

## Significance of Mother Tongue Influence on ESL Students' Language Fluency

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### Abstract

This study sought to determine the influence of mother tongue on ESL students' language fluency. A qualitative research method was used to obtain rich data from the study participants. The participants included 25 undergraduate ESL students from a private university in Malaysia. The researchers used a semi-structured interview for data collection for this study. The study's results revealed that thinking of their mother tongue while speaking English affected the ESL students' English language fluency.

Moreover, direct translation from their mother tongue to English created issues and problems in speaking fluently in the English language and led them to choose the wrong vocabulary. The ESL students made errors in pronouncing some English words, which was also one of the influences of their mother tongue. The most common reason was to transfer or interference from their mother tongue to English which caused errors in pronunciation due to differences in the sound system and spelling symbols between their mother tongue and English.

**Keywords:** English language, mother tongue, language fluency, ESL students

### Introduction

Language fluency is one of the essential skills when it comes to speaking or communication skills. For most EFL and ESL students, English language fluency becomes challenging and sometimes tough to improve. However, according to Monila and Briesmaster (2017), "it is often the main goal of almost every second language learner because the communicative approach is the primary focus of language learning." This study explored the significance of mother tongue influence on ESL students' English language fluency.

Speaking is conveying meanings and expressing one's opinions and feelings in a spoken language. When people hear someone speak, they almost immediately pay attention to what the speaker sounds like. People will guess according to what they hear and judge the speaker's personality, attitudes, home region, and native or non-native speaker status. People use their speech to create an image of themselves to others. Using speed, pausing, and variations in pitch, volume, and intonation, they also create a texture for their talk that supports and enhances what they are saying.

Using speed, pausing, and variations in pitch, volume, and intonation, they also create a texture for their talk that supports and enhances what they are saying. Therefore, the sound of the people's speech is meaningful, which is why this is important for assessing speaking. People tend to judge

native/non-native speaker status based on pronunciation. Every language has different regional varieties and regional standards. The standards are valued differently in different regions and for different purposes, making it difficult to choose a particular standard for an assessment or requiring learners to stick to only one standard. Urrutia Leo and Vega Cely (2010) stated that learners' oral performance is influenced by their lack of vocabulary, diffidence, and fear of being despised. It was also indicated that learners' cooperation, self-confidence, vocabulary knowledge, and the class environment encouraged them to improve their speaking skills.

If speaking like a native speaker is considered a standard, it is said that most language learners fail because not many learners can speak like a native speaker. It is important to remember that speaking form is a part of the shared social activity of talking. The aim can be to share opinions or get something done and do all of them at once. So many factors influence our impression of how well someone can speak a language. According to Cameron (2013), learners of a foreign language will learn to interact conversationally with an increasing range of people in different situations with different goals and topics, moving from the familiar settings of home, family, and classroom to situations in the wider world. Thus, the students must study and master listening and speaking to become fluent English speakers. The more they practice both skills, the more they will be able to improve their language fluency. The main psychological factors that prevent students from speaking a foreign language are motivation, anxiety, self-confidence, aptitude, shyness, and fear of mistakes. All these psychological factors are interrelated.

Kelleher (2013) mentioned that the mother tongue plays a significant role in learning the target language. Instead of focusing on the negative role in the learning process, he added that the mother tongue plays a positive role in the language learning process. According to the findings of his study, the mother tongue was a help for the students to learn the second language. Suliman (2014) conducted a study on the mother tongue's influence on one's speech production. His study showed that mother tongue interferes with students' speech production. They employ the translation method, although they denote the importance of the English language. Fitriani and Zulkarnain (2019) investigated the mother tongue influence of Acehese Indonesian learners in vocational English classes. The findings of their study are presented in two parts containing pronunciation and grammar errors. Their data showed that the learning process of the target language was affected by the first language. Rahmatullah (2021) believes that the effect of the mother tongue on the second language is both positive and negative. Xhemaili (2017) clarified the complimentary transfer of the mother tongue to the second language as "positive transfer occurs when the meaning of items that are transferred is in line with the native speakers' notion of acceptability" (p.8).

### **Methods**

This qualitative study investigated the significance of mother tongue influence on ESL students' English language fluency. The researchers used the purposive sampling technique to select the study participants, including 25 Malaysian students at a private university in Malaysia. The students were enrolled in English speaking course in the undergraduate program. A semi-structured interview was used to collect data among the ESL students virtually. The data gathered from the interview questions were recorded and transcribed accordingly. Finally, the researchers coded, categorized, and analyzed the data through content analysis.

### **Results and Discussion**

This study focused on how the mother tongue influences ESL students' English language fluency. Based on the data collected among the students, the mother tongue can affect how the students speak the second language. Here are some of the students' feedbacks:

St (2) "I prefer expressing myself in my mother tongue because it is easier to express my thoughts and ideas than in English. My mother tongue sometimes misleads me because I try to have a direct translation which will result in wrong English".

St (8) "I will use my mother tongue to express myself if everyone in the class understands it. My problem is that I think of my mother tongue when I speak English. That disturbs my English speaking. I must think English and speak English too."

St (10) "When I do not know a word in English when speaking in English, I use my mother tongue (Bahasa Malayu). I use my mother tongue because I do not have to think twice".

St (22) "when I speak English, I do not think directly like others. I first translate my sentences and words into Bahasa Malayu and try to understand if what I am saying in my mother tongue will make sense in English. Then, I speak in English."

The students were using self-reflective capability while speaking English. Based on Bandura's social-cognitive theory (2014), self-reflection is about one's thinking and personal efficacy. Many students verified their thoughts by being self-reflective, which means they were monitoring their ideas, acting on themselves, or predicting occurrences from themselves.

It is worth noting that some ESL students believe that mother tongue influences will help them improve their fluency in the English language. This finding is in line with a study by Kavaliauskiene (2009), which mentioned that ESL students customarily rely on their mother tongue in learning English. However, according to the present study's findings, in some cases, English was disturbed due to thinking of their mother tongue while speaking the second language. Some students were comparing their language skills with the native speakers of the target language, which made them feel embarrassed as their pronunciation sounded different from the native speakers'. The most common reason was transfer or interference from the mother tongue to the target language. Usually, errors made in pronunciation are due to differences in the sound system and spelling symbols between the mother tongue and the English language. Some ESL students could not speak English fluently due to the direct translation from their native language. Wang (2014) also found that "the ESL learners were apt to put the adverbial clause behind the main clause in Chinese, demonstrating that language transfer was bidirectional and there existed backward transfer from the second to the first language".

Furthermore, some students stated that they prefer to express themselves in their mother tongue compared to English because they have been using it since childhood and feel confident about it. To them, the mother tongue was the best choice for communication than any other language since it facilitates communication, and thoughts and ideas come to mind faster while speaking the native language. It can be said that the mother tongue interferes with second language speaking in some ways. The ESL students mentioned that the mother tongue cause is making mistakes and errors when making sentences, and they prefer to use code-switching or code-mixing while speaking English. This study's findings align with Denizer's (2017) study, which stated that "mother tongue interferences in second language learning almost all aspects. The biggest effect of mother tongue interference can be seen in

the speaking as a language skill and grammar as a language area". In addition, Manrique (2013) mentioned that "mispronunciation and grammatical errors are the most common types of interference between the mother tongue and the target language."

The findings of a study by Fitriani and Zulkarnain (2019) also revealed that the student's mother tongue influence could be detected by the results of speaking errors on their performance. Sriprabha (2015) stated that North Indians have the accent of pronouncing "Sh" as "Is." This is a mother tongue influence on English language speaking. These people pronounce "S" as "J." For example, the word "Position" will be pronounced as "Bojision." The ESL students in this study also stated that their mother tongue affected their English pronunciation as pronouncing some letters is different in Malay compared to English. Delbio, Abilasha, and Ilankumaran (2018) believed that the influence of the mother tongue has become a significant region and is generally referred to as 'Language Interference.'

### Conclusion

The study's results demonstrated that direct translation from the mother tongue to the second language resulted in speaking wrong English. The choice of words that the ESL student made from their first language to speak the second one was incorrect. This occurred because they were not thinking in English while speaking it but in their mother tongue. Incorrect English pronunciations also happened due to the effect of the mother tongue, although pronunciation errors may also be due to other issues. The ESL students felt uncomfortable and unconfident in the process of speaking English and felt embarrassed for making errors and mistakes in the second language. The reason for such outcomes was the inability to speak English fluently due to internalizing sounds from their mother tongue.

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