

A Note on Features and Problems of Teaching Written Language Also as a Spoken Language

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Abstract

This note discusses briefly the features and problems of teaching written language and in which it is also spoken language, in the context of Tamil teaching and learning in the Republic of Mauritius. Teaching and learning Tamil at Primary and Secondary schools and at the University in the Republic of Mauritius focuses on Written Tamil. Issues relating to this process are presented. Tamil is an ethnic identity language. Written Tamil is more easily accessible and lends itself better grading of the complexity of materials presented to students who learn Tamil. Problems relating to learning subtle lexical and accent usage of humour, sarcasm, anger, love etc. are pointed out.

Keywords: Teaching Written Language, Spoken Language, parallels between written and spoken dialects, Tamil teaching and learning.

Introduction

Language is a means of communicating ideas, thoughts and ideals. It is a tool which is being used by every people throughout the world. Though a person does not converse in the respective language of the country he will try to pass on his message and thus makes things done. However it is to be noted that there is a difference between spoken and written varieties in languages is very widely prevalent all over the world.

In Tamilnadu, India, the distinction between Written Tamil and Spoken Tamil is clearly maintained. The nuances and style of speaking in each district in Tamil Nadu are prominent and the Tamils are proud of their heritage. However, the Teaching of Tamil in schools and colleges focuses mostly on the Written Tamil.

The Students write their materials and examination scripts using Written Tamil. Mixing Spoken Tamil in writing text in written Tamil is considered as an error unless the texts are being quoted for reference in the case of Literature.

Situation in Mauritius

The situation in Mauritius as regards Tamil calls for teaching Tamil as a written language. Tamil is not spoken at home or in the market place. Just to highlight that the exposure to the language at the societal level is to the minimum. Tamils in Mauritius do not use Tamil in their

daily activities. In some sense, while Tamil identity is preserved through various nonlinguistic means, it does not depend on the use of Tamil language.

The Question before the Tamil Teachers and Learners in Mauritius

Since there are now opportunities created by the Mauritius Government to learn Tamil and other Indian languages by respective linguistic/ethnic groups as part of the school curriculum, the question before the Tamils is whether they should learn Tamil first as the spoken language and then move to the written language, the strategy adopted in teaching and learning languages as Foreign Language in most European/American language teaching/learning centers.

Learning Written Tamil as the Spoken Language

This strategy of teaching/learning written Tamil also as the spoken language is certainly valid, practical and useful for various reasons. Spoken Tamil could be different from region to region as spoken in Tamilnadu. Regional variations are also linked to caste identity as well as the level of education of the speakers. Spoken Tamil accent is hard to follow without continuous exposure to the social, geographical and professional contexts.

While modern Tamil movies may be a good source of learning and understanding Spoken Tamil, most movies and episodes telecast tend to carry captions (translation) in English. This does not really help immersion into the spoken Tamil but at least those who does not know the language will learn the common words of Tamil during the course of time.

In addition, humour, sarcasm, anger, love and other emotions have subtle lexical and accent usage and this is hard to follow without some deliberate listening and learning.

Advantage of Focusing on Written Language

The advantage of focusing on written language is that it is based on textbooks, print medium. Ready reference, and easily graded material, and in many ways some control over the meaning based on the context, and the possibility of strict management of the structures and sentence types introduced help both teachers and students learn Tamil in some systematic manner. The materials producers are also to produce well graded materials. So, students go through the learning process without worrying about the regional variations, caste identity, mixing of borrowed words primarily from the English language. The motto is that the students at least learn the basics of the Tamil Language and write in the Language without errors and they have a mastery of the Language at different levels.

Mastering Spelling and Allophonic Variations, etc.

Learning the spelling of words also becomes easier, when we learn written Tamil. Phonetic variations are kept minimum.

At the same time, the common features of allophonic variations, an absolute necessity in Tamil, both in the spoken and written Tamil, must be learned. Reading the written Tamil text is not exempt from the application of allophonic distributions. So, students must learn to understand

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and produce appropriate allophones. In addition, the problems regarding pronunciation and distribution of nasals, laterals and trills also must be learned.

Mastery of the Script

Mastery of the script involves various subskills: students must learn the hand movements to write the Tamil letters; they need to learn the order in which the Tamil letters are presented in the Tamil script, an absolute necessity to make use of dictionaries. They must learn the pronunciation of the Tamil letters as traditionally pronounced in Tamil Nadu or in a manner that suits the context in Mauritius. All these are made possible with the training that the trainee teachers get before becoming full fledge teachers. During the lapse of time the teachers develop their own teaching pace with the experience acquired and they have to adjust to related strategies depending upon the levels of the students which are not same throughout the years of teaching.

The above item is closely related to the spoken form of the language. Yet the students will learn these as part of learning the written language.

Preference of Written Style Causes Some Problems Too

Choice of Written Tamil has led the textbook writers, creative writers and teachers in Mauritius to go for a style of language that uses minimal number of loan words and for the use of “Pure” Tamil words to certain extent. This could cause some problems of communication for Mauritius Tamil students of lower Grades when they communicate with the Tamils from or in Tamil Nadu. However, in Upper Grades materials of different but relevant nature are being exposed/ guided to the students so that they learn the different variances of the Tamil Language. This is only possible with the use of media.

Secondly, it creates some amusement among the Tamil speakers from Tamil Nadu. And yet Tamils in Tamil Nadu admire this style and praise the earnestness of Mauritius Tamils to learn and use Tamil to maintain their identity.

Speed of Delivery of Words, Sentences, and so forth

Learning Written Tamil also as the Spoken variety may reduce the speed of delivery of words. Learning appropriate sentence intonation may take more time. While repetition drill may help, sentence length becomes a crucial point here. It looks like that more care is taken to write and learn grammatically correct sentences than on the pronunciation of the sentences with greater facility.

Now, Not an Early Childhood Language

Since Tamil is not learned in most cases as home language in early childhood, fluent production of sentences will take several years and will be highly dependent on continuous practice in the class and outside classroom.

Need for More Research

What Exercises are Found to be More Useful to Increase Productivity?

Many explanations, examples and drilling exercises are included in the Tamil Textbooks so that the students get exposed to write in the language. The main focus will be on vocabulary, Grammar and sentence structures. The same are being introduced through varied texts. At the beginning of schooling the students learn the basics of the language. Gradually the students have to write sentences, sequential sentences and essays of different forms, and short stories to show their creativity and mastery of the language.

What is the Role of Translation in Learning Written Tamil?

Translation is one component in the syllabi of upper classes. The students have to translate small texts from Tamil to English and English to Tamil. It has been observed that students do better in the translating of text from Tamil to English. In the process of translating students develop knowledge at the level of lexical items and mastery at the syntactical level. The translation helps them to understand the Tamil Language better in a context where the exposure is less. They learn to translate simple sentences at the very outset and gradually move to small texts which are mainly base on combination of all sorts of syntaxes.

What are the Learning Errors We Notice More in Using Written Language Also as the Spoken Language?

1. Interference of Mother Tongue
2. Pronunciation
3. Grammar application
4. Misuse of appropriate vocabulary
5. Varieties of sentence structures
6. Lack of reading appropriate materials

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