

Teaching and Learning of Tamil Language in Singapore
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This paper highlights the pedagogical based research initiatives carried on at the National Institute of Education on Teaching and Learning of Tamil Language in Singapore.

A careful review of the current Tamil Language syllabus by the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice (CRPP) at the National Institute of Education (NIE) revealed that while intent appeared to be communicative, the syllabus itself was essentially structural in nature. This structuralist emphasis had also been carried over into textbook design, thus reinforcing the structural element in pedagogy too. A 2004 CRPP report (CRP36/03SL) highlighted key recommendations ranging from the effective use of Standard Spoken Tamil (SST) in classrooms to task-based pedagogical approaches for the teaching of language skills, all with the view to helping students learn to speak the Tamil language with ease and understanding. As learning is situated in learners' social and therefore interactional practices, tasks must not only be targeted at being accomplished but also encourage collaboration (Mondana Doehler, 2004).

Based on the personal, teacher education and classroom observations, with the increased emphasis on the use of Standard Spoken Tamil in the recent years, it has become indispensable that our students use oral language as an important starting point in their learning journey for Mother Tongue. Unlike in Tamil Nadu, India, the Singaporean Tamil-speaking community is a small; hence, a homogenous Standard Spoken Tamil is not an anomaly here. The reading of texts aloud which is a common classroom practice is a bridge that links spoken language with its Written Tamil form as it helps students understand what written script(non romanised) looks like. The challenge to students then becomes the gradual syllabus target of sub-skills such as symbol-sound relationships, the recognition of words and subsequently, the comprehension of texts.

A lexical syllabus, in comparison to a grammatical one, provides a corpus mirroring(new approach) the distribution of structures, word frequencies and phraseology that learners require in language learning. Pedagogic grammars, as opposed to reference grammars(structure, usage of Spoken not only written Tamil) help students to practice and

grammatical structures. NIE Tamil Corpus Data Bank, built up from classroom observations in primary, secondary schools, junior colleges and from the mass media resources database (CRP36/04SL), provides spoken corpus data for use as an additional link language for students learning to use Tamil both in the classroom and in social contexts. The systematic data bank also provides an additional resource for developing curriculum materials to promote the use of SST amongst Tamil students and eventually develop the Literary Tamil needed for their educational success.

Studies with the advancement of technology and easy accessibility and infrastructure becoming more and more prevalent, it makes more sense now, than ever before, to exploit the potential for video conferencing as a medium of synchronous computer-mediated communication in education as it allows for both verbal and visual interaction between participants. In examining the affordances of video conferencing software to create a positive environment for Pre-service teachers to interact and learn, as well as to adopt new skills for communicating, this paper shares important features of technical and educational methodology issues in relation to the Wimba software as expounded by researchers from both fields.

Action Research to involve practicing teachers, who do not stop/do not have time is currently widely engaged in the education field in CRPP/NIE, Singapore to identify areas of concern in the teaching and learning of languages with the aim of helping students to perform better in these areas. Sharing one study in 2007, Tamil teachers in the North 7 Cluster of schools utilized this technique to address the pressing need of developing comprehension skills of their students. These teachers collectively felt that students' lack in such skills was indeed a major contributing factor in the low marks obtained at national Tamil examinations.

Reading comprehension requires the ability to not just to read the printed lines but also to read between and beyond the lines. When a student is unable to successfully undertake the latter tasks, frustration sets in and gives up trying to make sense of the text, let alone understanding the co-relation between the text and its social context. Working on the understanding that students' interest in and their ability to relate to a topic/theme play a vital role in comprehending a given passage, teachers from all participating schools were requested to write passages of differing genres that would be of interest to their students. They were also required to draw up lesson plans that incorporated classroom activities geared towards developing their students' comprehension skills by enabling the students to immerse

in the contents of the passages and to invoke prior knowledge and experiences related to the passages.

Some early findings of analysis of the marked answer scripts and transcripts of interview recordings revealed that with well-planned lessons centred on comprehension passages that can be easily related to, students can be made to engage in reading comprehension even when they are presented with passages from a variety of genres. Interaction can be achieved during comprehension lessons, and subsequently, students can be guided in developing their comprehension skills through motivation and selection of reader friendly materials. Through consistent reinforcement in the classroom, students can become competent in these skills and be able to successfully apply them to any passage they are required to read, comprehend and answer on their own in tests and examinations.