

Teaching Tamil using ICT in the UK - a prospective study

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Introduction

This paper aims at exploring the possibility of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in teaching and learning Tamil in the United Kingdom. The paper details the issues related to teaching Tamil in UK, possible solutions and the various roles ICT can play to help solve these issues. While it deals mainly with United Kingdom, the issues I feel are universal to many western countries with a sizeable Tamil speaking population. The aim of the paper is to bring to light the possibility of spreading Tamil knowledge among the next generation using a medium that is more attractive and familiar to them.

Issues in teaching Tamil

The main issue with teaching Tamil in the UK is lack of good teachers. Even though there is some limited support from government for community languages, the lack of demand from the Tamil speaking population has meant very few schools offering Tamil lessons.

As far as Britain is concerned there is no demand to employ a full time or part time Tamil teacher. The number of Tamil children in the schools varies. If you look at the highly populated Asian community, there are community languages classes such as Urdu, Punjabi and Arabic in the mainstream school. This is not only because of the number of students, but also because of parents asking the education authority to run these language classes for their children. Unfortunately there is no such heavy demand from the Tamil community.

There were no syllabi or a curriculum framework for these languages before, but now the teaching is more structured. At present Tamil is at the same stage in the UK. Efforts at developing a syllabus and a teaching framework are underway. As you will all agree, a strong fundamental framework is a basis for a strong education system. This brings us to the role of ICT in teaching and learning Tamil.

What is ICT?

Information and Communications technology is a logical extension of Information technology, encompassing the Internet and multimedia. In a broader sense, anyone using email or the computer to play interactive games is already using ICT. The power of ICT is such that it can be used as a very effective teaching and learning medium. The British government fully understands this and has started many projects to encourage the use of ICT in schools.

Why ICT?

Parents feel that using ICT is enjoyable for their children and that it allows children to be more creative. Children also feel that computers help them to produce work of which they are really proud and that having access to the Internet is likely to help the quality of their work. With good government support and wider prevalence of ICT in the community, it forms a very good teaching medium. It also solves many issues that are present in teaching Tamil.

Good quality Tamil teaching materials can be prepared more cheaply abroad. Reproduction costs are also less as compared to conventional printed materials. This also keeps the syllabus consistent with how it is natively taught. It is much easier for someone lacking formal knowledge of Tamil to teach it students. This might include parents of pupils who have reading and writing knowledge of Tamil, but who do not understand the concepts of grammar as a teacher does.

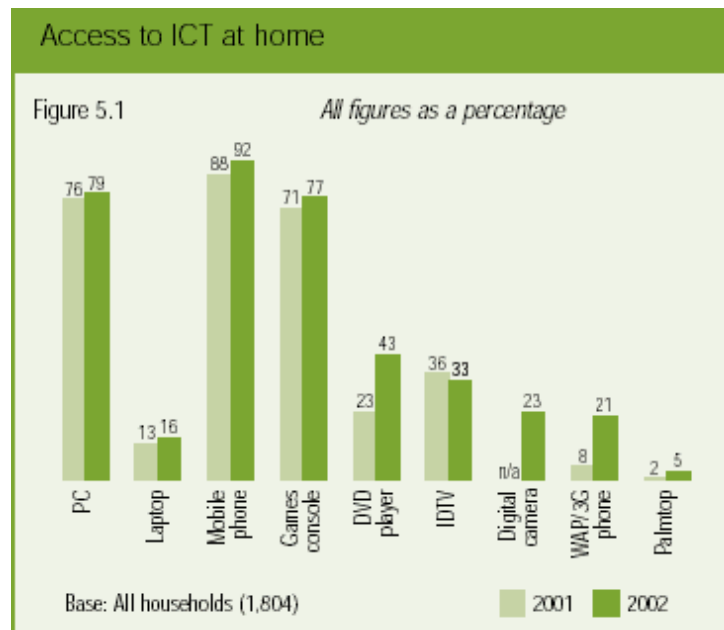
Nowadays teachers are also familiar with ICT. A study conducted by British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta), www.becta.org.uk, found the following results.

In many areas of ICT use and application, such as email, Internet, spreadsheets and word processing, teachers reported greatly improved levels of competence (ability) and confidence in the 12 months since the baseline survey.

Teachers who bought laptops exhibited higher levels of confidence/experience in most packages when compared with those who bought desktops.

Nearly all teachers had undergone some ICT training. There was a strong belief reported by teachers that personal access to a computer has both increased their confidence to use ICT in teaching and learning, and aided their productivity as a teacher, with no differences by gender or age.

A study by BECTA showed the following usage pattern of ICT at home



This is quite encouraging, as the costs of ownership of ICT tools are becoming less.

How to use ICT?

Web-based teaching is becoming a reality with better Internet connections and widespread availability of broadband. Initiatives like Tamil virtual university are a positive step towards this. With students getting easier access to ICT from both school and home, the web could prove a very powerful tool in teaching. There could also be a Train the Trainers program where UK based Tamil enthusiasts are trained in teaching Tamil using the material prepared by linguists through ICT.

CDROMS and DVDs carrying interactive Tamil lessons that cater for and are in line with the Key stages of in the British education system. These should be produced and kept in school libraries for public access.

Most of the Tamil teaching ICT materials available today are individual ideas to teach Tamil to children and do not conform to any syllabus. This reduces the authority of such material. There must be an authorizing body that validates the Tamil teaching materials produced for use with ICT.

Summary

There is a widespread Tamil speaking population in Britain that would want their children to learn to speak, read and write Tamil. The population is spread out, thus not creating a sufficient demand in a single area. Due to this, the British schools are not too keen to employ a fulltime or part time Tamil teacher. The use of ICT would solve many of these problems. The availability of ICT in Britain is quite satisfactory, which could make an initiative to use ICT to teach Tamil a success. However it is important for such materials to be officially endorsed.