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**Let Us Learn from Our Standard 1 Textbook, Again!**  
**A Brief Note on the New Standard 1 Tamil Textbook in Tamilnadu**

**M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.**

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**New Tamil Textbooks in the Internet**

The Government of Tamilnadu has published several language textbooks through their website <http://www.textbooksonline.tn.nic.in/>. This, indeed, is a welcome step. And this initiative has received great appreciation mostly from Tamils living and working abroad, among others, as seen from the feedback the initiative has received in the website. Language textbooks in Tamil, English, Kannada, Malayalam, Telugu and Urdu are available online for “viewing purpose.” These textbooks are presented in pdf format.

However, it looks like that this website is not updated and so we do not have access to the most recently produced textbooks for our review here. I went through various links provided in Google search to find out whether the latest series for the current year have been posted. But I could not locate the link, if current year books have been posted.

In view of the above, my comments presented here should be related only to the textbooks series published in 2007. In this sense, this review is rather very late and may not even be found wholly useful.

However, I would like to present the review here with the hope that when I get an opportunity to view the 2010 books in print in September this year, I will be able to make a comparison of the 2007 series with the 2010 series, so that we all can gain clarity of the issues relating to textbook production in complex Indian languages such as Tamil. Languages like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Hindi and Bengali pose many and varied challenges to textbook writers and producers.

The Tamil textbooks, for example, have the imperative need to emphasize the historical continuity with its earlier stages, and with issues such as diglossia (primarily distinctions between spoken and written forms of the language), issues of pronunciation (relating to regional and social variations and first generation literacy, and in relation to Tamil script, etc.) that could change the entire direction of textbooks and the language. In addition, issues relating to code shift and code switching, etc., also need to be taken care of. All these should be considered even as we carefully manage to take care of the current linguistic, cognitive, social, and educational needs of children.

### **Now, for the 2007 series Tamil Standard 1 Textbook**

The color scheme is pleasing, and the visuals are good also. Hopefully, the Government of Tamilnadu printing and layout managers will have a look at the Tamil textbooks designed by the Singapore Government, and emulate the excellent production of visuals in those textbooks. Font sizes are well chosen, and the lines are properly arranged in the print.

By and large this 2007 production is greatly improved from the earlier versions of Tamil textbooks for beginners.

### **A Brief Review of the Textbook – What Do Children Bring With Them?**

This brief article discusses some of the features of the Tamil Textbook intended for Standard 1. Students in this grade usually hail from homes that provide Tamil as the language of early childhood experience to their children. In a good number of cases, such homes could be bilingual, where Tamil, however, plays a very crucial role as the language of immediate experience and transactions outside the home. Thus, children (with this background) entering

Standard 1 normally have already acquired the contours of Tamil as a spoken language, using which these children meet their immediate personal needs.

There may be exceptions to the above situation, but, for the review of Standard 1 textbook, I'd like to assume that vast majority of children may belong to the above category.

### **What Should a Review Focus Upon?**

And this immediately takes us to an important fact: spoken language is already established to some extent, and, so because of this reason, what connection does spoken language have with the textbook offered to these children as mandatory course work in Tamil? Are we not generally expected, in all matters, to proceed from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the known to the unknown, from the simple to the complex, etc.?

In addition, we also need to review whether selection, gradation and presentation of content and language elements included/presented in the textbook are coherent, cogent, and appropriate to the milestones of cognitive and linguistic learning at this age.

We need to consider whether the contents and language elements intended to be taught/conveyed to children can be handled by the teachers. What learning aids are provided to and/or asked to be prepared by the teachers so that they can use these to help children “learn with ease,” an important goal of the textbook, as claimed by the publishers.

### **The Burden of Preliminary Pages**

Ten pages in the beginning (out of the total of 97 pages) are devoted to the presentation of preliminary information such as the National Anthem, Vande Mataram, Declaration of and Allegiance to National Integration, Greetings to Mother Tamil, the Vow Students are expected to take before or in the presence of Bharat Mata (Mother India), one page foreword by the producers of the textbook, followed by the list of contents as well as a list of skills to be imparted in the lessons.

10.3% of the textbook thus is devoted to such information. If 500,000 copies of this textbook were printed, 500,000 pages would be devoted to such preliminaries. It is for the Government to consider how they can enforce some economy here; especially some of the materials are well beyond the understanding of Standard 1 children. Most of this information can be part of the

guidelines given to the teachers, who would then include the information as part of teaching activity.

### **Disconnect in Preliminary Pages**

Unfortunately there is some serious disconnect here in the design of these pages. For example, there is a translation in Tamil for the National Anthem, but there is no such thing for Vande Mataram. Likewise, to help better comprehension and appreciation, I would welcome a prose rendering of the Greetings to Mother Tamil, if these are to be necessarily included in the textbook. Why should we announce the caste name of the author of the poem Greetings to Mother Tamil, especially when the Government did not use this device to name a university after his name?

The Foreword by the producers of the textbook (“To the Teachers”) could have been written in a style with simple Tamil words and short sentences for better comprehension and follow up work by the teachers. If the words chosen and the style adopted were close to the spoken language, but with written language endings, teachers will be more at home with the content and its application. It will be also easier to impart to small children.

It appears strange to me that the producers of the textbook had to resort to the use of English words to bring out clearly what they mean by some of the ideas they present under the section **List of Skills**. Do they expect their First Standard teachers to grasp the meaning of what they say only through the help of this additional supply of English words? We can easily compose what is intended using simple Tamil words and straightforward sentences, without taking the help of English words and phrases given in parentheses.

### **Disconnect Between Instructions**

There is also some other disconnect as well: There is certainly an attempt to present the lessons in simple Tamil (but this has not been done adequately to match the performance skills of the beginners), but the instructions presumably intended for the teachers are in high flown Tamil avoiding simple words and familiar verb endings. Why should this be so? Especially when most parents who may like to help their children with their lessons will have to do some extra work to understand what the producers want their children to achieve. What do the producers of the textbook mean by the distinction between *uRaiyaaTal* and *vacanam* as these terms relate to lesson 4 according to the List of Skills on page ix?

### **Excessive Emphasis on the Acquisition of Words**

There is greater emphasis on the acquisition of vocabulary. Acquisition and use of one thousand words in a formal setting, even if most of these words are already known to children at the spoken level, is an ambitious goal.

What needs to be done is to relate the acquisition of vocabulary to the acquisition of other things such as language skills including writing. Do the producers want the children actually know how to read and write 1000 words in the First Standard itself? Can we focus on active and passive vocabulary distinction and relate vocabulary acquisition to acquisition of cognitive abilities, etc., through the use of the mother tongue?

Lesser number of new vocabulary, more use of the vocabulary already known to the children employed in learning other language skills, avoidance of words not in use in the current language, avoidance of words with multiple meanings, use of the same word to refer to the same action and/object (avoidance of synonyms), etc. may be considered here.

### **Issues of Pronunciation**

The textbook does not deal with the issues of pronunciation at the spoken as well as the written level. This is an important aspect that Tamil textbooks and Tamil teachers should deal with right from the beginning. Children come with their own home speech habits. They are now initiated into reading and writing that require a shift from the home speech habits to a different style. This involves appropriate pronunciation of the lateral sounds, nasal sounds and the trills in the Tamil script.

Because of the influence of regional and social dialects (and some other factors), many parents are not in a position to equip their children with the appropriate pronunciation of the above listed phonetic elements attached to specific letters of the Tamil script. Coalescence has resulted in the loss of several distinct features of these sounds.

Both teachers and parents are in a bind here. Many teachers are also not fully aware of the coalescence of sounds in their speech. So, elementary school textbooks need to focus on this important aspect to train children to speak with appropriate pronunciation of the letters of the Tamil script. This textbook does not give adequate attention to this problem.

### **Not an Easy Task – Envisioning Transfer and Building Bridges**

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Let Us Learn from Our Standard 1 Textbook, Again! - A Brief Note on the New Standard 1 Tamil Textbook in Tamilnadu

Writing any textbook is not an easy task. So many factors are involved in the production of language textbooks. In this sense, this textbook is certainly an improvement over others of the past.

Total awareness of the complexity is hard to achieve especially when we are stuck with the notion that only high flown language style is the most appropriate for use in textbooks. We really need to devise strategies that will take care of the linguistic and cognitive requirements of our children even as we also include a carefully planned transfer from the home speech habits to standard spoken language with clear distinctions between sounds to correct spelling and reading pronunciation at the writing level. In addition, Tamil teachers should accept the burden of helping children maintain the age-old continuity between various stages of Tamil, from Chemmozhi to modern Tamil.

We are called upon to build a bridge through the use of appropriate steps between stages of the language, between styles, between home speech habits to spoken and written standards, etc. But our primary focus is to enable our children to use the current idiom effectively for all practical purposes.

I look forward to presenting a comparison between the 2007 series and 2010 series in my next report.

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