

# HERITAGE LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT (HLE) AND ITS IMPLICATIONS UPON LANGUAGE CURRICULUM: A CASE OF TAMIL HERITAGE STUDENTS AND DESIGNING A DIFFERENTIATED CURRICULUM

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## Abstract

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*The diverse nature of heritage language learners in the context of their language learning situations forces one to explore the nature and the type of differentiated curriculum that one needs to design in order to cater the needs of each of these diverse groups of learners. In particular, the diaspora population is diversified itself vastly in a number of distinctive terms including their period of migration, linguistic context of living, their retention rate and so on. Identifying each of these groups of learners, on the one hand, and attempting to develop a pedagogically sound language curriculum for each of them, on the other hand, are the two challenging tasks that one would need to accomplish in the context of any heritage language learning and teaching tasks. In this respect, this paper attempts to categorize four different learner groups of the heritage learners of Tamil based on their unique learning styles and their retention, and subsequently suggest a differentiated curriculum that can be considered as appropriate for these diverse groups. It is discussed in detail here how the language traits of these groups differ largely because of their typical language learning environments, as well as their diversified motivational factors. This study was conducted based on a set of formal interviews and questionnaires among a group of high school and university level students of Tamil along with a number of their family members who migrated to the U.S. Students and parents from a number of community Tamil schools were also engaged in during the process of this study.*

**Key words:** Tamil learning, Pedagogy, Heritage learners, Language learning, Language Curriculum, Language retention, Tamil Diaspora.

## Résumé

La nature diverse des apprenants de langue d'origine dans le contexte de situation d'apprentissage nous oblige à explorer la nature et le type de cursus spécifique qui doit être développé afin de répondre aux besoins de chacun de ces divers groupes d'étudiants. La population diasporique est elle-même particulièrement diverse et contient un ensemble de signes distinctifs incluant leur période de migration, le contexte linguistique de leur lieu de vie, leur taux de maintien, etc. Identifier chacun de ces groupes d'apprenants, d'une part, et tenter de développer un programme d'étude avec une base pédagogique adaptée à chaque groupe, d'autre part, sont les deux défis à relever dans tout contexte d'apprentissage et d'enseignement d'une langue d'origine. Ce travail tente d'identifier quatre différents groupes d'apprenants de tamoul, langue d'origine, en se basant sur leur style particulier d'apprentissage et de maintien, et de proposer un programme différencié qui pourrait convenir à chaque groupe. Cet article décrit comment les particularités linguistiques de ces groupes diffèrent largement à cause de leurs contextes particuliers d'apprentissage ainsi que leurs divers facteurs de motivation. Cette étude s'appuie sur un ensemble d'entretiens et de questionnaires adressés à un groupe d'étudiants de tamoul dans des écoles et au niveau universitaire ainsi qu'aux membres de leur famille émigrés aux États-Unis. Un certain nombre d'étudiants dans des écoles tamoules communautaires et leurs parents ont également participé à cette étude.

**Mots-clés :** apprentissage du tamoul, Pédagogie, apprenants de langues immigrantes, apprentissage de langues, programme d'enseignement de langue, préservation langue, diaspora tamoule.

## INTRODUCTION

With the recent increase in enrollments of students with Heritage Language (HL) background at the university level language classrooms, a need arises as to how one would redesign the language curriculum so both the True Beginning Learners (TBL) as well as the Heritage Language Learners (HLL) are placed in appropriate language learning environments. Among many challenges involving the language education for heritage learners what concerns the most is not a matter of how one can distinguish between a HLL and TBL based on their linguistic profiles, it also entails how one can design a differentiated curriculum that could fit the needs of both types of learners at any given learning environment. For the main reason of minimum number of enrollments in Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTL) classrooms, like in the case of Tamil, it often becomes the case that both TBL and HLL are placed together in the same language class room with a common predefined syllabus. As a result, both types of learners face concerns related to their learning at various discomfort levels – either they are challenged too much or too less than they are capable of. As the linguistic profiles of each of the HLLs mostly show a personalized HL environment at home, community, or any other linguistic circles, one is not in a position to define any particular

type of target language speech context as the typical language acquisition environment for diaspora population.

## 1. DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

The heterogeneous nature of Heritage Language Environment (HLE) compels one to formulate a methodology to judge and identify the diverse nature of HL students' linguistic profile, especially based on a number of factors such as their nature and amount of exposure to HL in both informal and formal contexts, their motivations and previous skill levels and so on. Differentiated instruction is a teaching theory based on the premise that instructional approaches should vary and be adapted in relation to individual and diverse students in classrooms (TOMLINSON 2001). In general, differentiated instruction focuses upon four different aspects of language learning processes namely content (lessons), process (activities), product (demonstration) and learning environment (classroom environment) and each of these categories needs to be formulated based on the proficiency levels of each participating student (cf. TOMLINSON 2000). In this respect, this paper attempts to discuss the diverse nature of heritage learners of Tamil, mostly with students coming from different levels of HLLs, and also proposes a differentiated curriculum that can be employed as a viable alternate to the conventional methods of instruction for such students. As part of this study, a set of heritage Tamil students belonging to both university as well as high school levels, along with a number of heritage Tamil family members who are engaged in community instructions were interviewed with a specific set of questions, mostly relevant to identify the Tamil language speech context in their home and community along with the motivation levels of students as well as parents. Subsequently, it is argued in this paper that this information when analyzed makes it necessary to distinguish four major types of Tamil HLLs, and correspondingly four types of activities to be kept in mind as part of the process of designing a differentiated curriculum in Tamil.

## 2. VARIETIES OF TAMIL AND THEIR ROLE IN FORMAL EDUCATION

What is most commonly observable among many HLLs of Tamil is that the knowledge they acquire from informal environment is fossilized to a certain extent so they seem to restrict their domain within it without any possibilities of further development. For them, learning a formal grammar and knowing the formal variety of Tamil do not show any impact upon their language use and acquisition unless they are trained to specifically unlearn their informal knowledge of Tamil that they learned from social contexts. Subsequently they need to learn to negotiate between spoken and written variety, a process that can be termed as “formalization of the knowledge of heritage learners”

(Renganathan 2008). It seems to be the case that when a child is raised in a bilingual environment where one of the languages is dominant outside home, and the target language is admired only at home by parents and other family members, the child undergoes an immense amount of pressure to learn the home language in parallel to the dominant language spoken outside of home. In consequence, the language attitude of the student, in general, is altered to an extent that the heritage speakers who arrive at the secondary and post-secondary level classrooms seem not entirely L1 speakers or L2 speakers of the language in question (cf. LYNCH 2003). In other words, the type of immersion that a L1 learner gets without any interferences is to be distinguished from that of what is obtained along with L2 language, which presumably takes over the immersion context of L1 at home.

### 3. WHO ARE THE HERITAGE LANGUAGE LEARNERS?

Most of the definitions of HLLs often are broader in nature simply because they assume anyone with a family background where the target language is spoken by parents is to be considered as heritage learners. “All definitions can be said to be valid for particular communities in the U.S. and to be of value for specific linguistic tasks (i.e. teaching, linguistic maintenance, revival, etc). However, no sole definition is capable of embracing all and only such individuals that could conceivably be argued to fall under the heading of “heritage language learner” (CARREIRA 2004). What many definitions fail to take into consideration, however, is the fundamental deciding factor of how each student is exposed to the target language within the nature of their language acquisition, and in what degree they are motivated to learn the HL. What seems to be of primary concern is students’ acquaintance with the target language in terms of how they relate themselves to it and how much language is imposed upon them in turn, so they can call themselves as bilingual speakers to certain extent. The compelling question, perhaps, is how can one determine the degree of bilingual knowledge of any HL speaker!

A close study of HL students of Tamil in university class rooms as well as in community classes show that their degree of familiarity with Tamil language differs significantly among each other to the extent that every HL student can be considered to be placed at a distinct level of language proficiency of their own. In some cases, based on their very meager knowledge in TL, despite their heritage background, they may not even be considered as a HLL. Obviously, this particular group of students would be treated with a content as that of TBL, with quizzes on graded vocabularies and grammar exercises.

Interviews with the entering Tamil language heritage students during the process of language placement at the university level classes indicates the fact

that they demonstrate unique and individualized environments of their own as to how they are exposed to the Tamil language in their diaspora context. Some consistently interact with their parents in somewhat near-native fluency of Tamil; some always engage themselves in a Tamil-English mode of communication, and for yet others Tamil is considered to be completely foreign. Thus, it becomes necessary for one to define what constitutes the ideal HLE so that one can comfortably place students under the categories of whether they are HLLs or TBLs at university level language classes, irrespective of their ethnic origin. Not only does the understanding of HLE allow one to create appropriate linguistic profiles for those students who enroll in formal classes, it also offers us information about the attributes of ideal HLEs that can later be mimicked in diaspora atmospheres and subsequently plan for appropriate curriculum.

#### 4. HERITAGE LANGUAGE SPEECH CONTEXT

Based on the diverse linguistic backgrounds of students who attempt to learn a second language, one is compelled to distinguish between those who have a prior exposure to language from families where the target language is spoken and those who do not have such exposures. Thus, it becomes possible to identify a number of scenarios as to how the the students exhibit their proficiency in the second language. Some have good aural skills with a limited spoken skill; many lack literacy skills of reading and writing in the target language; and very rarely some have a near native fluency. With no systematic study of how the students from various caste groups of Tamil fall in one of these skill levels, a cursory analysis of the participants of the interview processes suggests that most of the *Chettiyar* community students who participated in this study tend to show a near native fluency in Tamil and they consistently engage themselves in spoken conversation more fluently compared to other community students. Strikingly, this becomes analogous to the findings of Fishman in the context of Spanish and Korean immigrant communities. Although Korean and Spanish are both immigrant languages in the U.S., the community profiles of these two languages differ significantly with regard to literacy, educational attainment, and other sociolinguistic variables (Fishman 2001). Without any such systematic study of heritage students of Tamil across the U.S., taking into consideration of their social, cultural and family backgrounds, the reason for their varying levels proficiency remains to be precisely documented.

A close observation of the linguistic performances of a select number of Tamil children of the age group between two and five in a pre-kindergarten stage without any day-care experience shows that their language acquisition resembles very much to the first language acquisition in that they speak and

understand the type of Tamil language their parents speak at home. The parents of these children, when interviewed, proclaim the fact that their motivation tends to be making these children as fluent as they are in terms of understanding and speaking of the Tamil language. Under this circumstance, one may consider that these children tend to have a first-language environment in terms of HL acquisition, as their exposure to the foreign language is yet to surface. For the same reason, the interactions with the family members of this particular HLE suggest that the parents do not have as much difficulty as that of families with older kids in making them understand and speak the language at a proficient level. Subsequently, judging the proficiency levels of these children also suggests that their HLE is confined mostly within the family with both parents being native speakers, an ideal first language acquisition context.

There are also instances where parents tend to be noncommittal to their children's learning of the Tamil language, but they consciously talk to them only in Tamil – mainly because of their common habit, as may be understood from what one of the intermediate Tamil students states: "...throughout my life, my parents (from Tamil Nadu) have spoken to me almost primarily in informal Tamil. I have typically responded in English, and it was not enforced by my parents that I was to speak in Tamil to them." These students demonstrate a skill in Tamil that can, in general, be considered as near native fluency in terms of intonation, fluent use of complex grammatical patterns, and spontaneous reflex in target language. Ideally, for the reason that this group of parents speak only Tamil to these children most of the occasions and with a very less English interaction, the passive competency of these students exhibit a near native fluency. Further, the acquisition of fluency in passive competency also becomes responsible for them to internalize a number of informal words and expressions of the Tamil language from their parents. Such word forms, that are mostly colloquial and informal in nature, are commonly intended to be used in restricted contexts such as in homes, but not publicly in any formal situations.

Some of the examples of expressions that the Tamil HLLs tend to acquire quite frequently from their parents, but without knowing much about their linguistic appropriateness, may be included as below.

puṭṭukka pōvudu	"might break"
appamēlu	"afterwards"
ikkkunōṇḍu	"tiny bit"
vantākkā	"if one arrives..."
eppāccum	"occasionally"
ennatte colla?	"what to say?"
varumāṭṭrukku	"it appears as though something could come"

These forms are restricted to be used only at very informal contexts among close relatives and friends mainly for the reasons of their obscure word formation methods, as well as for their highly stigmatized nature. Commonly, most of the spoken Tamil forms can be related to their corresponding literary variety by way of application of a specific set of automatic phonological rules. But relating these forms to any such conceivable literary correspondences would be very obscure, as they have undergone many morphological changes within them historically and thus led to an unidentifiable and unrecognizable source. Thus, employing these words in one's speech in any formal context such as in platform speech, language classrooms, and other formal occasions is considered to be very unsophisticated and unacceptable. Lacking such a knowledge of linguistic appropriateness among all of the HL students is considered to be a known trait that needs special attention in the context of HLA.

Learning to comprehend the linguistic appropriateness of such spoken forms and expressions is considered to be part of the native speaker's fluency, and it can only be acquired in any ideal native language environment. On the contrary, the HLLs who attend formal classes in diaspora environments tend to use these forms and expressions in their speech as well as in their writings consistently without being aware of their social taboo, thus failing to capture the knowledge of linguistic suitability. Most of the heritage language students living in the US do get chances to engage themselves in language immersion environments by their occasional visits to Tamil Nadu, but the knowledge of Tamil they acquire from such visits do not show any impact upon their Tamil language acquisition on a permanent basis. This is mainly because of their returning quickly back to the routine English language environment.

“... every three years, we go for a six-week long vacations to India where I was forced to speak in basic Tamil to my large extended family – many of whom did not know any English. My exposure to Tamil increased dramatically as well. At the end of every trip, (especially those taken when I was younger than 12 years of age) my spoken Tamil fluency increased somewhat noticeably by the end of the trip. However, I would quickly return to my previous level of Tamil proficiency after being back in the US and falling back into the normal routine of solely using English in school and at home.” (HL student Ramasamy).

Noticeably, their comprehension of both formal and informal Tamil, which can otherwise be termed as their passive or aural skill in Tamil, does not weaken as much as their spoken skill and it continues to extend. It must be observed that this attitude applies only to those children whose parents, both father and mother, speak Tamil consistently at home. On the other hand, in such circumstances when only one of the parents speaks Tamil, the child's learning the Tamil language during the pre-kindergarten stage improves only

when the mother speaks the Tamil language to the child, in most of the observed cases. A close observation of the heritage students who are enrolled in the beginning Tamil classes shows that only those who had the experience in Tamil, as discussed above, during their childhood stage demonstrate the behaviors of HLL, whereas those others without such rigorous first language acquisition experience during their childhood lack many skills as one can normally attribute to any ideal HLL.

What one can call this set of students as the ideal HLLs requires a content, process and product in differentiated instruction in such a way that the lessons and the activities trigger their active skills particularly utilizing their passive knowledge, which encompasses within it an extensive knowledge of vocabularies, pragmatic constructions, idiomatic expressions, cultural knowledge and so on. Further, the mode of communication with these students should always be restricted to Tamil with a very minimum use of English, on restricted contexts such as discussing any non-linguistic information.

## 5. HERITAGE LANGUAGE LEARNERS' LANGUAGE TRAITS

Comprehension of enormous amount of vocabulary, good listening skill, understanding the fast speech etc., are some of the traits that one can consistently attribute to any ideal HLL. What may be termed as a “single track bilingual communication”, where the parents speak in Tamil and the children respond in English in equal fluency is a familiar trait that one can observe invariably among many of the HL children. These students with a rigorous exposure to Tamil language from family exhibit fluency mostly in aural skill, but fail to demonstrate as much spoken skill as one would expect. They tend to understand a heavy load of vocabularies and idiomatic expressions; they often can process the complex speech involving free flow of natural Tamil, as fast as any native speaker of Tamil would speak, but one finds it very difficult to produce comparable fluency of Tamil in their speech.

“...I have always found the large gap between my aural Tamil abilities and my spoken abilities to be very frustrating. I can completely understand fairly rapid speech and complex forms used by my parents, friends, and family, but I am simply unable to think of the same forms when I am trying to speak to them. In terms of spoken Tamil, I still struggle to spontaneously form sentences and thoughts. In Tamil class, I often raise my hand to say a sentence and quickly realize I'm not really sure how to form it.” (HL Tamil student Ramasamy).

The very trait of not being able to produce expressions in spoken language as opposed to what is fluently understood as their comprehension may be ascribed to the inadequacy of their training in active language skill, which can, in general, be attainable only in language immersion environments.

Not to mention the fact that when these students attend language classes in a formal context, they often tend to reproduce the spoken forms similar to what they learned from their parents, and thus are unable to distinguish between what constitutes to be the formal and informal varieties of Tamil. For them having to distinguish between the very different written and colloquial Tamil creates much confusion. Thus, the knowledge they acquire from any informal environment is fossilized to an extent and they tend to have restricted to their domain only within the circumstances of what they have learned from their parents. Further, these students seem to find the differences between spoken and literary variety very convoluted, especially in the context of their attempts to expand their knowledge in terms of understanding the formal and informal varieties. To be able to distinguish between formal and informal variety is assumed to be another unique competency pertaining to the knowledge of the Tamil language, and it can be developed only among native speakers in any ideal L1 context. Alternating between these two varieties of the language in appropriate speech contexts often results an inappropriate use of the language, a tendency that is most commonly seen among non-native speakers speaking the formal variety to native speakers of Tamil. The reason for this erroneous communication method is mainly because the formal variety is incorrectly assumed as the de-facto variety in Tamil language pedagogy. Similarly, all of the heritage learners, who have learned the spoken language from home, tend to use the same register both in their writing and speech – a quite opposite tendency of using only the formal variety in their day-to-day conversations by foreigners (non-HLLs). For the HLLs, learning a formal grammar and knowing the formal variety of Tamil do not show any impact upon their already fossilized language use, unless they are specially trained to unlearn their informal knowledge of Tamil that they had learned from social contexts.

## 6. SOCIAL AND REGIONAL DIALECTS OF TAMIL AND THEIR INFLUENCE UPON HLLS

Presence of many social and regional dialects in the Tamil language often entails the use of many spoken varieties among Tamil speakers. Thus, a possible scenario would be that the HL students who attend Tamil language classes in Tamil diaspora countries such as in the U.S., Canada, Europe, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia etc., may come from diverse family backgrounds in terms of their castes, regional dialect they belong to in Tamil Nadu, their social status and so on. Every caste group demonstrates a set of stigmatized lexical forms, which might differ from region to region because of their influence from respective regional dialects. Thus, it is possible that a Brahmin Tamil speaker from the Madurai region may speak a different variety of Tamil than

a Brahmin who is from Coimbatore region mainly because of the impact of their respective regional varieties upon social dialects. Impact upon regional and social dialects is reflected upon a number of different ways in all levels of language, including intonation, lexical, grammatical and culture. Not to mention the fact that the instances of inter-caste and inter-regional marriages among their parents also make the deciding factor for HL speech environment a very complicated one. As each member of these groups of parents might end up speaking a completely different dialect, choosing a common form of the language by HLLs becomes a daunting process. The diglossic nature of Tamil with two distinct High and Low varieties (cf. Annamalai 2011a, Britto 1986, and Asher 1982); and the presence of many forms of social and regional dialects obscure the matters further, so deciding any single form of Tamil to be considered as standard and pertaining to common form of speech becomes an inconceivable task. “Speakers may vary depending on social characteristics such as their place of birth, their community of origin, their level of education, their socio-economic status, their sex, their age, their occupation, whom they are talking with, and any other social markers one may isolate” (Schiffman 1999 p. 3). These differences can be noticeable in many ways including the ways in which the phonological rules apply on each verb and noun form in order to produce the corresponding spoken form. For example, consider below the variations of the progressive and completive aspectual forms as marked differently because of their impact from regional and social varieties.

pōykkkunōṅṭu iruntān “had been going (he)” – Past progressive form (formal variety)

### Spoken variations:

pōykkittiruntā – Thanjavur dialect (koṅṭ > kiṭṭ)

pōyṭṭiruntā – Thanjavur dialect – fast speech (koṅṭ > ṭṭ)

pōyiṅuruntā – Tirunelveli dialect (koṅṭ > ṅ)

pōyiṅdiruntā – Brahmin dialect (koṅṭ > ṅḍ)

vantuṭṭuvān – “he will (definitely) come” – Future completive aspectual form (formal variety)

### Spoken variations:

vantuṭṭuvā – Thanjavur dialect (viṭu > ḍ)

vantuṭṭuvā – Madurai dialect (viṭu > ṛ)

vantuṭṭuvā – Tirunelveli dialect (viṭu > ṅ)

vantuṅṭirukka vēṅṭum enkiṛatu – “the fact that one needs to come” (formal variety)



Not only the nature of spoken Tamil that the HL students of Tamil hear on a daily basis from their parents and friends, but also the kind of language they encounter from other sources such as television, movies etc., tend to consist themselves with many of such complex constructions. Thus, it becomes an excessively daunting and overwhelming task for any Tamil language curriculum planner to account for all of such agglutinated constructions that can be produced with a whole range of combinatory possibilities. Unless a curriculum is specially designed in a way for students to have access to such a database of combinations of verb forms and expressions and familiarize themselves with their spoken usages, these complex combinations would only sound foreign to any HL student despite their education in a formal setup. Renganathan (2010), for instance, is one of such attempts to offer the learners of Tamil with a convenient access to a depth of Tamil speech situations by means of audio and video resources that are developed in a graded and pedagogically sound fashion. The carefully designed dialogues that are included as part of the videos and subsequently illustrated in the text book comprise within them many complex utterances as discussed above. Further, writing spoken Tamil forms in Tamil script, as opposed to their corresponding literary variety is commonly considered to be against the norms of Tamil pedagogical practices for the main reason that there is a general belief that literary Tamil is considered to be pure and the spoken variety is impure. Despite such beliefs, there are attempts to standardize Tamil writing in conjunction with speech, but such attempts also lack merits for the fact that the Tamil spelling system is believed to be inadequate to accommodate all of the sounds that one would hear in speech. Annamalai (2011b) opines that the way the spoken Tamil is written is notoriously inconsistent between authors and the same author at different places. Unless one attempts to present Tamil text concurrently in both spoken and written style in Tamil script, the HLLs find it an overwhelming task to learn to speak and write differently.

“... During the second semester, I learned basic grammar and improved my reading skills. Reading stories was difficult since my vocabulary is somewhat limited. Also, many of the words used were entirely different from the words used in spoken Tamil. Learning simple tenses in both spoken and written forms was confusing at times, but ultimately, learning each tense has laid the groundwork for me to be able to understand Tamil speech better. Having to distinguish between very different written and colloquial Tamil creates much confusion.” (HL Tamil student Ramasamy).

## 7. HERITAGE LANGUAGE ACQUISITION (HLA) AND HL SPEECH COMMUNITY

A common question arises as to how much of prior knowledge of language learned from family background is enough to identify someone as a heritage learner, as opposed to assuming one as a true beginner. This requires for one

to closely look at the possible linguistic environments of HLLs where they grow up in diaspora countries and scale their linguistic knowledge based on a number of criteria pertaining to their linguistic abilities. Valdés (1997 p. 14) posits for Spanish HLLs eight different categories that reflect the diversity of background and linguistic experiences of U.S. Latinos. At one end of this classification are the fluent speakers of a prestigious variety of Spanish while at the other end are those who have only receptive skills in a contact variety of rural Spanish.

As for Tamil, the most practical environment for HLA seems to be where both parents speak Tamil and they both consistently attempt to impart the knowledge of Tamil to their children by various means. Some of such means include talking to their children consistently in Tamil despite their tendency to respond in English; making their children attend Tamil language community classes and even homeschooling regularly places their acquisition of Tamil to be at an appreciable level. However, as mentioned elsewhere, despite such efforts, what seems to be the case is that their fluency in Tamil is restricted only to a level of comprehension and their skill in speech and writing still lacks in many ways. Some speak in a limited manner in simple sentences but mostly in incorrect intonation; some can read and write simple Tamil, but their ability to read and comprehend any advanced level of Tamil readings show many limitations. One of the main reasons for this state of affairs is because of the fact that many educated Tamil speakers themselves are unfamiliar about some of the basic principles of Tamil grammar. The reason for this is that nowhere in their Tamil education are they taught the formal grammar of modern Tamil, as there is none along these lines exists in the Tamil Nadu curriculum for Tamil education.

Tamil language education in Tamil Nadu emphasizes more on Tamil literature and the grammar of poems, as opposed to prose and speech. As a result, the Tamil education in diaspora countries, mostly offered in community schools by parent teachers on a voluntary basis simply attempts to imitate it and thus fails to follow any appropriate pedagogical method of teaching Tamil as a second language. Further, the continued development of many new vocabularies in Tamil, mostly coined to avoid code mixing from English, makes the style of Tamil prose more convoluted than one can imagine. On many occasions even for the native speakers of Tamil it requires special attempts to understand such new registers in a coordinated fashion.

The Tamil language heritage learners, whose familiarity is restricted within a very limited number of common vocabularies that they usually hear from their parents, face a difficult time reading commonly used pedagogic aids such as news paper articles, short stories, novels etc., where the use of words, idioms and other custom expressions far exceed their comprehensibility mostly

because of their unfamiliarity in them. Even continued training in language classrooms with vocabulary drills, exposure to many new idiomatic expressions, complex usages, fast speech etc., seems not to have any considerable effects among HLLs of Tamil mainly due to their poor language retention skill in diaspora context, thus challenging the notion of any ideal speech context for HLA. Also, the expectations of the parents fall along the lines of not only having to make their children as fluent as they are, but also make them versatile in understanding the depth of Tamil literature, which they consider as the source of their lineage and tradition.

The other common category of HLLs of Tamil belongs to Sri-Lankan ethnicity. Tamil Sri-Lankans, who migrated in large numbers to other countries including Canada, England, Australia, France and U.S.A., mainly for the reasons of the recent ethnic conflict in Sri-Lanka contribute to a considerable number of second-generation Tamil students who attempt to learn Tamil in Western universities. Unlike the mainland Tamil heritage community, whose dialects are marginally intelligible to each other, the intelligibility between Sri-Lankan Tamil dialect and mainland Tamil falls completely off the track, mostly in terms of lexical variability and intonational differences. In such circumstances, for any Sri-Lankan based HLL, learning the variety of Tamil in formal environment in any diaspora country would seem like learning a foreign language, unless otherwise the curriculum is exclusively designed for their need in Sri-Lankan Tamil dialect and is taught by Sri-Lankan Tamil instructors. For this reason, in some of the educational institutions such as in University of Toronto, Canada, Goldsmith College, London, etc., where there are heavy population of Sri-Lankan Tamil immigrants, preference is given for Sri-Lankan Tamil instructors as opposed to someone from Tamil Nadu. Needless to say, this is an entirely unrealistic expectation in most other places such as U.S., Singapore, and Malaysia etc., where the immigrants are distributed among themselves from both Tamil Nadu as well as Sri-Lankan populations.

Yet another category of Tamil HLLs, who can conveniently be called as a fall-back category, belong to the type of those whose motivation falls far less than the other groups as discussed above. These groups of HLLs belonging to the type of those who have a very limited amount of HL exposure from home and their community show the traits similar to TBL. The reason being that one of their parents is belonging to another ethnicity – either from Indian origin, or of English origin; their parents converse with them mostly in English but with limited Tamil; or them not having any opportunities to attend to any community schools and so on. Practically speaking, these students do not demonstrate a Tamil language skill that can be attributed to the skills of any ideal HLLs, nor can they be attributed to belonging to Tamil heritage, except for their ethnic relatedness. This is also observable in diaspora countries such as the

French islands including Guadeloupe, Reunion, etc., where the immigration took place during nineteenth century as indentured laborers and subsequent population completely lost the knowledge of Tamil, except for using fragments of them in their Tamil religious ceremonies that they retain throughout. In this respect, the countries like Mauritius, Sri-lanka, Singapore and Malaysia need to be grouped under one category where L2 language immersion is still possible. Whereas in countries like the U.S., England, France, Canada, L2 language immersion is not observed as much as they are observed elsewhere.

The TBLs of Tamil, on the other hand, is someone who never had any prior exposure to the language either through heritage or through any of their personal affiliations to the heritage of Tamil. They are mostly the speakers of English who intend to study Tamil in conjunction with their graduate programs focusing specifically on Tamil heritage and culture, or those with an intention to interact with the Tamil language community for one reason or the another. For them, learning the language in a graded fashion, either through communicative or task-based approach seems very ideal and it meets their style of learning in all respects. Language instructors of Tamil who are often trained in linguistics or second language pedagogy find it less problematic to teach this group of students, as they have no preconceived notions, whatsoever, about the Tamil language or culture. However, the practical scenario is that when the TBLs are allowed to learn Tamil among the HLLs in the same classroom, they find it more of a hindrance than a convenience for the main reason that they are unable to learn the language in many careful steps. Learning in a mixed group is convenient in one sense that they can engage in conversations with their HLL peers using a relatively authentic language, but it is a hindrance in another sense that they will not be able to learn it in a structured manner from beginning to advanced level of Tamil in a graded fashion, as they are often have to face random words and expressions of advanced levels on a rather unexpected and puzzling manner.

In summary, based on the above observation, the Tamil HLLs, in general, can be categorized under four major categories namely a) Ideal HLLs with a native and near-native fluency in Tamil, b) Tamil HLLs who constantly engage in single-track Tamil-English communication, c) Tamil HLLs whose knowledge of Tamil is limited to passive knowledge without any active participation, either in speech, reading or writing and d) the fall-back category who do not have sufficient knowledge of Tamil language for one or more of the reasons, such as either of the parents is a non-Tamil, both parents lack sufficient knowledge of Tamil, or their immigration to the respective diaspora country took place quite a while ago. Along these four major categories of Tamil HLLs, their needs in the context of the differentiated curriculum on the content and process may be outlined as below.

HLLs	Lexical control	Comprehension	Spoken fluency	Written fluency
Type I: Ideal Tamil HLLs: Engaged in active communication in Tamil at home with both parents as native or near-native speakers of Tamil.	Full control with comprehension and use of sufficient number of words. Vocabularies of high registers such as newspaper, scientific documents are needed.	Fully proficient with understanding of fast speech as well as complex constructions, both cultural as well as linguistic structures. Mono-lingual teaching method with native like conversation may be employed.	Near-native fluency, but frequent use of colloquial and slang forms.  Special instruction on distinction of formal and informal variety in the context of formalizing the knowledge of Tamil is to be included.	Inadequate skill level. Tend to use spoken forms often.  Literacy needs to be introduced in a graded fashion. Knowledge of formal grammar, idiomatic expressions and cultural competency need to be advocated.
Type II: Tamil HLLs used to single-track Tamil-English communication HLE.	Same as above.	Same as above.	Inadequate skill in speech.  Rigorous training for spoken fluency is to be inducted.	Same as above.
Type III: Tamil HLLs with passive HLE: No interaction whatsoever in Tamil with parents, but are passively exposed to Tamil speech.	Poor lexical control and requires a heavy training for vocabulary improvement.	Very minimal comprehension of speech and requires rigorous training in understanding structures. Introduction of speech in slow pace is required.	Very minimal or no fluency in speech and requires a rigorous instruction in spoken skill	Same as above.
Type IV: Tamil HLLs in fall-back category: No exposure to Tamil due to lack of one or both parents with the knowledge of fluent Tamil	No proficiency and requires training like that of TBL. Quizzes and vocabulary practices from basic vocabularies are required to be included as part of language learning environment.	TBL instruction.	TBL Instruction.	TBL Instruction.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Given the diverse nature of Tamil language learners at the university level Tamil language classes as well as in community schools, a need arises to pursue a field of study that exclusively explores the linguistic behaviors of HLLs as against TBLs, so as to develop a differentiated curriculum that would appropriately cater the needs of both the categories of learners on the one hand, and many subcategories within the HLLs on the other hand. Typically, though, for the reasons of issues related to poor enrollments in Tamil classes in the US universities – usually between five and fifteen students – as opposed to forty to fifty students in other comparable classes including Japanese, Chinese, Spanish, etc., it becomes impractical for one to offer separate classes to meet the needs of individual group of HLLs, nor can they even offer separate classes for HLLs and TBLs. As discussed elsewhere, it becomes an impracticable task to identify any single or a few homogenous groups of HLLs based on their unique HLEs in any diaspora community. This is mainly because of the fact that these diaspora population exhibits a very heterogeneous nature of Tamil speech situation. However, each of the four groups of learners as discussed in this study demonstrates a proficiency that can be attributed as belonging to a specific trait of HLE from an overall perspective. Thus, developing a differentiated curriculum for HLL students of Tamil usually requires providing them more exposure to the formal knowledge of the language as well as improving their production skills such as speaking and writing, than to the passive skills namely listening and reading comprehension. In other words, the comprehension skill of HL students sounds in most cases very similar to native speakers, whereas the nature of their writing and speaking skills depend fully upon the idiosyncrasy of their Heritage Language Environment, a topic that requires a careful study in the context of retention of language among the diasporas.

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