

**THE INFLUENCE OF FIRST LANGUAGE AMONG ENGLISH LANGUAGE STUDENTS WITH TAMIL BACKGROUND WHILE PRONOUNCING ENGLISH WORDS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY**

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**Abstract**

This study investigates the problems in pronouncing and understanding English words experienced by the learners whose first language is Tamil. In other terms to find the problematic sounds that cause challenges and to find out techniques that may help the Students With Tamil Background (SWTBs) to improve their intelligibility and thereby pronunciation as well. The subjects for the study were 42 students from Sadakathullah Appa College, Tirunelveli (SAC) who study English Phonetics as one of their major courses. They listen to the videos of the Natives and Indian speakers as well in the language laboratory as part of the Major Courses.

The tool used for collecting the data was a structured Questionnaire. The data collected were analysed statistically. The findings of the study revealed that the Tamil students of English whose state is Tamil Nadu had problems with understanding certain English sounds. They find it easy to replace the RP sounds such as /ʒ/, /z/ and /ʃ/ with /s/ that is commonly used in their L1. Based on the findings, the study concluded that factors such as interference of the First Language (L1), militate against the students' competence in terms of intelligibility and pronunciation. The conclusion of this study aims at recommending curricular and pedagogical approaches and modern methods for improving competence in terms of pronunciation. The Study also suggests the practical need of having some valuable Assessment Standard/Model against which the pronunciation performance of the learners (SWTBs) may be evaluated.

**Keywords:** English Pronunciation, First Language, influence, Tamil students, intelligibility, pronunciation, modern technology.

**1) Introduction**

The Literature Surveys have demonstrated that the errors made by the Indian speakers (including News Presenters), who speak English, are something systematic and not random. Dr P. Iyadurai (2006) and T. Balasubramanian (2018) demonstrated that Tamil students happen to face problems in pronouncing English Sounds such as /ʒ/, /z/ and /dʒ/. Ronald Carter and David Nunan 2001 noted that the errors of pronunciation that non-native learners make are systematic and not accidental. Hence, they concluded that the main problem of the non-native speakers of English, is the substitution of sounds, i.e, they substitute the sounds that are not available in their Native Sound System, with other sounds that are close to them. They replace /ʒ/ /z/ and /dʒ/ with /s/. The keen

observation of the researcher also helps him to arrive at similar conclusions when the learner adds a vowel in front of the word-initial consonant cluster and a consonant in front of the word-initial vowel.

## 2) Statement of the Problem

A close and meticulous observation of the Students With Tamil Background (SWTBs) found out that they mispronounce /ə/ in “thank” /z/ in “pleasure” and /z/ in “rose”. Through the observation which lasted for months, it was noticed by the researcher that the students have problems with the contrasting sounds such as /s/ - /z/ and /ʃ/ - /z/. The students were almost unable to produce the sounds /z/ and /z/ due to the absence in the Sound System of L1. Instead, they replace those sounds with its counterparts e.g. rose /ro:s/ for /rəʊz/ , pleasure /pleʃə/ for /plezə/. They also do not pronounce the suffixes in conformance to the set of rules that leads to unintelligibility.

E.g.

Eyes	/aɪz/	/aɪs/
Knees	/ni:z/	/ni:s/
Peas	/pi:z/	/pi:s/

The replacement of bilabials by the SWTBs poses a similar problem as in

bray /breɪ/

pray /preɪ/

This phenomenon causes unintelligibility and prevents the learner from speaking in approximation to the native accents. Hence this study attempts to identify such problematic areas of pronunciation because of the influence of L1 and to suggest suitable methods (both modern and traditional) that may help them with better pronunciation.

## 3) Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Linguists who did substantial research on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have discussed the factors that pose challenges in achieving the target pronunciation. They have pointed out certain factors that influence learning a second language (L2) in general and English pronunciation. They also try to identify the precise reasons behind such errors and try to suggest suitable strategies that help the students improve their English pronunciation.

English pronunciation is one of the most difficult skills to acquire and learners should spend lots of time improving their pronunciation (Aliaga García, 2007; Martínez-Flor et al. 2006). Understandable pronunciation is one of the basic requirements of learners’ competence and it is also one of the most important features of language instruction. According to Fraser (2000), teachers should be provided with courses and materials that help them improve their pronunciation instruction. Cook (1996 as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2016) defined pronunciation as the production of English sounds. Pronunciation is learnt by repeating sounds and correcting them when produced inaccurately. When learners start learning pronunciation, they make new habits and overcome the difficulties resulting from the first language. According to Yates (2002 as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2016), pronunciation is the production of sounds that is used for making

meaning. As Levis (2007) points out, CAPT [computer assisted pronunciation teaching] applications are tools to meet instructional goals, and the tool should be appropriate to the job.

The advent of CALL Courses help extensively both the facilitators and learners with regard to attaining the skills of the Target Language in general and the Target Pronunciation in specific. Listening Skill is taught through the Language Laboratories using specialized software. CAPT is yet another concept that may take phonetic instruction to the next level. The usage of voice commands (Automatic Speech Recognition) in smart gadgets may offer a perfect training ground for the learners in attaining the Target Pronunciation.

### 3.1. Factors that Influence Pronunciation

Researchers and Linguists have pointed out several linguistic factors viz. the differences in the sound system between (L1) and (L2), the lack of one-to-one correspondence of some sounds of the English language, the influence of L1 and the influence of spelling that impact the Target Pronunciation.

#### 3.1.1. Sound System Differences and Mother Tongue Influence

Languages are made up of sounds. Still, not all languages have similar sounds. Every language has a unique sound system. Some are simple sounds, and some are complex. A native speaker with some involuntary actions gets some training and masters those sounds to become an effective communicator.

For example, in Tamil sounds such as /zh/ and /ng/ is said to be unique and special, which are not found in other languages. It cannot be denied that Tamil is one of the oldest languages. English may have unique sounds as well like /ʒ/, /ə/, /ð/ etc as well. Arabic has sounds such as /ظ/, /غ/ etc. It may be noted that all these unique sounds pose greater challenges to a learner of the respective language.

In Tamil, Gemination (or) Doubling of consonants is a common feature. When the consonant is doubled there is some extra/added force in pronunciation. But in English, though the consonant is doubled in the script, it is not done so in pronunciation.

E.g.

Stunner	/ˈstʌnə/
Butter	/ˈbʌtə/
Mutton	/ˈmʌtn/
Rubber	/ˈrʌbə/

Meanwhile in Tamil

Mother	-	/ʌmma:/
Father	-	/ʌppa:/
Degree/kite	-	/pʌttəm/
Jaggery	-	/velləm/

These factors influence greatly in the pronunciation of English words by an SWTB.

## 4. Method

In this study, the data has been collected from 42 final-year B.A. English students of SAC, after the completion of a Course in Phonetics and a Course in Listening as part of their curriculum. A questionnaire to be answered by them to write their opinions and ideas about difficulties in pronouncing native sounds, find out the exact reasons for mispronunciation and suggest suitable ways that may help them to improve their pronunciation. All data were analysed later on a statistical and descriptive basis.

#### 4.1. Population of the Study

The original population of this study was the final year students of B.A. English Literature who have completed courses on phonetics and listening skills. They were asked a total of 6 questions. The questions focused on the difficulties in pronouncing native sounds, the exact reasons for mispronunciation and the suitable ways to improve the pronunciation. The researcher has followed descriptive and statistical methods in this study. The descriptive method describes the problems and the phenomenon. Then it offers recommendations for solving the problems and phenomenon. The analytical method has been used to test the hypotheses of the study by using statistical procedures.

#### 4.2. Tool for Data Collection - Questionnaire

The tool of any given study is the instrument that any researcher uses for collecting the required data. Here the researcher used observation and a well-structured questionnaire containing items that reflect the opinions of the teachers about the pronunciation of SWTBs.

In the questionnaire, the students were asked to choose any one option from the available three options (Agree-Not Sure-Disagree). Forty-two copies of the questionnaire were printed and answered by (forty-two) students from SAC within a time of 4 days. The questionnaire consisted of items asking about their convenience of replacing RP consonants with their GIE variants, e.g., /t/ in place of /θ/, /w/ with /v/, /ʒ/ with /ʃ/ etc. The last part of the questionnaire asked the respondents to register their take on the recommendations as solutions for errors e.g., whether looking up words in the dictionary, constant listening to native speakers through audio-visual aids/technology-tools, which way of pronunciation is easy to emulate, which one is standard and the pronunciation they desire to use. The result was very acceptable and all statistical procedures such as the Simple Percentage Method and Cross Tabulation method were carried out by the researcher with the help of an expert using a computer and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). It all helped to obtain satisfactory results. The Questionnaire also consisted of questions pertaining to the social and educational backgrounds of the respondents. The responses to the questions were analysed descriptively and statistically in the following part of the article.

### 5. Results and Discussion

#### 1. Do you find it comes naturally to you to use GIE /t/ instead of RP /θ/?

Table No. 1

S. No.	Particulars	Tamil Medium		English Medium		Total
		No. of students	%	No. of students	%	
1	Agree	19	76.00	6	24.00	25

2	Not Sure	5	45.45	6	54.55	11
3	Disagree	0	0.00	6	100.00	6
Total		24	57.14	18	42.86	42

### Model Interpretation

For the First question out of 42 respondents, 25 agreed, 11 were not sure and 6 disagreed.

In the first component 'Agree' 19 of the respondents did their Higher Secondary in Tamil Medium schools and 6 of the respondents were from English Medium Schools. In the second component 'Not sure' 5 were from Tamil Medium and 6 were from English Medium.

In the third component 'Disagree' none were from Tamil Medium and 6 were from English Medium.

### 2. Do you find it comes naturally to you to use GIE /d/ instead of /ð/?

Table No. 2

S. No.	Particulars	Tamil Medium		English Medium		Total
		No. of students	%	No. of students	%	
1	Agree	18	81.82	4	18.18	22
2	Not Sure	6	37.50	10	62.50	16
3	Disagree	0	0.00	4	100.00	4
Total		24	57.14	18	42.86	42

### Model Interpretation

For the First question out of 42 respondents, 22 agreed, 16 were not sure and 4 disagreed.

In the first component 'Agree' 18 of the respondents did their Higher Secondary in Tamil Medium schools and 4 of the respondents were from English Medium Schools. In the second component 'Not sure' 6 were from Tamil Medium and 10 were from English Medium.

In the third component 'Disagree' none were from Tamil Medium and 4 were from English Medium.

### 3. Do you think it is habitual for you to replace RP /t/ with retroflex /ʈ/?

Table No. 3

S. No.	Particulars	Tamil Medium		English Medium		Total
		No. of students	%	No. of students	%	
1	Agree	21	77.78	6	22.22	27
2	Not Sure	1	12.50	7	87.50	8
3	Disagree	2	28.57	5	71.43	7
Total		24	57.14	18	42.86	42

### Model Interpretation

For the First question out of 42 respondents, 27 agreed, 8 were not sure and 7 disagreed.

In the first component ‘Agree’ 21 of the respondents did their Higher Secondary in Tamil Medium schools and 6 of the respondents were from English Medium Schools. In the second component ‘Not sure’ 1 were from Tamil Medium and 7 were from English Medium

In the third component ‘Disagree’ 2 were from Tamil Medium and 5 were from English Medium.

**4. Do you think it is natural for you to replace RP /d/ with retroflex /dʒ/?**

**Table No. 4**

S. No.	Particulars	Tamil Medium		English Medium		Total
		No. of students	%	No. of students	%	
1	Agree	18	78.26	5	21.74	23
2	Not Sure	5	38.46	8	61.54	13
3	Disagree	1	16.67	5	83.33	6
Total		24	57.14	18	42.86	42

**Model Interpretation**

For the First question out of 42 respondents, 23 agreed, 13 were not sure and 6 disagreed.

In the first component ‘Agree’ 18 of the respondents did their Higher Secondary in Tamil Medium schools and 5 of the respondents were from English Medium Schools. In the second component ‘Not sure’ 5 were from Tamil Medium and 8 were from English Medium

In the third component ‘Disagree’ 1 were from Tamil Medium and 5 were from English Medium.

**5. The Pronunciation deviations found among the students are due to the sound system differences between the Tamil language and English language.**

**Table No. 5**

S. No.	Particulars	Tamil Medium		English Medium		Total
		No. of students	%	No. of students	%	
1	Agree	21	75.00	7	25.00	28
2	Not Sure	2	14.29	12	85.71	14
3	Disagree	0	0	0	0	0
Total		24	57.14	18	42.86	42

**Model Interpretation**

For the First question out of 42 respondents, 28 agreed, 14 were not sure and none disagreed.

In the first component ‘Agree’ 21 of the respondents did their Higher Secondary in Tamil Medium schools and 7 of the respondents were from English Medium Schools. In the second component ‘Not sure’ 2 were from Tamil Medium and 12 were from English Medium

In the third component ‘Disagree’ none were from Tamil Medium, and none were from English Medium.

**6. Do you think looking up words and transcriptions in the dictionary may help improve English Pronunciation?**

**Table No. 6**

S. No.	Particulars	Tamil Medium		English Medium		Total
		No. of students	%	No. of students	%	
1	Agree	22	78.57	6	21.43	28
2	Not Sure	2	16.67	10	83.33	12
3	Disagree	0	0.00	2	100.00	2
Total		24	57.14	18	42.86	42

### **Model Interpretation**

For the First question out of 42 respondents, 28 agreed, 12 were not sure and 2 disagreed.

In the first component ‘Agree’ 22 of the respondents did their Higher Secondary in Tamil Medium schools and 6 of the respondents were from English Medium Schools. In the second component ‘Not sure’ 2 were from Tamil Medium and 10 were from English Medium

In the third component ‘Disagree’ none were from Tamil Medium and 2 were from English Medium.

The analysis of the responses to the questions brings about important finding that leads to a more logical conclusion. The influence of L1 factors while pronouncing English Words is pervasive. Most of the respondents, irrespective of their social and educational background have agreed to the notion that, constant listening to native speakers may help improve pronunciation and there by intelligibility. They accept and admit native accents such as RP and American Accent are standard benchmarks and steadfast listening to those native speakers may help the situation.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study concludes that the SWTBs find it natural to replace /θ/ with /t̪/, /ð/ with /d̪/, /t/ with /t/ and /d/ with /d/. It was also found out through observation that SWTBs use gemination while pronouncing English words such as summer, rubber, stunner and cutter. On the other hand, the SWTBs mispronounce vowels since each English vowel has more than one way of pronunciation. It may be concluded that such deviations from the Target Pronunciation are systematic and not random due to the influence of L1. The social and educational background of the learners which they hail from are also the factors to be given due weightage. The need of independent/individual practice in achieving pronunciation goals is also inferred through the study. The availability of Modern Technology may be used by the facilitators and students alike to meet the teaching and learning goals of Pronunciation.

### **Recommendations**

In connection with the results of the study, the following are recommended:

- The study suggests that equal weightage and consideration should be given to the pronunciation part (speaking skills) of the language like other parts viz. spelling, vocabulary, and grammar.
- The study suggests that the teacher must draw the attention of the SWTBs toward the significance of proper pronunciation in learning English.

- The study suggests that the SWTBs must be exposed to native accents such as RP, and American accents using audio-visual aids and dictionaries. These tools are deemed to be very useful for practising pronunciation. Referring to the transcription of the words will also be of great help.
- It is also suggested that due importance of precise pronunciation must be instilled in the minds the young learners even at the pre-university stages. This will provide a basis for the teachers to identify the physical reasons for mispronunciations at an earlier stage and correct those mistakes then and there.
- The usage of ASR(Automatic Speech Recognition)/speech-to-text in smart devices through applications such as Voki, Puppet Pals, Google voice assist etc., provides valuable independent practice of pronunciation.

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