

## Formalizing the Knowledge of Heritage Language Learners: A Technology-Based Approach

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### Introduction

Despite the fact that there can be no single profile that one can use to demarcate between heritage and non-heritage learners, heritage learners, in general, are quite familiar with a good number of vocabularies and possess a good command over a variety of syntactic structures. Thus, it is possible to generalize how their pedagogical needs vary from non-heritage learners, and where they stand in terms of attaining a native-like fluency both in speech as well as in comprehension. Heritage learners' language learning needs differ significantly from true-beginner language learners in various ways, the foremost being their native-like fluency in listening comprehension. Assessing the knowledge of heritage learners for the purposes of placement and designing appropriate syllabi are always challenging tasks as they belong to a category of what Harding and Riley (1986: 34-35) describe as receptive or passive bilinguals with very limited or no spoken skill in their first language. Here, some pertinent questions are: what language development opportunities are available for heritage learners of Tamil, and what methodologies would be ideal for them in any given educational environment?

The knowledge of language that heritage learners normally acquire through informal contexts needs refinement in terms of the formal aspects of the heritage language (HL), so they can gain confidence not only to develop their spoken skills but also to enrich their learning curve in a successful manner. Paradis, for example, assumes that it is the renewed contact with the heritage language community that provides the speaker not only with necessary input but also with the need to use the language productively, which in turn feeds confidence to the speaker to use what linguistic knowledge becomes available to them (Paradis, 1997). Note that it may not be just the 'renewed contact' with heritage language speakers that enables them to attain a native-like fluency. Heritage learners may acquire both linguistic and non-linguistic factors from their contact with other heritage language speakers and thus build confidence in their own abilities. With regard to Tamil, heritage learners' poor knowledge of such factors like High (H) and Low (L) varieties, diglossic characteristics, informal and formal forms, socio-linguistically significant dialect forms etc., handicap them greatly in being able to participate confidently in HL communication. Teachers should offer heritage learners enough exposure to real time speech situations, subsequently followed by a formal discussion about all of the extra linguistic information as noted above. Thus, such information gives them an opportunity to review and reactivate the previously stored knowledge from these points of views and confidently attempt to use the HL in spoken and written forms of communication.

This paper considers the case of the heritage learners of Tamil and attempts to define a paradigm as to how their status as heritage learners is to be identified, how their syllabus is to be distinguished from that of non-heritage learners, and finally how a technology enhanced approach would effectively meet their needs. For this purpose, I have considered two diverse groups of heritage learners of Tamil students, one in university level classes and the second represented by students from a community school serving elementary and middle school aged children. I propose that a technologically sound pedagogic method of teaching and learning can offer students enough opportunity to re-use their passive skill in an efficient manner. Some of the potentials of technology include integrating multimedia elements such as video, audio and images in addition to other internet specific methodologies such as use of web forms, chat rooms, story board, etc. In particular, some of the complex characteristics of Tamil, including the

existence of multiple dialects, its diglossic nature, and its demarcation between formal and informal forms, pose special problems in the context of designing a comprehensive lesson plan exclusively for heritage learners. It is discussed in detail here how instructors can deal with such language specific issues with a technology integrated pedagogical method.

Heritage learners of Tamil, who enroll at the university level beginning and intermediate classes, can be conveniently grouped into three major categories depending on their proficiency in non-literacy skills, namely: a) those who have near-native level of proficiency in listening comprehension and only have limited fluency in spoken skill, b) those who have a near-native level of proficiency in listening but lack skill in speaking, and c) those whose skill in Tamil is very limited both in passive as well as active skills (i.e., listening comprehension and speaking). The following table can help us understand better the listening and speaking proficiency profiles of these three groups of learners:

	Literacy	Non-literacy
Receptive	Reading	Listening comprehension (High, Mid, Low, None) <sup>1</sup>
Active	Writing	Speaking (High, Mid, Low, None)

The terms 'literacy' and 'non-literacy' are used here in the sense of whether or not a particular skill is acquired in formal educational environment. For example, reading and writing skills necessarily require a formal education, whereas listening and speaking skills do not impose such a requirement. From the point of view of the linguistic knowledge of heritage learners, it is most likely that they do not demonstrate any literacy skills but only non-literacy skills in different degrees, as shown in the table.

Depending on the amount of their prior knowledge in HL, heritage learners are also categorized under such terms as quasi-native speakers, residual speakers, bilingual speakers, and home-background speakers (see Valdés 1997, p. 13). Consider, for example, the third group of heritage learners whose proficiency ends at a very minimal level of understanding a restricted number of vocabularies and very simple expressions. In such circumstances, it may be misleading to refer to all of the students whose parents are speakers of the respective language as heritage learners. The reason being, at least from the point of view of language pedagogy, that it is not their heritage background that one can take into consideration to identify them as heritage learners, but what is significant is their nature of prior exposure to the respective speech community. Kagan (2005, p. 213), for example, defines the sources of language acquisition for heritage speakers as a triad consisting of a) family, b) community/community schools, and c) formal education. According to her, each of the elements in this triad can have a greater or lesser prominence depending on the language, history of the language group migration and attitude to language preservation, among a host of other factors. Community schools are a kind of semi-formal institution because they function with linguistically untrained but native speakers of the language as instructors. Therefore, students from such schools exhibit language acquisition skills much closer in some degree to those that one would acquire from any native language environment in the respective country, where the language is spoken. In one case, basic knowledge of the spoken language is learned in the home country from the linguistic environment, and literacy is built on that knowledge in schools. In the other, in the diaspora environment, students often lack exposure to a sophisticated linguistic environment.

### Assessing the Knowledge Levels of Heritage Learners

Depending on how they perform in their HL communication, and how they demonstrate various linguistic skills, it is possible to identify a heterogeneous group of heritage learners. In such

case, it might even be a cumbersome task for anyone to define a solid definition of who the heritage learners are. Valdés, for example, notes that “the term heritage speaker is used to refer to a student of a language who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or merely understands the heritage language, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language (p.1).” On the other hand, there exist other views, where heritage learners are those who have an ancestral relationship to the HL community. Gambhir, for example, is of the opinion that many HL learners may be true beginners who have only recently renewed their interest in the ancestral language and culture for ethnic and religious reasons after generations of no family connections with the target language and culture (Gambhir, 2001, p. 214). However, these definitions may be relevant only from the point of view of their motivation levels toward learning the language, but not from a pedagogical perspective.

Thus, for pedagogical reasons there arises a need to draw a clear dividing line between heritage and non-heritage learners, so that one can develop appropriate pedagogical material suitable for each of these groups. Along these lines of thought, it may be possible for one to presume that true heritage learners are those who have mastered comprehension skill with native or near native level of proficiency, but lack active skills such as speaking and writing. In the case of those with speaking skills, one must gauge their pronunciation, fluency of speech, proper use of social forms such as those used for politeness etc., on a par with native proficiency. Since writing and reading are considered to be part of the realm of literacy skills that one acquires from a formal environment such as schools and colleges, they need not be considered as a factor to determine their status as heritage learners. Especially, for languages with non-roman scripts, like Tamil, heritage learners would be expected to undergo a formal instruction on alphabet and writing schemes like any other learner.

Apart from literacy skills, heritage learners achieve a native like proficiency in comprehension because of their speech environment at home and their community where parents and relatives converse with them in the HL consistently. This phenomenon may be termed “Bilingual Non-reciprocal Communication, (BNC),” meaning situations in which parents speak to their children in the HL but children respond to parents in English (or any other local language of their choice like French, German etc.). Then, it is possible to assume that the BNC is responsible for making the children acquire a thorough receptive skill, which subsequently determines their status as heritage learners. One can then call this type of speech situation a Heritage Language Environment (HLE), as this is a unique phenomenon only relevant to diaspora community, which is normally a bicultural and bilingual community due to its members’ multi-ethnic and bilingual background. In such cases, the curriculum that one designs for heritage learners does not necessarily require any graded form of lessons, such as the presentation of simple to complex aspects of grammar as well as vocabulary, because they have already internalized a sufficient amount of structures as well as most of the commonly used vocabulary from the HLE.

What requires the most attention in the context of setting up a syllabus for heritage learners, then, is the formulation of a curriculum that focuses heavily upon enriching their ability to use many linguistically complex forms, such as idiomatic expressions, proverbial constructions, socio-linguistically relevant dialectal forms and so on. Additionally, instructors should aim to improve heritage learners’ skills in reading, writing and speaking at a natural speed. Such an approach would allow them to gain confidence in participating in the spoken communication by making use of their receptive knowledge. In other words, in order for them to acquire native-like fluency in both active and receptive skills, the syllabus needs to be structured in such a way that it encompasses all of the features that are normally attributed to authentic language, and at the same time makes use of their prior knowledge in an appropriate manner. In this context it may be worthwhile to refer to what Scalera hypothesizes about how the success of heritage learners in a foreign language classroom is determined by the way their prior knowledge is used as a starting point. According to her, “a heritage student who is treated with respect for her linguistic and cultural knowledge and taught in ways that tap into her special linguistic competencies will

excel in a foreign language class while a student whose heritage knowledge is ignored is less likely to be successful" (Scalera, 2003). This is probably a more important factor for Tamil, since native speakers tend to denigrate the knowledge of spoken Tamil as something that needs to be extirpated, rather than built upon.

## Heritage Learners of Tamil

As already mentioned, two diverse groups of heritage learners were observed over the course of two years. One group was comprised of graduate and undergraduate students at university level intermediate Tamil classes, and the other included students from elementary and high schools in a community Tamil school. For the former type, one of the intermediate level Tamil classes at the University of Pennsylvania during the course of four semesters of formal instruction was observed. For the latter type, a community Tamil school at Cherry Hill, New Jersey was chosen. While the former was an environment where instruction was conducted in a formal way, with a series of quizzes, tests and grading procedures, the latter was an informal environment where the instruction was normally conducted with the cooperation of parents and friends. Further, among the former group of students it became possible for the instructor to include discussions relating to linguistic terminologies on grammar, language varieties, language use, diglossia<sup>2</sup>, stigmatization of language forms and so on, as the students in this level are usually undergraduates or graduates whose meta-linguistic consciousness is relatively well developed when compared to the latter group of students. It is understood that the meta-linguistic information about Tamil becomes a prerequisite for any successful Tamil learner, as Tamil is a diglossic language exhibiting a fine distinction between high and low varieties, besides the other complex features such as polarity between spoken and written forms, informal and formal forms and so on. In addition, it is noted that the language attitude of the Tamils toward their language and culture also contributes to the development of a common desire among the Tamil parents of the diaspora community to raise their children to be both bicultural and bilingual in every sense. Essentially, this raises the motivation levels of Tamil heritage learners considerably to learn the language.

## Heritage Speakers in Academic Setup

As discussed earlier, proficiency levels of those students who are enrolled in Tamil classes have always been heterogeneous in nature, and defining a single profile encompassing all of the students is always impractical. In addition, some of them, despite their heritage background, show a very low proficiency level in knowledge and use of Tamil when compared to others. Upon discussion with heritage students in general about their language background, attitude etc., it became clear that those who maintained a low profile, i.e., having low skills in the language, had neither conversed with their parents in Tamil, nor did they attend any community schools. This means that this group of students failed to have an opportunity to take part in what was earlier discussed as bilingual non-reciprocal communication (BNC), and thus they profoundly failed to acquire enough knowledge of Tamil in order to be categorized as heritage learners. Instead, they can be conveniently grouped under what Wiley (2000) states as those who represent a unique group whose motivation level will be high, and who possess a heritage connection to the language, but do not have any linguistic abilities in the heritage language. As a result, maintaining a balance between these two groups of students in a heritage language classroom always becomes a challenging task. On the other hand, the group of students who actively took part in the HLE at home acquired enough listening skill so as to be categorized as true heritage learners from a pedagogical point of view. Their knowledge of Tamil is such that they can comprehend, like any native speaker, the Tamil that is spoken in movies, conversations of native speakers, language used in TV, radio, etc., without any difficulty. But, their only deficiency lies in their inability to actively speak and participate in natural communication with

enough confidence. Their comprehension skill also enables them to translate complex forms of Tamil speech to natural English in a manner of what Orellana (2003) refer to as “language brokering” or “natural translation”. Thus, their lack of skill in speaking and writing makes it necessary to develop individualized pedagogic materials, which should potentially harness their existing skills and enable them to participate in natural speech like any native speaker.

Further, it is to be noted that almost all of the so called “true heritage learners” of Tamil invariably lack the knowledge of Tamil-specific non-linguistic information, such as sociolects, diglossia and literary versus spoken variety. Specifically, their lack of knowledge about caste dialects, standard spoken variety<sup>3</sup> and consequently their inability to code-switch between them prevent them from participating in any natural speech confidently. It is a common practice that only the standard spoken form and the literary variety of Tamil are used in the educational context, whereas neither the social dialects nor the regional dialects are used in any way as part of the pedagogic materials, either in Tamil Nadu or in the diaspora environment. Native speakers of Tamil acquire their knowledge of social and regional dialects along with a skill to switch between them only through informal contexts. This means that heritage learners have no way of learning these multiple varieties and skill to code-switch in any diaspora environment, and the only form they would be acquainted with is whatever variety their parents speak at home. In consequence, when the heritage learners of Tamil attend Tamil classes, they realize they need not only to acquire a general knowledge of various varieties of Tamil but also to develop a skill to switch to formal varieties of both spoken and written language, by giving less priority to their thus-far learned home dialect. Naturally, this causes confusion among the heritage learners of Tamil in the academic environment because they are not in a position to negotiate between two styles of what they learned already from informal HLE and what they learn from a Tamil classroom—an issue that the non-heritage learners of Tamil do not have to face.

## Tamil Syllabus for Heritage Learners

The syllabus that is designed primarily for the sake of the heritage students of Tamil focuses heavily on developing their active skills of both speech as well as writing. Specifically, an array of video lessons was developed to augment their knowledge in the use of idioms, proverbial expressions, language-specific constructions, body language and so on. Reading texts were chosen from Tamil novels and short stories in such a way that their contents always require a presupposed knowledge about a number of factors, including language use, application of sociolinguistic rules, and employment of language varieties. During the process of reading any text, it was kept in mind that glosses are made available only for culture-specific new vocabularies, and for the rest they were expected to derive their sense from contextual information. The process of reading texts was always preceded by suitable pre-reading activities, including discussions about a number of extra-linguistic information such as personality of the writer, nature of plot, style of language used and so on. Some of the reading materials are also made available online with sufficient reading assistance, such as mouse-over glosses (glosses on demand), hot spots for translations (on a demand basis), illustrations for culture specific vocabularies, audio files for proper pronunciation.

Examples:

<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/tamilweb/yukam/yukamcol.html>

<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/tamilweb/fables.html>

<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/tamilweb/sujatha.htm>

Classroom contact time is best used for such activities like narration of stories, discussion of idiomatic and proverbial constructions, producing novel expressions by making use of words and phrases chosen from text, and a host of other related activities, which give an opportunity for students to get help for matters that can be resolved well only by the expertise of instructors.

Video clips containing dialogues were chosen in such a manner that they demonstrate both linguistic and non-linguistic information adequately. Linguistic information includes grammatical patterns, use of vocabularies, and switching between literary and spoken varieties. Non-linguistic information includes body language, use of intonation, employment of culture specific information and the like. While the texts are used to improve the reading skill of the students, video clips are used to improve students' spoken ability and proper use of idioms, styles, and custom expressions.

It must be noted that any instruction to develop literacy skills such as reading, writing and learning about basic grammatical functions, follows a common curriculum that is relevant to heritage and non-heritage learners. This means that as far as the knowledge of literacy skill is concerned, no distinction whatsoever between heritage and non-heritage learners is maintained. Keeping this fact in mind, the first two semesters of Tamil instruction are devoted to focusing on literacy skills, whereas in the subsequent two semesters two distinct pedagogic materials, each with a special focus on heritage and non-heritage learners respectively, are employed. A comprehensive set of technology-enhanced pedagogic lessons that are used with these two groups of learners is made available in the following website:

<http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil>

What follows is a discussion of how this technological resource is integrated in the curriculum and how it supports a need-based approach for heritage and non-heritage learners. The technology-enhanced Tamil curriculum discussed here proposes a diverse method of teaching with a methodology that is quite different from traditional approaches.

## Tamil Language in Context

The Tamil learning website is intended mainly to incorporate rich multimedia content such as video, audio, pictures, online exercises and glossaries as part of the language pedagogy. This site consists of a total of twelve units, and each unit is comprised of six lessons. The primary purpose of each lesson is to illustrate a speech context composed of all of the linguistic and non-linguistic information, as discussed earlier. Thus, the center of all of these lessons is a set of video clips demonstrating a number of speech contexts in the form of dialogues. Some of the examples of speech contexts that become part of the first six units include 'asking for direction', 'bargaining in stores', 'renting a car', 'taking a bus', 'inviting friends for dinner' and so on. In the latter units are more complex speech environments, such as 'domestic arguments between household women', 'unexpected guests', 'discussion of news items from news papers', and 'Tamil movie reviews.'. These dialogues were shot in Chennai, India, where Tamil is spoken. The people who took part in these dialogues were both native speakers of Tamil as well as professional movie/T.V. serial actors and actresses. Although transcripts for all these dialogues were written ahead of time, enough flexibility was given to the actors to make subtle changes within the transcripts so as to maintain a natural flow of speech in the dialogues. However, a balance between the pre-meditated transcript and natural speech was maintained throughout in order to avoid any artificiality and at the same time not sacrifice any expected results due to forced communication. During the process of filming, it was decided to take many instances of the same dialogue and later, during the process of editing, select the portions that fit the best for each of the contexts. Every dialogue, thus, is an edited version consisting of snapshots chosen from a set of identical video shots. Correspondingly, the transcript for every dialogue is presented in the website in such a manner that they contain new vocabularies and expressions highlighted with mouse-over glosses alongside the video. So, it becomes possible for learners to watch video and simultaneously read the text with suitable reading aids. Grammatical and cultural explanations relevant to each of these dialogues are provided in the same page so as to enable students to get all of the information relevant to any particular speech context in the same page.

Examples:

[http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil/unit\\_01/section\\_A/lesson01.html](http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil/unit_01/section_A/lesson01.html)

[http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil/unit\\_02/section\\_A/lesson01.html](http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil/unit_02/section_A/lesson01.html)

[http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil/unit\\_02/section\\_C/lesson01.html](http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil/unit_02/section_C/lesson01.html)

The lessons, as shown in these links, are followed by suitable comprehension exercises in order to assess the skills that the students acquire from each component. These units are also accompanied by four different reading passages (with suitable glosses and images), each demonstrating an identical topic to what is demonstrated in the dialogues.

As discussed earlier, basic literacy skills, such as knowledge about script, introductory grammatical principles, fundamental knowledge about custom and culture etc., are dealt with in the first six units, which are aimed at both heritage and non-heritage learners. One of the important aspects of the first six units is the presence of a detailed discussion about the distinction between literary and spoken forms. Students can switch between literary and spoken forms of transcripts in order to get a clear understanding of how the distinction between these two forms is made. This is also supplemented with adequate discussion of phonological rules that can be used to convert between literary and spoken varieties.

However, the latter units, from unit seven to twelve, are intended exclusively for heritage learners in that they cover a wide range of topics on advanced syntactic constructions as well as culture specific information. While the first six units are designed in a graded fashion with grammatical and cultural information presented in a particular order from simple to complex, such is not the case in the lessons from latter units. The latter units deal in detail with language issues such as idiomatic usages, proverbs, dialect forms, socio-linguistically relevant speech forms, and so on.

Examples:

[http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil/unit\\_07/section\\_A/lesson02.html](http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil/unit_07/section_A/lesson02.html)

[http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil/unit\\_07/section\\_C/lesson01.html](http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil/unit_07/section_C/lesson01.html)

[http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil/unit\\_08/section\\_A/lesson01.html](http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil/unit_08/section_A/lesson01.html)

Later units are constructed either with minimal glosses and translation or they are not made available at all. This is because of the fact that heritage students are expected to derive contextual information on their own, exploiting their prior knowledge of language and culture. As part of the comprehension exercises, students are asked to enact among themselves in class the environments illustrated in each of the dialogues. This can be either in the form of skit, classroom discussion, monologue or a play. Often, students are also asked to apply all of the special forms discussed in the dialogues in their own conversations with their parents and relatives at home in order to get feedback and subsequently gain confidence to use them freely in natural contexts. They are also required to report their experience in the class about how they used them in their speech. To cite one example, the concept of 'rarely' and 'unusually' is expressed in Tamil with the idiom *atti puuttatu poola* 'like the *atti* flower that blooms once in twelve years'. This idiom is used in everyday speech to convey (usually with a mood of exaggeration and humor) anything that happens very occasionally or rarely. Any relative or friend's rare visit to someone's house, making of certain food on rare occasions etc., are some of the contexts where this idiom can be employed. Using this idiom as part of one's speech requires a thorough understanding of the context where it can fit. Often, no heritage learner would have had any prior exposure to this or any other related kind of idioms, as they require a presupposed knowledge in one way or another. Also, using these idioms or custom expressions either in any inappropriate speech contexts or with mispronunciation would only lead to embarrassment. Further, capturing this type of information as part of the receptive skills of heritage learners requires sufficient training in terms of formal discussion and enough exposure to identical speech contexts at a conscious level. Keeping this in mind, the videos from unit

seven to twelve are developed to illustrate a variety of idiomatic expressions in a very detailed manner.

Example:

[http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil/unit\\_07/section\\_B/lesson01.html](http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil/unit_07/section_B/lesson01.html)

Students are asked to watch these videos repeatedly and latter discuss in class in Tamil about their thoughts related to their content. Note below some of the expressions that the students attempted to produce using the above idiom in their own speech at their home:

innekki *atti puuttatu poola* idli panniyirukke

You made Idly (food) today like the blooming of the flower *atti*.

*atti puuttatu poola* nii enne poonle kuuppittirukke

You called me on the phone today like the blooming of the flower *atti*.

The other important aspect of designing a heritage language curriculum is incorporation of lessons illustrating language specific syntactic constructions. Language specific grammatical constructions are those forms whose derived sense does not correspond to the normal order of arrangement of words and instead are understood as a result of habit. For example, in Tamil the suffix denoting the meaning of 'at least' is *aavatu*. This suffix is also used in a number of contexts where its basic meaning does not correspond to the derived meaning of 'at least'. One such construction is denoting the concept of 'inability to accomplish something'. This meaning is denoted by adding the suffix *aavatu* with both subject *and* the predicate, as illustrated below:

niingaL-*aavatu* paritceyile paas panRat-*aavatu*

*you-at least exam-locative succeed-do-at least*

'You will never ever pass the test'

It is obvious that without any formal instruction about this type of language-specific constructions, no heritage learner would be capable of comprehending and internalizing them as part of their receptive skill. In addition, it would be hard even for native speakers to explain in detail how this type of construction could get their desired meanings, as they only use them as a habit without much attention. Consider the dialogue in the link below for how this culture-specific construction is illustrated in the form of a dialogue:

[http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil/unit\\_08/section\\_A/lesson01.html](http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil/unit_08/section_A/lesson01.html)

A total of twenty five video clips that are included as part of the units between seven and twelve deal with a total of about forty five idiomatic and custom usages in Tamil. All of these forms are included in the dialogues in such a manner that they occur more than once for the reasons of reinforcement.

## Skits

Writing skits and subsequently acting them out in classrooms are proven to be a resourceful activity where heritage students can further their knowledge of language in a successful manner. Heritage students are specifically asked to include in their skits the idioms and culture-specific vocabularies that are exemplified in the video clips and reading. Such activities help them immensely to internalize, and subsequently use them as part of their speech in a natural manner. Consider below the links that give a snapshot of some of the skits performed by heritage learners of Tamil in one of the intermediate Tamil classes:

<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/tamilweb/skit/skit1.html>

<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/tamilweb/skit/skit2.html>

## Heritage Learners in a Community Language Learning Environment

In contrast to the academic environment, heritage students who learn Tamil in a community environment are usually middle or high school students whose meta-linguistic knowledge is very limited. This forces one to design a syllabus that contains no information about grammar or linguistic terminologies of whatever kind. Instead, they are to be furnished with simple texts such as stories, straightforward conversations, riddles etc., in ordinary language. Systematic instruction of Tamil scripts and adequate practice for making simple words and sentences usually follows the process of reading simple texts. Motivation of the students in community schools is often driven by the language attitudes of their parents. As far as Tamil is concerned, the language attitude of its speakers, in general, is rooted in the rich history of both religious and non-religious literatures of Tamil dating back two thousand years. This forces one to incorporate an element of Tamil literature as part of the pedagogy in one way or other.

## Online Comprehension Exercises for Heritage Learners at a Community Level

Keeping in mind language attitude as one of the driving forces behind the motivation to preserve the language, and the kind of skill levels of students in community schools, a separate curriculum was designed to cater to the needs of the children from Tamil heritage families. Basically, this curriculum was designed in such a manner as to encompass topics from Tamil literature, Tamil movies, T.V. commercials and a number of other related media. A series of online tests consisting of multiple choice, yes/no and true-false questions are designed based on what is illustrated in these multimedia components. These tests are aimed not only to improve students' understanding of the language from selected Tamil texts, they are also meant to improve their reading skills. This website consisting of about fifty five exercises so far is accessible from the URL <http://rewardzone.thetamilanguage.com/login.php>. An important point to remember is that this site requires individual login, which is found to be very resourceful for a number of reasons. They include a) student's performance can be monitored at every stage, b) their grades can be maintained electronically, c) it helps students get instant feedback about their performances, and d) it allows them to keep track of their grades on a regular basis. This method of teaching the heritage learners is found to be very effective for the fact that it motivates students to complete exercises regularly as and when they are available online. Even though these exercises are made available in this site for various levels of proficiencies, no effort is taken to present them in a graded fashion from simple to complex topics. This is mainly because it is assumed that every heritage learner is exposed in one way or another to most of the commonly occurring daily speech situations from home, and also they are found to be quite familiar with conversations from Tamil movies, speeches, etc. Video clips that are used in the Tamil instructional site <http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil> are reused as part of these exercises in various ways. Also, suitable images representing culture-specific objects such as vegetables, dress, food items etc., are incorporated as part of these tests in order to improve their knowledge of culture specific vocabularies. The grading system, instant feedback method and subsequently every student's ability to get anonymous access to the grades of their peers not only motivate them to complete exercises with enthusiasm but also allow them to participate in the learning process on a regular basis.

In addition to language classes, an attempt is also made to teach students in this school both cultural and religious values. Thus, the aim of this community school is twofold in the sense that it imparts the knowledge of both language and culture simultaneously. Maloof et al (2006), for example, notes the identical role of a Vietnamese language school, which, according to them, aims for a) development of competence in both host and HL (the phenomenon of 'additive bilingualism'), and b) development of competence in both host and heritage culture, a phenomenon they refer to as 'integrated cultural identity'.

## Summary

In summary, heritage learners who acquire knowledge of the HL through informal contexts—usually from their diaspora community—require a formal education as a supplement to their knowledge of language use and function of HL so that they can gain confidence in using the language in both active and passive contexts effectively. This is true especially from the point of view of Tamil, as the heritage learners of Tamil have no access from the HLE to any information related to the formal aspects of the language, namely formal versus informal speech, standard spoken variety versus social and regional dialect forms etc., which are usually the essential part of any authentic speech of Tamil. Natural speech is a blend of numerous linguistic features, including appropriate pronunciation, use of language-specific constructions, employment of idioms, handling of intonation and so on. While native fluency is determined based on how well one can demonstrate these skills, the status of a heritage learner is also assessed based on how close their skills can replicate these features. According to Campbell and Rosenthal (2000) and Valdés (2000), ideal competencies to be accomplished by heritage learners include native pronunciation and fluency, a good command of a wide range of syntactic structures, extensive vocabulary, pragmatics and sociolinguistic rules of the heritage language community. Achieving most or all of these competencies depend upon a number of factors, including effective pedagogy and language attitude of the speakers. The Bilingual Non-reciprocal Communication (BNC) in any HLE is instrumental to determine heritage learners' knowledge of the HL for the purposes of designing a syllabus. What is important in the context of teaching heritage learners, then, is a specialized curriculum that can carefully harness their prior exposure to the HL, and present lessons in such a manner that they can formalize their prior knowledge in a gradual fashion and subsequently acquire proficiency in both literacy and non-literacy aspects of active and receptive skills. It is demonstrated how the sequentially ordered and technologically sound Tamil video lessons from the Tamil learning website serve as a need-based pedagogic content for both heritage and non-heritage learners of Tamil.

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- 1 The scale 'high', 'mid' and 'low' as noted here is comparable to ACTFL's standards of advanced, intermediate and novice respectively.
- 2 See Ferguson 1959 for a detailed description of the term 'diglossia' and Britto 1986 for how it is relevant to the context of Tamil.
- 3 Tamil has both social and regional dialects, and the native speakers of Tamil, in general, are quite capable of code-switching between social and regional dialects very comfortably. In fact, code-switching between regional and social dialects is assumed to be part of the native competence in Tamil. It has also been proven that there exists a standard spoken variety which acts as a lingua franca among different dialects. According to Schiffman (1998), Standard Spoken Tamil (SST) is, "everyday speech of educated non-Brahman Tamils, and its most obvious public domain is the Tamil movies of the so-called "social" type, other modern "social" stage dramas, some radio broadcasting (radio plays etc.) and to some extent in television."