

Teaching, Learning and Using Tamil in Mauritius

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Abstract

This paper discusses the position that Teaching and learning of Tamil in Mauritius may not really fit in any of the usual approaches: First language/mother tongue instruction, Second Language learning/teaching, or Foreign language learning/teaching. To safeguard the ethnic identity of the Tamils in Mauritius, it is being taught as a compulsory subject at school levels from Grade 1 to Grade 9. The context that they live in does not encourage them to use Tamil continuously as there is the overall influence of the Mother Tongue, *Kreol Morisien*. There are some words related to food, prayer and clothing that are still being used among the families. However, the amount of vocabulary is so low that the Tamil learning/teaching takes place only in a conducive classroom environment. Written Tamil learned in schools in Mauritius is well accepted also as the spoken variety of Mauritius. The paper presents the problems Faced by Teachers and Learners.

Keywords: Mauritius Tamil, Language Affinity, Ethnic and Religious Identities, written standard Tamil as spoken Tamil, Learning Contextual Pronunciation Values of Tamil Letters

Tamil Learning: First, Second or Foreign Language Learning Situation?

Teaching and learning of Tamil in Mauritius may not really fit in any of the usual approaches: First language/mother tongue instruction, Second Language learning/teaching, or Foreign language learning/teaching.

It is to be noted that the Teaching and learning of Tamil in Mauritius started in 1940 in the Primary Schools of Mauritius depending upon the availability of teachers during those days. There is no denying the fact that the majority of Mauritian Tamils do not acquire Tamil as first language/mother tongue as during the course of time the Tamil language which had the status of a mother tongue among the Tamil immigrants has gradually shifted to second language owing to different influential factors. It is considered to be an ancestral language and to safeguard the ethnic identity of the Tamils in Mauritius, it is being taught as a compulsory subject at school levels from Grade 1 to Grade 9.

No Immediate Environment Outside the Classroom

The children from Tamil families learn Tamil in school as there is no immediate environment outside the classroom (including their homes) available for them to speak or write Tamil. The context that they live in does not encourage them to use Tamil continuously as there is the overall influence of the Mother Tongue, *Kreol Morisien*. There are some words related to food, prayer and clothing that are still being used among the families. However, the amount

of vocabulary is so low that the Tamil learning/teaching takes place only in a conducive classroom environment.

Career Goals and Tamil Learning

There is no denying the fact that Tamil is not associated with most of the career goals of the Tamil population, just as English or French learning is. This is a factor which does not encourage many Tamils to study the language at higher levels. But still those who are ardent lovers of the language make much effort to learn the language either for self-motive or for professional reason.

Language Affinity and Ethnic and Religious Identities

Language affinity and ethnic identity somehow bring in Tamils close to their ancestral language. Tamil is appreciated as part of their religious identity as well, since Tamils have their own sectarian temples and rituals wherein use of Tamil plays an important part, whether they understand Tamil or not. Tamil identity is also important for the Tamils in the politics of Mauritius. Tamil culture and Tamil language are both linked together in the Mauritian context. It is the culture that is predominant and gives the identity as Tamils of Mauritius. So we can deduce that Tamil serves as an ethnic identity, but knowledge of Tamil language is not an integral part of this identity.

What Should be the Effective Way of Teaching and Learning Tamil Language in Mauritius?

In the above described circumstances, what should be the effective way of teaching and learning Tamil language in Mauritius?

When the Non-Tamils in Europe or North America seek to learn Tamil for some teaching or professional careers, and in mixed family groups, learning spoken language becomes the first step. In these mostly adult situations, only individuals are considered, and these individuals mostly prefer to learn spoken Tamil. The syllabus is framed with initial emphasis on spoken Tamil and then slowly there is movement toward learning the written Tamil.

In Mauritius there had been a lot of initiatives from institutions to teach Tamil in spoken form as Adult Beginner's Course to Non-Tamils as well as to Tamils. Many Adult Tamils compared to the young people have showed interest in learning to speak in the language. Some of them are still learning the spoken form as a hobby course.

Spoken and Written Tamil Varieties

The distinction between spoken and written Tamil varieties is well established, although the movement from the spoken to the written variety does encounter some difficulty for the learners of Tamil as a foreign language.

Bearing this difficulty in mind, Mauritius educational system has adopted teaching written Tamil in their Tamil classes. There is no separate or distinct spoken Tamil classes. Learning written dialect of Tamil helps students to develop their spoken language skills based on the written Tamil they have learned.

In fact, Teachers and Tertiary Level students use written dialect of Tamil as their interpersonal spoken medium. With hardly any active use of Tamil using spoken dialect outside the classroom in the social environment, both students and teachers use the written form of Tamil language as their spoken dialect. Because this will help the students to write in the written form easily. The use of different types of teaching tools help the students to distinguish the different sounds of the letters.

Problems Faced by Teachers and Learners

I would like to present a few problems that we as teachers and users of Tamil and our students as learners and users of Tamil face in this interesting, unavoidable innovative linguistic context.

Students master the Tamil script readily and quickly. The inherent patterns adopted in Tamil for the consonant-vowel combination (*uyirmey ezhutthu*) are also readily learned. In fact, absence of stop consonants in Tamil for the voiced and aspirated categories used in Indo-Aryan as well as non-Tamil Dravidian languages makes learning the Tamil script easier. In addition, based on shape similarity also, students may be asked to draw one letter from another letter and learn the sound of the letter easily.

Learning Contextual Pronunciation Values of Tamil Letters

However, there are some difficulties encountered by the learners/students of Tamil in Mauritius, perhaps, found also in other Tamil diaspora countries. While the patterns are impressive and easily learned when it comes to writing Tamil letters, pronunciation values of some of the letters are not easily mastered in the absence of spoken Tamil in the environment.

For example, some students have difficulty in mastering the allophonic distribution of Tamil stop consonants – inter-vocal variations, variation following a nasal sound. In addition, they also have the difficulty of mastering the lateral sounds. More often than not, alveolar lateral is used both for the retroflex and grooved lateral sounds. Another issue is the mastery of trills. The hard trill (*vallinam R*) is associated with the voiceless alveolar stop *t*, a sound easily mastered because of commonly used French, English and Kreol Morisien. The same voiceless alveolar stop is used for the voiceless retroflex stop. When *vallinam R* is doubled within a word, in written and spoken dialects of Tamil used in Tamil Nadu, the double consonant *RR* sounds more like *-tt-*.

There is also some overlap between voiceless dental consonant and alveolar trill (*vallinam R*). For example, a personal name written usually with the following spelling *Muthu* may be pronounced as *Muttu*.

Grooved palatal lateral occurring in a Tamil word is usually given the transliteration **zh**. For example, the musical instrument *yaaL* is usually written as *yaazh*. Students and some teachers do pronounce the sound as it is written, rather than pronouncing **zh** as a grooved palatal lateral. Other examples are as follows: *pugazh*, *magizhchi*, *pazham*. It is noted that there is a lot of impact of the French sound, **zh**, in the pronunciation of these words.

Remedial Steps

However, bearing in mind all these difficulties, drilling exercises are being done to develop good pronunciation of both the letters and words. Communication skills in the form of speaking in the Tamil language is being encouraged either individually or in group work at classroom level. This has been initiated two years ago as per the National Curriculum Framework-Mauritius and it is observed that the students are showing interest in speaking in the language at the classroom level. The positive note is that their performance in terms of writing is becoming better.

Written Tamil

Written Tamil learned in schools in Mauritius is well accepted also as the spoken variety of Mauritius Tamil. Amazingly, Tamil sentence types are acquired with appropriate grammatical inflections. Another interesting point is that somehow both students and teachers (the main body of Tamil users in Mauritius) use short sentences. While compound and complex sentences are used, the written or literary tradition of using several subordinate clauses within a single sentence is not commonly found. Perhaps this useful facility or skill is acquired because of the carefully designed Tamil textbooks with appropriate exercises to facilitate the learning process of the students.

What Lies Ahead?

Mauritius offers a unique situation when it comes to teaching, learning and using Tamil. What lies ahead is possibly an evolution of its own Tamil standards, which may depend heavily on written form of Tamil which will also be used as the spoken variety. The advantage in this possible evolution is that all literary and other types of works in Tamil all around the world by both the natives of Tamil Nadu and India will be more easily accessible to Tamil users in Mauritius as well.

To Conclude

On a concluding note, it has been observed that the Teaching and learning of Tamil language in Mauritius have gone through different phases with step by step ascension. Our situation is far better than it was 80 years ago. Many facilities are available in the media, thus adding a different and relevant touch to the Second Language acquisition. However other mechanisms have to be envisaged in order to create the interest of learning the language among the Tamils in Mauritius.

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