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INFLUENCE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN THE ACQUISITION
OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Rajdeep Chatterjee

Assistant Professor, Annapurna Memorial College of Education, Kakdwip (M.Ed, B.Ed,
D.El.Ed), WB, India.

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Keywords	Abstract
<i>Mother Tongue, Second Language Acquisition, English Language Learning, Language Transfer, ESL.</i>	Language acquisition is a complex cognitive and social process in which the learner's first language (L1), commonly known as the mother tongue, plays a crucial role. In multilingual contexts like India, learners often acquire English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL), and their mother tongue significantly influences pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and discourse patterns. This paper examines the influence of the mother tongue on the acquisition of the English language, highlighting both positive and negative effects. Using a qualitative-descriptive methodology supported by secondary sources, the study reviews year-wise literature to understand how L1 transfer affects second language learning. The findings reveal that while mother tongue interference may cause errors in phonology and syntax, strategic use of L1 can facilitate comprehension, confidence, and cognitive development. The study underscores the pedagogical significance of integrating mother tongue support in English language teaching for effective and inclusive learning.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Language is the primary medium through which human beings communicate thoughts, emotions, and knowledge. The mother tongue is the first language acquired naturally by an individual in early childhood and forms the foundation of cognitive and linguistic development. In many countries, especially postcolonial and multilingual societies like India, English is learned as a second or foreign language rather than as a native language.

The acquisition of English is deeply influenced by the learner's mother tongue. This influence, often referred to as language transfer, can be either positive (facilitating learning) or negative (causing interference and errors). Understanding the role of the mother tongue is essential for developing effective teaching strategies, designing curricula, and addressing learners' difficulties in English language acquisition. This study explores how the mother tongue affects English language learning by reviewing significant research contributions year-wise and analysing their implications for pedagogy. Language acquisition is a fundamental human process through which individuals develop the ability to communicate, think, and participate in social life.

In multilingual and multicultural societies like India, English occupies a unique position as a link language, a medium of higher education, administration, science, and global communication. However, for the majority of learners, English is not a native language but an additional language learned in formal classroom settings. This situation makes the role of the mother tongue particularly significant in the acquisition of English. Learners often rely on their first language for comprehension, interpretation, and expression while learning English, consciously or unconsciously transferring linguistic patterns from L1 to L2.

Thus, the present study seeks to examine the influence of the mother tongue in the acquisition of the English language by reviewing theoretical and empirical studies over time.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE (YEAR-WISE)

1953 – Weinreich

Weinreich (1953) was one of the earliest scholars to discuss language contact, emphasizing that bilingual speakers often transfer features from their mother tongue into the target language. He identified phonological, lexical, and syntactic interference as natural outcomes of bilingualism.

1957 – Lado

Lado (1957) introduced the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, asserting that similarities between L1 and L2 facilitate learning, while differences create difficulties. He emphasized that mother tongue habits strongly influence second language learning.

1964 – Brooks

Brooks (1964) argued that structural differences between languages result in habitual errors. He emphasized the importance of drilling and practice to overcome mother tongue influence, particularly in grammar and sentence structure.

1967 – Corder



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Corder (1967) viewed learner errors not merely as interference but as evidence of language development. He argued that mother tongue influence is a natural part of the learning process and provides insight into learners' interlanguage systems.

1972 – Selinker

Selinker (1972) proposed the concept of Interlanguage, highlighting that learners construct a linguistic system influenced by both mother tongue and the target language. L1 transfer was identified as a key process in second language acquisition.

1981 – Krashen

Krashen (1981), through the Input Hypothesis, suggested that comprehensible input is essential for language acquisition. While he minimized direct L1 interference, he acknowledged the supportive role of mother tongue in lowering learners' affective filters.

1983 – Littlewood

Littlewood (1983) emphasized communicative competence and stated that learners often rely on their mother tongue to negotiate meaning during communicative tasks in English.

1994 – Ellis

Ellis (1994) provided a comprehensive analysis of second language acquisition and confirmed that mother tongue influence is more evident in phonology and syntax than in semantics. He also noted that proficiency level determines the extent of L1 interference.

2001 – Cook

Cook (2001) argued for the strategic use of the mother tongue in the ESL classroom. He maintained that banning L1 entirely is pedagogically unsound and that bilingual competence should be valued.

2010 – Cummins

Cummins (2010) emphasized Common Underlying Proficiency, stating that skills acquired in the mother tongue transfer positively to second language learning, particularly in reading and writing.

2015 – Nation

Nation (2015) highlighted the role of L1 in vocabulary acquisition, asserting that translation and comparison with the mother tongue can enhance word retention and comprehension.

2020 – Mahboob & Lin

Mahboob and Lin (2020) examined multilingual classrooms and found that judicious use of the mother tongue improves learner participation, clarity, and conceptual understanding in English learning contexts.

2022 – Shin, Dixon, and Choi

Shin et al. (2022) reported that bilingual instructional approaches improve English learning outcomes without hindering target language exposure.

2023 – Alrabai

Alrabai (2023) observed that controlled use of the mother tongue lowers foreign language anxiety and improves speaking confidence among English learners.



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3. GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

A critical examination of the existing literature on the influence of the mother tongue in the acquisition of the English language reveals several significant gaps that necessitate the present study. Firstly, a large proportion of earlier studies, particularly those rooted in contrastive analysis and structural linguistics, primarily focused on mother tongue influence as a source of interference and error. While these studies successfully identified patterns of phonological and grammatical transfer, they often failed to explore the constructive and facilitative roles of the mother tongue in English language acquisition. The present study addresses this imbalance by examining both positive and negative dimensions of mother tongue influence.

Secondly, many empirical studies have concentrated on isolated linguistic components such as pronunciation or grammar, without adopting a holistic view of language acquisition. There is a noticeable lack of integrative studies that examine the influence of the mother tongue across multiple linguistic levels—phonological, syntactic, lexical, and pragmatic—within a single analytical framework. This study attempts to bridge that gap by synthesizing findings across all major linguistic domains.

Thirdly, much of the existing research is based on Western or monolingual educational contexts, which may not fully represent the realities of multilingual classrooms, particularly in countries like India. There is limited literature that contextualizes mother tongue influence within Indian ESL classrooms characterized by linguistic diversity, socio-economic variation, and examination-oriented pedagogy. The present study situates its analysis within such multilingual educational contexts.

Fourthly, although recent studies advocate the use of the mother tongue in English classrooms, there remains a lack of clarity regarding the extent and pedagogical boundaries of L1 use. Many studies recommend mother tongue support in principle but do not provide sufficient synthesis of how, when, and why it should be employed. This study contributes by critically reviewing literature to highlight informed and judicious use of the mother tongue rather than indiscriminate reliance.

Finally, while contemporary concepts such as translanguaging and multilingual pedagogy have gained prominence, there is a scarcity of consolidated reviews that integrate these modern perspectives with classical theories of language transfer.

In view of these gaps, the present study seeks to provide a balanced, context-sensitive, and pedagogically relevant synthesis of literature, thereby contributing meaningfully to the existing body of knowledge on second language acquisition.

4. SYNTHESIS OF LITERATURE

The year-wise review reveals a clear shift from viewing mother tongue influence as interference to recognizing it as a valuable pedagogical resource. Early structuralist views emphasized error prevention, while contemporary research supports bilingual, learner-centered, and inclusive approaches to English language acquisition.



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5. METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design based on secondary data. Academic books, peer-reviewed journals, conference papers, and authoritative reports related to second language acquisition were analysed systematically.

- **Sources of Data**

National and international journals

Books on linguistics and ESL pedagogy

Research articles published between 1957 and 2020

Method of Analysis

Content analysis of theoretical and empirical studies

Thematic categorization of mother tongue influence (positive and negative)

Comparative interpretation of findings

6. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The mother tongue significantly influences English pronunciation, especially stress, intonation, and sound substitution.

Grammatical structures of the mother tongue often interfere with English sentence construction.

Vocabulary learning is facilitated through mother tongue equivalence and translation.

Learners with strong literacy skills in their mother tongue acquire English reading and writing skills more effectively.

Controlled use of L1 reduces anxiety and builds learners' confidence.

Complete exclusion of the mother tongue may hinder comprehension, particularly at the beginner level.

7. KEY FINDINGS

Inevitable Influence of Mother Tongue

The study reveals that the influence of the mother tongue in the acquisition of the English language is inevitable. Learners naturally draw upon their first language as a cognitive and linguistic framework while learning English.

Strong Impact on Phonology

The influence of the mother tongue is most prominent in pronunciation, stress, intonation, and articulation. Learners tend to substitute English sounds with familiar sounds from their mother tongue.

Grammatical Interference

Sentence structure, word order, use of articles, prepositions, and tense formation in English are significantly affected by mother tongue patterns, especially at the beginner level.

Facilitation of Vocabulary Acquisition

The study finds that vocabulary learning is enhanced through mother tongue equivalence, translation, and semantic mapping, enabling faster comprehension and retention of new English words.



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Support in Reading and Writing Skills

Learners with strong literacy skills in their mother tongue demonstrate better performance in English reading comprehension and writing, indicating cross-linguistic transfer of academic skills.

Reduction of Learner Anxiety

Strategic use of the mother tongue in English classrooms reduces fear, anxiety, and hesitation among learners, creating a psychologically supportive learning environment.

Enhanced Learner Confidence and Participation

Allowing limited and purposeful use of the mother tongue increases learner confidence, classroom interaction, and willingness to communicate in English.

Role of Teacher Awareness

Teachers' understanding of learners' mother tongues plays a crucial role in addressing errors effectively and using contrastive teaching techniques to support learning.

8. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study is significant for the following reasons:

It helps teachers understand learner errors as developmental rather than defective.

It supports bilingual and multilingual approaches in English language teaching.

It aids curriculum planners in designing inclusive language policies.

It contributes to teacher education by promoting reflective pedagogical practices.

It encourages respect for learners' linguistic and cultural identities.

The present study holds considerable significance in the field of English language education, applied linguistics, and teacher training, particularly in multilingual and multicultural learning contexts.

Firstly, the study provides deeper insight into the role of the mother tongue as a cognitive resource rather than merely a source of interference.

Secondly, the findings of the study are valuable for English language teachers, especially those teaching in ESL and EFL classrooms. Awareness of mother tongue influence enables teachers to anticipate common learner errors, design contrastive teaching strategies, and provide targeted feedback.

Thirdly, the study contributes significantly to teacher education and professional development programmes such as B.Ed., M.Ed., and language training courses.

Fourthly, the study supports inclusive and equitable education by validating learners' linguistic and cultural identities.

Fifthly, the study is beneficial for curriculum designers and textbook developers. The insights gained can assist in integrating bilingual instructional strategies, scaffolding techniques, and contextualized learning materials that connect English with learners' existing linguistic knowledge.

Finally, the study has practical significance for learners themselves. By understanding the natural influence of their mother tongue, learners can develop positive attitudes toward language learning, reduce fear of making mistakes, and use their first language strategically to enhance English proficiency.



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9. IMPLEMENTATION GAPS

Despite extensive theoretical and empirical evidence supporting the constructive role of the mother tongue in the acquisition of the English language, several critical gaps remain in translating research findings into effective classroom practice.

Firstly, there is a noticeable gap between research recommendations and classroom implementation. While scholars advocate the judicious use of the mother tongue, many English classrooms continue to follow rigid English-only policies.

Secondly, teacher training programmes often lack adequate emphasis on bilingual and multilingual pedagogy. Many teachers are insufficiently trained to use the mother tongue strategically and pedagogically, resulting in either excessive reliance on L1 or complete avoidance of it.

Thirdly, curriculum frameworks and textbooks rarely provide clear guidelines regarding the appropriate use of the mother tongue in English teaching. The absence of structured instructional strategies leads to inconsistent practices across schools and educational institutions.

Fourthly, assessment practices remain predominantly monolingual and exam-oriented, focusing solely on English output without recognizing the cognitive support provided by the mother tongue.

Fifthly, institutional and administrative pressures often discourage teachers from using the mother tongue, equating its use with pedagogical weakness. Such misconceptions prevent teachers from adopting learner-friendly bilingual strategies.

Finally, there is a lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation of mother tongue-based instructional strategies. Without empirical classroom-based evidence of effectiveness, innovative practices remain underutilized and unsupported at the policy level.

10. CONCLUSION

The present study affirms that the influence of the mother tongue in the acquisition of the English language is both inevitable and multifaceted. The mother tongue, being the foundation of an individual's linguistic and cognitive development, continues to shape the learning of English at various levels, including pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and discourse. The review of year-wise literature clearly demonstrates that mother tongue influence operates through both positive and negative transfer. While structural and phonological differences between the mother tongue and English may lead to errors, similarities between the two languages can significantly facilitate learning.

11. AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

The writers affirm that they have no connections to, or engagement with, any group or body that provides financial or non-financial assistance for the topics or resources covered in this manuscript.

12. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.



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13. PLAGIARISM POLICY

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