

Malaysian ESL Undergraduates' Perspectives on Fossilisation in Spoken English

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ABSTRACT

Fossilisation is a phenomenon in second language acquisition where learners stop progressing beyond the language skills that they have already mastered. This often leads to the persistence of L1 related errors that can be detected in their L2. This often results in the second language having linguistic errors which, over time, become normalised and accepted. To investigate how learners perceive language fossilisation, a qualitative study was carried out on Malaysian ESL undergraduates. Grounded in Selinker's (1972) Interlanguage Theory, a thematic analysis was adopted to analyse respondents' interviews. The findings revealed that respondents perceived fossilised linguistic errors as socially acceptable in informal contexts. Fossilised language is used to prioritise fluency and comfort in communicating rather than grammatical accuracies. Respondents also perceived that the main contributors to fossilisation were overexposure to informal English, and a limited vocabulary range. Fossilization can be remedied with learner feedback and self-regulation strategies. The study concluded that fossilisation is shaped by sociocultural norms as much as linguistic competence. The findings highlight the need for pedagogical strategies that are feedback-rich and context-sensitive. Meanwhile, teacher training must also address entrenched patterns in language learning.

Keywords: (ESL, language fossilisation)

INTRODUCTION

A multiethnic country such as Malaysia consists of a varied population namely, Malay and Bumiputera, Chinese, and Indian communities (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025). The official language of Malaysia is Malay while English is a second language taught as a compulsory subject throughout the national schooling system (Rahman et al., 2022). Malaysian students attending public schools learning the national curriculum will learn English as a second language throughout their primary to secondary levels for 11 years (6 years in primary and 5 years in secondary). With English being the second most spoken language in Malaysia, most Malaysians encounter it daily as it coexists with Malay or other mother tongues (Rahman et al., 2022). Students spend over a decade learning English formally, however, many were reported as unable to produce English that is accurate and fluent by the time they complete their schooling years.

Over time, habitual linguistic errors may form as learners struggle to speak accurately. This phenomenon is known as fossilisation. Similar to other ESL speakers, Malaysian learners experience fossilisation due to a lack of vocabulary, minimal corrective feedback, and strong influence from their first language (L1) (Azman & Razali, 2024). Entrenched, non-standard forms of language mean that speakers repeatedly use specific speech patterns that are acceptable in their social circles. Additionally, to foster social belonging, code-mixing is normalized and not always perceived as errors (Roslan et al., 2021; Yusof et al., 2023). Therefore, this study seeks to explore the perspectives of the ESL learners and to study their views and beliefs regarding fossilisation in their spoken English. Additionally, it can help shed light on their awareness of fossilised errors and what they believe are the factors contributing to fossilisation. This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the learners' perceptions of their use of fossilised spoken English?
2. According to the learners, what factors contribute to fossilisation?
3. Do learners believe that using more English, even slang or informal language, in daily conversations would help them improve?

LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Interlanguage Theory posits that second language learners develop an interim linguistic system distinct from both their first language (L1) and the target language (L2) (Selinker, 1972). This interlanguage features its own vocabulary and styles as speakers alternate between the L1 and L2. The development of the interlanguage can stall due to fossilisation, where certain non-target forms become stable and resistant to change (Shiddiq & Oktaviani, 2022; Xu, 2022). Research indicates that fossilisation is encouraged by negative L1 transfer and a lack of corrective feedback (Tang & Yang, 2023).

A significant contributor to learners' fossilisation is their reliance on their first language and the extent to which their L1 influences their L2. This is displayed, for instance, in their preference for local vernaculars to preserve their L1 identity, for convenience, and to fit in with social norms. Malaysian ESL learners were found to have a higher tendency to use Manglish because of its similarity and familiarity to their mother-tongue habits as well as to fulfil the need for social identity (Yusof et al., 2023), and also because of efficiency and a sense of belonging (Roslan et al., 2021). Ultimately, speakers have entrenched errors in speech contributing to fossilisation mainly due to their limited vocabulary, lack of corrective feedback, and strong L1 influence (Azman & Razali, 2024).

Language fossilisation is not unique to Malaysia. Among Chinese ESL learners, students rely on L1 structures as linguistic scaffolds for their L2 production (Tang & Yang, 2023). This may lead to learners having minimal improvements in L2 grammar and phonology despite continued exposure (Xu, 2022). It can be implied that L1 interference and a lack of corrective feedback remain the major reasons why fossilisation persists in L2 learners.

The pedagogical implications of fossilization in the context of ESL teaching warrant further exploration. To elaborate, further research can be carried out on investigating the specific empirical approaches and methodologies educators can apply to deter the impacts of fossilization within the ESL context. Ellis (2024) reiterated that while some educators emphasised the integration of "focus on form" in the teaching and learning, there is a lack of systematic, instructional frameworks that addresses fossilized errors. Therefore, while "focusing on form" can guide and remind learners of the correct vocabulary and grammar use, this method lacks the theoretical backing and is perceived as insufficient (Ellis, 2024). Further area of investigation can be explored to see how instructional methods can be adapted to address fossilization (Fouz-González, 2018). This is because in the classroom, learners' participation and the entire classroom dynamics were found to have implications on how fossilization is confronted (Bernales, 2016). Dialogic interactions are proven to minimise fossilization, but further research can explore the specific strategies related in such interactions remain underexplored (Bernales, 2016).

Next, there is a gap in fossilization and the social dynamics aspects of language learning. Research suggests that more research can be done on the aspects of self-efficacy, self-awareness and cooperative learning strategies (Zahidi & Ong, 2023). Despite formal lessons in the classroom, self-reflection and self-monitoring are crucial in making a positive impact in the learners' language journey.

METHODOLOGY

To explore the perspectives of Malaysian ESL undergraduates on fossilisation in spoken English, a quantitative approach was appropriate. One limitation of the study is the small sampling, only involving eight respondents. This small sample constituted a focused pool of respondents that is appropriate for in-depth interviews. Respondents were chosen purposively (purposive sampling) since this can ensure rich, detailed data (Khamis et

al., 2024; Lim, 2024). The criteria for sampling selection ensured that all participants were Malaysian ESL undergraduates with active use of spoken English.

Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

The instrument for data collection was the semi-structured interview. A semi-structured interview combines predetermined questions with the flexibility to probe further, allowing for the collection of detailed and nuanced experiences. The interview protocol included open-ended questions constructed based on the research objectives, theoretical framework, and past studies to fulfil the research questions. Data were collected from January to June 2025 through a series of online and face-to-face interviews, contingent upon respondents' agreements and preferences. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were analysed manually using thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative analysis method suitable for this study because it allows for flexibility and the ability to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within data (Ahmad Harith et al., 2021; Norliza et al., 2025). The process of coding involved repeated readings of the transcripts to achieve familiarisation, followed by manual coding of the data. Codes obtained were categorised into themes, and the emergent themes were organised in alignment with the research questions. This detailed method ensured a rigorous interpretation of the responses, providing insights into learners' perceptions of fossilisation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the semi-structured interviews yielded significant insights into respondents' perspectives on fossilised spoken English and the contributing factors to the phenomenon.

Research Question 1: Perceptions of Fossilised Spoken English

The first research question explored how Malaysian ESL undergraduates perceive their own use of fossilised spoken English. Respondents reported that they use informal English, code-mixing (Manglish), and fossilised errors in daily interactions. They also reported that they are aware they are committing linguistic errors when doing so. Findings revealed that ESL learners possess some level of awareness of their recurring errors, such as mispronunciation, common grammatical mistakes in subject-verb agreement and tenses (e.g., has/have; was/were), and the habitual use of Malay discourse markers like 'lah' and 'kan'. This highlights the issue of normalising linguistic errors, which consequently entrenches the errors further.

Respondents stated that they perceive these speech patterns as normal and socially acceptable. They also felt that it strengthens rapport when communicating in informal settings within their social circles. Fossilised errors were considered minor or inconsequential and were viewed as natural and appropriate for peer interactions, but not acceptable or less common in formal English settings such as academic or professional contexts. Respondents opined that the ability to switch linguistic features between these two contexts implied confidence in their English-speaking abilities. Meanwhile, speakers who are hesitant and self-doubting are often not able to alternate convincingly in formal situations and are often perceived as having code-switching conversations filled with fossilised errors.

Research Question 2: Factors Contributing to Language Fossilisation

The second research question examined the contributing factors leading to fossilisation in learners' spoken English. The data acquired from the interviews revealed five major themes. Firstly, learners perceive that fossilisation is mostly due to the influence of their first language (L1). Specifically, they acknowledged and identified the strong influence of Malay and other native languages on their pronunciation and sentence structure. Secondly, respondents cited contextual language choices as a factor. They described this as their strategy of adapting their English based on social contexts, namely, using informal speech, code-switching, and Manglish with friends, while attempting more formal English in academic or professional settings.

The third theme was the normalisation of errors, which contributes to entrenched language errors. This can be seen in the normalisation of code-mixing and fossilised errors within Malaysian society, where this way of communicating has become widely accepted as a common communication style. The next contributing factor was limited vocabulary and poor confidence. It appears that years of formal learning do not guarantee fluency and accuracy in language production. Many learners struggle with restricted vocabulary and are unable to smoothly retrieve learned words. This can lead to communication breakdowns, causing speakers to feel anxious and inadequate. Since formal situations demand complex structures, these speakers tend to avoid them and communicate only in simpler, more familiar ones.

Lastly, the final theme emerging from respondents' perspectives was the influence of media and the environment. Respondents acknowledged their heavy exposure to media, particularly social media, which is widespread with informal language. Their extensive use of social media reinforced fossilisation through the use of casual speech patterns and slang. In conclusion, these contributing factors worked in combination to create a context where L1 interference, social norms, and peer influence normalised the use of non-standard English. Comparatively, intrinsic factors such as high anxiety, poor confidence, and limited vocabulary further discouraged speakers' efforts to achieve accuracy in their language production.

Research Question 3: Beliefs About Using More English for Improvement

The third research question investigated respondents' perceptions of whether the frequent use of English, in both formal and informal varieties, could improve their proficiency. Unanimously, respondents agreed that application and practice in both settings would lead to better proficiency and confidence. However, some respondents shared a word of caution related to excessive exposure to informal language, which they believed could lead speakers to master inaccurate language forms. An excessive reliance on slang and Manglish might reinforce incorrect grammar and pronunciation, thereby deepening fossilisation. According to respondents, if ESL learners believe exposure alone is enough to achieve proficiency, they may choose to use informal English dominantly, which risks fossilising errors further. Hence, informal practices are helpful to build confidence and conversational fluency but are not sufficient for mastering more formal or academic English.

DISCUSSION

This study's findings provide an explanation of how Malaysian ESL undergraduates perceive and experience fossilisation in their spoken English. The findings revealed that respondents are aware of their recurring errors but feel that these errors are socially acceptable. This aligns with Interlanguage Theory, which suggests that when learners deprioritize accuracy, their interim language systems can stabilise due to social and psychological factors. For Malaysian ESL undergraduates, who alternate between Malay, English, and the local vernacular "Manglish," Interlanguage Theory provides a practical lens for understanding how L1-shaped linguistic routines persist even when learners possess explicit knowledge of the correct L2 rules. Furthermore, Yusof et al. (2023) reported that this outlook is parallel with other studies where undergraduates view Manglish with positive attitudes. ESL speakers did not view Manglish as a linguistic deficiency, but rather as a tool to ease communication when linked to social contexts (Yusof et al., 2023). Code-switching and code-mixing are considered normal when speakers are aiming for efficiency and solidarity (Roslan et al., 2021). Thus, when the use of non-standard forms signals group belonging and achieves communicative goals, learners are less likely to challenge these patterns, leading to further fossilisation of errors.

Fossilisation appears to be a result of the context-bound environment surrounding the learner rather than an individual linguistic failure. The findings of this study—mother tongue interference, normalisation of informal English, and media influence—further support this notion. Similarly, Azman and Razali (2024) also found that L1 influence, a lack of corrective feedback, and environmental reinforcement are primary contributors to fossilisation among Malaysian ESL learners. This is also consistent with the results from Xu's (2022) longitudinal research. Without targeted feedback, learners' grammar and phonology can remain stagnant despite continued exposure to the target language. This is a familiar context in Malaysia, where learners have reported poor mastery of English despite prolonged exposure during their formative years in school.

The study also highlights an interesting paradox. Learners believed in the principle of "more practice is better". In order to reduce and monitor their use of fossilized language, they practiced self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-monitoring. Respondents acknowledged the importance of self-monitoring which is a critical aspect of self-regulating to actively track their language use, fostering awareness of persistent errors (Yot-Domínguez & García, 2017). Self-regulatory skills such as self-reflection can encourage learners to evaluate their learning progress critically and identify areas in need of improvement (Li, 2024). Respondents opined that the frequency of practice can promote fluency, although practice does not guarantee linguistic accuracy. While repetition in informal language can encourage confidence (Roslan et al., 2021; Yusof et al., 2023), corrective feedback is key to achieving accuracy and minimising fossilisation (Azman & Razali, 2024; Xu, 2022). Respondents acknowledged the importance of self-monitoring which is a critical aspect of self-regulating to actively track their language use, fostering awareness of persistent errors, and this finding is in line findings by Yot-Domínguez and García (2017). Being aware of negative transfer from their L1 to L2 that occurs when they speak can deter fossilization, as supported by previous research (Lizzio & Wilson, 2005). Self-regulatory skills can be instilled through structured teaching environments that promote self-reflection and self-monitoring (Şeker, 2016).

CONCLUSION

This study explored Malaysian ESL undergraduates' perspectives on fossilisation in their spoken English. The findings revealed that while learners are aware of their persistent errors, they often perceive them as socially acceptable norms in informal interactions where rapport and social identity are prioritised over grammatical accuracy. Fossilisation was perceived to be an outcome of several contributing factors, namely mother tongue interference, normalisation of linguistic errors, limited vocabulary, poor confidence, and the influence of media and the environment. Respondents also believed that although the frequent use of informal English can build confidence, it may not be sufficient to achieve accuracy and could further entrench fossilised errors. To address fossilization effectively, self-regulation strategies and learner feedback can empower learners to take charge of their language learning experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Researchers interested in similar areas may carry out investigations on the integration of technology to provide learner feedback as a tool to remedy language fossilization. Digital technology allows feedback to be given immediately and automatically rather than waiting for turns. The use of digital technology in delivering student feedback can enhance learners' self-efficacy and self-awareness significantly (Khat & Vogel, 2022). Digital tools can also enhance collaborative learning environments to help promote self-regulation strategies, such as collective reflection and goal-setting to share strategies and insights, hence, reducing fossilization.

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