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Giving emphasis to spoken Tamil in
Tamil language teaching in Singapore schools

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GIVING EMPHASIS TO SPOKEN TAMIL IN TAMIL
LANGUAGE TEACHING IN SINGAPORE SCHOOLS

The present emphasis on written Tamil in Tamil language teaching in Singapore schools needs to be reconsidered in the light of current research in language teaching and language learning.

This paper considers the considerable weighting given to written Tamil in the Primary School Leaving Examinations, that is, 80% for written Tamil and 20% for Oral Tamil.

This has given rise to a cohort/generation of speakers from English-educated households who have perhaps achieved a certain level of competency in written Tamil but are unable to communicate orally in Tamil or conduct everyday conversation, for instance, with their grandparents, parents or class mates.

This paper will consider the following questions How do we encourage English educated pupils to use and communicate in Tamil? What approaches can we adopt for teaching Spoken Tamil in the classroom? What approaches and methods can we incorporate for teaching communicative competence in Tamil into the Tamil language syllabus, and what sort curriculum materials can we design for spoken Tamil?

The Tamil pupils in Singapore classes have the following contrasting profiles: (i) that of the Tamil pupil who speaks mainly Tamil at home and (ii) that of the pupil who speaks mainly English at home.

Type A speaks mainly Tamil at home and has little problems with Tamil language learning, but his problem is his inability to manage other subjects, maths, science, English.

Type B English is the main mode of communication. He understands Tamil when spoken to but finds it difficult to respond orally. He usually does well in other subjects but has problems with Tamil. It is type B pupil who is the main concern of our paper today. Type A pupil requires help too but of another kind. Our paper is aimed at language teachers and our concern is with children from English speaking homes and who struggle to master Tamil. There has been little opportunity for language use in the typical Tamil language classroom. The greater part of classroom time has been spent on finishing written exercises on grammar, memorising proverbs, learning spelling, vocabulary, composition writing and correction.

Yet Tamil pupils who attend English classes are already exposed to a wide variety of approaches - group work, pair work and interactive work. They are given opportunities to interact, do peer conferencing, role play, dramatise, negotiate meaning and to talk/use the language for carrying out tasks. The Tamil pupil thus comes with expectations to the Tamil language class hoping to interact instead of doing silent work.

As language teachers we have to be aware that when the pupil appears to be trying to communicate, we should assume that the pupil has something important to say and that the attempt should be encouraged accordingly. We should help to extend his language.

Since the child's utterances may often be unclear or ambiguous, the teacher should try to understand the intended meaning before responding, rephrasing, or extending what the pupil has contributed. When the teacher replies, the teacher should take the child's meaning as the basis of what to say next, confirming the intention and extending the topic or inviting the child to participate. Teachers should select and phrase their responses in such a way that the child has the ability to comprehend.

What are the objectives of language learning in Tamil in Singapore? The objectives for language learning in Tamil are the following: (a) functional uses (b) economic necessity

and (c) cultural identity. It enables a Tamil to be able to appreciate and participate and be involved in his own culture - in music, dance, or in the festivals, customs and traditions of his indigenous culture.

Often the main mode for participation is spoken language, that is the oral tradition.

There is one language learning principle that all language teachers ought to be aware of in their teaching, i.e. that speech is primary and innate. Every child from birth begins to respond to his mother's talk and quickly acquires speech to communicate his needs. Though one thinks he has little language at the point, yet the child is able to communicate and satisfy his needs with his one word or two word utterances - eg. asking for milk. The mother is able to respond to the 'limited' utterances - because she makes the effort to understand and expand the child's utterances. Thus there is a need to build a strong oral tradition in language learning. There is also a need to provide rich input in the form of oral language. In the home for instance the mother provides this input by extending and expanding the language of the child. Thus the family, friends, peer groups provide a familiar environment where the child explores language. If he makes mistakes he is not corrected in the same way as in the classroom where the teacher can't resist correcting all the time, leaving him little chance in the classroom.

Why does he need to be involved in speaking activities in the language class? There are few opportunities to speak Tamil in the home, in the classroom or in the playground. The classroom should provide more interaction rather than silent

work as the pupil needs to develop his linguistic skills.

Research in language in English and other languages shows that speech is primary and that you need speaking skills before you can learn to write.

Pupils need to verbalise, to share with a peer/partner or a teacher his ideas and thoughts.

This in turn helps the pupil to structure what he wants to say and write, i.e. organise his thoughts, ideas, and grammatical structures.

Oral work helps to rehearse what the pupil wants to say and write i.e. it provides practice. This may be followed up by writing exercises after the pupils have had warming up exercises through oral work.

Group work makes learning a less threatening situation as there is less fear of making errors when you have a chance to share and compare and refine your answers. Oral practice and peer interaction helps the pupil to rephrase, to reexpress and to choose better and more appropriate vocabulary and to find out whether your partner has understood what you meant to say and write. It enables the learners to set up their hypotheses and test them. Thus this approach links up both the skills of speaking and writing.

The following suggestions are made on how Tamil can be taught.

Beginners

Oral stories/compositions or short story booklets written by pupils with the help of teachers using the following:

- photographs/postcards/newspaper/ magazine clippings or photographs of family/child/friends/siblings/relatives/ visitors taken during outings eg. at the zoo, fun fair, Bird Park, Sentosa.

(ii) photographs taken during special occasions: birthdays, festivals, religious occasions - Deepavali, Onam, Varuseperuppu, Christmas, Taipusam, Ponggal.

(iii) Food, clothes, preparations for important day, rituals.

(iv) News Time: short story/incident/event on everyday experiences/ neighbourhood happenings.

(vi) Songs/rhymes, making up rhymes/verses/songs riddles/jokes about their favourite playing on words) toys/dolls/food games etc.

(vii) Teacher helps to write up and print these stories and poems and record them on tapes. Play the tapes with the children following scripts. After acting and rehearsing present in class with action/mime and (costumes etc).

Other procedures to encourage oral work:

(i) use the following input to stimulate interest. Encourage suggestions - ideas eg. one word suggestions, phrases.

Use questions such as What happened next? Who was there? Was it frightening? Was it funny?

(ii) Teacher next extends child's language and writes it up as correct, connected sentences with proper verb endings etc.

(iii) Teacher/Pupil models story (narrates) and others take turns.

(iv) Use other variations to completing the story with different endings.

Intermediate/Advance Level Learners

Students need to be orientated to the topic before they can speak: Provide input through the following : use of AVA to arouse interest e.g. a short reading passage/- a series of provocative statements /- a tape recording/video clipping /- a questionnaire - photographs/posters/postcards /- exercises to build up vocabulary needed for a task/ - worksheets/tasksheets

Topics: select topics within the experience of students and ask students to suggest topics e.g.family life, money hobbies, sport, food ,friends, holidays, personal favourite experiences, past times.

Procedure: From controlled to fluency activities :

Use input to stimulate/encourage discussion/ students work in pairs/groups and draft/write up what they want to present /- Students share with other groups / - Peer group evaluation of the task / Teacher acts as facilitator - helping to extend, expand students language use /-Teacher does not judge what is right or wrong /- Teacher does not use up time giving explanations /- Encourage feedback reports from students - Students become aware of areas in which they have to improve when they report on how well they performed.

Role Play for language Learning - Suggested Activities for pupils

Whats my line, picture role plays, filling up forms
Situational role plays: at the shops, postoffice, bank and at home

Improvisation: example, pupil has lost his pet and is asked to say what he will do.

Suggested procedure:*

Dialogue continuation

- * Prediction
- * Writing scripts based on situation
- * Suggesting background details, or roles and how situation is changed ie. Pet is found

Mime Simple acts that describe pupils everyday routine experiences for example: eg washing hands, combing hair peeling an orange, riding a bicycle, picking up hot chips, rubbing cold hands, conducting a band, warding off an attacking bee rowing a boat, walking on the moon, looking at someone at a upper floor, playing tennis, sweeping floor, carrying a baby, moving like a robot/soldier, baby learning to walk,

Situational Mime : example

1. You have an ice-cream in your hand.
2. Lick the ice-cream gently and slowly.
3. Ice-cream starts melting so lick it quickly.
4. Ice-cream is running down the side of the cone, like the cone too.
5. Now you've finished the ice-cream, but your hands have ice-cream on them.
What will you do now?

Use of Puppets to aid in situational mime or improvisation to do the followings: to stimulate imagination, encourage co-operation, to participate in less threatening

Talking About: my favorite food, picture talk : vegetables & fruits as basic foods

Singing

Excursions: To the school canteen, To the NTUC supermarket, To Komala Vilas/MacDonalds