

Mother Tongue Influence: Error Analysis of Tribal Learners

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Abstract: This study investigates the structural and pedagogical factors contributing to written errors in Tamil, with a specific focus on marginalized student demographics, such as tribal learners. Drawing upon classical grammatical frameworks and modern error analysis (EA), this paper delineates the critical distinction between systemic “errors”- which stem from competence deficiencies and deep-seated structural misunderstandings - and transient “mistakes,” which arise from performance variables like cognitive fatigue or inattention. The analysis reveals that the systematic disregard for grammatical norms, compounded by a lack of pedagogical engagement in language education, manifests in widespread orthographic, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and sandhi (morphophonemic juncture) anomalies. By categorizing these deviations, this research underscores the vital role of explicit grammar instruction in preserving linguistic integrity and provides a foundational framework for developing targeted, culturally responsive remedial pedagogy.

Keywords: Error Analysis, Tamil Linguistics, Orthographic Errors, Morphophonemic Juncture (Sandhi), Tribal Education,

Introduction

In the domain of applied linguistics, the written replication of a language serves as a primary metric for assessing a learner's systemic competence. In the context of the Tamil language a classical language characterized by complex diglossia and rigorous morphophonemic rules the emergence of written deviations presents a significant pedagogical challenge. Orthographic and structural errors in written Tamil primarily manifest when established grammatical norms are bypassed during the composition process. This linguistic divergence is frequently exacerbated by pedagogical limitations; a systemic failure among educators to foster intrinsic motivation and linguistic appreciation in students often results in low language proficiency. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among marginalized student cohorts, such as tribal communities, whose written output consistently displays high frequencies of structural divergence. When learners particularly those from vulnerable tribal backgrounds consistently reproduce specific deviations (such as the uniform misspelling of fundamental lexical items like "Tamil"), these patterns cease to be accidental slips. Instead, they indicate a fossilized deficiency in the learning process itself. Based on this established scholarly consensus, any systematic, predictable deviation observed in a student's examination script is classified as an error.

Fundamentally, a linguistic error involves the erroneous substitution of an deviant linguistic element for the standard target form. Because erroneous writing disrupts the structural integrity and historical continuity of the language, strict adherence to prescriptive grammar is essential for its preservation. Consequently, this study adopts a systematic taxonomy to isolate, categorize, and analyze the systematic deviations found in student examinations, mapping them across four core linguistic dimensions: orthographic, lexical, syntactic, and sandhi anomalies.

Second Language Errors

When students from tribal communities acquire Tamil as a second language, the errors they commit serve as a yardstick for measuring their linguistic proficiency and provide insights into the specific nature of their

linguistic knowledge. This phenomenon arises from the fact that each tribal student speaks a distinct native language (mother tongue). By analyzing these errors, one can discern not only the specific linguistic elements the students need to master but also the underlying patterns and methods of their language acquisition process. During the process of language acquisition, tribal students encounter errors across various linguistic domains including phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics manifesting in issues related to pronunciation, grammatical elements, sandhi errors, word compounding, and sentence structure. Furthermore, as students acquire a second language, they face difficulties involving all four language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

Causes of Errors

Generally, errors occur based on eight distinct categories. According to Nataraja Pillai (1981, p. 47), these errors arise from the following eight factors:

1. Analogizing
2. Misapplication of target language rules
3. Interference from the developing language
4. Interference from the mother tongue
5. Interference from a second language
6. Simplification errors
7. Contextually induced errors
8. Lack of proficiency/Ignorance

Error Analysis

When the internal cognitive processes of a student during language acquisition were examined, several new shifts were observed within the field of language learning. One such shift is the emergence of "Error Analysis."

Similarly, Error Analysis is defined as the process of collecting and identifying the various types of errors committed while learning a specific language, and subsequently proposing effective strategies to rectify them (Ramiah, 1995). Broadly speaking, Error Analysis serves multiple purposes: it helps in identifying the linguistic difficulties encountered by students during language acquisition and devising remedial measures; it aids in understanding the approaches and strategies adopted by students to learn a language; and it facilitates the assessment of a language learners linguistic development.

Perspectives of Linguists

Linguists have lauded the Tamil language for possessing a unique feature: a specific written character (grapheme) corresponds to every single sound unit (phoneme). In contrast, in many Western languages, there is often a divergence between the written form of a word (orthography) and its spoken form (pronunciation). However, such a discrepancy does not exist in Tamil. As S.V. Shanmugam (1969, p. 43) observes, "We pronounce words exactly as they are written, and we write them exactly as we pronounce them." Scholars note that the Tamil language functions with exceptional distinction, characterized by its precision in phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Given these inherent qualities, it is imperative and indeed indispensable to perceive the language as it truly is, and to speak and write it with absolute fidelity to its nature. Vasanathan (2023) Unlike certain other languages, one of the distinct virtues of Tamil is that words formed through phonetic combination remain identical in their structure both when they are written down and when they are spoken aloud. The errors an individual commits while learning a second language serve as a yardstick for their level of

linguistic proficiency and reveal the nature of their linguistic knowledge. It is observed that second-language learners often adopt the very same approaches utilized by students acquiring their first language.

Regarding the scope of language development, Selinker (1972) designates the level of proficiency attained in the target language at each specific stage as “Inter language.” He further describes errors that become deeply ingrained in a learner's mind persisting and recurring even after a considerable period as “fossilized errors.” Similarly, errors arising from the interaction between languages can be termed “inter lingual errors.” Collectively, these phenomena are referred to in English as “Inter language Interference.” Chandrasekhar (1978) notes that the other languages serving as the source or cause of such errors are termed the “Base Language.” An error is defined as any deviation whether in speaking, writing, or reading from the standard linguistic norms and conventions followed by the general community of speakers. Carter (1967) posits that the errors typically committed by students provide insights into the specific learning strategies they have internally formulated to acquire a language, as well as the extent of the linguistic knowledge they have internalized from their instruction. Furthermore, research conducted by scholars such as Wilkins (1968) and Duskova (1969) regarding the nature of errors corroborates and reinforces this very same perspective.

Language Errors

When assessing a student's learning proficiency, errors observed at the levels of writing, vocabulary, and speech are collectively termed “language errors”. By rectifying these errors, the structural integrity of the language can be corrected and refined. Fundamentally, a language error is defined as a deviation that occurs when one writes in contravention of established grammatical rules. Based on data gathered by the researcher from tribal students, language errors are comprehensively elucidated herein across three distinct levels. These are as follows:

Language errors are generally explained in terms of the following three levels:

1. Errors observed at the graphemic (letter) level
2. Errors observed at the lexical (word) level
3. Errors observed at the phonetic (pronunciation) level

Errors Observed at the Graphemic Level

Linguists refer to the sounds responsible for semantic differentiation as “phonemes”. From this, it becomes clear that a letter (or grapheme) functions as the smallest unit of sound, serves as the fundamental basis of language, conveys semantic distinctions, and exists as a written graphic form. A letter possesses two forms: a graphic form (written script) and a phonetic form (sound). Of these, the phonetic form is primary. The term “letter” denotes both the sound articulated by the mouth and the graphic line inscribed by a writing instrument. A sound that embodies both a phonetic form and a graphic form is defined as a “letter”.

Linguist's note that, with the exception of monosyllabic words (single letters functioning as complete words) and other sounds that merely serve to identify themselves, all other sounds constitute “letters.” Therefore, to identify errors occurring at the graphemic level, the quarterly and half-yearly examination papers of tribal students studying in the 9th and 10th grades were obtained with the direct assistance of the Headmaster and the specific spelling errors committed by these students have been analyzed and illustrated with examples.

Categories of Spelling Errors

The spelling errors committed by the tribal students have been categorized into five distinct types:

1. Errors involving the interchange of short and long vowels
2. Errors involving the interchange of consonant letters

3. Errors involving consonant clusters (consonant blending)
4. Errors involving phonetic variants (pseudo-forms)
5. Errors involving the graphic form (script shape) of letters
6. Errors Involving the Interchange of Short and Long Vowels

In the examination papers of the tribal students, instances can be observed where short vowels, short vowel-consonants, long vowels, and long vowel-consonants are written by substituting one for another. These errors are further classified into seven distinct categories:

1. Errors involving the substitution of a long vowel for a short vowel
2. Errors involving the substitution of a short vowel for a long vowel Errors:
3. The error of writing a long vowel-consonant instead of a short vowel-consonant.
4. The error of writing a short vowel-consonant instead of a long vowel-consonant.
5. The error of writing a different short vowel-consonant instead of the corresponding short vowel-consonant.
6. The error of writing a Thunaikkaal (auxiliary stroke) adjacent to a long vowel letter.

The Error of Writing a Long Vowel Instead of a Short Vowel

Tribal students commit errors by writing a long vowel in place of a short vowel.

For example:

1. Vaazhthida oothavum (instead of uthavum - to help one live)
2. Maadasaamiyin Mahaan (instead of Magan - Maadasamy's son)
3. Paasu (instead of Pasu - Cow)
4. Thanneerai aalli aalli (instead of alli alli - scooping up water repeatedly)
5. Ivatrai meyyeluthukkal endru (instead of endru - they call these consonant letters)

It is observed that they write erroneously in this manner because they are unaware of the distinction between short and long vowels, and because proper pronunciation was not adequately taught to them when introducing vocabulary. By providing oral and written exercises specifically designed to distinguish between short and long vowels, the errors observed among tribal students can be rectified.

The Error of Writing a Short Vowel Instead of a Long Vowel

For example:

1. Anukkup (instead of Aanukkup - A woman is indeed no less than a man!)
2. Bharathiyar tham paadal moolam desappatrai oottinar (instead of oottinaar - Bharathiyar instilled patriotism through his songs)
3. Oru ooril Madasaamy (instead of Maadasaamy - There was a man named Maadasamy in a town)
4. Irandavathu (instead of Irandavathu - The second one)

Since these types of errors occur in their writing, it is essential to clearly teach tribal students the grammatical rules regarding the lengthening and shortening of vowel sounds is essential.

Errors involving the substitution of consonants

This section explains errors that occur when one consonant is written in place of another.

For example, these errors are categorized into three types:

1. Errors distinguishing between the consonants 'ṇa', 'na', and 'ṇa'.
2. Errors distinguishing between the consonants 'ra' and 'ṛa'.
3. Errors distinguishing between the consonants 'la', 'la', and 'la'.

The error of using the consonant 'na' in place of 'ṇa'.

It is observed that tribal students frequently commit the error of substituting the consonant 'na' for the consonant 'ṇa'. For example:

- ❖ Manakkoil (Manakkoil)
- ❖ Discipline is essential for a manavan (student)
- ❖ Andhanar (Brahmins) are those who embody virtue

The reason for such errors lies in the fact that, in spoken Tamil, these two sounds are often pronounced without distinction, and words are written without an awareness of the resulting difference in meaning. To rectify this error, one must explain and clarify the specific meanings of words in which the letter 'na' (ṇa) appears.

The Error of using 'ṇa' (ṇa) Instead of 'na' (na)

When tribal students write - particularly in examination papers - one frequently observes the error of substituting the letter 'na' (na) with 'ṇa' (ṇa).

For example:

- ❖ Viṇaiyecham (Viṇaiyecham) [Verbal Participle]
- ❖ Thiruninravur is superior to the four (ṇāṇku) Vedas
- ❖ The sage came in search of the fruit (kaṇi).

This error stems from having learned to pronounce both 'na' (na) and 'ṇa' (ṇa) without any phonetic distinction in everyday speech. This mistake can be avoided by providing tribal students with specific training - through writing and pronunciation exercises in the classroom - using words that feature the letters 'na' (na) and 'ṇa' (ṇa).

The Error of using 'na' (na) Instead of 'na' (ṇa)

For example:

- ❖ Anuppunar - Anuppunar [Sender]
- ❖ Perunar - Perunar [Recipient]
- ❖ Vidunar - Vidunar [Releaser/Issuer]

The letter 'na' (ṇa) is a medial consonant (an intermediate sound). There is a widespread tendency to misuse this specific letter. To correct this error, tribal students must be thoroughly made to understand the phonetic and contextual distinctions between 'na' (na) and 'ṇa' (ṇa).

The Error of using 'ra' (ர) Instead of 'ra' (ர)

When tribal students write, there is a prevalent error involving the substitution of the soft consonant 'ra' (ர) with the hard consonant 'ra' (ர).

- ❖ Thiru-navukkarasar lost his life after being bitten by a snake (aravu).
- ❖ One must toil, subjecting the body to hardship (varuthi), in order to obtain food for sustenance.
- ❖ One must toil, subjecting the body to hardship (varuthi).

Errors involving the substitution of the letter 'ra' for 'ra'

- ❖ Via a shortcut (kurukku / kurukku)
- ❖ He designed airplanes by observing birds (paravai / paravai).
- ❖ They spoke (kūrinārkaḷ / kūrinārkaḷ)

Linguists' Views on the Articulation Points of the Letters 'la', 'la', and 'la'

Linguists describe the letter 'la' as an alveolar sound produced when the tip of the tongue makes contact with the tip of the alveolar ridge and refer to it as an "anterior lateral sound." Students should understand a letter primarily through its pronunciation. Linguists characterize the letter 'la' as a "retroflex lateral sound." They note that it is produced slightly behind the point where the tip of the tongue meets the tip of the alveolar ridge; thus, they also refer to it as a "post-alveolar sound." Agathialingam (1976) describes the letter 'la' as a "post-alveolar sound" specifically, a sound produced slightly behind the alveolar point where the tip of the tongue meets the tip of the alveolar ridge. "In Tamil, the three letters 'l', 'l', and 'l' are all lateral sounds. Among these, 'la' is an alveolar lateral sound (involving the tip of the tongue and the alveolar ridge); 'la' is a retroflex lateral sound (involving the curling of the tongue); and 'la' is a tongue-tip lateral approximant," observes Ku. Paramasivan (1983).

The Error of using 'la' (ள) Instead of 'la' (ல)

When writing, tribal students often exhibit errors where they use the letter 'la' (ள) in place of 'la' (ல)

- ❖ The sky is nīla-colored (instead of nīla-colored).
- ❖ Let us plant trees teruvellām (instead of teruvellām all over the street).
- ❖ Kūlavāṇikaṇ (instead of Kūlavāṇikaṇ grain merchant).

When 'la' is written in place of 'la', this error frequently results in the formation of meaningless words. Therefore, this error can be rectified by providing tribal students with specific training in both writing and pronunciation.

The Error of using 'la' (ல) Instead of 'la' (ல)

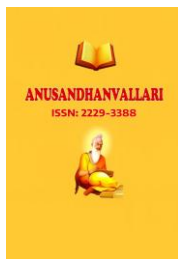
In many instances, one can observe the special letter 'la' (ல) being used in places where 'la' (ல) is required.

- ❖ She rested her talai (instead of talai - head) on her mother's lap.
- ❖ The nālāvatu (instead of nālavatu - fourth) army set out from the mērkilīruntu (instead of mērkilīruntu - west).
- ❖ Playing in the mālai (instead of mālai - evening).

In these examples, because 'la' was used instead of 'la', the words become meaningless and constitute errors.

The Error of using 'la' (ல) Instead of 'la' (ல)

One can also observe the letter 'la' (ல) appearing in places where 'la' (ல) is required.



- ❖ The Kauravas spoke *ikaḷntu* (instead of *ikaḷntu* - scornfully) to the Pandavas.
- ❖ The *Tamilmoḷi* (instead of *Tamilmoḷi* - Tamil language) is a very *paḷamaiyāna* (instead of *paḷamaiyāna* - ancient) *moḷi* (instead of *moḷi* - language).
- ❖ The people of the Sangam era *kaḷarri* (instead of *kaḷarri* removed) their earrings and chased away the *kōli* (instead of *kōli* - hen).

The Error of using 'la' (ள) in Place of 'la' (ல)

As noted above, one can observe the error of using the letter 'la' (ள) in contexts where the letter 'la' (ல) is actually required.

- ❖ This short story provides us with *viḷippuṇarvu* (instead of *viḷippuṇarvu* - awareness/vigilance).
- ❖ Let the rooster crow in the *oḷinta* (instead of *oḷinta* - deserted) town.
- ❖ *Viḷimēl* (instead of *viḷi* - upon the eye).

The failure to perceive the differences in pronunciation among the letters 'la' (ல), 'la' (ள), and 'la' (ள) as well as the failure to recognize the semantic distinctions between them is the primary reason for mispronouncing and misspelling these words.

The Error of using 'la' (ல) in Place of 'la' (ள)

The letter 'la' (ள) a retroflex lateral approximant is, in certain contexts, erroneously used as the letter 'la' (ல).

1. The first story to emerge in Tamil is the tale told by the banyan tree at the *kuḷattaṅkarai* (instead of *kuḷattaṅkarai* the bank of the pond).
2. A *milaku* (instead of *miḷaku* - pepper) plant grew.
3. The *mattalam* (instead of *mattaḷam* - drum) was beaten.

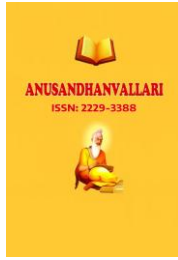
The Error of using 'la' (ள) in Place of 'la' (ள)

1. Along with impurities, everything enters the *vaḷi* (instead of *vaḷi* - atmospheric) sphere.
2. The entire evening was spent in *viḷaiyāṭṭu* (instead of *viḷaiyāṭṭu* - play/games).
3. *Vaḷaiyal* (instead of *vaḷaiyal* - bangle).

Conclusion

This study underscores the profound impact of Mother Tongue Influence (MTI) on the acquisition of written Tamil among tribal learners. The empirical findings demonstrate that a significant portion of student errors ranging from persistent orthographic shifts to structural sandhi anomalies are not random slips, but systematic linguistic transfers from indigenous dialects into the target language. These fossilized error patterns point to a critical gap where standard pedagogical frameworks fail to accommodate the unique phonetic and syntactic baselines of tribal communities.

To mitigate these challenges, educational policy must pivot away from punitive grading and toward culturally responsive, contrastive linguistics in the classroom. By recognizing MTI as a structured cognitive process rather than a lack of aptitude, educators can design targeted remedial interventions. Ultimately, bridging this linguistic divide is essential not only for improving academic outcomes but also for fostering inclusive literacy that respects the native linguistic identity of tribal students while ensuring their mastery of standard Tamil.



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