic differences between Kurdish, English, and Arabic have affected the students' language comprehension and production. Besides the great effect of L1, the way of learning, faulty learning, the teacher, the environment, and other reasons lead to errors. Sometimes, the teacher focuses more on fluency rather than accuracy and does not correct every single error so the learner keeps using it unconsciously. In other cases, the teacher himself/herself is the source of the error.

After analyzing the results, the researcher had an interview with other professors in the English department and the following solutions were suggested:

1. Embracing the idea that it is acceptable to make mistakes and that they are parts of the learning process. Teachers must understand and teach their students that learning a foreign or a second language is a process full of different stages and it is normal to have errors. Understanding this point helps to motivate the learner to communicate and interact without feeling shy and afraid of mistakes which in turn may improve their language.
2. Using a strategic method of error correction, while correcting the students' writing samples, the teacher sometimes only crosses the paper without referring to the mistakes. The teacher can give feedback to the students and explain these

errors to them. The teacher can explain the reason that leads to these errors and the way of avoiding them.

3. To improve the writing skills of students, they must practice many times and get feedback from others either peer review or from the teacher.
4. Encouraging the students to read more to increase their vocabulary in the L2 and improve their writing style
5. Encourage the students to proofread their writings and use a dictionary. Allowing the students to check the structure, and the grammar from the internet or a dictionary helps in increasing awareness of their errors.
6. Teaching students to avoid thinking in Kurdish and Arabic and to avoid translating to L2. They should learn to think and write using L2 structures and items.

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