Mother Tongue Matters: Investigating L1 Interference in English Acquisition Among Tribal Welfare Students

Rehana Iffath*

Lecturer, TGTWRDC(W), Rajanna Siricilla, Telangana, India

Abstract

This research investigates the impact of mother tongue (L1) on the learning of the English language by students in Tribal Welfare Residential Educational Institutions in Telangana, India. Based on language transfer theories, interlanguage theory, and linguistic interdependence, the study analyzes how structural aspects of tribal languages like Gondi, Koya, and Lambadi shape students' English proficiency in phonology, syntax, and grammar. Identifying repeated patterns of L1 interference that prevent the establishment of proper and fluent English use, the research uses qualitative classroom observation and error analysis of student writing samples. The findings indicate that mother tongue to English negative transfer frequently leads to long-term grammatical flaws, pronunciation issues, and restricted code-switching capabilities. These problems are compounded by the absence of mother tongue support in English-medium classrooms. The research emphasizes the call for linguistically responsive instruction that bridges students' home linguistic experience with second language teaching. The research calls for specific teacher training, L1-aware scaffolding strategies, and the implementation of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) approaches to impact English learning among tribal students.

Introduction

Language is not just a form of communication but also a vehicle of culture, identity, and cognition. In multilingual countries such as India, the interaction between a learner's native language (L1) and second or foreign language — especially English (L2) — has significant bearings on academic achievement. One of the most linguistically and culturally heterogeneous communities in India are the tribal groups, who tend to speak mutually different native languages like Gondi, Koya, Lambadi, and so on. Although English has become a major language of academic mobility and socioeconomic growth, its learning among the tribal students is beset with difficulties many of whose roots lie in the structural. The medium of instruction in the majority of

Tribal Welfare Residential Educational Institutions (TWR Schools), particularly in the states of Telangana, is English. However, the vast majority of tribal students come from households where English is not used or promoted in the home, and where first languages are typically unwritten and non-standardized. These students thus experience English in a subtractive, as opposed to an additive, manner, frequently bypassing mother language-based foundational learning. This abrupt change tends to evoke L1 interference, wherein phonological, syntactic, morphological, and semantic features of the mother language interfere with the acquisition and use of English and yield habitual errors and lower-level proficiency.

Scholars such as Selinker [1], Cummins [2], and Odlin [3] have consistently highlighted the role played by mother tongue in affecting second language acquisition. In the context of tribal education, this dynamic is under-researched and under-told in national educational discourse. Tribal students are usually instructed to learn English by direct immersion, without scaffolding that is required to honor their languages. Not only does this hinder their academic achievement but also leads to decreased self-esteem and school alienation [4,5].

The present study tries to explore the impact of tribal students' mother tongues on their proficiency in English with

a focus on patterns of phonological and grammatical interference. Based on the data analysis of some Tribal Welfare schools in Telangana, the study focuses on establishing areas of recurring L1 transfer, examining their implications for pedagogy, and offering recommendations for inclusive language-sensitive pedagogical practices. Through this, the study contributes to the common knowledge about bilingualism, educational equity, and language policy in tribal environments.

Literature Review

The relationship between a learner's native language (L1) and the acquisition of a second language (L2), specifically English, has been a key issue in the field of applied linguistics and second language acquisition (SLA) for many years. In the context of Tribal Welfare students in India, this is exacerbated by sociolinguistic factors, educational access, and remoteness between tribal languages and English at phonology, syntax, and semantics levels.

Theoretical frameworks on L1 influence

L1 interference, also known as language transfer, is often cited as a central influence on L2 learning [3]. According to Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis [6], learners tend to transfer the linguistic features of their mother tongue to the target language, which may result in either positive transfer (facilitating learning) or negative transfer (interference). Later scholars, such as Selinker [1] in his theory of Interlanguage, emphasized that fossilized errors in L2 usage often stem from L1 interference.

Cummins' [2] Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis posits that proficiency in L1 can support L2 development when literacy skills are transferable. However, in contexts where students' L1s are oral and non-standardized, as in many tribal communities, the absence of formal L1 literacy can hinder English learning (Mohanty, 2009).

Tribal languages and English: Structural divergences

Tribal languages such as Gondi, Koya, Lambadi, and others commonly spoken in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, differ significantly from English in syntax, morphology, and phonological structure [7]. These differences can lead to L1-induced errors in English, particularly in areas such as:

- Subject-verb agreement
- Tense usage
- Articles and prepositions
- Pronunciation and intonation

For example, the absence of copulas in many tribal languages can lead to incorrect sentence constructions like "He going" instead of "He is going".

Empirical studies on L1 interference in Indian contexts

Annamalai [8] highlighted that English language teaching needed to be contextualized within the multilingual contexts of India. He observed that tribal and rural students tend to find English difficult because of cognitive and cultural distances between the mother tongue and English.

In research conducted by Mohanty et al. [4], tribal children in Odisha were found to experience "subtractive bilingualism," where English or local language learning was at the expense of devaluing their L1 language. Through such disconnect with their L1, they reported underachievement in academics as well as lack of self-confidence in English usage.

Additionally, Jhingran [5] discovered that language mismatches between the home language and school language were among the primary reasons for dropout among India's tribal children. Such mismatches frequently lead to inefficient understanding and reinforcement of English errors based on mother tongue structure.

Educational challenges in tribal welfare schools

Tribal Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society (TSTWREIS) institutions in Telangana focus on delivering quality English-medium education to underprivileged tribal populations. Nonetheless, language-in-education policies neglect L1 influence. Teachers at these institutions are not likely to receive bilingual or mother tongue-based teaching training, which means that direct English immersion takes place without scaffolding [9].

Secondly, home environments of students rarely provide English input, which enhances their dependence on L1-bound speech patterns. Insufficient contextually appropriate English materials and mother tongue-friendly pedagogy tend to further expand the L2 proficiency gap.

Recent advances and recommendations

Recent publications support mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) as a stepping stone to enhancing English learning by tribal students [10,11]. Empirical research by Li et al. [12] indicates that using L1 in class improves metalinguistic awareness and strengthens learners' understanding of L2 grammar and vocabulary.

Technology-enhanced language learning software and context-sensitive bilingual lexicons also increasingly look to their ability to facilitate L1 interference by emphasizing structural differences between tribal languages and English [13].

Conclusion

The role of mother tongue in the acquisition of English among tribal students is not an issue of a purely linguistic nature but is intertwined with socio-economic, cultural, and pedagogical considerations. Although L1 interference is a definite challenge, strategically designed bilingual education and pedagogy that responds to the culture can turn it into a scaffolding tool instead of an obstacle for English proficiency.

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