Interlanguage Fossilization in Chinese EFL Writing

—An Empirical Research of 20 English Major Students

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This research is designed to investigate interlanguage fossilization in Chinese college students' written output. Twelve common linguistic errors from 20 Chinese EFL (English as a foreign language) learners' writing assignments are observed. Results show that among 12 typical errors, five types of errors are declining while the rest are increasing, indicating a tendency towards fossilization. Analysis shows that negative/corrective feedback has played a key role in reducing fossilization of some errors, but it does not work in every case. Some errors tend to be fossilized for several reasons. First, language items that do not have a direct form-function relationship are likely to be fossilized. Second, advanced learners create their own language system and neglect the basic rules of grammar. Third, task difficulty takes learners' attention away from form to meaning. Fourth, ingrained thinking patterns have a great impact on how learners organize their thoughts in writing. It is true that many Chinese EFL advanced learners reach a plateau in the process of acquiring English. However, attention, consciousness, and training of self-monitoring ability will help destabilize their interlanguage system.

Keywords: Chinese EFL (English as a foreign language) learners, interlanguage, stabilization, fossilization

Introduction

Since Selinker (1972) advanced the concept of interlanguage and fossilization, the study of interlanguage fossilization has become one of the main topics in the field of L2 (second language) acquisition. Researchers have disagreed with each other on issues such as whether fossilization exists, how fossilization is defined, what causes fossilization, and how instruction affects fossilization. Fossilization is used to describe various learner performances related to failure in acquisition, such as backsliding, stabilized errors, persistent non-target-like performance, learning plateau, typical error, low proficiency, ingrained errors, systematic use of erroneous forms, and errors made by advanced learners (WEN, 2010, p. 88), just to name a few. HAN (2003) explained from external, internal, neuro-biological, and social-affective factors to give a thorough and systematic analysis of the causes of fossilization. Although many achievements have been made in the past few decades, researchers still have a very limited understanding of fossilization. In addition to disagreements on the definition of fossilization, explanations of the phenomenon are based on insufficient observation and description, and are often one-sided and incomplete, which is mainly caused by a lack of long-term,

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longitudinal empirical research. Therefore, longitudinal study is indispensable for research on fossilization, and is badly needed in today's study (Long, 2003).

The present study was based on a two-year observation of 20 Chinese EFL (English as a foreign language) learners' errors in their written output, and was designed to observe whether, and how these linguistic items had become fossilized, and, if so, why. The study was supposed to have important theoretical and practical implications for EFL teaching.

Theoretical Rationale

Interlanguage and Interlanguage Fossilization

"Interlanguage" in the present study particularly refers to the English produced by L1 (first language) Chinese students who learn EFL. It bears the characteristics of both Chinese and English. Interlanguage fossilization is "a process which sometimes occurs in which incorrect linguistic features become a permanent part of the way a person speaks or writes a language" (Richards & Schmidt, 2003, p. 211). Selinker noted that many L2 learners (perhaps as many as 95%) fail to reach target language competence, and they stop learning when their interlanguage contains at least some rules different from those of the target language system (Ellis, 1999, p. 48).

Stabilization and Fossilization

Scholars disagree on the relationship between stabilization and fossilization. Some linguists believe that these two terms refer to the same phenomenon. Others hold that they have different connotations. Fossilization, they believe, can never be changed, but stabilization is a temporary "stop" in learning. Some others divide fossilization into two types: temporary and permanent fossilization. If defossilization takes place, learrners will make progress in learning and their interlanguage will be closer to the target language. Otherwise, temporary fossilization will result in permanent fossilization. Many learners are at the temporary fossilization stage, and some might linger for a long time or even for a lifetime. In this study, we call such a phenomenon "stabilization", and errors of this kind "stabilized errors". We give it such a name, because fossilization is an abstract term, and mostly refers to the ultimate state of linguistic competence. Stabilization, however, is a better term, because most errors in Chinese students' output are temporary and subject to change and only some become permanently fossilized.

Research Design

Purpose of Research

The research was designed to investigate interlanguage fossilization in Chinese college students' written output. The focus was on linguistic errors, and the purpose was to observe the degree to which stabilized errors become fossilized. The following questions were to be answered in the study: (1) What linguistic forms in Chinese EFL written output are likely to be stabilized?; (2) Which errors are more stable than others and why?; and (3)What is the implication of the research for FL (foreign language) teaching in China?.

Subjects

Twenty Chinese EFL learners, from 19 to 22 years old and studying in the English Department of a university in South China, were chosen as subjects. They are regarded as advanced English learners, because they had learned English in China for nearly 11 years, and have passed the TEM 4 (Test for English Majors Band 4).

During the first year (Grade Two) of the survey, they attended English writing class regularly, two hours a week, and were asked to write a composition every three weeks, and the writing teacher helped to point out the mistakes and correct some of them. In the second year when they became juniors, they did not have writing class, but kept writing in other courses. Their writing assignments were collected and proofread three times a semester. The linguistic errors were marked and some were corrected by their teachers. All the subjects received certain kinds of feedback, some explicit, and others, implicit.

Research Methods

This study employed a mixture of longitudinal approach, typical-error approach, advanced-learner approach, and corrective-feedback approach. First, the subjects were all advanced learners, and their interlanguage was presumed to be much nearer to the target language. Those language items which are different from the target language, and which stay in learners' output during the two years' survey are likely to become stabilized. Second, the errors collected from subjects' writing are mostly typical errors, produced by learners who have the same mother tongue, Chinese. Our basic assumption is that those typical errors produced by a group of FL learners who speak the same mother tongue are most likely to be fossilized language items. Third, corrective feedback was used to see whether learners make adjustments in their production after receiving negative feedback. If learners make no changes, we assume that they became stabilized. This is possible, because the errors have been studied for two years, and they might have existed before the subjects entered college. The stabilization of these errors may well indicate an inclination towards fossilization.

Data Collection

The data were collected from regularly gathered compositions. During the two years, 160 compositions were collected from 20 subjects, 80 from sophomores, and 80 from the same subjects when they become juniors. All the compositions were first drafts without any proofreading to ensure that the errors were produced unconsciously. Among the regularly assigned compositions, 20 were collected at the midterm of each semester, and 20 at the end. Subjects handed in their work as normal assignments, and none of them was told of the purpose of doing this. After having been collected, all compositions were immediately duplicated and kept as raw data, and returned to the teachers for revision and correction. Then errors are collected and categorized into four main levels: morphology, vocabulary, syntax, and discourse. Twelve typical errors, including those errors in number, part of speech, tense, wording, conjunction, article, passive structure, collocation, there-be structure, double-verb structure[1], run-on sentence, and overuse of second person, will be discussed in detail.

Negative/Corrective Feedback

Negative/corrective feedback was given to help the subjects to realize and overcome the errors. For sophomores, a professional writing teacher provided negative feedback regularly after the first drafts were finished. Not all the errors were corrected explicitly. Mistakes that were slips of pen and that were assumed to be able to be recognized when pointed out were just underlined. Subjects were also required to self-correct and peer-edit each others' writing. The purpose was not to see how negative feedback works, but to try to find out how stable those errors were, and why some errors tend to be fossilized. We held the view that if errors were

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[1] Double-verb structure, a name coined by the author, refers to an independent cause/sentence in which there are two verbs such as "He came here visit me last week".

recognized and corrected after negative/corrective feedback, interlanguage improved and errors were not likely to be fossilized; if an error stayed unchanged for one year in four assignments despite corrective feedback, they were stabilized; if an error regularly showed up for two years in eight assignments despite the teachers' correction, they were likely to be fossilized.

Research Findings

From the data, we collected various kinds of errors ranging from morphological to discourse level, as was shown in Examples (1)-(4):

Example (1) Errors at morphological level:

Article: <u>Half month</u> later, I got the result of the examination. (Half a month)

Parts of speech: Being close to nature keeps you physically <u>health</u>. (healthy)

Case: It's a student right to decide whether to attend lectures. (student's)

Example (2) Errors at lexical level:

Choice of words: The <u>big</u> rain prevented us from going to school. (heavy)

Collocation: I was scared <u>at</u> them at the beginning. Then they got so kind <u>of</u> me. (of; to)

Tense: With the development of the global economy, China <u>open</u> herself to the World. (has opened)

Comparative: One thing we should do is to make our country <u>more strong and prosperous</u>. (stronger and more prosperous)

Preposition: Some people may work <u>on</u> weekends. (at)

Number: I am just a common girl, and lead an ordinary life with my <u>families</u>. (family)

Concord: Not every student <u>have</u> enough knowledge to understand the lecture. (has)

Example (3) Errors at syntactical level:

Omission of verb: They just follow it even though it <u>may</u> beyond your ability. (may be)

Run-on sentence: You can stay at home, <u>you</u> can go out shopping. (or you)

Subordination: I always try my best to learn <u>English. Because</u> I want to be a teacher. (English, because)

Double-verb: A terrible memory in my childhood <u>was</u> an accident <u>took</u> place at the age of six. (taking place)

Passive voice: We <u>were fallen down</u> by a thin layer of sand. (fell down)

Example (4) Errors at discourse level:

Coherence: My family was poor. So my parents had to get up before daybreak and pick vegetables in the fields <u>so</u> they could carry them to the market earlier and sell them at a good price. (so that)

We focused on 12 main types of errors to study the different degrees of error stabilization in Chinese EFL learners' written output, and the result of the survey is illustrated in Figure 1 to show the difference in the number of 12 errors in sophomores' and juniors' written output:

It is found that the number of some errors drops while that of others goes up. In order to see more clearly, we put these two trends, decline and increase, in Tables 1-2 to show the difference in error stabilization.
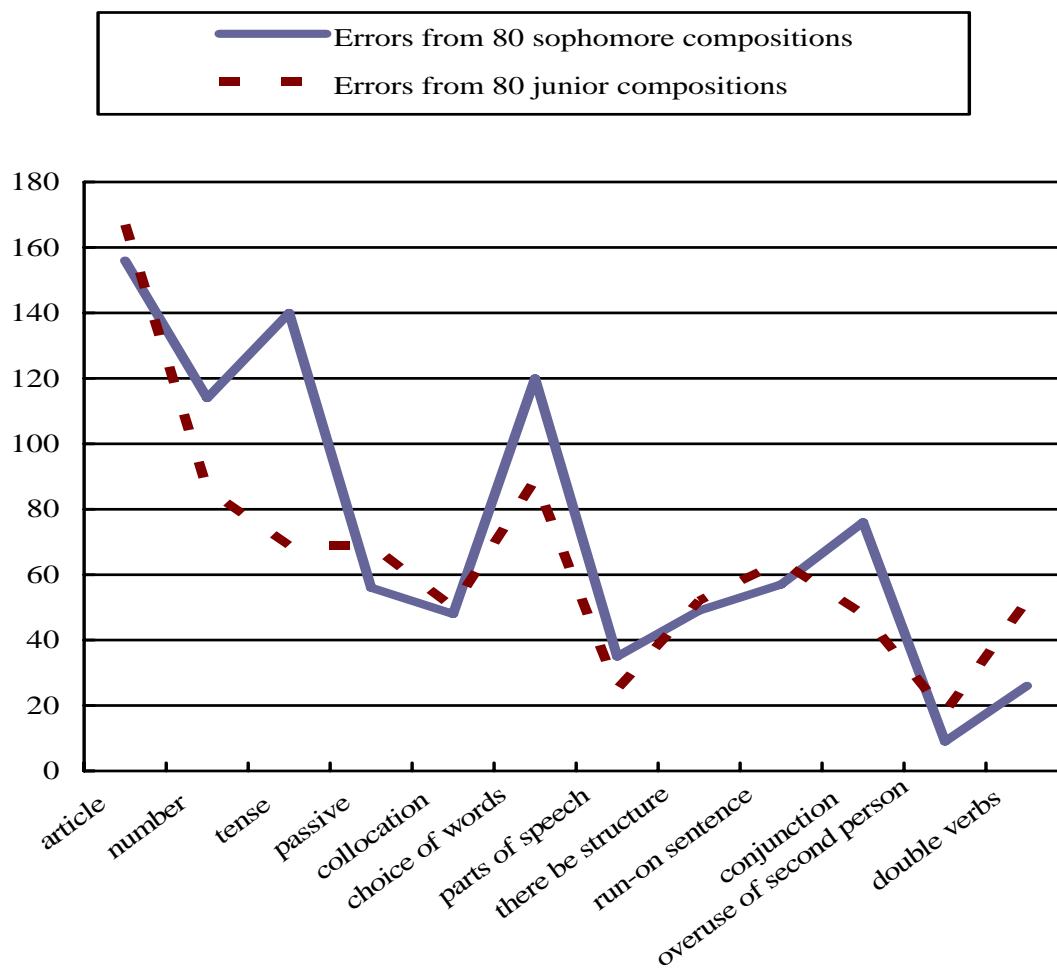
Figure 1. A contrast of errors in sophomore and junior writing.

Table 1

Less Stabilized Errors in Learners' Compositions

	Sophomores	Juniors	Decline percentage (%)
Number	114	86	24.56
Tense	140	69	50.71
Choice of words	120	89	25.83
Parts of speech	35	25	28.57
Conjunction	76	48	36.84

Table 2

More Stabilized Errors in Learners' Compositions

	Sophomores	Juniors	Increase percentage (%)
Article	156	167	7.05
Passive voice	56	69	23.21
Collocation	48	50	4.17
There-be structure	49	55	12.24
Run-on sentence	57	64	12.28
Double-verb	26	52	100
Overuse of the 2nd person	7	13	85.7

Discussion and Analysis

Stabilized Errors Do Exist

The above statistical results show that there exist stabilized errors in Chinese EFL written output despite the fact that some errors are less stable than others. Errors made in number, tense, wording, part of speech, and conjunction (see Table 1) decline during the two years of learning at college. However, other types of error remain and even become more prevalent (see Table 2). For example, errors in the use of articles are the most prevalent, ranking the highest in number (156 in sophomore writing, and 167 in junior writing), and still having an increasing tendency (7.05%). Errors in passive voice, there-be structure, and run-on sentences also keep growing, but remain less stable than article errors. These syntactical errors seem to be neglected by learners. They tend to be more stable since juniors make more such errors than sophomores (increasing by 23.21%, 12.24%, and 12.28%). Collocation errors, though having a smaller increasing percentage (4.17%), still remained. Double-verb errors are the most typical errors, having the highest growing percentage (100%). What is more, errors at discourse level, such as the overuse of the second person pronoun in narration, also seem to be increasing in more elderly learners' written assignments.

Why Are Some Errors More Stable Than Others?

Negative feedback destabilizes learners' interlanguage system. The errors in Table 1 are less stable and have a tendency to decline in students' written output. This can be partially explained by teaching intervention in which negative feedback plays a main part. The writing teacher employs, like middle school teachers, form-focused instruction and repeatedly calls students' attention to erroneous structures and helps to correct them in their spoken and written output. Errors in number, such as *I am just a common girl and lead an ordinary life with my families* appear frequently in sophomores' writing, but can be rarely seen in juniors' writing. Learners apparently over-generalize the rule of noun pluralization and may assume that plural form *families* (

) refers to all the family members. In this case, the teachers' negative feedback may work best: An explicit explanation that the single form *family* can refer to all the members in a family may well help to destabilize the learners' interlanguage system. Similarly, without regular corrective feedback, students might have continued to say *I am at a crossroad in my life* instead of *I am at a crossroads in my life*. Other errors like tense, diction, parts of speech, and conjunction in the subjects' initial writings are destabilized under the influence of corrective feedback. This is possible, because these grammatical features indicate a more direct form-function relationship so that learners can easily see the differences in forms related to their corresponding functions. In this case, explicit instruction works well. As pointed out by Higgs and Clifford (1982), without grammar teaching (including error correction), fossilization would occur. Corrective feedback may help prevent fossilization, and error correction is an effective way in doing this. Many other scholars such as Higgs and Clifford (1982), Lightbown and Spada (1999), and Montrul (2001) all hold that lack of corrective feedback results in fossilization, and classroom instruction may prevent fossilization.

Grammatical features without direct form-function relationship tend to be stabilized. Negative/corrective feedback, as indicated above, does not always work for other kinds of errors. The errors listed in Table 2 seem to persist in students' writing without any sign of decline. Among the list, the error in

article (a/an, the) is the most prevalent. We found 156 errors in sophomores' writing, and 167 in juniors' writing, with an increase by 7.05%. A typical error is the omission of the article, such as in the sentence *Half month later I got the result of the examination* and *Teacher is the guide for juveniles to acquire knowledge*. Most of these errors are the result of interference of the L1, Chinese, in which nouns do not usually take articles. Another explanation for the prevalence of article error is that this grammatical feature does not usually have a direct or clear form-function relationship (Todeva, 1992), so learners think it makes little difference whether to have an article or not to have one, or whether to have a definite or indefinite article. For example, learners pay little attention to the context in which a specific article is used for a particular reference, totally neglecting the function of the grammatical form. Let us look at Example (5):

Example (5) *I have lived in the dormitory for nine years.*

We are fully convinced from this example that the learner is unaware of the impact of pragmatic context on the use of the article. The learner studies in a 4-year undergraduate college, and it would be impossible for him to live in the same dormitory for nine years. However, from the linguistic context in his composition, we have worked out that the student began to live in a dormitory since he entered junior middle school. Context determines meaning, and the meaning of *the* differs from that of *a* functionally. Therefore, misuse of an article causes misunderstanding. If *a* were used here instead of *the*, the meaning would be clear: *I have lived in a dormitory for nine years*.

The same is true of collocation errors, which is also becoming more prevalent and remains in learners' written work. Most of these errors are connected with the wrong use of prepositions, which, like articles, do not exhibit a clear form-function relationship. The use of prepositions is often arbitrary. Learners are rather confused and determine which one to use unconsciously, either due to L1 interference, or due to the misunderstanding of the function of prepositions. The most confusing prepositions to Chinese ESL students are *at*, *to*, and *of*. As can be seen from Table 2, more such errors appear in juniors' writing than in sophomores'. Learners continue to say *I was scared at them* instead of *I was scared of them*, *They are so kind of me* instead of *they are so kind to me*, and *We went to cycling* instead of *we went cycling*.

Creative/free use of language may result in stable errors. Another phenomenon worth noticing is that Chinese learners of English tend to create structures in writing. Errors in the use of passive voice have attracted our attention. We have found more errors in passive voice in juniors' writing than in sophomores', indicating an increase of 23.21%. Such an error can be named "pseudo passive voice" since they appear like the passive structure, but actually they are not. A false generalization made by Chinese students is that all verbs can be used in the passive structure. Among the errors, we find two kinds of verbs (non-transitive and copulative verbs) are often erroneously used as passive structures (see Examples (6)-(7)):

Example (6) *We were fallen down by a thin layer of sand. (non-transitive)*

Example (7) *The picture was seemed to be a normal photo of two hands holding together. (copulative)*

What is more, some transitive verbs are wrongly used in the passive structure, which is unacceptable in English (see Example (8)):

Example (8) *I was heard from my father that my grandmother was sent to hospital in an emergency.*

We may assume that in the learner's mind there are two syntactical structures, which have already been

learnt: *I hear from (my father*) and *I hear the news from (my father)*. Surely, it would be better if the learner had used either of these two structures. But she might want to try a new structure in order to be creative in using English. So she incorporated two simple structures into one and changed it into the passive voice. We are convinced that L2 learning is a process of trial and error.

Pseudo-passivity may result from a gap of a corresponding relationship between English and Chinese passive structures. Learners feel at a loss and are likely to create their own structures according to the basic *be + v-ed* pattern, without knowing, or simply neglecting the fact that not all verbs can be used in passive voice. In this case, corrective feedback may help, but rather ineffectively. Such errors represent a creative use of language and different learners have their own creations.

Creation errors can also be found in there-be structure (*There must have such a special day*). This hybrid structure *there must have* may partially be the result of negative transfer from L1 to L2, because Chinese uses *you (have)* to express possession, and partially be the result of mental storage of there-be structure in the learner's mind. The following is a tentative analysis (see Example (9)):

Example (9) There-be structure:

        Yiding huiyou zheyang yige teshude rizi.

        There must have such a special day.

        "There must be such a special day."

Another creation error is what we call "double-verb structure" (*I consider my birth seem a tragedy to my family*). Such a Chinese-English sentence has two or more verbs without coordination or subordination. We can see from the data that "double-verb structure" usually occurs in a sentence which contains a weak verb (*be*, *seem*, *feel*, *find*). The reason might be that learners do not think these verbs are strong enough in expressing an action, and so they add a redundant verb to emphasize the action. Such kind of error is very prevalent in the use of English there-be structure: *There are many people live in the countryside. There was an accident took place when I was six. There was a man came to see you just now*. However, a content verb can be used correctly, such as in the sentence *You may come to my house to eat lunch*. Both verbs, *come* and *eat*, are content words, and the learner is clear that the purpose of coming to my house is to eat lunch. This finding of creative use of interlanguage keeps in agreement with the research result of Pica, Holliday, Lewis, and Morgenthaler (1989), who suggested that learners "test hypotheses about the L2, experiment with new structures and forms, and expand and exploit their interlanguage resources in creative ways" (pp. 63-90).

Task difficulty takes efforts and attention. Another explanation of why some syntactic and discourse errors in Table 2 are more stable is most likely due to non-linguistic factors such as task difficulty and declining attention to linguistic forms. During the two-year survey, we found that the writing tasks for juniors were much more challenging than for sophomores. The sophomores usually followed a fixed writing pattern, which is designed for TEM 4 training, and subjects do not have to worry about how to organize their writing and how to develop ideas, so they can focus more attention on language items. Junior students, though more advanced learners, face more difficult writing tasks and have to organize their own ideas. In this case, explicit grammar teaching or negative feedback does not work well and leads to little gain in production tasks, such as translation

and free writing (Macaro & Masterman, 2006). Their attention is focused on meaning rather than linguistic forms. So it is quite understandable that some errors remain in their writing and are on the way to fossilization.

Error stabilization at discourse level. Another two kinds of errors found at discourse level are run-on sentences and overuse of the second person in narration. These two errors are also typical in Chinese students' writing. A run-on sentence is one in which several short clauses run together without stop or the linking device (*He came, I went away*). Overuse of second person in writing often occurs when the learner tries to give advice or suggestions (*If you work hard, and if you think of others and help each other, we will have a warm and friendly community*). Such errors are closely related to the Chinese way of thinking and organizing ideas into sentences. Chinese is a typical topic-dominated language, which focuses on meaning rather than forms. Linking words are often omitted, and word order can be freely changed as long as ideas are clearly conveyed. Such errors become stable largely as a result of concept transfer (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008), indicating a fact that even though an/a L2/FL learner has reached a high level of linguistic competence, he still cannot free himself from the influence by his mother tongue. This is what Lardiere (2006) called "ultimate attainment". Let us look at the following analyses (see Examples (10)-(11)):

Example (10)

    Ta laile, wo zoule.

    He came, I left.

    "He came, and I left."

Example (11)

    Zhe ben shu wo xihuan ta bu xihuan.

    This book I like he not like.

    "I like this book, but he doesn't."

Implications for FL Teaching in China

We have explored whether errors are stabilized and why some errors are more stabilized than others. Evidence shows that those language items (in Table 1) that have a direct and clear form-function relationship will be likely to be acquired after a short period of stabilization. However, other language items (in Table 2) become more stable and tend to be fossilized. Analyses and explanations show that negative feedback sometimes works and some other times does not. This study has the following implications for L2/FL teaching in China: (1) enhance learners' self-monitoring ability. Results of the study show that some errors are backsliding, because the writing task becomes more difficult and learners focus more attention on meaning than form. The temporarily fossilized errors are of the cognitive type and can be realized and corrected by learners. What is needed is to remind learners to raise their consciousness and sensitivity to linguistic forms while writing; (2) give appropriate feedback. Learning a FL is a process of trial and error. Learners tend to produce whatever they think is right and wait for instructors' feedback. If they get no feedback, they tend to believe they are right, and in this case, errors are likely to be fossilized. Feedback, therefore, is indispensable. However, teachers should take a positive attitude towards students' errors. They should not correct the errors and present the right forms directly; instead, they should motivate the learners to take part in the correction. Above all, correction should be done in a proper way

without discouraging the learners; (3) high-quality input. Input plays an important role in language learning. Input refers to the language that the learner is exposed to. Since the majority of the learners cannot get access to a natural language environment, the input in the formal teaching environment is crucial in reducing interlanguage fossilization. According to Krashen (1985), second languages are acquired by understanding messages, or by receiving "comprehensible input" (p. 2). Nowadays, multi-media is a good choice for an English teacher to arouse students' interest. The integration of sound, image, and plot makes English learning a joyful and lively experience. What is more, wide reading is also indispensable. Through reading, learners can improve their sensitivity to English and gain implicit knowledge of how the language works; and (4) target language culture accumulation. It is found that many errors become fossilized due to learners' lack of target language cultural knowledge, which often determines the appropriate use of target language. Culture should be considered a necessary component of the L2 teaching, and the teaching of culture should be integrated into the whole process of target language teaching.

Conclusions

This paper answers three main questions concerning whether fossilization exists in Chinese EFL learners' writing, why some errors are more stable than others and what implications the research has for EFL teaching in China. The results show that all these language items have the tendency to stabilization. The only difference is that some grammatical features, especially those representing an obvious form-function relationship, are less stable under the influence of negative and corrective feedback, while those language items indicating an indirect or less obvious form-function relationship, syntactical errors, and some discourse errors tend to become more stable. Analysis shows that negative feedback does not seem to work for these errors. First, advanced learners are creating their own language system and neglect the basic grammatical rules. Second, an increasing degree of task difficulty requires more effort so that learners focus more attention on meaning rather than form. Third, ingrained thinking patterns have a great effect on how learners organize their thoughts in writing. It is true many Chinese EFL advanced learners reach a new plateau in the process of acquiring English. However, this does not mean their interlanguage has fossilized. Attention, awareness, and the training of self-monitoring ability will help destabilize their erroneous interlanguage system.

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