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Fossilization and Error Correction in English for Specific Purposes: Reflections from Teaching Navy Students

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Abstract: In English for Specific Purposes contexts, error correction requires careful consideration to balance linguistic accuracy, fluency, and communicative competence. This article explores the role of corrective feedback in ESP classrooms, with particular attention to English instruction for navy students. Operating in a domain where clarity and precision are essential, these learners must master technical vocabulary and communication routines that have direct operational implications. As such, error management becomes not only a pedagogical concern but also a professional necessity. The paper revisits key frameworks from Second Language Acquisition, including the dynamics of immediate versus delayed correction, explicit versus implicit feedback, and the persistent challenge of fossilization, especially among adult learners in professional training environments. Drawing on classroom-based observations and reflective teaching practice, the study investigates how naval students respond to various feedback types during context-rich tasks such as simulated radio communications, operational briefings, incident reporting, and professional presentations. Building on this analysis, the article proposes a formative and student-responsive model of error correction that addresses both communicative clarity and entrenched linguistic inaccuracies. It outlines strategies that promote self-monitoring, peer correction, and long-term linguistic development, while sustaining learner motivation. The aim is to reframe corrective feedback as a constructive, ongoing process essential to effective language acquisition in specialized military settings.
Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP); fossilization; error correction; corrective feedback; navy students; Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

1. Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) presents unique pedagogical challenges, particularly in military settings where communicative accuracy is not merely academic but operational. Among these challenges, error correction emerges as a focal point. Instructors must decide when, how, and to what extent they should intervene in learner production to correct linguistic inaccuracies without impeding fluency, confidence, or autonomy. This becomes more complex in adult learning environments such as naval academies, where learners are often resistant to correction due to fossilized patterns that have become ingrained over time.

Fossilization, a concept introduced by Selinker (1972), refers to the phenomenon where incorrect linguistic forms become stable and resistant to further correction in second language learners. In ESP contexts - especially those involving structured language for procedures, reporting, or safety - fossilized errors can hinder clear communication. This paper explores the relationship between fossilization and corrective feedback within ESP classrooms and proposes a student-responsive model of error correction adapted to navy learners.

2. Literature Review

The treatment of fossilized errors through corrective feedback has been a central concern in second language acquisition (SLA), particularly in adult learning and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts. In military and naval English instruction, where language serves as a precise operational tool, persistent linguistic inaccuracies, especially those that resist correction, demand targeted pedagogical responses. This review explores the core theoretical frameworks surrounding fossilization and corrective feedback, with a view to their practical relevance in ESP instruction for adult learners.

2.1 Fossilization and Interlanguage in Adult Learners

Errors have long been recognized as a natural and necessary part of second language development. Corder (1967) argued that learner errors are not merely signs of failure but important evidence of an evolving interlanguage system. Rather than treating errors as obstacles, instructors and researchers view them as windows into the cognitive processes underlying language learning.

Building on this perspective, Selinker (1972) introduced the concept of fossilization, referring to the phenomenon whereby certain errors in a learner's interlanguage become permanently embedded, resisting correction even in the face of continued input. These errors may range from grammatical and lexical to phonological and pragmatic, and are particularly common among adult learners who have already developed functional communicative competence. Han (2004) elaborates on the distinction between global fossilization, which affects the learner's overall interlanguage system, and local fossilization, which is restricted to specific features or patterns. In both cases, the stabilization of inaccurate forms can limit learners' ability to progress toward target-like performance.

Fossilization in adult learners is often associated with decreased linguistic plasticity, limited opportunities for meaningful interaction in the target language, and a tendency to prioritize meaning over form. Han & Selinker (2005) further identify psychological and environmental factors, such as reduced motivation to change established habits or a lack of awareness about recurring inaccuracies, that contribute to the persistence of fossilized errors. While fossilization may not entirely inhibit communication, it often undermines clarity, especially in professional or technical domains where linguistic precision is required.

2.2 Corrective Feedback: Approaches and Effectiveness

Corrective feedback (CF) is a widely studied mechanism in SLA that serves to alert learners to linguistic errors and guide them toward more accurate use of the target language. Lyster & Ranta (1997) offer a taxonomy of CF types, including recasts, explicit correction, metalinguistic feedback, clarification requests, elicitation, and repetition. Their findings suggest that different feedback types yield different levels of learner uptake and repair, depending on the instructional context and the learner's cognitive engagement with the correction.

Subsequent research (e.g. Lyster, 2004; Ellis, 2009) has questioned the long-term effectiveness of implicit strategies such as recasts, which may go unnoticed by learners focused primarily on message content. In contrast, more explicit feedback forms, such as metalinguistic cues or prompts that require learner reformulation, have been shown to enhance awareness and retention of correct forms. Ellis (2009) emphasizes the importance of aligning the type and timing of feedback with the learner's proficiency level,

the complexity of the task, and the nature of the error itself (systematic vs. occasional, surface-level vs. structural).

In ESP instruction, corrective feedback takes on added significance due to the context-specific nature of the language being learned. Basturkmen (2010) notes that ESP learners often encounter language through professional or technical tasks that demand accuracy and appropriateness within specialized discourse communities. Instructors in such settings must decide which errors are worth correcting - focusing especially on those that interfere with task performance, misrepresent domain-specific terminology, or disrupt formal registers.

2.3 Correcting Fossilized Errors in ESP Classrooms

The correction of fossilized errors in ESP contexts poses a particular challenge, as these errors are often deeply entrenched and may not immediately obstruct communication. Thornbury (1999) argues that persistent errors are less likely to be addressed effectively through incidental correction alone and require a more reflective, metacognitive approach. Learners must become aware not only of the error itself but of its broader communicative consequences and recurring nature.

ESP learners, especially those in structured, goal-driven programs such as technical or vocational education, often operate under tight instructional timelines and assessment-driven curricula. As such, the classroom may emphasize communicative success over linguistic precision, inadvertently reinforcing the use of fossilized forms as long as the message is conveyed. Instructors must therefore create opportunities for focused feedback within communicative tasks, incorporating both immediate intervention when meaning is at stake and delayed, reflective correction to promote long-term improvement.

Hyland (2000) suggests that adult ESP learners respond best to correction when it is embedded in relevant contexts and paired with learner reflection. Activities such as peer review, correction portfolios, and guided error analysis can enhance learners' awareness of recurring patterns. These methods encourage autonomy and help learners take ownership of their language development - essential strategies when dealing with fossilized structures that resist traditional instruction.

3. Common Fossilized Errors in Naval ESP Classrooms

In English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction, error patterns often reflect the unique communicative demands of the professional environment. For navy students, these demands include technical accuracy, adherence to standardized terminology, and effective communication under pressure. Although many learners demonstrate intermediate to high receptive proficiency, their productive language is often marked by fossilized errors - persistent linguistic forms that have become resistant to correction. This section examines the most frequently observed fossilized patterns in grammar, lexis, and pronunciation, as encountered in ESP classrooms for naval learners.

3.1 Grammatical Errors: Subject-Verb Agreement, Tense, and Article Use

Grammatical fossilization is particularly prominent in subject-verb agreement errors. Utterances such as *"he go to the deck"* or *"the officer give the signal"* are persistent across proficiency levels. These errors typically stem from negative transfer from Romanian, where verb morphology is handled differently, and subject-verb agreement is not as visibly marked in speech. Even after repeated correction, the omission of the third person singular -s remains stable in learners' interlanguage. In a sentence like *"the officer give the signal"*, the grammatical inaccuracy may seem minor, but the action itself refers to a formal or operational command. The "signal" might trigger a maneuver, initiate a drill, or start a reporting procedure - functions that require clarity and authority. The incorrect verb form weakens the linguistic precision and can disrupt the expected tone in formal naval discourse.

Tense misuse, particularly confusion between past simple and present perfect, is another area of fossilization. Students frequently produce forms like *"I have received it yesterday"* instead of the correct

"I received it yesterday." This reflects a misunderstanding of the English temporal system, particularly the distinction between completed past events and present relevance. In operational settings (such as reporting inspection timelines or damage events) this kind of errors can lead to confusion regarding timing and sequencing.

Learners also commonly omit auxiliary verbs, subjects, or articles, as in *"Is good ship"* instead of *"It is a good ship"*, or *"Captain is on bridge."* These errors, while not necessarily impeding comprehension, weaken structural accuracy and are often stabilized by classroom tolerance or peer influence. They tend to remain uncorrected when comprehension is prioritized over form, and thus gradually become entrenched.

Modal verb errors, such as *"He must to report this"* or *"He can goes now",* also occur frequently. These constructions reveal overgeneralizations or direct translations from Romanian (*trebuie să...*, *poate să...*), and their fossilization suggests a need for explicit contrastive instruction to highlight modal syntax and functions in English.

3.2 Lexical Errors: Domain-Specific Vocabulary and Semantic Approximation

One of the most recurrent categories of learner errors in naval ESP settings involves the misuse of technical vocabulary. As I.S.P. Nation (2001) emphasizes, ESP learners must acquire mid-frequency, field-specific vocabulary that lies between general English and highly specialized jargon. However, learners often substitute inaccurate or general terms for domain-specific ones, saying *"launch the anchor"* instead of the correct *"drop the anchor"*, or referring to the *"back of the ship"* instead of *"aft."* These substitutions suggest a reliance on general English or L1 equivalents and point to an incomplete acquisition of the professional lexicon.

Another common lexical issue involves inappropriate collocations or semantic approximations. Expressions such as *"make a mistake with the map"* instead of *"make a navigation error"* reveal a lack of precision. Similarly, *"take care the ropes"* rather than *"handle the mooring lines"* reflects fossilized general English usage that fails to meet the demands of domain-specific communication.

Errors in fixed expressions or procedural verbs are also typical. Learners may say *"stop the machine"* instead of *"shut down the engine"*, which while understandable, fails to meet the clarity standards required in technical instruction or maintenance contexts. Such fossilized expressions persist because they often convey meaning adequately in informal contexts, but they undermine professional communication standards in operational settings.

Prepositional mis collocations are equally frequent and fossilize easily. Learners may say *"check on the system"* instead of *"check the system"*, or *"listen the announcement"* instead of *"listen to the announcement."* These errors result from overgeneralizations or L1 influence and, though minor, can affect clarity in command execution or procedural understanding.

3.3 Pronunciation Errors: Intelligibility in Operational Speech

Pronunciation fossilization can significantly affect intelligibility in oral communication, especially during simulations, emergency drills, or other high-stakes speaking tasks. Among the most frequent fossilized errors is the confusion of minimal pairs, such as *"ship"* and *"sheep"*, or *"bit"* and *"beat."* These vowel contrasts are subtle but meaningful. For example, mistaking *"ship"* for *"sheep"* may introduce ambiguity during radio exchanges or oral reports concerning vessel identity or cargo.

Non-standard pronunciation of numbers and procedural terms is also widespread. Learners may pronounce *"three"* as /tri:/ rather than the operationally standardized /tri/, or shorten *"niner"* to *"nine"*. These deviations may appear trivial, but in communication environments affected by noise, static, or urgency, such differences can result in miscommunication or delay. Jenkins (2000) emphasizes that in lingua franca contexts like naval operations, intelligibility - not native-like accuracy - must be the primary pronunciation goal.

Mispronunciations of key technical terms - such as *"bearing"*, *"buoy"*, or *"engine"* - also frequently become fossilized, especially when incorrect forms are reinforced by peer speech or insufficient phonological feedback. These errors are often unintentionally stabilized because they do not always cause breakdowns in classroom communication, yet they represent deviations from internationally standardized forms.

Additionally, intonation errors - such as using a falling tone for questions (e.g. *"Where is the fire"*) - may flatten or distort the pragmatic force of a message. In procedural or emergency language, appropriate intonation serves not only to convey meaning but also to signal urgency and authority. Fossilized intonation patterns, therefore, have both linguistic and operational implications.

By explaining the communicative context and potential impact of each fossilized form, instructors can better prioritize their corrective interventions. The next section will build on these observations and propose targeted feedback strategies that address not only the linguistic form but also the operational function of learner output in naval ESP classrooms.

4. Beyond the Error: Strategic Correction and Language Development in Naval ESP

Correcting fossilized errors in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classrooms requires more than isolated instances of instructor intervention. For navy students, whose communicative tasks are embedded in high-stakes professional contexts, feedback must be both linguistically effective and operationally relevant. Drawing from SLA research and classroom experience, this section outlines pedagogical strategies designed to address fossilization through corrective feedback, with a focus on learner awareness, task integration, and sustained language development.

4.1 Feedback Type and Timing: Balancing Fluency and Accuracy

One of the core challenges in correcting fossilized errors is determining the appropriate type and timing of feedback. As Ellis (2009) and Lyster and Ranta (1997) emphasize, feedback may be implicit (such as recasts) or explicit (including metalinguistic cues or direct correction), and the choice should depend on both the communicative context and the nature of the error. In navy ESP classrooms, where learners participate in both high-fluency and high-accuracy tasks (e.g. procedural briefings, equipment reporting), instructors must strike a balance.

Immediate correction is particularly useful during drills where specific terminology or command structure is practiced. For example, during a simulated inspection task, an instructor might interrupt and reformulate an error like *"launch the anchor"* by saying, *"Drop the anchor - launch is incorrect here."* This allows for in-the-moment learning and prevents repetition of incorrect terms in a high-frequency context.

Delayed correction, on the other hand, is more appropriate during extended role-plays or written tasks. For example, after reviewing an incident report that reads *"The water level rise in engine room"*, the instructor can facilitate a post-task correction discussion or provide written comments, drawing attention to errors in tense and article use. Delaying correction in such cases helps maintain fluency during production while still addressing fossilized forms with focused attention.

4.2 Metalinguistic Awareness and Consciousness-Raising

Many fossilized errors persist not because learners are unwilling to improve, but because they lack awareness of the error, or do not recognize its significance. Raising learner consciousness about recurring patterns, particularly those related to grammar and collocations, is crucial. As Dulay et al. (1982) suggest, metalinguistic reflection allows learners to process language analytically, helping them reframe how structures function.

In practice, instructors can use noticing tasks, such as underlining fossilized errors in student writing and asking learners to hypothesize the correction. Error logs or language portfolios, where students record and

reflect on recurring mistakes (e.g. subject-verb agreement or prepositional usage), help externalize patterns that might otherwise remain implicit. Group-based error analysis, such as correcting anonymized excerpts of classmates' work, can also reduce anxiety while encouraging collaborative metalinguistic development.

4.3 Simulation-Based Correction and Task Embedding

Since many errors occur within domain-specific tasks, task-embedded correction is particularly effective in ESP. Classroom simulations, ranging from simulated radio communications, safety briefings, incident reports, role-plays, and presentations, provide authentic contexts in which fossilized errors naturally surface. Instructors can use these scenarios to introduce corrective feedback cycles, where learners complete a task, receive individualized or group feedback, and then repeat the task with revised language.

Repetition with variation is another effective strategy for addressing fossilized errors. For instance, if a student says *"Go engine room check pressure"* during a simulation, the instructor can organize a second round of the same task with added support. This time, learners might receive a checklist or phrase bank that includes the correct form *"Proceed to the engine room and check the pressure gauges."* By repeating the activity with these targeted cues, students are more likely to internalize the correct grammatical structures, vocabulary, and sequencing needed for clear professional communication.

Role-playing standardized dialogues, such as giving or receiving orders, also helps learners internalize correct structures, particularly for collocations and formulaic expressions. These scripts can be followed by debriefing sessions, where instructors point out fossilized forms and explore why alternatives are more appropriate.

4.4 Pronunciation Focus and Intelligibility Training

Pronunciation errors, especially those that affect intelligibility, often require explicit attention and dedicated practice time. Instructors can implement shadowing exercises, a technique where learners immediately repeat spoken input to enhance pronunciation, fluency, and listening skills (Murphey, 2001). In a naval English context, this can involve repeating recordings of typical operational dialogues and commands, with careful attention to rhythm, stress, and clarity. Repetitive practice with numbers, procedural vocabulary, and unit-specific phrases (e.g. "shut down the engine", "proceed to the engine room") can help reinforce accurate production and develop operational communicative competence.

Learners also benefit from contrastive listening activities, where they compare recordings of correct and incorrect pronunciations and discuss the potential operational consequences of miscommunication. Peer correction in pronunciation drills, especially in small-group settings, can also raise awareness and encourage self-monitoring.

Because pronunciation fossilization is often reinforced by low confidence or anxiety, instructors should aim to create a supportive environment where learners are encouraged to experiment with sounds and to view mispronunciation as part of the learning process, not a source of embarrassment.

4.5 Encouraging Learner Autonomy in Error Correction

One of the most effective long-term strategies for addressing fossilization is to promote learner autonomy in the correction process. Students who are trained to recognize and correct their own errors become more reflective and precise users of language, both in the classroom and in professional contexts.

To facilitate this process, instructors can introduce self-monitoring tools, such as personal "error trackers", correction journals, or digital glossaries of recurring mistakes. Regular self-assessment checklists, especially before oral presentations or writing submissions, encourage learners to pause and consider form as well as content.

Peer review protocols are equally useful, particularly when learners are guided with rubrics that highlight fossilization-prone areas (e.g. subject-verb agreement, technical terminology, pronunciation clarity).

Reviewing a partner's work sharpens error recognition skills and reinforces internalization of corrected forms.

Corrective feedback in naval ESP classrooms must therefore go beyond incidental correction. It requires a multi-pronged approach, one that combines timing sensitivity, metalinguistic support, task relevance, and learner responsibility. Addressing fossilization is not a one-off intervention, but an ongoing process of raising awareness, embedding correction into communicative tasks, and nurturing autonomy.

5. Conclusion

Correcting fossilized errors in ESP instruction, particularly for navy students, requires more than isolated grammar drills or spontaneous corrections. These persistent inaccuracies - rooted in L1 transfer, peer reinforcement, or insufficient awareness - can affect clarity in operational contexts where precision is critical.

This article has examined how fossilization manifests in grammatical, lexical, and phonological patterns in naval classrooms, and has proposed targeted, pedagogically grounded strategies for minimizing them. By integrating correction into simulations, building metalinguistic awareness, and encouraging learner autonomy, instructors can help students overcome fossilized errors without interrupting fluency or participation.

Ultimately, correction in ESP must go beyond identifying mistakes; it must guide learners toward professional competence. Through sustained, reflective, and context-sensitive feedback, instructors can transform error correction into a meaningful part of the learning process - supporting not just accuracy, but communicative confidence in real-world maritime settings.

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