

# On the Plateau Phenomenon in College English Learning

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## Abstract

The plateau phenomenon is a phenomenon with regularity discovered by educational psychologists in the process of studying the formation of operational skills. Skill is an activity or mental activity to successfully complete a certain task. It is obtained through practice. When skills are formed, practice will temporarily stop at a certain stage. On the growth curve, it is shown as maintaining a certain level and continuously rising or falling, but after breaking through the plateau phenomenon, the curve can be seen to continue to rise. This article analyzes the manifestation of the plateau phenomenon in the process of learning English for college students, and analyzes that the main reasons for it. Some students are not interested in English learning, their mental state is not good, they lack effective learning strategies and the teacher's classroom management is not in place. Therefore, to help students overcome the plateau phenomenon, teachers should improve classroom management, cultivate students' interest in English learning, improve students' self-confidence, and teach students effective learning strategies. This article introduces the reasons for the plateau phenomenon and effective strategies to solve the plateau phenomenon, so that students can better understand the plateau phenomenon, break the bottleneck of English learning, and make greater progress.

## Keywords

Plateau Phenomenon; College English; Strategies.

## 1. Introduction

The plateau phenomenon is a phenomenon that often occurs in the learning process of students. In the process of learning, the effect of early learning will rise linearly, and after a certain stage, it will stagnate or even regress.<sup>1</sup> Educational psychology calls this stagnant phenomenon a plateau phenomenon.

The so-called "plateau phenomenon" is one of the four stages that need to be traversed in the process of learning. In the process of learning, all kinds of new knowledge generally go through the following four stages. To start with, it's the beginning stage. Learners must first understand new things and familiarize themselves with new laws. It will be more difficult to learn at first, so the speed of learning at the beginning is relatively slow. Besides, it's the rapid improvement stage. After a learner has a preliminary understanding of some skills in knowledge and skills, his academic performance will be significantly improved, and he will be encouraged by this, and his interest in learning will increase rapidly. Furthermore, it's the learning plateau stage. In this period, because learners have already mastered some basic knowledge beforehand, most of the remaining is difficult points, coupled with various factors such as energy and psychology, so the pace of improving academic performance suddenly slows down. Although the learners insist on practicing every day and work very hard, they have not made much progress. Some people even drop in their grades, basically in a stagnant state. Finally, it's the stage of overcoming the plateau phenomenon. When learners persist in learning every day, continuously improve their learning method, overcome difficulties encountered in learning, and grasp new laws, academic performance will gradually rise.

Although the plateau period is an indispensable process from quantitative change to qualitative change, the student's academic performance has been kept in place, which will put a lot of pressure on the students and have a great impact on the students' psychology. If the plateau phenomenon persists for a long time, it may cause students to lose interest in learning English, lose confidence and goals of hard work, which will seriously affect students' English learning effects.

## **2. Academic Bases**

To understand the plateau phenomenon in college English learning, it is necessary to understand the sophomore phenomenon related to the plateau phenomenon and the fossilization of second language acquisition.

### **2.1. Sophomore Phenomenon and Plateau Phenomenon**

The sophomore phenomenon in college English learning is related to the plateau phenomenon in English learning. American scholars have long noticed that sophomores are the most dissatisfied group of all students. Freedman first proposed the concept of "sophomore slump"<sup>2</sup> in 1956. The most obvious problem with sophomores is that they often feel bored and indifferent, dissatisfied with the college and the school experience. Lemons and Richmond further defined the sophomore slump as: "The sophomore slump is a period of developmental anxiety. Students behave as a series of confusion and anxiety, feeling less hopeful, less invested, and less competitive."<sup>3</sup> The cost of attending higher education in the United States has been rising in recent years, and the loss of students has been serious. Researchers found that the second grade is a high-risk period for college students to drop out. Sophomore students are also prone to problems such as mistakes in course selection, lack of interest in courses, low academic input, difficulties in major and career decision-making, interpersonal questions, self-identity anxiety and so on. And thus enter the plateau period.

There is also a sophomore phenomenon in our country: Many sophomore students have set themselves a goal to pass CET-4 and CET-6 in the sophomore year. This invisibly puts a lot of pressure on them. They feel that the English class that only revolves around the teaching material is not very helpful to them. Instead of memorizing more words as follows, doing more model tests and past exam papers for CET-4 and CET-6. These students who have chosen the sea of words and sea of questions tactics for self-study out of classroom learning often fail to achieve their expected results. Their grades do not rise but fall, and they appear impatient, anxious, disappointed and even give up English learning. At the same time, after students enter the second grade, their enthusiasm for learning in classroom teaching activities has been significantly reduced, and many students have even stagnated in their language ability.<sup>4</sup>

This sophomore phenomenon indicates that students have entered the plateau stage in college English learning. Educational psychology calls this stage the plateau phenomenon or plateau period.

Plateau phenomenon is a phenomenon with regularity discovered by educational psychologists in the process of studying the formation of operational skills. Skill is an activity or mental activity to successfully complete a certain task. It is obtained through practice. When skills are formed, practice will temporarily stop at a certain stage, which is manifested in slower progress in learning, lower learning efficiency, and slower improvement in academic performance. Plateau phenomenon is an objective phenomenon that students inevitably appear in the learning process. As long as the correct strategy is found, it can be overcome.

### **2.2. Fossilization of the Second Language Acquisition**

In the higher stage of second language acquisition, "plateau phenomenon" is prone to appear, that is, the phenomenon of fossilization in interlanguage. In 1972, Selinker proposed the

concept of fossilization in his “Interlanguage”<sup>5</sup> article. He found that 95% of second language learners are unable to reach the language level of native speakers, and some errors will be repeated in the learners’ interlanguage. He defined this phenomenon as the fossilization: “Regardless of the age of the learner and the interpretation and course of the target language he accepts, the learner who uses the native language may retain some of the language units, rules and sub-systems in the interlanguage which formed during the formation of the target language.”<sup>6</sup> In 1978, Selinker and Lamendella realized the insufficiency of the previous definition and redefined the fossilization: Fossilization is a phenomenon of interlanguage stagnation in the learning process that forms before the learner acquires all aspects of the target language structure. Regardless of whether there is a difference in learning ability, opportunity, language type or motivation to integrate into the target language society, learners may encounter the fossilization in their language learning process.<sup>7</sup>

In 1992, Selinker revised the definition of the fossilization again: Fossilization is considered by the strong theory that its language characteristics are irreparable. No matter how much the learner receives about the interpretation and education of the target language, none of them can have any influence on the characteristics of fossilized language that have been formed. The weak theory believes that the fossilization is a plateau period in the learning process. In this process, the acquisition and development of some target languages are only temporarily hindered. The length of time will vary with the education received and the motivation of learners.

The existing language ability and learning foundation of second language learners are the basis for further language acquisition. There is a transition period for the increase and decrease of language ability, and the plateau period in this transition period is the key stage. The phenomenon of fossilization is a critical stage for the improvement of second language acquisition ability. When the second language acquisition enters a relatively slow growth or fossilization state, its plateau stage performance will gradually become prominent. When entering the fossilized plateau period, it will develop into two results: One is to overcome fossilization, and learners’ second language acquisition ability improves, and they enter a higher level of second language acquisition state, just like phoenix nirvana. The second is to continue to fossilization, the learner’s second language acquisition ability stagnates, and may decrease. At any stage of second language acquisition, the phenomenon of fossilized plateau may occur. It is the only way for second language acquisition and the watershed between temporary and permanent fossilization.

### **3. The Plateau Phenomenon in College English Learning**

The so-called plateau phenomenon refers to the rapid progress in the initial stage of continuous learning and mastery of skills, and the curve of the relationship between practice time and practice results rises rapidly. After a certain period of time, this curve began to rise slowly, and finally showed a level state, so that the practice results are difficult to improve or stop.

#### **3.1. Manifestations of Plateau Phenomenon**

The plateau phenomenon is common in the learning and acquisition of various skills, and its time process has some common characteristics, that is, learners’ ability increases rapidly in the early stage of learning, and after a period of time, or at a certain stage, it will stagnate.

Compared with high school, most students’ vocabulary, grammar, listening, reading and writing ability usually have a qualitative leap after a year of college study. English learning performance will be significantly improved, so the learning interest will be greatly increased. By the sophomore year, students have already mastered some elementary English knowledge, and the rest is difficult to master. Although the new vocabulary and grammar taught by the teacher can

be understood, the new grammar vocabulary cannot be used in real life communication. Although students can persist in reading, their reading speed and comprehension are always in place. Although they practice listening hard every day, their pronunciation and intonation are still not significantly improved, especially when the speaking speed is fast, they can only catch scattered words. There is no way to understand the whole article. Under the pressure of college students to pass CET-4 and CET-6, their grades still do not improve or even decline in daily practice. The psychological pressure of students increases, their interest in learning decreases, and they gradually enter the plateau period.

For the vast majority of students, this phenomenon is just a temporary learning phenomenon in the process of English learning under certain conditions and environments. As long as teachers take effective measures, adopt appropriate teaching methods, or students can change internal or external learning conditions, this temporary “plateau phenomenon” can be overcome.

### **3.2. Factors Resulting in the Plateau Phenomenon**

From the perspective of educational psychology, the plateau phenomenon is a common phenomenon in most learners' knowledge learning, and the reasons for its formation are also diverse. Each student's learning methods, academic performance and mentality are different, and the reasons for the plateau phenomenon are also different.

Firstly, students' lack of motivation to learn English is an important factor resulting in the plateau phenomenon. Einstein once said that interest is the best teacher. Unsatisfactory English learning results are an important reason why most students lose motivation in English learning. Some students feel that they spend a lot of time memorizing words, but they have little effect. They cannot remember words completely and cannot form direct reactions. For example, when they see “Sorry”, they will automatically pop up its meaning. This dampened their enthusiasm for learning English to a certain extent. Some students feel that their current English level has not improved compared with high school, or even worse than it was in high school. If the students' English proficiency has not been improved, they will easily lose interest and motivation in English, and thus enter the plateau period and are unwilling to take one step further.

Secondly, students' negative attitude towards English learning also causes the plateau phenomenon. College English requires students to develop comprehensively in listening, speaking, reading, and translation. High school English teaching often only focuses on students' reading and writing skills while ignoring students' listening, speaking, and translation abilities, resulting in students not being able to understand the content of the teacher's lectures and academic achievements after going to college. The gradual decline has discouraged students' enthusiasm for learning, and made students tired of studying and reluctant to listen to the content of the teacher's lecture. Students have just switched from a tense high school learning atmosphere to a relaxed university learning atmosphere. Without the supervision of teachers and parents, their enthusiasm for learning will decrease, and they will turn to the embrace of entertainment and games. If they don't listen to lectures or complete their homework in class, their grades will naturally not improve, and English learning can easily enter the plateau period. Besides, students will be weary of English learning because of students' psychological and physical tiredness. Quite a few students feel that English learning is not a simple matter. After entering the sophomore year, as the difficulty of learning materials increases and the pressure of CET-4 and CET-6, most students will feel excessive anxiety especially for those students with weak psychological endurance and lack of resilience. Under such extreme conditions, their learning attitude will inevitably affect their academic performance. Nowadays, students generally like to stay up late. Students lack sleep, poor diet, impetuous mood, listlessness, and distraction when reviewing. As a result, students lose concentration in class, and their learning

efficiency is low. Reflected on the performance curve, it shows a state of temporary suspension of growth or very slow growth.

Furthermore, students' lack of effective learning strategies also makes their English learning stagnate. Learning methods and strategies affect the results of learning. Most students cannot adjust their learning strategies and methods according to their own learning level, which will also cause a plateau phenomenon. Freshman's English knowledge is still in the transition period of connecting with high school. It is relatively simple. Students can memorize words and sentences mechanically to achieve good results, but after the sophomore year, mechanical recitation is no longer applicable. English learning at this time pays more attention to understanding and uses the knowledge of understanding, but the students still rely too much on the teacher, have poor independent learning ability, and have not formed good learning habits. Therefore, if students reach the upper grades and still do not change their learning methods, it will be difficult to make progress in learning. Even if they consciously want to change their learning strategies, it will take a long process. This is also one of the reasons why the plateau phenomenon persists.

Finally, teachers' poor classroom management is also one of the important factors for the plateau phenomenon of students. Many teachers only impart knowledge and complete their own teaching tasks, regardless of students' physical and mental state, learning state, learning methods, and learning effects. Under the influence of pragmatic utilitarianism, students listen to the lectures selectively. Some courses that are helpful to their future careers will be carefully listened to, but the courses that are not helpful to their future careers will not be listened to. As a result, there are often the phenomenon of not completing homework, arriving late to class and leaving early and not listening carefully. After seeing that the management has been ineffective for many times, the teacher adopts the method of neglecting. After seeing the teacher's lax management, the students became even more unscrupulous. If things go on like this, a vicious circle is formed. The students' undisciplined attitude greatly affects the teaching, and at the same time, the students' own learning effect will become worse, thus entering the plateau phenomenon.

Some teachers choose teaching content and use teaching methods improperly, and will not organize teaching from the perspective of student development, which will not attract students to actively participate in teaching. For example, some teachers only explain one cloze in a 45-minute class, and the concentration of students is consumed. Gradually, they become distracted in class. The learning efficiency is low and the learning effect is poor, leading to the students entering the plateau phenomenon.

## **4. Effective Strategies to Overcome Plateau Phenomenon**

English teachers are the leaders of students' English learning, and they should actively guide students to overcome and eliminate the plateau phenomenon. Although linguists believe that many foreign language or second language learners will inevitably experience a plateau phenomenon in the process of learning, but as long as students maintain a good attitude and actively communicate with teachers, the plateau phenomenon can be overcome.

### **4.1. Strategies for Students**

To overcome the plateau phenomenon, students need to work hard. CET-4 and CET-6 is a nationwide wide-ranging test, which plays an important role in overcoming the plateau phenomenon and improving students' motivation in learning. Although the test is only a means of testing teaching not the purpose, many schools still use CET-4 or CET-6 as the basis for graduation. Many companies use CET-4 and CET-6 scores to judge whether a person can speak English. This undoubtedly puts a lot of pressure on the students. Without pressure, there is no

motivation. CET-4 and CET-6 for college students can be regarded as a motivation to stimulate students' learning. If this pressure is used properly, it will play a positive role in promoting students' English learning, otherwise, it will hinder students. Schools and teachers should make full use of CET-4 and CET-6, adjust their own teaching content, and give full play to its positive role, so as to promote students' learning and improve their learning enthusiasm.

Interest is the best teacher. To overcome the plateau phenomenon, it is necessary to stimulate students' interest in English learning. Teachers should learn to teach students in accordance with their aptitude and adjust their teaching methods and teaching content in a timely manner. For example, most students like to watch movies and TV shows. Teachers can teach students some language skills and cultural knowledge by playing some high quality English movies, which can improve students' listening skills and promote the accumulation of foreign cultural knowledge. In our school, there is an English dubbing competition. Students can choose the English segment they are interested in for dubbing. In order to practice the segment well, students will follow the shadow reading voluntarily, so that they can improve their listening and speaking skills without knowing it. In classroom teaching, the teacher can combine the content of the text before starting a new class, and put forward some topics that students are interested in, so that students can actively participate in, and they can have something to say. Teachers can also combine the content of the text to allow students to perform role-playing, so that students fully understand the role which they play and have a deeper understanding of the content of the text. Teachers use such teaching methods and methods to stimulate students' interest and enthusiasm for English learning, so that students can truly participate.

High school English learning can be regarded as small class teaching. Teachers can pay attention to everyone's learning situation. After entering the university, English teaching in most schools is a public class. There are a large number of students in class, so the teacher has no time to take care of every student. Most of the students learn English by reviewing themselves after studying in class. After entering the second year of university, students gradually become accustomed to public class teaching, but still feel that their English proficiency has not been greatly improved. When the ability to use language is stagnant or even regresses, students are prone to weariness due to lack of confidence, which leads to a plateau phenomenon. Therefore, in the teaching process, teachers should pay attention to fostering students' self-confidence. For students with poor grades, teachers should not be biased against them, and should actively guide them to participate in learning together. If they make progress, the teacher should encourage them in time to help them improve on the original basis. For students whose grades are in the middle, the teacher should help them build up the courage and confidence to overcome the plateau phenomenon and make them believe that they can overcome the plateau phenomenon. For students with excellent grades, the teacher can appropriately increase the difficulty of their usual exercises, and at the same time ask them to guard against arrogance and rashness, and humbly ask others to help those students who are in the plateau phenomenon get out of the plateau phenomenon.

## **4.2. Strategies for Teachers**

Students want to overcome the plateau phenomenon, in addition to their own efforts, but also cannot do without the help of teachers. To overcome the plateau phenomenon, the key is to master efficient learning strategies. Many students begin to use rote learning strategy to learn English from the middle school stage, and they still use this learning strategy in college. At the beginning, this learning strategy was still effective, but when they entered the upper grades, this learning strategy began to be insufficient. Therefore, when students enter the plateau period, they should pay attention to adjusting their learning strategies and find the most suitable learning method to help themselves break through the plateau period as soon as possible. However, it is difficult for many students to actively find the most effective learning

strategy, even though they all recognize the effect of changing learning strategies on breaking through the plateau period. Therefore, in the teaching process, teachers should help students master learning strategies in the process of teaching knowledge, and effectively use them in the process of learning English, improve academic performance and efficiency, so that students can smoothly pass the plateau period. To achieve this goal, first of all teachers themselves must understand learning strategies in order to adopt a variety of methods in teaching to better help students use successful learning strategies. In the process of learning English, if students adopt efficient learning strategies, they can do more with less and reduce the burden of learning. For example, when students are reciting vocabulary, they can use synonymous memory method, homophone classification memory method, root affix memory method to replace rote memorization, so that their learning efficiency will be improved. Secondly, teachers should teach students to communicate learning strategies with others. Each student's learning strategy is different. If each student can find and apply their own learning strategies in the communication with others, the learning effect will be greatly improved. For example, in English reading, some students like to guess the meaning of words based on the context, some like skimming or skipping, and some students like to find the topic sentence in combination with the article, the teacher can encourage the students to communicate with each other's question-making methods and learn from each other, which can promote the common progress of students. Finally, teachers should also teach students to reflect and adjust learning strategies in a timely manner. English learning is inseparable from learning strategies, but whether the learning strategies are effective and whether they are really helpful for learning, the teacher can guide students to reflect and summarize after a period of learning, find the shortcomings in this period of learning time in time, and summarize more good learning strategies to overcome the plateau phenomenon.

When college students experience plateau phenomena in the process of learning English, teachers should pay attention to the status of students, strengthen classroom management, so that students can concentrate on listening and actively participate in the classroom. To carry out effective curriculum management, we must first establish a good teacher-student relationship. This requires teachers to treat every student fairly and impartially. Teachers cannot discriminate against students because of poor student performance and discourage students' enthusiasm for learning. Teachers should look at students with a developmental perspective. Poor students can also make progress. Don't think they are cheating just because poor students have made progress. At the same time, teachers should not overly favor students because of their good grades. Teachers should respect, understand and care for every student, and set up effective class rules. Teachers should lead by example and supervise the classroom well. If there are students who violate the class rules, the teacher should focus on language education, use positive words to guide students not to violate the class rules, and guide students to actively participate in learning activities. Teachers should pay attention to observing every student. Once they find that the student's mental condition is not good, they should actively provide psychological counseling to the student. Teachers should create a good learning atmosphere for students. Teachers should set a goal suitable for students, organize teaching reasonably, and improve teaching efficiency. Teaching methods can be flexible and diverse. Teachers must maintain students' interest and enthusiasm for learning. When students encounter difficulties in English learning, teachers must pay attention to encouraging students so that students can maintain a positive learning status.

## 5. Conclusion

College English is usually defined as a public class, and students often do not pay attention to English learning. Although there are mid-term exams and final exams, students often like to

cram temporarily, and language learning such as English is to focus on the usual accumulation. So it is not advisable to rely on temporary cuddling to cope with the exam. The evaluation of university test scores is different from that of previous middle schools. The middle school only looks at the scores on the examination papers of each subject, while the university performance evaluation is based on the usual results plus the scores on the examination papers. This makes many students pay attention to their attendance rate to a certain extent. But as the grades continue to increase, the knowledge in textbooks becomes more and more difficult, and students' enthusiasm for English lessons will gradually decrease, so they will lose confidence in their own English learning. Although it is pressured for students to pass CET-4 and CET-6, most of them will never have any sense of urgency until the last moment before the exam, and will not want to go to review. If this happens, it will cause students to learn English with a negative attitude. The plateau phenomenon in college English learning will arise from this.

The plateau phenomenon of college English learning directly affects students' learning attitude and performance. It should be taken seriously and measures should be taken. If the students have been on the plateau, their academic performance will definitely stagnate or even decline. As a result, it will inevitably undermine students' confidence in English learning. Every student will inevitably have a plateau phenomenon in the process of English learning, as long as the students are willing to work hard with the courage and determination to overcome the phenomenon. Teachers can also strengthen classroom management and conduct students to develop the ability to learn independently, master effective learning strategies and stimulate their interest and enthusiasm for English. Consequently, the plateau phenomenon in college English learning will no longer be a problem.

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