



Research Article

Phonological Challenges in ESL Learning among Sinhala and Tamil Speakers in Colombo, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This study looks into the phonological challenges that Sinhala and Tamil speaking ESL students in Colombo come across when learning English pronunciation. The study targets to examine the effect of first-language interference on English-speaking skill. Using a mixed-method approach, purposive sampling was used to select participants from a private language institute in Colombo. Quantitative data suggests that common errors such as improper replacement of consonants and the application of syllable-based rhythm. Qualitative results highlighted key factors such as first-language interference, learner anxiety, limited pronunciation-focused instruction, and sociocultural attitudes toward accent. Ultimately, this leads to the fact that these pronunciation difficulties contribute to errors that become a permanent habit in learners' speech. The study offers pedagogical recommendations, which include contrastive teaching and clear practice of English stress patterns. It also recommends prioritizing pronunciation-focused training into ESL courses and increasing teacher training to address speech issues before they become permanent. Suggestions include improving ESL teaching in multilingual environments.

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INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka, being a linguistically varied South Asian country, regards English serving as a very important L2 for education and professional communication. Sinhala and Tamil are the basic native languages, English works as a link language between different communities. However, ESL learners who speak Sinhala and Tamil often come across phonological difficulties when learning English, forming a barrier that can make even a very simple conversation can feel like a great struggle for both the listener and the speaker. While most of the people speak Sinhala and Tamil as their native languages, English proficiency is increasingly seen as a means of global communication and economic success (Wijesekera, [2014](#); Thakur, [2020](#)). The importance of English in Sri Lanka originally began in the British colonialist effect, with the language still serving as a bridge between Sinhala and Tamil-speakers (Ariyasinghe & Widyalandara, [2016](#)). However, Sinhala and Tamil-speaking ESL learners continually come across phonological difficulties when learning English. As a result of this pronunciation problems weakens fluency and communication efficiency (Hettiarachchi et al., [2024](#)). These difficulties stem from essential differences in the phonological systems of Sinhala, Tamil, and English. For example, Sinhala speakers typically use /s/ or /t/ instead of /θ/, and /d/ instead of /ð/, while Tamil speakers struggle a lot with English diphthongs and also consonant clusters (Senaratne, [2014](#); Wasala & Gamage, [2005](#)).

Other than this, both languages copy a syllable-timed rhythm, unlike English's stress-timed rhythm, making it difficult to produce the natural intonation pattern and stress pattern (Nation & Newton, [2008](#); Thampoe, [2017](#)). Even with, being legally recognized as a second language, teaching in English in Sri Lankan schools has been reported to place relatively less importance on pronunciation practice. This has led to communication barriers and reduced confidence in spoken English, thus affecting learners' academic and professional growth (Walisundara & Hettiarachchi, [2016](#); Jayasingha & Suraweera, [2020](#)). Phonology plays an important part in language competency, directly influencing students' capability to communicate well in English. Incorrect pronunciations can lead to misunderstandings, reduce fluency, and make learners feel hesitant to speak in academic and professional settings (Derwing & Munro, [2015](#)). Continuous pronunciation errors can also lead to

permanent wrong pronunciation (Selinker, [1972](#)), anxiety, and avoiding speaking situations, creating barriers to language development and learner's confidence.

In Sri Lanka's higher education and professional sectors, English is the main medium of instruction. This is mainly because better pronunciation skills are important for learners' academic success and to secure well-paid employment (Thakur, [2020](#)). Although the significance of pronunciation in ESL learning is well-known, research on Sinhala and Tamil-speaking students' pronunciation remains inadequate. Studies that are present regularly examine general ESL pronunciation problems without examining the different phonetic and phonological characteristics of these languages (Senaratne, 2014; Walisundara & Hettiarachchi, [2016](#)).

Hence, the current study aims to bridge that gap by examining the most common phonological mistakes of students who speak Tamil and Sinhala and providing focused methods for improving ESL pronunciation training in Sri Lanka. Also, the present study observes how particular languages' phonemic differences, patterns of stress, and syllable structures affect these challenges. It also investigates how the main language's phonological systems hinder English pronunciation in order to inform effective teaching strategies.

These main objectives are supported by Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories, mainly Transfer Theory and the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Odlin, [1989](#); Lado, [1957](#)), which shows the importance of the part of native language usage in influencing improvement in second language phonology.

This research has academic, pedagogical, and socio-linguistic importance. The study listens to the research gap by focusing especially on the phonological difficulties Sinhala and Tamil-speaking ESL students, which are not taken into account in international SLA literature. This study also helps us understand how a person's native language shapes their English accent. By looking at Practical, day-to-day evidence from South Asia's unique multilingual mix, we get a clearer picture of how these languages actually interact in daily life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Phonological Competence in Second Language Acquisition: Theoretical Perspectives

The way we master skills is very important in second language acquisition (SLA) as it shapes the way we speak, the flow of conversation, and our ability to truly communicate with others. Understanding the phonological difficulties of ESL learners allows teachers to design teaching approaches more effectively personalized to suit the specific needs of Sinhala and Tamil speakers (Fernando, [2023](#)). Among these theoretical frameworks, the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and Transfer Theory are particularly important to the present study, as they directly explain how first-language phonological systems influence English pronunciation errors.

The study of phonological challenges among ESL students is based on several key linguistic and second language acquisition theories. The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) assumes that those differences between the phonetic systems of L1 and the target language (L2) are the reasons for pronunciation difficulties (Lado, [1957](#)). This hypothesis is mainly connected to Sinhala and Tamil speakers learning English, as their native phonological structures do not have some English phonemes, which may lead to systematic pronunciation mistakes (Wijetunge, [2008](#)). The CAH supportive space allows teachers to predict areas of difficulty by understanding sound systems that differ between languages, providing a base for tailored support to address phonetic mispronunciations. Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, [1972](#)) explains that ESL learners develop evolving linguistic systems that include vocal habits that stay with them throughout the journey. Phonological slips continue as part of this developmental system, stressing the importance of targeted pronunciation instruction (Gass & Selinker, [2008](#)). The interlanguage view highlights the active nature of language learning, allowing learners create their own logic on how the language should sound, which steadily finding their way towards those of the target language. However, deeply rooted pattern, an instance where incorrect phonetic

habits become permanent, showcases an important challenge in pronunciation training (Aissat & Tayeb, 2024).

Moreover, Flege's Speech Learning Model (SLM) clearly suggests that learners may substitute unfamiliar L2 sounds with similar L1 sounds (Flege, 1995). According to SLM, learners who are unable to notice the differences between L2 sounds and similar L1 sounds tend to replace them with the closest equivalent from their native phonology. This model highlights the importance of early pronunciation interfering and wide auditory exposure to develop the correct phonetic formation in L2 learners. Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which recommends the importance of practical input in learning a second language, argues that the students can learn language most effectively when they are introduced to input that is just a little above their current proficiency level ($i+1$) (Krashen, 1982). Experience in rich and meaningful spoken English allows learners to practice pronunciation patterns with much ease and confidence. Similarly, Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory stresses the role of social interaction in language learning. It explains that learning takes place through social relationships, and pronunciation development benefits from communicative engagement with skilful speakers. Best's Perceptual Assimilation Model (PAM) explains how unfamiliar L2 sounds are interpreted through existing L1 phonological categories. (Best, 1994). This means that Sinhala and Tamil speaking learners may struggle with some English sounds because they do not fit into their present phonological groups. Finally, the Critical Period Hypothesis (1967) acknowledges that as we move into adulthood, our vocal habits become more firmly rooted, making way to a new accent, a more intentional and patient journey. This goes well with studies showing that adult learners often struggle a lot more with phonology than young learners (Scovel, 2000).

In general, these theoretical views provide a complete outline for understanding the phonological difficulties that Sinhala and Tamil-speaking ESL learners face. They together demonstrate how first language interference, theoretical limitations, developmental methods, and social interaction affect second language pronunciation. Using insights from these theories, the present study investigates how exceptional phonological aspects of Sinhala and Tamil affect English pronunciation and how particular teaching methods can resolve these concerns. This theoretical framework supports the study's focus on detecting typical pronunciation problems, shaping their language roots, and providing instructive solutions based on both cognitive and sociocultural mechanisms of language learning. Finally, the theories guide data explanation and support the study's aim of linking the gap between phonological research and practical application in the classroom.

Environmental Challenges in Phonological Development

In addition to theoretical frameworks, sociolinguistic and environmental aspects play a key part in phonological development in ESL learners. In Sri Lankan culture, English language always carries a social status that can develop an additional burden on students to imitate native-like speech (Arachchi, 2020). This problem, however, can cause anxiety and reduce learners' interest to speak, resulting in delaying the development of correct pronunciation. These social dynamics show us how important it is to provide a supportive and low-stress learning environment where students can research with English sounds without fear of being judged.

Also, the idea of phonological fossilization, in which the wrong pronunciation patterns become permanently fixed, has important consequences for Sinhala and Tamil learners. Fossilization is more common among adult students and is usually caused by early-stage negative transfer, insufficient helpful feedback, and a lack of particular phonological teaching (Selinker, 1972; Derwing & Munro, 2015). These types of problems become worse in Sri Lankan ESL classrooms, where pronunciation is normally outperformed by grammar and vocabulary. As a result, complete pronunciation-focused training is needed not just for accurate phonetic, but also for long-term spoken fluency and understanding.

As Wijetunge (2008) says, common methods to pronunciation teaching normally fail to account for the specific problems that Sinhala and Tamil speakers come across, such as stress-timed vs. syllable-timed rhythm differences and limited experience with native-like English models. This more localized phonological research considers the wide-ranging language backgrounds of ESL learners. By setting

this study in the Sri Lankan context, it adds to a growing body of research encouraging culturally and linguistically suitable ESL teaching.

These sociolinguistic and environmental factors are reflected in the present study's qualitative findings, particularly in relation to learner anxiety, limited exposure to authentic input, and attitudes toward pronunciation.

First Language Interference and Pronunciation Errors

First language interference plays an important part in the pronunciation challenges of ESL learners. According to Odlin (1989), first language transfer takes place when students apply phonological rules of their native language to the target language, which can lead to many methodical mistakes. Speakers those who speak Sinhala often insert unnecessary vowel sounds into English consonant clusters, while Tamil speakers may shorten final consonants in English words. These first language-based changes may cause pronunciation mistakes that can be there forever without a proper correction.

Sinhala speakers often substitute unfamiliar consonants and insert epenthetic vowels, whereas Tamil speakers more frequently simplify consonant clusters and show difficulty with certain vowel contrasts. For example, the English schwa /ə/, a common vowel that is not stressed, does not have a direct similar one in Sinhala and Tamil, causing learners to over-articulate vowels where native speakers would use reduced vowels (Gunesekera, 2005). Also, the English /ɪ/ and /i:/ are different, as in “bit” and “beat,” which carry a challenge as Sinhala and Tamil have different vowel categorizations, often resulting in vowel replacement errors (Senaratne, 2014). This mispronunciation can lead to fluency issues in communication, particularly in academic and professional settings.

Intonation and rhythm transfer from Sinhala and Tamil to English also cause major pronunciation difficulties. As Parakrama (1995) argues, English employs wide-ranging pitch contours to express meaning; Sinhala and Tamil are relatively flat in intonation. This can lead to an uninteresting speech delivery by ESL students, making their spoken English sound unnatural. Moreover, the stress placed on words also differs significantly across the three languages. Sinhala and Tamil speakers normally use their native stress patterns in English words, which can change their meanings and reduce their clarity (Parakrama, 1995). For example, they may incorrectly stress the second syllable in words like “content” (instead of stressing the first syllable in the noun form as in /'kɒn.tent/). Moreover, phonotactic limitations in Sinhala and Tamil affect learners' ability to pronounce English words correctly. Many English words contain consonant clusters either at the beginning or at the end of the word (e.g., “strength,” “text”), but both Sinhala language and Tamil languages show limitations with complex consonant clusters, although this is more pronounced among Tamil speakers, who tend to simplify or drop-down final consonants, while Sinhala speakers often insert vowels (Parakrama, 1995). This structural difference additionally confuses pronunciation and requires clear instruction and targeted practice to overcome. Fossilization of pronunciation mistakes is another concern. According to Selinker (1972), students who are not exposed to corrective feedback in early learning stages often remember the incorrect pronunciation patterns, making them difficult to change later. As indicated, one's first language can unfavourably impact on his or her pronunciations.

Pedagogical Approaches to Address Phonological Challenges

These instructional approaches are particularly relevant to the pronunciation challenges identified in this study. Effective instructional approaches are more important in addressing pronunciation difficulties among Sinhala and Tamil-speaking ESL learners. Various pronunciation instruction methods have been suggested and also applied, with varying degrees of success. A clear phonetic teaching method has been widely promoted as an effective strategy, where students are taught articulation techniques for problematic sounds (Derwing & Munro, 2015). This method includes phonetic training, articulation training, and phonemic awareness exercises to help learners differentiate difficult sounds and produce them accurately.

Contrastive analysis-based instruction helps students recognize and correct phonetic differences between their L1 and English (Halik & Umashankar, 2022). This method highlights direct comparison

between the learners' native phonological features and English phonology, helping them become more aware of their pronunciation mistakes. Regularly, teachers use minimal pair training, i.e., students practice noticing the difference between similar English sounds (e.g., "ship" vs. "sheep"), supporting correct articulation through repeating the words and listening exercises (Roach, 2009). Pronunciation training given in communication converts pronunciation practice into realistic communication tasks, allowing students to apply their skills in meaningful backgrounds (Jenkins, 2007). Practice activities like role-plays, verbal presentations, and storytelling etc. encourage students to focus on pronunciation without the nervousness that is associated with drills alone. Moreover, the Prosody Pyramid Approach also highlights rhythm, stress, and intonation as important components of fluency, other than focusing only on specific phonemes (Gilbert, 2012).

The use of technology in pronunciation training has increased in popularity in recent years. Some applications that are designed to learn language and speech recognition offer learners with immediate feedback on their correct pronunciation (Levis, 2018). Moreover, tools like spectrograms and voice modulation software allow students to easily compare their pronunciation with the native speakers, leading the way to self-monitoring and development (Levis, 2018). Many online platforms also provide access to interactive exercises, allowing learners to practice on their own outside the classroom. The Audiovisual Feedback Method has also been very effective in pronunciation training. The learners gain the opportunities to watch and imitate video recordings of the native speakers, so that they can closely concentrate on their mouth movements and articulation. This method improves correct pronunciation by giving a multisensory learning experience (Lord, 2005). In addition, exercises known as shadowing, in which learners repeat the spoken language in real-time after listening to a native speaker, also help improve their fluency and pronunciation through active engagement (Lord, 2005).

Including task-based language teaching (TBLT) in pronunciation training has also proven support in encouraging the learners' engagement and lifelong practice of pronunciation skills. The tasks that require learners to focus on pronunciation while completing communicative goals, such as group discussions or problem-solving activities, also encourage the natural mixture of correct pronunciation in speech (Ellis, 1994). A very clear phonetic instruction and contrastive analysis-based teaching help learners identify differences between L1 and English phonology. Techniques such as minimal pair practice and communicative activities support accurate sound production. In addition, exposure to authentic input and audiovisual feedback can enhance learners' pronunciation development.

While these instructive methods offer promising results, their effectiveness depends on factors such as a learner's motivation, his/her contact with native-like input, and the teacher's proficiency in pronunciation training. ESL programs must include strong pronunciation instruction personalized to the specific phonological challenges of Sinhala and Tamil-speaking learners.

METHOD

Research Design

The study followed a convergent mixed-methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and integrated during the interpretation stage. This technique was selected to understand the phonological issues of Sinhala and Tamil-speaking ESL students successfully. The quantitative characteristics included phonetic transcript and study of errors, while the qualitative section included teacher interviews and student observations. The mixed-methods techniques allowed triangulation, which improved the dependability of results by cross-validating data from several sources. Quantitative data helped in methodically classifying pronunciation mistakes, while qualitative data gave understanding of background of the learners' difficulties with English phonology. By incorporating these methods, this study ensured a complete understanding of the phonological issues learners face, as well as how these challenges affect their communicative skills in English. The two strands were connected by comparing quantitative error patterns with qualitative understandings from interviews and observations to give a comprehensive insights of learners' phonological challenges.

Context, Participants, and Sampling

This study took place at a private language centre in Colombo, Sri Lanka, where many Sinhala and Tamil-speaking students learn English. The reason for choosing this language centre was its various student population and its designed ESL programs, making it perfect for studying phonological difficulties in a controlled environment. The language centre provided an organized academic background where students were given pronunciation-focused coaching, making it a proper place for study. In addition, the availability of beginner and skilled ESL teachers and the student demographic improved the data collection process. However, the use of a single institutional setting may limit the broadness of the findings to other ESL contexts in Sri Lanka.

The target population included twenty students. Of these, 9 were Sinhala speaking and 11 were Tamil speaking learners, learning English as a second language at the intermediate level, and five ESL teachers teaching at the same private language centre in Colombo. This group was selected because the intermediate learners showed different types of phonological challenges, making them suitable for methodical analysis. Intermediate-level learners were picked as they have basic knowledge of English phonology but continue to struggle with segmental and suprasegmental features, making their phonological mistakes more easily recognizable. The study wanted to find out all the specific pronunciation difficulties, also including consonant substitutions, vowel distortions, differences in syllable stress, and intonation errors. Given the relatively small and potentially unbalanced sample, comparing between Sinhala students and Tamil learners are interpreted cautiously.

A purposive sampling method is always used to select participants with a thorough knowledge of the research field (Abeywickrama, 2019; Abeywickrama, 2021a). And also, these conditions required ESL learners to be native Sinhala or Tamil speakers, studying English as a Second Language at an intermediate level, and their ages to be between 13 and 17 years. The selected participants had a shared language background with varied learning experiences and challenges. Students who learnt English firstly through informal exposure, such as through mass media or being in households where English was spoken, and advanced ESL learners with somewhat native-like pronunciation fluency were not included in the study. The reason for not including the students mentioned above was to ensure that the study focused on students with systematic phonological errors applicable to their mother tongue influence rather than informal contact or advanced proficiency.

Data Collection

The study included different data collection methods to make sure a complete examination of phonological challenges. Here, the students were asked to read a list of words, a reading paragraph, and to participate in unprompted speaking task. The given word list included commonly problematic phonemes such as /θ/, /ð/, and several consonant clusters. The reading passage was designed to provoke both segmental and suprasegmental features, including stress patterns and rhythm patterns. The speaking task included short, open-ended prompts (e.g., describing daily activities or personal experiences). Their speech was recorded and then later on transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to identify any phonetic slips made. The transcription was carried out by the researcher and reviewed for consistency. A subset of the data was cross-checked to make sure of the transcription reliability. These speech samples were then examined for common pronunciation patterns, including replacements used instead of certain sounds, alterations made while segmenting, and the placing of stress patterns in the incorrect places.

These pronunciation errors were categorized into (a) substitution, where one sound replaced with another, (b) omission, where sounds are dropped, (c) insertion, where extra sounds are inserted, and also (d) distortion, where incorrect articulation, which does not match native English phonemes, was placed. This grouping helped in identifying steady patterns among students and also it provided understandings into specific phonemes that showed difficulties. Classifying these errors allowed a structured approach to examine the regularity and nature of learners' phonological mistakes, enabling targeted pedagogical recommendations.

To further examine students' pronunciation problems and teaching concerns, five English as a Second Language teachers were interviewed. Each interview lasted for approximately 20–30 minutes and then the interview followed a semi-structured format mainly focusing on pronunciation challenges, instructional approaches, and difficulties faced by the learners. For qualitative Thematic Analysis (TA), these interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. For this type of educational research, TA is mostly used (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Abeywickrama, 2019; Abeywickrama, 2021b). Students' difficulties, teaching methods that can address pronunciation problems, and teachers' opinions on students' phonological development were the main areas of the interviews. ESL teachers offered insightful explanation regarding the effectiveness of the present teaching methods and the importance of focusing on interferences. Also, classroom observations were also conducted to record students' speech patterns, their confidence levels, and the interaction between the teacher and students. A limited number of sessions were observed, focusing on students' pronunciation patterns, participation, and teacher feedback practices. Also, observational data helped in validating findings from speech recordings and interviews by providing real-time evidence of learners' engagement with English pronunciation.

Data Analysis

To understand how often learners make pronunciation mistakes and to observe patterns or changes in those mistakes, descriptive data of transcription of phonetics and pronunciation tests were analysed. The frequency of each type of pronunciation error (e.g., substitution, omission, insertion) was calculated based on the number of occurrences across speech samples. To find frequently occurring errors, the speech samples were sorted and marked step-by-step in an organized method. Then, these mistakes were arranged by how they were pronounced, such as unusual rhythms, leaving out certain consonant clusters, and pronouncing vowel sounds incorrectly. The study examined how often certain mistakes occurred and how common they were among students using quantitative analysis.

Interviews and observational field notes were well-examined using the TA to identify common themes related to phonological challenges and instructional strategies. The analysis followed key stages, including familiarization with the data, initial coding, identification of patterns, and development of themes related to phonological challenges and instructional factors. This procedure included coding transcribed interviews and categorizing responses into main themes such as phonetic difficulties, native language interference, and the effectiveness of feedback that indicates errors and helps fix them in pronunciation training. The qualitative analysis provided depth to the quantitative data by explaining why certain errors continued and how learners and teachers understand pronunciation difficulties.

The study observed three types of data: recordings of students' speeches, interviews with teachers, and classroom observations. By analysing them thoroughly, the results became more valuable and trustworthy. This process clearly showed the types of pronunciation problems Sinhala and Tamil-speaking students face, and also highlighted the need for special training in ESL classrooms. The use of both quantitative and qualitative data helped in providing a complete understanding of all these difficulties.

Proper considerations were also maintained during the study. All participants provided informed consent to take part in the study. Participants were also informed of the study's objectives, procedures, and rights, making sure that the process was open and also honest, and that participants joined completely willingly without any kind of persuasion. Personal data were anonymized to protect participants' privacy and maintain confidentiality, and participation was entirely voluntary, with participants able to withdraw at any time. Before data collection commenced, the organization consent forms were obtained from the chosen private language centre in Colombo, ensuring that academic and ethical study standards were followed at all times. To preserve confidentiality, the collected data was safely stored.

This methodology confirms a complete and reliable study of the phonological challenges faced by Sinhala and Tamil-speaking ESL learners in Colombo. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, triangulating data sources, and addressing ethical considerations, the study provided a

thorough analysis of pronunciation difficulties and instructional strategies aimed at improving phonological skills among ESL students.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The main aim of this study is to examine the phonological challenges that Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking ESL students in Colombo encounter when learning English pronunciation. This section presents quantitative and qualitative analyses to highlight the difficulties in phonemes learners face, reasons for those errors, and ESL teachers' suggestions to address them. The findings were derived from a phonological diagnostic test, semi-structured teacher interviews, and observational field notes. A detailed description of errors in segmental and suprasegmental features is provided to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the learners' phonological difficulties. The findings are presented in relation to key areas of phonological difficulty, including segmental errors, suprasegmental features, and underlying sociocultural and psychological factors.

Phonological Test Results: Overview of Quantitative Data

The phonological diagnostic test evaluated the pronunciation of various English phonemes by the Sinhala and Tamil-speaking ESL learners, focusing on common mispronunciations, replacements, and changes in sounds. One of the most common phonemes that is mispronounced is the sound /θ/, as in the word "thin." 19 out of 20 participants (95%) struggled to clearly pronounce this sound correctly, instead replacing it with /t/ or /s/, resulting in pronunciations such as "tink" or "sink." This issue is directly connected to the phonemic inventory of Sinhala and Tamil, as neither language includes the interdental fricative /θ/. As one teacher commented, "Most Sinhala students say /tink/ instead of think, and even when corrected, they repeat the same mistake. It shows how their L1 interference dominates over correction." (Teacher Interview 2). However, when carefully compared, it revealed that 7 out of 9 Sinhala-speaking participants showed substitution of /θ/ with /t/, whereas 8 out of 11 Tamil-speaking participants more frequently omitted final consonants and showed difficulty with diphthongs. This clearly indicates that while both groups share challenges with interdental fricatives, their more general problems with pronunciation differ according to the phonological systems of their first languages. So that, the learners start using phonemes that are more familiar to them, leading to these systematic substitutions.

Another important challenge was noticed with the phoneme /ð/, as in "this." 12 out of 20 participants (60%) replaced this sound with /d/, pronouncing some words like "this" as "dis" and "that" as "dat." This error, much like the mispronunciation of /θ/, is all because of the lack of the interdental fricative /ð/ in Sinhala and Tamil phonology, forcing learners to choose a sound that is a closer native equivalent. The phoneme /ʃ/, as in "sheep," was also problematic for 9 out of 20 of the learners (45%). Many replaced it with /s/, pronouncing words such as "sheep" to sound like "seep." The lack of variation between /ʃ/ and /s/ in the learners' native phonetic systems can be the cause of this error, as Sinhala and Tamil speakers often do not differentiate between these two sounds in their first language. However, these differences are interpreted cautiously due to the limited and uneven sample size.

Moreover, pronouncing the vowel sounds incorrectly was also known to be common. 12 out of 20 of the ESL learners (60%) who participated in this study struggled with the confusion between /æ/ and /ʌ/, for example pronouncing "cat" as /kʌt/. Similarly, the vowel sound /ɪ/ was usually pronounced as /i:/, making words like "bit" sound like "beet." This difficulty may be the reason why the Sinhala and Tamil vowel sounds do not include as many vowel contrasts as English, which results in learners combining similar sounds based on their L1 phonology. This awareness was shared by teachers during their interviews: "Students generally pronounce every vowel clearly, even in unstressed syllables. For instance, they say /'kænada/ instead of /'kænədə/ for Canada." (Teacher Interview 5). This comment aligns with Best's Perceptual Assimilation Model (1994), which explains that L2 vowels that are unfamiliar are matched to the closest L1 category. The results obtained from the other data collection methods further validate this finding.

Another phonological challenge, which is noteworthy, was the adding of an extra vowel sound in consonant clusters. About forty-five percent of the students showed this problem, which is easy to notice, mostly in words like "school" being incorrectly pronounced as "iskool" and "special" being pronounced incorrectly as "ispecial." The inserting of extra vowels in consonant clusters is primarily related to phonotactic constraints in Sinhala and Tamil, which do not permit complex consonant clusters. Also In contrast, difficulties with stress and rhythm are related with the transfer of syllable-timed patterns into English, which is stress-timed. Given that students add an extra vowel to break up a consonant cluster that does not naturally appear in their native language. In addition, suprasegmental problems, like stressing in the wrong place, were very commonly seen among students. About forty percent of the participants stressed equally on all syllables in polysyllabic words, making their speech sound mostly less natural in English rhythm. This problem increases from the syllable-timed nature of Sinhala and Tamil, where each syllable receives equal amount of stress, in contrast to English, which is actually stress-timed.

These quantitative results reveal that the phonological difficulties experienced by Sinhala and Tamil-speaking ESL learners are almost caused by the influence of the first language. The systematic nature of these errors shows that targeted phonetic teaching is very important to deal with these pronunciation problems and also to improve learners' spoken English proficiency level.

Teacher Interview Insights: Overview of Qualitative Data

The semi-structured interviews carried out with five ESL teachers provided a comprehensive understanding of the repeated phonological challenges faced by Sinhala and Tamil-speaking ESL students. As teachers stated, consonant clusters, stress patterns, and syllable timing were major parts of the students' difficulty.

One of the important observations that teachers emphasized was students' unwillingness to participate in speaking activities because of lack of confidence they had. "So, they show signs of nervousness, such as pausing regularly, lowering their voice, or looking for reassurance before speaking. Many are reluctant to speak when words have unfamiliar phonemes, so they choose simpler vocabulary in their place or avoid speaking in English. This means that they struggle with phonemes that are unavailable in their native languages, leading to replacement and mispronunciation" (Teacher Interview 3). This phenomenon aligns with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which indicates that anxiety and low self-esteem delay language acquisition.

Another important observation was the impact of traditional teaching methods on pronunciation development. Teachers also explained that pronunciation training is hardly given priority in Sri Lankan ESL classrooms, with more importance given to syntax, semantics, and writing skills. As a result, students receive very little guidance on errors in their pronunciation, allowing phonological errors to become fixed over time. Teachers expressed their concerns about this phenomenon, stating that "learners often struggle to revise incorrect pronunciation patterns on their own without ESL teachers' involvement, which is inadequate to unlearn what they have already internalized incorrectly" (Teacher Interview 1). Similarly, "introducing authentic English pronunciation was found to be limited among the students. Hence, many students largely depend on locally influenced varieties of English or locally marked pronunciation patterns, particularly from Sri Lankan teachers and media, stressing non-standard pronunciation styles" (Teacher Interview 3).

Critically, a lack of contact with native or well-skilled English speakers hinders the ability of the students to develop exact phonetic awareness. Cultural reasons also play a very important role in pronunciation difficulties; for instance, some students and teachers purposely continue phonological features of their own native language just to maintain their linguistic identity. As reported by ESL teachers, "some students struggled to adjust their pronunciation to native like speakers, fearing that it might sound unnatural or might sound like showing off within their social circles" (Teacher Interview 4). This scenario demonstrates the complicated connections between language, identity, social agreement and students' approach to their pronunciation.

In general, the qualitative results emphasize the awareness that phonological challenges in Sinhala and Tamil-speaking ESL learners are associated with first language interference, psychology, teaching pedagogies, and social factors. Speaking of these challenges needs an approach that revisits targeted phonetic training, increased contact with authentic English, and also some approaches to enrich students' confidence level in oral communication.

These findings align with theoretical perspectives such as the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and Interlanguage Theory, which explain how first-language influence and developmental factors contribute to persistent pronunciation errors.

Suprasegmental Features and Communication Breakdown

Other than the slips with single sounds, the study shows challenges in suprasegmental features of pronunciation, which also include stress, rhythm, and intonation. Sinhala and Tamil are syllable-timed languages. Each syllable here is given roughly equal emphasis, unlike English, which is stress-timed. This important difference results in an unusual pattern when Sinhala and Tamil speakers try to speak English.

As per the classroom observations, students generally stress all syllables, which does not make the speech sound natural. For an example, in a sentence like "I will go to the market," an ESL student may stress every syllable equally, other than stressing on the words "go" and "market," which is correct in natural English. This perception was strongly supported by the ESL teachers, for example, "when students read or speak, they have a habit of stressing on each word equally, as in the sentence I will go to the market, which clearly makes their speech sound kind of a bit robotic" (Teacher Interview 4). The classroom observation also showed that students often read aloud word-by-word, producing a very flat delivery that lacks the natural rhythm that is expected in English speech. This pattern shows negative transfer from Sinhala and Tamil, which are syllable-timed languages, unlike English, which is stress-timed (Kenworthy, 1987; Nation & Newton, 2008). And also, it is very important to note that the consistency of this mistake across speech samples, observations, and teacher interviews highlights its trustworthiness and shows the impact of first-language interference predicted by the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957).

When there is no rhythm, speech sounds are uninteresting and can negatively affect smooth speaking, as native speakers mostly depend on stress patterns to understand the meaning and purpose. Field notes exposed that students have a habit of reading aloud word-by-word without natural rhythm, producing by giving the same length for every syllable in speaking. A teacher noticed, "even after repeated practice, they applied equal weight to every syllable, which makes their speech sound unnatural." (Teacher Interview 4). Similarly, a stress that is placed in the wrong place in a word that has many syllables was another repeating issue. Many students placed stress on the first syllable of words where the stress should be placed on the second or third syllable, as in words like "important" being pronounced as "IM-portant" instead of "im-POR-tant." This mistake can really affect listener comprehension and make speech sound not normal.

Other than that, incorrect intonation patterns were commonly observed. Many students produced rising intonation where falling intonation was expected, making statements sound like questions. This not only affects clear speech but also this affects the speaker's ability to express meaning effectively. Placing intonation in the wrong place can lead to misunderstandings in conversations, particularly in professional and academic backgrounds, where a clear communication is very important.

Psychological Barriers to Pronunciation Development

The findings reveal that phonological difficulties are not only language-related but also psychological. The unwillingness of students to engage in oral communication originates from fear of making mistakes in pronunciation, which can hinder oral communication a lot and language acquisition. This strongly goes hand in hand with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which tells that anxiety and lack of confidence can negatively affect language learning.

When interviewed, Teachers said that many students are highly likely to avoid themselves speaking in English because of feeling embarrassed or ashamed of their wrong pronunciation. Some students purposely use simple words to decrease the risk of pronouncing joined words incorrectly. This behaviour of avoidance eventually can slow down fluency development in English, as pronunciation improves with regular practice and a lot of experience. The results of the study also found out that unpleasant classroom experiences can lead to increased anxiety. This affective impact was specially mentioned by ESL teachers, for example, "some students are scared that their classmates might laugh at the way they pronounce certain words, so they don't come forward to speak in class." (Teacher Interview 1). This result is consistent with earlier research on the influence of drive and self-confidence on foreign language pronunciation (Derwing & Munro, [2015](#)).

Learners who receive negative or corrective feedback in an unsupportive way normally develop a fear of speaking, which also further develops their unwillingness to take part in pronunciation training. Teachers also highlighted the need for a more encouraging learning environment where errors are treated as opportunities to improve their pronunciation skills, rather than disappointments.

Moreover, cultural reasons can also develop psychological barriers. Some students struggle to make their pronunciation resemble that of native speakers, due to concerns about not sounding natural and normal, or about distancing themselves from their first language and cultural identity. This phenomenon may be particularly strong among students who mainly communicate in Sinhala or Tamil outside the classroom, strengthening native pronunciation patterns.

Pedagogical Implications

The study shows that, given the influence of the first language, problems with intonation, and psychological barriers on the pronunciation of Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking ESL students, the ESL training programs need much focused pronunciation teaching. Effective educational interventions can improve students' pronunciation accuracy, confidence, and overall communicative capability.

One of the most serious recommendations is a clear pronunciation exercise. Earlier ESL courses in Sri Lanka normally focus on grammar and vocabulary, not noticing about proper phonetic teaching, which obviously leads to long-term fixed pronunciation mistakes. For example, the common mispronunciation of school as /iskul/ was noticed among both Sinhala and Tamil speakers. As one teacher observed, "this mistake is fixed in them so strongly that even advanced students continue to say /iskul/ without their knowledge, even after many years of experience." (Teacher Interview 1). Teachers also noted that interaction with friends strengthened these permanent errors, as students always tend to repeat incorrect pronunciations of classmates, making them the practice within the classroom setting. These practices confirm Derwing and Munro's ([2015](#)) observation that pronunciation mistakes, if not corrected, can become permanent in adult learners' interlanguage. The recurrence of this finding in speech samples, teacher interviews, and observation notes clearly confirms its reliability.

Applying enthusiastic phonology lessons, diagnostic pronunciation assessments, and continuous pronunciation training can make sure that students receive complete language training. Applying a planned pronunciation drill that discusses common mispronunciations, like minimal pairs exercises where differences between /θ/ vs. /t/ ("thin" vs. "tin") or /ʃ/ vs. /s/ ("ship" vs. "sip") are shown, can help students develop phonemic awareness and correct proper articulation. Given this background, the study recommends that existing ESL programs in Sri Lanka should be revised to include structured pronunciation components.

Another important approach is increased connection to native English pronunciation. The study found that in the beginning many students hear English from non-native speakers, limiting their contact with correct phonological models. Encouraging students to engage in English-language media, such as podcasts, audiobooks, and television shows, can also provide essential audio input and strengthen correct pronunciation patterns. Most importantly, teacher training is also very important in addressing pronunciation challenges. Many ESL teachers in Sri Lanka have little or no formal training in phonetics and phonology, making it difficult to analyse and correct pronunciation errors successfully. Professional development programs focusing on articulatory phonetics, corrective feedback techniques, and

phonological awareness strategies can help teachers with the skills necessary that are needed to support students in overcoming pronunciation difficulties. In addition, creating a helpful classroom is important for reducing nervousness and encouraging student active participation. By reducing the affective filter, learners will take part with more interest in taking risks in pronunciation and in developing greater fluency over time.

Furthermore, anxiety and self-consciousness meaningfully affect pronunciation development, thus, creating a classroom that is supportive and where no one is judged, in this classroom is essential. Teachers should design exercises that build confidence, such as peer-assisted pronunciation practice, role-playing, and cooperative speech exercises. Giving feedback that improves the students in a positive way, other than only focusing on mistakes, can help reduce students' fear of speaking English. The study also highlights the social and cultural factors in pronunciation learning. Students' fear of being laughed at and dependence on peer models regularly result in incorrect forms, highlighting that pronunciation is both a linguistic and a social challenge. So that, solving these affective reasons is so important as phonetic training itself.

Overall, this discussion shows that Sinhala and Tamil-speaking ESL students face a lot of pronunciation difficulties because of their first language (L1), segmental and suprasegmental difficulties, and also their psychological barriers. These findings show us the need of a very clear and proper pronunciation teaching, more contact to real English speech, and the making of helpful learning environments to reduce anxiety. Addressing these phonological challenges through targeted pedagogical interventions will surely enhance learners' spoken English level and communicative competence.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the phonological challenges faced by Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking ESL learners in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The results also confirm that the first-language (L1) interference is the most important factor affecting pronunciation difficulties, particularly with individual speech sounds that are not in the learners' native languages (L1). Recurring segmental and suprasegmental errors were identified, reflecting the influence of first-language (L1) phonological systems. This study contributes to ESL phonology research by providing a comparative analysis of Sinhala and Tamil phonological influences within a shared ESL learning context.

The study also underscores the importance of suprasegmental features, such as word stress, speech rhythm, and intonation, which affect fluency and clarity. These difficulties may arise from the differences between the syllable-timed style of Sinhala and Tamil and the stress-timed format of English, which makes it difficult for learners to develop native-like speech styles. Learners also experience anxiety and lack of confidence, which limit participation in spoken English activities, consistent with the Affective Filter Hypothesis. This phenomenon is consistent with the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that emotional complications may delay language learning.

Limited pronunciation-focused instruction and feedback contribute to the persistence of errors. The findings also indicate that pronunciation is often underemphasized in ESL classrooms in Colombo. Limited teacher training in phonetics and phonology further constrains effective instruction.

Generally, the study confirms that phonological challenges among Sinhala and Tamil-speaking ESL learners derive from the interference of their first language, ineffective pronunciation practices, and psychological factors. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes explicit phonetic instruction, increased exposure to native English pronunciation, and supportive teaching strategies that build learners' confidence and motivation.

These findings have important implications for ESL teaching and curriculum development. They highlight the need for targeted pronunciation instruction, including contrastive analysis and stress pattern practice, as well as enhanced teacher training in phonological instruction. The study also reinforces the relevance of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and Transfer Theory in explaining L1 influence on L2 pronunciation.

Future research could examine pronunciation development over time through longitudinal studies and evaluate the effectiveness of digital tools such as AI-based pronunciation software. Further studies may also explore regional variation within Sri Lanka and the impact of early phonetic instruction in primary education.

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