



## Category: Research Article

# Mother Tongue Assisted Second Language Teaching for Low- Proficient University ESL Students

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

#### Article History

Published Online: 14<sup>th</sup> August 2024

#### Keywords

English as a second language, Mother tongue, Monolingual approach, Second language teaching, Methods of teaching

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### ABSTRACT

The development of ESL teaching methods over the recent past has encouraged the use of monolingual language instructions in the ESL pedagogical context. However, the concept of MT assistance in teaching English as a second language has not been completely discarded. Hence, the study aimed to investigate the effect of MT-assisted teaching on low-proficient ESL undergraduates in the Faculty of Management Studies of the Rajarata University of Sri Lanka. The study was conducted with selected low-proficient ESL learners by division into experimental and controlled groups. The experimental group underwent MT-assisted learning while the control group had usual lessons with monolingual pedagogy. Both the groups were subjected to a pre-test and a post-test in which the students were equal in standard. The quantitative data analysis using IBM SPSS software indicated that the experimental group subjects significantly improved, with a mean difference of 10.07. Therefore, the effect of MT use in the context of ESL teaching has been proven to be effective. Since the study was confined to the faculty of management discipline, further studies on faculties of other disciplines would validate the study results. However, the study results could be generalized in similar ESL contexts.

## 1. Introduction

Teaching English to ESL students is a challenging and complex process, and the task is more challenging for low-proficient learners. Practitioners of second language teaching have been using different approaches and methods such as Communicative Language Teaching, the Direct Method, the Audiolingual Method, the Grammar-Translation Method, The Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning, Total Physical Response, and the Natural Approach. Some of these approaches complement monolingual principles in second language (L2/target language) in foreign language (FL) classrooms, while others recognize the facilitation of teaching with L1 assistance. Teachers' use of mother tongue (MT) in the second language teaching context has been a controversial issue and has always been a subject of debate in ELT research.

MT plays a crucial role in reshaping the pedagogical practices in the ESL classrooms. According to [1], using MT in second language teaching should be tuned up with effective target language teaching. MT is essential for a child's

development since it is the host of other essential skills, such as literacy and critical thinking. Research indicates that concepts gained by a learner in the home language, MT, can never be retaught when the learner adopts the second language. For instance, cognitive skills can also be transferred to the second language if a learner develops the ability to acquire meaning from a context or gain meaning by reading between the lines. The child's personal, social, and cultural identity can be observed and improved easily through the mother tongue. The choice of words and expressions carry different meanings across cultures, wherein one language, asking direct questions, is considered intrusive, but in another language, it is inquisitive. This means the child chooses either the mother tongue or the second language before conveying an idea.

Learning a foreign or second language differs from learning other subject disciplines. Brown [2] theorized that learning another language requires considerable devotion on the part of learners. Second language learners are affected as they struggle to reach beyond the limits of the first language and ought to move towards a new discipline of language, a new way of thinking, a new

culture, and a different way of feeling and acting. Also, learners learning a new language vary in age, gender, aptitude, attitudes, motivation, and learning style [3].

The MT in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) issue has attracted considerable attention from researchers. Facilitating second language learning with MT was more viable in the Direct Method at the end of the nineteenth century [4]. In the Communicative Language Teaching methodology, L1 use is acceptable to a limited extent, and this phenomenon is still subject to debate by scholars in second language teaching (SLT). The influence of MT in the child's total development indicates the role played in second language learning. In the pedagogy of second language, the domination of monolingual principles, which uses the target language in pedagogy, has been an area of concern. As Howatt [5] points out, the monolingual principle refers to the exclusive use of the target language (TL) as the language of instruction to enable students to think in TL with minimal interference from MT. Concern over students' maximum exposure to the English language, a perceived lack of target language competence in the case of non-native teachers, or even sheer necessity when the teacher does not share the same linguistic background with learners [6] were the major reasons where the monolingual principle had become an opinion of strong perception which is taken-for-granted in language instruction [7].

ESL teachers are urged to use the English language in teaching, often exclusively or as much as possible, using the monolingual approach. Hence, the target language in ESL classrooms is the legitimate language in second or foreign-language classrooms [8]. However, monolingual instruction in ESL classrooms has been challenged, and the role played by L1 in ESL as a learning and teaching resource has been acknowledged [9,10]. Since this paradigm shift has drawn increasing attention to ESL pedagogy, the validity and effectiveness of L1 in second language teaching has become an area of further research.

In the Sri Lankan university system, undergraduates are facilitated with regular ESL programs such as intensive English and ongoing English courses along with significant areas of study. The prime aims of the university ESL programs are to facilitate English medium education in the university study programs, provide required English language input for seeking knowledge in research and experiments, equip graduates with necessary English language communication skills to face and get selected for competitive job markets, and encourage post-graduate studies primarily

conducted in English medium. However, despite a plethora of ESL study programs in universities, the level of proficiency attainment in the English language of undergraduates of the national university system is unsatisfactory. The issue is more comprehensive for low-proficient ESL learners.

There is a remarkable doubt whether MT-assisted second language teaching could be adopted in ESL teaching in the Sri Lankan context and the university sector. Moreover, research emphasis on L1 interference in university ESL programs is rare. This condition is more apparent for both low proficiency and learners with average proficiency in the university sector in the Sri Lankan context. Hence, a research gap has been created to find a valid theoretical foundation regarding MT use in ESL classrooms, as there have not been adequate studies to clarify this area of perception. Therefore, the study aims to ascertain whether low-proficient ESL learners could benefit from L1-assisted teaching and learning in university ESL programs.

## **2. Literature review**

Learning a foreign language differs from learning other disciplines of study. Brown [2] theorized that learning another language requires considerable devotion on the part of learners. Second language learners are affected as they struggle to reach beyond the limits of the first language of the learners and move towards a new language, a new way of thinking, a new culture, and a different way of thinking and acting. Also, learners engaged in learning a new language vary in age, gender, aptitude, attitudes, motivation, and language style [3]. The MT in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) issue has attracted considerable attention from researchers. The facilitation of second language learning was more viable in the Direct Method at the end of the nineteenth century [4]. In communicative language teaching methodology, L1 use is acceptable to a limited extent, and this phenomenon is still subject to debate by scholars in second language teaching.

The use of MT in ESL and EFL classrooms has been an area of concern as several attitudes and perceptions are in favor and against it. Macswan [11] asserts that instructions are vital in second language learning and add to L2 learning in crucial conditions. Second language learners not only possess a language system that is potentially available as a factor in the acquisition of a second language, but equally important, they already know what a language is for, its communicative functions, and its potential. Although knowing two languages confuses people, evidence has proved that well-developed bilingualism improves cognitive flexibility

[12]. Further, Skutnabb-Kangas [13] provides research evidence claiming that bilingualism positively affects children's linguistic and educational development. Therefore, it is apparent that when children develop their abilities in two or more languages throughout the primary school years, they tend to gain an extensive understanding of language and how to use it effectively.

In second language teaching, treating the L1 as a classroom resource opens up several ways to use it, such as for teachers to convey meaning, explain grammar, and organize the class, and for students to use it as part of their collaborative learning and individual strategy. The first language can be a helpful element in creating authentic L2 users rather than something to be shunned at all costs.

Theories of bilingualism provide ample evidence in respect of MT-assisted second language learning. The interference of MT during acquiring a second language has been considered immense. In second language teaching and learning, interference occurs with the use of the first language in the second language acquisition process, representing the initial stage of language acquisition. In second language teaching literature, there are many theories about bilingualism. Hence, different opinions exist. The Balance Theory of bilingualism suggests that the two languages exist in a state of balance existence. The Balance Theory is explained by the analogy of two balloons inside the head, each representing a language. Monolingual people have only one filled balloon, while bilingual people have two less-filled or half-filled balloons. When one language balloon increases, the other one decreases. In this theory, the two languages operate independently without transferring knowledge from one language to the other.

In the analogy of Iceberg Theory, a standard underlying proficiency of bilingualism is represented, and the first and the second languages are represented by two icebergs separated above the surface of the water but connected underneath. However, the two languages are visually different but operate through the same processing system underneath. Since the two languages operate through the same system, previous knowledge is a starting point for acquiring a new language in all learning situations that may facilitate second language learning with language transfer.

### **2.1 Use of MT in second/foreign language teaching methodology**

The historical sequence of the most-recognized language teaching methods and the presence of native language in pedagogy could perhaps bring about controversy in second language teaching. The

Grammar Translation Method (GMT), which dominated up to the nineteenth century, encouraged the facilitation of MT. Second/foreign languages were taught through grammar illustration, translation exercises, and with the help of bilingual vocabulary lists. As Stern [14] emphasizes, in GMT, the learners' mother tongue is freely used as a reference system in the process of the target language acquisition. The communicative function of the target language did not receive much attention in GMT. However, due to the increase and development of travel, tourism, and transnational commercial contacts, a dire need was felt for communication with people of different nations. The improvement of the reading and writing skills, which the GMT targeted by the need for effective communication, was suppressed. Hence, Direct Method appeared in second/foreign language teaching as a methodology and concentrated on the spoken language. The notion that children should learn a second language much the same way as their native language was the prime fundamental philosophy of the Direct Method. In this light, learners should be immersed in the target language through its use as a medium of instruction and communication. Harmer [15] points out that avoiding using MT in the language classroom stems from the Direct Method (DM).

Further, in this method, translation is regarded as uncommunicative, boring, pointless, difficult, and irrelevant. The DM began to decline in the 1st quarter of the twentieth century due to its impracticability in cost, class size, and the lengthy duration of class time. Later, methods such as Audio-Lingual Method and Communicative Approach began to expand and develop due to the limitations of the DM.

The Audiolingual Method (AM) originated from a US Army Programme developed after World War II to produce speakers proficient in the languages of friends and enemies. This method aimed to help learners proficiently use the target language communicatively [16]. The AM was concerned with the habit formation model of behaviorist psychology and a structural linguistic theory of language. In the AM, memorization through pattern drills and conversation practices were special characteristics in its principal pedagogy. Moreover, the Audiolingual Methodology restricted translation at the early-stage level and the use of students' native language in the classroom.

The communicative language Teaching (CLT) approach emerged as the most popular methodology in second language teaching beginning in the last decade of the 20th century. The focus of the CLT approach is the use of the target language during functional and communicative

activities. In this approach, MT is allowed when and where necessary, and the translation may be allowed only when learners find it essential and helpful (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, cited in [17]).

The review of the language teaching methodology in SLT has indicated that the use of MT (native language) in teaching second/foreign languages is controversial, as different theories of foreign/second language acquisition accommodate different hypotheses about the use of MT. Some theorists have promoted a monolingual approach as they perceived similarities between the processes of second-language learning and first-language learning. As Cook [4] has pointed out, some theorists have believed that maximum exposure to a second/foreign language and least exposure to MT are essential because interference from first language knowledge obstructs the second/foreign language learning process.

However, some language educationists [16, 18] have argued against the complete elimination of learners' first language in second language teaching classes and have reiterated that well-planned use of native language can yield positive results. Atkinson (cited in [15]) suggests that activities like grammar explanation, checking comprehension, giving instructions, and discussing classroom methodology are included in this category. EFL teachers working with monolingual students with low English proficiency find the prohibition of MT use in the classroom impossible [19]. Second-language acquisition researchers have become increasingly aware of MT's role in the EFL classroom. Dornyei and Kormos [20] find that L2 learners use L1 as a communication strategy to compensate for deficiencies in the target language. Moreover, Auerbach [21] also acknowledges the positive role of the mother tongue in the classroom.

## **2.2 Findings of research in L1 interference in second language learning**

The usual concept that there is room in children and adults for one language has not been validated by research. Further, the idea that knowing two languages confuse people where it affects their second language learning has also not been proven by second language research. Studies have shown that when minority students receive native language instruction for at least 50% of the day through grades 5 or 6, they do better academically than those in all English programs. That is, they suffer no loss due to less exposure to English, and by 6th or 7th grade, they appear to be gaining on their counterparts in all-English programs [22].

A study by [23] revealed that translation enabled students to learn vocabulary in more significant

numbers. The study's findings have further revealed that the use of the native language is vital in second language learning as translation involves MT directly. Liu [24] conducted experimental research on the effect of Chinese on English vocabulary learning by Chinese college students, and the study revealed that the native language provided many advantages with the help of translation. Among the advantages, it was revealed that translation was an easy and efficient strategy to express the essential meaning of a word.

Khati [25], in his study, found that students mainly from government-aided schools needed first-language assistance in second-language learning. The study explored the frequency and occasion of using the mother tongue in the language classroom by observing three separate classes in different schools in Nepal. Khati also elicited the views from two focused group discussions among teachers and students studying at the secondary level. It was found that teachers generally use Nepali to explain difficult concepts, grammar rules, and new words, and they use it to give instructions.

Similarly, [26] conducted a study to determine the participants' attitudes toward using Chinese in the EFL classroom using different research methods, including classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaires. The respondents included 100 students in their first year at a university in Beijing and 20 teachers. The study found that the students and teachers had a positive attitude towards using the mother tongue in the Chinese EFL context. Further, the teachers in this study indicated that translating some words, complex ideas, and even whole passages is an excellent way to learn a foreign language. The study also showed that the teachers think Chinese should be used only when necessary to help them learn better.

Likewise, Timor [27] conducted a study to determine English teachers' attitudes and ways of implementing Hebrew as the mother tongue in EFL teaching at elementary and secondary schools in Israel. The findings demonstrate that teachers' attitudes were positive, and most see the benefit of using their mother tongue in EFL teaching.

It is clear from these studies that there is ample literature on the use of the mother tongue in English language teaching, especially focusing on school teachers and students in different contexts. However, literature on research in the university sector is relatively rare. This situation is more acute in the Sri Lankan context, where research and findings on university students are limited. There is a dire need to determine whether mother tongue-assisted teaching could facilitate teaching English to

ESL students who are low in proficiency in Sri Lankan universities.

### 3. Methodology

The study was conducted with students from the Faculty of Management Studies of Rajarata University of Sri Lanka. In the Faculty of Management Studies, students must undergo a compulsory ESL course with one credit value as a part of their degree program. In keeping with the aim of the study, a sample of 79 second-year students was selected based on a proficiency test, and students who scored below 40% of the marks on the English language proficiency test were taken as a low-proficient sample of the study. A total of 129 students who were studying in the second year of the Department of Business Management were taken as the initial sample for the English language proficiency test. Since the average pass mark of the university's ESL study programs is 40%, students who scored less than that were considered low proficient students. The sample was subdivided into the control and experimental groups, with a population of 39 and 40 students, respectively. The study sample belonged to a unique linguistic background whose mother tongue was Sinhala language, and their range of age was between 22 and 25 years. Further, the sample included both male and female students, and the respective numbers based on sex were not considered as sex was not a variable considered in the scope of the study.

In the next phase of the study, a pre-test was conducted for both the experimental group and the control group. After that, the experimental and the controlled groups were subject to their compulsory ESL course during the semester. In the study, the experimental group was subject to nearly 25% of mother tongue-assisted teaching, while the control group had monolingual instructions and explanations only in the target language during the semester. Mother tongue-assisted language teaching was mainly used in the classroom to explain/translate difficult words, explain grammar, provide individual attention and assistance, teach new vocabulary, and maintain classroom rapport. At the end of the semester, a post-test was conducted for both groups to gauge whether there was a difference in the proficiency levels of the subjects of the control and experimental groups.

#### 3.1 English Language Proficiency Test, Pre-test and the Post-test

The purpose of the English language proficiency test was to identify and segregate the students with low levels of English knowledge from the sample population. Compared to the pre-test and the post-

test, the difficulty level of the initial proficiency test was comparatively higher as the test aimed to identify students with low proficiency levels in the English language.

The pre and post-tests were meant to measure the students' English language competency level based on the contents of the semester syllabus. The test duration was one hour each, and language skills such as reading, writing, and grammar were included. To maintain the accuracy of data, both the pre-test and the post-test had similar competency levels.

### 4. Results and discussion

The study was based on the hypothesis of whether MT-assisted teaching in the ESL context would foster low-proficient learners with target English language competencies. As discussed in the methodology section, MT-assisted teaching was facilitated for the experimental group while the control group underwent usual ESL lessons in the monolingual teaching context. The marks obtained at the pre-test and the post-test by both the control group and the experimental group were considered the data sources for the study. The data analysis was done quantitatively using SPSS software with the help of Tests of Normality and the Paired Samples T Test.

#### 4.1. Tests of Normality

The study included four marks: marks of the pre-test, the post-test of the controlled and experimental groups, and the marks of the post-test of the controlled and experimental groups. Initially, the Tests of Normality were performed to check if the marks considered had a normal distribution, and to ensure the normality of the four data sets; abnormal responses were removed from the data sets. Hence, Normality Tests with Kolmogorov-Smirnova values were obtained for all the data sets.

Table 1 shows the normal distribution of marks of which the sig. The value of the Kolmogorov-Smirnova test of the Test of Normality is .200. As per the analysis of data, the sig. Value is more than 0.05. Therefore, it indicates that the data of the pre-test of the controlled group have a normal distribution.

Table 1: Pre-test of the controlled group

**Tests of Normality**

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Pre-Test Controlled Group	.111	39	.200*	.977	39	.606

\*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

In the case of the post-test of the controlled group, as indicated in Table 2, the marks obtained by the students have a normal distribution since the sig. The value of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov<sup>a</sup> test of the Test of Normality is .051, which is more than 0.05.

Table 2: Post-test of the controlled group

**Tests of Normality**

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Post-Test Controlled Group	.140	39	.051*	.957	39	.144

\*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

Table 3: Pre-test of the experimental group

**Tests of Normality**

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Pre-Test Experimental group	.085	40	.200*	.963	40	.216

\*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

The data analysis in Table 3 indicates the normality of data in the pre-test of the experimental group. As shown in the table, the sig. The value of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov<sup>a</sup> test of the Test of Normality is .200, which is more than 0.05. Hence, it is proved to have a standard data distribution.

In the case of the experimental group's post-test (see Table 4), the sig Value of the Kolmogorov-Smirnova test of the Test of Normality is .200. As the sig. The value is more than 0.05, and the data in the table proves that the marks of the post-test of the experimental group have a normal distribution.

\*. This is a lower bound of the true significance

Table 4: Post-test of the experimental group

**Tests of Normality**

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Post-Test Experimental Group	.113	40	.200*	.975	40	.515

**4.3 Results of the experimental group**

The main hypothesis being tested in the study was whether MT-assisted language teaching in the ESL context for low-proficient learners had a positive effect on the selected sample of second language learners. As depicted in Table 5, the paired samples statistics indicate that the pre-test score had a mean value of 49.22 with a standard deviation of 6.370. In contrast, the post-test had an improved mean value of 59.30 with a standard deviation of 5.55 for the experimental group. Therefore, the data analysis indicates that the experimental group that received MT-assisted ESL teaching had considerable improvement (mean value difference - 10.07, see Table 6) in the post-test. However, this improvement has to be validated through data analysis.

Table 5: Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test Experimental group	49.2250	40	6.37096	1.00734
	Post-test Experimental group	59.3000	40	5.55716	.87866

Hence, it was necessary to prove statistically that the mean difference of the mean value of the pre-test and the post-test of the experimental group had a significant difference in the variables. According to the Paired samples t-test performed, as indicated in Table 6, the sig. Value (2-tailed) is .000, which is less than 0.05 (sig. < 0.05). Therefore, the data analysis of the Paired samples t-test performed for the experimental group about pre and post-tests indicates that the mean difference of the tests, as shown in Table 5, had a significant difference in terms of statistics.

Table 6: Paired Samples t-test

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 Pre-test Experimental group Post-test Experimental group	10.0750	10.10810	1.59823	-13.30773	-6.84227	-6.304	39	.000

**4.4 Results of the Controlled Group**

As per the Paired Samples statistics shown in Table 7, the mean value of the post-test against the pre-test increased from 50.10 to 53.00, an increase of 2.9 in the mean value. Though this is a minor increase, a Paired Samples t-test was performed to check whether the difference is

statistically significant. As indicated in the Paired Samples t-test of Table 8, the sig. Value (2-tailed) is .602. As the value is more than 0.05 (sig. > 0.05), the Paired Samples t-test proves that the increase in the mean value of the post-test over the pre-test of the controlled group is statistically insignificant.

Table 7: Paired Samples Statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 Pre-test Controlled group	50.1026	39	5.34984	.85666
Post-test Controlled group	53.0095	39	5.44770	.87233

Table 8: Paired samples T-test

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 Pre-test Controlled group Post-Test Controlled group	2.9069	7.86526	1.25945	-6.62655	-1.52730	-3.237	38	.602

**5. Conclusion**

The study investigated the effect of MT-assisted teaching in the university ESL context of the Faculty of Management Studies of the Rajarata University of Sri Lanka. The scope of the study was narrowed down to low-proficient learners as the sample. Initially, low-proficient learners were segregated with the assistance of a language proficiency test, and they were divided into a controlled group and an

experimental group. Subsequently, a pre-test was conducted for both groups to gauge their level of proficiency. Only the experimental group was subject to MT-assisted ESL teaching, while the control group received only the usual semester ESL lessons without MT. At the end of the semester, a post-test with equal competency to the pre-test was performed for both groups. As per the data analysis, the improvement of the post-test by the experimental group over the pre-test is significant, with a mean difference of 10.07. Therefore, the results prove that

MT-assisted ESL teaching for low-proficient undergraduates is more successful, and MT-assisted teaching would yield better results in English language teaching, particularly for students with lower standards of English. As the sample population was confined to undergraduates of the Faculty of Management Studies, further research on other faculties such as Social Sciences and Humanities, Agriculture, Medicine, and Science-based faculties is needed to establish and validate the concept of MT-assisted ESL teaching for low-proficient ESL learners.

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