

The Role of Mother Tongue in English Language Acquisition: A Study Among Tamil Medium Learners

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of the mother tongue, particularly Tamil, on English language acquisition among undergraduate students. In multilingual countries like India, the interplay between the first language (L1) and second language (L2) is complex. While L1 can aid comprehension and vocabulary development, it can also interfere with pronunciation and grammar. This research highlights both the advantages and disadvantages of incorporating L1 in English language instruction, drawing on classroom observations and a case study. The findings provide insights for educators seeking to balance native language use with English language development.

Keywords: Mother tongue, English acquisition, L1 interference, ELT, Tamil learners, bilingual education

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Indian context, English is typically taught as a second language. Students from Tamil medium backgrounds frequently struggle with English-dominant higher education environments. This study explores the dual role of the native language in either supporting or hindering English language learning. Recognizing this duality is crucial to developing effective and inclusive ELT practices.

2. Literature Review

Theoretical frameworks from Krashen, Cummins, and Vygotsky provide valuable perspectives on second language acquisition. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982) emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input just beyond the learner's current level. Cummins (2001) proposes the Common Underlying Proficiency theory, suggesting that cognitive skills developed in L1 can transfer to L2. Vygotsky (1978) underscores the sociocultural context of learning, asserting that a learner's cultural and linguistic background is essential in shaping their academic development.

3. Impact of Mother Tongue on English Learning

For Tamil-speaking learners, the mother tongue provides emotional and cognitive support, assisting in clarifying complex concepts and boosting confidence. Teachers often rely on Tamil for explaining abstract ideas. However, excessive dependence on L1 may result in L1 interference, leading to issues such as mispronunciations and syntactic errors influenced by Tamil grammar.

4. Pedagogical Advantages of L1 Use

- **Enhanced comprehension:** Learners grasp complex content more efficiently.
- **Reduced anxiety:** The use of L1 fosters a more comfortable learning environment.
- **Vocabulary development:** Translation between L1 and L2 helps in vocabulary retention.
- **Scaffolding:** L1 serves as a bridge to understanding intricate L2 concepts.

5. Challenges in ELT Classrooms

- **Language interference:** Continuous use of Tamil can result in fossilized errors.
- **Limited fluency:** Students may not gain adequate exposure to spoken English.
- **Over-reliance on translation:** Teachers and learners may become overly dependent on L1 translations rather than constructing meaning in English.
- **Curriculum misalignment:** English-only policies may not align with classroom realities in bilingual contexts.

6. Observations and Case Study

This case study was conducted at a rural college in Tamil Nadu with a sample of 30 first-year undergraduate students. Classroom observations and informal interviews were used to assess the role of the mother tongue in English language learning. Students frequently used Tamil during peer discussions and group work, which initially supported engagement and understanding. However, this reliance often hindered spontaneous English usage.

A subgroup of students was encouraged to engage exclusively in English during certain classroom activities. By the end of the semester, these students demonstrated measurable improvement in oral proficiency, as noted through teacher assessments and peer evaluations. The case underscores the importance of a gradual transition strategy using L1 support initially but promoting increasing use of L2.

7. Conclusion

The mother tongue functions as both a facilitator and an impediment in second language learning. When used strategically, Tamil can support comprehension and reduce learner anxiety. However, unchecked reliance can inhibit English proficiency. Educators must adopt a balanced approach that gradually reduces L1 dependency while fostering immersive English learning environments.

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