WWW.IJRPR.COM

International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Morphological Transfer in English L2 Acquisition: An Analysis of Sentence Completion and Error Correction Tasks among Tertiary Learners

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A B S T R A C T

This study investigates morphological transfer in English L2 acquisition among 31 Tamil-speaking tertiary learners (20 female, 11 male) at Madras Christian College, Chennai, focusing on sentence completion (Task 1) and error correction (Task 2) tasks. Using quantitative and qualitative analyses, the study addresses three research questions: (1) What types of morphological errors are exhibited? (2) How do these errors reflect Tamil L1 transfer? (3) How do task types influence error patterns? Results reveal prevalent Omission errors (e.g., missing auxiliaries, agreement markers), reflecting Tamil's agglutinative structure, with error correction tasks proving more challenging (M = 1.19 correct responses) than sentence completion (M = 2.74). Qualitative analysis highlights learners' reliance on Tamil's simpler verb and agreement systems. No gender differences were found. The findings suggest that metalinguistic awareness, fostered through targeted instruction and scaffolded tasks, can mitigate transfer errors. Pedagogical implications include explicit teaching of English morphology and contrastive analysis to address L1 transfer, contributing to SLA theory and practice for low-proficiency learners with agglutinative L1s.

Keywords: Morphological Transfer, Agglutinative language, Inflectional language, Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis,

1. Introduction

Morphological transfer, a subset of cross-linguistic influence, occurs when a learner's first language (L1) morphological system influences their second language (L2) acquisition, often resulting in systematic errors (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). For Tamil-speaking learners, whose L1 is an agglutinative Dravidian language, the absence of auxiliary verbs and complex tense-agreement paradigms in Tamil leads to errors such as omitting auxiliaries (e.g., "I go to market daily") or overgeneralizing forms (e.g., "singed" for "sang"). These errors stem from the structural contrast between Tamil's suffix-based morphology and English's fusional system, making this population ideal for studying L1 transfer in English L2 acquisition.

This study examines morphological transfer among 31 second-year BA Tamil Literature students at Madras Christian College, Chennai, whose limited English exposure results in low proficiency. The study addresses three research questions: (1) What types of morphological errors do Tamil-speaking tertiary learners exhibit in sentence completion and error correction tasks? (2) How do these errors reflect Tamil L1 morphological transfer? (3) How do task types influence the frequency and nature of transfer-related errors? Data from 31 participants (20 female, 11 male), assessed on five sentence completion (Task 1) and five error correction (Task 2) items targeting verb tense, agreement, pluralization, and auxiliary use, reveal prevalent errors like auxiliary omission and agreement mismatches, consistent with Tamil's morphology.

By focusing on Tamil-speaking learners, this study fills a gap in SLA research, which often overlooks agglutinative L1s (Han, 2013). The findings aim to inform pedagogical strategies, such as explicit instruction on English tense and agreement, to mitigate L1 transfer. Comparing productive (Task 1) and receptive (Task 2) tasks provides insights into task-specific demands, contributing to SLA theory and L2 assessment practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Morphological Transfer in L2 Acquisition

Morphological transfer occurs when L1 morphological rules shape L2 production and comprehension, often leading to errors (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957) posits that L1-L2 structural differences predict errors, particularly when L1 is agglutinative (e.g., Tamil) and L2 is fusional (e.g., English). Tamil's clear, separable morphemes for grammatical functions contrast with English's complex tense-agreement systems, resulting "'They has many book') (Annamalai, 2000). Transfer errors are more pronounced in low-proficiency learners, where L1 reliance is

stronger (Lardiere, 2009). Developmental errors, such as overgeneralization (e.g., "singed" for "sang"), also occur but are often intertwined with transfer effects in early L2 stages (Dulay & Burt, 1974).

2.2 Cross-Linguistic Influence and Tamil Morphology

Tamil, a Dravidian language, employs agglutinative morphology, using suffixes to mark grammatical relations without obligatory auxiliaries or complex agreement (Krishnamurti, 2003). For example, Tamil verbs indicate tense through suffixes (e.g., "nāḷai pōv-ēṉ" for "I will go tomorrow") without requiring auxiliary verbs like English's "will." This leads to errors like omitting auxiliaries (e.g., "I go to market daily") or agreement markers (e.g., "He walk now") (Annamalai, 2000). Research on agglutinative L1s suggests that learners struggle with English's synthetic structures, such as third-person singular -s or irregular plurals (Murakami & Alexopoulou, 2016). Tamil-speaking learners may also overgeneralize regular forms (e.g., "childrens") due to L1 suffix patterns, highlighting the need to study specific L1-L2 pairs (Ortega, 2009).

2.3 Sentence Completion and Error Correction Tasks in L2 Assessment.

Sentence completion tasks, which require producing forms like verb conjugations or plurals, are effective for eliciting transfer errors (Ellis, 2005). For Tamil learners, errors like "going" for "goes" may reflect L1 influence on verb morphology. Error correction tasks, testing recognition and correction of errors (e.g., "They has many book" to "They have many books"), demand metalinguistic awareness, often yielding different error patterns (Sheen, 2007). While receptive tasks may reduce cognitive load, low-proficiency learners may struggle due to limited grammatical knowledge (Leow, 2015). Studies comparing these tasks in agglutinative L1 contexts are scarce, particularly for learners with minimal English exposure (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

2.4 Tamil-Speaking Tertiary Learners

Tertiary learners in Tamil-medium programs, like BA Tamil Literature students, often exhibit persistent L1 transfer due to limited English exposure (Annamalai, 2000). Their low proficiency amplifies errors like auxiliary omission or agreement mismatches, reflecting Tamil's simpler morphological system (Krishnamurti, 2003). SLA research on Tamil L1 learners is limited compared to Indo-European or isolating L1s (e.g., Spanish, Mandarin) (Han, 2013). The unique challenges of Tamil-speaking learners, such as navigating English's auxiliary and agreement rules, warrant focused investigation (Ortega, 2009).

2.5 Role of Metalinguistic Awareness

Metalinguistic awareness, the ability to reflect on and manipulate language structures, is critical for overcoming L1 transfer (Roehr & Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2013). For Tamil learners, explicit awareness of English's auxiliary and agreement requirements can reduce errors like "I am go" by highlighting L1-L2 differences (Bialystok, 1994). Task-based assessments, particularly error correction, test this awareness, but low-proficiency learners may struggle due to limited exposure (Leow, 2015). Pedagogical interventions fostering metalinguistic skills, such as contrastive analysis or guided error correction, can mitigate transfer effects (Ellis, 2005).

2.6 Research Gap

Despite extensive SLA research on L1 transfer, studies on Tamil-speaking tertiary learners with low English proficiency are limited. The interaction between task type (productive vs. receptive) and transfer-induced errors in agglutinative L1 contexts remains underexplored (Gass & Selinker, 2008). This study addresses these gaps by analyzing morphological errors in sentence completion and error correction tasks among 31 Tamil-speaking learners, contributing to SLA theory and pedagogy for low-proficiency learners.

3. Methodology

This study investigates morphological transfer in English L2 acquisition among Tamil-speaking tertiary learners using sentence completion (Task 1) and error correction (Task 2) tasks. The methodology details participants, data collection, task design, and analysis.

3.1 Participants

The study involved 31 second-year BA Tamil Literature students (20 female, 11 male) at Madras Christian College, Chennai, aged 19. Participants had minimal English exposure, having studied it only as a "General English" subject, with Tamil as their primary language. Their low proficiency made them ideal for studying L1 transfer. Convenience sampling was used, with informed consent and anonymity ensured via Student IDs.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected in a classroom using paper-based tasks, each with five items targeting verb tense, progressive forms, pluralization, and auxiliary use. Participants completed each task in 30 minutes without reference materials. Instructions were in Tamil for comprehension.

3.2.1 Sentence Completion Task (Task 1)

Task 1 assessed productive knowledge. Participants completed five sentences:

- Q1: Present tense verb (e.g., "She ___ (go) to school daily" → expected: "goes").

- Q2: Past tense verb (e.g., "He ___ (play) football yesterday" → expected: "played").

- Q3: Progressive form (e.g., "They are ___ (run) now" → expected: "running").

- Q4: Noun pluralization (e.g., "The ___ (child) are playing" → expected: "children").

- Q5: Future tense (e.g., "We ___ (buy) a car tomorrow" → expected: "will buy").

3.2.2 Error Correction Task (Task 2)

Task 2 evaluated receptive skills. Participants corrected one error per sentence:

- Q1: Auxiliary omission (e.g., "I am go to market daily" → expected: "I go to the market daily").

- Q2: Overgeneralized verb form (e.g., "She singed a song yesterday" → expected: "She sang a song yesterday").

- Q3: Word order/progressive error (e.g., "He is walking toschool now" → expected: "He is walking to school now").

- Q4: Agreement error (e.g., "They has many book" → expected: "They have many books").

- Q5: Auxiliary misuse (e.g., "We will going to cinema" → expected: "We will go to the cinema").

Table 1 - Summary of Findings

Tasks	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**
Sentence completion	2.74	1.29
Error Correction	1.29	1.14

3.3 Data Analysis

3.3.1 Quantitative Analysis

Data from the primary and secondary datasets were analyzed. The primary dataset provided correct responses (out of 5), performance scores (Poor: 0–1, Fair: 2–3, Good: 4–5), and error type counts. The secondary dataset detailed individual responses and error types (Omission, Overgeneralization, Agreement, Word Order, Auxiliary Misuse). Descriptive statistics (mean, SD, median, range) summarized correct responses. Performance scores were quantified (Poor = 1, Fair = 2, Good = 3) for analysis. Paired samples t-tests compared Task 1 and Task 2 performance, and independent samples t-tests assessed gender differences. Chi-square tests examined error type distributions. Pearson's correlation analyzed error types vs. correct responses. Analyses used Microsoft Excel and Python (`pandas`, `scipy`), with $\alpha = 0.05$.

3.3.2 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis complemented quantitative findings by examining error patterns for evidence of Tamil L1 transfer. Responses were reviewed to identify recurring errors linked to Tamil's morphology (e.g., auxiliary omission due to Tamil's lack of equivalents). Patterns were coded thematically (e.g., "simplification of verb forms," "over-reliance on L1 suffixes"). High-performing (Good) and low-performing (Poor) students' responses were compared to explore how proficiency influenced transfer. For example, errors like "going" for "goes" were analyzed for L1 influence vs. developmental causes. This approach provided deeper insights into the cognitive processes underlying errors, addressing research question 2.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Participants provided informed consent and could withdraw. Data were anonymized using Student IDs and stored securely.

4. Results

4.1 Overall Performance

Task 1 (sentence completion) had a mean of 2.74 correct responses (SD = 1.29, median = 3, range = 1–5), while Task 2 (error correction) had a mean of 1.19 (SD = 1.14, median = 1, range = 0–4). A paired sample t-test confirmed Task 1's higher performance, $t(30) = 6.82$, $p < 0.001$. Task 1 scores were Poor (17 students, 54.8%), Fair (10, 32.3%), and Good (4, 12.9%); Task 2 scores were Poor (22, 71.0%), Fair (8, 25.8%), and Good (1, 3.2%).

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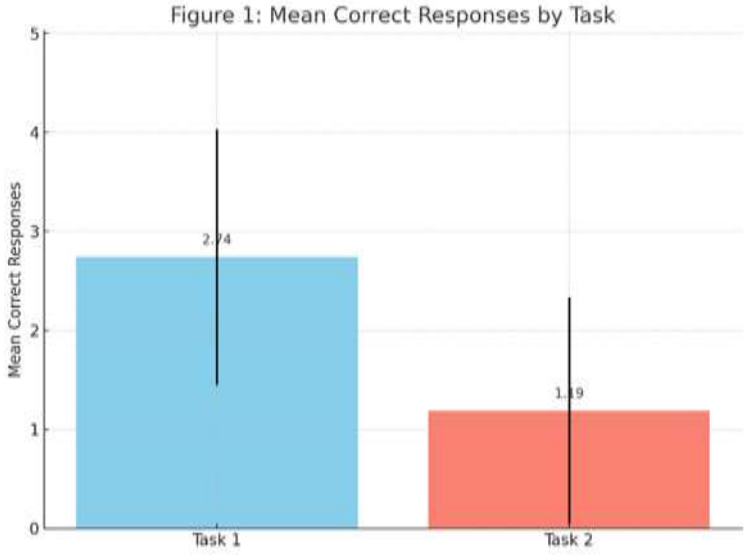
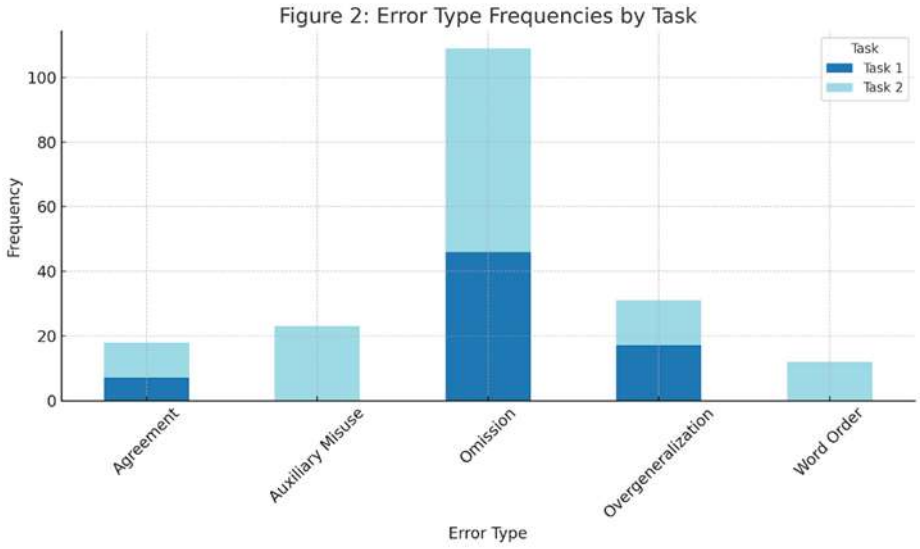


4.2 Gender Differences

No gender differences were found. For Task 1, females (M = 2.85, SD = 1.27) and males (M = 2.55, SD = 1.37) performed similarly, $t(29) = 0.61$, $p = 0.55$. For Task 2, females (M = 1.15, SD = 1.09) and males (M = 1.27, SD = 1.27) showed no difference, $t(29) = -0.29$, $p = 0.77$.

4.3 Error Patterns

Task 1 errors included Omission (46 instances), Overgeneralization (17), Agreement (7), and no Word Order or Auxiliary Misuse errors. Task 2 errors were Omission (63), Auxiliary Misuse (23), Overgeneralization (14), Word Order (12), and Agreement (11). A chi-square test showed significant differences in error distributions, $\chi^2(4, N = 193) = 47.12$, $p < 0.001$. Tamil L1 transfer was evident in Task 1 Q1 (13 students used "going" for "goes") and Task 2 Q1 (29 failed to correct "I am go"), reflecting Tamil's lack of auxiliaries. Overgeneralization (e.g., "childrens" in Task 1 Q4) suggested developmental errors.



4.4 Error Diversity

The mean number of error types per student was 3.61 (SD = 0.76, range = 1–4). Error types negatively correlated with Task 1 ($r = -0.62$, $p < 0.001$) and Task 2 ($r = -0.47$, $p = 0.008$) correct responses, indicating that diverse errors linked to lower performance.

4.5 Qualitative Findings

Qualitative analysis revealed three themes of L1 transfer:

1. **Simplification of Verb Forms**: Errors like “going” for “goes” (Task 1 Q1, 13 students) and failure to correct “I am go” (Task 2 Q1, 29 students) reflected Tamil’s lack of auxiliary verbs and third-person singular -s. High-performing students (e.g., Student 32, 5/5 in Task 1) avoided these errors, suggesting greater awareness of English rules.

2. **Over-Reliance on L1 Suffixes**: Noun pluralization errors (e.g., “childrens,” “childs” in Task 1 Q4) mirrored Tamil’s suffix-based pluralization, where learners applied regular -s endings incorrectly. Low-performing students (e.g., Student 10, 2/5 in Task 1) exhibited this consistently.

3. **Agreement Mismatches**: Errors like “They has” (Task 2 Q4, 17 incorrect) reflected Tamil’s simpler agreement system, where subject-verb concord is less explicit. High-performing students corrected these errors, indicating partial mastery of English agreement.

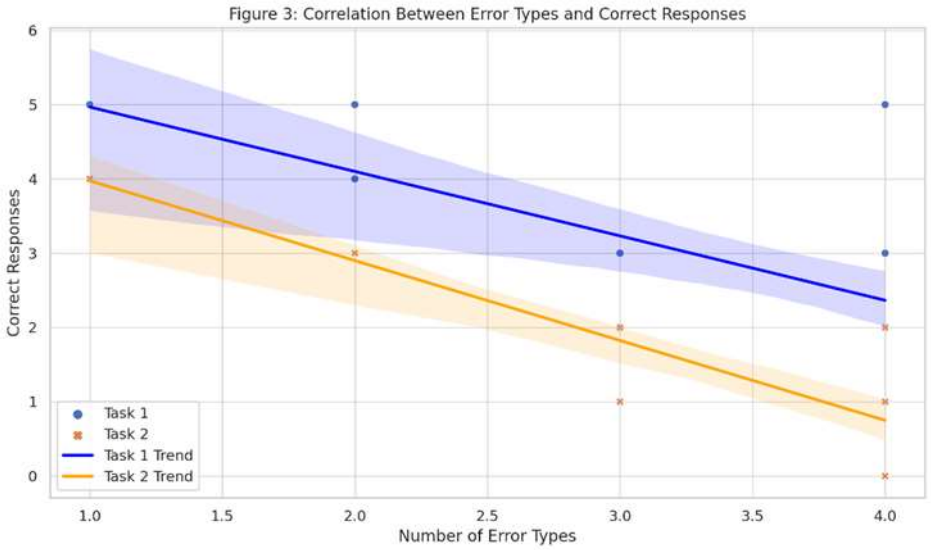
These patterns suggest that low proficiency amplifies L1 transfer, while higher proficiency reduces reliance on Tamil structures.

5. Discussion

The findings confirm significant morphological transfer among Tamil-speaking learners, supporting the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957). Omission errors, dominant in both tasks, align with Tamil’s lack of auxiliaries and agreement markers (Annamalai, 2000). For instance, “going” for “goes” in Task 1 and failure to correct “I am go” in Task 2 reflect Tamil’s simpler verb morphology, where tense is marked by suffixes without auxiliaries (Krishnamurti, 2003). Qualitative findings reinforce this, showing that low-performing students simplified verb forms due to L1 influence, while high-performing students demonstrated emerging awareness of English rules.

Overgeneralization errors (e.g., “childrens,” “singed”) indicate developmental processes (Dulay & Burt, 1974), but their co-occurrence with omission errors suggests a blend of transfer and developmental influences, particularly in low-proficiency learners (Lardiere, 2009). The qualitative theme of over-reliance on L1 suffixes explains errors like “childrens,” where learners applied Tamil’s suffix-based pluralization to English irregular nouns.

Task 2’s lower performance ($M = 1.19$ vs. 2.74 for Task 1) and greater error diversity (e.g., Auxiliary Misuse, Word Order) highlight the higher cognitive demand of error correction, requiring metalinguistic awareness (Sheen, 2007). This contradicts expectations of higher accuracy in receptive tasks (Leow, 2015), likely due to participants’ limited proficiency, which hindered error identification. The qualitative analysis supports this, as low-performing students struggled with agreement mismatches (e.g., “They has”), reflecting Tamil’s minimal agreement rules.



The negative correlation between error types and performance (r = -0.62 for Task 1, r = -0.47 for Task 2) suggests that diverse errors stem from incomplete rule internalization (Ellis, 2005). High-performing students (e.g., Student 32) made fewer, less varied errors, indicating progress toward English morphological competence. Gender differences were absent, aligning with prior research that L1 transfer and proficiency outweigh gender effects (Ortega, 2009).

5.1 Pedagogical Implications

The findings advocate for explicit instruction on English tense, agreement, and auxiliary use to counter Tamil L1 transfer. Metalinguistic awareness can enrich the transfer process by enabling learners to consciously compare L1 and L2 structures (Roehr & Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2013). For example, contrastive analysis exercises highlighting Tamil's lack of auxiliaries vs. English's obligatory "be" or "have" can reduce omission errors. Guided error correction tasks, where learners analyze errors with instructor feedback, can create awareness of agreement and auxiliary rules, addressing Task 2 challenges. Translation tasks comparing Tamil and English sentences can further help learners internalize differences, such as third-person singular -s or irregular plurals. Integrating these strategies into curricula, with scaffolded practice (e.g., progressing from guided to independent error correction), can enhance morphological accuracy and reduce L1 reliance (Bialystok, 1994).

5.2 Limitations

The small sample (n = 31) and convenience sampling limit generalizability. Lack of L1 proficiency data restricts insights into transfer variability. The tasks targeted specific morphological features, potentially missing other transfer effects (e.g., article usage).

5.3 Future Research

Larger, diverse samples and longitudinal designs could track morphological development. Qualitative methods, such as learner interviews, could elucidate error-making processes. Comparative studies with other agglutinative L1s (e.g., Telugu) would clarify L1 typology's role.

6. Conclusion

This study confirms morphological transfer in Tamil-speaking tertiary learners, with Omission errors reflecting Tamil's agglutinative structure. Error correction tasks were more challenging than sentence completion, highlighting the role of metalinguistic awareness in low-proficiency learners. Qualitative insights reveal simplification and L1 suffix reliance as key transfer mechanisms. The findings contribute to SLA theory by documenting Tamil L1 transfer and task-specific error patterns, addressing a gap in agglutinative L1 research. Pedagogically, explicit instruction, contrastive analysis, and scaffolded error correction are recommended to foster metalinguistic awareness and mitigate transfer errors. Future research should explore longitudinal interventions and diverse L1s to enhance understanding of morphological transfer.

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