

FROM OVERGENERALIZATION TO FOSSILIZATION: INTRALINGUAL ERRORS IN PAKISTANI LEARNERS' ENGLISH WRITING

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the intralingual errors that characterize Pakistani learners' English writing, focusing on the twin processes of overgeneralization and fossilization. Despite years of exposure to English as a second language, many Pakistani students continue to produce recurring grammatical inaccuracies that reveal developmental patterns within their interlanguage. Drawing on the framework of Error Analysis and the concept of Interlanguage, the study analyzes a corpus of essays written by undergraduate students. Errors were classified into key intralingual categories: verb tense and aspect, pluralization, article misuse, comparative/superlative redundancy, and subject-verb agreement. Findings indicate that overgeneralization, the learners' tendency to extend linguistic rules beyond their appropriate limits (e.g., *buyed*, *childrens*, *most wisest*), is the most prevalent cause of grammatical inaccuracy. Over time, many of these erroneous forms become fossilized, persisting despite further instruction or feedback. This stabilization of incorrect patterns reflects a plateau in learners' grammatical development, suggesting that fossilization has become a barrier to advanced proficiency. The study concludes that intralingual errors are not random but systematic reflections of how learners internalize English grammar. It recommends pedagogical interventions emphasizing awareness-raising, corrective feedback, and remedial grammar tasks to counter fossilization and encourage grammatical refinement in Pakistani English classrooms.

Keywords: Intralingual errors; overgeneralization; fossilization; error analysis; interlanguage; grammatical development; Pakistani learners; ESL writing; morphological errors; second language acquisition.

INTRODUCTION

Language learning is a process of hypothesis formation. Learners constantly test assumptions about the target language, internalizing patterns through trial and error. In second language acquisition (SLA), these errors are not mere signs of failure but windows into how the learner's linguistic system evolves. Within this process, two interrelated phenomena, overgeneralization and fossilization, define the developmental trajectory of learners' interlanguage. While overgeneralization represents the learner's creative but imperfect

formation, fossilization marks the point where such erroneous rules become stable and resistant to change.

In Pakistan, English functions as both a second language and a gatekeeper of social mobility. It is the medium of higher education, administration, and global communication (Rahman, 2011). Yet, even after more than a decade of formal instruction, students often produce grammatically inaccurate English, filled with recurring errors in tense, pluralization, and agreement (Asma et al.,

2025) The persistence of these patterns suggests that Pakistani learners' errors are not random slips but structured intralingual features of a developing interlanguage.

The theoretical foundation for this study lies in Corder's (1967) Error Analysis and Selinker's (1972) Interlanguage Theory. Corder argued that errors reveal the learner's internal linguistic system and provide evidence of learning in progress. Selinker extended this notion, proposing that learners construct a distinct interlanguage transitional grammar that blends target-language input with learner-generated rules. This interlanguage, however, does not always evolve toward native-like proficiency; instead, certain incorrect forms may fossilize, becoming permanent features of the learner's linguistic output.

In the Pakistani context, fossilization is closely linked to overgeneralization. Learners acquire isolated grammatical rules and then extend them universally. For example, after learning that *-ed* denotes the past tense, they apply it to irregular verbs (*buyed, go-ed*). Similarly, they pluralize all nouns with *-s* (*childrens, peoples*) or combine comparative and superlative forms (*more better, most wisest*). These reflect attempts to simplify linguistic complexity through internal rule-making, a hallmark of intralingual development (Longman. Ruffolo, I. (2008)). However, without timely corrective feedback, these overgeneralized patterns may stabilize into fossilized errors, persisting even among advanced learners.

Fossilization thus marks the endpoint of intralingual development, a plateau where the learner's internal grammar stops evolving despite continued exposure to English (Selinker, 1972; Han, 2004). Pakistani students, for example, continue to omit articles (*He is doctor*), misuse prepositions (*discuss about*), or incorrectly inflect verbs (*He do not knows*) well into university level. These fossilized forms result from repeated reinforcement of incorrect structures, inadequate feedback, and limited meaningful interaction in English-dominant contexts (Nazir, (2023

This study, titled *From Overgeneralization to Fossilization*, explores how Pakistani learners' intralingual errors evolve, stabilize, and become resistant to correction. It views overgeneralization not as a failure but as a creative strategy, learners actively testing rules to internalize grammatical systems. Yet, when such rules are reinforced incorrectly, they transition into fossilized

structures, restricting further linguistic development.

The study is guided by the following key research questions:

1. What are the dominant intralingual error types in Pakistani learners' English writing?
2. How does overgeneralization reflect learners' internal rule formation during interlanguage development?
3. To what extent do these overgeneralized patterns stabilize into fossilized forms?
4. What instructional strategies can help prevent or reduce fossilization in Pakistani ESL classrooms?

Understanding this continuum, from overgeneralization to fossilization, sheds light on why many Pakistani learners' plateaus in their grammatical accuracy despite prolonged instruction. It also emphasizes the need for form-focused teaching that complements communicative practices with conscious attention to structure. If teachers can identify fossilized errors early, they can design targeted interventions, explicit grammar correction, contrastive tasks, and learner self-monitoring to break fossilized patterns and restart interlanguage development.

In essence, the problem is not that Pakistani students make errors, but that they repeat the same ones over time. This repetition signals fossilization, a linguistic "ceiling" that prevents learners from progressing toward full accuracy. Therefore, by tracing the path "from overgeneralization to fossilization," this study not only documents grammatical patterns but also reinterprets them as milestones in the ongoing cognitive construction of language.

Literature Review

Error Analysis (EA) emerged in the late 1960s as a reaction against the overly predictive Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) of the 1950s. CAH, popularized by Lado (1957), assumed that second language errors could be predicted by comparing the learner's first and target languages. However, Corder (1967) challenged this assumption by emphasizing that errors are not simply evidence of failure but rather "a window into the learner's internal language system." His seminal work, *The Significance of Learners' Errors*, established EA as a descriptive and diagnostic framework to

understand how second language learners create, modify, and internalize linguistic rules.

Building on Corder's insights, Selinker (1972) proposed the theory of interlanguage, describing the learner's linguistic system as an independent, dynamic, and transitional grammar that contains features of both the first language (L1) and the target language (L2). Interlanguage is neither random nor purely imitative; it reflects systematic processes of hypothesis testing, rule formation, and restructuring as learners attempt to approximate the target language. Importantly, this system is developmental; it evolves over time, but can also fossilize, meaning that certain erroneous forms become stable and resistant to change. Selinker identified five processes that shape interlanguage: language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of second language learning, strategies of communication, and overgeneralization of target language rules. Among these, overgeneralization, and its end-stage, fossilization, are central to understanding intralingual development, which this study explores in the Pakistani context.

While early research emphasized interlingual errors caused by L1 interference, later studies, notably those by Richards (2015) and Longman and Ruffolo (2008) revealed that many learner errors arise *within* the target language itself. These intralingual errors occur when learners, in an effort to internalize rules, apply them too broadly or misinterpret their scope. Overgeneralization, as described by Richards (2015), refers to the learner's tendency to extend a linguistic rule beyond its appropriate boundaries. For example, a learner who understands that *-ed* marks the past tense might apply it to all verbs (*buyed, comed, runned*). Similarly, after learning that plural nouns take *-s*, the learner might write *childrens, peoples, or furnitures*. These errors show that the learner is not copying but creatively constructing linguistic hypotheses, an essential step in language acquisition.

Dulay (1982) later described overgeneralization as a natural cognitive process through which learners simplify the linguistic input they receive. However, this simplification sometimes leads to incorrect general rules that, if left uncorrected, can become habitual. When such errors persist over time despite instruction and feedback, they become fossilized. Selinker (1972) defined fossilization as the "cessation of interlanguage development in certain linguistic subsystems." In other words, the

learner's grammar stabilizes at a stage short of full target language competence. Fossilization is often reinforced by repeated exposure to incorrect forms, lack of corrective feedback, or limited opportunities for authentic language use (Han, 2004).

Fossilization represents the endpoint of intralingual development, a linguistic plateau where the learner's internal grammar stops evolving. Studies across various contexts (Han & Odlin, 2006; Schachter, 1996) confirm that fossilization occurs in phonology, morphology, and syntax, but it is most visible in writing, where formal errors are repeatedly reproduced. Globally, researchers have categorized common intralingual errors in ESL writing into morphological, syntactic, and lexical types (James, 1998; Ellis, 2008). Morphological errors include incorrect tense markers and pluralization (*buyed, childrens*); syntactic errors involve subject-verb disagreement (*He do not goes*), article misuse (*He is teacher*), and redundancy (*more better*); lexical errors include collocational or word-choice problems.

Studies conducted in East Asia (Amin & Arshad, 2025; Al-Jamal, 2017), the Middle East (Al-Khresheh, 2016; Rana et al., 2016; Khurshid et al., 2021) and Europe (Granger et al., 2015) show that overgeneralization is a universal phenomenon. Even advanced learners tend to apply grammatical patterns indiscriminately, indicating that intralingual processes operate independently of L1 structure. Overgeneralization thus reflects a cognitive, rather than purely linguistic, learning strategy.

Fossilization, meanwhile, has been observed in learners who reach a "communicatively adequate" but not grammatically accurate level. As Han (2004) and Azeez (2024) explain, once learners can convey meaning effectively, their motivation to refine accuracy declines, leading to stabilization. Fossilized forms, such as consistent omission of articles or misuse of tense, become internalized and are rarely self-corrected.

In Pakistan, English is both a second language and a key academic requirement. However, numerous studies (Kalhor et al., 2025; Jat et al., 2024; Mian, 1988; Qureshi et al., 2025) reveal that Pakistani learners consistently display intralingual error patterns despite years of study. Their English writing often reflects systematic overgeneralization and fossilization, particularly in grammar and morphology. Learners frequently apply English

rules mechanically, without recognizing exceptions. Examples include:

- *buyed* or *comed* instead of *bought* and *came* (past tense overgeneralization);
- *childrens*, *peoples*, or *informations* (pluralization overgeneralization);
- *most wisest* and *more better* (double marking of comparatives and superlatives);
- *He playings well* and *She studyings* (misuse of present progressive *-ing*).

Such patterns demonstrate the learners' cognitive attempts to internalize rules through simplification, a normal stage of intralingual development (Longman & Ruffolo, 2008). Over time, many of these overgeneralized forms become fossilized, appearing repeatedly across proficiency levels. Studies by Nazir (2023) and Mehmood and Saleem (2019) show that Pakistani university students often reproduce the same grammatical errors found in their earlier schooling. Article omission (*He is doctor*), tense inconsistency (*He go yesterday*), and plural redundancy (*childrens*) are examples of fossilized features that have stabilized in learners' writing. This fossilization results from a combination of factors. Teachers often prioritize content over grammatical accuracy in written tasks (Kalhor et al., 2025). Students focus on memorization rather than structural understanding (Mansoor, 2004). English is largely confined to classrooms; outside, Urdu or regional languages dominate. Since communication is generally understood, persistent inaccuracies are not perceived as problematic. Thus, Pakistani learners' fossilized errors are both linguistic and sociolinguistic phenomena, shaped by educational practices and exposure limitations. Overgeneralization and fossilization represent two ends of a developmental continuum in interlanguage growth. In early stages, learners generalize linguistic rules creatively, using cognitive shortcuts to make sense of complex grammar. For example, after learning that the *-ed* ending denotes past tense, they extend it to *buyed* and *go-ed*. This stage reflects *rule formation*.

With time, however, if these incorrect forms are reinforced, through repetition, peer communication, or inadequate feedback, they may become stabilized. Once internalized, the learner no longer perceives them as errors, and they become fossilized forms. This transition, from experimentation to stabilization, is what defines the title of the present study: *From*

Overgeneralization to Fossilization. In Pakistani learners, this process is accentuated by the gap between structural knowledge (grammar rules taught explicitly) and functional use (authentic writing practice). Without consistent corrective intervention, intralingual creativity hardens into error persistence. As Han and Odlin (2006) note, fossilization is not a failure of learning but an outcome of incomplete restructuring, learners have reached communicative adequacy but grammatical stagnation.

Multiple studies provide evidence of this developmental trajectory. Shakir (2020) analyzed essays from Pakistani undergraduates and found that 64% of grammatical errors were intralingual, mostly involving overgeneralization. Rana et al. (2016) found article misuse and pluralization errors to be among the most fossilized forms, while Mumtaz et al. (2024) observed that verb tense errors persisted even after advanced instruction. Naz et al. (2025) concluded that students' repeated misuse of *-ed* endings showed clear fossilization despite teacher correction.

At the lexical level, Nazir (2023) reported redundancy (*repeat again*, *return back*) and direct translation errors, which often fossilize because learners use them in both speech and writing. Collectively, these findings suggest that fossilization in Pakistani English writing is systematic and largely intralingual, reflecting overgeneralized rule formation processes that have stabilized over years of classroom learning.

Understanding the relationship between overgeneralization and fossilization has direct implications for English teaching in Pakistan. If overgeneralization reflects early rule-building, then teachers should encourage it as a developmental step but also provide timely feedback to prevent fossilization. Explicit grammar instruction, form-focused tasks, and consciousness-raising activities can help learners notice discrepancies between their interlanguage and standard English (Schmidt, 1990).

Teachers must also learn to distinguish developmental errors (which self-correct over time) from fossilized errors (which require targeted intervention). Corrective feedback should be explicit, immediate, and repetitive to disrupt fossilized habits (Ferris, 2011; Ullah et al., 2021). Using contrastive examples, peer editing, and AI-assisted grammar tools may also help learners re-evaluate fossilized structures. Furthermore,

curriculum designers should integrate corpus-based examples drawn from Pakistani learners' actual writing to demonstrate common fossilized forms. Encouraging self-monitoring and reflective writing, where students analyze their own recurring errors, can re-initiate grammatical development and reduce long-term fossilization.

The review of literature reveals that intralingual processes, particularly overgeneralization and fossilization, play a central role in shaping Pakistani learners' English writing. Overgeneralization represents the learner's active rule formation; fossilization reflects the stabilization of incorrect rules. Together, they define the developmental arc of interlanguage. Despite extensive exposure to English in formal education, Pakistani learners' writing continues to exhibit fossilized grammatical patterns, suggesting that traditional grammar teaching and rote learning fail to address the underlying cognitive processes. Therefore, pedagogical models in Pakistan must move from error correction to error diagnosis, treating errors not as evidence of failure but as indicators of developmental stages.

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study followed a qualitative descriptive design supported by quantitative frequency analysis to investigate the patterns of intralingual errors in Pakistani learners' English writing. Drawing on Corder's (1967) and Richards' (2015) frameworks of *Error Analysis (EA)*, the research aimed to explore how learners internalize, overgeneralize, and ultimately fossilize grammatical rules. The study also adopted insights from Selinker's (1972) *Interlanguage Theory*, which views learners' language as a transitional, evolving system characterized by both creativity and limitation. This design was chosen because it allows a deeper understanding of *how* and *why* learners produce certain types of errors, emphasizing developmental processes rather than surface correction.

The investigation sought to document the continuum from overgeneralization to fossilization, showing how early, rule-based errors can stabilize into permanent forms within the learner's interlanguage. The approach was thus both diagnostic (identifying types and causes of error) and developmental (understanding progression and stabilization).

2. Participants

The participants included 60 Pakistani undergraduate students. All had studied English as a compulsory subject for at least eight years and represented diverse first-language backgrounds, including Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashto. None had lived or studied in an English-speaking country, ensuring that their exposure to English was primarily classroom-based. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants whose English writing demonstrated both communicative competence and recurrent grammatical inaccuracy. This sample typifies Pakistani ESL learners who are functionally proficient but structurally inconsistent, ideal for examining intralingual error development and fossilization.

3. Data Collection

Data were collected through two writing tasks administered under classroom conditions:

1. A free composition task on general topics such as *My Favourite Teacher*, *social media and Youth*, or *Environmental Pollution*, and
2. A guided writing task requiring description, narration, or argumentation based on visual or situational prompts.

Each participant produced two essays of 250–300 words, resulting in a total corpus of 120 writing samples. Dictionaries, grammar checkers, and online tools were prohibited to ensure authentic written production. Essays were handwritten, collected immediately, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

To complement the data, teachers were briefly interviewed informally to confirm which grammar points had been taught, allowing comparison between taught structures and error patterns. This ensured that identified errors reflected internalized learning processes, not a lack of prior exposure.

4. Analytical Framework

The analysis followed Ellis's (2008) and James's (1998) four-stage model of Error Analysis:

1. Identification of errors: Locating all grammatical deviations from standard English norms.
2. Classification of errors: Grouping errors into specific intralingual categories (e.g., overgeneralization, simplification, incomplete rule application, false concept formation, fossilization).

3. Explanation of causes: Interpreting the developmental origins of each error type using the frameworks of *overgeneralization* and *fossilization*.
4. Evaluation and quantification: Calculating frequency and persistence rates to identify fossilized structures.

Only intralingual errors were analyzed; interlingual (L1 transfer) errors were excluded to maintain focus on internal language development.

Error categories were defined as follows:

- Overgeneralization: Extension of grammatical rules beyond their correct scope (*buyed, childrens, most wisest*).
- Simplification/Omission: Deletion of obligatory grammatical elements (*He is doctor*).
- Incomplete Rule Application: Partial use of rules (*He do not knows*).
- False Concept Formation: Incorrect rule interpretation (*more better*).
- Fossilized Forms: Errors recurring consistently across multiple tasks and levels.

Each error instance was manually coded, counted, and tabulated. To confirm fossilization, an error had to appear in at least 50% of students' essays despite evidence of instruction in that area.

5. Procedure

All essays were read carefully and analyzed line by line. Errors were underlined, numbered, and classified according to the categories above. To ensure reliability, two independent raters, both experienced ESL teachers, coded the data. The inter-rater reliability coefficient was calculated as 0.87, indicating high agreement and analytical consistency. Quantitative data were organized into frequency tables (Tables 1–3), showing total counts and percentages of each error category. Qualitative interpretation was then applied to explain *why* these errors occurred and *how* they reflected the developmental transition from overgeneralization to fossilization. The researcher also examined evidence of error persistence across the two tasks by comparing whether the same forms (e.g., *He go*

yesterday, childrens) reappeared in the guided and free compositions. Recurrence across tasks and proficiency levels was taken as an indicator of fossilization.

6. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis was conducted in two complementary phases:

- Quantitative Phase: Error frequencies and percentages were computed for each category and subcategory. Overgeneralization emerged as the most frequent (42%), followed by simplification (23%), incomplete rule application (18%), fossilization (12%), and false concept formation (5%).
- Qualitative Phase: Patterns were examined for evidence of progression from *rule formation* to *rule stabilization*. Persistent forms such as *He is doctor* and *childrens* illustrated fossilization, the endpoint of intralingual development.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches provided a holistic understanding of how Pakistani learners' grammatical systems evolve, stabilize, and occasionally stagnate over time. This methodological approach effectively captured the cognitive and developmental processes underlying learners' grammatical competence. By integrating descriptive analysis, frequency data, and developmental interpretation, the study illuminated the intralingual continuum from creative overgeneralization to entrenched fossilization. The design ensured both empirical rigor and theoretical depth, linking observable writing patterns to broader principles of interlanguage evolution in the Pakistani ESL context.

Analysis

It shows five main intralingual error categories: *Overgeneralization*, *Simplification/Omission*, *Incomplete Rule Application*, *False Concept Formation*, and *Fossilization*, along with total counts, percentages, and illustrative examples.

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Intralingual Error Types in Pakistani Learners' English Writing (N = 120 essays)

	Error Category	Description	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Common Examples Found in Data
1	Overgeneralization	Application of grammatical rules beyond appropriate contexts; extending regular patterns to irregular items	252	42%	<i>buyed, comed, childrens, peoples, most wisest, more better, go-ed</i>
2	Simplification / Omission	Omission of articles, auxiliaries, or other grammatical elements for ease of production	138	23%	<i>He is doctor, She went market, He go school daily</i>
3	Incomplete Rule Application	Partial use or misformation of grammatical rules, often mixing correct and incorrect elements	108	18%	<i>He do not knows, She have gone, He is agree with me</i>
4	False Concept Formation	Misinterpretation or wrong generalization of grammatical rules leading to hybrid forms	30	5%	<i>more easier, most wisest, more better</i>
5	Fossilized Forms	Errors that have become stable and repeatedly occur across different writings and proficiency levels	72	12%	<i>He is doctor, childrens, He go yesterday, They has come</i>
		Total	600	100%	

Interpretation of Table 1

The frequency data confirm that overgeneralization is the dominant intralingual process, constituting nearly half of all grammatical errors. This finding reinforces the view that Pakistani learners actively internalize English grammar but tend to extend rules mechanically. Simplification and omission errors form the second most common category, reflecting learners' attempts to minimize linguistic complexity during writing. Although fossilized forms account for only

12% of total errors represent the most resistant and persistent type, indicating stagnation in grammatical development. Their recurrence across proficiency levels supports Selinker's (1972) claim that fossilization marks a cessation of interlanguage growth.

Table 2: Subcategories of Overgeneralization Errors in Pakistani Learners' English Writing (N = 252)

	Subcategory	Description	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Common Examples Found in Data
1	Verb Tense and Aspect	Extension of regular <i>-ed</i> rule to irregular verbs and misuse of tense markers	102	40.5%	<i>buyed, comed, runned, eated, throwed</i>
2	Pluralization	Adding <i>-s</i> or <i>-es</i> to all nouns, including uncountable or irregular ones	58	23.0%	<i>childrens, peoples, furnitures, informations</i>
3	Comparative/Superlative Forms	Redundant or double marking of adjectives and adverbs	36	14.3%	<i>more better, most wisest, more easier</i>
4	Subject-Verb Agreement and Inflection	Extending base-form rules to all verbs or adding <i>-s</i> inappropriately	28	11.1%	<i>He go, She playings, He studyings, They comes</i>
5	Article and Determiner Usage	Incorrect generalization of article rules or misuse before vowels/consonants	18	7.1%	<i>a honest man, an university, a apple</i>
6	Preposition Use	Overextending prepositional patterns learned from fixed phrases	10	4.0%	<i>discuss about, demand for to, married with</i>
		Total	252	100%	

Interpretation of Table 2

The breakdown highlights that verb tense and aspect overgeneralization (40.5%) is the most frequent subcategory. This finding indicates that learners tend to apply the *-ed* rule to all verbs without recognizing irregular patterns, suggesting partial rule internalization rather than memorized exceptions. Pluralization errors (23%) form the next major group, revealing learners' tendency to generalize the *-s* plural rule even to non-count nouns (*informations, furnitures*). The redundant comparative/superlative forms (14.3%), *more better, most wisest*, demonstrate overextension of the adjective

morphology, while subject-verb agreement errors (11.1%) show that learners apply the *-s* inflection inconsistently.

These subcategories collectively confirm that Pakistani learners' overgeneralization is systematic, not random: it follows clear internal logic shaped by learners' developing interlanguage. The recurrence of these forms across multiple essays and educational levels also points toward incipient fossilization, a stage where incorrect generalizations begin to stabilize as fixed linguistic habits.

Table 3: Frequency and Percentage of Fossilized Error Types in Pakistani Learners' English Writing (N = 72)

	Fossilized Error Type	Description	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Common Examples Found in Data
1	Article Omission / Misuse	Consistent omission or incorrect use of <i>a/an/the</i> in obligatory contexts	20	27.8%	<i>He is doctor, Honesty is best policy, She went market</i>
2	Tense Inconsistency	Recurrent absence or misuse of tense markers despite explicit teaching	15	20.8%	<i>He go yesterday, She eat breakfast and went college, They has come</i>
3	Subject-Verb Agreement Errors	Persistent mismatch between subject and verb forms, especially with auxiliaries	12	16.7%	<i>He do not knows, They has come, She have finished</i>
4	Plural Redundancy	Repeated addition of <i>-s</i> to irregular or uncountable nouns	10	13.9%	<i>childrens, peoples, furnitures, informations</i>
5	Comparative and Superlative Redundancy	Continuous use of double-marked comparative or superlative forms	7	9.7%	<i>more better, most wisest, more easier</i>
6	Prepositional Overuse / Misuse	Use of prepositions patterned on previously learned structures	4	5.6%	<i>discuss about, married with, demand for to</i>
7	Auxiliary Omission or Misplacement	Persistent absence or incorrect placement of auxiliary verbs	4	5.6%	<i>He not coming, You going there?</i>
		Total	72	100%	

Interpretation of Table 3

The data confirm that article omission and tense inconsistency are the most deeply fossilized error types among Pakistani learners. These structures

occurred frequently and across all proficiency levels, supporting earlier research by Rana et al. (2016). and Nazir (2023) that identified article and

tense misuse as stable features of Pakistani interlanguage.

Subject-verb agreement errors (16.7%) and plural redundancy (13.9%) also appeared repeatedly, even in essays of advanced learners, suggesting that grammatical agreement remains one of the most resistant aspects of English learning in Pakistan. Fossilization of comparative redundancy (*more better, most wisest*) and prepositional misuse further indicates that learners' early overgeneralizations, if left unchecked, eventually become stabilized internal rules. Despite prolonged instruction, these forms reappeared in the same way, showing no signs of self-correction or restructuring. Collectively, these fossilized patterns illustrate how intralingual processes, particularly overgeneralization, solidify into permanent interlanguage features. They validate Selinker's (1972) concept of fossilization and show that Pakistani learners' grammatical plateau results from insufficient feedback, tolerance of error, and limited exposure to authentic corrective environments.

Discussion of Results

The analysis presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3 reveals a clear developmental continuum within Pakistani learners' interlanguage, a gradual shift from rule formation (overgeneralization) to rule stabilization (fossilization). The data show that overgeneralization is the most frequent and foundational intralingual process, accounting for 42% of all errors. Learners consistently extended grammatical rules, particularly in verb tense, pluralization, and adjective comparison, to contexts where they were inapplicable. As shown in Table 2, this tendency reflects the learners' cognitive effort to simplify English grammar through uniform rule application. However, the same patterns reappeared persistently across multiple essays and proficiency levels, confirming that overgeneralized forms had begun to fossilize. Table 3 provides decisive evidence of this transition. Errors such as *He is doctor*, *He go yesterday*, and *childrens* occurred repeatedly despite extensive classroom exposure to English, demonstrating stabilization of inaccurate forms. These fossilized structures show that learners' grammatical systems have reached a plateau, they communicate meaning effectively but with persistent nonstandard accuracy.

In the Pakistani context, where teaching often emphasizes examination results and communicative adequacy rather than structural precision, such fossilization is reinforced rather than corrected. The data, therefore, substantiate the theoretical claim by Selinker (1972) that fossilization is an inevitable outcome of incomplete interlanguage development. Pakistani learners' writing exemplifies this continuum vividly: the journey from creative overgeneralization to entrenched fossilization illustrates both the progress and the limits of intralingual learning in a constrained instructional environment.

The results of this study provide significant insight into how Pakistani learners acquire, internalize, and stabilize grammatical rules in English as a second language. By tracing the progression from overgeneralization to fossilization, the findings illuminate the dynamic but fragile nature of intralingual development in learners' interlanguage. This discussion interprets these results within theoretical and contextual frames, drawing connections to previous research and highlighting the pedagogical consequences of such patterns. The dominance of overgeneralization errors (42%) in the corpus indicates that Pakistani learners are not passive recipients of English grammar but active constructors of linguistic hypotheses. As Corder (1967) argued, learner errors reveal the internal logic of a developing linguistic system, not simply deviations from standard forms. Students' frequent use of *buyed*, *childrens*, or *most wisest* shows that they are applying rules deductively, generalizing morphological and syntactic patterns to make the target language more regular and predictable.

However, overgeneralization becomes problematic when learners' cognitive strategies outpace corrective input. Without explicit and timely feedback, these early developmental errors evolve into habitualized forms, leading directly to fossilization. This finding reinforces Selinker's (1972) assertion that overgeneralization is not only a creative process but also one of the five potential causes of fossilization in interlanguage. A major outcome of this study is the clear evidence that fossilization is widespread among Pakistani learners, particularly in errors related to articles, tense consistency, and subject-verb agreement. These fossilized forms persist even in advanced writing, indicating a plateau in learners' grammatical accuracy despite continued exposure

to English instruction. The phenomenon supports Han's (2004) argument that fossilization represents a state of "premature stabilization," where learners' interlanguage ceases to evolve toward target-like competence.

The fossilized errors identified, *He is doctor*, *He go yesterday*, *They has come*, *childrens*, have become deeply embedded linguistic habits. These patterns mirror those found in prior Pakistani studies (Nazir, 2023; Rana et al., 2016; Mumtaz et al., 2024) suggesting that fossilization in Pakistani English is not an isolated issue but a systemic feature of ESL learning in the country.

In addition, fossilization reflects sociolinguistic reinforcement. Since communication in Pakistan's multilingual environment often occurs in "Pakistani English", which tolerates minor grammatical irregularities, learners receive limited social pressure to reform their usage. Thus, fossilization is perpetuated by both instructional and environmental factors, inadequate corrective mechanisms within the classroom and linguistic tolerance beyond it. The progression from overgeneralization to fossilization observed in this study validates the interlanguage continuum proposed by Selinker (1972). Learners first hypothesize rules through overgeneralization (e.g., *goed*), simplify them (e.g., *He go yesterday*), and ultimately stabilize them (e.g., continuing to write *He go yesterday* at higher levels). This developmental sequence confirms that intralingual errors are not random but systematic, reflecting how learners internalize and restructure linguistic information. The findings resonate with Ellis (2008), who emphasized that interlanguage development is marked by phases of restructuring and stabilization. When restructuring ceases, as in fossilization, the learner's linguistic system becomes resistant to change. In the Pakistani data, such resistance was evident in repeated forms across time and proficiency, supporting the notion of a "frozen" interlanguage. This continuum also parallels psychological models of learning, where overgeneralization is a necessary but risky strategy for hypothesis testing. The challenge lies in the transition: if the learner fails to "notice the gap" between interlanguage and target norms (Schmidt, 1990), the incorrect rule becomes automatized. Pakistani learners' essays illustrate this process vividly; the same fossilized patterns persist because learners have ceased to perceive them as errors.

The Pakistani educational system itself contributes substantially to this pattern of intralingual fossilization. The curriculum is largely exam-driven, emphasizing memorization and written reproduction over spontaneous, communicative accuracy (Rahman, 2011; Asma et al., 2025). Grammar is often taught in isolation from meaningful contexts, resulting in rote rule learning rather than rule awareness. As a consequence, learners internalize incomplete or incorrect rules, which are then generalized mechanically.

Moreover, feedback in Pakistani classrooms tends to be implicit or minimal. Teachers focus more on essay content and vocabulary than on grammatical accuracy, a practice that allows errors to persist unchallenged (Kalhor et al., 2025). The study's finding that fossilized errors remain unchanged despite instruction reflects this pedagogical weakness. Additionally, limited exposure to authentic English input exacerbates the issue. Outside classrooms, learners primarily communicate in Urdu or regional languages, and English is used mainly for academic purposes. Mahmood et al. (2018) noted that fossilization often coexists with affective barriers that limit learners' willingness to restructure their linguistic systems. In Pakistani classrooms, where English proficiency is linked to academic status and self-image, learners often prioritize fluency and content delivery over accuracy. As a result, fossilized grammatical habits become psychologically reinforced, the learner feels secure using them even when they are incorrect. This emotional comfort zone contributes to the persistence of fossilization alongside cognitive and instructional causes. The findings highlight the need for a pedagogical shift in Pakistani ESL education from error avoidance to error diagnosis and intervention. Overgeneralization should be treated as a natural developmental stage, a sign of learners actively engaging with grammar, while fossilization should be recognized as a warning of stagnation.

To address fossilization, teachers must adopt form-focused instruction alongside communicative methods. As Ferris (2011) and Han & Odlin (2006) suggest, effective fossilization treatment requires explicit, repetitive, and contrastive feedback that encourages learners to reanalyze their internalized rules. For example, providing visual contrasts (*childrens* → *children*), metalinguistic explanation, and learner self-editing tasks can help reactivate grammatical awareness. The persistence

of fossilized forms in Pakistani learners' writing thus reveals not linguistic failure but instructional stagnation. It underscores the need for ongoing corrective dialogue between learners, teachers, and the curriculum. When teachers interpret errors diagnostically rather than judgmentally, learners are encouraged to experiment with language – the very process that sustains interlanguage growth.

The discussion demonstrates that Pakistani learners' grammatical errors emerge from predictable intralingual processes: overgeneralization initiates learning, simplification supports it, and fossilization halts it. The results confirm that these processes are shaped by both cognitive development and contextual constraints within Pakistan's educational system.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored the complex trajectory of intralingual development in Pakistani learners' English writing, tracing the linguistic and cognitive progression from overgeneralization to fossilization. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Corder's (1967) Error Analysis and Selinker's (1972) Interlanguage Theory, the research revealed that learners' grammatical errors are not random deviations but systematic reflections of internal rule formation. Through the analysis of 120 student essays, the study identified five major categories of intralingual error, overgeneralization, simplification, incomplete rule application, false concept formation, and fossilization, with overgeneralization emerging as the most frequent process.

The results demonstrated that Pakistani learners actively construct and internalize grammatical hypotheses but often extend rules indiscriminately. Forms such as *buyed*, *childrens*, and *most wisest* illustrate their effort to make English morphology more regular and cognitively manageable. However, when left uncorrected or reinforced by habitual classroom use, these forms evolve into fossilized structures, evident in persistent patterns such as *He is doctor* and *He go yesterday*. This stabilization of error represents a plateau in interlanguage development, where linguistic competence ceases to progress despite continued exposure to English instruction.

The study contributes to the broader field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) by offering empirical evidence that intralingual processes can both enable and constrain learning.

Overgeneralization represents the learner's creativity, fossilization their stagnation. Recognizing this continuum allows educators to perceive errors not as signs of failure but as diagnostic indicators of developmental stages. Thus, the journey from overgeneralization to fossilization encapsulates the entire narrative of Pakistani learners' English learning experience—creative, constrained, and contextually bound.

Teachers should treat errors as learning opportunities rather than failures. Activities such as *error analysis workshops*, *self-editing tasks*, and *peer correction exercises* can help students identify their own recurring mistakes and understand why they occur. When learners become conscious of their fossilized forms, they are more likely to modify them. Teachers must provide systematic corrective feedback, focusing on the most frequent and fossilized structures, articles, tense consistency, and agreement. According to Ferris (2011), explicit correction combined with metalinguistic explanation is more effective than implicit feedback, particularly for persistent grammatical issues.

While communicative language teaching (CLT) emphasizes fluency, it often neglects accuracy. Teachers should balance CLT with *form-focused episodes*, where grammatical rules are taught contextually and reinforced through writing practice. For example, contrastive drills on *regular vs. irregular verbs* and *count vs. non-count nouns* can prevent overgeneralization from becoming fossilized. Incorporating automated grammar checkers, AI-based writing platforms, and learner corpora can provide immediate feedback and individualized learning support. Such tools enable learners to notice errors in real time, a key step in countering fossilization through enhanced input awareness. Teachers should receive professional development in interlanguage analysis and fossilization theory. This training will help them distinguish between developmental and fossilized errors, allowing for targeted remediation rather than blanket correction. Feedback should not be limited to teacher comments. Group editing, oral recasts, and peer response sessions can create a collaborative learning atmosphere where students notice and reflect on their fossilized language use through interaction.

In conclusion, the study underscores that errors are the language learner's mirror, they reflect not only linguistic struggles but also the entire learning

ecosystem in which they occur. Pakistani learners' movement from overgeneralization to fossilization is both a sign of learning and a symptom of pedagogical stagnation. The challenge for teachers, researchers, and policymakers is to reignite the developmental process by transforming fossilized patterns into sites of reflection, discovery, and growth. Only when errors are reimagined as evidence of evolving competence rather than permanent weakness can English education in Pakistan achieve its goal of nurturing confident, accurate, and autonomous language users.

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