

Tamil Teaching via Distance Learning: Achievements and Prospects for the future

Harold F. Schiffman
South Asia Studies
University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

The notion that languages such as Tamil can be taught on-line, using various kinds of electronic and web-based resources, has now been carried out with some success since the Penn Tamilweb site was established in 1997. The challenge now is to extend and improve this system, bearing in mind a number of important issues.

A Consortium of US-based South Asia Language and Area Centers has recently proposed the establishment of a South Asia Language Resource Center (SALaRC) based at the Universities of Chicago, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. The materials development component of this LRC will be based at Penn, and will involve a number of initiatives. One of these will be to involve Tamil Heritage language teaching resources, in order to both improve the teaching of Tamil among Heritage programs, as well as to make the quality of early language instruction that much better so that university-based instruction can go beyond the usual levels. This would mean bringing Heritage language instructors to workshops and training programs, perhaps in the summer months, along with other summer training institutes that will use the best research on language teacher training, utilize a focus on applying research on bilingual education and language acquisition in general, developing assessment and evaluation tools, and in general making the best knowledge of language teaching available to all Tamil teachers in the US, whether in higher education, or at the community level.

This paper outlines how we intend to build on the success of the past to improve Tamil language teaching on-line and on the web in the future.

1. Introduction

Much has been made of the prospects the Internet hold for language teaching, and since the first attempts to put materials on-line in the 1990's, it can be said that some progress has definitely been made. But other impediments remain, and until certain technological improvements have been made, and high-speed connections are available to ALL users, progress will probably be limited and proceed at a slower pace than anticipated by some.

This paper will attempt to talk about what achievements we have made in teaching Tamil (in particular) on-line, and what prospects exist for future improvements. I will also assume that this audience consists mostly of people who are interested in seeing that the Tamil language is taught, but that people do not have personal experience teaching the language, or are not *professionally involved* in teaching Tamil. There are many websites devoted to 'teaching Tamil' on the Internet that are well-intentioned, but often ignore or are unaware of the best knowledge that we have about language teaching. (Much of this 'best knowledge' has been

produced by people devoted to teaching other languages, and in particular, to the teaching of English as a second language, or ESL.)

2. What is Tamil?

One of the first things we must do when discussing teaching "Tamil" in any way, mode, or form is to decide the following:

1. What do we mean by "Tamil"?
2. What kinds of issues (factors, strategies) might be involved in deciding what kind of Tamil is to be taught?
3. **Who** makes the decision(s) about what Tamil is, or ought to be, and what ought to be taught?

This brings up issues of *control* of language, an issue that, as far as the Tamil language is concerned, is always divisive, and can often lead to rancorous debate. I only need to remind some here in the audience about the debates on the subject of Tamil Unicode that came out of the Tamilnet 1997 conference, some of which became very unpleasant, led to name-calling and breast-beating, and as far as I can tell, generated much heat but very little light. One of the things that has not yet registered with the Tamil community, especially those who **do** believe that language needs to be strictly controlled, is that language control is a losing battle. That is, the form of a language (its styles, its grammar, its literature) is difficult enough to control when one is dealing with printed documents, or the form of poetry, but when it comes to the internet, language cannot **ever** be controlled. That is, the idea that that the Internet can be used to disseminate and preserve a kind of pure beautiful Tamil, and will allow us to thereby eliminate all kinds of impure and corrupt Tamil, ushering in a new "Garden of Eden" in which there will be no strife (especially no linguistic strife), is simply untenable.

The Internet has in fact allowed all kinds of strange, free, and unfettered kinds of language to flourish, and has also allowed many kinds of information, some of it hateful, ignorant, and even obscene, to be easily disseminated all around the world. This is as true for English as it is for Tamil, and if there is any universal truth that has emerged, it is that the Internet allows *any* kind of language to be used by whoever wants to use it, and that it **cannot** be controlled, either in form or in content, by some central body, language academy, or well-meaning guardians of 'pure' language.

Our task, if we wish to use the Internet to teach Tamil, therefore, is to recognize that many kinds of Tamil will be available on the Internet, much of it a kind of Tamil that many people may see as corrupt, colloquial, broken, whatever, and that we must teach students to be able to deal with in some way. That is, we don't need to teach students to *use* all the kinds of Tamil they may find on the net, but they should be able to recognize it, understand it, and do with it what they like. So far in the development of the Internet, there have been attempts to control the **content** of language (i.e. to control for hate speech, obscenity, or whatever) but nobody has yet to devise a way to control the **form** of language, nor will they succeed as far as the Internet is concerned.

We also have to realize that language learning is not a **passive** process, with learners sitting inertly in front of their computer screens, silently imbibing the language they see on the monitor. Language learning involves interaction and at the moment, some kinds of interactive

processes are easier on-line than others. So we must pay attention to what kinds of interaction lead to learning, and what kinds do not. Since language control may often involve the expectation that receivers of language will assent to some notions of 'good' vs. 'bad' language, and dutifully reject the 'bad' in favor of the good, we will probably find that modern language learners, whose value systems do not involve much obedient acceptance of authoritarian standards laid down for them by people who 'know better', will in fact not accept ideas of good and bad from others, especially if it has to do with *form* rather than content.

3. Language Learners and their Needs

One of the first things that we must address in any discussion of language learning is what the **needs** of learners are. In the language teaching profession, we usually talk about *skill acquisition*, and we identify at least four language-learning skills, though we might add some more (which I will discuss below.) In general, we can divide these skills into active and passive skills, and also divide this another way, between the oral and the written.

1. **Listening skills:** Listening is a largely passive skill, involving comprehension of spoken language, which can be independent of speaking and/or other language skills. That is, there can be individuals who understand spoken language but are hard-put to speak it, even though they may understand all or almost all of what they hear. This skill is typically found among children who hear a language spoken around them (by adults) but are not required to speak it in order to survive. It is very typical for children of Tamil speakers who have settled in America, e.g., but it is a skill that may be totally absent among non-Tamil students studying Tamil as a new language.
2. **Speaking skills:** This is an active skill that seems naturally to be related to listening, but may be independent of it. Again, immigrant children may lack active speaking skills, but may understand a language well, while non-immigrant neo-learners may actually be better at speaking than listening, i.e. they can generate language samples but not understand them when spoken by mother-tongue speakers. This is especially true if the spoken language (e.g. spoken Tamil) is not actively encouraged by educated Tamilians, who seem to think knowledge of spoken Tamil is a useless skill, unrelated to knowledge of literary Tamil.

Those of us who have taught Tamil to 'foreigners' (i.e. people whose mother tongue is not Tamil) know that being able to speak Tamil is not a natural offshoot of being able to read and write it, whereas people who teach Tamil in Tamilnadu can assume that their students already speak Tamil, and do not need to be given explicit instruction in speaking.

Those of us who have learned Tamil as a second language (i.e. our mother tongues are something other than Tamil) also know that spoken Tamil and written Tamil are as different as different languages, i.e. as different as Latin and Italian, and must be taught using different materials and with different strategies; this is one of the most difficult issues for Tamilians who are not experienced with teaching 'foreigners' to grasp, but it is a necessity if we are all to remain on the same page for the rest of this talk, at least.

3. **Reading:** Reading is again a more passive skill, which can be acquired **without** acquiring any other language skills. Often so-called 'dead' languages are taught as a reading skill only; students may also take a 'reading course' in a scholarly language in order to read, but not speak or write the language. (During my linguistic career, I have learned to read Old Church Slavonic, Sanskrit, Portuguese, and Dutch, but I can not speak any of these.) It is also the case that reading may be domain-specific, i.e. one could learn to read e.g. newspapers or novels, but perhaps not read scientific literature. Often western learners discover that being able to read, say French and Italian gives them the ability to also read e.g. Spanish, that is, they can 'figure out' what is going on in a Spanish text, but they would not be able to actively produce grammatically correct written Spanish.
4. **Writing:** Writing is an active skill, and is probably dependent on being able to read; it is to me inconceivable that someone could write a language but not be able to read what s/he had written. But it is also possible to be able to write different kinds of language, i.e. write poetry but perhaps not write scientific literature. We assume that learning to write brings with it skills in reading, but how these are linked psychologically may be not well understood.
5. **Others:** Many language teachers know that even when all the above skills have been acquired, other kinds of knowledge might be absent, e.g. cultural knowledge about how the linguistic culture in question functions. Thus a lack of cultural knowledge would mean that sentences could be decoded, but without a clear understanding of what they 'mean' in actuality; or, their literal meaning might be understood but not their metaphoric, poetic, or other meaning. Teaching and learning of cultural knowledge is often assumed to take place along with the teaching of other skills, but the skills are often seen later to be lacking. Teaching politeness, for example, is usually attempted in teaching spoken language; but cultural notions of what is polite and what is not differ from linguistic culture to culture, and many cultural situations are difficult to replicate within the classroom. Notions of politeness differ even within a culture from generation to generation, or from region to region, so that addressing a group of Americans as "You guys" can be considered uncontroversial if the addressees are young, but if they are of my parents' generation, the term is considered offensive. (Addressing someone as "you dudes" is even more problematical.) I discovered that certain notions of what is polite in Tamilnadu may not be the same in Singapore among Singapore Tamils, especially younger ones, who giggled when I addressed a class with "vaNakkam" and this gesture [folded hands]. Later one student said I sounded "Just like her Granny!" In the American south one is expected to use forms like "Sir" and "Ma'am" with older people, but in other parts of the country this sounds formal and even militaristic.

Another issue that cannot be ignored in the design of teaching materials is that in addition to different kinds of skills, we must also have materials at different **levels** progressing from the beginning to the advanced, as shown in the table below

Levels, Skills, and Needs					
	Speaking	Listening	Reading	Writing	Other?
Elementary					
Intermediate					
Advanced					
Superior					
Other?					

4. Different Learners

The above skill and level groups can be further broken down into learning various *functions* of language, i.e. how we use language to perform certain tasks. I have mentioned nothing about such things as **grammar** which used to be always taught explicitly, and is more likely to be taught explicitly for written Tamil than for spoken Tamil. Most modern language teachers avoid explicit grammatical explanations, hoping that grammar will be learned 'holistically' or 'implicitly', or even ignoring grammar as a skill as long as learners can 'make themselves understood' and can get what they want by using the language, no matter how 'ungrammatical' it is. Other teachers feel the need to make grammar more explicit, especially with a language like Tamil, which is structurally so different from English that using English grammar and Syntax gets the user very little.

5. Heritage learners

But the other issue we must face here is that of the so-called Heritage learner who has some skills in the language from home acquisition, but still lacks active skills such as speaking or writing. Or, the HL speaks, but does not write the language, and may also hope to 'get by' by writing the way s/he speaks, since old-country speakers can certainly understand spoken Tamil when written.

It is also the case that the amount of writing that is **actually** required of either the HL or the neo-learner is really quite minimal. We are not expecting any of our learners to write novels or scientific tracts, so the actual skills needed for survival may come down to letter-writing, if the truth be told. (We do not want to admit this, but it is probably true.) And if we have to justify why we teach students to write, it is because we assume that writing skills 'carry over' to reading, i.e., we will read better if we write well, because we assume that since writing is an active skill, it somehow penetrates the brain more deeply than does a passive skill. This assumption may be totally unjustified, but it underlies much language teaching.

6. How to teach these skills on the Internet?

Here is where we now face the issue of teaching Tamil or other languages on the web. First of all, teaching someone to actively speak a language via Internet is probably still not possible. We lack the bandwidth on the Net to provide adequate interactive back and forth dialoguing with a teacher, and we also lack the ability to create a *virtual reality* that a student could enter into, where a robotic voice could answer appropriately in ways that would ensure that a student gets the proper feedback. We simply don't have the bandwidth or the technology or

the understanding of how to create an electronic environment for this as yet, so until this happens, **speaking skills** will continue to have to be learned with live speakers in a classroom setting, or more ideally, in a one-to-one setting.

But this is not a terrible thing; the Net *is* good for certain things: we can teach the more passive skills via web-based materials, and reserve the classroom for the more interactive active skill acquisition. In fact the teacher can "off-load" the passive skill learning to the web--send the student who hasn't learned particular things to site where drilling and learning can take place, and reserve the classroom for active skill learning.

For example, the teacher may discover that one of his/her students is woefully unprepared in a particular area, such as the knowledge of which postpositions in Tamil are used with which case markers. For those of you who are familiar with the language but not the terminology, an example of this would be the question of which of these two sentences is grammatical:

- | | | | |
|---------|----------|--------|-----------|
| 1. naan | avane | paattu | siricceen |
| 2. naan | avanukku | paattu | siricceen |

The issue here is of course which of these sentences would be the correct spoken Tamil translation of the English sentence '*I laughed at him.*' Since English speakers generally assume that English 'at' is translated by the dative case (*veerrumai*) they might be tempted to use the second sentence instead of the first.

If a student has such difficulties, what the teacher can do is one of the following:

1. Stop the lesson and drill *all the students* on this material.
2. Stop the lesson and drill only the one who needs help on this material.
3. Refer the student who is having problems to some material on the website that s/he can refer to to correct his/her lack of knowledge.

The last solution is of course the ideal one, because it does not detract from class time and in fact waste valuable class time for the problems of one student. An example of this kind of exercise can be seen [here](#). This is a page I designed for when my son was studying German and was not getting any particular help with this problem in German. It gives the student a chance to drill on the German prepositions (similar of course to Tamil *veerrumai* problems.) I must refer you to a non-Tamil exercise here because in fact I do not have a Tamil example to refer you to on Tamil case-formation, but if the question were another typical problem in Tamil, that of **past-tense** formation, I could refer you to [this page](#) which drills on the difficult problem of past-tense formation, here with feedback, or without. With these exercises, the student sends his/her answers to the teacher via email, so that the teacher can be sure that the student is actually taking the advice of working on the prescribed issue.

These and other materials can also be used *diagnostically* i.e. they can be used to test a student's readiness for a particular level of work, so that when a student registers for the course, s/he can be placed in the appropriate level after s/he takes the proficiency test. [Here](#) is another page where various diagnostic tests are kept that any student can take any time. These

can be used by any Tamil teacher anywhere, not just at Penn, and emailed to that teacher's email account.

7. New Ideas about the Teaching of Reading

When I say in this talk that we need to have our materials reflect the 'best knowledge' that we have about language teaching, I want to give you an example of ways in which knowledge from language teaching in general has impacted our teaching methods. One of these is the discovery already twenty years ago that when people read, they bring prior knowledge to the decipherment of the text that may help them to understand it better. If they lack prior knowledge about a particular area, they will read better if they are *prepared* to read it by being given appropriate **pre-reading** material. In older approaches to reading, students were often given a text and were just expected to decipher it, whether or not they had any knowledge about the text. It was assumed that they would learn what they needed to know about the text **as they went along** rather than having some strategies for decoding it. This is the way classical languages are often taught, but it is probably not the best way to teach, if the truth be told. (My first experience with studying Sanskrit was like this, and I have never in my life been so baffled about what was going on pedagogically as I was in that class.)

On our Tamil website at Penn we have taken materials we used to use for teaching some short stories such as Jeyakanthan's *Yuka Canti* and provided pre-reading materials that introduce the student to some of the issues that are dealt with in the story: widow remarriage, jajmani relationships, and some of the geographical background that the stories deal with, especially the three cities of Chidambaram, Cuddalore, and Neyveli. In the story, these three cities are *metaphorical* for three characters: the Brahman widow Gauri, her son, and his daughter. In other words, it is not accidental that these three characters come from (a) a historic temple town, (b) a colonial-era administrative town, and (c) a new industrial town; it is **important** that students know what these three towns represent because the character of the towns is parallel in some ways to the characters in the story. So we give background in the pre-reading about the towns, their geography, and their appearance, since it helps the student to understand the story. These materials can be viewed [here](#) along with some background about the author, as well, and of course other pedagogical aids, such as questions about the story that the student can answer and send to his/her teacher.

As an example of the value of having some kind of knowledge that we bring to reading, I like to give an example of my own experience once when taking a reading exam in Old Church Slavonic, which I studied when I was majoring in Slavic Linguistics. The literature written in OCS is almost exclusively that of the Christian Bible, so the reading test was to be based on a passage from the New Testament. I had agreed with the professor to prepare the passage from 'The Beatitudes' and I presented myself for the test. When he asked me what I had prepared, and I said 'The Beatitudes', his reply was "Oh the Beatitudes! It's so boring, just [byxaashe] this and [byxaashe] that!" Why don't you do '*Jesu Leiden*' (the *Passion of Christ*). I had not prepared that passage, and I was somewhat taken aback, but I did not protest, and he gave me the passage to read. As it happened, however, I was familiar with my Bible, having been raised in a religious family, so as I looked at the OCS version of the Passion, I was able to translate it *based on my previous knowledge* of this passage in English. I translated it successfully and passed the test, but if I had not had the pre-reading knowledge of it, I probably would not have been able to do this. Similarly, we find that our Tamil students who come from Indo-American backgrounds have **background knowledge** about Hinduism and

other aspects of Tamil culture that our 'American' students do not have, and even if those Tamil-American students' parents do not think they know much about Tamil culture, they certainly have more knowledge than our Anglo-American students do, and it usually serves them well in learning Tamil. Even being able to understand Tamil, if they do not speak it, is useful knowledge, and is worth something.

Whatever knowledge students bring to a situation, we need to build on it and act as if it is useful, rather than useless. It is a resource, and building on background resources is a way of connecting a person to more knowledge. So often in some teaching situations, linguistic knowledge brought from home is treated as useless, and the teachers focus more on annihilating this background knowledge instead of building on it. (This is the approach used too often in the Singapore schools, where students' home knowledge of Chinese dialect(s), vernacular Malay, spoken Tamil, or Singapore English is treated as a **deficit** rather than an asset, and teachers attempt to kill off this knowledge, rather than build on it.)

8. Conclusion: So What's New?

After our initial successes with web-based teaching of Tamil we have found ourselves somewhat in the doldrums. Part of this is due to the dot.com collapse and a certain amount of reassessment after the initial euphoria that had predicted that the Internet would 'revolutionize' and totally restructure our learning, especially of less-commonly-taught languages. Those who had predicted that university courses could be taught on-line, and that the Internet would make the teaching of previously unprofitable subjects on-line are now pursuing careers in the rapid-nourishment industry, or elsewhere. It turns out that the Internet allows us to do some things better than other things, and face-to-face (also known as 'F2F') interaction is still important.

One example of a way the Internet does things well is based on the fact that large databases of information, which computers, as we know, handle well, can be created to provide *reference* materials, such as dictionaries, glossaries, and other background information for the language learning. The creation of databases for dictionaries is a long and slow process, but we can show some progress in the creation of at least one such resource, namely, the English Dictionary of the Tamil Verb that has been an on-going project at Penn for some years.

Let us look at this project and see what it tells us about the uses and non uses of Internet resources for language teaching. <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/dictionary>