

THE INFLUENCE OF THE MOTHER TONGUE ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT

Language plays a central role in human communication and cognitive development. In multilingual societies, learners often acquire English as a second or foreign language while maintaining proficiency in their mother tongue. The influence of the mother tongue on English language acquisition has long been debated among linguists and educators. Some scholars argue that the mother tongue interferes with second language learning, while others believe it facilitates comprehension and cognitive development. This study examines the role of the mother tongue in acquiring English, focusing on its positive and negative influences, pedagogical implications, and practical classroom realities. The research synthesizes existing literature and provides conceptual analysis relevant to multilingual contexts such as India. Findings indicate that while mother tongue interference may occur in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, strategic and guided use of the mother tongue enhances comprehension, confidence, and academic performance. The study concludes that balanced bilingual approaches are more effective than rigid monolingual methods.

KEYWORDS: Mother Tongue, English Language Acquisition, Bilingualism, Language Transfer, Multilingual Education.

INTRODUCTION

Language is deeply connected with identity, cognition, and social interaction. Every learner begins the journey of communication through the mother tongue, which becomes the foundation of thought, expression, and understanding. When learners encounter English as a second or foreign language, they do not start from zero; rather, they bring with them a fully

developed linguistic system shaped by their first language. The relationship between the mother tongue and English learning is therefore both complex and significant.

In multilingual societies such as India, children grow up using regional languages at home while learning English in school. This situation naturally creates interaction between the two languages. The structures, sounds, and vocabulary of the first language influence how learners perceive and produce English. Sometimes this influence supports learning by making connections easier. At other times, it leads to errors due to structural differences between the languages.

For many years, English teaching methods discouraged the use of the mother tongue in classrooms. Teachers were often instructed to maintain an English-only environment to maximize exposure. However, practical classroom experience shows that completely ignoring the learner's first language is unrealistic. Students frequently think in their mother tongue before expressing ideas in English. Translation, comparison, and mental referencing are natural learning strategies.

The influence of the mother tongue can be observed in pronunciation patterns, sentence construction, and vocabulary choice. For example, learners may pronounce English words using familiar sound patterns from their first language. Similarly, they may construct sentences by directly translating from their mother tongue. While such interference may create temporary errors, it also indicates that learners are actively engaging in cognitive processing.

Recent educational thinking emphasizes bilingual competence rather than strict separation of languages. The mother tongue is increasingly viewed as a resource that can assist in building conceptual understanding. When students understand ideas clearly in their first language, they are better able to express those ideas in English. Therefore, instead of treating the mother tongue as an obstacle, it may be more productive to treat it as a bridge.

This study examines how the mother tongue shapes English language acquisition. It explores both supportive and challenging aspects of this relationship and considers how teachers can manage it effectively. Understanding this influence is essential for designing teaching strategies that respect linguistic diversity while promoting strong English proficiency.

Review of Related Literature

Scholarly interest in the relationship between the first language and second language learning has evolved over decades. Early research largely focused on identifying errors caused by linguistic differences. The theory of contrastive analysis suggested that areas of difference between two languages would create difficulty for learners. According to this perspective, language interference was viewed primarily as a negative phenomenon.

Later research expanded this understanding by examining cognitive and social dimensions of bilingualism. Scholars began to recognize that the first language is not merely a source of interference but also a foundation for acquiring additional languages. Studies in bilingual education demonstrated that literacy skills developed in the mother tongue often transfer to second language learning. For instance, reading comprehension strategies such as predicting meaning or identifying main ideas can function across languages.

The concept of interlanguage further deepened scholarly understanding. It suggested that learners construct a unique linguistic system that blends elements of both languages while gradually moving toward proficiency. This perspective shifted attention from error correction to developmental progression. Mistakes influenced by the mother tongue were interpreted as natural stages in language growth.

In recent decades, the idea of multilingual competence has gained recognition. Researchers argue that bilingual individuals possess integrated linguistic knowledge rather than separate language compartments. The practice of moving between languages for meaning-making has been acknowledged as a legitimate pedagogical strategy. This approach challenges the assumption that successful English learning requires strict exclusion of the first language.

Empirical research in classroom contexts has shown mixed results regarding the use of the mother tongue. Some studies indicate that limited use of the first language can clarify difficult grammar points and reduce anxiety. Others caution that excessive reliance on translation may reduce opportunities for active English practice. Therefore, scholars increasingly advocate balanced and purposeful use rather than complete acceptance or rejection.

The literature also highlights contextual factors such as age, proficiency level, and learning environment. Young learners may depend more heavily on their first language, while

advanced learners gradually rely less on it. Cultural attitudes toward English and local languages also shape classroom practices.

Overall, the literature reflects a gradual shift from a deficit perspective to a resource-based perspective. The mother tongue is no longer seen solely as a barrier but as a meaningful component of bilingual development. However, debates continue regarding the extent and manner of its use in English classrooms.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research approach. Rather than conducting experimental testing, the research focuses on examining theoretical perspectives, reviewing scholarly discussions, and analyzing classroom realities related to mother tongue influence. This approach is suitable because the topic involves conceptual understanding and pedagogical interpretation rather than numerical measurement alone.

Data for this study were collected primarily from secondary sources. Academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and research reports on bilingual education and second language acquisition were carefully examined. These sources provided insights into theoretical models, empirical findings, and educational practices. By comparing multiple viewpoints, the study identifies common themes and areas of disagreement.

In addition to literature review, informal observation of multilingual classroom practices informed the analysis. In many educational settings, students naturally shift between languages while learning. Observing how teachers respond to such shifts provides practical insight into the functioning of bilingual strategies. Although not structured as a formal field study, these observations contribute contextual understanding.

The analysis process involved organizing information into thematic categories such as positive transfer, interference, cognitive benefits, and pedagogical strategies. Each theme was examined to determine how the mother tongue influences English learning at different stages. Attention was given to both linguistic and psychological aspects.

The study does not attempt to generalize findings statistically. Instead, it aims to provide conceptual clarity and practical reflection. The qualitative nature of the research allows for in-depth discussion of nuanced issues, including identity, confidence, and cultural connection.

Limitations of the methodology include reliance on existing literature and absence of quantitative measurement. However, the strength of this approach lies in its ability to synthesize diverse perspectives and generate meaningful educational recommendations.

Through systematic analysis of scholarly discussions and classroom realities, the methodology supports a balanced evaluation of the mother tongue's role in English acquisition.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The findings of this study confirm that the mother tongue plays a complex and multidimensional role in English language acquisition. Rather than functioning solely as an obstacle, the first language interacts dynamically with cognitive, psychological, and pedagogical factors. This discussion interprets the findings in light of broader theoretical perspectives and classroom realities.

One of the most significant observations is the inevitability of language transfer. Learners naturally rely on prior linguistic knowledge when encountering new language structures. This reliance is not a weakness but a cognitive strategy. Human learning operates through comparison, categorization, and pattern recognition. When students compare English grammar with structures from their mother tongue, they actively construct understanding. This confirms that language acquisition is not isolated memorization but an interpretive process grounded in existing knowledge systems.

At the same time, the analysis reveals that transfer can produce both facilitation and interference. Positive transfer occurs when similarities between languages support comprehension. For example, shared sentence order or similar conceptual categories allow learners to grasp new forms quickly. On the other hand, negative transfer appears when learners impose incompatible structures from their first language onto English. Pronunciation differences, especially in vowel sounds and stress patterns, often illustrate this phenomenon. However, such errors should be understood as developmental rather than permanent barriers. Over time, increased exposure and corrective feedback gradually reduce interference.

Another important dimension emerging from the findings is the psychological role of the mother tongue. Learners often experience anxiety when required to operate exclusively in English, particularly at early proficiency levels. The availability of the mother tongue as a

support system reduces fear and encourages participation. When students feel that their linguistic identity is respected, they are more willing to engage in communication. Confidence plays a crucial role in language development, and emotional security enhances cognitive processing. Therefore, the strategic inclusion of the mother tongue can create a more inclusive and motivating classroom environment.

The analysis also highlights the pedagogical implications of excessive reliance on the first language. While limited use aids comprehension, overdependence may reduce opportunities for authentic English practice. Language learning requires meaningful interaction, listening exposure, and spontaneous production. If classroom communication frequently shifts to the mother tongue, students may not develop sufficient fluency. Thus, balance is essential. The teacher's role becomes central in managing when and how the mother tongue is used.

A balanced approach may include using the first language for explaining complex grammar, clarifying instructions, or discussing abstract concepts. However, communicative activities such as role-plays, presentations, and group discussions should primarily occur in English. Gradual transition strategies can help students move from mother tongue reliance toward independent English expression.

Another analytical insight concerns literacy transfer. Reading comprehension skills developed in the mother tongue often support English reading ability. Skills such as identifying main ideas, making inferences, and summarizing information are transferable across languages. This suggests that strengthening the first language does not hinder English proficiency; rather, it provides a foundation for academic success. Educational policies that discourage mother tongue literacy may inadvertently weaken overall language competence.

The discussion also raises sociocultural considerations. In many societies, English is associated with social mobility and prestige. As a result, local languages may be undervalued in formal education. Such attitudes can influence classroom practices and learner perceptions. Recognizing the mother tongue as an asset challenges hierarchical language ideologies and promotes linguistic equity.

Furthermore, the analysis indicates that teacher training is a critical factor. Without professional guidance, teachers may either overuse translation or avoid the mother tongue completely. Effective bilingual pedagogy requires structured planning, awareness of

linguistic differences, and clear learning objectives. Professional development programs should equip teachers with strategies for managing cross-linguistic interaction productively.

In summary, the discussion demonstrates that the influence of the mother tongue on English acquisition is neither inherently positive nor negative. Its impact depends on pedagogical management, learner proficiency level, and classroom context. When strategically integrated, the mother tongue serves as a cognitive bridge and emotional support system. When uncontrolled, it may limit immersion and fluency development. Therefore, the most effective approach lies in thoughtful balance rather than rigid exclusion or unrestricted use.

Findings of the Study

The findings of this study indicate that the mother tongue plays a dual role in English language acquisition. Its influence is neither entirely beneficial nor entirely harmful; rather, it depends on context, purpose, and degree of use.

One major finding is that positive transfer occurs when similarities exist between languages. Learners use prior grammatical knowledge to understand new structures. For example, if both languages share similar sentence order, learners adapt more easily. Conceptual knowledge, such as understanding of time or quantity, also transfers smoothly.

Another significant finding concerns vocabulary learning. Students often connect new English words with equivalent terms in their mother tongue. This mental linking supports retention and comprehension. Particularly in early stages, translation serves as a practical learning tool.

The study also reveals that pronunciation is strongly influenced by the first language. Learners tend to substitute unfamiliar English sounds with familiar native sounds. While this may create accent variation, it gradually improves with exposure and practice.

Grammatical interference is another observed pattern. Learners sometimes apply sentence structures from their mother tongue directly to English. These errors reflect developmental processes rather than lack of intelligence or effort.

Importantly, the findings highlight psychological benefits of acknowledging the mother tongue. Students feel valued and respected when their linguistic background is recognized. This emotional security enhances participation and reduces fear of making mistakes.

However, overdependence on the mother tongue may limit opportunities for active English use. If classroom interaction remains dominated by the first language, learners receive insufficient practice in listening and speaking English.

Overall, the findings suggest that moderate and purposeful use of the mother tongue enhances comprehension and confidence, while excessive reliance may slow fluency development. Balanced bilingual strategies therefore appear most effective.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding bilingual education in multilingual contexts. English has become an important global language, yet learners continue to rely on their mother tongue as the foundation of identity and cognition. Recognizing this reality is essential for effective teaching.

For educators, the study provides insight into how language transfer operates. Understanding the reasons behind learner errors enables teachers to respond constructively rather than critically. Instead of viewing mistakes as failure, teachers can interpret them as developmental steps.

For curriculum planners, the research emphasizes the need for flexible language policies. Strict English-only policies may ignore cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning. Balanced policies that allow guided use of the mother tongue can create more inclusive environments.

For learners, the study reinforces the idea that bilingualism is an asset rather than a weakness. Maintaining proficiency in the mother tongue does not hinder English development; in many cases, it strengthens academic skills.

At a broader level, the research supports multilingual education principles. Respecting linguistic diversity promotes cultural preservation while encouraging global communication skills. This balanced approach is particularly relevant in diverse societies.

Finally, the study contributes to academic discussions by synthesizing historical and contemporary perspectives. It highlights the evolving understanding of language interaction and encourages continued exploration in varied contexts.

Gaps in the Literature

Although considerable research has examined the relationship between the mother tongue and second language acquisition, several important gaps remain. One major gap concerns contextual diversity. Much of the foundational research in this area has been conducted in Western or urban educational settings. Multilingual rural classrooms, particularly in developing regions, remain underrepresented in empirical studies. The linguistic dynamics in

such environments are often more complex, involving multiple local languages alongside English. This diversity requires context-specific investigation.

Another noticeable gap lies in primary-level education research. Many studies focus on adult learners or secondary school students. However, early childhood and primary education are critical stages for language development. Young learners rely heavily on their mother tongue to interpret new information. Research exploring how early bilingual instruction influences long-term English proficiency is still limited. Longitudinal studies tracking learners over several years would provide deeper insights.

There is also insufficient attention to teacher training and preparedness. While theoretical discussions promote balanced bilingual strategies, few studies examine whether teachers are adequately trained to implement such approaches effectively. Teachers may lack guidance on how to manage classroom code-switching, how much mother tongue use is appropriate, and how to transition smoothly between languages. Without structured professional development, policy recommendations may not translate into practice.

Another gap relates to assessment systems. Standardized examinations often prioritize English-only responses and penalize linguistic interference. Little research has investigated how assessment practices influence classroom language use. If evaluation systems reward rigid English usage without acknowledging bilingual realities, teachers may feel pressured to avoid the mother tongue entirely.

Furthermore, technological and digital learning contexts have not been sufficiently integrated into research on mother tongue influence. With the growth of online learning platforms, students increasingly access multilingual resources. Understanding how digital tools support or complicate bilingual learning would enrich the field.

Finally, more interdisciplinary research is needed. Linguistic studies often focus on structural aspects, while educational research emphasizes pedagogy. Psychological dimensions such as identity formation, motivation, and self-confidence require deeper integration into language acquisition studies.

Addressing these gaps will help develop a more comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of how the mother tongue interacts with English acquisition across different educational realities.

Synthesis of Literature

A synthesis of existing literature reveals a significant shift in theoretical orientation over time. Early scholarship primarily interpreted the mother tongue as a source of interference.

Differences in phonology, syntax, and vocabulary were believed to cause predictable learner errors. This structural focus emphasized correction and contrastive analysis.

However, later developments in cognitive and sociolinguistic research broadened the perspective. Scholars began to recognize that language learning is not merely a mechanical process but a cognitive and social experience. The mother tongue contributes to conceptual development, literacy skills, and academic reasoning. Rather than obstructing progress, it often provides scaffolding for understanding complex ideas in English.

The theory of language transfer evolved from a strictly negative interpretation to a balanced view acknowledging both positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer occurs when similarities between languages facilitate learning. Negative transfer appears when learners apply incompatible structures from their first language. Both processes are natural and developmental.

Recent discussions on bilingualism emphasize integration rather than separation. Multilingual learners are seen as possessing interconnected linguistic systems. The practice of alternating between languages to construct meaning is increasingly considered pedagogically sound. Such flexibility allows learners to access deeper comprehension while gradually strengthening English proficiency.

At the same time, scholars caution against uncontrolled dependence on the mother tongue. Effective bilingual education requires careful planning. Teachers must ensure that English exposure remains sufficient for communicative competence. The goal is not replacement of English instruction but enhancement through strategic support.

Overall, the literature demonstrates convergence around a balanced approach. Absolute exclusion of the mother tongue appears unrealistic and potentially counterproductive, while unrestricted use may limit language immersion. The synthesis therefore supports a guided bilingual model that respects linguistic diversity while maintaining English learning objectives.

Implementation Gaps

Despite theoretical support for balanced bilingual approaches, practical implementation faces multiple challenges. One primary gap is policy inconsistency. Educational policies may officially support multilingual education, yet classroom expectations often prioritize English-only instruction. This contradiction creates confusion among teachers.

Teacher preparedness is another major concern. Many educators have not received formal training in bilingual pedagogy. They may rely on instinctive translation rather than structured

strategies. Without professional guidance, classroom practices may vary widely in effectiveness.

Large class sizes also hinder personalized language support. In overcrowded classrooms, teachers may struggle to monitor how students use their mother tongue. Managing balanced interaction becomes more complex when individual attention is limited.

Learning materials present another difficulty. Textbooks are frequently designed for monolingual English contexts. They may not include comparative exercises that acknowledge local languages. The absence of culturally relevant examples can reduce engagement and limit conceptual connection.

Assessment practices further widen implementation gaps. If examinations measure only grammatical accuracy without considering communicative development, teachers may emphasize rote memorization rather than interactive learning. Students may focus on avoiding errors instead of developing confidence.

Societal attitudes also influence classroom implementation. In some contexts, English is associated with prestige and economic opportunity, while local languages are undervalued. Such perceptions may discourage open acknowledgment of the mother tongue in academic settings.

Addressing implementation gaps requires coordinated efforts involving curriculum reform, teacher training, resource development, and assessment redesign. Only then can theoretical recommendations effectively translate into classroom reality.

CONCLUSION

The influence of the mother tongue on English language acquisition is multifaceted and deeply rooted in cognitive, social, and educational processes. This study has examined the relationship from historical, theoretical, and practical perspectives. The analysis demonstrates that the mother tongue is neither purely an obstacle nor purely a solution. Its impact depends largely on how it is managed within the learning environment.

Early theories emphasized linguistic interference and focused primarily on structural differences between languages. While such differences can lead to pronunciation and grammatical errors, later research revealed that bilingual learners possess cognitive advantages and transferable academic skills. Literacy developed in the mother tongue often strengthens second language comprehension. Emotional security associated with linguistic identity also contributes positively to learning motivation.

The study highlights the importance of balanced pedagogy. Excessive reliance on the mother tongue may reduce exposure to English, slowing fluency development. Conversely, rigid exclusion of the first language may create anxiety and hinder conceptual clarity. A middle path that integrates guided comparison, limited translation, and gradual transition appears most effective.

Educational systems must recognize linguistic diversity as an asset. Teacher training programs should include strategies for managing bilingual classrooms. Curriculum designers should incorporate culturally relevant examples and structured cross-linguistic activities. Assessment systems should evaluate communicative competence rather than penalize developmental errors excessively.

In multilingual societies, English learning cannot be separated from the learner's linguistic background. Respecting and utilizing the mother tongue enhances inclusion, equity, and academic growth. Rather than competing languages, the mother tongue and English can function as complementary systems supporting intellectual and social development.

Future research should expand empirical studies in diverse educational contexts, particularly at early learning stages. Long-term investigations would provide deeper understanding of how bilingual strategies influence overall proficiency.

In conclusion, the mother tongue serves as both foundation and bridge in English language acquisition. When thoughtfully integrated into teaching practice, it strengthens rather than weakens the learning process. Balanced bilingual education therefore represents a practical and humane approach to language development in multilingual societies.

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