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Phonological Deviations from Received Pronunciation: An Analysis of L1 Transfer in Tamil-Speaking Learners

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Abstract

The study investigates the phonological deviations from Received Pronunciation (RP) among English as a Second Language (ESL) students whose mother tongue (L1) is Tamil. It is grounded in the theory of Language Transfer, wherein elements of the first language are transferred to the target language. In the Indian context, Received Pronunciation remains the dominant standard for spoken English across academic and professional domains. It is the benchmark for national-level competitive examinations and corporate employability programs. While Indian English has gained recognition as a distinct variety, RP is regarded as the preferred model for formal and scholarly discourse in India. The results reveal that ESL students commit errors in the pronunciation of both consonants and vowels in more than one way. When a specific phoneme in Received Pronunciation lacks an equivalent in Tamil phonology, learners tend to substitute it with the nearest Tamil counterpart. So, this paper tries to elucidate some of the common MTI issues and their respective remedial measures as well.

Key Words: Mother Tongue Influence (MTI), English as a Second Language (ESL), Received Pronunciation (RP), Phonemes, L1 (Mother Tongue), L2 (Second Language), General Indian English (GIE)

Objectives

1) To identify the common pronunciation errors caused by Mother Tongue Influence (MTI) among Tamil students with reference to deviations from Received Pronunciation (RP).
2) To analyse the production of specific sounds such as /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /ɒ/, and /ɔ:/
3) To examine students' difficulty in distinguishing phonemes

Methodology

The researchers employed Naturalistic Observation within the context of Communicative English sessions. The data were gathered from a diverse group of 100 engineering students over the course of one semester. The researchers utilised Auditory Analysis, recording and transcribing speech errors observed during role-plays, group discussions, presentations, mock interviews, JAM activity and reading exercises. The focus was on identifying deviations from Received Pronunciation (RP).

Limitations of the Study

The present study is limited to 100 first and second-year undergraduate engineering students from a Private Engineering College in Tamil Nadu during the even semester of the 2025-26 academic year. Suprasegmental features such as tone, intonation, and stress are not included in this study. General Indian English features, such as pronouncing /r/ at the end of words, fall outside the scope of present analysis.

Introduction

Learning a second language constitutes a complex and lengthy process that involves multiple variables. Effective communication in a second language requires comprehensive commitment and engagement across physical, intellectual, and emotional domains. English presents specific challenges for learners, as it is an unphonetic language; individual letters do not correspond to single sounds. Pronunciation is a critical component of oral communication, as inaccurate pronunciation frequently results in misinterpretation of the intended message by the listener. Accurate pronunciation enhances clarity and intelligibility. When combined with grammatical accuracy and lexical knowledge, correct pronunciation facilitates more precise, effortless, and rapid comprehension of the speaker's intent. Intelligible pronunciation contributes to increased self-confidence in speaking and fosters the

development of social competence, thereby enabling greater participation in discourse and improved interpersonal interaction with peers and others.

Hornby (1987: 497) states that "Pronunciation is the way in which language is spoken; the way in which a word is pronounced; the way a person speaks the words of language. Dalton (1998:3) defines "pronunciation as the production of significant sounds into sense. The sound is significant because it is used as part of the code of a particular language. It is also significant because it is used to achieve meaning in the context of use." Seidlhofer (2001: 56) defines pronunciation as "the production and perception of the significant sounds of a particular language in order to achieve meaning in contexts of language use". Harmer (2001: 184) states that "the meaning of a sentence will be understood from the way it is pronounced". It means that when learners speak in an intelligible manner, they will understand and convey the desired meaning. The learners are intelligible only when they understand what is heard and are to be understood by using simple language tools to convey messages. Gilakjani (2012:119) assumes that "pronunciation is a set of habits of producing sounds". The habit of producing a sound is acquired by repeating it over and over again, and being corrected when it is pronounced wrongly. Yates and Zelinski (2014:31) state that "pronunciation refers to how we produce the sound that we use to make meaning when we speak". It includes the particular consonants and vowels of a language (segments), aspects of speech beyond the level of individual segments, such as stress, timing, rhythm, intonation, phrasing (suprasegmental aspects) and how the voice quality is estimated. Pronunciation also plays a great role in our lives, in a way that we project our identity through our way of speaking, and also show our membership of particular communities (Seidlhofer, 2001: 56). Pronunciation training improves clear speaking abilities among learners. Darcy (2018:13) emphasised that clarity of speaking improves intelligibility and minimises effort for interlocutors.

The definition of Received Pronunciation (RP) remains subject to considerable scholarly debate. The majority of speakers of this accent live in, or originate from, the south-east of England. The native speakers of this accent are of middle-class or upper-class origin, educated at private schools. The accent is most familiar as that used by most 'official' BBC speakers of English origin. Early in the 20th century, Daniel Jones, the great exponent of the description of English pronunciation, named it Public School Pronunciation (Jones 1917), but later changed the name to Received Pronunciation. Other names have been proposed, such as

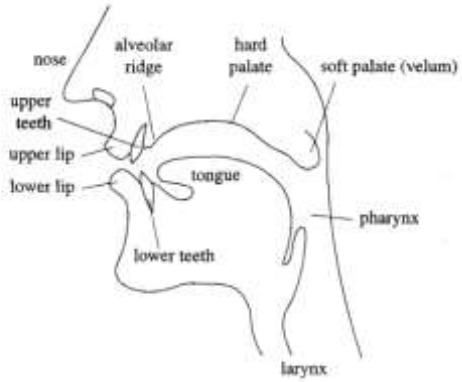
General British (GB) and Educated Southern British English. Received Pronunciation is also referred to as the "Queen's English," the "King's English," "BBC English," or "Oxford English." RP consists of 44 phonemes:24 consonants and 20 vowels. Vowels are again classified into 12 monophthongs and 8 diphthongs. It should also be noted that speakers use more than one style of pronunciation, and a person may pronounce the same word or group of words quite differently under different circumstances. Phonetic transcription is the representation of discrete units of speech sound through symbols. Over the years, multiple writing systems and computer symbol sets have been developed for this purpose. The most common is perhaps the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

In India, Received Pronunciation continues to serve as the prescribed model for spoken English across multiple domains, including research, higher education, media, and professional communication. It is widely adopted as the standard for English language teaching in schools and universities, and forms the basis for pronunciation training in teacher education programs. RP is also the preferred accent for national-level competitive examinations, broadcast journalism, and corporate training modules aimed at enhancing employability. Academic publications, international conferences, and diplomatic discourse in India frequently adhere to RP norms to ensure intelligibility in global contexts. Despite the emergence of Indian English as a recognised variety, RP retains institutional legitimacy and is perceived as the target accent for formal and academic purposes.

Tamil, a Dravidian language, has a clear and systematic sound system that differs significantly from English. It is a phonetic language. As a result, Tamil speakers pronounce words exactly as they are written. Tamil is also a syllable-timed language: each syllable is given equal importance. In contrast, English is a stress-timed language, where some syllables are stressed, and others are reduced. Tamil does not make strong use of reduced vowels like the schwa (/ə/). Because of this, Tamil learners often pronounce every syllable clearly in English, which can result in a more even or flat rhythm. Tamil also has distinct sound patterns. It differentiates between dental, alveolar, and retroflex sounds, especially for consonants like t, n, and l. However, Tamil lacks certain English sounds such as /f/, /z/, and /ʃ/ in many contexts, and it does not use aspirated consonants like English. Therefore, learners often replace unfamiliar sounds with the closest Tamil equivalents (for example, /f/ may be pronounced as /p/). In addition, Tamil has restrictions on consonant clusters, especially at the beginning of words. As a result, learners may simplify clusters or adjust their

pronunciation to make them easier to produce. These features—syllable timing, absence of certain sounds, and consonant constraints—play an important role in Mother Tongue Influence (MTI) among Tamil learners of English.

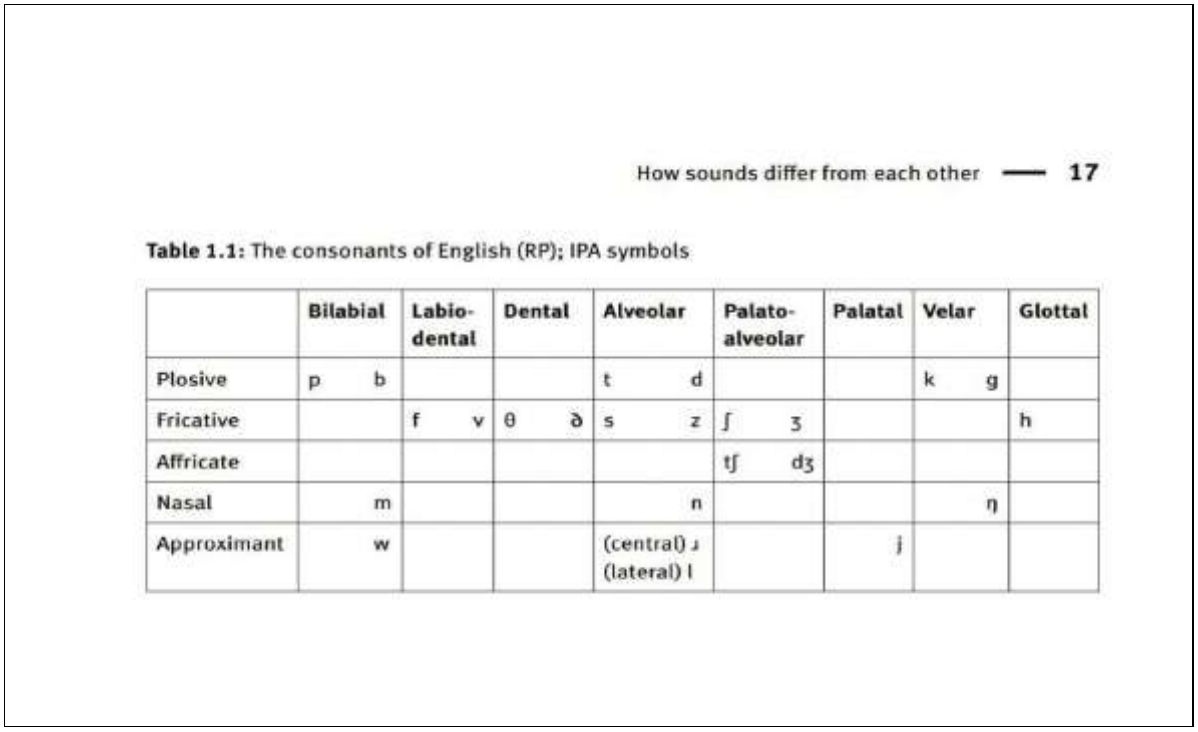
The concise theoretical background outlined above is necessary for readers to grasp the response to the research objectives examined in this article. With a central idea about first-language interference, the above discussions highlight the importance of speaking English with clear articulation, as well as the difficulties ESL learners encounter in acquiring English pronunciation. The following section discusses the major pronunciation challenges encountered by ESL learners at a private Engineering College in Tamil Nadu.



The Organs of Speech

Linguistic Analysis

The data revealed three primary phonological deviations. Each is analysed with a few examples below, based on the linguistic interference of the Tamil language



How sounds differ from each other — 17

Table 1.1: The consonants of English (RP); IPA symbols

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b			t d			k g	
Fricative		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ			h
Affricate					tʃ dʒ			
Nasal	m			n			ŋ	
Approximant	w			(central) ɹ (lateral) l		j		

The 24 consonants of English RP

1) Fricative Substitution:

Students consistently replaced the voiced palato-alveolar fricative /ʒ/ with its voiceless counterpart /ʃ/.

Words	Observed Pattern	Received Pronunciation (R.P.)
Confusion	/kənfjuːʃən/	/kənˈfjuːʒən/
Measure	/meʃər/	/ˈmeʒə/
Pleasure	/pleʃər/	/ˈpleʒə/
Treasure	/treʃər/	/ˈtreʒə/
Vision	/vɪʃən/	/ˈvɪʒən/
Revision	/rɪvɪʃən/	/rɪˈvɪʒən/

The voiced post-alveolar fricative /ʒ/ illustrates the phenomenon of negative phonological transfer. The voiceless counterpart /ʃ/ is a post-alveolar fricative articulated with the blade or tip of the tongue approaching the posterior region of the alveolar ridge, while the front of the tongue is simultaneously raised toward the hard palate. The teeth are approximated, the velum is raised, and the vocal folds remain abducted, resulting in no voicing. The phoneme /ʒ/ shares the same place and manner of articulation, differing only in that the vocal folds are set into vibration, producing voicing. Crucially, /ʒ/ does not exist in the Tamil phonemic inventory. In accordance with L1 transfer theory, learners resort to substituting it with the nearest available Tamil equivalent: the voiceless post-alveolar fricative /ʃ/. This substitution exemplifies the tendency to replace unfamiliar L2 sounds with analogous L1 phonemes and demonstrates how the absence of voicing contrast in the L1 inventory leads to systematic devoicing in L2 production.

2) Long Vowel Substitution:

Words	Observed Pattern		Received Pronunciation (R.P.)
Long	/lɔːŋ/	/laːŋ/	/lɒŋ/
Hot	/hɔːt/	/haːt/	/hɒt/
problem	/prɔːbləm/	/praːbləm/	/ˈprɒbləm/
monitor	/mɔːnɪtər/	/maːnɪtər/	/ˈmɒnɪtə/
Shop	/ʃɔːp/	/ʃaːp/	/ʃɒp/
Wrong	/rɔːŋ/	/raːŋ/	/rɒŋ/
proper	/prɒpər/	/praːpər/	/ˈprɒpə/

In place of the short back rounded vowel /ɒ/, learners typically substitute either the long vowel /ɔː/ or /ɑː/, failing to maintain the target quality and quantity of the RP phoneme. Thus, rather than reproducing the precise durational and articulatory features of the vowel, learners erroneously modify either its quality, its length, or both. This tendency further illustrates how the absence of certain phonemic contrasts in the L1, coupled with L1 orthographic habits, leads to systematic approximations in L2 speech, as previously demonstrated with the fricatives /ʒ/ and /ʃ/.

3) Devoicing of the phoneme /z/:

The voiced alveolar fricative /z/ was frequently devoiced at the end of words or in intervocalic positions.

Words	Observed Pattern	Received Pronunciation (R.P.)
Is	/ɪs/	/ɪz/
Please	/pliːs/	/pliːz/
Visit	/vɪsɪt/	/ˈvɪzɪt/
president	/presɪdənt/	/ˈprezɪdənt/
Does	/dʌs/	/dʌz/
Reason	/riːsən/	/ˈriːzən/

This pattern of L1-driven substitution extends to the voiced alveolar fricative /z/, the voiced counterpart of the voiceless /s/. During data collection, it was observed that participants exhibited incomplete voicing of /z/, frequently substituting it with a lenis or weak /s/. This devoicing was particularly pronounced in medial and word-final positions. The phenomenon can be attributed to phonotactic constraints in Tamil, which generally lacks the voiced fricative /z/. Consequently, learners terminate vocal fold vibration prematurely and default to the closest L1 equivalent. This further substantiates the argument that spelling pronunciation, combined with the absence of specific L2 phonemes in the Tamil inventory, systematically shapes learners' interlanguage phonology.

Evidence-Based Suggestions

The following pedagogical interventions are proposed to overcome MTI. These strategies were implemented in the classroom by the researchers and were found to be effective in enhancing learners' intelligibility and reducing L1 phonological transfer.

1) Visual Phonetics: Using diagrams of the vocal tract to show the difference between voiced /z/ and /ʒ/ and voiceless /s/ and /ʃ/ sounds.

2) Minimal Pair Drills: Explicitly practising pairs to build phonemic awareness.

3) Tongue Twisters: They were employed as a remedial strategy to address students' pronunciation difficulty. It improved articulation, fluency, and accuracy of target sounds.

Conclusion

In the contemporary globalised engineering sector, English serves as the primary medium for technical communication and professional placement. The present study demonstrates that Tamil engineering students' shows consistent phonological deviations influenced by their mother tongue, particularly in the production of specific sounds mentioned above in the study. These patterns confirm that MTI significantly alters learners' pronunciation.

However, MTI should not be considered as deficiency but as a natural outcome of language transfer. The paper findings suggest that targeted pedagogical measures such as visual phonetics, minimal pair, and tongue twisters can effectively improve articulation and clarity.

There is a research gap for future scholars to incorporate suprasegmental features and other general Indian english features with broader range of population to obtain more comprehensive understanding of pronunciation challenges among ESL learners.

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