

# The Fossilization in the English Learning of College Students in Guangdong and its Causes

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**Abstract.** Fossilization is a common phenomenon which is hard to change and it is more obvious to college students who have been learning foreign languages for many years. This paper mainly studies the phenomenon of fossilization of college students in Guangdong province, trying to figure out the causes. In the learning process, fossilization is not terrible. The most important thing is to find solutions to overcome it. Only fully understand the phenomenon of fossilization, can we eliminate it.

**Keywords:** fossilization; Cantonese college students; errors; causes.

## 1. Introduction

Fossilization is a common phenomenon which is hard to change and it is more obvious to college students who have been learning foreign languages for many years. And it is always accompanied by incorrect foreign language characteristics in spoken and written language of foreign language learners. Fossilization can be manifested in many ways, such as pronunciation, lexical usage, and grammar. This paper attends to studying the phenomenon of fossilization of college students in Guangdong by way of investigating 100 students. There are 28 questions involved in the research, which aim to find out whether there is fossilization in learning, what kind of fossilization is in learning and then to explore the causes of fossilization.

## 2. The Different Kinds of Fossilization of Cantonese College Students

### 2.1 The Fossilization in Pronunciation

As is known to all, Cantonese is the main dialect in Guangdong. More than 90% of students think that Cantonese has an impact on oral English and listening. This is especially evident in the four consonants: /v/, /z/, /θ/ and /ð/.

The native Cantonese learners tend to replace /v/ with /w/ or /f/. According to the survey, 75% of the students have confused /v/ with /w/. If the consonant /v/ is at the end of the word, it is usually replaced by /f/, such as “relieve” and “relief”; whereas at the beginning of the word, it is replaced by /w/. For example, the word “vest” begins with the consonant /v/, but most of the listeners will think it is another word “west”. 78% of the students have confused /z/ with /r/ due to the fact that the consonant /z/ does not exist in Cantonese. So they prefer to use /r/ rather than /z/. For instance, the word “invasion” would be identified as the wrong form “invation” or other varieties. Consonant /θ/ is a clear tooth grabbing consonant. 72% of the students have confused /θ/ with /s/. For example, the word “thought” will be heard as the word “sort” or “fault” and its variants. Consonant /ð/ is not easy to pronounce correctly for many Cantonese native speakers, and a similar sound /d/ is chosen to replace it under the influence of mother tongue, such as “lather” and “ladder”.

### 2.2 The Fossilization in Vocabulary Usage

The main forms of fossilization in vocabulary usage can be analyzed from the following perspectives: spelling, articles, prepositions and nouns.

(1) Fossilization in spelling

Spelling errors is one of the most common mistakes in the lexical errors. 52% of the students still misspell words in spite of many times of correction. The omission or addition of letters is the main kind of them.

E.g. For such a big quacity, you should give us discount. (quantity)

In this sentence, the spelling of “quantity” omits the letter “n”, which creates a wrong word “quacity”. “Quantity” is often confused with “quality” by people because they are similar. People are very familiar with the word “quality”, in which there is no letter “n”. So when one spells the word “quantity”, he would think that the spelling of “quantity” has no letter “n”.

#### (2) Fossilization in articles

There are no certain rules of article usage in Cantonese. In the process of learning English, students will think subconsciously in their mother tongue, which makes it easy for students to make some kinds of mistakes. In the survey, 52% of the students say that they often used articles improperly. For instance:

(a) Invitation to offer is a party’s manifestation of intention to invite the other party to make an offer thereto. (An invitation)

(b) My mother always tells me that I will be glad not to have given up practicing piano. (practicing the piano)

#### (3) Fossilization in prepositions

Prepositions can collocate with different words and express different meanings. Native speakers can use prepositions freely and correctly, while the second language learners should go through continuous learning and memorizing. 63% of the students always make mistakes in preposition in English.

There are few prepositions in Cantonese. Sometimes preposition can be omitted in Cantonese. For example, in the Cantonese sentence “将呢啲旧书卖咗佢” (sell these old books), “将” is equivalent to “把” in Mandarin, which is a preposition. It can be omitted while the meaning of the sentence is the same. In English, there are many prepositions and complicated uses. Some prepositions have similar meanings but they apply to different scenarios. For example, “on” and “above” both mean “在……上面”. But “on” refers to a position that one can only touch the surface of the object; while “above” is used to represent the measurement of vertical up and down and the height of the post. In learning English, the Cantonese students are likely to confuse the usage of prepositions in Cantonese with that in English and found it acceptable among themselves, which in the long term form a kind of fossilization.

#### (4) Fossilization in Nouns

The fossilization in nouns is mainly manifested in the use of single and plural nouns. According to the survey, there are 51% of the students will make mistakes in the form of nouns. In terms of lexical meaning, nouns can be divided into proper nouns and common nouns, and common nouns can be further divided into countable nouns and uncountable nouns. Some special nouns belong to both countable nouns and uncountable nouns. Because of these complicated rules, it is inevitable to make mistakes in the process of language learning. For example,

a. He is busy writing his thesis which are the requirement to graduate and gain diploma. (theses)

b. They bought some new furnitures last week. (furniture)

c. A great poem is a fountain forever overflowing with the water of wisdom and delight. (waters)

In sentence a, it indicates irregular forms of change in nouns. In sentence b, “furniture” is an uncountable noun, so the singular and plural forms are the same. In sentence c, “water” belongs to the special noun, when it takes context into consideration to express the Chinese meaning “a stretch of water”, which needs to use plural form.

It is obvious to see that there are several kinds of plural forms of countable noun in English. While the nouns in Cantonese are the same both in singular and plural, which cause the students often make mistakes in the form of nouns when they learn English.

## 2.3 The Fossilization in Grammar

When learning English, students are likely to fossilize some grammatical rules hence make it more difficult for them to correct those grammatical errors. Grammatical errors generated from fossilization can be divided into morphological errors, syntactic errors and cohesive errors.

### (1) Morphological errors

E.g. There are seven childrens playing football. (children)

In the given sentence, “children” is a plural form of “child”, which is irregular. But some English learners always remember adding “s” after the singular form of a noun to change it into the plural form. Thus, the morphologic fossilization occurs.

### (2) Syntactical errors

E.g. The teacher together with some students are visiting the factory. (is)

In this sentence, because of the phrase “together with”, the form of the predicate is determined by the single multiplicity of the first subject. But the students only remember the rules that the predicate after the plural noun should be used in the plural form. The form of the predicate is not determined by the syntactic structure.

### (3) Cohesive errors

In Cantonese, the logic in a sentence is not presented by the cohesive devices, but by the internal meaning of the sentence, which is known as parataxis. So they are not much aware of the use of conjunctions. When they learn English, they know that “and” is used to connect sentences so they always use “and” to connect sentences without thinking about the logical connection. In the sentence “I was not invited. And I would have been there.”, the word “and” should be substituted for “otherwise” based on the text’s meaning.

## 3. The Causes of Fossilization

### 3.1 The Transfer of Mother Tongue

Selinker pointed out that learners were used to applying mother tongue thinking patterns to target language learning, thus transferring some grammatical features from mother tongue to target language and eventually lead to fossilization. Cantonese is the main dialect in Guangdong and Hong Kong and English is an international language with a wide range of use. The difference between the two languages is so obvious that negative transfer will occur during the learning process.

The typical sample is Chinglish “Good good study, day day up”, which means “study well and makes progress every day and study hard and make progress every day”. When people translate their mother tongue into the target language, they will always be influenced by the mother tongue and translate it word by word in the order of their mother tongue. This is one of the typical performances of fossilization.

### 3.2 Students’ Attitudes

Specifically, the learning attitude of the students is one of the root causes of fossilization. One’s interest will determine his attitude towards his mistakes. A man who has strong interest in something will be happy to take his time to unravel all doubts and find the right answers. People must pay full attention to the subjective and objective factors that produce fossilization, and make a comprehensive understanding and study of it in order to effectively overcome the great obstacle that hinders their progress in language learning. But according to the survey, only 23% of the students have strong interest in learning English. 72% of them say that they study English just for a good job. Moreover, 62% of the students say they study English hard just to get certificates and once they reach their goal, they will lose the motivation to learn the language and do not make further study of English. It is not enough to overcome the habitual forms of language expression by merely relying on teachers or the external movement to correct the errors of language.

### 3.3 The Negative Transfer of Training

One of the effective measures to prevent fossilization is accurate language input. According to Krashen's input hypothesis, learners need to have a comprehensive input process and input a prototype of the language form according to natural requirements. The more comprehensive language knowledge is input, the stronger the learner's ability to acquire language.

In Guangdong, there is a large amount of foreign teachers coming from English-speaking countries. But in many not-so-good colleges, there are few foreign teachers. Only English majors can communicate with foreign teachers in class. There are fewer English courses for non-English majors, not to mention foreign teachers' lessons. In fact, there are many English teachers in China who have no experience of living in English-speaking countries, which makes it difficult for them to provide their students with standard English expressions.

Besides, people who tend to study alone are more likely to produce fossilization. Without teachers' guidance and immediate correction, it's very difficult for students to be aware of their mistakes and hence get used to the wrong expression. 63% of students do not correct their mistakes without delay according to the survey.

### 3.4 The Frequency of Language Use

The regular use of target language to communicate will help students improve their language proficiency. The higher the frequency of using the target language, the less the occurrence of fossilization. In fact, more than 60% of students do not actively communicate with others in English. 56% of the students in the survey say they only use their textbooks rigidly in class and they do not know how to use the language in the real life. The knowledge learned from textbooks is not fully applicable to real life. It must be judged according to the actual situation. When it is difficult for Cantonese students to speak the second language smoothly and exactly, they will tend to seek the help from Cantonese. So it is not surprising why fossilization exists in English learning.

## 4. Conclusion

Fossilization is inevitable for every language learner. The phenomenon of fossilization in college students' English learning in Guangdong is mainly manifested in pronunciation, vocabulary usage and grammar. The main reasons of fossilization are the transfer of mother tongue, students' attitudes, the negative transfer of training and communicative strategies. In the learning process, fossilization is not terrible. The most important thing is to find solutions to overcome it. Only fully understand the phenomenon of fossilization, can we eliminate it to the maximum.

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