

## Interlanguage and Its Implications in College English Teaching and Learning

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### Abstract

Interlanguage, often used by foreign language users, is a language system of middle state lying between target language and mother tongue. Interlanguage offers us a brand new perspective to study the second language acquisition, indicates the rules for second language acquisition, and provides enlightenment for foreign language teaching. Based on the analysis of the concept, features and development stage of interlanguage, this essay puts forward constructive suggestions for college English teaching and learning with the aim of stimulating students' interest in foreign language and helping them improve their English learning ability and proficiency.

**Key words:** Interlanguage; Implications; College English teaching and learning

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### 1. DEFINITION OF INTERLANGUAGE

The concept of interlanguage was first put forward by Selinker in 1969, and it was first illustrated in the essay entitled "Interlanguage" in 1972. Interlanguage refers to the separateness of a second language learners system, a system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and target language (Selinker, 1972). Selinker pointed out that there are two layers of meaning in his definition: firstly, in a particular learning stage, it is the

language system that formed in the process of learning a second language, and it refers to the static system in a certain point; the second, in the whole process of a second language learning, it is the system with its own features reflected in mastering and developing, and it means the dynamic changing system (Selinker, 1972). The former focuses on the specific stage of a learner, called "interlanguage"; while the latter pays its attention to the process of development, generalizing the common phenomenon that happened in all the learners' learning process, and this abstract system is called "interlanguage continuum".

Interlanguage is a language which is not only different from speakers' native language, but also not the same as the target language. All the second language learners should and have to experience the stage of beginning from their mother tongue, going through the interlanguage, and ultimately reach the level of target language. Interlanguage can be regarded as the bridge connecting the speakers' native language and target language, and it is an indispensable part in mastering a second language.

### 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERLANGUAGE

Through dozens of year's researches, different linguists offer different types of features of interlanguage. American professor C.Adjemian (1976) put forward three characteristics: permeability, systematicity, and fossilization. Based on his theory together with some researches of other linguistics, four main and indispensable features of interlanguage are listed here.

#### 2.1 Permeability

Permeability refers to the feature that interlanguage can be influenced by the rules and forms both of learners' native language and target language. From the view of native language, it is mainly the positive and negative transfer; from the target language, it is

the overgeneralization of the ever-acquired rules and regulations of the target language, or, the lack of target language knowledge. Interlanguage is an open system and not an invariable one. Second language learners constantly receive new input of the target language and internalize new language forms and signals. It is this feature that makes interlanguage continuously proceed to be perfect and complete, gradually on its way to the target language.

From the author's teaching experience, a case in point is that, most of the Chinese learners, when they are in the process of mastering the second language, they will try to understand it on the basis of their mother tongue. It can be easily found that most of the Chinese students have little difficulty in understanding English sentence patterns. It is for the reason that both English and Chinese are language with the same basic sentence patterns. As a result, Chinese students can understand them in right order even when they are first introduced to English. This phenomenon is for students' use of the similarities between the two language, no matter the learner himself is conscious of it or not.

## 2.2 Systematicity

There are a lot of varieties in interlanguage, and everyone has his own version of interlanguage in the state of development, however, it does not mean this system is out of order and has no rules and regulations to follow. As a matter of fact, interlanguage, in any of its developing stage, displays strong systematicity and is always in accordance with the nature of language. It is equipped with a lay of its own complete features and rules of phonetics, vocabulary, syntax, etc. Second language learners, just on the basis of the requirements and regularities, effect their communications with others by using what has formed in their mind. Consequently, as teachers, we may find it predictable to guess learners' mistakes and errors, possible proficiency in different learning stages.

As people acquire their mother language, the second language learners learn the language in its own order. Only under the control of the regularities and rules, can learners master the second language gradually and correctly.

## 2.3 Fossilization

Fossilization is defined as a process occurring from time to time in which incorrect linguistic features become a permanent part of the way a person speaks or writes a language. Aspects of pronunciation, vocabulary usage, and grammar may become fixed or fossilized in second or foreign language learning. These fossilized features of pronunciation contribute to a person's foreign accent. Fossilization may occur at any time and at any level. Foreign language learners may have such experience that they can not make progress step by step just like the first few years when they are first introduced to the language, or, some may feel that they can not make any difference or progress, worse still, some may think they are worse than before. It is a prominent feature that most second

language learners will experience and its significance can not be overemphasized.

Some of my students have the experience that after some years of learning, no matter how much efforts they exert, their language proficiency stand still without any change, let alone proceed on, or worse, fall behind compared with the ever-being. Such phenomenon may be seen as a kind of fossilization. It can be found in the level of vocabulary, syntax, discourse or the whole point, which, for most people, is a indispensable period and can not be omitted or jumped.

## 2.4 Variability

It is obvious that interlanguage is a system with unceasing development, and this is caused by learners' desire for achievement and also their need of practical communication. Such dynamic feature is what we call variability. This language system gradually becomes far away from their native language, experiencing a process from simplicity to complexity. This process is a process of repetitively checking of the hypothesis, and learners will continuously and consciously prove and check the hypothesis they have set by way of practical use of the second language from different angles.

Interlanguage is all the time on the state of dynamic development, however, it is not always a linear course but sometimes has zigzags and regress, for that sometimes although learners has achieved a high professional skills, their language proficiency may go back to the previous stage, on account of some reasons such as emotional factors, special environment, etc. But from the general point of view, it is in a course of keeping on going forward, to the direction of perfection and integrity. In other words, it is a process of dynamic balance, being broken and then forming a new balance on and on, until the target language proficiency forms.

In the process of second language learning, learners' interlanguage is always on the consistent way of changing and improving. Sometimes there isn't any errors in some aspects of learning, let us say, vocabulary, they also have a lot of opportunities to see, understand and use some new words and phrases to express their similar meanings.

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## 3. DEVELOPING PROCESS

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H.D.Brown in 1986 (Si, Qin Hu, & Shu, 2005), from the view of the error of the second language learners, divided the development course of interlanguage into four periods: random error stage, mergent stage, system atic stage, and stabilization stage.

### 3.1 Random Error Stage

In this stage, the errors the learners commit do not have any regularity. It is for the reason that learners do not have a detailed and systematic idea of the target language, so their output of target language may involve some irregular errors.

For this stage, students or learners may know some basic vocabulary and simple grammatical structure, but cannot use them correctly in communication, thus producing a lot of irregular errors, like the sentence “In here have a book”. The errors in this stage are always those appearing in the very first learning of the new language, and it happens without any fixed formation or regularity. For most college students has crossed this stage, we will not discuss it in detail here.

### 3.2 Mergent Stage

In this stage, learners’ output of interlanguage gradually becomes consistent with the target language, and learners begin to be able to understand or even internalize some system rules of the target language. But this system that learners have acquired is not stable and can easily go back to the first stage. Generally speaking, although the teacher points out learners’ errors, learners can not explain the reasons why they speak or write like that, let alone rectify them by themselves.

Most of us have such experience that after a period of English learning, we think we are, to some degree, familiar with the target language. However, when we are introduced to something new, we may break our previous thinking and consider it difficult. For some of my students, they are in this stage and some examples made by them are illustrated here.

For example, we say yogurt in English, but for students, when doing translation exercises or in one’s oral English use, they may use the “Chinese counterpart”, that is, sour milk. It is obvious that this kind of error is committed by the strong influence of their mother tongue Chinese, and students are lack of corresponding English input. Similar examples can also be cited such as taking the “black tea” as the “red tea”, “buy one, get one free” as “get one, give you another” by word for word literal understanding.

### 3.3 System Atic stage

Learners at this stage show more consistency in language practical use. He may still not be able to internalize target language rules completely, but he has much more possibility to learn them continuously, or, to get much nearer to the target language system. So, the most conspicuous feature is that if the error has been pointed out properly, learners will be more capable of rectifying them with the correct form. Many of my students are in this stage and an sentence in there composition is explained here: Grandma seemed to alone after grandpa passed away, but that day she smiled a long time when she saws that we were healthy and happy.

There are apparent errors in this simple sentence. The first is that the word “alone” should be rectified as the word “lonely” from the understanding of the whole sentence, and another, the word “alone” should be together with a “be”. As for the first error, we can

imagine, it is committed for the student’s unclear perception of the different meanings between the two words “alone” and “lonely”, which can be corrected by way of consulting the dictionary by the student himself. And the third is so obvious that an English learner even at his very first stage can find out, that is, in the time clause, the verb should be “saw” but not “saws”. These two errors are those that can be corrected by writer’s careful review, and not for the learner’s lack of professional knowledge but carelessness.

### 3.4 Stabilization Stage

Having experienced the former stages, second language learners will eventually come to the final stage of interlanguage, stabilization stage. Obviously, it means learners have basically acquired the target language system and also have a good master of the language in practical use, having no big difficulties in communicating with others. We can say that at this stage learners’ language system has approximated to the stable state, and errors at this stage are mainly for learners’ carelessness of some already knowed rules.

These are the four stages of interlanguage development, and in our practical teaching and learning, both teachers and learners should learn to distinguish that the errors occurring in different stages have different meanings and for different reason.

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## 4. IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING

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The enhancement and improvement of the second language teaching depend mainly on the understanding of the learning process of second language learners. Researches on interlanguage can help us form a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the requirements and regularities to better acquire second language; also promote the detailed comparisons, the researches of the various variable factors related to second language teaching and learning.

### 4.1 Cultivating a Proper Way to Deal with Learners’ Errors

In second language learners’ learning process, there will inevitably appear some errors. For those, our traditional attitude is always rectifying them with no difference, for that they believe, once the error is formed, it will be difficult for students to correct them, which may easily lead to fossilization. As a result, correcting learners’ errors has been the main activity in English teaching class. However, the behavior of unceasingly correcting those errors is negative to learners’ learning and development, for that such activities will more or less interrupt learners’ learning process, and even worse, learners may have the feeling of being afraid of committing errors, which is quite bad for language proficiency achievements.

The theory of interlanguage shows us that language errors in learning process are the specific manifestation of their learning proceeding. The total course of language acquisition is an approach from less skilled to more proficient. Errors in this developing process is like a window to expose language learners' development stages, and it is an indispensable part in this process, as well as the manifestation of internalization of second language knowledge.

Consequently, teachers are not advised to make a fuss at the mistakes and irregular forms the second language learners' commit, but should adopt tolerant attitude to them, so as not to rigidly adhere to correct them as long as there is any, and they should also give some specific analysis and guides. As well, they should try to make the learners' recognize that errors are a necessary and indispensable part in everyone's learning process, and only through a series of contrast, hypothesis, imitation, and analogy, can we eliminate those errors step by step, and finally come to the target of mastering the second language.

#### 4.2 Avoiding Fossilization

As for fossilization, Ellis (1985) pointed out that in the learning process, correct and incorrect form of second language will be simultaneously digested by our minds. But we call the former acquisition and the latter fossilization, and the discrimination of these two will benefit us in avoiding fossilization.

In order to avoid the input of the incorrect form of target language, second language learners should listen as much as possible the English news, watch English TV programme, read English novels, and communicate with English-speaking natives, enhancing the quality of input language.

As for the teachers, they should know clearly learners' incentives, personalities, language structures, learning strategies, so they can teach in accordance with students' individual features. They should also adopt different ways to deal with learners' different errors such as the errors in pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, which is an effective way to lessen learners' fossilization.

#### 4.3 Lessening the Effect of Negative Transfer

The negative transfer can have a negative effect on second language learners, and it is an origin of the phenomenon of fossilization. When their target language can not satisfy the purpose of expressing their ideas and keeping on the communication, second language learners will naturally turn to their mother tongue for help.

Its manifestation can be divided into two: one is the interlingual errors caused by the influence of their native language; and the other is learners' use of the combination of the native and target language. And the most effective way to decrease the influence of mother language is to enlarge the input of correct target language, and teachers may conduct learners to pay attention to the obvious differences between two languages. And then learners and students have more opportunity to establish the acquisition system of their target language.

#### 4.4 Optimizing the Learning and Teaching Environment

As a special language form, interlanguage develops and evolves at a fast speed. In this course, the models that can be imitated and learned by the second learners play a very significant role in their learning process. As a result, teachers in the class should at most extent, supply their students with sufficient and correct learning models. The conversations made in the native countries under natural environment will be a better choice. In a word, second language teachers should offer English teaching scenes and environment as much as possible. Also, they should emphasize the balance of the language input and output, adjusting the time between teachers' teaching and learners' practicing. Optimization of the learning and teaching environment is helpful in improving learners' language ability and proficiency.

As an indispensable stage in the learning process of every second language learner, interlanguage plays an irreplaceable and important role in improving the language ability of learners. In the practice of college English teaching, teachers should make full use of interlanguage theories to better promote second language teaching and learning under the guidance of the law of language development.

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