




Research Article

The Impact of the Mother Tongue on English Language Acquisition Among ESL Learners in the Sri Lankan Context

Mohamed Ismail Reesma Sheroon¹, MJF Sujani², MB Nowzath³, MR. Rishad Muhammed⁴

1. Department of Management and Commerce, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka;
reesmasheroon@gmail.com 
2. Department of English, Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technological Education;
sujanifathima@gmail.co
3. Department of English, Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technological Education;
nowzathmnf@gmail.com
4. Department of Arabic Language, Linguistics and Translation, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka;
rishadhakeemi96@gmail.com



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Abstract. The research aims to explore the challenges Grade 8 students at KM/KM/Shams Central College face in learning English due to the influence of their mother tongue, Tamil. It seeks to identify how Tamil language structures, such as sentence order and phonetic features, interfere with English learning, and to examine sociocultural factors like attitudes, language anxiety, and exposure that affect motivation and success. The study also evaluates the impact of linguistic interference on grammar, pronunciation, sentence structure, and vocabulary. Finally, it aims to propose effective teaching strategies to minimize Tamil's influence and enhance English proficiency, with a particular focus on rural educational contexts. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative pretest

and posttest assessments with qualitative data from structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with both students and teachers. The findings indicate that Tamil interference significantly contributes to challenges in English grammar and pronunciation, particularly in the misuse of articles, prepositions, and word order, as well as pronunciation errors involving sounds not found in Tamil. While the interventions implemented, such as task-based learning and pronunciation exercises, showed measurable improvements, sociocultural factors like anxiety and limited exposure to English outside the classroom remained barriers. The study concludes that effective English language acquisition requires addressing both linguistic interference and sociocultural challenges. Recommendations include incorporating communicative language teaching, increasing exposure to English in daily life, and providing professional development for teachers. Future research should explore the long-term impact of these strategies and the potential of technology in overcoming these challenges.

Keywords: Linguistic Interference, Sociocultural Factors, Second Language Acquisition, English Language Proficiency, Phonological Challenges

INTRODUCTION

This study investigates how the mother tongue, Tamil, influences the acquisition of English as a second language among Grade 8 students at KM/KM/Shams Central College in rural Sri Lanka. The linguistic differences between Tamil and English, particularly in syntax, grammar, and pronunciation, pose challenges for Tamil-speaking learners, as noted in prior studies by Muthusamy (2012) and Wijesekera (2013). For example, Tamil's subject-object-verb (SOV) structure contrasts with English's subject-verb-object (SVO) order, leading to frequent errors in sentence construction. Moreover, the lack of opportunities to use English outside the classroom exacerbates these difficulties (Wijesekera, 2013). Researchers such as Selinker (1992) and Odlin (1989) highlight the dual role of language transfer, where positive transfer facilitates learning through similarities, while negative transfer causes interference due to structural disparities. Sociocultural factors also play a significant role, as learners' attitudes and limited exposure to English in rural settings further hinder proficiency (Hornberger & McKay, 2010; Kramsch, 1998). The study aims to provide insights into addressing these linguistic and sociocultural barriers to improve English instruction for Tamil-speaking learners.

Tamil-speaking students face significant challenges in learning English due to the stark linguistic differences between the two languages and sociocultural factors, particularly in rural areas like KM/KM/Shams Central College Maruthamunai. Tamil's subject-object-verb (SOV) sentence structure contrasts with English's subject-verb-object (SVO) order, leading to frequent grammatical errors. Additionally, the absence of certain English phonemes, such as /θ/ and /ð/, in Tamil causes pronunciation difficulties that hinder fluency and oral communication. These challenges are compounded by limited exposure to English outside the classroom, insufficient pronunciation training, and sociocultural attitudes that view English both as an opportunity for advancement and as a remnant of colonialism, creating ambivalence and anxiety toward learning the language. Students often struggle with grammar, such as article usage and prepositions, and experience language anxiety, which

inhibits participation in English classes. These linguistic and sociocultural barriers negatively impact students' academic performance, confidence, and ability to use English effectively in a globalized world.

This research explores how Tamil, as the mother tongue, influences the acquisition of English as a second language among Grade 8 students at KM/KM/Shams Central College. The study seeks to identify specific ways in which Tamil language structures, such as sentence order and phonetic features, interfere with English learning, as well as to examine sociocultural factors like students' attitudes, language anxiety, and limited exposure to English that affect their motivation and success. Additionally, it evaluates the impact of linguistic interference on students' grammar, pronunciation, sentence structure, and vocabulary proficiency. The research also aims to propose effective teaching methods and strategies to mitigate the influence of Tamil on English learning and improve language proficiency, particularly in rural educational contexts.

The research gap in the Sri Lankan context lies in the lack of focused studies addressing the specific linguistic and sociocultural challenges faced by Tamil-speaking students in rural areas when learning English as a second language. While broader research has explored language transfer and sociocultural influences, there is insufficient investigation into how Tamil's unique syntactic and phonological features, such as its subject-object-verb structure and lack of certain English phonemes (e.g., /θ/ and /ð/), directly interfere with English acquisition. Additionally, existing studies, like those by Wijesekera (2013), have identified limited exposure to English in rural Tamil-speaking regions but fail to deeply analyze specific linguistic errors or the impact of sociocultural attitudes shaped by colonial history and the global status of English. This study aims to address this gap by examining both the linguistic and socio-emotional barriers to learning English, offering localized insights to enhance English instruction for Tamil-speaking learners in rural Sri Lanka.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Extensive research has examined the influence of the mother tongue on second language acquisition, emphasizing both linguistic and sociocultural factors. Selinker's (1972) interlanguage theory highlights how learners develop a transitional language system influenced by their first language (L₁), often resulting in errors when L₁ and the target language (L₂) differ significantly. Odlin (1989) further explored language transfer, noting that positive transfer facilitates learning when L₁ and L₂ share similarities, while negative transfer creates challenges due to linguistic disparities, a recurring issue for Tamil-speaking learners of English. Regionally, Muthusamy (2012) found that Tamil-speaking students in India frequently face difficulties with word order and tense usage due to structural differences between Tamil and English. Similarly, Wijesekera (2013) highlighted that rural Tamil-speaking students in Sri Lanka suffer from limited exposure to English, leading to weak language skills and low confidence. Derwing and Munro (2005) addressed phonological interference, stressing the importance of targeted pronunciation instruction for Tamil-speaking learners struggling with English sounds like /θ/ and /ð/. Hornberger and McKay (2010) underscored the impact of sociocultural factors, including community

attitudes and limited practice opportunities, on second language acquisition. These studies provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by Tamil-speaking students in contexts such as KM/KM/Shams Central College.

Furthermore, Language transfer, or linguistic interference, plays a significant role in second language acquisition (SLA), particularly for Tamil-speaking learners of English. This interference manifests in various ways, such as syntactic errors due to the differences in word order between Tamil (OSV) and English (SVO), and issues with articles and prepositions, as Tamil lacks such grammatical markers (Vyas & Mpondi, 2020). Phonological interference also occurs, with Tamil speakers struggling to pronounce sounds not present in their native language, such as /θ/ and /ð/, and exhibiting a syllable-timed rhythm that clashes with the stress-timed nature of English (Derwing & Munro, 2005). Moreover, semantic interference arises from false cognates, and Tamil orthography affects spelling due to its phonetic nature. Despite these challenges, targeted instruction focusing on explicit grammar teaching, pronunciation drills, and contextualized vocabulary learning has been shown to mitigate these issues and promote positive transfer (Cook, 2008; Odlin, 1989).

In addition, Sociocultural factors significantly influence Tamil-speaking learners' acquisition of English, with factors such as attitudes toward the language, historical perceptions, and exposure to English playing key roles. In rural areas like Maruthamunai, English is often seen as a tool for economic advancement, although it also carries associations with colonization, which can create resistance or ambivalence toward learning (Hornberger & McKay, 2010). Limited exposure to English outside of the classroom, coupled with the influence of family and community, can further restrict language practice and internalization. Additionally, Tamil cultural norms, such as modesty and fear of error, can lead to anxiety and reluctance to use English in public settings, impeding language development (Horwitz et al., 1986). The availability of resources, such as proficient teachers and modern materials, is often scarce in rural regions, compounding these challenges (McKay & Hornberger, 2010). Furthermore, phonological differences between Tamil and English, including challenges with sounds like /θ/ and /ð/, stress patterns, and vowel quality, lead to mispronunciations and difficulty in communication (Derwing & Munro, 2005; James, 1980). These pronunciation issues are primarily due to the influence of the learners' native language phonological system and require explicit instruction to overcome.

Moreover, Teaching methodologies play a crucial role in addressing the challenges Tamil-speaking learners face when acquiring English. Traditional methods, such as grammar-translation and rote memorization, hinder communicative skills and contribute to mother tongue interference, especially in terms of grammar and pronunciation (Cook, 2008). In contrast, contemporary approaches like Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) focus on interactive and context-driven language use, reducing reliance on Tamil structures and promoting real-world language application (Krashen, 1982; Ellis, 2003). Additionally, pronunciation drills and the use of technology, such as speech recognition tools, help learners overcome phonetic discrepancies (Derwing & Munro, 2005). Bilingual strategies, when balanced

correctly, also aid in building understanding and confidence, especially in explaining complex grammar rules (Hornberger & McKay, 2010). Furthermore, creating a supportive, culturally inclusive environment and minimizing anxiety through group activities can foster greater language use and self-confidence (Horwitz et al., 1986). Ultimately, integrating these methodologies with modern technology, like language apps and online exchanges, offers a comprehensive solution for overcoming the barriers posed by mother tongue interference.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed-methods research design to explore the impact of Tamil on English language acquisition among Grade 8 students at Km/Km/Shams Central College Maruthamunai in Sri Lanka. A descriptive approach was used to document the linguistic interference patterns, sociocultural barriers, and teaching practices. The research combined both quantitative and qualitative methods, including standardized English proficiency tests, structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews with students and teachers, and classroom observations. The quantitative data focused on grammatical errors, vocabulary, and pronunciation issues, while the qualitative data explored students' attitudes, learning strategies, and sociocultural factors affecting language acquisition. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 50 students and 5 teachers, ensuring a focus on Tamil-speaking learners in a rural setting. Secondary data from existing literature provided theoretical context. The study followed a phased data collection procedure, starting with proficiency tests, followed by questionnaires, and culminating in interviews and observations, all aimed at gaining comprehensive insights into the challenges faced by Tamil-speaking learners in acquiring English.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis begins with pretest results, highlighting key issues such as grammar errors, pronunciation challenges, and limited vocabulary. Posttest results are examined to evaluate the effectiveness of targeted interventions in improving students' English proficiency. Insights from interviews with students and teachers reveal sociocultural and pedagogical factors influencing language learning. The findings are contextualized with previous research, offering a detailed understanding of the challenges and progress in English acquisition among Tamil-speaking learners.

Findings of the Data Analysis

The data gathered in the pretest, posttest, and interviews were analyzed to gain holistic understanding of Tamil speaking learners' struggles in the need to learn English as well as their effectiveness to learn English after the interventions. Aspects of phonetic interference in language acquisition are explored as well as issues regarding the teacher's sociocultural role in the learning process.

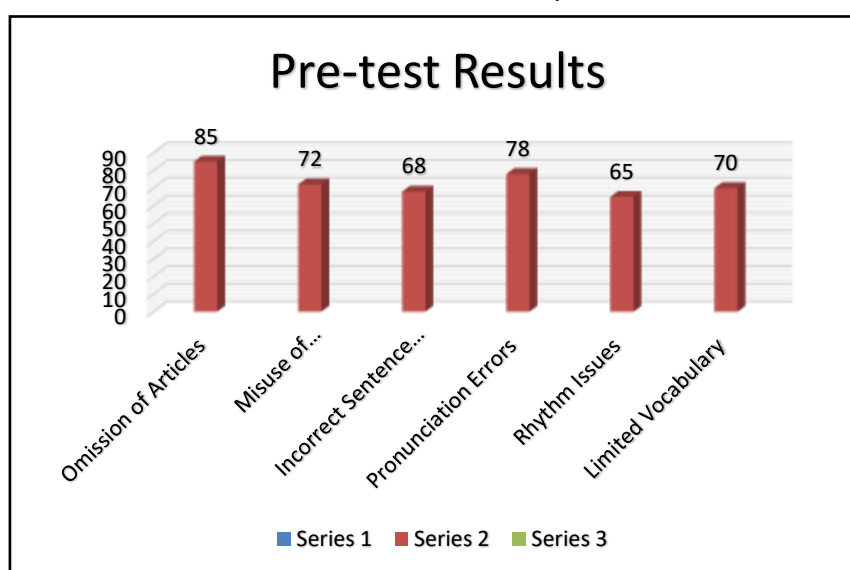
Pre-test Results

The analysis of the pretest process revealed metrics for difficulty in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary learned by Tamil-speaking learners. Grammar-wise,

the omission of articles was reflected in the English sentences of 85% of the students, as articles do not exist in Tamil. This led to common errors such as “I saw cat” rather than “I saw a cat”. Also 72% of students used a wrong preposition, which is also common, as they fail to put the right preposition in front of the words, such as “I go school” in place of “I go to school”. Phrase structure was a problem for many of the students as well (68%), who tended to get stuck in what we’ll call ‘SOV’ (the Tamil order) despite writing in ‘SVO’ (the English order), so rather than write “She a book reads” they wrote “She reads a book”.

In terms of pronunciation, 78% of students were unable to produce English sounds which do not occur in Tamil /θ/ (think) and /ð/ (this), replacing them with /t/ and /d/ sounds respectively (think → tink and this → dis) as was revealed in the

Figure 1: Pretest Results - Percentage of Students with Errors in Grammar, Pronunciation, and Vocabulary.



pretest. Furthermore, 65 percent of the students faced issues with stress and rhythm, as Tamil is syllable-timed and English is stress-timed, a hurdle common among Tamil speakers. Complexities arose from this misalignment in rhythm, such as monotonic speech and inability to stress the right syllables in words or phrases. Lastly, most of the students used Tamil-English cognates (70%) and therefore, the semantic errors occurred. For example, words such as the word ticket could also mean to the learners the influence of the way Tamil uses this word.

These findings strongly suggest the contribution of Tamil towards students' English language ability, serving as a baseline for improvement through interventions. It may be represented visually with a histogram showing the percentage of students making mistakes in each category (grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary).

Post-test Results

Using targeted interventions like pronunciation practice, task based learning and more speaking activity, our post-test results resulted in significant progress. In grammar, learners' percentage of omission of articles was reduced from 85% to 40%

showing that the intervention helped learners internalize the use of articles. Likewise, misuse of prepositions dropped 30%, and many students accurately used prepositions like to, in, and on in sentences. The students also had more control over sentence structure: 55% used correct Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) word order. Although this feedback was excellent, some of the students still struggled with sentence structure, indicating we would need to continue to focus on syntax in future lessons.

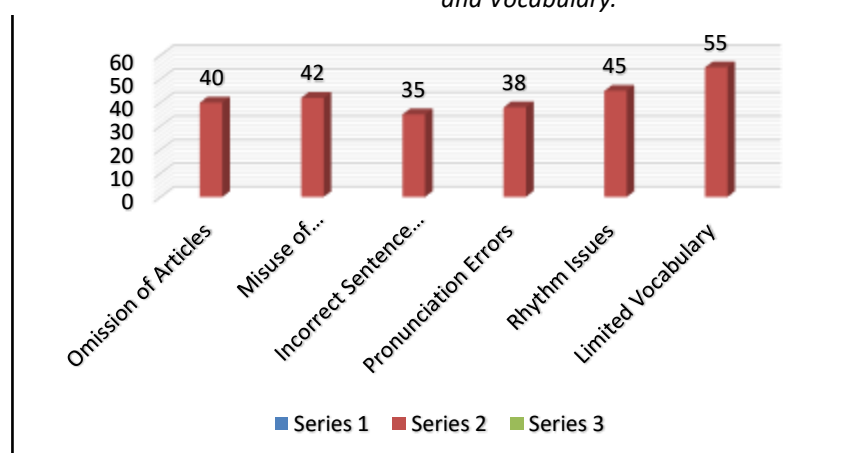
As for the pronunciation, 40% errors of the /θ/ and /ð/ sounds have been reduced and 60% of the pupils improved in these sounds. However, the intervention was successful in assisting learners in producing these sounds more accurately, with some students still struggling with this task. Furthermore, the students demonstrated improvement with stress and rhythm patterns, with a higher proportion employing stress patterns accurately in words and groups of words, but requiring further practice in order to attain a native-like level of fluency.

They also used many more vocabulary words, with less Tamil-English cognate use, and gaps in word usage were fewer and further apart. This change in performance indicated the effect of both exercises that focused on vocabulary and learning in context. The results can be illustrated in a four bar graphs, one for each category (grammar, pronunciation, sentence variety, and vocabulary) where the pretest and posttest results are compared.

Interview Findings

Some qualitative data, from interviews with students and teachers, is also

Figure 2: Post-test Results - Percentage of Students with Improvement in Grammar, Pronunciation, and Vocabulary.



reported often to clarify the quantitative data and relate it to the pretest and posttest data. Students said that they were anxious about speaking English and scared to make mistakes just two of the many challenges they faced in learning the language. They shared that they were afraid of being judged, which stopped them from speaking English especially in front of their classmates. EDTEP, the latter a series of intensive programs over months or years in which everyone spoke and heard only English, supplementing aural input in English outside of class something most of my students had never received. They said that they mostly used English only in reading and writing exercises in class.

In interviews, teachers reported that they had seen students' English improve, but that the curriculum and the limited time they had to drill pronunciation and speaking exercises constrained them. "The limited resources specific to these issues and time in class to work on these issues made it extremely difficult for the students to address the pronunciation," the teachers emphasized. In addition, educators noted that while some students made huge strides, others struggled tremendously to shed the ingrained forces of Tamil. Teachers also suggested adding more interactive and communicative pedagogy like group discussions, role plays and pronunciation drills to address these challenges. This thematic analysis of data helps to align insights that can be visually represented via charts or diagrams that indicate reoccurring themes e.g., stress in learning, limited exposure, teaching obstacles et cetera.

Discussion

This section revisits the relevant data collected in the study concerning two current subtopics, Linguistic Interference and Its Impact on English Learning followed by Sociocultural Factors and Their Influence on Language Acquisition. Both these subtopics are vital in understanding the difficulties and advancements in learning English among Tamil speaking students in Km/Km/Shams Central College Maruthamunai.

Linguistic Interference and Its Impact on English Learning

The results of the pre-test and post-test clearly show that the students faced with interferences from Tamil language. Systematic interferences from Tamil language severely affected their ability to learn English especially in grammar, pronunciation, and sentence formation. Both article omission and preposition error constituted the main noticeable interference. Odlin (1989) previously identified negative transfer as structural elements in the first language (L₁) not conforming to the syntactical rules of the second language (L₂). For instance, Tamil does not have articles (like a, the) or prepositions, making students drop or misplace them in English. Such interference is not ignorance or a mistake rather a direct consequence of absence of these linguistic features in Tamil.

Moreover, the sentence structuring mistakes in which students had overgeneralised Tamil subject-object-verb (SOV) order over English were consistent with earlier findings by Muthusamy (2012) who also found Tamil-speaking learners in India committing similar mistakes. The SOV word order in Tamil is quite different from the SVO structure in English, resulting in sentences such as She a book reads instead of the correct She reads a book. This is evidenced in the posttest data, which suggest some progress, but also show that many others are still having difficulty with such a foundational syntactic difference, and that more targeted instruction needs to be provided for these students. Sound issues often hinged on problems with pronunciation except for sounds such as /θ/ and /ð/, which simply serve to highlight the phonological interference between Tamil and English. It is generally known that explicit pronunciation practice is important for overcoming such barriers (Derwing and Munro, 2005), and whilst the posttest results of the present study indicate some degree of improvement, there is a clear need for further development. According to

vocabulary, the use of Tamil-English cognates contributed semantic mischief to many students. The problem, reflected in pretest results, was that the students used words incorrectly because of their dual meanings, in Tamil and English. This is in agreement with the work of Cook (2008), who warned that false cognates are dangerous and can lead the learners astray as it would influence their vocabulary development. However, the posttest shows a clear improvement, indicating that the more context and vocabulary exercises students are provided with, the better they can discriminate between words in both languages.

Sociocultural Factors and Their Influence on Language Acquisition

Not only linguistic barriers were significant, the sociocultural issues also greatly contributed to the students' experiences in learning English. Students and teachers cited factors that affected the progress of students in learning English including anxiety, limited exposure to English and attitudes about the language. This correlates with Kramsch's (1998) work, which stated that language and culture are not separate. English, in the case of Tamil-speaking learners, is naturally afforded a space as a foreign language as a result of its association with opportunity and privilege as well as a history of colonialism. On the one hand, they appreciated the value of English as a means for career opportunity and economic mobility; on the other hand, they felt ambivalent or alienated from the language because of its association with an elite or colonial past.

During the interviews, it became clear that for many students fear of making mistakes was one of the main barriers not allowing them to actively engage in speaking activities. This is consistent with Horwitz et al. (1986) - debilitating anxiety about speaking foreign languages, where learners resist all spoken communication for fear of being judged. Coupled with being so rarely in contact with English beyond the classroom, this made it all but impossible for students to practice English in real-life situations. The absence of English being used in

a practical context made a lot of students feel like it was just something to memorize to prepare for a test, rather than a necessary communication device in daily life.

Also, their language development was significantly hindered by the environment in which they were learning with little exposure to English beyond the classroom. More than half the students said their exposure to English was limited to classroom study, with limited or no chance to use the language outside school. This is in line with Hornberger and McKay's (2010) study that highlighted how limited exposure to the target language supersedes all other factors in hindering language acquisition, especially in rural, and non-urban environments where, daily use of English is not the norm. And while posttest scores indicate some improvement, sociocultural elements such as anxiety and exposure to the language still hinder progress and warrant further investigation.

Teachers also pointed to establishing a supportive learning environment that encourages students to take risks with their English. The interviews indicated that the traditional emphasis on grammar and reading exercises improved writing skills at best, but not language anxiety that many experience when they speak. Teachers

suggested incorporating more interactive and communicative teaching methods, like role-play and group discussions, to foster a more engaging and supportive classroom environment where students could practice English in a low-stakes context.

Subtopic	Findings	Implications	Relevant Literature
Linguistic Interference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 85% of pupils left out articles. - 72% misused prepositions. - 68% used SOV instead of SVO sentence structure. - 78% mistaken use of /θ/ and /ð/ sounds. - 70% used Tamil-English cognates. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of Articles (easy templates like missing articles, deviation of preposition usage - not use of 'the', 'a' etc because they are non-existent in Tamil) - Sentence errors because of different word structures in Tamil and English. - Similar pronunciation but different phonologies - Vocabulary confusion caused by Tamil-English cognates 	<p>Odlin (1989) - Negative transfer of L1 to L2.</p> <p>Muthusamy (2012) - Sentence structure challenges in Tamil-English learning.</p> <p>Derwing & Munro (2005) - Phonological interference.</p>
Sociocultural Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 65% of students had language anxiety and fear of making mistakes. - Little English exposure outside of the classroom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Anxiety impacted the students to be hesitant in participating the activities, more in speaking activities. - Inadequate exposure to 	<p>ramschi (1998) - Language and culture are intertwined.</p> <p>Hornberger & McKay (2010) - Impact of exposure on language</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - English as a language of privilege and colonisation. 	<p>English beyond the classroom hindered language acquisition.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Evolving perceptions of English: seen as an opportunity but also a remnant of colonial past 	<p>learning.</p> <p>Horwitz et al. (1986) - Language anxiety and its impact.</p>
Progress after Interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Major upgrades in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. - 40% decrease in pronunciation errors. - 25% better with the way sentences are structured. - Lesser dependence on cognates — words similar in Tamil and English 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - English proficiency improved with targeted interventions. - Task-based learning, interactive methods and pronunciation training produced measurable improvements. 	<p>Derwing & Munro (2005) - Importance of explicit pronunciation instruction.</p> <p>Ellis (2003) - Task-based language teaching benefits.</p>

Table 1: Summary of Findings, Implications, and Relevant Literature on Tamil-English Language Learning Challenges

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that Tamil significantly influences English language acquisition among Grade 8 students, particularly in grammar, pronunciation, sentence structure, and vocabulary. Common issues such as missing articles, incorrect prepositions, and mispronunciation of English sounds not present in Tamil were identified. Sociocultural factors, including language anxiety, limited exposure to English, and mixed attitudes toward the language, further hindered learning. While

traditional grammar-based teaching prepared students for exams, it did little to improve speaking confidence or fluency. Targeted interventions like task-based learning, pronunciation training, and interactive teaching methods showed measurable improvements, emphasizing the need for holistic approaches. Recommendations include focusing on pronunciation training, incorporating technology for autonomous learning, implementing communicative and task-based teaching methods, and providing more opportunities for English exposure both in and outside the classroom. Teachers should foster supportive learning environments to reduce language anxiety and undergo specialized training in communicative and pronunciation-focused strategies. Future research should explore the long-term impact of interventions, sociocultural dynamics, and technology's role in addressing barriers. Further studies on teacher training and its influence on classroom practices could help develop more effective strategies for improving English acquisition in Tamil-speaking and similarly under-resourced contexts.

Significance of the study

This study aims to uncover how Tamil influences English acquisition among Grade 8 students at Km/Km/Shams Central College Maruthamunai, focusing on linguistic factors such as syntax and pronunciation that cause errors in sentence structure and communication. For example, Tamil's subject-object-verb (SOV) structure and absence of certain English sounds may underlie recurring grammatical and phonological mistakes. By identifying these challenges, the research will help educators target specific areas for improvement. Additionally, it will examine sociocultural factors, including attitudes toward English, motivation, and community perceptions, highlighting how limited exposure to English and its colonial associations affect students' willingness to learn and use the language. The findings will offer practical recommendations for creating supportive learning environments and improving English instruction in rural, multilingual settings, ultimately enhancing the proficiency and confidence of Tamil-speaking learners while supporting their academic and future success.

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