

*Ahibalova T. M.,**Associate Professor, Kharkiv Institute of Finance  
of Kyiv National University of Trade and Economics**Alpatova O. V.,**Senior Lecturer, Institute of International Education,  
V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University*

## A PHENOMENON OF PLATEAU PHASE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

**Summary.** The following article is devoted to the phenomenon of plateau in foreign language learning. It determines a particular spectrum of differences between obstacles learners encounter at the earlier stages of education and permanent demotivating stopping in their communicative progress. Plateau mostly affects intermediate students at a stage when they are willing to come with fluency and naturalness of language, instead realizing they make no progress anymore. The paper also accents the importance of awareness of fossilization effect, consequently leading to constant errors in case learners are tend to use non-natural interlanguage.

**Key words:** plateau, communication, communicative competence, fossilization, interlanguage, language world view, cross-cultural communication, high-context culture, low-context culture.

**Introduction and relevance of current research.** A phenomenon of plateau in the process of foreign language acquisition mostly refers to the intermediate students' undesirable experience, when a great number of highly motivated ones encounter difficulties and a lack of motivation within ongoing process of learning and self-education.

Indeed, being experts in mother tongue by nature, learners are tend to anticipate sometimes gradually increasing, sometimes rapid progression of quality, smoothness, fluency in FL communicative performance. Moreover, conscientiously and persistently practicing basic language skills – reading, listening, writing and speaking – they expect, from a certain moment of learning, a significant breakthrough, which will allow producing a native-speakers-like language output. Instead, students discover, that mechanism of usable selection of language units and stylistic means does not come with essential grammar and vocabulary.

**Scientific sources and publications review.** In theoretical and practical aspects, the mentioned problem is under analysis within current Methodological Study. The main aspects regarding nature and methodology of foreign language acquisition are clarified by C. Faerch, Fan Yi, P. Foster, G. Kasper, P. Lightbown, S. Moras, A. Pawley, J. Richards, M. Saville-Troike, R. Schmidt, P. Skehan, D. Slobin, N. Spada, M. Swain, F. Syder. Nevertheless, an issue of plateau phenomenon remains the point of researchers' current concernment. Therefore, the **purpose** of the present article is to clarify a nature of difference between discouraging aspects learners face at an early stage of process of acquisition and language plateau manifestations they encounter at their middle stage of gaining competence.

**Statement of the problem.** At an early stage of FLL students are greatly motivated, facing lots of exciting and challenging moments that encourage them to develop their skills. This fact is

easily explained in Philological and Psychological Study due to particular qualities of our language mind.

Born with congenital ability to perceive and interpret information, a human being is able to develop concepts and gain knowledge about reality. A set of kept in mind objects constitutes one's world view system. Denoted with language units, these objects compose a language word view (LWV). Consequently, being holders of monolevelled LWV, learners, in process of time, enlarge their margins to overcome cultural borders. Henceforth, individuals' intellectual capacity rises significantly, since they acquire co-called extra data, presented in foreign language. As a result, they obtain a multilevelled LWV.

Moreover, aimed by secondary school curriculum at routine face-to-face conversations, sightseeing, and probably even participating events, learners may encounter another barrier. We asked our students to list the most valuable skills they gained while acquiring foreign context. They put an ability to look for certain information in the Internet with the use of new-comprehended language means at the top of a scale, only after that the second position was given to power of face-to-face communication. It reveals a true requirement of nowadays learning – a need to use language not just in vacation trips, but in our second reality.

The nature origin of difficulties novices encounter while learning may be interpreted from psychological point of view:

1. Every nation possesses a unique ethnical identity. Impartially, first, children like listening to their grandparents' fairy tales that come from their cultural background. They develop their primary set of morality rules from traditional forms of collectivity and cultural regulation that unite people. Then, teens who study abroad speak with their mothers and fathers, former classmates and relatives in their mother tongue. Along, when adults meet with their compatriots, they communicate in native language wherever they move or relocate. Therefore, language becomes one of the most important means of ethnic identification at any stage of humankind development.

2. Secondly, under parenting in their native language, children automatically develop their propitiousness to their native speech sound. They get used to particular rhythm of intonation, tempo, pauses. Even in conditions of the use of unknown words, kids do not become nervous when communicate with someone who uses the same language.

With foreign languages, it may happen that your child will face communicative barriers, even in spite of pure tutor's intentions, tolerance, and the most advanced teaching approach "do not scare, do not irritate, do not interrupt". This fear to make a mistake can follow young learners and grow simultaneously with their growth. But, according to the rules of successful cross-cultural communication, language fluency and flexibility comes from self-confidence when using

non-native language. Ability to concentrate on interlocutor's messages and produce an appropriate feedback are the most important factors in ensuring the stability of dialogue, focusing on a topic of conversation.

3. The next difficulty occurs not just due to the lack of target-language realities, but for the shortage of foreign stylistic means in speaker's language cognition. In professional conversation, any novice idiom or rarely used phraseological unit can become an obstacle for effective communication. An unfamiliar terminological unit can sometimes negate the whole team's two-week work and break the process of negotiations. Moreover, when we get emotionally unstable under some conditions or want to develop a "spiritual" dialogue, we fall into a trap of having no words.

Whether or no, first stages presuppose a constant curiosity of learners, since another culture symbols and realities, and in communication in particular, reveal a beneficial ground for language memory. Elementary abilities establish a background for extended skills which lead to prolonged success in dealing with foreign language. Nevertheless, at the middle level of FL comprehension students undergo a damaging effect of plateau, they start losing their confidence and hope to communicate with native speakers with their natural language.

In our opinion, even considering the proved naturalness of it, a range of demotivating factors sometimes can differ from country to country, from group to group. In the current field of culture and language investigation the terms referred to intercultural competence are in demand: cultural intelligence training, cultural sensitivity, cultural assimilation. Thus, higher education approaches to teaching foreign languages presupposes students international academic mobility as one of the fundamental factors of quality and competitiveness. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary and up to time for both, students and educators, to be prepared for variety of "language clashes" while studying/having internship abroad. In this case, access to competence is determined by level of language and cultural awareness.

On the assumption of our experience in teaching languages to Ukrainian learners, the youth from the countries of post-Soviet Union space (Azerbaijan, Dagestan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, Armenia), foreign students, who come from Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Syria, Iran, Bangladesh, India, a certain number of them, questioned on the point of problems they face in the situation of cross-cultural communication, mention that in the very beginning of their involvement into the process of learning they suffered from:

- 1) poor vocabulary, misunderstanding the meaning of terminology and certain phraseological units;
- 2) lower listening, reading, writing and speaking abilities;
- 3) lack of grammatical skills (in particular, they did not know how to build sentences, therefore were afraid of producing even general sayings);
- 4) stylistic incompetence, so that from time to time they were not sure about the accuracy of chosen language means;
- 5) cultural shock.

As they confirmed, the negative feelings regarding listed factors of their communicative uncertainty, though, have passed with natural process of persistent classroom training. According to global learning facts, this training becomes much more productive on condition that students are provided with two teachers – a tutor who comes from the same country and a teacher from the target language country who represents another cultural space. Otherwise, there is a danger of classroom preparation supporting learners with tools they do not know when, where and how to use. In terms of researchers' point of view, during their studies they concluded that «peo-

ple anywhere in the world master hundreds of what we came to call "situational dialects", none of which is the language taught in the classroom. More important, the classroom is the only place where the classroom form of the language will be found [1, p. 132].

But then, at some point of their intermediate target language performance, learners confronted another obstacle referred to an intention to produce a language unit of more complexity in order to sound/to be read as more advanced language user. What is more, students suffered from lack of language means in situations of both acquaintanceship and professional use. Some potential for learning small superficial aspects of the language might still exist, such as vocabulary, but conceptual understanding of the material will not develop any further. In terms of Griffin's idea, "diagnosis does not necessarily involve using any standardized tests of reading or any other skills. It is looking at the child's problems rather than any specific set of tests to be carried out" [2, p. 77].

In fact, in comparison with previous stage of difficulties, in plateau phase an emphasis is put onto *complexity*. And the third item in the list, referred to target Grammar, should be put into the category of fossilization items rather, than plateau problems.

A lack of stylistic means also refers to the existence of effect of fossilization, when learners encounter errors developed from applying their native language rules and features to the structures in target language. In this case they deal with new language, called *interlanguage*, or *approximative language*. Things would be very good if they were not so bad, because this novel language is full of permanent errors. Those fossilization mistakes could be too irritating. Unfortunately, more capacious use of authentic materials (texts, listening activities, video resources) can also cause a mentioned effect on learners. Students perceive, memorize and then adapt gained mechanisms with the use of their native language principles, multiplying, for instance, particular grammar errors again and again. That is what we call permanent fossilization. This affects learners in a very bad way, especially when they start noticing their constant faults. Learners are tend to escape communication with native speakers and feel more comfortable making a conversation with non-native interlocutors.

To overcome faults in listening and reading skills, self-motivated students come from adapted to authentic contexts. They complete a variety of writing tasks, for example, ones who study at economics departments practice business correspondence tasks, deal with e-commerce and language of meetings and negotiations. Consequently, constant practice leads to mastery, and motivated learners become competitive in their field of degree. But when it comes to spoken skills, it is a potential applicant at the phase of plateau.

A power of communicative competence is based on fact that used language responds accomplishing specified objectives, that is a prominent goal of foreign language education. According to Edward T. Hall's concept of effectiveness of anthropological view of culture including communications, "the essence of cross-cultural communication has more to do with releasing responses than with sending messages. It is more important to release the right response than to send the right message" [1].

For the following plateau stage one of the most effective tips is to change a teaching strategy. It is obviously an extremely useful experience to practice classroom dialogues and monologues, but in order to improve learners' skills, teachers should aimed lessons at practicing different phases of communication. Students must be taught how to perform the six aspects that are particularly relevant to an effective conversation performance: opening, turn-taking,

interrupting, topic-shift, adjacency pairs, closing [3, p. 42–43]. The mentioned issues are considered in the field of *cultural etiquette*. And it is, no doubts, a breakthrough through a vicious circle of plateau to advanced level of proficiency.

In total, stylistic incompetence at a plateau phase becomes a real problem for participants of educational process. They realize, that even trying their best, they, from time to time, sound too bookish or unreasonably formal. At the earlier stage of target language acquisition spoken difficulties refer to incorrect use of prepositions, phrasal verbs, etc. But with gained experience learners want to produce utterances with a high degree of accuracy and naturalness. To overcome those distractive moments, teachers should involve students into a methods of asking and answering open-ended questions. This will prepare them for productive communication, whether professional or small talk. “When the learner has a clear communicative need of using English, he is most likely to learn the language spontaneously and take active part in all learning activities. So the primary aim of the classroom management must be creating positive situations that encourage and involve the learners in communication” [4, p. 29].

Culture shapes our perception, therefore it influences our language cognition. In order to adapt to another environment people use an approach of following a set of accepted unwritten rules on manners, behavior, eating habits, even appearance (style of dressing, appropriate make-up, etc.). The only thing to be disappointed with is the lack of communicative competence due to co-called cultural shock, therefore “one framework for approaching cross-cultural communication is with *high-context* and *low-context* cultures, which refer to the value cultures place on indirect and direct communication” [5]. In accordance with C.B. Halverson’s idea, the difference between mentioned types of culture occurs in displaying the following tendencies: *interaction*, *territoriality*, *temporality*, *learning* and *association* [6, p. 130].

*High-context cultures* rely on nonverbal communication, in terms of Brian Neese interpretation, they are more dialectical and depend on certain background information. People are very close to each other, spend a lot of time together, and accuracy is valued, change is slow. Central European, Latin American, Asian, African, Arab countries are generally considered to belong to high-context cultures space. In *low-context cultures* with western European roots your idea should be spelled out to be considered. Individualism is appreciated as one of the traits of talented personality. They rely on the use of logic, change is fast and speed is valued, your time belongs to you [5]. However, in modern global community the awareness of cultural preferences and excellent communicative skills are no longer graduates’ advantages, that is what employers expect from university graduates.

**Conclusion.** To summarize the listed above, we resume, that plateau affects students at their middle level of language competence. Aspects referred to perception of language input do not occur at this stage, while activities related to native-like, natural, competent output require special attention. Aimed at a high level of accuracy and naturalness, learners expect to make a constant progress in language acquisition. Rather easily passing vocabulary and grammar difficulties at earlier stages of education, they lose their motivation unable to develop conceptual thinking, concerning foreign culture and communication.

Since dealing with plateau phenomenon, it is also of a significant importance to mention the fact, that both students and teachers should be aware of a danger of fossilization that comes together with upcoming competence. In this case, an effective approach for teaching should presuppose development of capacity to monitor

errors in communicative manifestations of others students as much as in their own language. A methods of developing those learners’ abilities outlines a perspective for our further research.

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#### Агібалова Т. М., Алпатова О. В. Феномен фази плато в процесі вивчення іноземної мови

**Анотація.** Статтю присвячено феномену плато, що виникає в процесі вивчення іноземної мови. Розвідка висвітлює певний спектр відмінностей між перешкодами, з якими стикаються студенти на ранніх етапах навчання, і тривалою демотивуючою ситуацією відсутності подальшого прогресу. Плато здебільшого виникає на етапі, коли учасники навчального процесу досягають рівня *Intermediate*, прагнуть досконалості й природності в уживанні іноземної мови, але несподівано усвідомлюють неможливість досягнення нових результатів. Також наголошено на важливості розуміння ефекту фосилізації, що супроводжується наявністю постійних помилок у мові, якщо студенти мають тенденцію використовувати так звану інтермову.

**Ключові слова:** плато, комунікація, комунікативна компетенція, фосилізація, інтермова, мовна картина світу, кроскультурна комунікація, висококонтекстні культури, низькоконтекстні культури.

#### Агибалова Т. Н., Алпатова Е. В. Феномен фазы плато в процессе изучения иностранного языка

**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена феномену плато в процессе изучения иностранного языка. Авторами описан спектр различий между проблемами, с которыми сталкиваются студенты на более ранних этапах освоения языка, и продолжительным демотивирующим застоем в их коммуникативном перформансе. В большинстве случаев феномену плато подвержены учащиеся, достигшие уровня *Intermediate* и намеревающиеся достичь беглости и натуральности в целевом языке, вместо этого они осознают, что продвижения в обучении больше не происходит. Также сделан акцент на важности осознания опасности от возможного эффекта фоссилизации, что может привести к повторяющимся из раза в раз ошибкам в иностранном языке в случае, если обучающийся использует интерязык в качестве так называемого промежуточного варианта языка.

**Ключевые слова:** плато, коммуникация, коммуникативная компетенция, фоссилизация, интерязык, языковая картина мира, кроскультурная коммуникация, высококонтекстные культуры, низькоконтекстные культуры.