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First Language Interference in Learning Tamil as a Second Language: A Case Study

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Language learning has been one of the significant interest in the humanistic discipline. In recent studies, First Language Learning is viewed as a part of individual's biological development. Second Language Learning is a major discipline in both Applied Linguistics and Psycholinguistics, which have gained significance in educational contexts around the world today. In Sri Lanka Tamil Language acts as the First Language for Tamil and Muslim people, further the Sinhalese students learn it as a Second Language. Since Tamil and Sinhalese Languages belong to different Language families, many similarities and differences can be identified between these two languages. The aim of this research is to identify the Sinhalese Language interference in learning Tamil as a Second Language. A sample of twenty-three first year students, who are following Translation studies at the Department of Linguistics in University of Kelaniya were selected for this study. In the process of learning Tamil as a Second Language, students tend to perform many errors because of the interference of their first Language. The data were collected by studying the answer scripts, written assignments and presentations of the above-mentioned group of students. Twenty-three written assignments and answer scripts were analyzed using the theory of error analysis. Being a structural analysis, it considers the errors from the lexical level. Thus, the first Language influence could be seen in morphological and syntactic levels. Significantly, many errors could be identified in morphological level, where 75% of the students made errors particularly in cases in Tamil. There are eight cases in Tamil and the Sinhalese students have shown no errors when making sentences in 1st (Nominative) and 8th (Vocative) cases because they are similar to Sinhalese, whereas they have made considerable number of errors when making sentences in other cases, particularly the 2nd (Accusative) and the 4th (Dative). Therefore, word-to-word translation is not effective in teaching cases in Tamil for the Sinhalese students, thus, it is recommended to teach Tamil while comparing the grammar rules with Sinhalese.

Key words: Tamil Language, Sinhalese Language, First Language, Interference,
Second Language Learning