# A Study on Errors Made By Tamil Speaking Adult Students in Using Present Simple Tense in English

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**Abstract:** The paper examines the errors made by the Tamil speaking students of South Eastern University of Sri Lanka in using present simple tense in English. It focuses on the errors on the third person singular present tense agreement with morpheme –s and the inter-language grammar influence. The finding suggests that the Tamil speaking English language learners have difficulty in the use of –s due to mother tongue influence. The phonological similarity, omission, incorrect suffixation and substitution are the most common types of errors found in their usage.

**Keywords:** Second Language Learner, Second Language Teaching, Error Analysis, Inflectional Morpheme, Grammar in ESL

## Introduction

The opportunity to learn English in schools are widely open but the necessity is not equally realized by all. The way that people in villages look at English is not similar to that of the people in cities look at it. The environment, the interest of parents, students and motivation of teachers contribute much in this regard. The students who come to universities are also bounded to such conditions. Of all tenses, simple present tense has become a difficult part for such children who come to universities. It is obvious from daily activities of the students' class work of South Eastern University of Sri Lanka and gave a thought to continue a study on the usage of simple present tense among the first year students of Arts of SEUSL.

Turning to the second language speaker, there are a number of parallels with first language process. The novice second language learner cannot develop all aspects of the planning stages simultaneously and therefore selectively uses only those aspects that have already been organized (Ellis 1986).

However, the relative lack of success of most L2 learners in comparison to L1 learners suggest that there may be radical differences in the way first and second languages are acquired. These differences may be of many kinds it is likely for instance, that differences in the social conditions in which L1 and L2 learners learn have some kind of impact. L1 learners, for example, do not experience social distance, it also possible that L1 and L2 acquisition draw on different learning mechanism because most adult L2 learners no longer have access to universal grammar (UG) Ellis (2012).

Rutherford (1999) mentioned another challenge facing the learner of English is one having to do with the ways in which semantic relations are preserved over syntactic formations that differ in category, in size and in rank. It is a question grammatically phonemes, of 'what goes together with what' – that is, collocation - and the challenge is greater for learners whose mother tongue makes less use of grammatical phonemes than does English.

The objective of this study is to examine the acquisition of English tense specifically the present simple tense as it is considered to be problematic for the adult Tamil speaking students who learn English as a second language. This difficulty can be attributed to the differences between the first and second language(s) (i.e. Tamil and English respectively). The main objective of this study is to analyze students' errors in present simple tense and identify the sources of errors as taken from the grammaticality judgment task and the elicited written production task by adult English language learners as well as to provide some pedagogical implications for the English as a second language classroom teaching practice as well as for second language teachers and researchers.

**Theoretical Background**

The agreement of words in forming a sentence in simple present tense carries a number of characters. Different forms of the verb 'have' and 'be', dropping of the 's' of the third person singular, spelling of the forms that take the 's' and 'es' of the third person singular, acceptance of *do* (or third-person singular *does*) with the bare infinitive of the main verb in questions and negations, and sometimes for emphasis, expressing ideas of different situations, and the agreement subject-verb are identical among its features.

There are several factors to be observed in connection with the higher ratio of nouns to verbs. These have to do with the semantics of the verb, the derivation of the noun, and some maters of common usage, (Rutherford, 1999 p.48). The orders and sequences of acquisition can be altered through formal instruction. In modern English, verbs have lost all their inflections for number and person except in the third person of the singular number. (Rao and Wren & Martin 2008 p.78). The words that do not obey the regular pattern are complicated to the L2 learners. The words such as each, every, neither-nor, and either-or are a few examples. As noted by Amin, Eravelly, and Ibrahim (2008) when two subjects are joined by the words either ....or we use a singular verb when both subjects are singular and a plural verb when both subjects are plural. If one subject is singular and other subject is plural, the verb agrees with the subject that is closer to it.

Some irregular verbs may confuse students. The verb 'be' plays a majour role in simple present. The student should understand the different form of be associated with the subject of a sentence. Also the learner should know where he can accept such "be" in a sentence in case of simple present tense. Although he knows that the word 'be' consists of am, is, are, he fails sometimes as he is unaware of the character of the relevant subject and makes errors. Different use of -'s is again a confusion for the L2 learner.

Ellis (2012) argues that errors appeared when there were some similarities and some contrasts between equivalent items or structures in the two languages. Once students apply this concepts they neglect the changes accepting differences for e.g. 'has' for third person singular.

Thenext concern is related to the dropping of the 's' of the third person singular which many students seem to forget . Most of the L2 learners restrict the language to their mother tongue. The most difficult structure are regular past and third person –s. On the basis of these findings, it has been suggested that there must be a natural order of acquisitions that all learners follow (Ellis 2012. p.22).

Another difficulty is the spelling of the forms that take the 's' of the third person singular. Sometimes, only 's' is added (rise – rises) while in some forms 'es' is added (catch – catches.) Sometimes, the L2 learner has poor understanding of the sounds of English. Further it comprises varieties of morphemes(sh, ch, x, o. y) (Lott 2007, p.6). This may cause confusing. Ultimately they choose own rule in using the verbs when third person singular is present in a sentence.

The interrogative and negative forms which necessitate the auxiliary 'do' may represent another challenge for beginner students. For the L2 learner of English, even he is very careful in the use of do and does, he randomly makes error due to its complexity. The place where do, or does goes in a sentence and the use of verb corresponding to the doer and the form of the sentence are again a mess. As an L2 learner, he sometimes refuses the words 'do' or misplaces it or wrongly uses.

Another important feature of present simple tense is Tag Question which L2 learners neglect to use in their day to day English. Tamil speaking students are rarely aware of its use because they do not follow such systematic rules as it is in English when they use their mother tongue. "We use negative tag question with positive statements and Positive tag question with negative statements. Also we use short forms and pronouns in tag question where the pronoun must agree with the subject." ( Ameen, Eravelly, and Ibrahim 2008 p. 94).

Generally, Tamil speaking learners of English are hardly aware of the different use of simple present. Until it comes to their normal practice they may not care about it. Because, the importance of it is rarely understood by the teacher of English too. Generally simple present tense is used to (1) state facts or general truths, (2) to express habits or customs (3) to relate future plans (often regarding

programs and timetables) and (4) to tell jokes and stories or to report sporting events in real time. Marjory Fuchs and Margaret Bonner.

Negative and questions take 'do'. Generally sentences take 'do' and 'don't' except third person singular which takes ' doesn't' and 'does'. Eastwood (2008). Do not add's' to the main verb in a negative sentence. E.g. He doesn't plays. Do not add's' to the main verb in a questions. E.g. Does he plays. - Doreen Da Costa. As noted by Rutherford (1999), 'inversion" of subject and auxiliary (including be)" or (if only an inflected main verb is available for inversion) the created 'tense-carries' do. To view what is often looked upon by learners as a bizarre and perversely complicated formation for simply asking questions in English, and that is in terms of the strong tendency of English grammar to preserve its word order. Thus consider for a moment the relationship between a declarative sentence like John smokes and its corresponding yes-no question, Does John smoke? If abstract away the question-making paraphernalia of 'tense carrier', 'do-support', 'inversion', etc. A yes/no question begins with an auxiliary verb. An auxiliary verb is a form of be or have or model verb. In the present simple we use a form of do. The main **be** also comes before the subject in a question. Most wh questions begin with a question word + an auxiliary verb + the subject. Who and what can be the subject of a question. The word order is the same as in a statement. Who and what can also be the object. (Eastwood, 2008, p. 84-90)

## Methodology
The study will focus on both quantitative and qualitative research methodology. The sample size of this case study comprises 30 first year students from the Faculty of Arts and Culture. The primary data were answer scripts of the students in response to the 70 different sentences with all possible forms that can be used in simple present tense. They were referred for authentic structural, textual and linguistic errors on the specified issues. According to the research suggestions are made to overcome the issue. However, unfortunately, the learners' contact and use of English outside the classroom is limited and in most cases they have no opportunity to contact or to use English outside the classroom. Since proficiency level may vary among the learners, their proficiency level was assessed independently. Different grouping of given answers was taken into consideration for analyzing the data which could gave a hint to categorize or define the most specified areas where the learners make mistakes.

## Results and Discussions
The learning approach on simple present tense, different structures in the subject verb agreement and mother tongue influence are some of the causes of errors.The errors in the use of present simple have been divided into ten different categories such as 'third person singular', ''third person plural ' each' / 'every', 'be with singular noun,' be' with plural noun', 'first person singular' 'first person plural'' 'interrogative objective',' interrogative subjective', and 'question tag'.
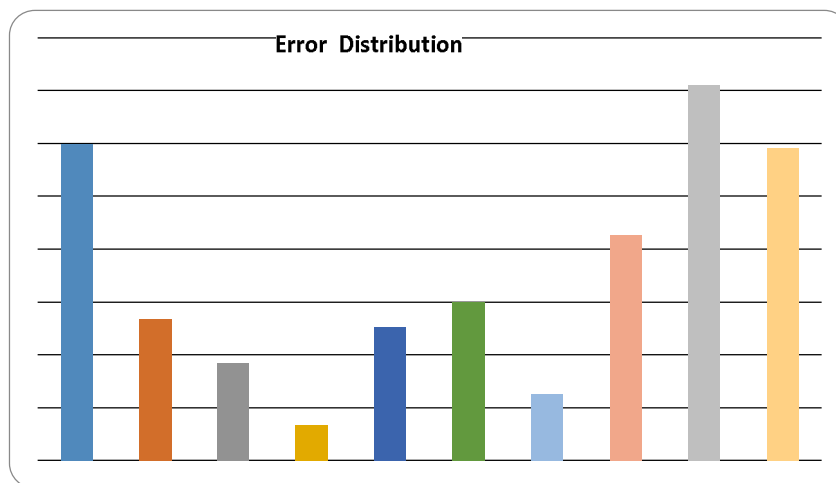
Figure 1: Bar Chart for Error Distribution

The above figure 1 indicates the errors made by the students for different types of questions. In order to analyze the data it has been divided into ten different topics. Names are represented by the X-axis whereas Y axis represents the errors in percentage.

The graph indicates the highest percentage of errorsfor 'Question Tag'. That reaches 70.83 percentages. The reason for such highest rate of error is sometimes due to the lack of use or absence of use in their daily use. Students fail to understand the appropriate structure. Basically the relevant response related to the positive sentence is negative question tag and it is connected to the proper pronoun found in the simple present tense and the negative sentence always takes the positive form of question tag with the appropriate pronoun. Although a similar structure is not found in Tamil language we can relate it to the place where questiontags are used. Unless it becomes practical in one's day to day life it is very difficult to eradicate such errors. The best choice for it is improve speech activities.

Sentences in third person singular have become very challenging and the percentage of error rises up to 59.66%. As we have discussed in the literaryreview most of the students have made mistakes in it. This may be because it consists of different rules in constructing sentences in third person singular. Acceptance of 's', 'es' and ' does ' have become complicated for the students. I understand students' knowledge related to simple present is not systematically developed. During their school career the students had been taught about the use of simple present but the environment to practice the language or the interest would have been very less and therefore they have forgotten the rule. During the university career the lesson would have been discussed. But time allocated for the particular chapter would be not sufficient to eradicate their errors. Students should design themselves a plan to learn English in their own. Language laboratory, individual teacher-student interaction can remarkably provide room for better learning process.I understand the diagramme given in this paper will provide opportunity to correct one's mistake related to present simple tense and learn it systematically and confidently.

The 's' of the third person singular in English is replaced with 'aan', 'athu' and 'aal' in Tamil. If we can drill the sentences associated with these characters in both languages, it will easily help students to learn with the existing language knowledge, Tamil and improve the knowledge of English.

To avoid the problem related to varieties of morphemes (sh, ch, x, o. y), compare the rules in Tamil language in forming plural nouns as in 'waahanam+kal → waahanangal', 'pul+kal → putkal'Similar examples can be elicited from students and ask them to follow the same procedure in using verbs in third person singular with such varieties of endings. Teachers should encourage the students to prepare a list including verbs that take the suffix –*s* or -*es* and other verb forms that include phonological changes to the verb forms such as try (i.e. tries) etc. Students must be encouraged to list the verb forms of the present simple tense with third person singular subjects (-*s*, -*es* or other verb

forms) and another list consisting the same verb forms of the present simple tense with first and second person singular subjects.

The next category is 'each' / 'every'. This has also the syntax difficulty among students and the ideas shared with present simple will be applicable to this. In every case, the students must see the verb if it takes 's' or 'es' or just it is accepted as the base form. Then he can continue the other steps.

In third person plural (26.66%), the use of 'be' for both singular (25%) and plural (30%), most of the errors are due to the presence of nous, some are always singular and some are always plural in meaning. Singular form such as news, politics, science and plural form such as the homeless, the injured, cattle are a few examples. List of such nouns can be brought to students' notice regularly to minimize such errors. Tamil translation of these words,are purely in singular form. Hence, the existing Tamil language will influence on the target language English to recognize the similarity and accept the correct use. Every day we can spend a few minutes for such task before the teacher starts the regular lesson.

The error ratio for interrogative sentencesanswersto the question who (subjective form) is 42.66% whereas objective form denotes only12.5%. It indicates that there is much confusion among the students in constructing questions in present simple in English. The correct choice for 'do', 'does' and the verb-s and the position of them are much mistaken. Mother tongue influence of Tamil can also be a reason for making mistakes here as it does not contain such different structure for it. Especially the subjective form is not identified by the students well. To avoid this error we can introduce play card system among the students in the classroom.

Subject + Object + Verb is the basic rule for a sentence associated with Tamil language. But in English it has an order such as Subject + Verb + Object. As it takes different order for questions in English, Tamil language doesn't take changes in the order of words of questions. The structure of the sentence in English for aninterrogative pronoun 'who' is just like in Tamil,the mother tongue when object is absent in the sentence. We can compare the common format and elaborate it to other different structure then the students may avoid such errors easily.Always the verb takes-s, when the answer to the question is about the subject (Amin, Erravelly. and Ibrahim. 2009 p. 122 )

In case of first person singular and plural the bars indicate error of 18.3% and 6.66% respectively. Although first person singular has significant amount it is due to the carelessness of the students. If we make the students aware of their errors and provide enough exercises to identify their errors we can simply avoid them remarkably.

The diagramme-1 will help students to confirm the knowledge in forming sentences in present simple tense. As the third person singular is the most challenging one I have given a special concern on it and tried to elaborate its function with an ideal diagramme to prove the accuracy.

Firstly, we focus on a sentence in present simple third person singular which possessesmain verb (e.g. run, study, play, etc.). Then we shall confirm if it is positive or negative. If it is positive we can choose the path on the left of the diagramme, otherwise we may choose the right. Again, we must confirm if the sentence is interrogative or the other. If it is interrogative it should satisfy the equation for the relevant type. Similarly we can compare our sentences with the respective equation and confirm our answers. In the diagramme every equation carries an example that will also help the learner to confirm his or her sentences. Until the learner becomes accustomed to it one can continue the effect.

Assume that the following words will be replaced with respective abbreviations. S-subject, V- verb, O-object and Wh-questions-WHQ.

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                    ┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
                    │      Third Person Singular-Present Simple     │
                    └─────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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| Positive<br>S + V-s + O<br>Bahey play**s** | Negative<br>S + doesn't + V + O<br>Bahey doesn't play cricket |

| Does + S +V + O?<br>Does Bahey play cricket? | Interrogative | Doesn't + S +V + O?<br>Doesn't Bahey play cricket? |

| WHQ + does + S +V + O?<br>Why does Bahey go there? | Wh-questions:<br>Answer to the question is | WHQ + doesn't + S +V + O?<br>Why doesn't Bahey go there? |

| Who + V-s + O?<br>Who knows the answer? | Who/What:<br>Answer to the question is the | Who + doesn't + V + O?<br>Who doesn't know the |

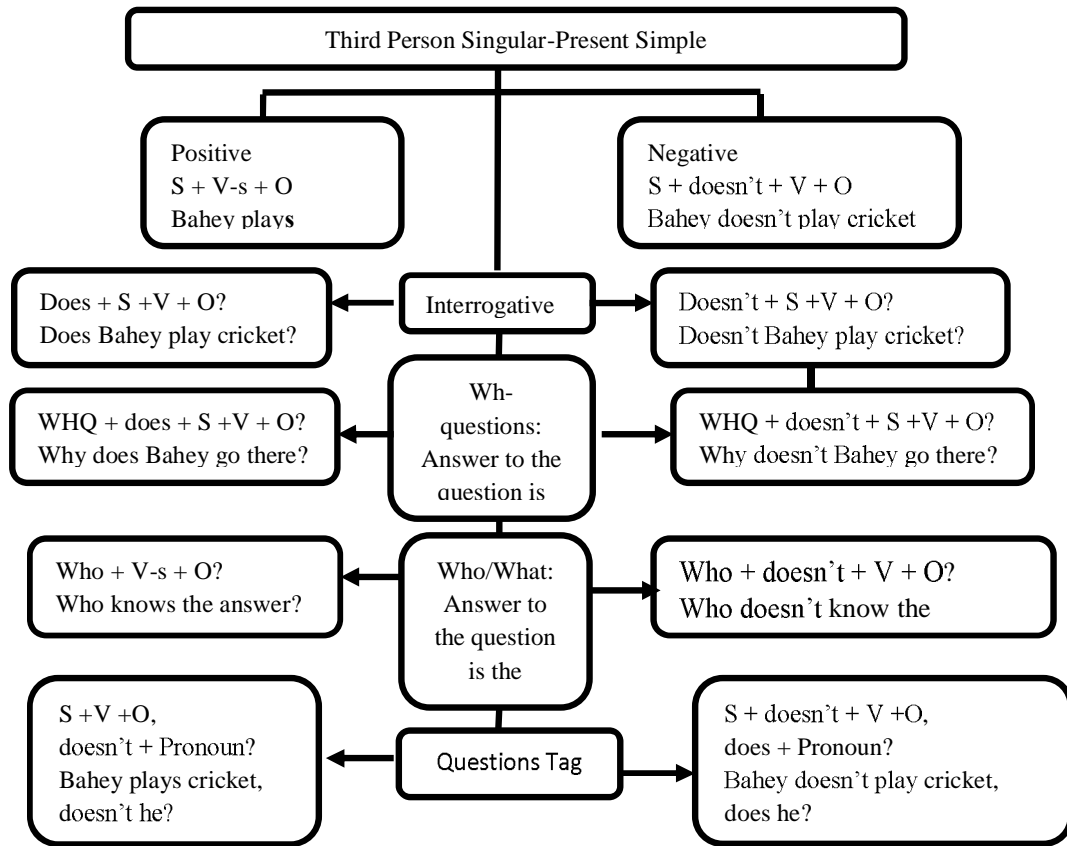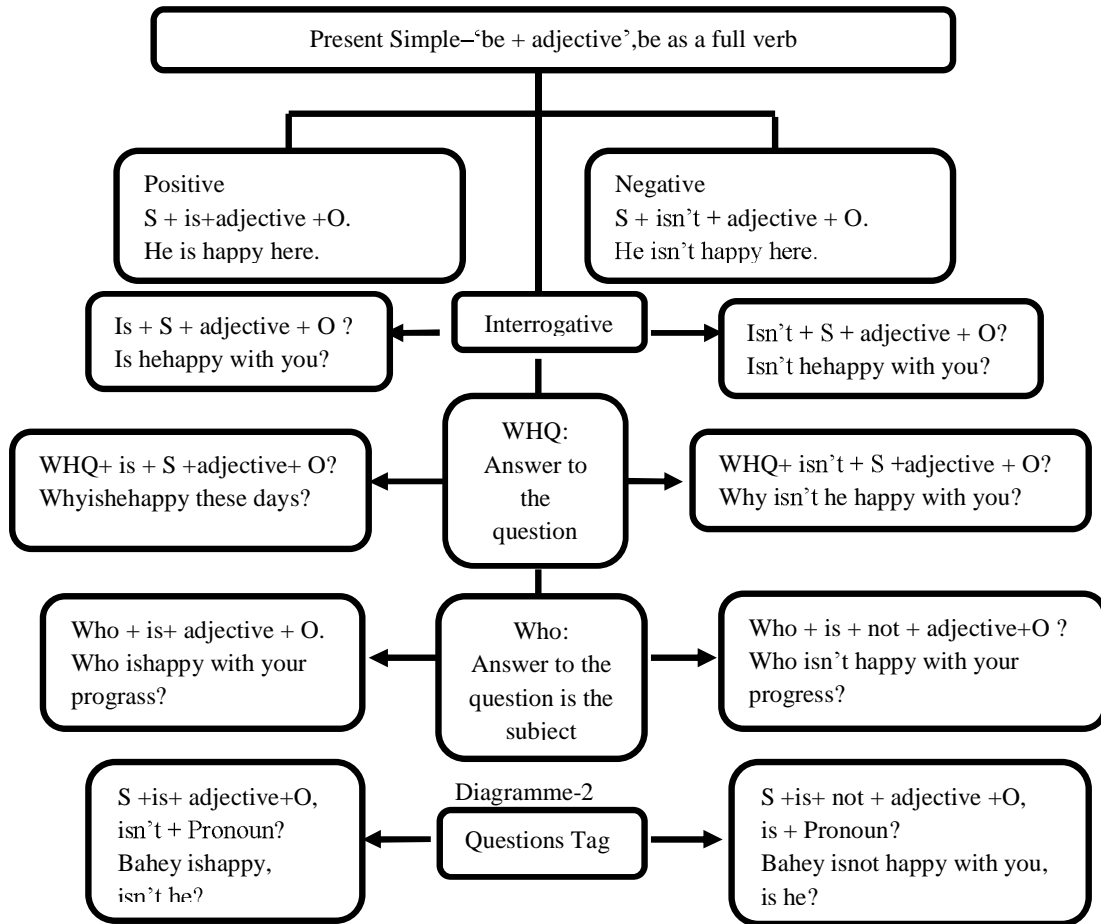| S +V +O,<br>doesn't + Pronoun?<br>Bahey plays cricket,<br>doesn't he? | Questions Tag | S + doesn't + V +O,<br>does + Pronoun?<br>Bahey doesn't play cricket,<br>does he? |

Diagramme-1

Diagramme-2 is associated with "be" and adjective or noun. As it is explained in the diagramme-1, students can follow the same procedure for the diagramme-2 to confirm their own sentences.

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│     Present Simple–'be + adjective',be as a full verb     │
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┌──────────────────────────┐          ┌──────────────────────────┐
│ Positive                 │          │ Negative                 │
│ S + is+adjective +O.     │          │ S + isn't + adjective + O.│
│ He is happy here.        │          │ He isn't happy here.     │
└──────────────────────────┘          └──────────────────────────┘
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┌──────────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────────┐
│ Is + S + adjective + O ?  │ ← │ Interrogative │ → │ Isn't + S + adjective + O?│
│ Is hehappy with you?     │   └──────────────┘   │ Isn't hehappy with you?  │
└──────────────────────────┘                       └──────────────────────────┘
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                            ┌──────────────┐
                            │ WHQ:         │
┌──────────────────────────┐│ Answer to    │┌──────────────────────────────┐
│ WHQ+ is + S +adjective+ O?│← the         →│ WHQ+ isn't + S +adjective + O?│
│ Whyishehappy these days? ││ question     ││ Why isn't he happy with you? │
└──────────────────────────┘└──────────────┘└──────────────────────────────┘
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                            ┌──────────────┐
┌──────────────────────────┐│ Who:         │┌──────────────────────────────┐
│ Who + is+ adjective + O. ││ Answer to the││ Who + is + not + adjective+O ?│
│ Who ishappy with your    │← question is the →│ Who isn't happy with your  │
│ prograss?                ││ subiect      ││ progress?                    │
└──────────────────────────┘└──────────────┘└──────────────────────────────┘
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                     Diagramme-2
┌──────────────────────┐┌──────────────┐┌──────────────────────────────┐
│ S +is+ adjective+O,  ││ Questions Tag││ S +is+ not + adjective +O,   │
│ isn't + Pronoun?     │←              →│ is + Pronoun?                │
│ Bahey ishappy,       │└──────────────┘│ Bahey isnot happy with you,  │
│ isn't he?            │                │ is he?                       │
└──────────────────────┘                └──────────────────────────────┘
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**Conclusion**

In learning English as a second language, new structures have to be built up on old structures, (ii) that simple structures should be instructed before the complex and (iii) that the linguistic interaction between certain structures (e.g. "do. insertion" and ' negation') are respected so that the corresponding structures may be introduced successively (Hyltenstam and Pienemann, 1985)

Accommodate enough room for speech activities. The first choice should go to the speech then the other skills can follow it. During this period make students to acquire the real language from the environment and concentrate less interest on correction until they learn from the environment. Provide opportunities to realize the errors and catch the appropriate term from actual speech by teacher or any printed, recorded documents. Make the class always authentic.

We can give students a number of different responsibilities. We can ask some of our students to teach the others. We can maximize individual work.

Different task based on the present simple must be introduced. Also it can be generalized or regularized. A single component can be looked at different angles so that the learner will understand the changes himself. We also can assign each student for separate set of identified character and ask him or her to present it to the class frequently. This will provide better environment for reemphasizing.

Teaching "subject and verb agreement" is another area that teachers should give emphasis to. Not only concentrating on the pronouns as subjects but also subjects in other different forms such as noun phrase, noun clause, and noun with adjective clause should also be taught as well. Most importantly,

Teachers and language instructors should also teach grammatical rules through context. After teaching the particular rule with regard to the present simple tense, the student should apply and practice that particular grammatical rule in a context. The teachers may follow these steps: Teachers may give a multiple choice exercise or a story with some deleted words related to the error types in present simple tense such as adverb of time, subject and verb agreement. Next, the students have to answer.

The teacher may organize the students into small groups of approximately 4-5 students each. The students may then be given a passage, a story or a paragraph where possible errors including omission of agreement suffixes, misspelling errors, substitution of other tenses or verb forms, etc are underlined. The students should learn how to work as a team. Firstly, they should read and discuss them in their groups. Secondly, they should give explanation why the underlined words are wrong. Then, they should try to correct those errors.

Make the language class much authentic, focus much on places where the L2 learners frequently make errors, provide students to bring the language orally and provide environment for listing, at the early stage simply neglect the mistakes and provide opportunities for free and confident move of the students.

In conclusion, the finding suggest that the first language (L1) interference is problematic for adult Tamil speaking students learning English as a second language. The source of errors may come from lack of communicative language teaching or lack of enough practice of present simple tense. The finding of the present study could provide useful insights to language teachers who teach present simple tense in English grammar. As a result, the teachers and the English language researchers would be able to work hand in hand in improving the present simple tense resulting successful language learning. However, it can be said that the findings from this study may not be conclusive. After all it is hard to say that the most serious problem for non native English speakers is the use of the present simple tense because of the low opportunity for using English in their environment. We hope that the results of this research would be useful for English teachers a well as the Tamil speaking learners of English

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