

# **The Persistence of Errors in Language Immersion**

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## **Abstract**

This study focuses on a sample group comprising students enrolled in the CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP) in Brooklyn, New York. The participants were between 18 and 28 years of age and at varying levels of English proficiency. Students had previously completed a High School level education in their native countries and were considered fluent in their L1s. Participants in the CLIP program draft two or more English essays per week as part of the language immersion process. As a part of this study, the student essays were analyzed grammatically. Two months' worth of language immersion progress was assessed. Student essays were corrected twice weekly by both the instructors on site. The focus of essay correction was entirely grammar-based, although grammar instruction was a minimal part of the classroom instruction. Findings were inconclusive in regard to students' grammatical improvement, and longer-term research should be conducted to indicate any fossilization of form.

## **Introduction**

This study measures participants' repeated errors based on two essays and attempts to conclude whether any forms have begun to stagnate. It also looks at various ways in which educators can assess student problem areas and prevent forms from fossilization in the longer term. Based on research in Second Language Acquisition over the last few decades, this study seeks to

determine which forms are most important for educators to focus on in order to help stem potential long-term implications for their students.

The study's subjects are students who wished to enter the City University of New York (CUNY). The CUNY Language Immersion Program meets five times a week for five hours a day and is necessary for ESL students to enter into the CUNY system. Upon successful completion of the course, they are admitted into the University. This is their first semester enrolled in CLIP. The study subjects include: a 19-year old Chinese woman, an 18-year old Chinese woman, a 28-year old Brazilian woman, and a 21-year old Chinese man. I chose a group from within my practicum placement that was primarily of one ethnicity to see whether I could pinpoint any specific learner errors for future teaching. Student enrollment in the study was low because the instructor on site asked me to give the participants individualized attention throughout the duration of the study. Students learned from a content-based curriculum with an emphasis on biology within an ESL context.

### **Literature Review**

In the last forty years, educators in the field of Second Language Acquisition have attempted to pinpoint the problems that lead to repeated mistakes and a fossilized form of lexical or grammatical mistakes. In this paper, I will refer to fossilization as a state in which a student's grammatical mistakes do not improve despite error correction and teacher-required revision of errors. While this study concluded after only two months, several long-term studies have tracked student progress over decades in order to discover whether they have reached an end state of language acquisition. This study measures the short-term acquisition of key grammar concepts in the context of an immersion program.

Fossilization has long been debated among SLA scholars. Does it exist as an end point, or is it merely learner stagnation? Several authors have attempted to define fossilization. Long explains his concept of fossilization as a learner-specific interpretation of language and essentially a personalization of incorrect forms. Long interprets Selinker's definition of fossilization as "a grammar which differ[s] from that of the target language variety, among other ways, in its permanent retention of deviant rules and forms, despite adequate opportunity for improvement" (Long, 488).

Its difficulty lies in the researcher's time spent studying the subject as well as how long the study participants have to demonstrate the fossilization of form. According to Long, most studies of fossilization require approximately 2-5 years to truly gauge the degree to which subjects' ability has stagnated. He writes that there are only three studies (Han, 1998, 2000a; Lardiere, 1998a, 1998b; Long, 1997) that have actually assessed long-term fossilization in learners.

Fidler discusses contemporary studies in fossilization (Han, 2003; Long, 2003; Birdsong, 2004) in contrast with Selinker and Lenneman's origination of the term during the 1970's. She sites Han's differentiation between global and localized instances of fossilization, which is key to assessing whether fossilization indicates an entire failure of the learner's SLA ability. Certain forms may fossilize while acquisition occurs normally in other areas.

Han (2003) discusses the central problem of adult SLA being the learners' inability to achieve "native like proficiency." She suggests that localized fossilization dramatically impacts interlanguage, leading to avoidance of certain forms by the learner. Ultimately, Han's study links a variety of causal variables, in addition to those within the learner's

interlanguage, to assess the grounds to assume fossilization has occurred. “If we are past the age of around 7–10 years the acquisition of an L2, in marked contrast to the way we acquired our first language (L1), can turn out to be rather slow, laborious and, even in talented L2 learners, tends to stop short of native-like proficiency. This ‘stopping short’ has been referred to as fossilization (Selinker, 1972) or incompleteness (Schachter, 1990)” (Han, p. 57). Han then goes on to list a variety of causal variables which may lead to learner fossilization. These range from absence of corrective feedback to L1 transfer problems and age issues. A partial list of Han’s causal variables are listed in the discussion section of this study.

Diane Larsen-Freeman in her article *Second Language Acquisition and the Issue of Fossilization, There is No End There is No State* (2004), seeks to further address these causal variables illustrated by Han, including why the concept of fossilization still maintains prevalence within the context of SLA. She concludes that fossilization is essentially the act of “non-learning,” and since the definition of learning is still evolving and being understood, the idea of fossilization is equally difficult to define.

#### Methodology

Data in this study consists of two essays: the participants’ first essay from February, 2009, and one from April, 2009. Both essays were corrected grammatically and errors were tallied to construct the data pool. Once the data had been collected, it was synthesized to contrast between the number of errors in the initial essay versus those in a later essay drafted by the participants after two months of bi-weekly teacher correction.

This data was analyzed in part using Brown’s Study of Morpheme Acquisition Order (1973). Brown’s work was considered essential to the data-synthesis process because he believed that morphemes are acquired in a

sequential order based on difficulty level. This gave a starting point in which to begin looking for the most prevalent errors as well as those which are considered to be the most accessible to ELL's.

The seven grammatical categories this study focused on include

- past tense,
- present progressive tense,
- perfect tense,
- third-person singular tense,
- prepositions,
- plurality, and
- dependent clauses.

With Brown's research in mind, errors with the highest incidence of occurrence were chosen for analysis. In addition to grammatical errors, also worthy of discussion in the data is the section on the syntactic usage of dependent clauses. There was a direct correlation found between time spent in the immersion setting and an increase in dependent clause usage.

### **Discussion**

Participant errors were analyzed and quantified over the course of a two-month immersion program. This research charts repetition of errors, which may be a contributing factor to future fossilization. Students in the CLIP program have passed the "critical period" as defined by behaviorists and additionally may be affected by outside variables such as interruptions in ESL education, differences in previous methods of instruction, or the number of years devoted to studying. These are important in determining causes of fossilization that are external from the English Language Learners.

Han creates a partial list of potential outside variables including (but not limited to)

- lack of instruction,
- absence of corrective feedback,
- satisfaction of communicative needs, and
- age (Han, 2005).

Long states that sufficient studies of fossilization require between two and five years of research. He notes that "...only three studies of purative fossilization in nearly 30 years (Han, 1998, 2000a, Lardiere, 1998a, 1998b, Long, 1997) have lasted that long" (Long, 2003). Studies on fossilization contrast the ideas of "backsliding" and "fossilizing" (Selinker, 1973). The former represents a loss of form that can be gradually reacquired, whereas the latter denotes as final the inability to acquire any more information despite positive input. It can be conjectured, then, that the concept of fossilization may simply be a plateau of form and not an end. Evidence for or against fossilization in the classroom is difficult to quantify because of the high number of variables affecting L2 acquisition.

Within this study, a negligible benefit was shown regarding intensive error correction and improvement in grammar. This is not to say that the forms in question have fossilized, but rather that they remain relatively unchanged in frequency over a two-month time period. For example, Student 1 (a Chinese speaking woman, age 19) was able to reduce her past-tense mistakes from four in her first essay to zero in the essay two months later. This is certainly a step forward in her ability to modify the tense marker. However, in the case of plurality, her second essay includes a distinctly higher number of errors than her first (seven versus one). This

gives legitimacy to the argument Fidler constructs when she cites Han, stating that

Globally, fossilization affects the entire interlanguage, making it unlikely that any further L2 learning will occur... On the other hand, fossilization can also be seen in local terms such that one particular subsystem (e.g. syntax) or even a particular feature can fossilize while development in other areas proceeds unabated.” (Fidler, 2006, p. 399)

The errors on the part of this participant do not necessarily demonstrate that fossilization has occurred, but they do show that there is stronger comprehension in one area (i.e. past tense) over another (i.e. plurality). Left unchecked, an error that has increased in incidence over the course of two months could lead to a larger problem. Specific error correction would certainly help the participant to focus her attention towards the issue. This could be seen as a preventive step to stop an error pattern from becoming a repeated mistake that may eventually become fossilized.

### **Findings**

Participants showed limited improvement grammatically in the immersion setting. Subjects were past the “Critical Period” of language acquisition, which, according to the Behaviorist model, makes acquiring native-like fluency nearly impossible. Brown’s Morpheme Order Study (1973) was used as a benchmark to find grammar points which were considered worthy of data collection. The students’ grammars were analyzed in their first essays in the immersion setting and again two months later. This study defines fossilization as elements of English that have become resistant to correction. Even with the working definition constructed, assigning the term “fossilized” to the grammar forms of a student may be detrimental to the way the student is treated.

Chinese students (Students 1, 2, and 4) showed high usage of dependent clauses as the course went on and an overall decrease in third-person singular and past-tense errors. The Brazilian student (Student 3) showed an increase in perfect-tense mistakes, which correlates with that tense's relative difficulty. Overall, this student seemed to make the most progress in self-correction, having her number of errors drop in almost every category between Essays 1 and 2.

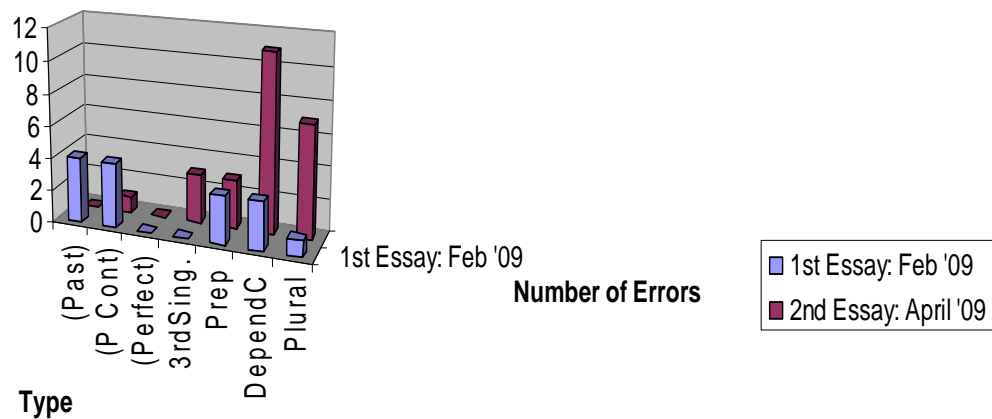
### **Conclusion**

It was not clear whether the amount of error correction done was beneficial in conjunction with the 25 hours of weekly English practice the immersion students received. It could be argued that grammatical accuracy was stressed over other forms of proficiency because of the emphasis placed on grammar correction. A minimum of two essays was corrected weekly for the students, which may have been too much feedback. Sufficient time for self-correction and synthesis of the materials may have been needed for the students.

Participants were not labeled as “fossilized” in any particular grammatical state because of insufficient evidence leading to this conclusion. Longitudinal studies over the course of 2-10 years are essential to understand whether a fossilized state has occurred, as illustrated by Long (2003). More research is needed to determine whether fossilization takes place; however, preventive testing may serve as a warning to language students against future stagnation.

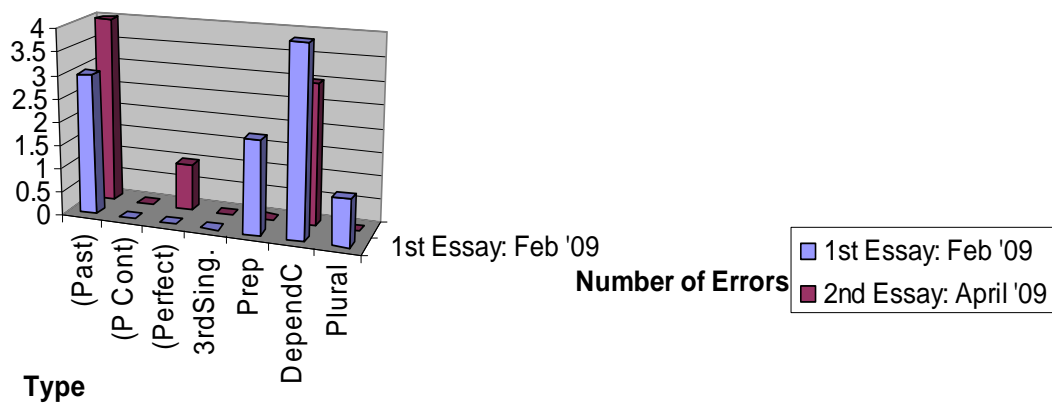


### Student 1 Errors



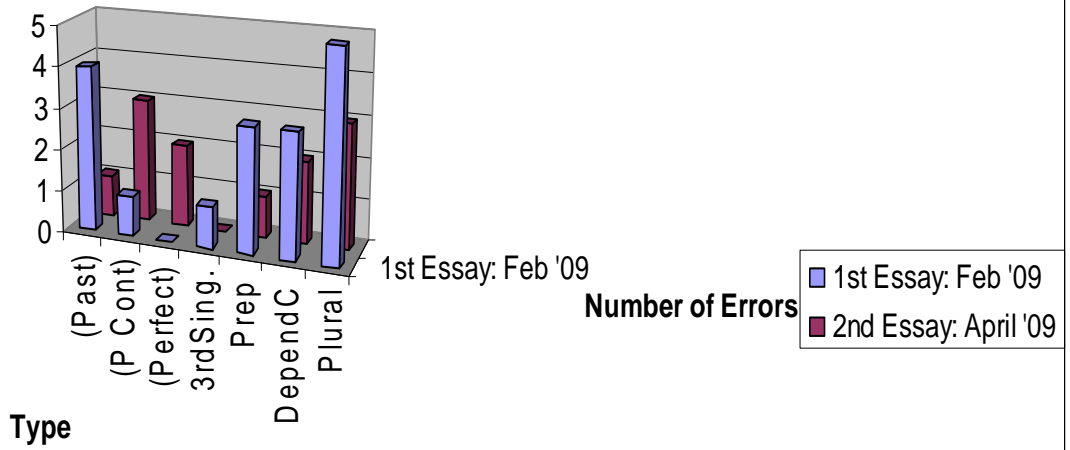
Type	(Past)	(P Cont)	(Perfect)	3rdSing.	Prep	DependC	Plural
1st Essay: Feb '09	4	4	0	0	3	3	1
2nd Essay: April '09	0	1	0	3	3	11	7

### Student 2 Errors



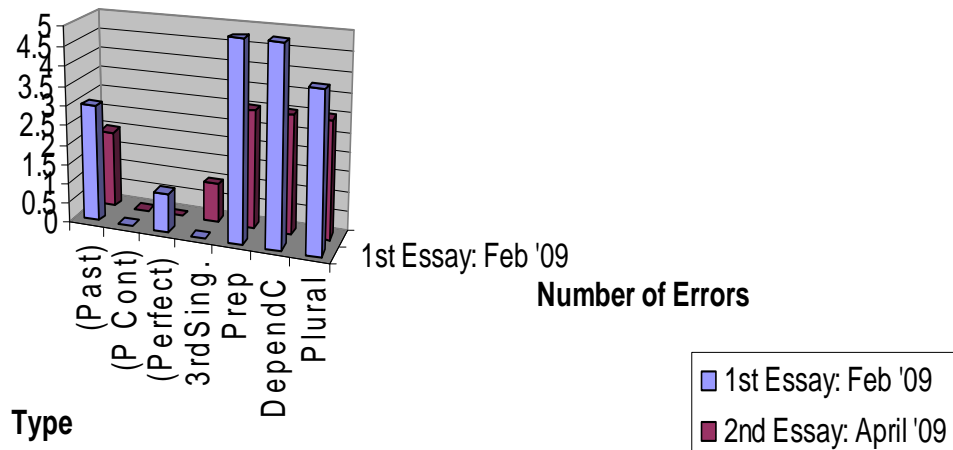
Type	(Past)	(P Cont)	(Perfect)	3rdSing.	Prep	Depend	Plural
1st Essay: Feb '09	3	0	0	0	2	4	1
2nd Essay: April '09	4	0	1	0	0	3	0

### Student 3 Errors

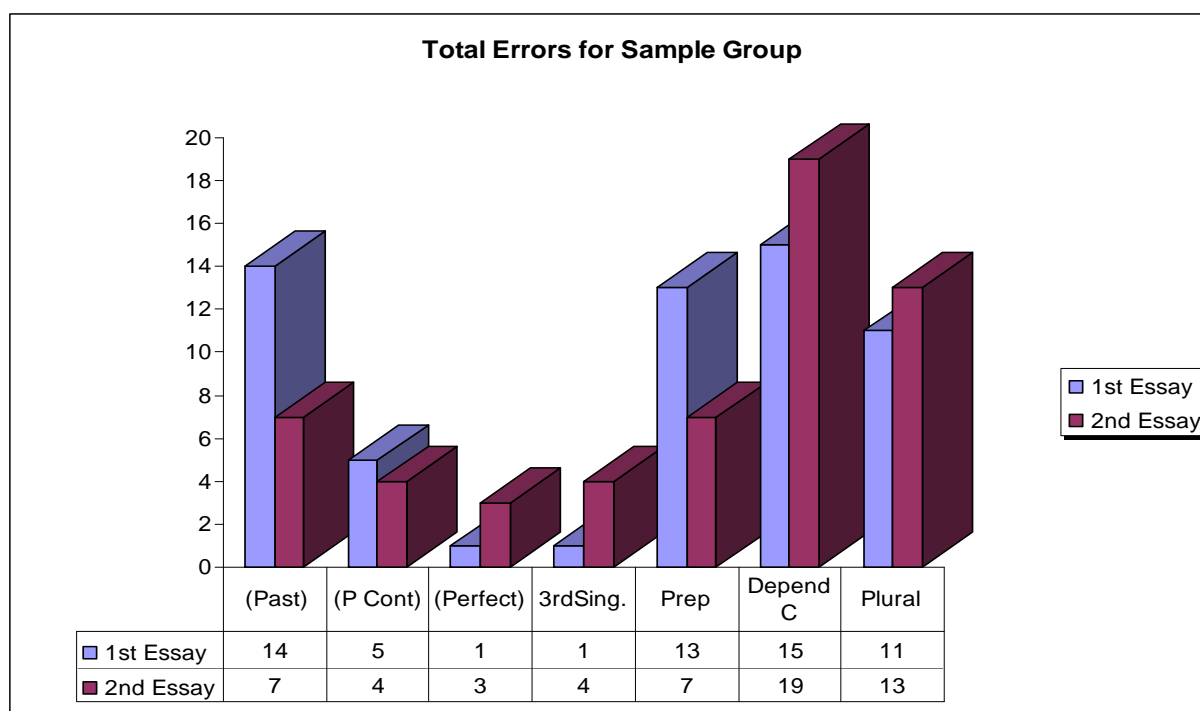


Type	(Past)	(P Cont)	(Perfect)	3rdSing.	Prep	DependC	Plural
■ 1st Essay: Feb '09	4	1	0	1	3	3	5
■ 2nd Essay: April '09	1	3	2	0	1	2	3

### Student 4 Errors



Type	(Past)	(P Cont)	(Perfect)	3rdSing.	Prep	DependC	Plural
■ 1st Essay: Feb '09	3	0	1	0	5	5	4
■ 2nd Essay: April '09	2	0	0	1	3	3	3



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