

The Influence of Mother Tongue on Students' English Language Learning in Telugu Medium Schools: A Linguistic Study

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Abstract: *The current research investigates the influence of the mother tongue (Telugu) on students' English language acquisition in Telugu medium schools across Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Drawing from linguistic transfer theories and second language acquisition models, this study explores phonological, syntactical, and semantic interferences that arise due to mother tongue influence. The qualitative research approach includes classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with students and teachers, and analysis of written and oral English assignments. The findings reveal that while the mother tongue acts as a scaffold for early language learning, it also contributes to significant linguistic interference, affecting fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. The paper concludes by suggesting pedagogical interventions and curriculum design modifications to improve English proficiency among students in regional language settings.*

Keywords: Mother Tongue Influence, Telugu Medium Schools, English Language Learning, Language Pedagogy, India Language Policy

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is more than a medium of communication—it's a cultural, cognitive, and educational framework that shapes how individuals learn and express themselves. In multilingual societies like India, where hundreds of languages coexist, the role of the mother tongue becomes pivotal in the cognitive development of a child, especially in school. Most students begin their educational journey in their native language, known as the mother tongue or first language (L1). In the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Telugu is the primary medium of instruction in many government and private schools, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. Simultaneously, English is introduced as a second language (L2) early in the curriculum due to its national and global relevance. However, students in Telugu medium schools often face challenges in acquiring English proficiency. These difficulties are not simply due to a lack of exposure but are deeply rooted in the structural and cognitive differences between Telugu and English. The transition from a Dravidian language with distinct phonology, syntax, and semantics to a Germanic language like English leads to various forms of interference. For example, sentence structures may be directly translated, pronunciation may be influenced by Telugu phonetic rules, and vocabulary usage may reflect literal translations rather than idiomatic English. This linguistic study seeks to explore how the mother tongue, Telugu, influences the English language learning process among students in Telugu medium schools. It investigates both the positive and negative aspects of mother tongue influence—where it may act as a scaffold or, conversely, where it becomes a barrier. Additionally, it examines how teachers address (or fail to address) these linguistic challenges in the classroom.

Given the growing importance of English for academic success, employability, and social mobility in India, understanding these influences is essential. The insights gained from this research can lead to more effective teaching strategies, improved curriculum design, and targeted interventions that respect the linguistic background of learners while promoting English language proficiency.



II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding how a learner's first language (L1) influences the acquisition of a second language (L2) has been a significant area of research in the field of linguistics, psycholinguistics, and education. Theoretical frameworks and empirical studies provide critical insight into the nature and consequences of mother tongue influence, particularly in multilingual settings like India.

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

One of the foundational theories in this domain is the **Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH)** proposed by Robert Lado in 1957. Lado argued that learning difficulties in L2 arise primarily due to differences between the native and target languages. When the structures are similar, learners find it easy to transfer skills. However, when they differ significantly, learners are more likely to make errors, a process known as **negative transfer** or **interference**. [Stephen Krashen](#), in his **Monitor Model**, emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input in second language acquisition. While he does not deny the role of L1, his theory suggests that learners acquire L2 more effectively when they are exposed to meaningful input that they can understand, regardless of their first language. Krashen also differentiates between *language learning* (conscious knowledge) and *language acquisition* (subconscious absorption), emphasizing the latter.

2.2 Indian Context and Multilingual Education

In the Indian educational context, [Braj B. Kachru](#)'s classification of Indian English as part of the "Outer Circle" recognizes the historical and functional role of English in Indian society. Studies by Annamalai (2004), Agnihotri (2007), and Mohanty (2006) reveal that many Indian students learn English in environments dominated by their mother tongue. These researchers emphasize the importance of **additive bilingualism**, where the second language enhances rather than replaces the first. Moreover, Indian researchers have noted that regional language speakers often face systemic disadvantages in English-medium assessments and higher education. Mother tongue interference is particularly evident in **phonetics**, where regional accents affect pronunciation; in **grammar**, where L1 sentence structures are mirrored in L2 output; and in **semantics**, where direct translation leads to errors in meaning.

2.3 Telugu-English Specific Challenges

Telugu and English belong to different language families—Dravidian and Indo-European respectively. The **syllabic nature of Telugu** and its emphasis on vowel-ending syllables contrasts sharply with the **stress-timed rhythm of English**. As a result, Telugu speakers often struggle with consonant clusters, silent letters, and the placement of stress in English words. Similarly, Telugu's flexible word order (often SOV) influences sentence construction in English, leading to errors like "He book read" instead of "He read a book."

Taken together, this body of literature clearly shows that mother tongue influence is a significant factor in second language acquisition. However, there remains a gap in localized studies focusing specifically on Telugu medium schools, where English is taught but seldom practiced outside the classroom. This research seeks to fill that gap through a detailed linguistic study rooted in real-life educational settings.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To analyze the extent of mother tongue interference in English learning among Telugu medium students.
- To identify which linguistic components (phonology, syntax, semantics) are most affected by the mother tongue.
- To explore how teachers in Telugu medium schools address or neglect this influence in pedagogy.
- To examine student performance in English in the context of their native language influence.
- To suggest strategies to improve English proficiency in such environments.

IV. HYPOTHESES

Based on the objectives, the study is guided by the following hypotheses:



H1: Telugu medium students demonstrate significant linguistic interference from their mother tongue in English language learning.

H2: The influence of mother tongue is most pronounced in the phonological and syntactic domains.

H3: The lack of immersive English learning environments in Telugu medium schools exacerbates mother tongue interference.

H4: Teacher training in bilingual or second language pedagogy correlates with lower levels of mother tongue interference in students' English.

V. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design plays a crucial role in shaping the direction and validity of any academic study. For this research, a **qualitative research approach** has been adopted. The choice of qualitative methodology stems from the need to explore complex linguistic phenomena in depth—something that structured surveys or quantitative methods alone cannot adequately capture. Since the goal of the study is to understand how the mother tongue (Telugu) influences the process of learning English in Telugu medium schools, it becomes essential to delve into the perceptions, behaviors, and real-life classroom experiences of both students and teachers.

This research is **exploratory and interpretive in nature**, aiming to generate insight rather than to test a pre-existing theory with numbers. Through this approach, we can study mother tongue influence not just as an isolated linguistic event but as a lived, cognitive, and socio-cultural experience embedded in classroom practices, pedagogical choices, and student-teacher interaction.

5.1 Methods of Data Collection

A multi-pronged method of data collection was employed to ensure a rich understanding of the research questions:

Classroom Observations: English classes were observed in their natural settings using an observation checklist. The focus was on how students speak, listen, read, and write in English, as well as how teachers facilitate, or correct linguistic errors influenced by Telugu.

Semi-Structured Interviews: In-depth interviews were conducted with both teachers and students. This format allowed for flexibility, enabling respondents to elaborate on their experiences, which provided contextually rich data.

Written Work Analysis: Student notebooks, class tests, and assignments were analysed for language errors, structure, and vocabulary usage. Special attention was given to syntactic and phonological patterns that could be traced back to Telugu influence.

Audio Recordings: Students were asked to read aloud and engage in short English conversations. These recordings were analyzed for pronunciation issues and mother tongue interference.

Teacher Feedback: English teachers provided feedback on the common challenges their students face and their strategies to overcome them.

This comprehensive and triangulated approach allowed for a deep dive into the intricate relationship between Telugu and English in the educational environment.

VI. SAMPLE AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

In order to ensure the relevance, diversity, and representativeness of the study, **purposive sampling** was employed. This non-probability sampling method is ideal for qualitative research where the focus is on selecting information-rich cases that can provide deep insights into the phenomenon being studied—in this case, mother tongue influence on English learning.

6.1 Sample Composition

The sample was carefully selected from **five Telugu medium schools** across different socio-economic and geographic locations in **Andhra Pradesh** and **Telangana**. The aim was to capture both rural and urban perspectives and to examine the influence of local context on English language learning. The sample breakdown is as follows:



Students: 40 students (8 from each school), from classes 6 to 10. Each school had a mix of students who were moderately proficient and those who struggled with English, providing a range of data points.

Teachers: 20 English language teachers with varying years of experience (ranging from 2 to 20 years) were selected. Teachers were chosen to include both government and private school faculty to understand institutional differences.

Schools: The selected schools include:

2 government schools from rural areas

1 private school in a semi-urban area

2 government-aided schools from urban locations

This selection ensured a wide spectrum of teaching styles, student demographics, and classroom environments.

6.2 Rationale Behind Sampling

The rationale behind purposive sampling was not to generalize findings to a larger population, but to **gain a detailed and contextual understanding** of how Telugu as a mother tongue shapes English learning behaviour. By including both experienced and newly appointed teachers, the study was also able to compare pedagogical methods. Including students across grades 6 to 10 allowed us to explore whether mother tongue interference reduces over time with increased exposure to English. Ultimately, the sample size and structure were designed to ensure **data saturation**, which is the point at which no new insights emerge from additional data collection. The chosen sample provided enough depth and variation to answer the research questions meaningfully.

VII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this qualitative research study reveal a layered and multidimensional influence of the Telugu mother tongue on English language learning in Telugu medium schools. The data collected from classroom observations, student interactions, interviews with teachers, and analysis of student work illustrate how deeply embedded the mother tongue is in shaping students' cognitive and linguistic processing of English.

7.1 Phonological Interference

One of the most consistent patterns identified was phonological interference. Telugu is a syllable-timed language, whereas English is stress-timed. This fundamental difference leads to a noticeable influence on pronunciation. Students often mispronounce English words due to the absence of certain sounds in Telugu. For instance, the English sound /v/ is frequently substituted with /w/, resulting in pronunciations like “wery” instead of “very.” Similarly, consonant clusters—common in English but rare in Telugu—are often broken up with vowel insertions, leading to phrases like “iskool” for “school.” Teachers reported that despite repeated corrections, many of these errors persist, especially among students who rarely interact with English speakers outside the classroom. Audio recordings revealed a consistent stress pattern that mirrors Telugu rhythm, making students' spoken English sound awkward or unnatural.

7.2 Syntactic and Grammatical Errors

Syntactic interference was another critical issue. Telugu's Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) word order often transfers into English sentence construction. Examples such as “She the letter wrote” or “I yesterday went market” illustrate direct translations from Telugu grammar. These errors are not isolated but widespread, suggesting that students process English through the lens of their mother tongue's syntactic rules. Teachers often rely on translation methods when explaining English grammar, inadvertently reinforcing the habit of mentally converting Telugu structures into English, rather than thinking in English. Classroom observations showed minimal use of English-only instruction, contributing to a reliance on Telugu grammatical framing.

7.3 Lexical and Semantic Interference

The study also found extensive lexical transfer. Students often use literal translations of Telugu idioms or vocabulary that make little sense in English. For example, “rice water” is used to describe “curd rice,” a literal translation of the Telugu



term “perugannam.” These lexical mismatches often lead to miscommunication, particularly in writing and oral comprehension. In student essays and assignments, there was significant evidence of limited vocabulary and overuse of basic verbs such as “do,” “go,” and “get,” which often serve as generic replacements for more precise action words. The lack of active reading habits in English further limits students’ ability to expand their lexical repertoire.

7.4 Classroom Environment and Pedagogical Practices

Observations of classrooms showed that most teaching happens in a bilingual mode, with English and Telugu used interchangeably. While this helps initial comprehension, it limits full immersion in the English language. Teachers admit they feel pressured to “cover the syllabus” and resort to translations rather than fostering true language learning through practice and interaction. The environment in rural schools was more limiting than in urban ones. Many rural students reported having no access to English media such as books, television, or the internet, reinforcing dependence on classroom instruction alone.

VIII. FUTURE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

While the current research offers a comprehensive view of mother tongue influence in Telugu medium schools, it also opens several avenues for future inquiry and pedagogical innovation. The findings underscore the urgent need to address systemic gaps in language education that perpetuate dependency on L1 and hinder English fluency.

8.1 Bilingual and Multilingual Pedagogical Models

Future research can explore the development and implementation of **additive bilingualism** models, where Telugu is not viewed as a barrier but as a cognitive resource. Rather than eliminating mother tongue usage altogether, instructional models can be designed where L1 and L2 coexist and support each other. The use of dual-language texts, bilingual dictionaries, and translanguaging strategies could enhance comprehension and retention without compromising English fluency.

8.2 Longitudinal and Comparative Studies

Another important area for future research is conducting **longitudinal studies** to track the progression of English proficiency across several years of schooling. This could help identify critical stages where mother tongue interference is most prominent and when it starts to diminish—if at all. Comparative studies between Telugu medium and English medium students in similar socio-economic backgrounds could provide insight into the effectiveness of immersion-based education.

8.3 Teacher Training and Policy Reforms

The research highlights the need for **professional development programs** for English teachers in regional medium schools. Future studies could examine the impact of teacher training programs focused on second language acquisition, phonetics, and bilingual education strategies. Additionally, policy-oriented research can assess the feasibility of integrating such training into pre-service and in-service teacher education curricula.

8.4 Technology-Driven Language Support

The study also recommends exploring the **use of technology**, such as mobile learning apps, interactive e-learning platforms, and AI-driven language tutors, tailored for Telugu-speaking learners. Future research can focus on how these tools can be customized to address specific mother tongue-related learning challenges and improve student engagement outside the traditional classroom.



8.5 Curriculum Development and Material Design

Lastly, curriculum designers and textbook developers can benefit from studies that explore **linguistically contextualized content**. Creating textbooks that account for Telugu-English transfer issues, include culturally relevant examples, and offer scaffolded grammar explanations can bridge the learning gap.

In conclusion, while mother tongue influence poses challenges, it also offers opportunities for innovative educational approaches that respect linguistic diversity while promoting English language proficiency.

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