Videoconferencing and
the Teaching of Tamil Language and Verbal Arts

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1) Introduction.

The Tamil language has been described as a goddess; therefore, communicating in both spoken and written Tamil can be seen as a mystical experience (1). The teaching of spoken language often first occurs in the context of the mother-infant relationship, which is among the most intimate of human relationships. In addition, both spoken and written Tamil have ancient histories. Thus it is with respect and humbleness beyond words that this paper begins to explore how the teaching and learning of spoken Tamil language might occur through videoconferencing.

2) Interactional Routines in Language Learning.

Following are seven questions-and-sample-answers. Via substitution, transformation, and accumulation drills (or games), these seven simple conversational sentences can serve as a gateway to the entire language (2).

The teacher may choose to speak the question and have the student repeat; or, the teacher may speak the question and have the student give an answer.   If the videoconference is between two or more people who are practicing the language together, they will have to devise their own rules for the activity.

In an accumulation game: one player says word A, the next says words A and B, the next says words A, B, and C, etc. For example, the game could begin with a noun (tree). An article could be added (a tree). Then an adjective (a tall tree). Then a subject and a verb (he climbed up a tall tree). Then an adverb (he slowly climbed up a tall tree), etc.

If there are two participants, turn-taking can go back-and-forth; if there are three or more participants, it can go around-in-a-circle, becoming a ring game. When players are co-present, they sometimes clap hands with another player when they take turns; some other movement would have to be devised for a videoconference (or, electronic painting could be performed as one speaks). Almost everywhere, children have played language games since the beginning of humanity. One function of such play has been to practice spoken language. These games present language together with rhyme, melody, rythym, repetition of variant phrases, and

gestures, all of which can assist with the memorization and internalization of words, grammar, and syntax (3).

Regarding the following visual presentation of languages: in each case, four lines are given --
    Tamil.
     Transliteration (International Phonetic System).
     Word-for-word translation (English).
 Colloquial translation (English).

3) Videoconferencing for Language Learning.

Videoconferencing can be defined as communication in which all parties can send-and-receive audio-and-video to-and-from each other. All other types of electronic communication (including typing, drawing, the viewing and manipulating of websites, the playing of prerecorded video, etc.) can occur within, or concurrently with, a videoconference.

Videoconferencing can occur via any number of technologies, including regular telephone lines, ISDN lines (a specialized type of telephone line), the Internet, and Internet2 (4). It is also possible to simultaneously transmit the combined audio-and-video of a videoconference over the Internet as a webcast, so that others can observe the videoconference conversation and participate via e-mail (5).

Under optimum technological conditions, videoconference partners can talk with each other in a conversational tone and can feel like they are almost in the same room and are only separated by a meter or two of space and a pane of glass. However, to the degree that conditions are not optimized, the following principles of Signal Detection Theory should be kept in mind. Five features that increase the reliability of signal detection in noisy environments are:

A)   Redundancy of part of a signal, or of the entire signal, enhances detectability.

B)   Conspicuousness by exaggeration of acoustic features enhances the signal-to-noise ratio by increasing the contrast between the signal and the irrelevant background information.

C)   A small repertoire of signals reduces the listener's uncertainty and enhances performance in signal detection tasks. With fewer and more distinctive categories in which potential signals can be classified, the opportunity for identification errors is minimized.

D)   Alerting components at the beginning of a signal increase detectability and recognition by letting the listener know when to expect the message component of the signal.

E)   Alerting components at the end of a signal alert the listener to ignore subsequent immediate material, and can serve as a request for the listener to indicate that she has received and comprehended the signal just sent.

4) Suggestions.

Tamil Nadu could provide language and verbal arts instruction via audio- and videoconferencing to people all over the world. She could take a leadership role in developing and providing such services for scholars, students, businesspeople, potential tourists, children

of Tamils who have emigrated, and others. This could lead to more people visiting Tamil Nadu, and to those visitors being more culturally-educated.

 This could also provide work for videoconference language instructors and videoconference language practice-partners in Tamil Nadu. University-trained Linguistics and Communication scholars would need to oversee such processes, but videoconference language practice-partners in Tamil Nadu could be less formally educated. Selected browsing centers in the state could be used as educational/commercial teaching and practice centers. 24-hour access to these browsing centers would be necessary, so that clients around the world, in all of the various time-zones, could be catered to at times convenient for them.

 Such dreams can only come true with the enthusiastic and mutually-encouraging participation of people in academia, business, and government.

Notes:

1) Sumathi Ramaswamy, Passions of the Tongue: Lnguage Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970, Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1997.

2) Diane Larsen-Freeman, Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching (2nd Edition), Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 2000. This very useful book presents and discusses many language teaching techniques in addition to the conversational routines, drills, and games that I have focused on in this paper.

3) Iona and Peter Opie, The Singing Game, Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1985.
   The Opies' wonderful collection is mostly drawn from children of Great Britain and Europe. Of course, traditional Tamil singing games -- both those taught by adults to children, and those which children teach to each other -- should also be collected, analyzed, and used in the teaching of Tamil language.

4) Internet2, the new generation of the Internet, allows transmission of full-screen near-broadcast-quality video. For information, please see <http://www.internet2.edu>. It might be beneficial if universities in Tamil Nadu could increase their Internet2 capability.

5) Information about, and Realplayer audio-video recordings of, two recent videoconference-webcasts can be found at:
   <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/videoconference/series/YuendumuPhila.html>
   "Old and New Forms of Storytelling," co-hosted by Warlpiri people (in Yuendumu, Australia) and Penn Folklore graduate students (in Philadelphia, USA); and
   <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/videoconference/series/April_20.html>
    "Virtual Performance," co-hosted NYU Performance Studies graduate students (in NYC) and Penn Foklore graduate students (in Philadelphia).
   Also please see, <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/webcast/discourse>,
   "A Discourse about Kannagi, and about Traditional Storytelling Techniques."

   For information about upcoming videoconference-webcasts involving "The Teaching of Tamil Language and Verbal Arts," please contact the author, Eric Miller <emiller@sas.upenn.edu>.