

# SINGING IN A SECOND LANGUAGE: PRONUNCIATION ERRORS MADE BY SRI LANKAN DECEDENT STUDENTS' WHEN SINGING SINHALA SONGS UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF THE AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH LANGUAGE



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## Abstract

When a speaker/vocal performer sings in a second language, the pronunciation can be labelled as a different or fake accent compared to the native speakers. On a theoretical level, it is very difficult for learners of a second language (L2) to get rid of the phonetic effects of (L1) and sometimes impossible, unless the language learner can process both languages from birth. This research aims to identify the pronunciation errors made by Sri Lankan decedent students' according to the consonant sounds of the Inattentional Phonetic Alphabet when they sing Sinhala songs under the influence of the Australian English Language. This research specifically questions what consonant substitutes are employed by the aforementioned speakers for the irreplaceable consonant identity of Sinhala sound production. In this research, Sinhala and English phonemes were compared based on the data from Cox & Palethrope (2007), Rajapakshe (1994 & 1997) and previous research of this researcher (Penahetipola, 2011). The research fundamentally employs a comparison of the phonetic inventory of both languages based on the IPA charts and data from spectrogram analysis of speech sounds made by 45 Australian-born children of Sinhala migrants who are 10-12 and study Sinhala as a second language. Prenasalised stops and nasals have been identified as the most noticeable substitutes. Also, retroflex, palatal, and bilabial are the concerned sound production. The finding is very useful in developing language-speaking programs for speakers and vocal performers who practice Sinhala as their second language.

## Keywords

Fake Accent in Singing, Second Language Pronunciation, Sinhala Vowel and Consonant, English L1 Influence on Sinhala L2, Singing in a Second Language.

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## Introduction

Singing in a second language can be audibly noticed as ‘different’ from the perspective of native speakers despite the singer/vocal performer’s vocal aptitude for performing on the correct pitch and notes. This condition can occur due to the different or incorrect pronunciation of vowels and consonants of lyrical words as well as the improper supra segmental features of singing the second language by a non-native speaker. However, some vocal performers try to ‘sing as native’, which can be noted as a ‘faking accent’ from the perspective of a native speaker. The ‘faking accent’ can be discussed under two linguistic perspectives, as a singer/speaker would be able to closely pronounce/sing the lyrics in the second language based on the short-term phonetic memory and/or vocal aptitude capability of the individual to pronounce vowel and consonants closely match with the supra-segmental characteristics of native speakers of the target language.

In Sri Lankan context, singing in Sinhala by a speaker from another first-language background or singing in another language under the influence of Sinhala as the first language may be noticed as a ‘different’ or ‘faking accent’. When a non-native speaker speaks in a native speaker's language, the recipient understands based on the sounds they hear in their language. Trubetzkoy refers to it as a phonological sieve (1969). Despite different reception, singing in the Sinhala second language has increased because of cumulative bilingualism in other ethnic communities. In Sri Lanka, the expanding population of children of Sinhala migrants in other countries as well as the social status of English-speaking socio-cultural communities in Sri Lanka.

The singing of a non-native speaker can be appreciated due to the uniqueness of vocal identity which can include mispronunciation of a second language. When someone from a different ethnic or national background sings a song in the receiver's native language, the accent can be appreciated as a sign of respect or the differentiation can be ignored due to the familiarization of the errors over time. Examples can be found in the Sri Lankan music industry, even such appreciation is given when someone from a different religious and language background sings songs not originally belonging to their own linguistic and ethno-religious culture. The best match is the vocal dissemination of veteran vocal performer Mohideen Beig, who was a Muslim and migrated to Sri

Lanka from Madras in India. Despite his accent which reflects a different ethnocultural background, Beig sang a large collection of songs, approximately 6500 in the Sinhala language, mostly composed to promote Buddhism (Devapriy,2016). However, when it comes to celebrating national identity, singing in a different accent or mispronunciation compared to the received pronunciation can be problematic. For example, a talented female singer Umara Singawansa, who is a descendant of the Malay community in Sri Lanka, has been accused of mispronouncing a few words of the National Anthem in an international tournament where local and foreign cricket stars are playing (Samarawickrama, 2023). An interesting factor from the sociolinguistic point of view is that Singawansa is highly recognized as a female vocalist in the Sri Lankan Sinhala music industry. In addition, it should be noted, that some vocal performers fake Sinhala accents to exhibit that their pronunciations of Sinhala language have been influenced by English first language.

This research aims to identify the pronunciation errors made by Sri Lankan decedent students' according to the consonant sounds of the Inattentional Phonetic Alphabet when they sing Sinhala songs under the influence of the Australian English Language. This research employs socio-linguistic and aquatic linguistic perspectives. This research specifically questions what consonant substitutes are employed by speakers/vocal performers for the irreplaceable vowel and consonant identity of Sinhala sound production.

## **Language Acquisition and Bilingualism**

A natural language learning opportunity can be considered as a process which does not have any intentional controlling forces. According to De Houwer (1998), Bilingual First Language Acquisition- (BFLA) is the acquisition of two first languages from birth. Gottardo and Grant (2008), argue that proficiency of the two languages can be shown at different levels. Research by the National Centre for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning (1998) presents that simultaneous acquisition of the first two languages begins at the age of three, and language acquisition at an older age is called 'Successive Acquisition of the Second Language'. Houwer identifies this acquisition as 'The Monolingual First Language' acquisition of only one language from birth, as well as from early second language acquisition, where originally monolingual children start to hear a second language regularly during childhood, usually through daycare or preschool. Further, the two languages are acquired simultaneously, De Houwer prefers to call them "Language A" and "Language Alpha" (2009).

Learning one's parent's language as a second language or simultaneous language is a common practice among migrant children due to both natural and/or forceful factors. The language exposure environments can be deliberately changed or set up for expected results including language influences by choices of the family members, influential individuals and teachers in formal language learning. Some native Sinhala-speaking parents may encourage their children to speak in English from childhood to vast immerse power, having more socio-political access and achievements through the gain of language (Gunasekara,2005).

As the arguments of some theorists such as Sumner (2014), this may be due to the idea that bilingualism delays child development and causes parents to delay learning their mother tongue. In such a context, when children articulate their parents' language, pronunciation differentiation can be noticed compared to Received Pronunciation. It can be the reason that there is an influence of a dominant language, particularly in phonemes. Gunasekera argues that, particularly in Sinhala and English language contexts, many speakers could overcome the pronunciation obstacles and become native-like speakers for the time being (2010). Without sufficient longitudinal research data and acoustic analysis through software, such an assumption is not confirmed. Research conducted by Lenneberg (1970) suggests that individuals who begin to learn a second language after the age of 12 will experience a decline in their ability to speak like a native. Similarly, Johnson and Newport (1989) found that language learners who start learning a second language between the ages of 3 and 7 are more likely to achieve native-like pronunciation. De Houwer argues claiming that, Language Alpha can be influenced by Language A, despite there being simultaneous acquisition. In such a case speakers replace sounds with those from the most dominant language. The phonological gap (diaphragm) between languages may be the reason for the phonological discrimination of the second language. For example, researchers explain the absence of Interdental Fricatives in German makes it difficult to distinguish some sounds (Collins 1989). In short, applying Flege & Hillenbrand's view (1984) theoretically, it might be complicated for learners of a second language (L2) to get rid of the phonetic effects of (L1) and sometimes impossible for a lifetime unless the language learner can process both languages since the birth (De Houwer, 1998).

In a cross-sectional acoustical analysis of adult Sinhala migrants who speak Sinhala as a second language, this researcher has presented that despite the time of exposure to English Second

language in a native language environment, adults are not fully capable of overcoming the influence of their mother tongue (Penahetipola, 2011). Hypothetically, in the opposite way, when someone from speaks/ sings in Sinhala language under the influence of English language would not have aptitude to overcoming the phonemic influence of the L1. One can raise the question of how to minimise pronunciation variations in a second language.

## Methodological Approach

This research is limited to consonants in both standard speech sounds of Sinhala and Australian English. Apart from the theoretical underpins, consonants of both languages were analysed in the level of surface structure mapped by linguistics according to the IPA symbols. The phonemic inventories of English and Sinhala are compared in searching for the uniqueness and similarities of those consents of both Sinhala and English languages. Consonants of Sinhala and English speech sounds were compared based on the data from Cox & Palethrope (2007), Rajapakshe (1994 & 1997) and data from this researcher's previous research on English as a second language acquisition of Sinhala adult migrants in an English language environment (Penahetipola 2011). In addition, the sample data exemplified here is extracted from this researcher's work-in-progress research<sup>2</sup> which primarily investigates the pronunciation variability of sound productions by young children learning Sinhala as a second language in an Australian English language environment. The sample was 45 respondents, children of Sinhala migrants in Australia who study the Sinhala language as a second language at the Victorian Language Schools in Australia and are aged between 10 and 12. Pronunciation differentiations are compared with the received pronunciation data on pronunciations done by young children speaking Sinhala as their first language in the Colombo District from 7 samples. The digitally recorded pronunciations are analyzed with auditory analytical software for identifying individual and general segmental and supra-segmental features and patterns.

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<sup>2</sup> Work in progress research in linguistics of this researcher: Penahetipola Mudiyansele, T. S. K. (2024). *A linguistic analysis on pronunciation errors done by students learning Sinhala as a second language* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Kelaniya..

## Sinhala and English Speech Sound Identities

A speech sound is divided into two parts, vowels and consonant sounds, according to the form of obstruction due to airflow during pronunciation. Sinhala pronunciation is based on the tongue's moving levels, position, and the way it shapes the lips (Rajapaksha,1997). According to Balagalle, despite there being 20 written symbols for representing Sinhala vowels in the Sinhala alphabet, only 13 of them are in use for pronunciations (1995) which consist of 7 short vowels and 6 long vowels (Rajapaksha,1997). In addition, Rajapaksha exemplifies 19 diphthongs in Sinhala vowels /iu/, /ei/, /eu/, /æi/, /æu/, /ai/, /au/, /oi/, /ou/, /ui/ /a: i/, /e: i/, /o: i/, /o:u/, /u:i/, /æ:i/, /a:u/, /æ:u/, /i:u/ (1997).

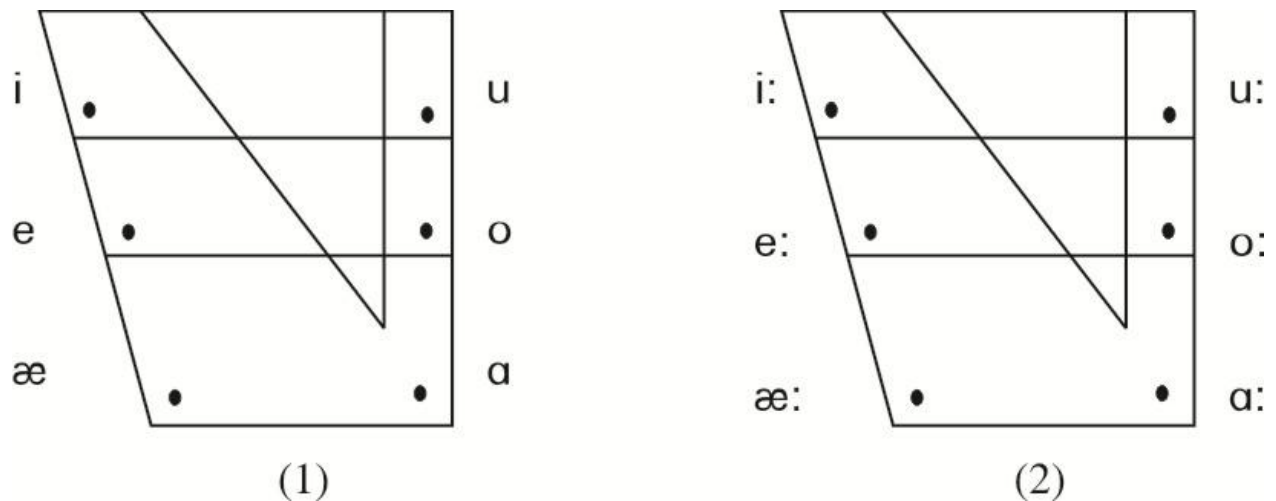


Figure 1: Sinhala Sort and long vowel sounds (Rajapaksha, 1997)

In comparison, despite the vowels of both Sinhala and English having similarities, pronunciation is significantly different according to the position of the vowel placed in the word and the unique utterance.

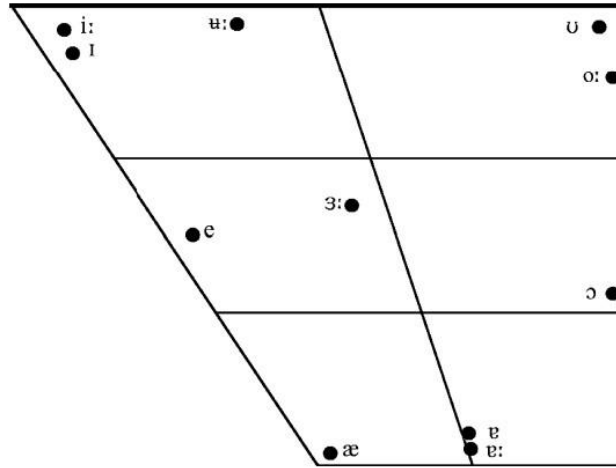


Figure 2: Australian Vowel Sound (Cox & Palethrope, 2007)

Though, there are 40 consonant letters in the Sinhala alphabet (Balagalla,1995), only 27 consonant phonemes can be identified (Rajapaksha,1994). Meanwhile, 24 consonant phonemes are in Australian English despite 21 being mapped in the English alphabet. By comparing the surface structure of consonant phonemes between these two languages, it can be concluded that they are less likely to have a problem with pronunciation in terms of numbers despite the additional consonant phonemes in the Sinhala language than in Australian English.

Table 1: Sinhala Consonant Phoneme (Rajapaksha, 1994)

|                      | (Bilabial) | (Alveolar) | (Soft Palate Alveolar) | (Retroflex) | (Palatal) | (Velar) | (Glottal) |
|----------------------|------------|------------|------------------------|-------------|-----------|---------|-----------|
| (Plosive)            | p b        | t d        |                        | ʈ ɖ         | c ɟ       | k g     |           |
| (Fricative)          | f          | s          | ʃ                      |             |           |         | h         |
| (Nasal)              | m          | n          |                        |             | ɲ         | ŋ       |           |
| (Trill / Rolled)     |            | r          |                        |             |           |         |           |
| (Lateral)            |            | l          |                        |             |           |         |           |
| (Semi-vowel)         | w          |            |                        |             | j         |         |           |
| (pre-nasalised stop) | ɸ          | ɽ          |                        | ɽ̌          | ɸ̌        | ŋ̌      |           |

In Australian English there are three nasal sound units /m/,/n/,/ŋ/, (Cox & Palethurpe, 2007), In comparison with Sinhala, there are four nasal sounds /m/,/n/,/ɲ/,/ŋ/, can be identified and the palatal voiced nasal sound /ɲ/, is unique to Sri Lankan Sinhala (Rajapakshe 1994,p35). It also can be seen that prenasalized stops are the additional features /ɕ/,/ɟ/,/ɟ̃/,/ɟ̃̃/,/ɟ̃̃̃/ of the Sinhala language pronunciation. In addition, Australian native speakers pronounce /w/ as velar whereas Sinhala speakers pronounce it as bilabial. In most cases, plosive (stops) is substituted by Australian English-influenced speakers.

As seen in the below tables, velar /ɟ̃/, all the retroflex /t̃/,/d̃/,/ɟ̃/, palatal/c/,/ɲ/,/j̃/, soft-plate alveolar /j/, alveolar /ɟ̃/, and bilabial /ɟ̃/ are specific speech consent sound production in Sri Lanka.

Table 2: Australian English Consonant Phonemes: Cox, F., & Palethorpe, S. (2007)

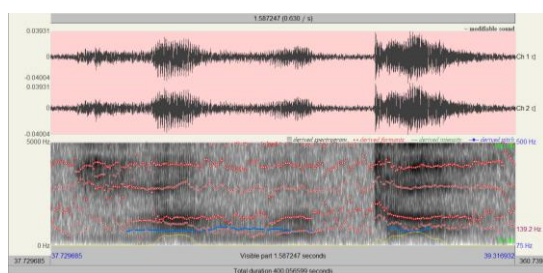
|                          | (Bilabial) | (Labio<br>Dental) | (Dental) | (Alveolar) | (Post<br>Alveolar) | (Palatal) | (Velar) | (Glottal) |
|--------------------------|------------|-------------------|----------|------------|--------------------|-----------|---------|-----------|
| (Plosive)                | p<br>b     |                   |          | t<br>d     |                    |           | k<br>g  |           |
| (Affricate)              |            |                   |          |            | tʃ<br>dʒ           |           |         |           |
| (Nasal)                  | m          |                   |          | n          |                    |           | ŋ       |           |
| (Fricative)              |            | f<br>v            | θ<br>ð   | s<br>z     | ʃ<br>ʒ             |           |         | h         |
| (Approximant<br>)        |            |                   |          | r          |                    | j         | w       |           |
| (Lateral<br>Approximant) |            |                   |          | l          |                    |           |         |           |

Pronunciation is significantly different according to the position of unique utterance to the plosive of the Sinhala language. Consonant phonemes, retroflex voiceless plosive/ t̃ / retroflex voiced plosive / d̃ / and palatal voiceless plosive / c /, and palatal voiced plosive/ j̃/, are inimitable. Hence, substitution is problematic. In addition, the palatal voiced nasal /ɲ/ is unique to the Sinhala phoneme. Furthermore, semi-vowels (bilabial voiced approximant) /w/, alveolar voiced lateral/ l /, and alveolar voiced rolled / r / are also unique sounds in Sinhala phonemes.

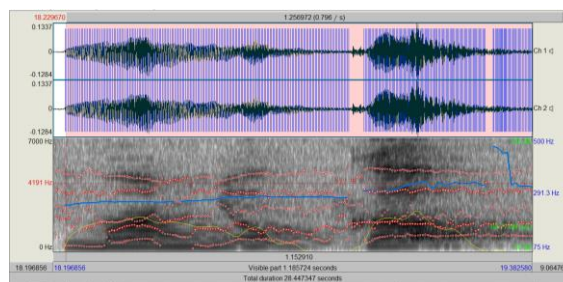
Table 3: Comparison Chart Sinhala and Australian English Speech Consonant Sound

| Sinhala consonant                 | speech | Category             | Australian English speech consonant |
|-----------------------------------|--------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| /h/                               |        | Glottal              | /h/                                 |
| /k/, /g/, /ŋ/, /ŋ̌/               |        | Velar                | /k/, /g/, /ŋ/, /w/                  |
| /t/, /d/, /ɖ/                     |        | Retroflex            | -                                   |
| /c/, /ǰ/, /ɲ/, /j/, /ʃ/          |        | Palatal              | /j/                                 |
| -                                 |        | Post Alveolar        | /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/                |
| /ʃ/                               |        | Soft-palate Alveolar | -                                   |
| -                                 |        | Labio-Dental         | /f/, /v/                            |
| /t/, /d/, /s/, /n/, /r/, /l/, /ɖ/ |        | Alveolar             | /t/, /d/, /n/, /s/, /z/, /r/, /l/   |
|                                   |        | Dental               | /θ/, /ð/                            |
| /p/, /b/, /f/, /m/, /w/, /β/      |        | Bilabial             | /p/, /b/, /m/                       |

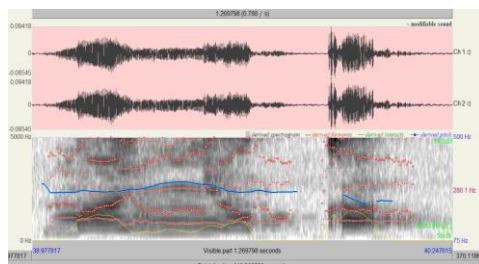
The uniqueness of palatal nasal sounds cannot be substituted and are used in the middle and the beginning of words as examples of /pipijɲa/, /ɲa:nəwəti:/. In the following spectrogram visual examples, the word /maɲɲokka/, the syllable structure of the word as follows, /ma/ɲ/ɲo/k/ka.



Speaker 1: Australia



Speaker 2: Australia



Speaker 3: Sri Lanka

Figure 3: Spectrogram Visual Examples

It was interesting to note that the Australian speakers of the latter example had more Sinhala language exposure in their early development. As seen in the spectrogram examples, both Australian and Sri Lankan speakers have some similarities in terms of sound breaking. Nevertheless, pronunciations are varied by all speakers as their stress of vowels, pitch, position of the tongue, roundness and replacement are dissimilar. For example, the Sinhala vowel /a/ is a low-back vowel that is possibly replaced with a low-central vowel /ɑ/ in Australian English.

Though nasal airflow makes less energy flow, Australian speakers (S1 and S2) replaced the palatal nasal sound /ɲ/ with the palatal voice approximants /j/ or the front closed vowel sound /i/ or replaced palatal voiced nasal sounds /ɲɲ/ with alveolar nasal /nn/. The Australian speakers' pronunciations of the word can be seen in the following patterns: /manjokka/, /mannokka/ and /mannokka:/. In addition, the Australian speakers stress the last part of the word as they are familiar with the consonant velar plosive /k/ and with long vowel /ɑ:/.

### Short-term Memory and Singing Aptitude

The phonetic inventory theoretically suggests that pronouncing certain vowels and consonants in a second language can be difficult. However, A research analysis revealed that singing abilities and phonetic aptitude could predict participants' English faking abilities (Coumel,et al., 2023).

According to a recent study on German speakers who fake French accents, individual differences in accent-faking abilities could be related to music perception and singing ability (Coumel et al., 2019). According to the latter study, the capacity to recognize rhythmic and tonal variations seems to be linked to the proficiency of imitating French accents. Individuals with better musical perceptual abilities are more likely to have a better phonetic perception, which helps them store more precise memories of the sounds of French language segments. Coumel et al. also suggest that being able to sing could aid learners in producing and memorizing highly accurate L2 sounds, although their performance could also be explained by innate learning capacities, such as phonetic aptitude (2023).

The ideal achievement of learners from the perspective of language teaching is that the learner would be able to pronounce much closer to the received pronunciation. The suprasegmental feature of a language consists of stress, pitch and intonations and it applies whole syllables regardless of the vowel and consonant. Hence, phonetic aptitude means that speakers need to be aware of supra-segmental features. In music practice, singers, who can distinguish the supra-segmental features of the second language phonemes used in context, would be able to closely simulate the accent with their embodied ability to adapt the tongue's moving levels, position, and the way it shapes the lips as used by the native speakers.

Recognizing the speech pattern of the learner and their pronunciation variations other than the received pronunciation could be employed as the main process of learning and practising L2. Computer-based programs for phonological analysis can be applied to compare the phonemic structures of L1 and L2. For example, a spectrogram as a technological pedagogical tool can be employed for practising Sinhala with the help of both visual and auditory senses. Though there is a debate about utilizing visual articulation feedback for correctives (Truscott 2007), multimodal analysis with visual, auditory, reading, and kinesthetic (VARK) multisensory also can be proposed as positively constructed for the practising process. Adopting the Verbotonal theory, auditory recognition overhearing such as changes of pitch, rhythm, and intonation via low frequencies can be effective as optimal language input more functionally helps to memorise ideal supra-segmental features of a second language (Lian, 2021)

## Conclusion

Former research suggests that learning a second language in the early years only helps speak native-like in the target language. This research specifically discusses pronunciation errors made by students of Sri Lankan descent when singing Sinhala songs under the influence of the Australian English language. Hence, this research particularly looks at the matter from the supra-segmental linguistic perspective. Mainly, comparing phonemes of two language structures, the nonexistence and unfamiliarity of the consonant phonemes of retroflex plosive, palatal nasal, bilabial, semi vowels, and all prenasalized stops in Sinhala language L2 are identified as challenging for pronouncing for speakers whose first language is English. The substitute of the Sinhala second language consonant phonemes with the familiar consonant phonemes of the English language

alpha, L1, can be the key issue of preventing speaking as native. However, spectrogram analysis shows that speakers who have been exposed to Sinhala from their early childhood may be able to simulate pronunciation as native speakers, which perhaps proves the concept of Bilingual First Language Acquisition. On a theoretical level, speakers with a singing aptitude may be able to fake the accent due to their competency in adapting sound production systems. Further, an audio-visual correction system can be employed to simulate the pronunciation practice of the target language. Future research requires longitudinal data samples of the target groups who speak Sinhala as a second language and have a vocal aptitude for singing at different levels.

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