E-Learning in Tamil- The Singapore Tamil Classroom Journey

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To succeed in the knowledge-based economy, teachers and students not only need to keep abreast of developments in emerging technologies and explore better ways to harness these technologies for teaching and learning, but they must also share their knowledge and innovations. Reflection and sharing will generate more creative ideas and new knowledge.

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Introduction

Learning is a life-long process. It begins at home, develops in schools and does not end there. With the emergence of IT, modern technologies have started changing the lifestyle of our modern population. In the field of education E-learning is now much sought after. Knowledge is acquired by using the benefits of high-speed network connections, Internet, video conferencing etc. Here in Singapore the area of E-learning is still being experimented. Though high tech tools are taking over, much care is given so that traditional tools (books, teacher, paper)will co- exist with these high tech tools. Some dot.com companies with a series of assessment papers and lessons have explored e learning in Tamil. E-learning in Tamil, in the Singapore schools however have been a method of exploring available interesting websites, for information and moulding it into an interesting lesson. Through this, much care is taken to reach the objectives of a lesson, while making it interactive, integrated and brain –based.

E-Learning in Tamil – The Singapore Way

E learning is the integration of computer technology and the Internet with school curriculum. It is more of a supportive programme where the physical presence of the teacher is not replaced. The teacher on the other hand becomes a co-learner and an expert guide who helps students achieve the desired outcomes of the lesson through a different channel. It provides alternative teaching methods and it is a breakthrough from the traditional classroom environment. This is an efficient method to engage today's IT –literate pupils. In Singapore every school has Internet access and with the IT master plan a pupil –computer ratio of 4:1 was made possible. Core training for teachers have been completed and IT has been integrated in the school curriculum.

Advantages of E-Learning in the Singapore Tamil Classroom

- Pupils enjoy IT based lessons and web based lessons, therefore interest is sustained throughout the lesson

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- Interactive exercises gets pupils involved and pupils are able to get feedback about their performance immediately.
- Pupils could engage in virtual discussion group and are able to form a wider network through email, chat rooms, video conferencing and audio dialogue.
- Discussion threads also facilitate quizzes, tests, projects and homework thus enabling pupils to develop independent learning skills.
- Online courses provided by private entrepreneurs are a form of supplementary education for pupils.
- This allows for flexibility in time and in the pace of learning.

Problems faced by the Tamil Teachers

- Though there is a vast amount of resources available, they need to be in line with the primary schools curriculum.
- Tamil Teachers need to put in more time in grounding the basics before using IT as a learning tool to enhance the teaching of Tamil.
- A lot of preparatory work has to be done by the teacher in order to conduct an effective lesson.
- Not all Indian parents are IT savvy, and everyone is aware of the Internet and E-learning. Furthermore not all pupils have computers or Internet connections at home.
- With the current syllabus, pupils only finish learning the Tamil alphabets in primary two, thus this makes it difficult to conduct any web-based lessons.
- Since the students' performance is assessed through the written examination, pupils could not be left on their own to complete assignments at their own pace. Pupils still have to work with the constraints of time.
- Lack of interaction between teachers and pupils.
- Lack of teamwork and collaboration between pupils.
- Teachers need to integrate the three initiatives NE,(National Education) IT and Thinking Skills in their lessons. Integrating teaching strategies such as co-operative learning while engaging in E-learning.
- Though teachers went through core training under the IT Master plan, courses were conducted in English. This made it difficult for Tamil teachers to adapt to it in Tamil.

Challenges faced by the Tamil Teachers and possible solutions.

Most of the Tamil teachers though apprehensive in the beginning are now using IT and exploring E-Learning more comfortably. Project Work is replacing Continual Assessments in a number of schools; thus enabling students more flexible time. However teachers face some challenges that have to be addressed periodically until the society, as a whole is able to move towards an IT enriched Education System. Some of the challenges include

1.   Teachers' have to be creative and have to crack their heads to come up with ideas.

- Teachers began to do sharing sessions on the use of IT in teaching Tamil. These types of sharing sessions were made possible by Teachers' Network. This is a department under the Ministry of Education, which looks after the learning needs of the teachers. Many teachers have learned a lot from fellow teachers. Furthermore experienced teachers are able to share lesson plans and ideas to solve possible problems that will arise in the use of IT in Tamil

Language teaching. Sharing sessions were also done in the annual Tamil Teachers' Sharing Session organised by the MOE . (Ministry of Education)

2.   Not every pupil has a computer at home.

   •   Sinda has a scheme where not so well to do families can apply for free computers.

3.   Different keyboarding styles for Tamil

   •   Tamil 99 keyboard was introduced to allow pupils to type, learn and interact on the internet using Tamil Language. Through the standardization of this keyboard , every child learns the same keyboard in all the institutions that he attends. The TAB, TAM and TISC encoding has enabled many different software users to be unified. With the Tamil 99 keyboard, all Tamil language users can type in the language for electronic – mails, as well as set up web pages

4.   Lack of time for teachers in schools due to work commitment

   •   Preparations done by teachers are mostly similar as they closely follow the syllabus. Teachers have been encouraged by the Ministry of Education and the Collation team to share their resources on the Internet. Pupils are also encouraged to send their articles to the following web sites so that they too can share resources and learn from one another.
The following sites are such sites :
http://www.singtisc.org/edu/pr/index.htm
http://www1.moe.edu.sg/namnaadi

   •   By sharing resources and ideas Tamil teachers are able to maximise the limited resources available. Sharing has also been a form of motivation for teachers to explore E learning.

5.   Picking interesting sites that will supplement our current syllabus and at the same time striving to achieve the learning outcomes.

   •   There are many available sites on the internet . So teachers who have identified such sites can share it at the above mentioned web sites so that other teachers can save time by not searching for them.

6.   Lack of lesson plans for teachers

   •   Lesson plans are also shared over the above mentioned website

7. Having a relevant web page which is tailored to Singapore Tamil syllabus is necessary

   •   http://www.singtisc.org/edu/pr/primary.htm has a wide variety of exercises especially tailored for Singapore Tamil Syllabus.

- This serves as a Rich Digital Portal for the Singapore Tamil teachers. A site where students, teachers, and parents can extract information pertaining to Tamil language.

Role of Society in E-Learning

The Public as Partners

We can only succeed in our mission with the full support and confidence of parents and the community. We seek to work together with them as partners, to develop our children to their fullest potential. Education will make our children's future, while our children will make the future for Singapore. – www.moe.edu.sg
(Corporate Information – under mission and vision statement
Ministry of Education - Singapore)

Education system at present has the task of making learning a relevant and life-long process, a process where there is continuous change. Technological developments have created a new dimension to learning. However this learning process not only involves the teacher and pupil but the society as a whole. The Tamil students in Singapore come from different socio-economic backgrounds. A number of Indian parents are not aware of e learning or even sure about the use of IT in schools. Those educated do not know much about the availability of resources in Tamil.
Society therefore has to play a vital role to increase the level of IT literacy among the Indian population. Teachers play an important role, as they have to instil a sense of liking for IT.

SHARING WITH THE PUBLIC

SINDA an Indian self-help group has and is still conducting valuable IT workshops for parents, children, working adults and even the elderly at a low cost. This effort has created awareness in Information Technology to the Tamil society in Singapore. The rise in the level of IT literacy among the Indian population is essential in making the society ready for changes such as the e-learning in Tamil.

Indian Activity Groups that belong to the various Community Clubs are also doing their part to increase the level of IT literacy among the Indian population. They are organising for talks, exhibitions, web tuitions and IT fairs where vendors are able to showcase their latest products.

The formation of the **Tamil Internet Steering Committee** also created a great awareness among the Indian population of the need to keep up with the global changes that is happening around us. TISC aimed to promote Tamil Internet usage and to help the Indian community become net savvy. It also encouraged the use of e-commerce for businesses and consumers

The **Tamil Teachers Union** collaborated with TISC to organise events such as Tamil IT competitions for students and also organised for forums on IT related problems.

Tamil Teachers also formed a **Collation Team** under the Content Development Sub Committee of the TISC. This collation team with the help of TISC has created web pages, which are very useful to students, teachers and parents. These web pages are in line with the MOE syllabus, which makes it easy for any teacher to conduct an IT-based lesson. This collation team which consists of some very dedicated teachers, has conducted web tuitions in the various community

clubs creating an awareness about the ***www.singtisc.org*** website and also other useful websites such as ***namnaadi***. The singtisc website covers the entire syllabus of primary Tamil education in Singapore.

Conclusion

Tamil teachers in Singapore have taken measures to keep up with the changes that are happening around them. They have strived to strike a balance in the use of IT in Tamil language teaching. Their aim is not to wander too far away from the traditional method; but to be a guide and co-learner, while sustaining the interest of the puipils .They are striving to prepare the students and the society for an E-learning environment in Tamil.

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