

## TOWARDS INTERLANGUAGE DEFOSSILIZING – A LANGUAGE LEARNING AND USING STRATEGY BASED MODEL

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### ***Abstract***

*Starting from certain observations about the features characterizing her educational context, the author raises the issue of interlanguage fossilization. The concept is discussed with a view to extracting important directions of ameliorative research, especially in identifying ways and means of defossilizing the learners. A possible remedial model is proposed and defined, based on ongoing empirical research carried out with engineering students studying in English, and created by designing and implementing a set of activities focused on language learning and using strategies as their central supporting element. The tasks and their rationale are briefly presented.*

**Keywords:** second language acquisition, interlanguage fossilization, language learning strategies, language using strategies, defossilization, motivation

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### ***Introduction – the origin of the problem***

The present study has stemmed from observing the phenomenon of fossilization present with the students of the Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages (FILS), both freshmen and sophomores. They tend to make the same mistakes repetitively. Moreover, more or less the same mistake repertoire is identifiable with second-year learners as with first-year students, despite their exposure to the English course input. What is even more dangerous, the students tend to accept that situation with serenity and/or complacency, either as they are not really aware of its long term potential dangers, or as their fossilized errors do not, unfortunately, affect intelligibility of communication in school in a drastic manner.

It is a matter of wide recognition that fossilized errors become really worrisome when they can be considered as a sign of low motivation in learning and of a quite reduced level of learner self-awareness. Hence, we believe that it is one of the important roles of the teacher to mastermind and manage the defossilization campaign. This paper presents the current stage in this rather farsighted "battle", covering the main elements of the empirical research carried out with a view to increasing students' motivation and awareness of the fossilization phenomenon. The research is based on embedding language learning strategies (LLS) and language using strategies (LUS) focused on helping the learners to reach a stage

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where they are aware of the risks of fossilization and they can monitor their own process of eliminating it, if possible even autonomously at the post-course stage.

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### ***On interlanguage (de)fossilization and the role of LLS and LUS – literature review***

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Most authors approaching the fossilization issue, from various perspectives, begin by emphasizing the fact that the term is not very clearly defined in the specialised literature. We would add that when, and if, a definition is attempted at, then the point of view regarding the matter differs much from author to author. One can even find lists covering a variety of definitions. It may be useful to state that some of them could be identified in our context, as well.

Thus, for one author (Ellis, 1985), one cause of fossilization is the satisfaction of the learner's communicative needs – a view also shared by other authors (Selinker and Lamendella, 1978). Many other factors come in turn under focus underlying fossilization in the literature: L1 influence, age, inappropriate learning strategy, will to maintain identity, false automatization, quality of input, simplification a.s.o.

We suggest that, in an effort to explain the reasons of the phenomenon, a better way of having these causes classified would be to group them under the umbrella of several categories, as follows:

- biological,
- social-affective,
- cultural,
- pedagogical,
- cognitive,
- environmental.

It is certainly important to stress the fact that for each learner or learning situation these factors may occur in different combinations.

The fossilization phenomenon affects the process of acquiring L2, during which interlanguage occurs, i.e. a temporary grammatical system of the learner, which is in continuous change, developing into a more or less vague approximation of the target language. In an ideal situation, it should keep evolving until it reaches a level which is (almost) equivalent to L2. But this does not happen very often, and literature (and language teachers' experience, as well, for that matter) points out to a diminishing of progress in attaining L2 with many learners. As pointed out (Selinker, 1972), this is valid for about 95% of all language learners. The phenomenon was termed fossilization (Selinker, 1972). He describes it as a 'permanent cessation of progress' towards the target language. The halt generally takes place at the moment when the learners have reached a level when they can

perform certain activities in L2 with the level of proficiency attained by them at that stage.

According to the same author, fossilization can be of two very different types: (i) favourable fossilization (when correct usage becomes fossilized in the interlanguage), and (ii) unfavourable fossilization, viz. using a certain structure incorrectly, especially if the learners are focused more on message than on form. It is actually a form of failure, as the learner has got used to using the structure in an incorrect manner. This is difficult – but, we maintain, not impossible – to rectify.

Interlanguage has several main features, as pointed out by one author (Selinker, 1972). It is:

- permeable (open to correction and change, able to evolve),
- dynamic (open to continuous revision/extension),
- systematic (it follows a predictable order in its evolution).

If the causes of the phenomenon have thoroughly been investigated, as well as the precipitating conditions conducive to its turning acute, the profile of most prone to fossilize learners and the range of linguistic material most likely to become fossilized, the possibilities of preventing it or defeating fossilization are still open to researchers. We should underline the role of motivation to learning as one relevant factor of improvement. Similarly, the relationship between fossilization and the learners' communicative needs has been investigated in recent years.

We will try to recompose the multifaceted concept of fossilization by listing in a totally non-prioritized order several points mentioned by different authors that have studied the issue. Thus, after the age of 10, L2 acquisition tends to be a 'rather slow, laborious' process, tending to stop 'short of native-like proficiency' (Han, 2002). There is even the hypothesis that this 'cessation of interlanguage learning' may be permanent (Selinker, 1996). Interlanguage is seen as an 'independent language system', different from the mother tongue, which however is influential on it (Li, 2011). If the learner has reached fossilization at a stage at which a certain linguistic feature does not yet have the same form as in the target language, then it will be manifested as an error (Ellis, 1985).

Another author (Hyltenstam, 1988) shows that fossilization covers: (i) either interlanguage features that are deviated from native speaker's norms and will not develop any further, or (ii) 'deviant features' which may seem left behind but may occur in the learner's speech.

There is an author (Mason, 2005) who points out to the 'learner-driven' character of the grammatical systems students build at the interlanguage stage. At different stages in their evolution, learners build their own grammatical systems, based on strategies such as relying on L1, on the desire to communicate or on the Universal Grammar. Fossilization is radiographed in motion, with the retention of certain errors while making headway in other respects, or, with many of the foreign

language learners getting ‘stuck upon a plateau’. He also provides a set of significant variables to be taken into consideration as having effect on language learning: sociological and affective factors, amount of exposure, opportunities for expression, negative feedback (more precisely, ‘signalling incomprehension’, not necessarily correction) and ‘absence or presence of pressure on communication’.

A rather pessimistic view can be found with an author (Han, 1998) quite a lot involved in analyzing the phenomenon. She considers that at empirical level fossilization involves the stabilized interlanguage forms that remain in speech/writing irrespective of input or learner’s actions to overcome it. Another not very optimistic view (Bley-Vroman, 1989) maintains that upon reaching fossilization even serious conscious efforts to improve remain futile, with only temporary improvement, followed by backsliding.

We feel, though, that there may be identifiable ways that can be conducive to progress, even if we discuss about young adults, so it is more about defossilization than about preventing that we are trying to campaign. In line with this opinion goes another author (Li, 2011), in whose study we have found a range of proposed measures to fight against fossilization: ‘using negative feedback and positive cognitive affective feedback’, ‘increasing the quantity and quality of the target language input’, ‘actively cultivating learners’ positive self-cognitive abilities’, ‘exploring learners’ learning strategies and communication strategies and stimulating learners’ study motivation so as to minimize learners’ interlanguage fossilization’. In the same vein, another opinion (Vigil and Oller, 1976) shows that feedback to the learner is important, mainly along the cognitive dimension, although the affective side of feedback is also of significance. Two other authors (Manqiu Qian & Zhihong Xiao, 2010) also attempt at identifying good strategies to overcome temporary fossilization:

- taking a right attitude to students’ mistakes (not a sign of failure, but an unavoidable phenomenon, and teachers should “respect” students’ errors),
- stimulating the students’ motivation to learn a foreign language,
- paying attention to verbal output and grasping the just relationship between accuracy and fluency,
- giving strategic feedback,
- stimulating students’ imagination and paying attention to their creativity,
- encouraging learners to become good language learners.

As regards the role of achievement motivation (Vujisic, 2009), interesting evidence shows that interlanguage fossilization is not actually a permanent phenomenon, pointing out to results that have demonstrated that there is a ‘moderate to strong positive relationship between interlanguage fossilization and achievement motivation’.

In order to develop a LLS and LUS based model of crusading against interlanguage fossilization, a brief review of the strategy connected concepts is necessary at this

stage. Thus, it is emphasized (Oxford, 1990) that we can discuss about 'strategic poliphonies' in language learning/teaching/evaluating. These should be seen and implemented in a principled manner, appropriately correlated and allowing flexibility of the approach. It is also important to maintain a clear cut distinction (Cohen, 1996) between LLS and LUS at operational level.

As regards the manner in which LLS and LUS can be successfully embedded in the English course with a view to increasing the learners' motivation, and hence their chances of attaining success and initiating the process of defossilization (Catelly, 2009), there are a range of possibilities, alongside a continuum from explicit manners in which this can be done, and up to implicit modes, more precisely some modalities of embedding strategy awareness raising activities as regards the phenomenon of fossilization can be not very strictly delimited from the language oriented ones, while in others there can be a common line for both approaches, followed a separations of plans. It is essential that in order to make the process as efficient as possible, the context concrete features should be analyzed and taken into consideration.

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### *The educational context profile*

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As shown above, there are not many studies focused on how to attain defossilization of the learners. It is a type of research that may extend over a quite long period of time. At present, the model proposed, based on LLS and LUS activities embedded in the English language course of the FILS first- and second-year students is being implemented for the first time in a coherent manner, although there have been previous piloting stages at various moments in the course. The application of the model is quite time consuming, but it is hypothesized to result in a global increase in the students' motivation and a decrease of their fossilized errors, which make it worth trying.

One major objective of the model is that the learners' awareness of the fossilization phenomenon and its risks should be raised so that they may become more motivated in fighting against it.

The profile of the situation, which has also been the starting point in trying to design an operational defossilization model, has resulted from a combination of direct classroom observation, the learners' written pieces of communication in their portfolios, their written tests and oral production in class etc. The research is of an ameliorative type, but it is rather premature to assert that there has been any noticeable (or sizeable) effect. Therefore, we wish to present the proposed model as an open ongoing experiment, that can be improved by fellow teachers' suggestions, which we would welcome.

So, who are my FILS – Electrical engineering students? I teach two groups of first-year and two of second-year students, and in each group there are students coming from at least 5 - 6 different countries, beside the Romanian ones. They are generally young adults, with ages ranging from 18 to 22, although there are some exceptions, of students aged over 25 – particularly foreign ones. They sat for an entry test of English, so it is assumed that they have reached a level along the lines of B2/C1 – CEFR. If that is totally so, we will have to analyze in what follows.

The data comes mostly from examining their spoken and written communication level. A lot of useful feedback comes from an essay about their opinions as regards their life as FILS students, which was part of the end of term test. It was also illustrative as to their level of awareness as regards their language proficiency, as well as the balance between fluency and accuracy.

In their answers to the test, an overwhelming 90% of them mention the fact that they do have difficulties in understanding the input presented by their teachers, blaming it on a range of causes, from the high level of the content, to the speed of the teachers in delivering the lectures, their own lack of learning habits and/or strategies at higher education level and, last but not least, the variety of accents and English proficiency level of the teachers – all this with numerous mistakes, from the almost classical wrong word order, misspelling of words such as "profes(s – sic!)or" or "(e – sic!)nglish", lack of "s" with the 3rd person of the verb for the Simple Present Tense, and up to a generalized informality of register and style originating in mobile phone message texting!

Certainly, there are fossilized errors obviously due to L1 interference, but there are also many common errors to all students – for instance pronouncing "a", instead of "an" in front of a word beginning with a vowel, use of the Future Simple tense in temporal or conditional clauses, the permanent "must to" construction, distorted interrogative and negative forms a.s.o. The list quite fully corresponds to any Google search return for the most common errors of learners of English.

They also maintained that, as their main purpose is to manage to learn the technical and scientific content of their courses, they are not much concerned with their accuracy, as it is fluency that matters most for them, even at written tests, with the teachers evaluating them especially for their technical knowledge, and not for the quality of their linguistic communication.

The students seem to be only vaguely aware that, beyond their difficulty in learning the technical content, they might have a problem with the language proficiency level, but they tend to see only the positive aspects, viz. they are given the opportunity to speak with their foreign colleagues and thus practise English and learn a lot about different countries/cultures/customs. They do not seem to reject/criticise or even correct those fellow members whose language command is lower than the group average level. Moreover, only one student – a very good one

in terms of language proficiency – expressed her concern for the risk they may run when they graduate and reach the first job stage, that the language level may be too low.

There is also another "myth" among these students, perhaps originating in their IT profile and interests, that maintains that, in terms of register and style, English is more permissive and favours informality. Consequently, they speak and mostly write in the manner of chats, forums, informal email messages etc. for tasks that would absolutely require a (semi)formal style and register.

One possible cause for such a situation may also be what fellow teachers call, on specialized forums of discussion (ELTCHAT, 2011) debating the fossilization phenomenon, too much "green light", i.e. too much permissivity in error correction by the teachers, with a view to supporting the students to become as fluent as possible, thus neglecting accuracy.

One special problem encountered is that of students' reluctance to get out of their comfort zone. They justify their attitude by the fact that content learning prevails among their interests, and not language level improvement, and also by the fact that the teachers are not native speakers. Under such circumstances, to motivate students does not seem to be an easy task.

Another constraint of the situation is the limited amount of time available, which has to be well administered, and each decision must be well justified pedagogically and in terms of both teacher's and learners' priorities on the course open and hidden agendas.

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### *The LLS and LUS based defossilization model – a proposal*

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The starting point in generating the LLS and LUS based defossilization model is represented by some previous research of the author (Cately, 2009), in which LLS and LUS were embedded in an innovative manner in an ESP module, with a view to increasing motivation and learning progress of the students.

The introduction of LLS and LUS based tasks in the English course for the FILS learners in the context described will, therefore, have an awareness raising character as regards the necessity and ways of attaining defossilization by the students.

The model is devised along three flexible lines of action, which should be seen as working together towards attaining the main aims: besides an increase of the learners' awareness of the need to defossilize, it is meant to increase the students' motivation, and it also has remedial characteristics. One important feature to be developed as a result of its consistent systematic application is to support the

learners to develop a (self)critical attitude towards their own language learning process.

At the present stage, the application of the model is ongoing (it is more of a process oriented type of didactic action, although in this particular case the product, i.e. defossilization, is also of utmost significance) and it has been planned for a longer period of time – approx. 25 weeks. It should be seen as a case study for the moment, as the experiment results have not been fully obtained yet. It is amendable and can be extended to other educational contexts, with certain shifts of emphasis prompted by specific features.

The type of LLS and LUS that have been used are focused on the cognitive, but also the social and affective aspects. Another aim is to provide students with a wide range of opportunities of expressing themselves, and the subtle differences between fossilized errors in the spoken vs the written patterns of communication should also be taken into account in devising the tasks.

In its broad lines, the model proposed has been conceived as a combination of tasks with focus on:

1. reflection,
2. correction,
3. awareness raising.

It is worth emphasizing that, as will be seen from the presentation of the tasks, the three sides quite often merge. Each of these components is described from the viewpoint of the rationale underlying it. However, the above seems to be the right logical sequence of introducing them to the students. Certainly, their distribution along the course units, degree of intensity and amount will necessarily depend on the priorities set for that particular course.

Thus, the first stage is that of reflection, where the main attention is given to the carrying out of a (self)analysis and error detection, gradually passing towards peer and whole group error system discovery, with possible extensions towards those in the real world of employees in the field of engineering. The teacher should provide a framework of examples and discussion opportunities, as well as suggestions as regards the instruments the learners should design and use to document their reflection stage.

At the second stage, that of correction, the focus is on remedial work, at self/peer/group levels. One of the teacher's roles at this stage is to foster peer correction and to renew teacher correction – a blend of unexpected feedback, positive and negative, delayed and immediate is suggested by the literature as having potential benefits.

The awareness raising stage, almost fully based on LLS and LUS, brings to fore activities such as Good Language Learner (Stern, 1975) and the learner's diary.

The tasks created and used throughout the experiment are briefly presented below, together with their rationale.

At the reflection stage, LLS are explicitly embedded. The first step should be to make the students notice that they do have fossilized errors. A debate question is raised to the whole group (ELTCHAT, 2011): *How do you feel when you speak to someone who makes a lot of errors in speaking your L1?* Its role is to sensitize learners to the topic for the first time. Students are asked to debate as a group and provide examples from their past experience. As a comment, in my classes, interesting differences occurred in terms of tolerance to errors in communication in a foreign language, and from the discussions a first important idea emerged, viz. that of the risks of miscommunicating in formal or important circumstances.

A reading and speaking task can be introduced next, to point out to the negative consequences of errors in communicating in English at the workplace, on the basis of a newspaper article or another type of text, with the purpose of getting the learners to understand that they may lose their jobs or their professional status in a real life situation of this kind.

In a class with students having over five different L1, it is then feasible to organize peer error analysis, with pairs/groups of students who have different mother tongues. They will be asked to analyze their peers' language learning portfolios and pieces of written communication, such as essays at tests or project texts in order to draw up lists of the main "fossils" (fossilized errors). One mention here about the essay at their written end of term test, whose topic was "Advantages and disadvantages of being a FILS Engineering student", particularly chosen as a form of awareness raising. The students should then draw conclusions as regards the group recurrent errors and the personal ones. Useful lists may emerge from this activity, which can be discussed, (re)grouped as grammar/vocabulary/style/other – with the specification by the students of what they have noticed in their peers' written products.

Comparisons can then be made between the errors identified in written and in spoken communication – which can be detected from other tasks, that can be implemented in conjunction with this one. For instance, the teacher can create speech opportunities for the students, preferably on a different topic than that of accuracy and determining errors, in order to avoid what has been called (ELTCHAT, 2011) "the karaoke effect", which actually means that the learners tend to monitor their speech production much more if they are aware of the task aim of identifying errors, whilst if they are asked to speak on an ESP topic, they will most probably focus on the content and message, rather than on error detection, which is a good thing, as it ensures a more reliable material for the

teacher to record and then use in class for analysis. I used the “job interview” topic as the input source, with students playing the roles of interviewer and interviewee, respectively.

There are several possibilities of getting the students to analyze their own/peers’ speech errors: either by having them listen to the tapes and note down the recurrent errors, or, a procedure which seems to have more impact on the students, namely to write the tapescript and show it to the student (ELTCHAT, 2011). They will probably remember it better, especially if they were not under stress at the recording of speech stage.

From all the reflection tasks it is important that the students draw up their own error lists/fossil dictionaries under a form or another, but which should refer to the type of errors, frequency of occurrence, identification of possible causes (in that, the so-called “usual suspect” is generally the influence of their L1, although other causes may be identified as well).

An interesting aspect to note at this stage is that, when these tasks were used with FILS first- and second-year students, the fossil lists that emerged were more or less similar. So I showed them to the students of the other year, as one more argument that fossilization does exist and something must be done about it. This seemed to have increase determination (or shall/can we call it motivation?), particularly with sophomores, in trying to do away with their fossils.

At the second stage, that of correction, we should perhaps start from simple sentence correction activities, the students’ task being to sort out correct and incorrect sentences. Then more complex activities can be introduced, such as: (i) students are given samples of texts written by their peers and they are asked to correct them from the point of view of grammar, spelling, style, register etc. A follow up task, appropriate for homework, is to ask students to analyze texts in English from forums of non native speakers of English and to identify the main fossilized errors. Alternatively, they can be asked to identify texts written for professional contexts (scientific papers, texts on various sites a.s.o.) drafted by speakers of the same mother tongue as themselves and “hunt” for fossils. Interesting conclusions may emerge from this activity, as the situation at the level of postgraduates using English in professional contexts is not identical in different countries. A discussion of possible causes can conclude this stage. A more complex activity is that of asking the learners to rewrite a “fossilized” text in terms of vocabulary, grammar or register, turning it from an informal into a (semi)formal one. Collaborative writing can be used for this task, with students having different L1 working together.

A very useful follow up task at this stage consists in getting the learners to actually create defossilization oriented tasks for their peers, with prizes for interesting original ideas. Winners should see their products displayed on the group site. It is

advisable to allow students freedom of choice in terms of the errors they wish to deal with in these tasks, thus diversity of approach is encouraged and a larger range of errors are made more visible to the entire group. The rationale underlying this activity is to make the students understand how to use the electronic sources in a creative way, as plagiarism should be strongly discouraged. The correction main purpose can be conducive to an improvement that may resist in time, if the students themselves author the tasks for their peers. Similarly, an increase in the learners' motivation and attention to errors can occur.

A student designed poster campaign may also prove useful: each student is asked to select an important error from their own fossil list (and which can also be identified on the group list – to enhance poster impact) and an A3 format poster is prepared with the correct vs wrong forms. The teacher may encourage the students to have them displayed in class for a period – they could be also useful in teacher error correction, as the teacher can simply point out to one poster, instead of interrupting the oral production of the student in order to correct them – it adds an element of fun and relaxation, increasing feedback effects.

Depending on the group profile, an activity can be organized with some students playing the role of monitors in class, which actually means assuming the role of the teacher in terms of error identification and correction. This activity should be organized at various moments in the learning cycle, and care should be taken to avoid any element of pressure on the rest of the students, for the task to really attain its correction purpose. In the same vein, the teacher can develop a personalized system of providing feedback to the students' errors, comprising gestures, funny moves, various hints to realia in the classroom and the like. They may prove useful in that they provide feedback without necessarily putting pressure on the learners or interrupting them.

Some teachers tend to believe (ELTCHAT, 2011) that even “good old drills” can promote self-awareness from the subconscious to the conscious level with the learners, certainly if they are well organized and justified pedagogically... which gets us neatly to the third category, that of awareness raising.

One important task which fully relies on LLS and LUS in order to get the students to become more aware of their errors repertoire is the student's diary. The rubrics must be kept simple, and they should cover the type of errors noticed by the students in their own production, spoken or written, the priority list of those errors considered as more important than others and which the student wants to “fix”, the peers' errors noticed during class work, ways of approaching correction. This is a highly affective type of task, which can be extended, if this is considered useful, to having the students compare diaries entries regarding their errors lists and the effort made to do away with them.

An equally important LLS and LUS based task is the set of activities around the Good Language Learner (GLL), which can include, for instance, some or all of the following: asking the students to vote for the best language learner in their group, invite the GLLs to answer to (semi)structured interviews as to their “secrets”, record these interviews and finish the cycle with a class discussion of good and bad points in their approach to language learning.

For register awareness raising purposes, variations of the following task can be organized: students receive information as a form of input and they are required to write two texts based on the same input, one formal and the other one informal; then they compare solutions identified and the differences. This can be done during the study of writing focused units, such as letter or email message writing. Alternatively, they are asked to rewrite a text, passing from one register (let’s say informal) to a (semi)formal one. These will make them become more aware of register and style differences, a very sensitive area of fossilization, which leaves room to false assumptions from the learners and misconception.

Sometimes game playing based on reflection and playing with errors is quite rewarding for the students, contributing to making the classroom atmosphere more relaxed and still motivating.

Some more teacher-driven tasks would be (i) to record a speaker (but not a member of the group) of the students’ L1 communicating in English and get the learners to take notes while listening and make errors lists, and (ii) after a written test or the grading of the students’ portfolios, to put an error list on board, without attributing them to the students who had made them – it is a positive form of delayed feedback.

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### *Interlanguage defossilizing - some open conclusions*

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The model presented in this study in its very broad lines needs some time to be applied and even more to verify if the hypotheses are confirmed.

Therefore, we could only sketch its main features here, as an invitation to fellow teachers interested in the same phenomenon to share their views with us.

The author tends to preserve her optimism on the following aspects:

- errors are simply of the persistent kind, and not fossilized,
- fossilization does not equal failure,
- errors can therefore be defossilized.

Moreover, if a teacher designs a coherent systematic approach to defossilization and applies it consistently, then we express our belief that such an action may be successful, at least to a certain extent.

This remains to be checked in time, but there are signs of progress in the students' attitude and in their motivation, which can already be detected in the way they focus on their own and their peers' learning process.

As teachers who carry out empirical research, we should necessarily be aware of the numerous limitations of such a comprehensive activity, from time and management constraints, to potential reluctance in the case of certain students. It is therefore the teacher's role to:

- design the set of activities with their students and the local context in mind,
- facilitate the implementation of the model without actually imposing it to the students,
- be prepared to get feedback from all those involved in the defossilization process,

amend the activities in line with the prompts coming from stakeholders.

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