

Impact of L1 on learning ESL (English as a Second Language) grammar skills of the ESL language learners- An error analysis with special reference to the undergraduates of the University of Jaffna.

Dr. K. Sanmuganathan

Senior Lecturer in ELT, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine whether L1 had an impact on the ESL (English as a Second Language) grammar skills of the beginning ESL language learners. An experimental research design was conducted at University of Jaffna. The study involved qualitative methods of data collection. General English Proficiency Test was administered among the subjects randomly, the data collected from the subjects' responses were analyzed, and the findings were derived. The findings show that there are a number of problems which are found to impede the learning of English due to the greater dissimilar features found between English and Tamil. The results will be beneficial for material development, ESL teaching and learning process in future. The major finding on overall error rates demonstrates that there is statistically significant difference in error rates with the comparison of students' L1 and English. Evidence provided by the written samples suggests that L1 played a role in the process of beginning ESL learners' writing in English. Understanding linguistic difference between students' L1 and English may help the learners reduce interference from their first language.

Key Words: L1, Linguistic difference, error analysis, ESL writing, Contrastive analysis

Introduction

Writing is a complex process even in the first language. It is even more complicated to write in a foreign language. Many studies indicate that, for beginning ESL students, there tends to be interference from their first language in the process of writing in English (Chen & Huang, 2003; Lado, 1957;). A better understanding of the L1 influence in the process of ESL writing will help teachers know students' difficulties in learning English. It will also aid in the adoption of appropriate teaching strategies to help beginning ESL students learn English.

Theoretical Background for the Study

Developments of language teaching over recent decades have been strongly founded on the notion of teaching methodology. Among these language teaching methodologies such as Grammar-Translation Method, Direct Method, Reading Approach, Audio-Lingual Method, Community Language Learning, the Silent Way and Total Physical Response, one of the recent developments in this field is Communicative Language Teaching.

In Sri Lanka, since the introduction of English to the school curriculum as a second language in the early 1950s, the Direct Method followed by Grammar-Translation Method was used for teaching English. The Direct Method teaches the target language in the target language context while the Grammar-Translation Method teaches

the target language in the students' mother tongue. However, experience shows that these methods have not been successful in improving English proficiency of Sri Lankan school students (Karunaratne, 1993). This view is further supported by the study on the students' proficiency in English at tertiary level (Sunthareswaran, 2003). His findings show that at the tertiary level in Jaffna, students learning English as a second language do not have equal proficiency in the English language skills, i.e. as listening, speaking, reading and writing.

At this juncture, it has been noticed that teachers of English language ask themselves why students are unable to excel in learning English and why they struggle or ignore it. Teaching English language to the students cannot be considered an easy task. Every teacher of English language finds teaching English a pedagogically strenuous task.

Notwithstanding enough these serious efforts have been taken in all aspects of the educational setup, still there are some bottlenecks in the road of learning English. There are a host of factors, which come into play in second language learning. The factors such as teacher's competence, motivation and attitude of learners, teaching methods, instructional materials, the structural similarities and differences between L1 and L2 etc, can be the variables that can significantly affect second language learning and teaching.

One of the common and accepted approaches to language teaching is through the contrastive method. In other words, the language specific features of both mother tongue of the learner and the second languages are studied thoroughly before and an attempt is made to teach the second language and to prepare instructional materials for second language teaching. Contrastive analysis emphasizes the influences of the mother tongue in learning a second language in phonological, morphological and syntactic levels. Examination of the differences between the first and second languages helps to predict the possible errors that can be made by L2 learners (Krishnaswamy, Verma, Nagarajan 1992).

Morphosyntactic features of English and Tamil for contrastive study

The case for contrastive analysis of morphosyntactic features¹ of English and Tamil is worth attempting. The learners of English have a great deal of problems in modifying one pattern into another due to the differences in morphosyntactic features, which are too many between English and Tamil. The sense is conveyed not only by the dictionary meanings of words, but also by their arrangement in their patterns. A sentence is not just a linear string of words; it is a sequence grouped in a particular way. The way groupings are ordered is important for understanding the sense. Each linguistic community has its own rules and procedures for transforming its "inner concepts" into "outside manifestations" as speech or writing. Selection of restriction features is to be observed for all natural languages. In case of syntactic feature in the languages, a category, for example, English "preposition" can be used in Tamil as "postposition". While the former occurs before nouns, the latter is used after nouns in sentences.

Objective of the study

The present study is primarily intended to identify the impediments the students of ESL (English as A Second Language) whose first language is Tamil, encounter while learning ESL and to suggest solutions to the learning problems. Since the researcher is a lecturer in English in the University of Jaffna where Tamil students are following degree programme it is hopefully assumed that he will be able to personally observe the attitude and classroom behavior of students. The objective of the study is to identify the learning difficulties of students of ESL in relation with linguistics and social issues and to suggest remedies to overcome such problems so as to enable them to achieve proficiency in English.

¹Morphosyntactic feature is a feature which is relevant to syntax. For a feature, to be 'relevant to syntax' means that it is involved in either syntactic agreement or government. Gender, number, person, case, tense, respect and definiteness are involved in agreement in languages

Implementation of the objectives.

A grammar is an attempt to justify the structures of the sentences of a language. In order to communicate meaningfully, the learner must account for all and only the grammatical sentences of the language. Most of the scholars in the fields of language learning and teaching assert that, when confronted with difficult grammatical forms, learners often conduct an L1 – L2 comparison and this comparison is implicit, it may result in the formation of wrong rules due to an incomplete L2 knowledge (Selinker, 1972; Robinson 1995). It provides a kind of interlingual comparison on the basis of contrastive analysis database. Such an approach may facilitate the learning process especially if the structures are difficult with respect to the learners' L1.

The most important objective in contrastive analysis is the notion of difficulty based on the difference of the native language patterns. The deviant realizations of the target language system in the language behaviour of the learner are ascribed to mother tongue interference. The areas of difficulty experienced by the learners are also known as "blind spots." Such problems obtained by contrastive studies should be tested against the actual performance of the learners with a different language background.

Objectives of the Present Investigation

The objectives of the present study are:

- a. To point out the areas of similarities and differences between the morphosyntactic features of English and Tamil.
- b. To determine the structural differences that may cause learning difficulties of the Tamil students by making use of Transformational Generative Grammar.
- c. To assess the validity of the problems by the study of the learner's opinion and errors and use the results of the study to determine the difficulty levels of the morphosyntactic features.
- d. To provide data and explanation of the errors committed by learners in the study.

- e. To bring out the relevance of the contrastive study to the teaching of English as a second language at University level.

The output from this study is valuable material for the people who are interested in second language learning and language teaching, ELT publishing, and language in general. It is important for the researchers who are interested in the language learning process, providing information on what the students get right as well as wrong and the chance to compare Learner English with native-speaker English. It is important for language teachers to understand the errors their students make and targeting their lessons to each student's individual needs, according to their mother tongue or language group. It has also become increasingly important to publishers producing English Language Teaching materials and reference books, including learner dictionaries, since it provides clear evidence of the specific areas of English which would most benefit from further analysis and clarification. Above all, it will help the students to understand their language issues.

Statement of the problem

It is a popularly recognized notion that language is rule bound and implicitly it follows that every language has its own distinctive form which is composed by its major elements such as grammar (subdivisions of two different but inter-related areas of study – morphology and syntax), vocabulary and phonological features. A study of the 'error' of the second language learning may be rewarding since it may produce some insights into the process involved in the learning of a second linguistics system. For, languages differ from each other. They have common properties as well as language specific properties. Because of this, L1 and L2 should help us to predict or at least explain errors made by L2 learners.

Research Questions

Is there a significant difference in students' written English error rates, as measured by a _____ post-writing assessment with the comparison of students' L1 and English?

The researcher established the following null hypothesis, to examine the research question:

There is no significant difference in error rates with the comparison of students' L1 and English

Objectives of the study

The present study is primarily intended to identify the impact of L1 in learning grammatical skills of ESL language learners and impediments the students of ESL (English as a Second Language) whose first language is Tamil, encounter while learning the process of ESL writing and to suggest solutions to the leaning problem. The objective of the study is to identify the learning difficulties of students of ESL in relation with linguistics and social issues and to suggest remedies to overcome such problems so as to enable them to achieve a good proficiency in English.

Literature review

The Role of L1 in ESL Writing

To investigate the relationship between students' L1 and ESL writing, Chan (2004) examined English writing samples from Hong Kong ESL college students. The findings reveal that, in all of the five error types investigated, most errors were closely related to the subjects' L1. The data from interviews with the students also confirms that ESL students first called upon their L1 before producing their English writings. The use of the language transfer was even more obvious among the learners of a lower English proficiency level.

Contrastive Analysis

The contrastive analysis emphasizes the influence of the mother tongue in learning a second language in phonological, morphological and syntactic levels. Examination of the differences between the first and second languages helps to predict the possible errors that can be made by L2 learners (Kirisnaswamy, Verma, Nagarajan 1992). For example, the phonological differences between Tamil and English can be stated as difficulties for the students. Tamil students. The absence of certain sound like /f/, /sh/, /z/, in Tamil causes difficulties to the students in learning

English. The morphological differences in plural morphemes such as 'elli- ellikal' in tamil, 'mouse-mice' in English and syntactic differences such as the word order in English 'SVO', the rigid word order, and in Tamil, 'SVO', the flexible order cause difficulties to the students.

Reappearance of Contrastive Analysis

The evidence of the rehabilitation of CA came in the form of two volumes published in the latter part of the eighties by Kellerman and Sharwood-Smith (1986) and Odlin (1989). A striking aspect of these two volumes is their focus on research on the role of negative transfer, or cross- linguistic influence, as it is now called, in the language acquisition process and the almost complete neglect of pedagogical implications of the various findings. This reappearance of the interest into the field of CA in the late 1990s confirms the Nehls' statement (1975:61) that 'even if all the just mentioned reasons for the explanation of errors are taken into account, contrastive analysis remains an important factor in errors analysis because learners' mother tongue will always be present as a factor or interference or support in the teaching process.

The most recent study made by Faghih (1997) (as cited in Kussmaul, n.d) receives more attention in terms of language transfer errors. In his study, he undertakes an overview of language transfer and a renewal of interest in contrastive analysis as a suitable testing ground for language transfer. He focused on Iranian students' difficulty in learning the English definite article 'the', CA shows that in Persian, there is no single word corresponding exactly to the English definite article.

Apart from syntactic errors, grammatical errors are another field that has recently attracted researchers' interest. Reima's study (2000) (as cited in Kussmaul, n.d) is very much related to the present research as it tries to understand learners' transfer competence, the difficulties they face in L1/L2 translation. Reima's study focuses on errors in the system of grammatical agreement. The results of her study show that 62% of the errors of grammatical agreement are interlingual and 38% intralingual.

Contact and Interference

Suntharesan. (2002) has quoted that the language contact may cause a structural change in one or both of the language concerned and this tendency of changing the structure is termed as interference. In other words, the violation of the norms of any of the language involved by the individual in his speech as a result of language contact is known as interference. Interference may result into rearrangement of the definite organized structure of a language from the introduction of foreign elements such as phonemic system, morphology and syntax and certain part of vocabulary.

The learning problems and the amount of interference depend on similarities of the language in contact. Accordingly the extent of interference may vary whereas the mechanism of interference remains the same between any languages.

Sri Lanka English Syntax

English Syntax is based on word order, subject-verb- object structure, prepositional phrases, verb tenses and noun phrases. The structure of a sentence in English is based on syntactic rules such as subject- verb- agreement, use of articles in noun phrases and the distinction between count and non-count nouns. In Sri Lankan English, the basic rules of English syntax are followed with some variation, particularly found in speech due to the struggle of many languages (Gunesekara, 2005). The marked distinction between colloquial and written Sri Lankan English in their standard forms reflects to some extent the diglossia found in the language of Sri Lankan English in their standard forms reflects to some extent the diglossia found in the language of Sri Lanka. Both Tamil and Sinhalese have diglossia and the speakers have transferred some of this to Sri Lankan English. For example, “mum, no money, how to buy?” This utterance reflects the typical Sri Lankan syntactic features of English speech. First, there is subject deletion in that “how to buy?” So the utterance made by the speaker symbolizes the language transfer from Tamil into English. The utterance in Tamil is ‘ammaa’ kaacillai, eppaTivaankiraṭu?’ according to

Gunesekara (2005), the marked distinction between colloquial and written Sri Lankan English in their standard forms reflect to some extent the diglossia found in the language found in the languages of Sri Lanka. Both Sinhalese and Tamil have diglossia, and we have transferred some of this to Sri Lankan English.

Research Methodology

Procedure for Data collection.

Given the research hypotheses and the scope of the study, the design and procedures employed will be discussed. The research employed in this study was basically deductive, in that it began with an observed regularity that needed to be described and explained. This means that the hypotheses mentioned above were deduced and then tested by collecting appropriate data which could be used to either support or reject the hypotheses.

In this investigation, 100 undergraduates from the Faculty of Arts in the second year of the University of Jaffna were selected as sample for the study. In order to endorse the findings made from the study of General English Proficiency Test which was designed by the researcher on various grammatical and lexical categories to be administered to the students, the informal investigation was made through the study of the students’ answer scripts, observation and focus group discussions with the students and the lecturers/ instructors in English language.

Results

Analysis of common errors of students of ESL

To collect data to study the specific features of common errors prevalent among students of ESL, a model question paper was designed and it was distributed to randomly selected group of 100 students from the faculty of Arts in the 2nd year, of the University of Jaffna. The researcher revealed the purpose of this test to the students to assure them that this test is not affiliated with their degree programme, by any means so that they could attempt the paper with confidence.

After carefully marking the answer scripts, the researcher noted the common features of the

errors made by the students and explained the cause of errors, based on his personal observation of the students' performance.

A General English proficiency Test was administered to the students by the researcher to collect data that may endorse the findings already derived from the data collected through the study

of the students' answer scripts, observation and focus group discussion with the students and the lecturers/ instructors in English language.

The bar chart shown below indicates the percentage of students who have ticked the correct and the incorrect answers in each section of the General English Proficiency Test.

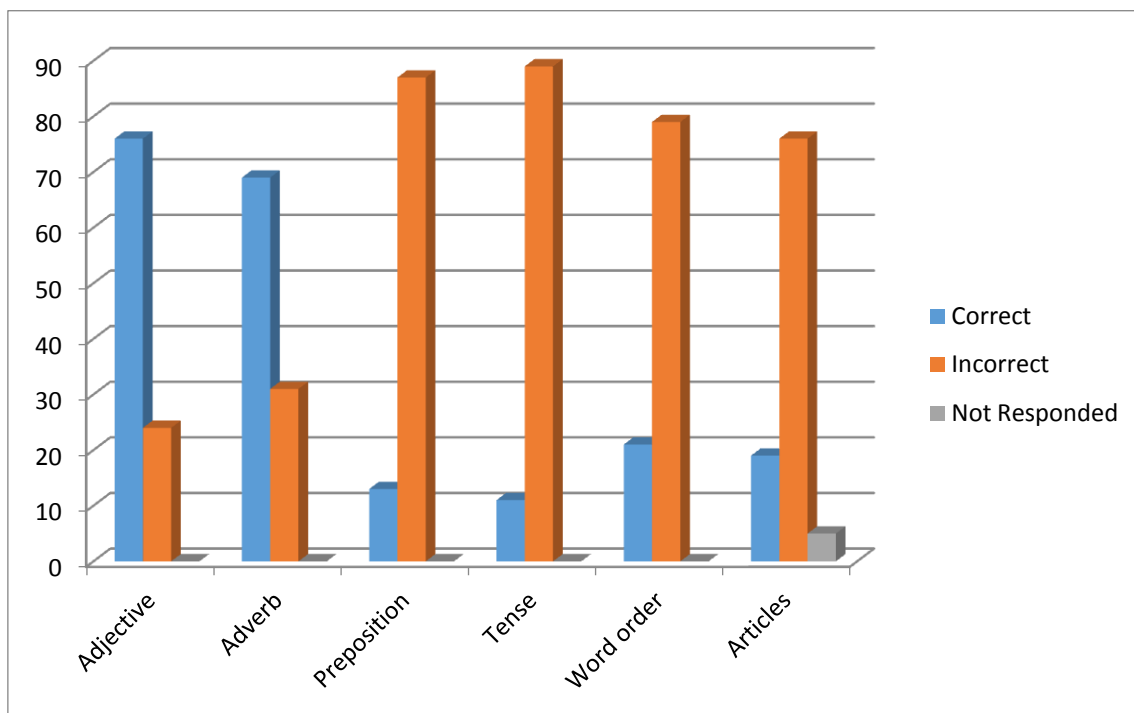


Figure1. SS' performance to the areas testing items in the proficiency Test

Discussion

It was found that the most frequent errors from this data were on the morphosyntactic and lexical level with inadequate lexical and morphosyntactic knowledge leading to the errors, which have been ranked according to the level of difficulty. The errors categories identified by the researcher based on the greatest numbers of errors that occurred are as follows. 1. Tense and subject-verb agreement 2. Preposition 3. Word order 4. Articles 5. Adverb 6. Adjectives. It has been observed that most of the errors are due to the differences between Tamil and English. Within these errors may result from the inadequate learning as well as the complexity of structures between Tamil and English.

In conclusion, the errors made by the students are related to language transfer. It causes problems for them in learning English language and makes the English writing process even more complicated.

At the same time, it has been observed that ESL students with different English proficiencies may have different learning difficulties. More advanced learners are found to have errors, which are not related to language transfer. L1 related errors are more prevalent for the students who have less proficiency in English and are the beginners of English.

Conclusions

Most of the scholars in the fields of language learning and teaching give evidence for the L1-L2 comparison by the learners when they confronted with difficult grammatical forms and it is natural for the learners. Since this comparison is implicit, it may result in the formation of wrong rules due to an incomplete L2 knowledge. In this study, an investigation was made to identify the Impact of L1 on learning the ESL (English as a second Language) grammar skills of the ESL

language learners". It provides a kind of interlingual comparison on the basis of contrastive analysis database. Such an approach may facilitate the learning process especially if the structures are difficult with respect to the learners' L1.

But at the same time, these impediments have been observed in large scale among the learners who have less proficiency in English language. Because of the impediments caused by the existence of dissimilar features between the two languages, the learners tend to make the wrong application of the rules in learning L2 or to generalize the L1 structures to L2. There are, of course, many other influences at play while learning a second language, but the influence that the mother tongue has on the language learners produce is usually referred to as 'Language interference', 'Transfer', or 'Cross-linguistic influence'. It is suggested that the language produced by second language learners that it should rather be termed an 'Interlanguage', since it will always be a blend of the second language and the mother tongue. The better the learners is at overcoming language interference, the more dilute that blend will be. This reliance on similarities between the language being learnt and the mother tongue can be both a help and a hindrance.

The present study has yielded valuable clues and guidelines pertaining to English language teaching. The theoretical as the practical aspects of the study have confirmed that there are similarities and dissimilarities between Tamil and English. There are, of course, many other influences at play when we learn a foreign language. But the influence that the mother tongue has on the language in general, and is usually referred to as 'language interference' 'transfer' or 'cross linguistic influence'. It is suggested that language produced by foreign learners is so unavoidably influenced, and even distorted by the mother tongue of the learner that it should rather be termed as 'interlanguage', since it will always be a blend of the foreign language and the mother tongue.

Recommendations for ESL Practitioners

Grammatical proficiency is the foundation of better writing ability. Efficient grammar instruction, especially for adult learners, helps ESL students learn English more effectively. Therefore, understanding students' learning difficulties and providing appropriate grammar instruction is the key to effective teaching for ESL teachers.

Language Comparison to Clarify Learning Difficulties

English writing for many Tamil ESL students is a process of translation, which is confirmed by the current study as well. This study indicates various errors the students made and ranked the most frequent error categories, which can be an indication for Tamil ESL teachers to better understand what errors their students could make and provide instruction thereby. Many errors found in this study were considered L1-related. It is apparent that L1 plays an important role in the process of writing in English. The participants of this study were adult students who are all eligible to express their ideas in a clear way. However, language transfer caused problems for them and made the English writing process even more complicated.

Clarifying learning difficulties can be the first step that helps beginning ESL students master English grammar. Language interference is apparently a common problem for beginning ESL learners. English teachers can help beginning ESL students reduce language interference by specifying the differences between Tamil (L1) and English, in order to make English grammar instruction more effective. Errors in the use of tenses in this study, for example, were ranked as the number one error category where the greatest numbers of errors occurred. Such errors should be given attention by ESL practitioners. In addition to explaining to explaining grammatical rules of English verbs, ESL teachers may also compare the verb differences including tense concepts between Tamil and English.

ESL students with different English proficiencies may have different learning difficulties. While more advanced learners may

have more errors not related to language transfer, L1-related errors are prevalent for beginning learners. English grammar instruction with the comparison of Tamil and English can be a good option for ESL practitioners.

Language Transfer Problems between Tamil and English

The researcher identified six errors categories as mentioned above. Language transfer problems in terms of these errors may benefit ESL practitioners' grammar instruction especially when comparing the two languages. The very different grammatical structures between Tamil and English make it more difficult for beginning ESL students to learn English; yet such distinct differences could also make it easier for practitioners to compare the two languages when instructing English grammar.

Incorporation of Technology in ESL Education

Aside from the comparison of English and Tamil that may facilitate students' learning of English grammar, the incorporation of technology in ESL education motivates students to learn a new language. In addition to an awareness of the L1, influence of technology is another issue that has been widely discussed in language instruction. A number of research studies confirm the advantages of integrating technology into language instruction (Cheng, 2003; Gonzalez-Bueno & Perez, 2000;). This paper reports the results of a study examining whether grammar instruction with the addition of CAI as an instructional support tool can help beginning level Tamil ESL students reduce their written grammar error rates. It also discusses how L1-related errors occurred in students' written essays.

References

1. Agesthalingam, S. (1966). "Teaching Tamil as a Foreign Language", Proceedings of the first International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies, Volume 11, Malaysia, PP. 503-507. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
2. Chan, A. Y. W. (2004, Spring). Syntactic transfer: Evidence from the interlanguage of Hong Kong Chinese ESL learners. *The Modern Language Journal*, 88(1), 56-74.
3. Chatel, R. G. (2002). New Technology, new literacy: Creating a bridge for English language learners. *The New England Reading Association Journal*, 38(3), 45-49.
4. Chan, C. Y., & Huang, H. Y. (2003). L2 acquisition of subject- prominence by EFL Students in Taiwan. *English Teaching & Learning*, 27(4), 99-122.
5. Chan, H. C. (1998). A contrastive analysis of the language errors made by the Chinese Students of English as a second/foreign language. *Journal of Wu-Feng Applied Linguistics*, 6, 224-237.
6. Chan, H. C. (2000). Error analysis of some features of English article usage. *Journal of Linguistics*, 8, 282-296.
7. Chen, S. J. (1999). Error analysis can be used in translation class. *Journal of Translation*, 4, 51-80.
8. Cheng, Y. (2003). The effects of web-based instruction on Chinese EFL students' Learning outcomes. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 64(2), 382. (UMI No. 3081482)
9. Chidambaram, K. (2004). *A study on the learning process of English*. (ph. d thesis) Department of Linguistic, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore 641045, TamilNadu, India
10. Ghabanchi, Z. and Vosooghi, M. (2006). *The role of explicit contrastive instruction in learning Difficult L2 grammatical forms: A cross-linguistic approach to language awareness*. The reading matrix, vol.6, No2 September.
11. Gonzalez-Bueno, M., & Perez, L. C. (2000). Electronic mail in foreign language writing: A study of grammatical and lexical accuracy, and quantity of language. *Foreign Language Annals*, 33(2), 189-198.

12. Gunasekara, M. (2000). *Morphosyntactic errors of fluent speakers of English in Sri Lanka*. Journal of Linguistics No. 7, (pp. 112-133) University of Kelaniya, Department of Linguistics, Kelaniya.
13. Gunasekara, M. (2005). *The post colonial identity of Sri Lankan English*. University of Kelaniya, Published by Katha Publishers, Colombo.
14. Huang, J. (2002). Error analysis in English teaching: A review of studies. *Journal of Chung-San Girls' Senior High School*, 2, 19-34.
15. Karunaratne, I.M. (2003). *Teaching English in Urban Sri Lanka : Some pedagogical issues*. 9th International Conference on Sri Lankan Studies, 28th – 30th November 2003. Matara, Sri Lanka.
16. Kadurugamuwe, N. (1994). *Estate Tamil: A morphosyntactic study*, Ph.d thesis (unpublished) University of Edinburgh.
17. Kailainaqthan, R. (1991/1992). *Postpositions in Jaffna Tamil*, Sri Lanka Journal of south Asian Studies, No:3 (New series) University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Pp 89-94.
18. Kellerman, E. (1979). "*Transfer and non-transfer: Where are we now?*" Studies in second language acquisition. P. 37-57.
19. Krishaswamy, S . Verma, K and Nagarajan. M (1992) *Modern applied linguistics*, Printed by V.N. Rao at Macmillan India Press, Madras 600 041.
20. Kussmaul, (n.d). Chapter 3. *Error analysis and contrastive analysis. Error analysis in Translation and learner translation corpora*. (Electronic version).
21. <http://reference.ksu.edu.sa/pdf/48724>. Retrieved on 12.05.2005.
22. Lado, R. (1957). *Linguistics across cultures: Applied linguistics for language teachers*. *Language Annuals*, 33(2), 189-198.
23. Nehls, D. (ed). (1979). *Studies in contrastive linguistics and error analysis*. 2 Vols. (Vol. 1: The theoretical background, Vol. 2: Descriptive contrastive analysis of English and German). Heidelberg: Groos.
24. Odlin, T. (1989). *Language transfer. Cross Linguistic Influence in Language Learning*. Cambridge, Cambridge University.
25. Robinson, P. (1995). '*Attention, memory, and the "noticing" hypothesis*', *Language learning*. pp, 283-331.
26. Selinker, L. (1972). '*Interlanguage*', *International Review of Applied Linguistics* 10:209-231. Edinburgh University Press.
27. Shanmugas, A, (1982). *Aspects of Tamil Language and grammar*. Poobalasingam Book Depot, Colombo.
28. Sivathamby.K. (1966) "*Some problems in simultaneous translation of speeches from English into Tamil and Vice- Versa*. Proceedings of the first International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies. Volume 11, Malaysia, P. 503-507.
29. Sharwood Smith, M. and Kellerman, E. (1986). *Cross linguistic influence in second language acquisition: An introduction* . New York: Pergamon Institute of English.
30. Sridhar, S.N. (1975). *Contrastive analysis, error analysis and interlanguage: three phases of one goal*. *Studies in language learning*, (ERIC Reproduction Service No. ED123888)
31. Suntharesan, V. (2002). *Use of English vocabulary in the Jaffna Tamil society – A socio*
32. *Linguistic Study*. Department of Linguistics, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka.
33. Sunthareswaran, S. (2003). *Language use in Jaffna society*. Department of Linguistics, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka