

*Impediments Encountered in Developing Writing skills of the undergraduates of
University of Jaffna*

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine whether L1 had an impact on the ESL (English as a Second Language) writings of the undergraduates of university of Jaffna. Students writing in a second language are also faced with number of problems such as their L1, social and cognitive challenges related to second language acquisition. Most of the scholars in the fields of language learning and teaching give evidence for the L1-L2 comparison by the learners when they confronted with difficult grammatical forms and it is natural for the learners. Since this comparison is implicit, it may result in the formation of wrong rules due to an incomplete L2 knowledge. In this study, an investigation was made to identify the impact of L1 on ESL writings of the undergraduates of the University of Jaffna. The study involved qualitative methods of data collection. The data collected from the subjects' responses were analyzed, and the findings were derived. The findings show that there are number of problems which are found to have impact on the learners' ESL writings. Evidence provided by the written samples suggests that L1 played a role in the process of beginning ESL learners' writing in English. Understanding linguistic differences between students' L1 and English may help the learners reduce the impact of L1. It can be argued that a focus on the writing process as a pedagogical tool is only appropriate for second language learners if attention is given to linguistic development, and if learners are able to get sufficient and effective feedback with regard to their errors in writing.

Key Words: - . L1 (Mother Tongue), ESL writing, L1-L2 comparison, Difficult Grammatical Forms Linguistic differences.

Introduction

All language learners can develop different sorts of linguistic knowledge. They can develop a Chomsky-competence and /or universal intuitions about their first language or about a foreign language that they are learning. There is a second sort of linguistic knowledge people can have. They can develop meta-cognitions of their personal versions of their mother tongue (MT) and the second or foreign language quite separately. Still, there is another sort of knowledge to take into account and that is the knowledge of relationships holding between one's languages; it can be the same thing as cross-linguistic awareness in the process of learning another language. All these three kinds of linguistic knowledge could be right or wrong. We can see positive or negative L1 transfer within L2 learners.

For adult learners, learning a foreign language is a complex process. The confusion of language transfer and mother tongue interference are more common for the beginning of EFL learners. Beginning English learners will be benefited if provided with systematic and well-designed grammar instruction in connection with their first language, through which language differences were indicated. Employing technology to facilitate language instruction is educator's new responsibility in today's technological age to bring about greater learning. The various types of views on the teaching as well as the learning of a second language have been given below.

According to Lado, (1957), the view of grammar as grammatical structure opens the way to a comparison of the grammatical structure of the foreign language with that of native language to discover the problems of the student in learning the foreign language. The results of such comparison tell us what we should test and what we should not test, it helps us devise test items and techniques that also look quite acceptable from a commonsense point of view, and this is the important consideration we can actually test the control of the language on the part of the student.

Vildomec (1963) proposes that the influence of the mother tongue on the learners' language may also vary according to the sociolinguistic situation. He observes that the interference between the bilingual's languages is generally on the productive rather than the receptive side. People often report instances of intrusion of elements of their mother tongue in speech production but rarely in their understanding of another language.

Background of the study

Writing is a complex process even in the first language. It is even more complicated to write in a foreign language. Many studies indicate that, for ESL students, there tends to be interference from their first language in the process of writing in English (Chen & Huang, 2003; Lado, 1957). A better understanding of the L1 influence in the process of ESL writing will help teachers know students' difficulties in learning English. It will also aid in the adoption of appropriate teaching strategies to help beginning ESL students learn English.

The language contact may cause a structural change in one or both of the languages concerned and this tendency of changing the structure is termed as interference

(Suntharesan, 2002). In other words, the violation of the norms of any of the languages involved by the individual in his speech as a result of language contact is known as interference. Interference may result into rearrangement of the definite organized structure of a language from the introduction of foreign elements such as phonemic system, morphology and syntax and certain part of vocabulary.

The learning problems and the amount of interference depend on similarities of the language in contact. Accordingly the extent of interference may vary whereas the mechanism of interference remains the same between any languages.

The need for contrastive study

In Sri Lanka, since the introduction of English to the school curriculum as a second language in the early 1950s, the Direct Method followed by Grammar-Translation Method was used for teaching English. The Direct Method teaches the target language in the target language context while the Grammar-Translation Method teaches the target language in the students' mother tongue. However, experience shows that these methods have not been successful in improving English proficiency of Sri Lankan school students (Karunaratne, 1993). This view is further supported by the study on the students' proficiency in English at tertiary level (Sunthareswaran, 1998). His findings show that at the tertiary level in Jaffna, students learning English as a second language do not have equal proficiency in the English language skills, i.e. as listening, speaking, reading and writing.

At this juncture, it has been noticed that teachers of English language ask themselves why students are unable to excel in learning English and why they struggle or ignore it. Teaching English language to the students cannot be considered an easy task. Every teacher of English language finds teaching English a pedagogically strenuous task.

Notwithstanding enough serious efforts have been taken in all aspects of the educational setup, still there are some bottlenecks in the road of learning English language. There are host of factors, which come into play in second language learning. The factors such as teacher's competence, motivation and attitude of learners, teaching methods, instructional materials, the structural similarities and differences between L1 and L2 etc, can be the variables that can significantly affect second language learning and teaching.

One of the common and accepted approaches to language teaching is through contrastive method. In other words, the language specific features of both mother tongue of the learner and the second languages are studied thoroughly before and an attempt is made to teach the second language and to prepare instructional materials for second language teaching. The contrastive analysis emphasizes the influences of the mother tongue in learning a second language in phonological, morphological and syntactic levels. Examination of the differences between the first and second languages helps to predict the possible errors that can be made by L2 learners (Krishnaswamy, Verma, Naharajan 1992).

Morphosyntactic features of English and Tamil for contrastive study

The case for contrastive analysis of morphosyntactic features of English and Tamil is worth attempting. The learners of English have a great deal of problems in modifying one pattern into another due to the differences, which are too many between English and Tamil. The sense is conveyed not only by the dictionary meanings of words, but also by their arrangement in their patterns. A sentence is not just a linear string of words; it is a sequence grouped in a particular way. The way groupings are ordered is important for understanding the sense. Each linguistic community has its own rules and procedures for transforming its “inner concepts” into “outside manifestations” as speech or writing. Selection of restriction features is to be observed for all natural languages. In case of syntactic feature in the languages, a category, for example, English “preposition” can be used in Tamil as “postposition”. While the former occurs before nouns, the latter is used after nouns in sentence.

Literature Review

Contact and Interference

Suntharesan. (2002) has quoted that the language contact may cause a structural change in one or both of the languages concerned and this tendency of changing the structure is termed as interference. In other words, the violation of the norms of any of the languages involved by the individual in his speech as a result of language contact is known as interference. Interference may result into rearrangement of the definite organized structure of a language from the introduction of foreign elements such as phonemic system, morphology and syntax and certain part of vocabulary.

The learning problems and the amount of interference depend on similarities of the language in contact. Accordingly the extent of interference may vary whereas the mechanism of interference remains the same between any languages.

The comments of Agesthalingam (1966) on the difficulties of a Tamil student of ESL are presented below.

“Another kind of problem that one has to encounter while teaching English to Tamil students is due to the difference in the structure of Tamil and English. While learning a second language in adolescence and in adulthood it is very difficult to get rid of the influence of the structure of one’s own mother tongue. We try to find out one to one correspondence between the target language and the mother tongue.” (p.506)

A Tamil student of ESL may form grammatically wrong sentences by using a wrong preposition. For example, he may construct a sentence, “Mohan comes to school in bus.” instead of the correct form, “Mohan comes to school by bus.” This wrong sentence construction is the result of the student’s positive transfer from Tamil into English. In Tamil, the form, “Mohan paaTacaalaikku pasil vatukiraan” (Mohan comes to school by bus). is grammatically correct. Here in this sentence, the inflection ‘-il’ occurs with the word, ‘pas’ which is an English borrowing in Tamil, meaning ‘bus’. The direct and usual English prepositional equivalent of this inflection ‘-il’ is ‘in’.

Similarly, in another instance “I am drawing a picture by a pencil.” Here again, the Tamil –aal as found in the Tamil sentence, “naan pencilaal otu paTam vataikireen.” (I am drawing a picture with a pencil.) is replaced by the English ‘by’.

Wrong selection of preposition is caused by generalization also.

e.g. She goes to the office by bicycle. (Instead of “She goes to the office on bicycle.)

The students’ familiarity with the sentences such as, “He goes to school by bus” etc. makes him generalize the prepositional rule in this manner.

Gunasekara. (2000) has investigated the morphosyntactic errors of fluent speakers of English in Sri Lanka and her study has yielded clues on the influence of Sinhala and Tamil syntactic structures on Sri Lankan English. She has identified the problematic areas of the tendency to pluralize collective or mass nouns, the problem with subject-verb agreement, the overuse of prepositions, the active passive confusion etc.

Some features of the system of Sri Lankan English

Suntharesan. (2002) has quoted some features of the system of Sri Lankan English in grammar, collocation, lexis and phonology.

In Grammar, the interference of the first Language leads to deviation in Sri Lankan English. The mother tongue interference is identifiable in interrogative sentences and tag questions. There are instances when the position of subject and auxiliary verb is not changed

E.g. (1). Where you are going?

(2). When he is returning?

In English, a tag question is formed by a statement and an attached tag. An affirmative main clause has a negative tag and a negative main clause has an affirmative tag. This rule is often neglected and tag questions are structured in a wrong manner in Sri Lankan English.

E.g.:- He is bathing, isn’t it?

(instead of “isn’t he?”)

Sivagurunathan. (1993) has also quoted the mother tongue (L1) interference in learning English. When we learn a second language it is likely to be influenced by our mother tongue. If the target language is a foreign language and if there are no similarities between the target language and the mother tongue, then, there is all the likelihood of inference of the mother tongue in the target language. Weinreich (1979) defines “interference” as follows:-

“Those instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language, i.e. as a result of language contact will be referred to as interference phenomena”

In the case of learning of English by Tamil students, the target language does not belong to the Dravidian family of language. It belongs to the indo-European family and both languages have different phonological, morphological and syntactic systems. Hence, the target language bound to be interfered with.

Most of the Tamil students have difficulties in constructing English sentences. The syntactic structure and the grammar are found to be influenced by their mother tongue. Thiru Kandaiah (as cited in Sivagurunathan, 1993) has given the following example for Lankan English (English that is influenced by the native language, Tamil).

- 1) Five years his brother spent on the course.
- 2) The talk is at what time?
- 3) Today no news paper
- 4) Straight away shall I do it?
- 5) All the books the boy collected and went home.
- 6) Mangoes he likes very much.
- 7) For the smell the rats must have gone. (P. 113)

The students mostly formulate the structure in Tamil and construct English sentences. They adopt mostly the Tamil word-order for English too which is said to be Sri Lankan English.

Shanmugas. (1982) has investigated the concord between subject and predicate in English and Tamil sentences. Concord is found to be essential when words are arranged as constituents. In English, concord is formed on the basis of number between subject and predicate. For example, the singular, subject 'He' takes the singular verb 'runs' but the plural subject 'they' takes the plural verb 'run'. This type of concord is found only in the present. At the same time, there is no concord between the subject and predicate in the past tense. For example,

He ran.

They ran.

On the other hand, In Tamil, the concord is formed on the basis of grammatical categories such as animate/ inanimate, gender, number etc.

- e.g. ava□ van□aal. 'She came' [aval-animate, female, 3rd person singular]
 avan van□aan. 'He came' [avan- animate, male, 3rd person singular]
 a□u van□a□u 'It came' [a□u- inanimate, 3rd person singular]

The gender classification found in nouns as subjects has concord with the gender classification formed in verbs as predicate in Tamil. This feature is absent in Sinhala and English.

Rationale for the study

The present study is primarily intended to identify the impediments the students of ESL [English as A Second Language] whose first language is Tamil, encounter while learning the ESL and to suggest solutions to the learning problem. Since the researcher is a lecturer in English in the University of Jaffna where Tamil students are following degree programme it is hopefully assumed that he will be able to personally observe the attitude and classroom behavior of students. The objective of the study is to identify the learning difficulties of students of ESL in relation with linguistics and social issues and to suggest remedies to overcome such problems so as to enable them to achieve a good proficiency in English.

Statement of the Problem

A grammar is an attempt to expose the structures of the sentences of a language. In order to communicate meaningfully, the learner must account for all and only the grammatical sentences of the language. Most of the scholars in the fields of language learning and teaching assert that, when confronted with difficult grammatical forms, learners often conduct an L1 – L2 comparison and this comparison is implicit, it may result in the formation of wrong rules due to an incomplete L2 knowledge (Selinker, 1992: Robinson 1995). It provides a kind of interlingual comparison on the basis of contrastive analysis database. Such an approach may facilitate the learning process especially if the structures are difficult with respect to the learners' L1.

The most important objective in contrastive analysis is the notion of difficulty based on the difference of the native language patterns. The deviant realizations of the target language system in the language behaviour of the learner are ascribed to the mother tongue interference. The areas of difficulty experienced by the learners are also known as "blind spots." Such problem obtained by contrastive studies should be tested against the actual performance of the learners with a different language background.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

To attempt to identify, describe and categorize errors in English essay writing of Sinhala speaking undergraduates and thereby make efforts minimize the difficulties encountered by them.

Hypotheses

Negative L1 transfer/interference is the major cause for errors in the English writings of Tamil speaking undergraduates.

Negative L1 transfer/interference is not the major cause for errors in the English writings of Tamil speaking undergraduates.

Research Methodology

The subjects in the research were 150 students in the second year. The subjects were all Tamil speakers of English. They were selected randomly from a group of male and female students studying in the Faculty of Arts and the faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Jaffna. At the very first stage of the research, it was intended to estimate the general status of the students for determining the possible areas of difficulty as to grammatical knowledge. In order to accomplish this task, three different instruments were utilized.

First, a questionnaire was distributed among the 100 students in order to confirm the results. In this questionnaire, the students had been asked to verify in which areas of grammatical structures, they had difficulty in learning and internalizing the rules.

A second task was also done in order to confirm the results. A validated General English proficiency test was administered to the 50 students randomly selected from the same faculties of University of Jaffna in order to further confirm the results

derived from the questionnaire. The test involved six items consisting of 10 questions in each item.

A third task was carried out through the informal conversations with the students, the study of their answer scripts, observations and the discussions with the Lectures/Instructors in English Language.

Findings

Data analyzed from the study of questionnaire distributed to the students shows that the difference between Tamil and English is greater (see figure 1) when compared with sameness.

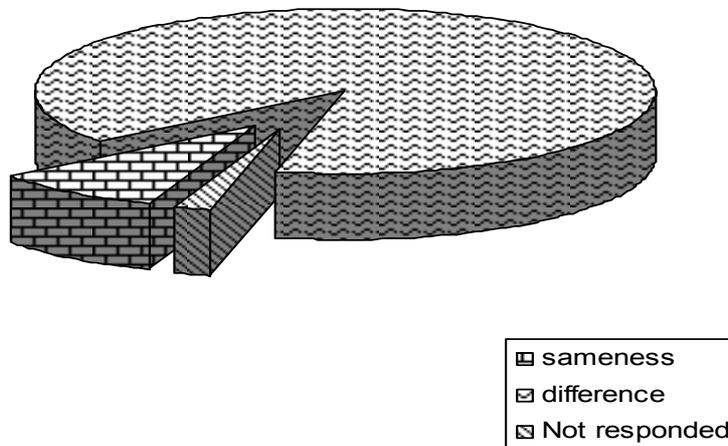


Fig. 1 Difference and sameness between English and Tamil grammatical features

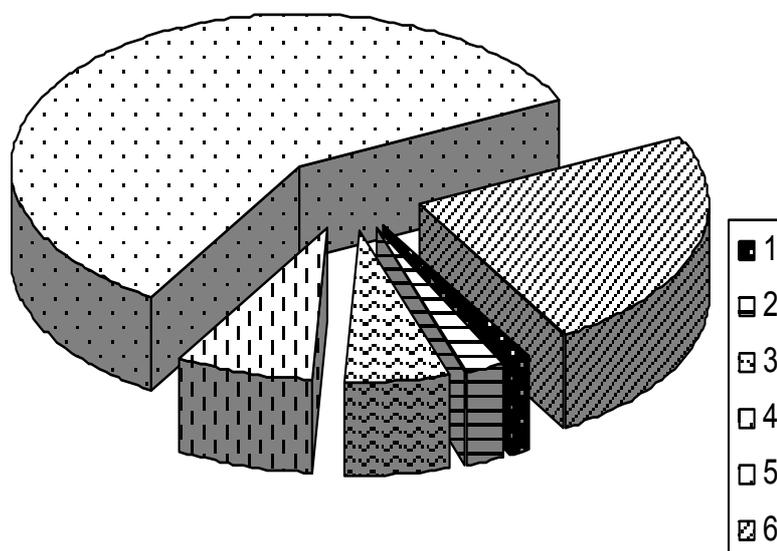
At the same time, the table given below shows the percentage of the student's inability in writing in their day to day situation due to various reasons.

Student samples 100	
Students' ability to write in English language in their day-to-day situation.	
Able to write in English language.	Unable to write in English language
12%	88%

Table 1. SS' behavioral results to write in English language in their day-to-day life. In response to the item of the questionnaire (if no, what is the reason?) out of 88% of the students, 52% of the students say that they have to think something in Tamil and then translate it into English.

Student Samples 100					
Reasons for students' inability to write in English language					
Makes Mistakes in using conjunctions	have difficulties in using adjectives and adverbs	makes mistakes in using prepositions	Make mistakes in using correct tense	Think something in Tamil as their translate into English	All the above
1%	2%	5%	7%	52%	21%

Table 2. SS' behavioral results to the reasons for the inability to write in English language in their day-to-day life.



Reasons for students' inability to use the language

1. Make mistakes in using conjunctions.
2. Have difficulties in using adjectives and adverbs.
3. Make mistakes in using prepositions
4. Make mistakes in using correct tense
5. All the above.
6. Think something in Tamil then translate it into English.

Analysis of common errors of students of ESL

To collect data to study the specific features of common errors prevalent among students of ESL and to confirm the data collected from the questionnaire, a model question paper was designed and it was distributed to randomly selected group of 50 students who were from among the 150 respondents of the self-administered

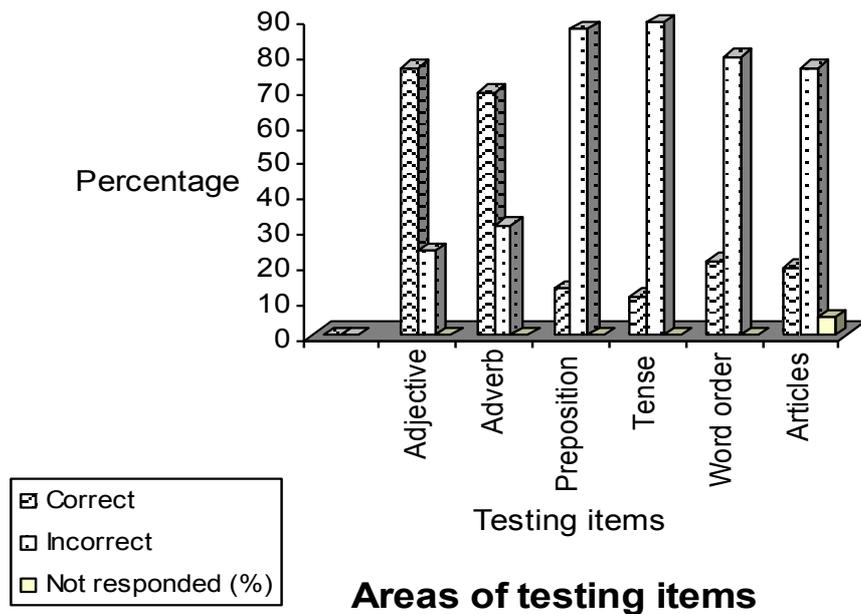
questionnaire including 75 students from the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce and 75 students from the Faculty of Arts in the 2nd year, of the University of Jaffna. The researcher revealed the purpose of this test to the students to assure them that this test is not affiliated with their degree programme, by any means so that they could attempt the paper with confidence.

After carefully marking the answer scripts, the researcher noted the common features of the errors made by the students and explained the cause of errors, based on his personal observation of the students' performance.

The bar chart shown below indicates the percentage of students who have ticked the correct and the incorrect answers in each section of the General English Proficiency Test.

Student Sample 100			
Areas of testing items	Correct (%)	Incorrect (%)	Not responded (%)
Adjective	76	24	0
Adverb	69	31	0
Preposition	13	87	0
Tense	11	89	0
Word order	21	79	0
Articles	19	76	5

Table 4.16 SS' performance to the areas testing items in the proficiency test.



Conclusion

It was found that the most frequent errors from this data were on the morphosyntactic and lexical levels with inadequate lexical and morphosyntactic knowledge leading to the errors, which have been ranked according to the level of difficulty. The error categories identified by the researcher based on the greatest number of errors that occurred are as follows. 1. Tense and subject-verb agreement 2. Preposition 3. Word order 4. Articles 5. Adverbs 6. Adjectives. It has been observed that most of the errors are due to the differences between Tamil and English. Within these errors, mother tongue interference and the structural transfer of L1 have been detected. These errors may result from the inadequate learning as well as the complexity of structures between Tamil and English.

In conclusion, the errors made by the students are related to language transfer. It causes problems for them in learning English language and makes the English writing process even more complicated. At the same time, it has been observed that ESL students with different English proficiencies may have different learning difficulties. More advanced learners are found to have errors, which are not related to language transfer. L1 related errors are more prevalent for the students who have less proficiency in English and are the beginners of English.

Recommendation

Communicative competence is a linguistic term which refers to a learner's L2 ability. It not only refers to a learner's ability to apply and use grammatical rules, but also to form correct utterances, and know how to use these utterances appropriately. The term unites the view of language learning implicit in the communicative approach to language teaching. So the grammatical proficiency is the foundation of better writing and speaking ability of ESL learners. Efficient grammar instruction, especially for adult learners, helps to learn English more effectively. Therefore, understanding students' learning difficulties and providing appropriate grammar instruction is the key to effective teaching for ESL teachers.

This study indicates various errors and these errors have been ranked the most frequent error categories, which can be an indication for ESL teachers to better understand what errors their students could make and provide instruction thereby. Many errors found in this study were considered L1- related. It is apparent that L1 plays an important role in the process of learning English. The participants of this study were the undergraduates of the University of Jaffna who are all eligible to express their ideas in a clear way. However language transfer caused problems for them and made the English learning process even more complicated.

Clarifying learning difficulties can be the first step that helps beginning ESL learners master English grammar. Language interference is apparently a common problem for beginning ESL learners. English teachers can help beginning ESL learners reduce language interference by specifying the differences between Tamil and English in order to make English grammar instruction more effective. Errors in the use of tense and prepositions in this study, for example, were ranked as the number one error categories where the greatest number of errors occurred. Such errors should be paid attention by ESL teachers. In addition to explaining grammatical rules of English tenses, prepositions etc. ESL teachers may also compare the differences between Tamil and English.

It has been observed that ESL learners with different English proficiencies may have different learning difficulties. When more advanced learners may have more errors which are not related to language transfer, L1- related errors are prevalent for beginning learners. English grammar instruction with comparison of Tamil and English can be a good option for ESL teachers.

To prevent L1 interference on L2 sentence, various sentence types of both L1 and L2 should be differentiated and distinguished and should be made known to the students. The sameness about sentence types of both languages will automatically eliminate the errors in syntax. Thus, effort has to be taken to create syntactic awareness among the students. To prevent the agreement problems, the relationship between words should be taught and if the problems are due to L1 structure, the relationship and variation between L1 and L2 in sentences should be indicated to the students.

The teacher should identify the differences between English and Tamil in terms of morphosyntactic features of these languages. To this effect the structural elements found in English but not found in Tamil should be well marked. Similarly structural elements found in Tamil but not found in English also should be highlighted. The areas where structural contradictions occur between these two languages should be underlined. These are steps that would make students well aware of the structural dissimilarities between English and Tamil. Then the teacher should be conscious of the problem areas of students which are generally caused by the structural variations. Now the teacher should adequately focus on designing tasks, and activities and exercises for students in order to enable them to overcome such problems. In this process, graded drills are recommended so that the students will be able to make progress gradually and firmly. Simultaneous concentration on the development of the four language skills, with specific focus on the problem areas caused by structural differences would effectively lead to successful learning.

For adult learners, learning a foreign language is a complex process. The confusion of language transfer is more common for beginning ESL learners. Beginning ESL learners will be benefited if provided with systematic and well-designed grammar instruction in connection with their first language, through which language differences were indicated. Aside from the comparison of Tamil and English which may facilitate the students' learning of English grammar, employing technology to facilitate language instruction is teachers' new responsibility in today's technical advancement to bring about greater learning.

The present study revealed the importance of contrastive instruction in learning English and in the light of the findings, contrastive approach and contrastive linguistic input (CLI) can be viewed as a foreign language learning facilitator of such difficult grammatical forms in foreign language settings. The study also revealed the area / areas of difficult grammatical features, which have to be taken into consideration in teaching and learning a foreign language. The importance of sound knowledge of L2 grammatical forms for the development of language skills which the learners of foreign language expect to develop for their communicative competence is strongly felt from this study.

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