

## **Alternative Strategy Use and the Impact of MT on Vocabulary Acquisition: Case of Sri Lankan ESL Learners**

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### **Abstract**

The influence of the mother tongue (MT) on second language (L2) acquisition has opened a wide array of scholarly discussions in Applied Linguistics. In this scenario, the influence of MT on L2 vocabulary is imperative. Thus, the major objective of this research was to find the alternative vocabulary strategies used by Sri Lankan ESL learners in L2 (English) vocabulary acquisition and to analyze the impact of MT (Sinhala) in using these strategies. It further aims to provide recommendations for ESL educators on tailoring vocabulary instruction based on students' linguistic backgrounds. Qualitative methods of data collection: sentence translations, interviews, and impromptu speeches, were utilized to gather primary data. The sample comprised 30 undergraduates from a state university in Sri Lanka. The study found that students employ alternative vocabulary strategies of synonyms, substitutions, hyponyms, homonyms, calques, circumlocution, omissions, borrowings, and gestures in written and spoken tests. Further, participants mentioned that they use English vocabulary in line with Sinhala terms, with less emphasis on contextual meaning and precise terminology. The impact of MT on L2 vocabulary acquisition has not been profoundly studied in the field of Applied Linguistics. Thus, this research will shed light on future ESL research fostering new research ideas.

*Keywords:* mother tongue, second language, ESL learners, language acquisition, alternative strategies

### **Introduction**

Learning English has become a significant endeavor in Sri Lanka for various reasons. Despite the education system's support, a considerable majority of Sri Lankan youth struggle to enhance their English language proficiency. A primary factor contributing to this issue is a prevalent fear and aversion towards the language (Weerakoon, 2022). Nevertheless, Sri Lankan undergraduates increasingly recognize the importance of mastering English and

actively seek to improve their skills using a variety of strategies. They employ diverse methods to effectively navigate different situations in their daily lives. The acquisition and use of English as a second language (L2) are influenced by the mother tongue (MT) (Delbio et al, 2018), impacting learners phonetically, syntactically, morphologically, and, to a lesser extent, semantically. The most significant challenge faced by ESL learners is often a lack of vocabulary (Rajab et al, 2015); conversely, grammar is less of a challenge, as they tend to construct sentences based on their MT. To address this vocabulary gap, learners utilize various strategies, and the influence of MT over their vocabulary choice is of paramount importance.

This study aims to document the strategies employed by ESL learners to substitute unfamiliar vocabulary and to explore the influence of MT in using these strategies.

**Research problem:**

- How do ESL learners overcome the L2 vocabulary gap in writing and speaking?
- How does the MT influence the use of alternative strategies by Sri Lankan ESL learners?

**Research questions:**

- What are the L2 vocabulary teaching methods in Sri Lanka?
- How does the MT influences on L2 acquisition?
- What are the challenges faced by Sri Lankan ESL learners in L2 vocabulary acquisition?

**Background**

The establishment of English as a medium of education in Sri Lanka can be traced back to the colonial era, where its primary purpose was to produce individuals capable of serving as intermediaries between the colonial authorities and the local Sri Lankan population. The European administration and occupation facilitated the promotion of Western education, consequently marginalizing vernacular education by deeming it inadequate. This educational framework has been referred to as the "three-tiered education system" (Sirisena, 1969; Rupasinghe, 1982), which served language as a powerful discriminatory factor.

Private schools	Children from wealthy landowners	English medium
Anglo-Vernacular schools	Children of traders, merchants, and small landowners	English and local languages
Vernacular schools	Children from peasants and socially unprivileged families in rural areas	Vernaculars

**Table 1: Three Tired Education System (Jayasuriya, 1977)**

In 1990s, the education reforms in which language played a pivotal role parted English and administrative power. In 1939, the enactment of Education Ordinance No. 31 granted authority to the Ministry of Education to develop and implement educational policies. In 1943 a policy document was produced addressing the issue of language in education, recommending that the student's mother tongue should serve as the medium of instruction in schools. With the implementation of the Free Education Policy in 1945, indigenous languages gradually gained prominence within the education system. Consequently, only a limited number of private schools offering English medium instruction were allowed to operate with no government funding (Jayasuriya, 1977).

The achievement of independence in 1948 shifted greater emphasis towards the use of vernacular languages. Thus, in the mid-1990s many anti-English movements occurred. Consequently, the teaching of English as a second language in schools was adversely affected, leading to a gradual decline in the number of qualified English teachers over time. However, as part of various educational reforms, a key initiative has been taken to “restore” English into the education system, as ‘English is the *de facto* first language’ that the job market demands (Kandiah 2003).

English emerged as a crucial necessity within the job market with the introduction of the ‘Open Economy.’ Consequently, numerous measures were implemented to enhance and advance English teacher education. Thus, many institutions such as Colleges of Education and District English Language Improvement Centres (DELICS), established in the 1980s to improve English language teaching in the country. The youth insurrection of the 1980s resulted in a substantial deterioration of the education system in Sri Lanka. In response to this crisis, the National Education Commission (NEC) was established in 1991 to initiate reforms within the educational framework. Consequently, English was reintroduced in primary and secondary education intending to enhance oral skills through vocabulary acquisition. The initiatives taken in new

education reforms implemented the following steps to develop English language teaching in Sri Lanka.

- English was introduced as a core subject for G. C. E. Ordinary Level Examination
- Included General English to the subject list of G. C. E. Advanced Level developing a strong foundation for English language skills required for employment.
- In 2000 Junior secondary (Grade 6-9) pupils were permitted to learn few subject; Science, Mathematics, Environmental Studies, etc. in English medium
- The permission was further extended to G. C. E. Advanced Level studies and examination.
- In 2003 English was included as a compulsory core-subject to the first year course content of the university

In contemporary Sri Lanka, English has emerged as the dominant language. Within this context, English education typically encompasses learning the language either as the medium of instruction or as a subject of study (Gunasekera, 2005). Elocution classes and English medium education have become prevalent features of the educational system. Education Reforms of 1997 made General English a compulsory subject in government schools from grade 1 (Gunasekera, 2005). Furthermore, numerous English language teaching institutions such as the British Council, various spoken English classes, and residential English programs were established across the country for the local youth to improve their English.

Teaching English in higher education has evolved to reflect new trends in the field. All universities now have an English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU) and departments (DELT). These units offer instruction based on innovative curricula, including English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English for Professional Purposes (EPP), and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Moreover, the fields of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), and Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) represent the latest trends in teacher training within Sri Lanka.

### **Literature Review**

The influence of MT on L2 acquisition has gained major attention in applied linguistics. It is of utmost importance to understand how MT affects ESL learners' vocabulary acquisition, especially in this ever dynamic business world where emphasis falls on English Proficiency. The following literature reviews existing research on MT influence, vocabulary acquisition, and alternative

strategies employed by learners, particularly within the context of Sri Lankan ESL learners.

### **Vocabulary Acquisition in Second Language Learning**

According to (Schmitt, 2000), vocabulary acquisition is a crucial component of L2 learning, often seen as a main aspect of overall language proficiency. Learners must not only know word meanings but also how to use them appropriately in context Nation (2001).

In a research by Zhang (2016) it was illustrated that learners' linguistic background is significantly influenced by the vocabulary knowledge. It is evident that ESL learners who possess strong MT vocabulary may face challenges when they encounter English words that lack direct translations or when contextual usage deviates from their MT norms. This is particularly relevant for Sri Lankan learners, who often rely on direct translation methods that may lead to misunderstandings or misuse of vocabulary. This is further stressed by Halik and Jayasundara (2021) when 56% of the participants (GCE A/L) pointed out their low proficiency in vocabulary affects their speaking proficiency.

### **The Role of the Mother Tongue in Language Acquisition**

Research focusing on MT influence in vocabulary acquisition has yielded varied results. Odlin (1989), in his article discusses extensively about the influence of cross-linguistic features on language learning, highlights that language transfer can be positive (facilitating learning) or negative (resulting in errors), depending on the similarities and differences between the MT and the L2. For example, in a study by Gass and Selinker (2008) they identify that learners in their attempt to comprehend vocabulary often look up to their MT, which sometimes leads to direct translations that may not accurately reflect the meaning in context. At the same time, studies have indicated that MT can significantly impact learners' pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary use (Sridhar, 1994).

In the context of Sri Lanka, where Sinhala and Tamil are predominant MTs, the interaction between these languages and English presents unique challenges. Perera (2015) conducted a qualitative study involving Sinhala-speaking learners where it was discovered that Sinhala speakers often struggle with English vocabulary due to differences in linguistic structure and semantics. This study conducted through interviews and written tasks, revealing that learners often defaulted to MT equivalents, hindering their grasp of contextual

usage in English. Thus, this emphasises the necessity for educators to recognize the influence of MT on vocabulary learning.

In another study by Sanmuganathan (2018) explored the errors of 100 second year undergraduates in Tamil medium from the Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna using a General English Proficiency Test which was designed by the researcher on various grammatical and lexical categories. Through the research it was highlighted that that the most frequent errors from were on the “morphosyntactic and lexical level with inadequate lexical and morphosyntactic knowledge Sanmuganathan (2018)”. The research also concluded that the complexity of structures between Tamil and English may effect the errors.

Similarly, a recent empirical study by Kumarasinghe (2020) investigated vocabulary acquisition among ESL learners in Sri Lanka. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study found that participants exhibited a reliance on their MT when acquiring new vocabulary. The data indicated that learners tended to rely on synonyms or paraphrasing when they did not know an English word, corroborating findings from Kecskes and Papp (2000), who noted that effective vocabulary strategies included circumlocution and the use of gestures.

### **Influence of Alternative Strategies on Vocabulary Acquisition**

ESL learners often implement alternative vocabulary strategies to navigate gaps in their knowledge due to MT interference, a topic explored by Schmitt (2000). His research emphasizes the vitality of teaching learners’ effective vocabulary strategies, such context clues, inferring meaning, and employing circumlocution. Apart from the mentioned other strategies include circumlocution, gestures, and the use of synonyms. Research by Bialystok (1990) indicates that successful language learners often use these strategies to enable communication when faced with vocabulary deficits.

In a study of Sri Lankan ESL learners, Perera and Liyanage (2019) found that students frequently used circumlocution and gestures when they could not recall specific vocabulary. This aligns with the findings of Kecskes and Papp (2000), who highlight that these alternative strategies enable learners to maintain fluency and engage in effective communication, despite vocabulary limitations.

Other empirical studies in Sri Lanka have demonstrated that ESL learners commonly use strategies like generalization and approximation when faced with unfamiliar vocabulary. In a study by Bandara (2019) focused on first-year undergraduates and revealed that circumlocution and generalization are employed by many students in both oral and written tasks. Kumarasinghe (2020) further emphasizes on this by documenting the particular strategies

used by Sri Lankan learners, such as using synonyms, gestures, and even code-switching between Sinhala and English. Both surveys and observation were used to capture how students faced communication challenges during classroom interactions, thus providing empirical evidence of strategies used in real-time contexts. Interestingly, according to research by Kalinga (2023) in the process of finding the meaning of a new word, most of the students often use either monolingual or bilingual dictionaries as a strategy. This is further emphasized by the fact that the participants who were first-year IT undergraduates, preferred using dictionary apps as a vocabulary strategy using online.

### **Methodology**

The study employed qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. Accordingly, sentence translations, impromptu speeches, and interviews were utilized to gather primary data. The sample comprised thirty undergraduates, chosen under random sampling, from a state university in Sri Lanka.

The participants in this study were presented with a set of ten general sentences written in Sinhala, which they were required to translate into English. This task was conducted without providing supplementary materials, such as dictionaries, translation tools, or external assistance, to identify the alternative strategies employed by learners when they encountered gaps in their L2 vocabulary knowledge. This process ensured that the data collected was both reflective of the participants' true proficiency levels and informative about the strategies they adopt in real-world language acquisition scenarios. The following ten sentences were given for translation.

- වැස්ස නිසා ඊයේ පැය කිහිපයක විදුලිය බිඳ වැටීමක් සිදු විය
- 2022 වසරේ දී විදුලි කප්පාදු බෙහෙවින් සිදු විය
- සහල් පරිභෝජනය අඩු වී ඇත
- නිසි ලෙස අපද්‍රව්‍ය බැහැර කරමු
- මිනිසෙකු වතුරේ ගිලෙනවා මම දුටුවෙමි
- මේ කාලේ හැමෝටම ප්‍රශ්න තියනවා
- ආණ්ඩුව මහජනතාවගේ දුක්ගැනවිලිවලට ඇහුම්කන් දෙන්න නෑ
- උසස් අධ්‍යාපනය හැදෑරීමේ අරමුණ නම් හොඳ රැකියා අවස්ථා ලබාගැනීමයි
- ශ්‍රී ලංකාව තුළ විවිධ ආගම් පැතිරුණේ විවිධ ජාතීන්ගේ ආගමනය නිසාවෙනි
- කොරෝනා වසංගතය දිවයින පුරා පැතිරුණි

Impromptu speeches were utilized as a method to examine how participants use alternative strategies to compensate for unknown vocabulary during spontaneous speaking tasks. This approach was chosen to create a

naturalistic speaking environment that mirrors real-life communication challenges, thereby allowing for a more authentic assessment of the participants' ability to handle gaps in their vocabulary knowledge. Each participant was instructed to draw a topic randomly from a set of pre-determined options, ensuring a diverse range of subjects. They were then given a preparation period of two minutes to organize their thoughts before delivering the speech. During this time, no additional materials, such as notes, dictionaries, or digital devices, were permitted, ensuring that the speeches were truly reflective of the participants' immediate lexical retrieval and compensatory skills. This process aimed to capture the spontaneous strategies employed by the participants when encountering unknown vocabulary, thereby providing valuable insights into their language adaptation mechanisms in an ESL context. Structured interviews were conducted with all the participants. Interview questions consisted of five open-ended questions that facilitate open discussions, thereby playing a pivotal role in gathering detailed information. The interview questions explored the strategies they use when using English in written and spoken discourses, the challenges they face in such situations, and their usual language practice. Face-to-face individual interviews were conducted. This enables attention to be paid to non-verbal behaviour, establishes a rapport over an extended period, and offers a greater degree of flexibility (Fox et al. 2000, p. 6).

## **Results and Discussion**

The principal purpose of this research was to find the influence of MT in L2 vocabulary acquisition, and alternative strategies used in using L2 vocabulary by Sri Lankan ESL learners. This section is aimed at presenting and analyzing the research data.

### **a. Alternative Strategies Employed in the Use of L2 Vocabulary**

According to the primary data collected through translations and impromptu speeches, the participants used the following alternative strategies.

- Synonyms/Similar Words
- Substitutions
- Hyponyms
- Calques
- Circumlocution
- Omissions
- Borrowings
- Gestures



**a.1 Synonyms/Similar Words**

Using synonyms or similar words is the most common strategy used by respondents. Merriam-Webster (2024) defines synonyms as ‘one of two or more words or expressions of the same language that have the same or nearly the same meaning in some or all senses.’ Synonyms, in this study, are defined as words that relatively have the same contextual meaning yet are not the definite equivalent of the source words. Table 1 indicates significant examples of utilization of similar words.

<b>Source word</b>	<b>Equivalent</b>	<b>Alternatives</b>
විදුලිය බිඳ වැටීමක්	power failure	power cut
පරිභෝජනය	consumption	use, eat
නිසි ලෙස	properly	correctly, rightly
අපද්‍රව්‍ය	waste	garbage, dust, trash, rubbish, litter
බැහැර කරමු	dispose	throw/throw out, taking out, destroy, dumping
මහජනතාව	public	people, everyone, human
දුක්ගැනවිලි	grievances	problems, sadness, difficulties, sorrows, common matters
හැදෑරීම	learn	doing, educate
අරමුණ	purpose	aim, goal, intention, objective, target
විවිධ	various	lot of, several
ජාතීන්ගේ	nationalities	ethnic groups, people, cultures
ආගමනය	advent	immigrate, enter, come, arrival
වසංගතය	pandemic	virus
දිවයින	island	Sri Lanka, Lanka, country

**Table 2 : Synonyms and Similar Words**

The word ‘power cut’ is significant in this phenomenon. This term was generalized by the students to describe all three contexts of ‘power cut (úÿ,s lmdÿj)’, ‘power interruption (úÿ,s wekysàu)’, and ‘power failure (úÿ,sh ìljeàu)’. The term ‘waste’ was rarely used by respondents as they are more familiar with the word ‘garbage’. Alternatives such as aim, goal, intention, objective, and target were used instead of ‘purpose’ for ‘wruqK’. These synonyms are

applicable in the context of ‘the **purpose** of pursuing higher education is to get good job opportunities’. However, these synonyms convey specific meanings that belong to different contexts.

‘Aim’ is a general direction (desired outcome) that one tries to achieve (Merriam-Webster, 2024). It is often broad and not necessarily specific (e.g. My aim is to improve my skills) whereas ‘Goal’ is a specific result or achievement toward which effort is directed (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). ‘Goal’ more concrete and measurable than an aim (e.g. My goal is to run a marathon). ‘Intention’ means ‘something that you want and plan to do’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024), often reflecting one’s motives or desires. It emphasizes personal resolve (e.g. My intention is to start exercising regularly). ‘Objective’ is ‘something that one hopes or intends to accomplish’ (Merriam-Webster, 2024). Thus, it is a concrete step towards a goal (e.g. The objective of this project is to increase sales by 10%). ‘Target’ is something that is accomplished (Merriam-Webster, 2024) and has a specific point or milestone that one aims to reach, often quantifiable and time-bound (e.g. The sales team has a target of 1,000 units per month). Comparably, ‘purpose’ is the fundamental reason or motivation for doing something, focusing on the broader meaning or reason behind an action. Accordingly, there is a ‘why’ behind the action; ‘why you do something...’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024).

Hence, learners often use similar words as a strategy to approximate meaning when they lack precise vocabulary. This occurs because they might not know the exact term or might not fully grasp subtle differences between words with similar meanings. For example, instead of using ‘grievances’, they might say ‘problems’; instead of ‘advent’ they say ‘come’ or ‘migrate’, as these are more familiar and general terms. Learners choose such simple, general words as they are not confident about using more complex vocabulary. While this strategy helps them communicate effectively, it can sometimes lead to less accurate or less nuanced expressions.

## **a.2 Substitutions**

Substitutions depict how words from different context are used to replace unfamiliar words. The following set of vocabulary provides significant examples in this regard.

බැහැර කරනවා	- dispose > manage, keep, recycle
ඇහුම්කන් දෙනවා	- listen > concerning, pay attention, don’t care, don’t attention
අපද්‍රව්‍ය	- waste > wastages
ගිලෙනවා	- drown > fall down

රැකියා අවස්ථා

- Job opportunities > job fields

Substitutions, in several situations, hinder the key meaning of the source word. For example, 'waste' was replaced by the English word 'wastage' which is not a similar word. The two words belong to two different contexts, thereby conveying different meanings. It is evident that the respondent referenced the term 'wastepaper basket' as the basis for substitution, without recognizing the contextual distinction from 'wastage.' 'drowning' was replaced by 'fall down' which does not rigidly imply the meaning. The respondent has translated the sentence as given below.

මිනිසෙකු වතුරේ ගිලෙනවා මම දැටුවෙමි - man falls down in water

The meaning of the above translation is not vague, yet lexically, the substitution is not accurate and proper. Consequently, the meaning is changed. For another example, 'job'/'career opportunities' was substituted with 'job fields.'

On the contrary, the first two instances; 'dispose > manage, keep, recycle' and 'listening > concerning, pay attention, don't care, don't attention' express the idea that is expected to be conveyed. Nevertheless, these words are not rigid equivalents of Sinhala source words.

In addition, substitutions are resulted by the influence of Sinhala homonyms. For example, the Sinhala homonym 'ගිලෙනවා' implies two different contextual meanings when it is used in 'a ship **sinks** in the water' and 'a man **drowns** in the water.' Many respondents have used the term 'sink' instead of 'drown' in 'මිනිසෙකු වතුරේ ගිලෙනවා මම දැටුවෙමි. Similarly, 'listen' has been replaced with 'hear' and 'ask', which have different contextual meanings when appearing in 'I **hear** a voice - මට කටහඬක් ඇහෙනවා and 'they **ask** questions - ඔවුහු ප්‍රශ්න අසති. In Sinhala both the terms are represented by the homonym 'අසනවා.' The following example further describes this phenomenon.

ප්‍රශ්න (problems) > questions

මේ කාලේ හැමෝටම ප්‍රශ්න තියනවා > everybody has **problems** these days

ගුරුවරයා ශිෂ්‍යයින්ගෙන් ප්‍රශ්න අසයි > teacher asks **questions** from students

## **b. Hyponyms**

A notable strategy employed by the students was the use of hyponyms to represent superordinates. In such cases, the learners substituted the broader, more general category (superordinate) with two or three specific examples (hyponyms) that belong to that category. Table 2 depicts how this phenomenon was used by respondents, mainly in speaking.

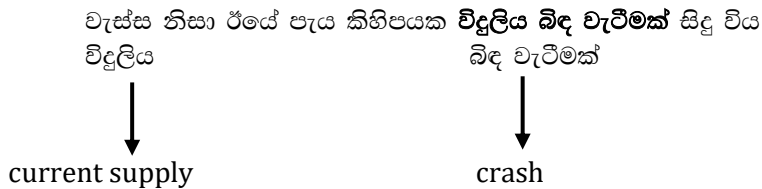
Student's sentence	Hyponyms used	Represented superordinate	Ideal sentence
<i>We have to clean apple, grapes, and pears well</i>	apple, grapes, pears	Fruits	Fruits must be cleaned properly
<i>Uncles, aunties, grandfather, grand mothers came to our home</i>	uncles, aunties, grandfather, grand mothers	Neighbours	Neighbours visited us
<i>We have to protect ponds, rivers like things</i>	ponds, rivers	water resources	We must protect water resources
<i>We have to protect fish, octopus, sea horses and other like things</i>	fish, octopus, sea horses	aquatic species/aquatic organisms	We must protect aquatic species

**Table 3:** Representation of superordinate with hyponyms

### c. Calques

A calque is defined as "a linguistic expression borrowed from another language by literal, word-for-word or root-for-root translation" (Haspelmath, 2009). Students employ this strategy when they encounter gaps in their English vocabulary. This strategy involves translating phrases or expressions directly from their MT into English, resulting in terms that may not be commonly used by native speakers but convey the intended meaning.

When employing this strategy, instances arose in which certain words conveying distinct contextual meanings were utilized instead of their equivalent terms. This happens due to their lack of awareness of the contextual meanings of Sinhala homonyms and relevant equivalents. For example, 'power failure' is translated as 'current supply crash'.



The word 'crash' is applicable when 'බිඳ වැටීම්' appears in a context like 'the glass crashed into pieces.' Similarly, 'failure' is replaced with 'fall down,' 'fell

down,’ and ‘break’ that convey different contextual meanings for the Sinhala homonym. The students have given more emphasis on ‘වැටීම්’ > fall down, therefore the word ‘down’ was widely used in their translations. One pivotal phenomenon in this instance is translating the word ‘විදුලිය’ as ‘current’ by many respondents, which is influenced by their linguistic background.

විදුලිය බිඳ වැටීමක් - power failure > electricity fell down, current break,  
 power supply fail down, current  
 supply crashed

On the other hand, calques such as ‘water plants’ and ‘water species’ were used without having any contextual differences, thereby conveying the precise idea that is expected to be conveyed.

ජලජ ශාක	- aquatic plants > water plants
ජලජ ජීවීන්	- aquatic species > water species, water animals
උසස් අධ්‍යාපනය	- Higher education > advanced education
විදුලි කප්පාදු	- power cut > electronic disruption, current cut down

This approach allows learners to communicate their thoughts when they lack specific vocabulary, but it can lead to misunderstandings or awkward phrasing.

**d. Circumlocution**

Circumlocution is referred to as ‘the use of an unnecessarily large number of words to express an idea’ (Merriam Webster, 2024). When the students were not aware of the equivalent, synonym, or a similar word, they described the source word. For instance, ‘going under the water’ was used to indicate the source word ‘drown’ (I saw the man going under the water). Similarly, ‘spread’ was indicated by ‘go into’ (කොරෝනා වසංගතය දිවයින පුරා පැතිරුණි > corona virus go into all Sri Lanka).

In many of these examples, Sinhala does not have a single word, but phrases. Therefore, the source words were represented by translating the Sinhala expression into English. For example, ‘peel’ is expressed as ‘පොකු අරිනවා’ in Sinhala. Thus, expressions such as ‘remove the cover’ (*I remove the cover of apple and banana*) and ‘clean the apple’ were used to replace the source word. In certain instances, students used adjectives along with similar words to indicate source words; දුක්ගැනවිලි – grievances > **sad** problems, **bad** problems, attempting to explain දුක්ගැනවිලි are severe issues/problems. Given below are several other significant examples of circumlocution.

මිනී පෙට්ටිය	- coffin	> body put into box
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- විදුලිය බිඳ වැටීම - power failure > disconnect the line, electricity not be able, down the electricity, electricity problem
- විදුලි කප්පාදු - power cut > disconnect the line, power supply fail down, power was disconnected, current supply crashed, down the electricity, electricity problem
- විවිධ ජාතීන් - different nationalities > abroad nations, other country people
- වැව - tank > water area
- ජලජ ජීවීන් - aquatic species/organisms/fauna > animal live in water
- ජලජ ශාක - aquatic plants > plants in water

Thus, circumlocution serves as an essential communicative strategy particularly when they encounter gaps in their lexical knowledge.

**e. Omissions**

Omissions, in this research, are referred to as deletion of vocabulary. This strategy involves omitting certain words or phrases that the learner believes are unnecessary for conveying their intended message. Students primarily employed this strategy in translations. Apparently, they use this strategy when they face challenges in vocabulary complexity. Omissions did not rigidly hinder the meaning of source text unless there were grammar mistakes. Table 2 depicts how omission is used as a strategy in vocabulary usage.

Source text	Ideal translation	Responses	Word omitted
උසස් අධ්‍යාපනය හැදෑරීමේ අරමුණ නම් හොඳ රැකියා අවස්ථා ලබාගැනීමයි	The purpose of pursuing higher education is to get good job opportunities	Purpose of higher education is to get good job opportunities	හැදෑරීම - learn/pursue
ශ්‍රී ලංකාව තුළ විවිධ ආගම් පැතිරුණේ විවිධ ජාතීන්ගේ ආගමනය නිසාවෙනි	Different religions spread in Sri Lanka due to the advent of various nationalities	Different ethnic groups spread different religions in Sri Lanka	ආගමනය - advent
		Many religions were spread in Sri Lanka by various ethnicities	
කොරෝනා වසංගතය දිවයින පුරා පැතිරුණි	The Corona pandemic spread	Covid 19 spread throughout the country	වසංගතය - pandemic

	throughout the island		
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**Table 4:** Omissions

It was noticeable that students used a minimum number of words when delivering their speeches as well. In speaking, to simplify their speech and reduce mental effort, they may omit nouns they consider less critical to the overall message, leading to sentences that lack specificity. Thus, when learners struggle to recall the appropriate noun, they might opt to delete it altogether instead of risking incorrect usage. As a result, they can focus on the core message they want to communicate. This strategy facilitates communication and reduces anxiety; learners may experience a high cognitive load when trying to form sentences in English.

**f. Borrowings**

Borrowings are words taken from one language and used in another (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). The use of borrowings to fill lexical gaps is a common phenomenon among speakers. Borrowings are generally used when culturally specific words (CSW) do not have equivalents in the target language. In addition, these words are used in speaking due to the lack of vocabulary.

- E.g. සහල්            - rice > Sahal
- නෙලුම්        - lotus > Nelum

Sinhala equivalents are available for the above source words. However, as the respondents were not familiar with them, relevant Sinhala terms were used as borrowings.

**g. Gestures**

Gestures were used during impromptu speeches to fill lexical gaps in speaking. This phenomenon was rarely used by students whose English language competency is considerably low. In such situations, they did not use vocabulary. Gestures were primarily used to indicate verbs such as swimming, kicking, stirring, and knocking, which are not often used in their regular conversations. The following examples aptly depict how the gestures were used as a strategy.

- There is the water. I go the (swimming gesture). I like it.*
- Door no open. So I like to going in. So I (knocking gesture).*
- We (kicking gesture) the ball and another group catch the ball.*

In almost all these instances, the students' ultimate purpose is to fill the lexical gaps when using English, whereas some of the students were highly confident that their lexical alternatives are accurate. These strategies, as aforementioned, result in different levels of meaning changes, however, the teachers understand what the student intends to express. Students are not aware of the semantic value of words; they solely expect to use English in written and spoken discourses with no vocabulary gaps.

### **Impact of MT on L2 Vocabulary Acquisition**

The influence of a learner's MT on the use of L2 is an inevitable aspect of ESL learning. This phenomenon manifests in various alternative strategies employed by students, revealing the intricate relationship between MT and L2 vocabulary usage.

One significant strategy observed is circumlocution which is particularly common when the Sinhala term is a compound (eg. Peel > පොතු අරිනවා). In this case, students tend to use the Sinhala term as a referent and translate it into English. Similarly, to indicate 'power cut' the students often resort to colloquial Sinhala expressions such as ලයිට් කපනවා, කරනම් කපනවා are used to create their English equivalents; 'they cut current', 'they cut light'. These translations reflect the learners' attempts to maintain familiarity with their MT.

The influence of MT on L2 vocabulary extends significantly through the use of calques, where ESL learners translate phrases directly from their native language. Learners often employ this strategy, leading them to pick words that are more commonly used or directly translated in their language. For example, 'උසස් අධ්‍යාපනය' is directly translated as 'advanced studies' instead of the more accurate 'higher studies' or 'higher education'. Similarly, 'ජලජ ශාක' and 'ජලජ ජීවීන්' were respectively translated as 'water plants' and 'water animals/species'. Such direct translations frequently result in the use of more general words instead of their specific counterparts, which can dilute the precision of communication and hinder effective expression in English.

Moreover, the influence of MT is prominently observed through the use of synonyms. Many ESL learners recognize cognates which can facilitate vocabulary acquisition. As aforementioned, the Sinhala homonym has an impact on the use of synonyms in English. For example, 'sink' was used in place of 'drown' despite the latter carrying a different contextual meaning. In Sinhala, both words are indicated by 'ගිලෙනවා'. As a result, not being aware of this difference, learners often misunderstand that 'sink' accurately conveys the meaning when 'drown' would be more appropriate. This example underscores



the challenges learners face in navigating the complexities of English vocabulary, as they rely on their MT for contextual guidance.

The learners' use of vocabulary is significantly influenced by their tendency to think in their MT and translate those thoughts into L2. Interview respondents revealed that they generally think in Sinhala while speaking and writing in English, as this facilitates them to develop ideas more fluently. Generating thoughts in L2, as noted by one respondent, presents a challenge due to limited vocabulary competence. Consequently, they often use English vocabulary in line with Sinhala terms, with less emphasis on contextual meaning and precise terminology.

Respondents further mentioned that their most significant challenge when using English lies in vocabulary limitations and the tendency to forget many words during speech. As a result, they heavily rely on their MT as a coping strategy, creating alternatives that may not fully capture the intended meaning in English. However, this leads to a cycle of avoidance rather than an active effort to enhance their vocabulary knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

Many ESL learners have a limited vocabulary and may not know more precise or nuanced words. As a result, they default to general terms which they are more familiar with. This reflects their stage of language acquisition, where building a more nuanced vocabulary is an ongoing process. In addition, they often depend on their MT, adopt MT colloquial expressions, and think in MT in L2 vocabulary acquisition, to make their use of English less challenging.

## **Suggestions and Recommendations**

In Sri Lanka, the educational system often emphasizes rote memorization over contextual usage of vocabulary, which can exacerbate these challenges. Consequently, learners may find themselves ill-prepared to navigate real-world communication situations, where contextual understanding is vital. The interplay between MT, vocabulary acquisition, and the use of alternative strategies suggests that ESL instruction must be tailored to accommodate learners' linguistic backgrounds. Educators should aim to build on learners' MT strengths while systematically addressing areas of difficulty. This may involve using comparative strategies that highlight the differences and similarities between English and the learners' MT, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of vocabulary usage.

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