

De-fossilizing” Fossilization in Foreign Language Teaching

“Desfossilizar” la fosilización en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras

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Abstract

The paper particularly addresses the foreign language teaching categories fossilization, error, mistakes and communicative competence, exploring and connecting them towards further construal of their nature, occurrence, frequency, relation with other terms, and setting forth experience-based tips to “de-fossilize” fossilization in classroom and after-classroom dynamics. To attain this, methods such as analysis-synthesis, induction-deduction and abstraction-concretion were used. The analyses made and the suggestions offered are conducive to an understanding of the issue and to better communicative competence in the students.

Keywords: foreign language teaching, communicative competence, fossilization, error, mistake

Resumen

El artículo se acerca en particular a las categorías fosilización, error, equivocación y competencia comunicativa, explorándolas y conectándolas hacia una mayor interpretación de su naturaleza, ocurrencia, frecuencia, relación con otros términos, y proponiendo sugerencias basadas en la experiencia para “desfossilizar” la fosilización en la dinámica del aula y fuera de esta. Para ello, se

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utilizaron métodos como análisis-síntesis, inducción-deducción y abstracción-concreción. Los análisis realizados y las recomendaciones dadas llevan a una comprensión del problema y a una mejor competencia comunicativa en los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, competencia comunicativa, fosilización, error, equivocación

Introduction

The number of foreign language teachers who pull their hair out pained, frustrated, self-questioning their capacity—even upset—because their students make the same mistakes over and over again and nothing in their correction power overturns that situation, is staggering. Communicative competence levels reached seem to never meet the standards expected. Linguistic limitations hinder student performance. Sadly, it remains so year after year. Is it a teaching or a learning problem? Or is it a combination of these two?

A foreign language course logically aims at furnishing students with the tools, theoretical and/or practical, for learning and for navigating the circuitous paths of the language they are striving with. A setback emerges in all of them: mistakes, mistakes, mistakes. Each course sets its bar according to purpose, context, type of student, interests and so on. The paper presents examples taken from different teaching contexts (Holguín, Guantánamo and Havana students), all of which pursue the completion of programs directed to the development of communicative competence.

Therefore, the paper particularly addresses the foreign language teaching categories fossilization, error, mistakes and communicative competence, exploring and connecting them towards further construal of their nature, occurrence, frequency, relation with other terms such as interlanguage and learning plateau, and setting forth experience-based tips to “de-fossilize” fossilization in classroom and after-classroom dynamics. To attain this, methods such as analysis-

synthesis, induction-deduction and abstraction-concretion were used. The analyses made and the suggestions offered are conducive to an understanding of the issue and to better communicative competence in the students.

Development

Dissecting the categories in the paper

Addressing communicative competence

A healthy procedure to open our discussion with is a brief presentation and analysis of the categories in the paper. Being communicative competence the ultimate goal in teaching as Reyes et al., (2024) tell us, “From the conceptions of the communicative approach, the development of communicative competence is the final goal in the teaching-learning process of languages...,” (p. 2) we begin with it.

With the impact of communicative language teaching, it has become commonly recognized that communicative competence should be the goal of language education. It is vital today for effective classroom training. Communicative competence is an original term in linguistics which refers to a language user's grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology and the like, as well as social knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately.

Much has been written and said on the category. Olivé et al., (2024) say, “... having communicative competence then is being able to communicate,” (p. 2), these same authors say, referring to Delmastro and Salazar, 2007, p. 26, so there are many notions involved in the process of communicating. The basic tenet of the communicative approach is, in Richards & Rodgers' words (1986), communication. According to them, “... learning a language is learning to communicate.” Olive et al. (2024, p. 2)

According to Medina (2006), taken from Rodríguez et al., (2024, p. 3), communicative competence is "... a configuration of capacities, knowledge and linguistic and extra-linguistic abilities and habits manifested during the communicative act in the foreign language to satisfy individual and collective communicative needs, in correspondence to the required linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic norms."

Another author, Font (2006, p. 23) proposes this definition: "... the individual's performance in his/her verbal and nonverbal activity in actual communicative situations involving two or more people and an oral or written text, according to a specific social context.", referred by (Ronda, 2016, p. 45).

In other words, communicative competence is the capacity to effectively use a language not only grammatically but also socially and culturally. Pragmatics, sociolinguistics and discourse competence play a weighty role here. Communicative competence is closely connected to error and fossilization. Highly competent students can avoid fossilization ably adapting to different contexts and through self-correction. On the other side of the coin, there are students who have difficulties in their communicative competence, what provokes more fossilization.

A brief approach to error and mistake

It is useful to establish key differences between two of the categories in the paper, error and mistake. The former refers to a systematic deviation from what is correct, usually due to lack of knowledge; the latter is defined as a slip or lapse in performance: the learner knows the rule, he/she knows how to use it yet fails to use it.

Generally, error making is associated to lack of understanding or low linguistic competence and the student is not aware of the error, while in the case of mistakes committed, they are related to a temporary lapse in attention, memory or concentration on what is being done. Most of the

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times, the student does realize he/she is making a mistake and can self-correct, because he/she knows the rule. Clear examples of error are:

- a. She GO to my house to study every night.
- b. Where (DO) you live?

In the first case, the student does not know the rule of the third person singular conjugation (She goes...). Spanish-speaking learners often fall into this error. In the second case, a more frequent one, the student fails to add the auxiliary verb “do,” because he/she has not learned the rule or his/her communicative competence is still in early stages of development.

There is another challenge in the second example, that is, the question. Besides the necessary use of the auxiliary in the question, a further obstacle is that the verb must also agree with the pronoun, be it singular or plural. Thus, if the student does add the auxiliary, he/she will have to know it must be properly conjugated. A “mimed” interrogative sentence would be Where he live? or Where DO he live?

Mistakes are committed, as was explained above, due to scanty attention, memory problems, carelessness and other factors. Overgeneralization of rules might produce examples such as I goed to the beach last Sunday instead of I went, To determinATE instead of To determine and to pronounce communicative /kə-'myü-nə-, kã-tiv-, -ni-kə-tiv/ stressing the third element in the word, /kə-myü-'Nə-, kã-tiv-, -'Ni-kə-tiv/.

The mental lapse is hopefully temporary and the student realizes, then corrects. Worst case scenario would be that if the students' mental lapse lingers, and no counteractive work is done, then the mistake erodes into an error. Delving into these phenomena, it can be added that in foreign language teaching errors are a consistent rule-based deviation due to incomplete language

acquisition, which points to a gap in learning and will need instruction and/or correction. The teacher should address the issue and correct to remedy the error.

Mistakes on the other hand, are seen as a performance-based slip that learners can recognize and correct. It marks a momentary failure, one they can resolve. Here, the teacher might choose to ignore for a moment (waiting for the student to notice and self-correct) or correct lightly/fully depending on context, nature of the mistake, student's learning phase, etc.

Usual examples of both phenomena are found in the use of modal verbs. Oftentimes students tend to conjugate modal verbs when the overall rule says they are not conjugated: My daughter can readS. This is an example of error when the student does not know the rule yet.

Very common mistake variants that can fossilize as errors if undertreated in the conjugation of modal verbs, oftentimes found in our practice, are the students' tendency to say My daughter can TO read (My daughter can read), I must TO go now (I must go now), and I am GO to school (I am going to school).

It is relevant to clarify that the communicative approach has, among others, a critical principle: Mistakes are not always mistakes. It means that during the learning process, students will use language still not at their disposal, that is, not in their already-acquired stock. So, in attempting to communicate they resort to structures and patterns making generalizations that they "handle" at will, either unaware of propriety (errors) or slipping because of hurry, lack of attention, etc. (mistakes).

On the other hand, Smith & Linch (2025), asseverate that: "...current practices often fall short, with ineffective methods and inadequate techniques hindering student development". (p. 1). Thus, transferring the error/mistake issue to other situations, when you strum the wrong string in guitar playing because no one ever taught you the right one or in self-learning you never learned

it, it is an error. When you strum the wrong one even knowing the right one, simply out of carelessness, then it is a mistake.

Richards & Schmidt (2010), referred by Escalona, (2025 p. 10), establish the difference between error and mistake:

Error: “caused by the use of a faulty linguistic item because of incomplete learning.”

Mistake: “caused by lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness or some other aspects of performance.”

To summarize, an error is a deviation from the linguistic rule. It can be corrected. Errors are common in the learning process and can be classified as systematic (a misunderstanding of the rule) or random (carelessness in use). Not all mistakes freeze into error. Corrected errors, which are eventually understood and overcome by the students, are part of the learning curve. Yet, if a mistake is not tackled, the student does not realize he/she is making it, and it can lead to fossilization.

Fossilization in foreign language teaching

Ochoa (2024) explains that the term fossilization was first coined by Larry Selinker in 1972 but its roots date back to the 1950s. It refers to the stage where a learner seems to have ceased learning and reaches a learning plateau. In our teacher jargon we call it a “learning ceiling.” Whichever term is used, it means that going beyond and upwards turns out to be not impossible but very complex and will take longer to attain.

Fossilization can be defined as “... the process by which incorrect language forms become permanently ingrained in a learner’s interlanguage, even after extended exposure or instruction.” (<https://en.wikipedia.org>). Fossilization can affect pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. When there is no corrective feedback on all levels or motivation wanes in the learner, fossilization starts

to atrophy learning. As noticed, we focus chiefly on the linguistic dimension of communicative competence.

Fossilization is the process in which mistakes in language use become permanent in a learner's speech or writing. These mistakes are largely of the grammatical, pronunciation or vocabulary type. Fossilization happens at any stage of language learning. However, it is commonly found in mid-level students exposed to a language for a long time without proper correction, feedback or practice. For example, a student who constantly says "He *go* to the store" instead of "He goes..." may have fossilized the mistake due to lack of remedial work or language practice, so it becomes an error.

This phenomenon also expands, as revealed above, to cultural aspects. In putting this forth, we are saying that the problem can be spotted as well in the sociocultural dimension of communicative competence. Each language responds to a specific cultural mosaic, which differs—sometimes to a high degree—from language to language. Norms and mores might be subject to fossilization as the learner will behave as he/she is and transpose his/her manners and attitudes and cultural signals as they are in his/her mother tongue.

Another definition of fossilization is: "... a stage in the L2 learning process in which the L2 learner language gets "encased" or stop-short to perform like a native speaker of that language." (Al-Shormani, 2013, p. 1).

Nakuma (1998, p. 247), referred by Al-Shormani, (2013, p. 3) says it is: "... a term used generally to denote what appears to be a state of permanent failure on the part of an L2 learner to acquire a given feature of the target language."

According to Ochoa (2024):

When we try to express something new in our target language we “fall back” on the logic of our native language in order to try to fill that gap. This inevitably leads to mistakes because the logic of our native language doesn’t perfectly overlap with that of our target languages. (n. p.)

Fossilized language for English speakers learning Spanish, for instance, is *Mi hijo es 26* (My son is 26 in English) instead of *Mi hijo tiene 26*. First-language interference is clear in this example.

It is argued, justifiably, that when a learner consistently makes mistakes and is not corrected (or correction is not systematic, effective or suitable enough), these can become fossilized: they become a fixed component of his/her language repertoire on any of the three linguistic levels (discrete elements of language): phonetic, lexical and grammatical.

Fossilization happens for many reasons. Two of the most referred to are the influence of the learner’s source language, that is, first-language interference, and overgeneralization of rules. Students tend to bring patterns and rules of their mother tongue into the learning of another language. Therefore, mistakes occur. If they are not tackled in time and corrected, these mistakes “petrify” and are very difficult to “de-fossilize” later. All in all, fossilization refers to mistakes that are habitually committed. Hence, the need to address them decisively in early stages of learning.

Outside the classroom, the learning plateau might be problematic to prevent or “heal.” As Ochoa (2024) explains, it is difficult to correct these mistakes because the speaker is hardly ever knows he or she is making them. Optimistically, she adds that neuroscience today is opening up ways to reverse fossilization. Pedagogy and Psychology assist in this reversal possibility as these disciplines posit that we are perfectible, to a lesser or higher degree.

Fortunately, the foreign language classroom does allow correction: it is the procedure to improve language alongside practice. Of course, rudeness and relentless disruption are out of the question: tactfulness and kindness are inherent in teaching. To correct, the teacher will have to know each student's personality: is he/she shy, too sensitive, easily offended or hurt, opposed to repeat in class, etc.? In our suggestions, we refer more in detail to the tactfulness component.

“De-fossilization” can be seen as the process of “undoing errors” through conscious practice and feedback. It implies the identification of wrong patterns and correction via pedagogical strategies. Some hints to correct in class that we can share are:

1. Know your students well.
2. Correct only if necessary (the mistake hinders communication).
3. Depending on the situation, you can:
 - a. Correct right away.
 - b. Correct repeatedly/occasionally.
 - c. Correct afterwards (either once the student finishes or after class hours).
 - d. Correct not orally, not publicly, but by jotting down the mistake/s and giving it/them to the students more discreetly.
 - e. Decide whether you or another student (a monitor for example) corrects.
 - f. Correct by socializing the mistake/s on the blackboard without direct reference to the student who made the mistake/s. This is delved into in this paper.
 - g. Correct (just turn the red light on and ask the student to repeat after you or a model) and not apply corrective techniques.
 - h. Correct and apply corrective techniques.

4. Choose to evaluate or not, to give a grade or not. Within foreign language walls there is plenty of time to assess performances as practice is a constant, so, an informed teacher has latitude to pick when to: summative evaluation keeps the teacher well informed about his/her students' progress along the course, which means he/she can select whom to evaluate and when.

Looking at fossilization in situ

Below, some concise examples of fossilization noticed in the students from our provinces. There is a fine line here as to the nature of their occurrence. Nonetheless, most cases hint at incomplete learning, happening in early learning stages, low communicative competence, insufficient, nonsystematic correction and/or failure to apply the fittest corrective techniques along the learning process.

Phonetic area:

Holguín – conclusion /kən-'klü-zhən/ (fixed as /kən-'klO-zhən/), answer /'an(t)-sər/ (fixed as /'an-sWər/), native /'neɪtv/ (fixed as /nAtif/. An interesting “ghost cross error” is encountered in class in spite of sustained teacher explanation, correction and repetition: students are prone to pronounce famous /'fā-məs/ as /'fā-mJəs/ and, paradoxically, behavior /bi-'hā-vjər/ as /bi-'hā-vər/.

Havana – asked /æskt/ (fixed as /askɪd/), insist /m'sɪst/ (curiously fixed as /'ɪnsɪst/ despite it being pronounced with stress on the second syllable in Spanish), cash /kæʃ/ (fixed as /katʃ/).

Guantánamo – objective /əb-'jɛk-tɪv/ [stress on the second element] (fixed with the stress on the initial or final element sounding more like “adjective” or “objetivo” in Spanish respectively), idem Holguín with *native* and Havana with *asked*.

Lexical (Semantic) area

Holguín – actually (really) (fixed as “in the present time or moment”).

Havana – She is unhappy (fixed as “She is dishappy”), My books are in the schoolbag (fixed as “My books are in the carpet”).

Guantánamo – idem Holguín with *actually* and Havana with *unhappy*.

Grammatical area

Holguín – other schools (fixed as “otherS schools”), people are [in reference to human beings, persons] (fixed as “people IS”), the real objective (fixed as “the reaLLY objective”).

Havana – Can you swim (fixed as “Do you can to swim?”), I will go there soon (fixed as “I will to go there soon”), He/It is very tall! (fixed as “Is very tall!”), The man is dead (fixed as “The man is died”), She is the tallest student here (fixed as “She’s the most tall student here”).

Guantánamo – idem Holguín with people.

Despite efforts by professors, as our introduction advanced, to detect-address-correct-re-correct, these examples prove how deeply rooted mistakes are. Even senior students regress and are seemingly unable to identify, reduce and control them.

It must be said that some other mistakes, after insistent teacher correction, dissolve (let us not forget that untreated or undertreated mistakes may lead to fossilization). Even so, some build in so deeply in the brain that students continue to stumble.

Towards possible solutions

Ochoa (2024) presents what she calls seven strategies to deal with fossilization (comments between parentheses are not Ochoa’s but the paper’s authors’):

1. Consciously notice/look out for mistakes.

(Learning to notice differences in the mother tongue and the foreign language).

2. Kind and effective corrections.

(Find someone to correct your mistakes and make sure there is polite correction).

3. The sound of your voice.

(Record and listen to yourself, or ask someone else to listen in).

4. Find a buddy.

(Buddy system, getting correction feedback from others).

5. Make it meaningful.

(Meaningfulness in learning is essential. There must be an original purpose and a supporting purpose along the way).

6. Be your own psychotherapist.

(Find out why mistakes are made and soldier on to eliminate them).

7. Practice makes perfect.

(Practice the language, repeat, practice, practice—consciously, enduringly).

Transferring all of these to our educational field, these are strategies—to honour Ochoa's term—exploited in foreign language teaching in English majors. In the English syllabus for students in the Education English Major (senior tier) in Holguín University (Olivé and Montero, 2024), the following is the aim of learning in terms of consciously detecting mistakes. The syllabus aims at accomplishing understandability, accessibility and meaningfulness while adhering to the sequence in the students' learning continuum, individually and socially, which will prepare them for their profession:

1. Being aware of and internalizing the socio-linguistic phenomena under analysis to discover how they acquired/developed their competences, concepts, sense of contextualization, etc. (Knowledge acquisition and Skill development).

2. Empowering themselves theoretically and practically with such knowledge/skill development to exploit it in facilitating/exacting their own learning and guiding their academic

training. (Self-assessment and Self-improvement – here improvement also applies to the students' whole educational formation, that is, a focus on developmental teaching and learning).

3. Redirecting stages 1 and 2 to their professional reality: how the stage they have reached enables them to teach English to their prospective pupils and solve problems related to their profession. (Professional rechanneling - referred to in specialized literature as transfer activities, extrapolation, application or, more broadly, expansion, but in our case as professional activities in class and during the students' internship and practice teaching). (pp. 28, 29)

Moreover, in such situation, the objectives are clearly channeled towards an understanding of the mistakes with teaching purposes: the students learn the language consciously and ready themselves to teach it.

Our personal construal of the mistake aspect in foreign language teaching in our reality focuses on the following assumption taken from Olivé (2024):

Didactically speaking, corrections of phonetic and grammar mistakes can be made public on the blackboard –with extreme tact and treatment– and socialized from a professional angle. When you correct and how you correct will largely depend on the students' characteristics. Diplomacy and opportuneness ought to be weighed by you; and your keenness to correct justly must accompany it. (p. 38)

Foreign language learners, in a context where they must learn the language to teach it, have to be exposed to mistakes. We believe in preparing teachers-to-be to know, realize/detect and remedy mistakes they make and the mistakes committed by their students. Consequently, we:

Favour respectfully presenting on the blackboard and discussing mistakes in a teacher-training classroom for three elementary reasons: to explore the cause of the mistake, that is, the nature of the phenomenon underlying it, to collectively choose the required

correction according to the type of mistake, and to sharpen the ability to notice that something in the language is not right. (Olivé, 2024, p. 38)

These reasons assist in keeping errors from sneaking in and are a must in teaching environments. Our students will be surmounting the fossilization hill working hard on their own problems and working harder to help their potential students solve theirs. In view of that, being a foreign language teacher signposts being free of fossilization.

Outlining general suggestions

To attempt to “de-fossilize” fossilization, teachers can preliminarily choose to follow the pieces of advice given by Ochoa (2024). Furthermore, they can find more options and valuable suggestions browsing the Web. Here we offer our own set of recommendations to deal with the rock-hard obstacle:

1. Diagnose students once they enter your classroom. This will allow you to detect fossilization patterns since the beginning, which will give you arguments as to whether your students are making mistakes or errors. You cannot forget that they may come from previous learning settings where teaching objectives did not consider correction a primordial factor or from a deficient/mistaken corrective approach to errors/mistakes or they evidently completed the requirements yet did not hone their communicative competence, specifically the linguistic one, or they made recurrent mistakes but their teachers did not mind them so failsafe competence fails to be safe. This is indicative of the strong need to know your students’ weaknesses and fortes in the language.

2. Equip yourself with an all-around, detailed corrective technique kit, one you can go to depending on the type of mistake/error in the phonetic, lexical and grammatical fields. This will save you time and keep you away from desperation, snap selection of technique, superficial

treatment of the mistake, redundancy when one technique does not kick in and you have to move back and forth among different ones to succeed.

3. Apply the techniques opportunely, zealously, systematically, systemically, sensitively, without giving up. Make your students aware—much more so knowing your students will be teachers too—of their weaknesses (and fortes) and of the techniques, that is, their relevance, how they are implemented, when to introduce them, when to change them, when to stop and when to resume.

4. Be patient, understanding, flexible, passionate, insightful, indefatigable, tactful, committed, so you don't arrive at the sad moment when you pull your hair out, surrender and affect them rather than save them. Your students need you—and they are very perceptive of their teachers' attitudes.

5. Be clear that fossilization is there because of a variety of factors, some of which escape the students' responsibilities—and some, the teachers'.

6. Be optimistic that even in the worst of cases fossilization can be diminished, uprooted, banished.

7. List concrete fossilization examples on the three planes of the language so you can follow up and retake if necessary, and have the list as feedback to work with other students in the future.

8. Attach a list of *ad hoc* corrective techniques and procedures (you already have a kit recommended in item 2) that proved effective and might come in handy with new students.

9. Do not forget fossilization is but a single concern in a sea of concerns in learning and teaching the language. For that reason, your addressing it will sometimes have to be holistic.

10. Praise advances and encourage progress and effort. Reward accomplishment. If your students sense they are in a deep learning pit they cannot climb up from, they will recede into pessimism, frustration, even disbelief or annoyance. If, on the other hand, they are gently prodded, stimulated and feel help is always on its way to them, motivation and chances of achievement will be heightened.

11. Keep high the flags of knowledge, practice, sacrifice, dedication, self-assessment, self-control not just for “de-fossilization” purposes but for the gamut of circumstances and challenges you and your students will always confront.

12. Exploit, and lead your students to, the valuable possibilities opened by technology in terms of explanations of linguistic phenomena, the range of dictionaries at your disposal just a click away on your electronic gadgets, etc.

13. Make your students’ aims at improving their language and their communicative competence a significant aspect of learning. Learning has social, pedagogical, psychological and personal facets. Being a better human being, a better professional, a better student and teacher, will obviously impact learner self-esteem and his/her social demeanor. Fossilization refers to paleontology and learning, not to behavior or the heart. It is not a virus, just a common cold. Teachers have instructional-educational medicine for that.

14. Class dynamics may also be directed towards: Feedback activities (Exposing the students to activities where they identify and correct their own mistakes. For example, in writing, the teacher can include incorrect sentences for the students to learn to detect and correct), Role-plays (Exposing the students to specific communicative situations so they detect and correct in a more natural context), Recordings (Recording the students’ oral performances and carrying out team checking to spot fossilization patterns).

15. Extracurricular activities may be: Talk clubs (Informal settings where students are trained to notice and correct mistakes), Language exchanges (Getting feedback from native speakers of the language. It allows instant feedback and aids in breaking fossilization patterns), Technology (Online apps and platforms that open a window to interactive practice. These are very useful too in identifying and correcting mistakes/errors).

Conclusions

The paper addressed fossilization, error, mistakes and communicative competence in foreign language teaching exploring and connecting them towards further interpretation of their nature, occurrence, frequency, relation with other terms, and setting forth experience-based tips to “de-fossilize” fossilization in classroom and after-classroom dynamics. After laying out updated theory and methodology on the matter, the authors set out to present their reflections and recommendations supported by years of teaching experience. The criteria given here do not exhaust the topic.

There is an unquestionable relation among fossilization, error, mistakes and communicative competence. Being aware of this facilitates foreign language teaching as it helps teachers conceive strategies to improve learning. “De-fossilization” then becomes a tool both in and outside the classroom via meaningful learning.

Fossilization is there, it exists, and it harms communicative competence, which, if poorly acquired, makes way to potential fossilization presence, and language proficiency both in writing and in speaking is harmed. It is the teachers’ duty to lead their students to optimal performance levels in the language. Let us “de-fossilize” the whole teaching and learning attitude.

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