

Factors Affecting Tamil Speaking Skills Among Grade 9 Students in Sinhala Medium Schools in Vavuniya South

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100600511>

Received: 05 June 2026; Accepted: 10 June 2026; Published: 29 June 2026

ABSTRACT

This study examined the factors affecting Tamil speaking skills among Grade 9 students learning Tamil as a Second National Language (SNL) in Sinhala medium schools in the Vavuniya South educational zone of Sri Lanka. A mixed-method research design was employed, with quantitative data collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 188 students from nine schools, and qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews with 15 Tamil language teachers. Findings revealed that students demonstrated weak to average Tamil speaking proficiency across all four language skills. Key barriers included pronunciation difficulties with Tamil-specific phoneme clusters, limited classroom speaking opportunities, language anxiety, examination-oriented teaching approaches, and insufficient use of interactive and multimedia-supported instructional methods. Teachers reported inadequate institutional support, shortage of Tamil-native teachers, and limited professional development opportunities as structural constraints. The study recommends adoption of learner-centred and communicative teaching strategies, increased multimedia resource use, and policy-level action to strengthen Tamil speaking competencies and advance national social integration in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Tamil speaking skills, second national language, language anxiety, communicative language teaching, Vavuniya South, Grade 9

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka is a multilingual and multicultural nation in which language serves not merely as a medium of communication but as the primary foundation for social cohesion and national unity. Following the 13th Amendment to the Constitution in 1987, both Sinhala and Tamil were recognised as official national languages, making Second National Language (SNL) instruction mandatory in schools from Grade 6 through Grade 9. The central policy objective is to reduce communication barriers between Sinhala and Tamil-speaking communities and to foster intercultural understanding among citizens (Rathnayaka, 2020).

Despite sustained policy efforts spanning more than three decades, practical implementation of SNL education continues to face considerable challenges. Students who complete four years of SNL Tamil instruction frequently remain unable to communicate effectively in the spoken language. Classroom instruction commonly emphasises reading and writing while oral communication receives comparatively limited attention, with national research documenting that fewer than 10% of SNL lesson time is allocated to speaking activities (Jayasinghe, 2022).

Grade 9 represents a critical transitional stage in secondary education at which students are expected to use language in practical communicative situations beyond textbook exercises. However, several barriers prevent effective oral language acquisition. Fear of making mistakes, pronunciation challenges arising from cross-linguistic interference, insufficient vocabulary, limited interactive classroom activities, and restricted exposure to Tamil-speaking environments reduce student participation in oral communication tasks (Perera, 2023).

This study aimed to examine the current level of Tamil speaking proficiency among Grade 9 students, identify factors contributing to speaking skill weakness, analyse currently used teaching methods, identify challenges teachers face in developing speaking competencies and recommend effective instructional strategies for

improving Tamil speaking skills. The findings contribute to evidence-based reform of second national language education within Sri Lankan schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking is widely recognised as the most essential and challenging skill in second language acquisition. Unlike reading and writing, oral production demands real-time language generation under communicative pressure (Brown, 2021). Effective speaking competence requires phonological accuracy, vocabulary range, grammatical control, fluency, and the ability to deploy language appropriately within social contexts (Thornbury, 2005).

Language anxiety has been consistently identified as one of the most powerful inhibitors of second language speaking development. Horwitz et al. (1986) described foreign language classroom anxiety as a distinct psychological construct involving communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Students with high anxiety levels tend to avoid oral participation, producing a self-reinforcing cycle of limited practice and reduced proficiency. In Sri Lankan SNL classrooms, fear of mispronunciation and negative peer evaluation has been specifically documented as a barrier to spoken Tamil use (Gunasekara, 2021).

Phonological interference from the learner's first language represents another documented challenge. Sinhala-speaking students frequently apply Sinhala phonological rules to Tamil pronunciation, particularly in distinguishing phoneme clusters absent in Sinhala. Such cross-linguistic interference affects accuracy and reduces learner confidence (Ramalingam et al., 2022).

The dominance of examination-oriented pedagogy has been identified as a structural barrier to communicative competence. Research indicates that over 80% of SNL classroom time is devoted to teacher explanation and written exercises (Jayasinghe, 2022). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) offer evidence-based alternatives prioritising meaningful interaction, role play, pair work, and authentic communication tasks. Studies confirm that TBLT produces measurable gains in speaking fluency and confidence (Livan & Md, 2021).

Technological integration has also been shown to improve second language speaking outcomes. Audio-visual resources, digital tools, and multimedia-assisted instruction provide authentic language input, support pronunciation modelling, and increase learner engagement (Gonzalez Cabanas & Nunez Mercado, 2024). However, the adoption of such resources in Sri Lankan SNL classrooms remains constrained by infrastructure and professional development limitations.

The literature identifies a research gap regarding Tamil speaking skill development specifically among Grade 9 students in Sinhala medium schools within the Vavuniya South bilingual zone. This study addresses that gap by examining speaking proficiency, contributing factors, and instructional practices within this specific educational context.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-method design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), in which quantitative data were collected and analysed first, followed by qualitative data to explain and deepen the findings.

The target population comprised all Grade 9 students and SNL Tamil teachers in Sinhala medium schools within the Vavuniya South educational zone. Nine schools met the inclusion criteria, with a target student population of 364. A sample of 188 students was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sampling table, ensuring a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error. All 15 Tamil language teachers in the zone constituted the teacher sample.

Student data were collected through a structured questionnaire employing five-point Likert-scale items assessing speaking confidence, classroom participation, pronunciation ability, experience with specific teaching methods,

availability of learning resources, and Tamil cultural knowledge. Teacher data were gathered through semi-structured interviews exploring instructional practices, classroom challenges, institutional support, and recommendations.

The questionnaire was piloted with 15 students and two teachers from a school outside the sample zone; feedback was used to improve item clarity and reduce technical jargon. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data were analysed thematically by research objective. Ethical clearance was obtained from relevant educational authorities, participation was voluntary, and anonymity was maintained through participant coding.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Objective 1: Student Tamil speaking proficiency levels

Table 1 presents students' self-assessed Tamil language proficiency. Speaking received the lowest ratings among all four skills. A combined 56.0% of students (weak: 29.8%, very weak: 26.1%) reported insufficient speaking competence. Tamil cultural knowledge showed the greatest weakness, with 55.3% rating themselves as very weak.

Table 1: Self-Assessed Tamil Language Proficiency among Grade 9 Students (N = 188)

Skill	Very Good	Good	Average	Weak	Very Weak
Speaking	8 (4.3%)	17 (9.0%)	58 (30.9%)	56 (29.8%)	49 (26.1%)
Listening	11 (5.9%)	9 (4.8%)	66 (35.1%)	59 (31.4%)	43 (22.9%)
Reading	10 (5.3%)	22 (11.7%)	60 (31.9%)	56 (29.8%)	40 (21.3%)
Writing	8 (4.3%)	21 (11.2%)	79 (42.0%)	41 (21.8%)	39 (20.7%)
Tamil Cultural Knowledge	3 (1.6%)	18 (9.6%)	29 (15.4%)	34 (18.1%)	104 (55.3%)

Objective 2: Factors affecting Tamil speaking skill development

Pronunciation difficulties with Tamil phoneme contrasts emerged as a major barrier. Table 2 presents student self-assessments of ability to produce five key Tamil phoneme pairs. The retroflex pair $\text{ɻ}/\text{ɻ}$ (T/D) was most challenging, with 80 students (42.6%) disagreeing and 71 (37.8%) strongly disagreeing that they could produce it correctly.

Table 2: Student Self-Assessment of Tamil Phoneme Pair Pronunciation Ability (N = 188)

Phoneme Pair	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
k/g/h (க/க/ஹ)	10 (5.3%)	18 (9.6%)	30 (16.0%)	70 (37.2%)	60 (31.9%)
s/j/sh (ச/ஜ/ஷ)	8 (4.3%)	15 (8.0%)	25 (13.3%)	75 (39.9%)	65 (34.6%)
p/b (ப/ப)	12 (6.4%)	20 (10.6%)	28 (14.9%)	68 (36.2%)	60 (31.9%)
t/d (த/த)	6 (3.2%)	14 (7.4%)	22 (11.7%)	78 (41.5%)	68 (36.2%)
T/D (ɻ/ɻ)	5 (2.7%)	12 (6.4%)	20 (10.6%)	80 (42.6%)	71 (37.8%)

Regarding student motivation, only 8.0% of students (n = 15) reported very high interest in SNL Tamil learning, while 34.6% (n = 65) reported very low interest and 33.5% (n = 63) reported no interest. Approximately two-thirds of the student sample lacked meaningful motivation to engage with Tamil language learning.

Objective 3: Teaching methods currently in use

Table 3 presents the frequency of use of various instructional methods as reported by teachers. Written assignments and picture description tasks were most consistently used. Debate was almost entirely absent, with eight of 15 teachers reporting they never use it. Drama and role play were also rarely employed.

Table 3: Frequency of Teaching Method Use as Reported by Teachers (N = 15)

Teaching Method	Frequently	Sometimes	Moderately	Rarely	Never
Conversations / Dialogue	3	5	4	2	1
Storytelling	1	3	4	3	4
Drama / Role Play	2	2	3	4	4
Songs	5	1	4	5	0
Debate	0	0	1	6	8
Written Assignments	6	7	2	0	0
Picture Description	6	4	5	0	0

Fewer than two teachers regularly used multimedia projectors; computers, Tamil radio programmes, video clips, and audio recordings were rarely or never used by the majority.

Objective 4: Challenges faced by teachers

Table 4 presents teacher ratings of institutional support. Across all stakeholder categories, the majority of teachers rated support as weak or very weak, reflecting systemic marginalisation of SNL Tamil instruction.

Table 4: Teacher Ratings of Institutional Support for SNL Tamil Instruction (N = 15)

Stakeholder	Excellent	Good	Moderate	Weak	Very Weak
Subject Supervisors	1	3	2	5	4
Teacher Advisors	2	1	4	3	5
School Principal	0	4	3	6	2
Other School Teachers	3	2	1	5	4
Parents	1	2	3	5	4

Interview analysis revealed that 73.3% of teachers (n = 11) used Sinhala as their primary classroom language during Tamil lessons, substantially reducing authentic target language input. Only four teachers (26.7%) were Tamil native speakers. Non-native Tamil teachers acknowledged difficulty modelling retroflex and dental consonant distinctions. Teachers reported that two allocated periods per week were insufficient for both curriculum coverage and communicative practice, and recommended appointment of Tamil-native teachers, school-level Tamil Day events, and structured use of the local Tamil-speaking community for authentic interaction tasks.

Objective 5: Recommended instructional strategies

Based on integrated student and teacher data, the following strategies were identified as most feasible and effective: (a) structured conversational pair work and dialogue activities; (b) picture-based description tasks; (c) Tamil songs for pronunciation and vocabulary development; (d) community exposure activities using the Tamil-speaking environment in Vavuniya; and (e) multimedia-assisted instruction including Tamil video clips and audio recordings.

DISCUSSION

The finding that over half of Grade 9 students rated their Tamil speaking ability as weak or very weak reflects a persistent gap between SNL policy intentions and classroom outcomes, consistent with national research on the failure of examination-oriented instruction to produce communicative competence (NIE Research, 2020; Jayasinghe, 2022).

The documented pronunciation difficulties with Tamil phoneme contrasts reflect a well-established pattern in second language phonology. Sinhala lacks the retroflex-dental distinctions central to Tamil, and students systematically apply Sinhala phonological rules when producing Tamil sounds. Combined with fear of peer evaluation, this produces the self-reinforcing avoidance cycle described by Horwitz et al. (1986), in which anxiety reduces practice, reduced practice weakens ability, and weakening ability increases anxiety further.

The near-complete absence of debate, drama, and role play from Tamil classrooms represents a missed opportunity. These activities have strong empirical support as tools for developing oral fluency and communicative confidence. The current dominance of written assignments, while useful for vocabulary development, does not sufficiently expose students to spontaneous oral production under communicative pressure, which TBLT research identifies as essential for speaking skill development (Livan & Md, 2021).

The finding that 73.3% of teachers used Sinhala rather than Tamil as the primary instructional medium is particularly significant. Reduced target language input limits acquisition opportunities inconsistent with both Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Swain's Output Hypothesis. Non-Tamil-native teachers were further found to model pronunciation inaccurately, potentially reinforcing phonological errors in students' developing language systems.

The weak institutional support reported across all stakeholder categories indicates that SNL Tamil instruction is treated as a peripheral rather than a priority subject. This institutional marginalisation reduces teacher motivation, restricts access to resources, and signals to students that Tamil proficiency is not genuinely valued by the school community.

A contextually distinctive finding is the underutilisation of the bilingual Vavuniya environment as a language learning resource. Tamil-speaking markets, public offices, and community spaces in the area provide authentic communicative contexts that are rarely leveraged in formal instruction. Community-integrated language learning approaches could substantially bridge the gap between classroom instruction and real-world language use.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Tamil speaking competencies among Grade 9 students in Sinhala medium schools in the Vavuniya South zone remain significantly below the level required for practical communication. The weaknesses result from an interconnected set of factors: language anxiety and fear of mispronunciation; phonological interference from Sinhala; examination-oriented pedagogy that marginalises oral communication; limited use of interactive and multimedia-supported teaching methods; shortage of Tamil-native teachers; and insufficient institutional support.

Effective improvement requires coordinated action at the classroom, institutional, and policy levels. At the classroom level, teachers should integrate communicative and task-based activities and utilise the authentic Tamil-speaking environment of the Vavuniya community. At the institutional level, schools should include SNL oral communication in assessment frameworks and provide visible commitment to Tamil programmes. At the policy level, the appointment of Tamil-native teachers and expansion of professional development for SNL instructors are essential structural measures.

Second national language education is not merely an academic objective — it is a cornerstone of national reconciliation in post-conflict Sri Lanka. Investing in effective Tamil speaking instruction at the secondary school level directly advances the communicative bridges between communities that the constitutional language policy envisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For classroom teachers:

1. Implement structured pair conversations, role plays, and drama as regular components of Tamil lessons, moving beyond the current dominance of written tasks.
2. Incorporate Tamil songs, audio recordings, and short video clips to model accurate pronunciation and provide authentic language input.
3. Design community interaction tasks using the Tamil-speaking environment of Vavuniya such as market visits and public service interactions — as authentic communicative practice contexts.

For school administrators:

1. Include SNL oral performance components in student assessment and progress records to increase accountability and motivation.
2. Organise school-level Tamil Day events and inter-class speaking activities to build student confidence and positive attitudes toward Tamil.
3. Provide visible institutional support for Tamil language teachers, including access to multimedia facilities and professional collaboration opportunities.

For educational policymakers:

1. Prioritise appointment of Tamil-mother-tongue teachers for SNL instruction, particularly in bilingual zones such as Vavuniya South.
2. Expand professional development programmes focusing on communicative and task-based language teaching for SNL instructors.
3. Review SNL curriculum time allocation to enable both curriculum coverage and meaningful communicative practice.

For future researchers:

1. Comparative studies across different provinces and educational zones would clarify whether Vavuniya South findings are generalisable nationally.
2. Longitudinal intervention studies examining the impact of communicative teaching approaches on Tamil speaking proficiency would strengthen the evidence base for policy reform.

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