

English Phonological Fossilization and Its De-fossilization: A Case Study of Chinese College Students

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Abstract: Phonological fossilization is just one aspect of language fossilization into which this paper will inquire. Given the fact that most wrongly pronounced sound elements are easily fossilized can be de-fossilized, the paper shows the methods to find out how to de-fossilize in the pronunciation of the foreign language learning in China and demonstrate the effectiveness through case study.

1. Introduction

Interlanguage (IL) fossilization is a very important notion in second language acquisition. Fossilization is the term used generally to denote what appears to be a state of permanent failure on the part of a second language (L2) learner to acquire a given feature of the target language. Phonological fossilization is just one aspect of language fossilization into which this paper will inquire. Given the fact that most wrongly pronounced sound elements which seem to be fossilized can be de-fossilized, permanent fossilization exists only when learners find no significance to redress it or can't keep doing remorseless practice. The case in native language acquisition is quite different, in which ensuring its intelligibility is not a matter of choice, but a have to. And it is not a temporary process but a life long process. The concept of fossilization in this paper is not quite the same as the common concept in second language acquisition (SLA).

Language is a tool for human beings to communicate thoughts. Clear and understandable pronunciation is a prerequisite for successful linguistic communication as far as oral languages are concerned. Pronunciation, which plays an extremely important role in learning and daily communication, is one of the three basic elements of English in addition to lexicon and grammar. However, quite a few Chinese college students have serious problems in their English pronunciation. It's hard for them to make themselves understood or understand English native speakers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definitions of Fossilization

There are at least four major accounts of fossilization which deserve mentioning, because of the implications they have for second language acquisition research: (1) fossilization as "permanent transfer" (Weinreich 1953); (2) fossilization as "permanent intermediate systems and subsystems" (Nemser 1971); (3) fossilization as a "manifestation of difficulties in L1 parameter resetting" (Hale 1988) and (4) fossilization as the product of the Multiple Effects Principle (MEP) involving 'transfer' (Selinker and Lakshamanan 1992).

2.2 Related Researches at Home and Abroad

Nemser (1961) argues that the learner's intermediate system is neither exactly his mother tongue nor his second language but has some features of both. Whatever level of proficiency a nonnative

adult language learner may acquire in the target language will never be “native”, which implies that such an intermediate system is “permanent”. Nemser’s account of fossilization as a deviant permanent intermediate system or subsystem, ends up being too broad to be of much interest to the discussion. Selinker (1978) primarily defined fossilization as: The long term persistence of plateaus of non-target-like structures in the interlanguage of non-native speakers (Selinker and Lamendella, 1978). As Selinker first introduced the term-fossilization, the definition has become much more authoritative and influential in the field of SLA.

In China, students learn English as a foreign language. Language fossilization is also prevalent at levels of their interlanguage. Some researches on language fossilization have been carried out by Chinese scholars, and some of them are not designated as fossilization though a great portion of researchers would define them as the phenomena of fossilization.

Sun (1994: 81-83) puts forth the phenomenon of the terminal 2 of Chinese English majors, in which he argues that improper feedback (or lack of proper correction) on students’ erroneous outputs, in the long run, may result in terminal 2 in their language competence. In Chen Yaping (1997: 56-60)’s article, language fossilization is called “Grade two phenomenon”. They believe that once a learner’ interlanguage is fossilized, there is little hope to redress it. That is, there is a distinct boundary between plateau in foreign language learning and interlanguage fossilization.

3. A Brief Review on Pronunciation Learning in China

The Contrastive Analysis has been loaded with broader sense in China. Chinese researchers have put a special emphasis on the Contrastive Analysis of English and Chinese at various levels of phonology, lexicon, syntax and even context. The contrastive study of pronunciation has been applied for a long time to the English phonetic books complied by Chinese scholars. They paid most attention to the detailed comparison of vowel and consonants between English and Chinese.

Some Chinese researchers have also made great contributions to English pronunciation learning in pointing out the major pronunciation problems among Chinese students by an analysis of causes of the problems primarily based on a difference between Chinese and English language. These studies mainly focus on the typical problems among students who speak certain Chinese dialects. Others analyze the affective factors in pronunciation learning and investigates the influence of attitude, motivation and strategy in English pronunciation learning (Zhang, 2002; Cui, 2003; Liu, 2005). They also make suggestions to the improvement of English pronunciation education in China from the pedagogical perspective.

4. A Case Study of De-fossilization

The problem the author being interested in is the feasible way to de-fossilize the fossilized phonological features. In light of the former works done by many researchers, it is feasible and meaningful to carry out a further study on one aspect of language items, the study of fossilization at phonological level. A case study is adopted at present study.

4.1 Subjects

In this case study, four students from Beihua University are chosen as the subjects. Student A is a freshman of 2016, majoring in Sociology; Student B is a freshman of 2016, majoring in medicine; Student C is a freshman of 2016, majoring in Medicine; Student D is a freshman of 2016, majoring in Sociology. All of them are from the same English class. Their pronunciation is problematic and many fossilized phonetic elements can be perceived. This is the reason for choosing them as the subjects of the case study.

4.2 Research Design

This study lasted about 9 months. Student A and B are under the process of phonetic-phonological remedy to de-fossilize their phonological fossilization. The same teaching procedure is applied to the two students (A and B). And Student C and D are not under the remedial procedure

but for a contrastive purpose. From the very beginning, Student A and B are asked to read texts and relevant recordings are preserved accordingly once a week, and each text is recorded after imitating and practicing. They are not informed of the author's academic purpose. The only thing they can sense is that they are practicing oral English but the teacher wants them to perfect their pronunciation. Student C and D are also asked to read texts but without de-fossilizing procedure, just record what is at their best. That is, before reading the text they are allowed to review the content until they are quite familiar with it. Student A and B underwent following teaching principles with MMC system as the underlying method to de-fossilize the fossilized sound elements.

4.3 Instruments

The instruments applied in this paper are composed of MMC system, the de-fossilizing procedure and the comparison between the students undergone the de-fossilizing procedure and the students who are not subjected to the de-fossilizing procedure implemented by the author. The MMC system refers to the framework of three kinds of exercises or drills combined in succession in FL classes: starting from mechanical drills, then using meaningful drills and finally spending more time on communicative drills (Sun, 1986: 20; Wei and Sun, 2001: 142).

5. De-fossilizing Procedure

To de-fossilize Student A and B's fossilized sound elements, the de-fossilizing procedure is carefully designed by the author as of five operational steps.

5.1 Warm up and motivation

Go over what is learnt in previous class, especially some difficult points, and chat with the student in simple everyday English. Thus he will do better than before and be motivated during which we will figure out the fossilized sound elements and crack them one by one. The author will not impose the student to correct all the fossilized elements perceived at this step. A pleasure and reassuring atmosphere is to be established.

5.2 Present new materials

Learn to pronounce new words and read aloud the text containing these new words. At earlier stage, attention is paid to the fossilized segmentals. Gradually, more and more attention is paid to suprasegmentals.

5.3 Find out fossilized sound elements

The sound element which is wrongly pronounced again and again with the same substitute after a week's correction and practice may be regarded as fossilized element.

5.4 Choose several fossilized sound elements as the targets to crack

I will find out and correct every mistake my student made when they read words or text. But each time there must be several focal elements to be dealt with, and the first round of process for some fossilized elements usually lasts for several weeks. When the student always reads one sound element wrongly and cannot sense it, the author records it and lets him hear his own pronunciation. Then we show the correct model. Thus we can make him sense the difference and figure out the problem in their pronunciation. Constantly, the student is encouraged to imitate the correct model. If the student still cannot pronounce the sound element properly, it is necessary to explain manners and places of articulation of relevant segmentals and proper ways to pronounce relevant suprasegmentals. Relevant English phonetic knowledge is supposed to be taught to the subjects considering their mature faculty of learnability. When the student can pronounce sound elements correctly in certain context, he is guided to practice them in different linguistic contexts as much as possible. Minimal pairs/sets and drills, including texts, are the linguistic contexts available for distribution of correct pronunciation.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, Student A and B, after 9-month phonetic-phonological remedies, have made a great progress in their pronunciation by de-fossilizing most of the fossilized segmentals. But Student C and D have no significant changes in their segmental changes. De-fossilization is effective in improving the pronunciation of college students.

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