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UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITIES OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF ESL CHALLENGES IN SRI LANKAN SECONDARY EDUCATION

Chethika Samarajeewa^{1*}

¹Department of TESL, Faculty of Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities, Lincoln University College (LUC), Malaysia.

***Corresponding Author: Chethika Samarajeewa**

ABSTRACT

This review paper explores the complex challenges involved in second language acquisition within Sri Lanka's secondary ESL education system. It offers an in-depth analysis of linguistic, psychological, social, cultural, and pedagogical barriers that hinder effective language learning. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from linguistics, psychology, education, and applied linguistics, the study situates these challenges within the broader educational and sociocultural context of Sri Lanka. The findings reveal a critical need for learner-centered instructional strategies, enhanced teacher training, and targeted reforms in curriculum design. This paper highlights the importance of responsive educational policies and practical classroom interventions aimed at improving ESL outcomes for secondary learners across the country.

Keywords: Second language acquisition, ESL education, Sri Lanka, linguistic barriers, psychological challenges, cultural competence, teacher training, secondary education.

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1. Introduction

English as a Second Language (ESL) holds a vital role in Sri Lanka, serving as a gateway to academic, social, and economic mobility. As a former colonial language, English continues to function as a lingua franca in the education system, the job market, and international communication. However, secondary-level ESL learners often face significant challenges in acquiring language proficiency, particularly in writing and speaking skills.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is a dynamic and multifaceted process that extends beyond vocabulary and grammar to include pragmatic, cultural, and interactional competencies. The trilingual environment in Sri Lanka—Sinhala, Tamil, and English—complicates this learning process, especially due to discrepancies in curriculum, societal attitudes toward English, and the unequal distribution of educational resources between rural and urban areas.

This paper investigates five major categories of barriers—linguistic, psychological, social, cultural, and pedagogical—affecting ESL learning in Sri Lankan secondary schools. Each section highlights how these barriers manifest in local classrooms, how they impact learners, and how they point to systemic issues in teaching practices, curriculum design, and language education policy. The goal is to offer context-sensitive recommendations for improving ESL instruction and ensuring equitable access to English language education across the country.

2. Linguistic Challenges

2.1 Phonological Differences

Sri Lankan learners struggle with the phonological distinctions between English and their native languages. While English is a stress-timed language, Sinhala and Tamil are syllable-timed, creating difficulties in mastering rhythm, stress, and intonation. Learners often mispronounce sounds like /θ/ (as in *think*) and /ð/ (as in *this*), and have difficulty with consonant clusters, leading to communication breakdowns. Classroom instruction should focus more on targeted pronunciation practice to address these differences.

2.2 Lexical and Grammatical Differences

Secondary students frequently face challenges in vocabulary development and grammar usage. For instance, misuse of articles and auxiliary verbs is common due to the absence of such structures in their first languages. Phrases like “She is teacher” reflect direct translations from Sinhala or Tamil. Teachers can address this through context-based vocabulary building and focused grammar exercises that contrast English structures with students’ native linguistic patterns.

2.3 Syntax and Sentence Structure

English uses Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) word order, while Sinhala and Tamil predominantly follow Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) patterns. This syntactic mismatch causes learners to construct grammatically incorrect sentences. To overcome this, instructors should provide explicit teaching of sentence patterns, including drills, modeling, and peer feedback.

2.4 Pragmatic Differences

Pragmatic competence, such as using appropriate levels of politeness or understanding idiomatic expressions, is another challenge. For example, while addressing teachers by their first name is acceptable in Sri Lanka, it may be deemed inappropriate in certain English-speaking contexts. Role plays and contextualized interactions can help learners develop pragmatic awareness.

3. Psychological Challenges

3.1 Anxiety and Fear of Mistakes

Language anxiety, especially during speaking activities or tests, hinders student participation. Fear of making errors in front of peers can stem from cultural expectations and fear of judgment. Creating a supportive classroom environment and incorporating low-stakes speaking activities can help reduce anxiety.

3.2 Motivation and Persistence

Motivation levels vary across urban and rural settings. Urban learners often see English as a practical necessity, while rural learners may perceive it as a theoretical subject with limited real-world relevance. To maintain engagement, teachers should integrate localized content and real-life applications into lessons.

3.3 Self-Confidence and Self-Esteem

Students from underprivileged backgrounds may develop low self-esteem, believing that English is too difficult for them. Encouraging peer collaboration and recognizing student effort can help boost confidence and class participation.

3.4 Cognitive Load and Processing

Managing multiple languages simultaneously places a high cognitive burden on learners. Breaking down complex language tasks into manageable steps can help reduce this load and support more effective learning.

4. Socio-Cultural Challenges

4.1 Language Background and Multilingualism

Sri Lanka's multilingual landscape poses a unique challenge to ESL learners, especially in rural areas where exposure to English is limited. In contrast, urban students often have greater access to English through media, social interactions, and extracurricular activities. This creates an uneven playing field and highlights the need for equitable language exposure opportunities.

4.2 Cultural Attitudes Toward English

In some communities, English is associated with colonialism and cultural erosion, leading to resistance or indifference. Teachers must position English not as a threat but as a tool for empowerment, while also affirming the value of students' native languages and cultures.

4.3 Socio-Economic Disparities

Economic disparities heavily influence ESL access and quality. Wealthier families can afford private tuition and resources, while low-income students often attend under-resourced public schools. Government intervention is needed to improve infrastructure, provide teacher training, and ensure equal distribution of educational materials.

4.4 Bridging Socio-Cultural Gaps in the Classroom

Teachers must adopt culturally responsive pedagogies that integrate students' backgrounds into the ESL curriculum. Using examples from students' cultural experiences and encouraging multilingualism can create inclusive learning environments. Teacher training should include components on cultural sensitivity and identity-aware teaching strategies.

5. Pedagogical Challenges

5.1 Teacher Training

Many ESL teachers are trained using outdated methodologies focused on rote learning and grammatical accuracy rather than communication. There is a need for continuous professional development in modern instructional strategies such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Content-Based Instruction (CBI). Teachers should also be encouraged to reflect on their practices and adapt them to local classroom contexts.

5.2 Assessment Methods

Current assessment practices are largely exam-oriented, emphasizing written tests over communicative competence. Incorporating formative assessments—such as peer reviews, projects, and oral presentations—can provide a more accurate picture of students' language abilities. Digital tools like language learning apps, online quizzes, and interactive simulations can also enhance assessment quality.

5.3 Integrating Technology into ESL Pedagogy

Technology has the potential to revolutionize ESL education, especially in under-resourced settings. Mobile-assisted language learning, multimedia tools, and video conferencing can provide immersive learning experiences. However, for effective integration, teachers must be trained in both using and teaching with technology. The government should invest in infrastructure and provide equitable digital access across schools.

6. Conclusion

The barriers to effective ESL learning in Sri Lanka are complex and interwoven—linguistic, psychological, socio-cultural, and pedagogical. These challenges are particularly acute in rural areas, where multilingualism, lack of resources, and cultural resistance to English converge to create learning environments that are often unsupportive of second language development.

To address these issues, Sri Lanka must adopt a systemic, multidimensional strategy involving curriculum reform, equitable resource allocation, and inclusive teacher training programs. Professional development should emphasize cultural responsiveness, student-centered pedagogy, and communicative competence. Additionally, assessment systems must move beyond rote memorization and begin to reflect real-world language use.

Ultimately, improving ESL education in Sri Lanka is not just about linguistic proficiency—it is about ensuring every student, regardless of geography or background, has equal opportunities to succeed in a globalized world. Through collaborative partnerships among government, educators, communities, and international stakeholders, Sri Lanka can work toward a fair, inclusive, and high-quality ESL education system that fosters both personal growth and national cohesion.

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