

## When No Speech Norms Exist: Observations from Sinhala

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### *Abstract*

**Purpose:** A well-established set of language-specific norms for phonological development is imperative in the assessment of child speech sound difficulties. Currently, English norms are used clinically (in the absence of norms for local languages) to determine if a child displays age-appropriate, delayed or disordered speech patterns in Sinhala. This preliminary exploratory study aimed to document phonological processes observed in typically developing Sinhala-speaking children aged 3;0–6;11 (years;months).

**Method:** The Test of Articulation and Phonology–Sinhala, a picture-based assessment, was devised by the researchers and administered to 102 Sinhala-speaking children from three geographical locations (Colombo, Kandy, and Gampaha). The quantitative measures included percent consonants correct, percent vowels correct, and percent phonemes correct, while the qualitative analysis identified phonological processes.

**Results:** The quantitative results showed a marked influence of age on phoneme production accuracy with over 75% consonants correct by 3 years 6 months. The qualitative findings demonstrate common typical phonological processes and less common phonological processes in Sinhala compared to the speech pathology and cross-linguistic literature. Common phonological processes included fronting, stopping, and weak syllable deletion widely documented in linguistic and speech-language pathology literature. Many shared phonological processes were observed between Sinhala and Sri Lankan Tamil, the two main local languages, including fronting of retroflex sounds and lateralization. The phonological process of denasalization of prenasalized stops was observed in Sinhala, with no documentation of the phonological process found within the mainstream speech-language pathology literature.

**Conclusion and Implications:** These findings reinforce the need to document and use language-specific typical phonological processes in Sinhala given the implications for early and accurate identification of speech difficulties and intervention.