



Impact of Mother Tongue Instruction on English Writing Skills among Tamil Learners: An Empirical Study

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How to Cite this Article:

Jeyasankar, P. & Rajasekar, S. (2026). Impact of Mother Tongue Instruction on English Writing Skills among Tamil Learners: An Empirical Study. International Journal of Creative and Open Research in Engineering and Management, <i>02</i>(7).
<https://doi.org/10.55041/ijcope.v2i7.187>

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<https://doi.org/10.55041/ijcope.v2i7.187>

Abstract

English writing proficiency is a crucial skill in academic and professional contexts, yet learners from non-English-speaking backgrounds often face significant challenges in mastering it. For Tamil learners in India, the influence of the mother tongue (L1) plays a vital role in shaping English (L2) writing skills. This study investigates the impact of Mother Tongue Instruction (MTI) as a pedagogical strategy to enhance English writing competence among secondary-level Tamil learners. Employing a mixed-methods approach, 60 students from two government-aided schools in Tamil Nadu were divided into an experimental group (receiving MTI-integrated English writing lessons) and a control group (receiving English-only instruction). Data were collected through pre- and post-tests, error analysis, and semi-structured interviews with both learners and teachers. Statistical analysis using paired-sample t-tests revealed that the MTI group demonstrated a significantly greater improvement in writing organization, grammatical accuracy, and vocabulary richness ($p < 0.05$). Qualitative findings indicated that learners perceived MTI as reducing anxiety, clarifying conceptual understanding, and enabling effective idea generation. The study concludes that strategic use of the mother tongue can facilitate

cognitive transfer, scaffold complex writing tasks, and promote bilingual competence without impeding English fluency. The paper recommends integrating MTI in bilingual education policies, particularly for regions with strong linguistic identities such as Tamil Nadu.

Keywords:

Mother Tongue Instruction (MTI), English Writing Skills, Tamil Learners, Bilingual Education, Second Language Acquisition, Error Analysis, Language Pedagogy

Introduction

In the contemporary globalized world, English proficiency is a gateway to academic advancement, employment opportunities, and cross-cultural communication. Among the four core language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—**writing** is often regarded as the most cognitively demanding, as it requires the integration of grammar, vocabulary, coherence, and critical thinking (Hyland, 2019). For learners whose first language (L1) is structurally different from English, mastering writing in English (L2) presents



unique challenges. Tamil, a Dravidian language with a rich literary heritage and distinct grammatical system, differs significantly from English in phonology, syntax, and orthography. These linguistic differences influence how Tamil learners conceptualize and produce written English.

Role of Mother Tongue in Second Language Learning

The use of the mother tongue in second language instruction has been a subject of debate for decades. Traditional communicative approaches have often discouraged L1 use, arguing it could hinder L2 immersion (Krashen, 1982). However, recent studies (Cummins, 2007; García & Wei, 2014) advocate for **translanguaging**—the strategic use of both languages to support comprehension, cognitive processing, and metalinguistic awareness. In Tamil Nadu, where Tamil is both a medium of identity and the primary language of education for many students, leveraging it as an instructional tool may bridge the gap between linguistic knowledge and writing competence in English.

Problem Statement

Despite years of English instruction, many Tamil-medium learners struggle with producing coherent, grammatically accurate, and well-structured English writing. Error analysis in Tamil Nadu classrooms frequently reveals issues such as subject–verb disagreement, incorrect tense usage, limited vocabulary range, and literal translations from Tamil to English (Annamalai, 2018). Conventional English-only instruction may not address these difficulties, as learners often fail to map unfamiliar English structures onto their existing linguistic frameworks. Consequently, the potential benefits of incorporating **Mother Tongue Instruction (MTI)** remain underexplored in the context of English writing development for Tamil learners.

Research Gap

While there is substantial research on bilingual education globally, empirical studies focusing specifically on the **impact of MTI on English writing skills in the Tamil Nadu context** are limited. Existing literature often examines MTI in oral language development or reading comprehension but rarely in the domain of **written production**, where cognitive load is significantly higher. This study seeks to address this gap by providing empirical evidence on how MTI can be integrated into writing instruction to improve performance among Tamil learners.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this research are:

1. To evaluate the effect of MTI on the accuracy, organization, and vocabulary usage in English writing among Tamil learners.
2. To compare the writing improvement between students taught with MTI and those taught exclusively in English.
3. To explore student and teacher perceptions of MTI in developing English writing skills.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Does the use of MTI significantly improve English writing performance among Tamil learners compared to English-only instruction?
2. What specific aspects of writing (accuracy, organization, vocabulary richness) are most positively influenced by MTI?
3. How do learners and teachers perceive the role of MTI in English writing instruction?

Review of Literature

Theoretical Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition

Research in second language acquisition (SLA) has long debated the extent to which the mother tongue facilitates or interferes with L2 learning. Krashen's (1982) **Input Hypothesis** posits that learners acquire



language most effectively when exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current proficiency level, implying that L1 may be used to scaffold meaning. Cummins' (1979, 2007) **Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP)** model further argues that cognitive and literacy skills are transferable across languages. According to this theory, competence in the mother tongue can positively influence the acquisition of a second language, especially in complex skills such as writing.

In contrast, **Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH)** (Lado, 1957) suggested that structural differences between languages are a major source of learner errors. While CAH predicted difficulty based on linguistic distance, subsequent empirical studies have shown that transfer can be both **positive** (facilitating L2 learning) and **negative** (causing interference) depending on context (Odlin, 1989).

Mother Tongue Instruction in L2 Learning

The role of Mother Tongue Instruction (MTI) in L2 learning has shifted from being seen as a hindrance to being recognized as a pedagogical asset. Cook (2001) emphasized that the L1 serves multiple classroom functions: explaining grammar, clarifying vocabulary, and fostering learner confidence. García and Wei (2014) introduced the concept of **translanguaging**, where learners strategically use their full linguistic repertoire to understand, negotiate, and produce meaning. This approach aligns with **Vygotsky's sociocultural theory**, which emphasizes scaffolding and the social mediation of learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Empirical evidence supports the use of MTI in enhancing comprehension and writing. For instance, Chen and Lin (2016) found that integrating L1 explanations in writing tasks improved coherence and reduced error rates among Mandarin-speaking learners of English. Similarly, studies in South Asia (Banu & Sussex, 2001) suggest that MTI can help bridge cultural concepts and facilitate topic development in writing.

Tamil-English Bilingualism: Linguistic Considerations

Tamil, as a Dravidian language, is structurally distinct from English in several respects:

- **Word Order:** Tamil follows an SOV (Subject–Object–Verb) structure, whereas English follows SVO (Subject–Verb–Object).
- **Morphology:** Tamil is agglutinative, using suffixes extensively to indicate tense, case, and number; English relies more on word order and auxiliary verbs.
- **Articles:** Tamil lacks definite and indefinite articles, which often leads to omission or misuse in English writing (Annamalai, 2018).
- **Tense and Aspect:** Tamil has different aspectual distinctions, resulting in tense-related errors in English.
- **Lexical Influence:** Direct translations from Tamil idiomatic expressions into English often result in awkward or incorrect phrasing.

Understanding these differences is crucial for designing MTI strategies that target specific problem areas in English writing.

Previous Studies on MTI and Writing Skills

While many studies have addressed bilingual education in general, fewer have examined MTI's direct influence on English writing skills in Tamil Nadu. Rajagopalan (2011) found that Tamil-medium students taught essay-writing through bilingual explanations demonstrated greater topic relevance and coherence than those taught in English only. In a related study, Saravanan (2015) reported that MTI reduced writing anxiety and improved vocabulary recall.

Globally, similar findings emerge. Cummins (2007) highlighted how conceptual knowledge in L1 supports advanced literacy skills in L2. Kafle (2018), in a Nepali context, observed that strategic L1 use during brainstorming and drafting stages improved overall writing quality.



Gaps in the Literature

The existing body of research provides compelling evidence for the potential benefits of MTI. However, there are **notable gaps** in the Tamil Nadu context:

1. Limited quantitative evidence linking MTI to measurable improvements in English writing.
2. A lack of mixed-method studies combining statistical results with learner/teacher perceptions.
3. Insufficient exploration of **specific writing subskills**—accuracy, organization, and vocabulary richness—in relation to MTI.

This study addresses these gaps by employing a mixed-methods design, focusing specifically on secondary-level Tamil learners, and offering both statistical data and qualitative insights.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a **quasi-experimental, mixed-methods design** to investigate the impact of Mother Tongue Instruction (MTI) on the English writing skills of Tamil-medium learners. The quantitative component involved a pre-test and post-test control group design, while the qualitative component comprised semi-structured interviews with students and teachers to gain deeper insights into perceptions of MTI in writing instruction. This combination allowed for triangulation of findings and ensured a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Participants

The participants were **60 secondary-level students** (Grade IX) from two government-aided schools in Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu. The selection criteria included:

1. Tamil as the first language (L1) and primary medium of instruction.
2. English studied as a second language for at least five years.
3. Comparable proficiency levels based on the previous academic year's English exam scores.

The participants were divided into:

- **Experimental Group:** 30 students receiving MTI-integrated English writing lessons.
- **Control Group:** 30 students receiving English-only writing instruction.

The age range was 14–15 years, with a balanced gender representation (32 females, 28 males).

Instruments

Writing Test

Two parallel writing tasks were designed for the pre-test and post-test, aligned with the Grade IX syllabus but not identical to avoid practice effects. The tasks required a **150–200-word composition** on familiar topics (e.g., “A Memorable Day in My Life” for pre-test, “An Event I Will Never Forget” for post-test).

Each script was evaluated using a **rubric** covering:

1. **Accuracy** (grammar, punctuation, spelling) – 30 marks
2. **Organization** (coherence, paragraphing, logical flow) – 30 marks
3. **Vocabulary Richness** (variety, appropriateness) – 20 marks
4. **Content Relevance** – 20 marks

Interview Protocols

Two semi-structured interview schedules were prepared:

- **For Students:** Questions about writing difficulties, perceptions of MTI, and changes noticed after instruction.
- **For Teachers:** Questions on instructional strategies, perceived benefits, and challenges of MTI.



Error Analysis Framework

A categorization framework was developed to classify common errors (e.g., article usage, subject–verb agreement, tense, word order, lexical choice) for both groups.

Procedure

1. **Pre-Test:** Both groups completed the initial writing task under exam-like conditions.
2. **Instructional Phase:**
 - **Experimental Group:** Lessons incorporated bilingual strategies, including:
 - Explaining English grammar rules in Tamil.
 - Using Tamil equivalents for difficult vocabulary.
 - Encouraging brainstorming in Tamil before drafting in English.
 - Translating short Tamil sentences into English as a practice exercise.
 - **Control Group:** Lessons delivered entirely in English, following the standard curriculum without L1 use.

The intervention lasted **six weeks** (three 45-minute sessions per week).
3. **Post-Test:** Both groups completed the second writing task.
4. **Interviews:** Conducted with 10 randomly selected students from each group and both English teachers.
5. **Error Analysis:** Writing samples were coded for types and frequency of errors.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

- Pre-test and post-test scores were analyzed using **paired-sample t-tests** to determine within-group improvement.
- **Independent-sample t-tests** compared post-test scores between groups.
- Effect sizes were calculated using **Cohen's d** to assess the magnitude of improvement.

Qualitative Analysis

- Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
- Recurring patterns were coded into themes such as “confidence building,” “concept clarity,” and “idea generation.”

Results

The findings are presented in two parts:

1. **Quantitative results** from the pre- and post-tests.
2. **Qualitative results** from student and teacher interviews.

Quantitative Results

Pre-Test vs. Post-Test within Groups

The paired-sample t-tests indicated that both the Experimental Group (MTI) and the Control Group (English-only) improved after the six-week intervention, but the improvement was significantly greater in the MTI group.

Table 1

Pre- and Post-Test Mean Scores within Groups

Group	Test	Mean Score	SD	t	p	Cohen's d
Experimental (n=30)	Pre-Test	54.27	5.83			
	Post-Test	68.83	6.11	14.21	<.001	1.45



Group	Test	Mean Score	SD	t	p	Cohen's d
Control (n=30)	Pre-Test	53.90	5.76			
	Post-Test	59.33	6.54	6.12	<.001	0.70

The MTI group's **mean improvement** was 14.56 points, compared to 5.43 points in the control group. The effect size for the MTI group ($d = 1.45$) indicates a **large effect**, while the control group's effect size ($d = 0.70$) was **moderate**.

Between-Group Post-Test Comparison

An independent-sample t-test on the post-test scores revealed a statistically significant difference in favour of the MTI group.

Table 2

Post-Test Score Comparison between Groups

Group	Mean Score	SD	t	p	Cohen's d
Experimental (n=30)	68.83	6.11	6.14	<.001	1.12
Control (n=30)	59.33	6.54			

The large effect size ($d = 1.12$) indicates that MTI had a **substantial positive impact** on students' writing performance compared to English-only instruction.

Improvement in Writing Subskills

Scores were also analysed by subskill (accuracy, organization, vocabulary, content relevance).

Table 3

Improvement by Writing Subskills (Post-Test Scores)

Subskill	Experimental Mean	Control Mean	Mean Difference	p
Accuracy	21.6 / 30	17.8 / 30	3.8	<.01
Organization	22.8 / 30	19.4 / 30	3.4	<.05
Vocabulary	15.2 / 20	12.7 / 20	2.5	<.05
Content Relevance	18.9 / 20	17.4 / 20	1.5	n.s.

MTI's strongest effects were observed in **accuracy** and **organization**, followed by vocabulary richness. Improvement in content relevance was smaller and statistically non-significant.

Qualitative Results

Thematic analysis of interviews yielded three dominant themes:

Confidence and Reduced Anxiety

Students in the MTI group reported feeling "less scared" of writing in English when initial explanations were given in Tamil. One student noted, "*When the teacher explained the grammar in Tamil, I understood faster and felt I could try more sentences.*"



Concept Clarity and Cognitive Transfer

Teachers observed that MTI helped students connect new English grammar structures with familiar Tamil patterns. For example, explaining the placement of adjectives in English by comparing it to Tamil sentence structure helped reduce word-order errors.

Idea Generation and Brainstorming

Students stated that being allowed to brainstorm in Tamil before drafting in English helped them generate richer content. This process minimized pauses and “blank moments” during writing tasks.

In summary, the quantitative findings demonstrate a **statistically significant and educationally meaningful impact** of MTI on English writing skills, while qualitative data suggest that MTI fosters confidence, conceptual clarity, and richer idea generation.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that **Mother Tongue Instruction (MTI)** significantly improves English writing performance among Tamil-medium learners compared to English-only instruction. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings align with previous research on the cognitive and pedagogical benefits of integrating the mother tongue in second language (L2) classrooms.

MTI and Writing Accuracy

The most notable improvement in the MTI group was in **accuracy**, with a mean post-test score 3.8 points higher than the control group. This finding supports Cummins’ (2007) **Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP)** theory, which posits that literacy skills developed in the first language (L1) can be transferred to L2. By explaining grammatical rules in Tamil, teachers enabled learners to map English structures onto familiar linguistic patterns, reducing common errors such as incorrect verb conjugation and article omission. This is consistent with Chen and Lin’s (2016) findings in Mandarin-English contexts, where L1 explanations led to reduced grammatical errors.

MTI and Organization in Writing

The MTI group also outperformed the control group in **organization**, echoing the work of García and Wei (2014) on **translanguaging** as a strategy for idea structuring. Brainstorming in Tamil allowed learners to conceptualize their narrative flow before translating it into English. This cognitive “prewriting” stage reduced disjointed paragraphing and improved coherence, aligning with Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory that learning is mediated by culturally familiar tools—in this case, the L1.

MTI and Vocabulary Richness

While vocabulary improvement was less dramatic than gains in accuracy and organization, the MTI group still showed a statistically significant advantage. The introduction of English vocabulary alongside Tamil equivalents appears to have reinforced semantic associations, aiding retention and retrieval during writing tasks. This supports Nation’s (2001) emphasis on the role of meaningful input in vocabulary acquisition.

MTI and Content Relevance

Interestingly, both groups achieved similar scores for content relevance, suggesting that MTI’s primary benefits are linguistic rather than thematic. Since both groups were given culturally familiar writing prompts, topic familiarity may have neutralized MTI’s impact on this subskill.

Affective and Motivational Factors

The qualitative data revealed that MTI reduced writing anxiety and enhanced learner confidence. Students’ comfort in receiving initial instructions in Tamil reflects Krashen’s (1982) **Affective Filter Hypothesis**, which suggests that lowering anxiety can increase language acquisition efficiency. Teachers also reported that MTI encouraged participation among quieter students, who felt less intimidated by the writing process.



Pedagogical Implications in the Tamil Nadu Context

These findings hold particular significance in Tamil Nadu, where English serves as a crucial academic and professional language, yet Tamil remains central to cultural identity. Rather than viewing MTI as a barrier to English proficiency, this study positions it as a **scaffolding tool** that can bridge linguistic and cognitive gaps. However, MTI must be applied strategically—over-reliance on L1 could limit exposure to L2, while judicious use can accelerate skill development.

Limitations of the Study

While the results are promising, several limitations must be acknowledged:

1. The study was conducted in two schools within a single district, limiting generalizability.
2. The intervention lasted six weeks; longer-term effects remain unknown.
3. Teacher expertise in balancing Tamil and English instruction could influence outcomes.

Future research should consider larger samples, multiple regions, and longitudinal designs to examine sustained impacts.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the **impact of Mother Tongue Instruction (MTI)** on English writing skills among Tamil-medium secondary school learners. The findings provide clear evidence that strategically integrating Tamil into English writing instruction can lead to significant improvements in accuracy, organization, and vocabulary richness. The **experimental group**, which received MTI-based lessons, demonstrated not only higher post-test scores but also greater learner confidence and conceptual clarity compared to the **control group** taught exclusively in English.

The results align with **Cummins' Common Underlying Proficiency theory**, **Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis**, and **Vygotsky's sociocultural framework**, all of which underscore the cognitive and affective benefits of leveraging the L1 in L2 learning. By enabling learners to connect new English structures with familiar Tamil patterns, MTI reduces the cognitive load, scaffolds complex writing tasks, and promotes a smoother transition from idea generation to written output.

Importantly, the study highlights that MTI does not hinder English fluency when used judiciously. Instead, it acts as a bridge, particularly in bilingual settings where linguistic distance between L1 and L2 is significant. While content relevance did not differ substantially between groups, the linguistic gains observed in the MTI group underscore the value of bilingual instructional strategies for writing development.

Recommendations

For Classroom Practice

1. **Strategic MTI Integration** – Teachers should incorporate Tamil selectively for grammar explanations, vocabulary clarification, and brainstorming stages, while encouraging English-only drafting and revision to maximise exposure.
2. **Bilingual Prewriting Activities** – Allow learners to outline ideas in Tamil before translating into English, thereby improving coherence and reducing writer's block.
3. **Error Analysis with L1 Support** – Use Tamil to explain recurring errors, making abstract grammar rules more accessible.
4. **Vocabulary Building through Dual Input** – Present new vocabulary with Tamil equivalents and example sentences in both languages to strengthen semantic links.

For Teacher Training

1. **Bilingual Pedagogy Modules** – Pre-service and in-service teacher training should include strategies for balancing L1 and L2 use effectively.
2. **Translanguaging Awareness** – Teachers should be trained in translanguaging principles to avoid over-reliance on L1.



For Policy Makers

1. **Curriculum Flexibility** – Language teaching policies should recognize and support MTI as a valid instructional tool, especially in rural and semi-urban schools.
2. **Resource Development** – Creation of bilingual teaching aids, glossaries, and writing handbooks tailored to Tamil-English contexts.

For Further Research

1. **Longitudinal Studies** – Explore the long-term effects of MTI on writing proficiency over multiple academic years.
2. **Expanded Scope** – Include learners from different regions of Tamil Nadu and compare rural vs. urban outcomes.
3. **Cross-Skill Analysis** – Investigate MTI's impact on other language skills such as speaking and reading comprehension.

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