

Understanding “Fossilized” Grammar: When Fluency Is Stronger Than Grammar

Many Language Support students are frustrated to find that despite years of English training and a level of comfort with academic English, they continue to make consistent grammar errors when they speak. These errors can hinder their ability to communicate effectively in conversation, presentations and on the ITA test. In addition, frequent grammar errors can make nonnative English speakers seem less fluent and less educated than they are, and could be a professional liability in the future.

Some second language learners make grammar mistakes because their fluency is weak or they are not used to communicating in spoken English. However, when a speaker has developed fluency more thoroughly than grammar usage, we often refer to that speaker as having “fossilized grammar”. Just as a fossil of an ancient plant is preserved in a hardened state, fossilized grammar errors have become hardened in a speaker’s language. However, fossilized errors do not need to be permanent and second language learners always have the opportunity to continue developing grammar usage.

A number of factors can cause a speaker to develop fossilized grammar including:

- Reaching a level of fluency that allows one to communicate sufficiently (e.g., with an advisor or peers who understand despite the errors, in limited contexts, etc.)
- An absence of corrective feedback (e.g., fluency has developed through conversation rather than in language classes where grammar errors would be pointed out and guidance offered to help students appropriately correct)
- Being more concerned with expressing ideas than with monitoring grammar (not a bad thing in the early stages of language learning)
- Lack of awareness of the frequency or severity of errors

Common concerns from students with fossilized grammar

My written grammar is good, but I always make mistakes when I speak. I did very well on the TOEFL grammar section, but there are many errors in my spoken language.

First of all, this is good news; it means that you have a working knowledge of English grammar. It is very common for second language learners to be able to use grammar more accurately in writing than in speaking. In fact, many speakers who have problems with fossilized grammar errors find that their writing is better than their speaking.

When you are writing, you have time to monitor your grammar. However, when speaking you must concentrate on multiple skills such as pronunciation, vocabulary, expressing your ideas in English and understanding and responding to questions. The brain can process only on a limited number of items and so you are less able to monitor your grammar. Many times students find that as they develop their overall fluency in English and no longer need to think about the other language skills, they are better able to monitor their grammar.

Many times, I don't realize when I make grammar mistakes in my speech.

This is not surprising. Not noticing your own grammar errors is one of the defining features of fossilized grammar. You have been making fossilized grammar errors for a long time; they have become habits that are hard for you to recognize let alone correct. One of the first steps you can take to improve your grammar is to find ways to become conscious of your errors (see suggestions for improvement below).

I've been in the US for many years, and I still make grammar mistakes when I speak.

Fossilized grammar is not uncommon for speakers who have been using English regularly for several years (e.g., in the US for high school, work or a previous academic degree). Such speakers have become increasingly comfortable with English, are able to express their ideas (although possibly by using a fluent yet flawed English), and have practiced the same errors over and over. If you are not aware of the mistakes you are making and if you do not get feedback about your language, fossilized errors can become more deeply embedded over time. Mere exposure to English will not necessarily improve grammar.

How can I improve my fossilized grammar?

The first step is to become aware of your particular errors, and then to learn and practice effective strategies for dealing with these errors. You can get appropriate feedback and training from the language specialists at the Student Academic Success Center. It is important to remember that peers, advisors, administrative staff, etc. will generally not give you feedback about your grammar (outside of a language classroom, this could be considered rude). Also, many native speakers simply do not know how to give appropriate feedback to nonnative speakers.

- *Attend Language Support Workshops and Seminars* that 1) deal directly with grammar (e.g., *Advanced Grammar Monitoring* and *Using Articles Accurately*) to become more aware of grammar issues, and 2) those that provide feedback on each student's use of language (e.g., *Fluency for Presentations, Language and Culture for Teaching*).
- *Record yourself* (many students like to use smart phones or tablets) and then make use of any of the following techniques:
 - » Listen for errors to build awareness of your own grammar issues.
 - » Listen for errors and correct them out loud.
 - » Transcribe your speech, look for grammar errors and then correct them in writing.
- *Make use of on-line grammar resources* (see the Language Support handout, Resources for Self-paced Grammar Practice).