Tamil Language Textbooks at the Undergraduate Level
Some Suggestions for Change in Focus

M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Until the end of the higher secondary classes, in Tamil textbooks, there is greater focus on moral instruction, and information and samples relating to traditional literature. The paper suggests that, at the Bachelor's level, we move over from this content, which focuses on teaching traditional Tamil poetry and culture information, to a greater focus on mastering Tamil writing/prose for practical purposes. Modern Tamil for Communication Purpose could be the focus of Tamil language classes at the Bachelor's level since most students seek employment at the end of their study at the Bachelor's level. Their competence in Modern Tamil for Communication Purpose needs to be strengthened. The paper discusses the place of Literary Tamil in college language classes, and argues for a variety of textbooks to train students to master communication in various fields.

Key words: Modern Tamil for Communication Purpose, literary Tamil, textbook writing, code shifting and code mixing, pronunciation problems, use of grantha letters.

How about Changing the Focus of Learning/Teaching Tamil?

1. Do we want to continue even at the Bachelor's degree level the emphasis noticed in Tamil textbooks, right from the elementary classes to the end of the higher secondary system (Plus 1 and Plus 2)? Until the end of the higher secondary classes, there is greater focus on moral instruction, and information and samples relating to traditional literature. May I suggest that, at the Bachelor's level, we move over from this content, which focuses on teaching traditional Tamil poetry and culture information, to a greater focus on mastering Tamil writing/prose for practical purposes?

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Place of Literary Tamil

2. Many students are able to understand and write effective prose for and on literary pieces. However, most students have difficulty in transferring this skill to write messages in modern communication formats since such modern communication demands a style that is different from the literary style. Plain Tamil (**eLiya** Tamil) as well as Technical Tamil are important tools for modern communication.

Plain Tamil for Business and Technical Communication

3. Also such communications should be presented in the appropriate format or forms. For example, how about mastering how to write a Memo, how to write a report, how to write a request, how to organize and present information in a table format, how to write a newspaper report, how to write a creative and effective advertisement, how to write letters to the Editor, how to write welcome speech, how to write a review or evaluation of a book, how to write a research article, what should be the sentence length, what sort of lexical items should be used, how about using Plain Tamil expressions for technical communication, how to avoid complex sentences in communication, how to get closer to the spoken Tamil by using words from the regional dialects, but presenting them with appropriate written spelling and grammatical endings? These are important skills for the mastery of effective communication in Tamil at the Bachelor's level. Traditionally for the last 60 years or more, platform speech was greatly admired by students interested in Tamil literature. Full of flattery and ornamental language, this form, I do hope, will be replaced with **eLiya** Tamil with direct content and with avoidance of ornamental embellishments of words which do not carry much meaning.

Code Shifting and Code Mixing

4. We are in the age of modern **manipravaaLam** with English as the major player. There seems to be an undue indulgence in modern **manipravaaLam** motivated by ideologies of various sorts. Even the linguistic communities such as Malayalis, Gujaratis and Bengalis, who, in the past, stuck to their languages when they spoke their mother tongue, do use and mix a lot of English words and English sentences in their spoken language.

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We already have developed and strengthened modern gaps between Spoken Tamil and Written Tamil through **code shifting** and **code mixing**. What can we do through textbooks and classroom instruction and exercises to avoid excessive indulgence in code shifting and code mixing? From my point of view, this is a very important part of language instruction. What kinds of exercises could we develop in this regard, which should be simple and which should avoid hard literary Tamil?

Problems with Select Sounds

5. There is continuing failure in most regions of Tamilnadu and among most communities to make distinctions between alveolar lateral (l sound as represented in the initial letter of the word laDDu), retroflex lateral (the l sound as represented by the l sounding letters in the word vaLLI, a personal name), and grooved palatal lateral (the l [zh] sound used in mazhai, meaning rain). There is continuing failure to distinguish between the two types of trills in Tamil between iDaiyina ra as in the word maram meaning tree and vallina Ra as in the word aaRu meaning six or river). Failure to pronounce the sounds correctly is more prominent in some regions but the failure is noticed widespread. Many teachers of Tamil in all the levels of education are not able to pronounce and use these sounds in words and sentences correctly. Thus both teachers and students need great practice to overcome this problem. It is possible to gain the correct pronunciation and use the sounds correctly at any time in the life of an individual when it comes to his or her mother tongue. I have seen a good number of teachers and students succeeding in their effort to pronounce and use these sounds with their original values through practice and conscious effort. What was not corrected at the High School stage could be corrected at the collegiate level as part of language training.

Use of Grantha Letters

In recent years I notice that there is new emphasis on bringing back all the **grantha** letters. In my school days, many decades ago, we were encouraged to drop the use of grantha letters to the maximum extent possible. Because of changing social values and assumptions (such as numerology and identity issues), we see the trend to use increasingly grantha letters even where such use is not warranted. Some new conventions relating the use of grantha letters have been established in the last 50 years or so. But there is now a slow but steady attempt to reverse

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the conventions. How do we integrate exercises on these items at the Bachelor's level? Language planning has been successful in Israel, and can we emulate some lessons from them to revive the extensive use of Tamil in all fields?

Words and Technical Terms

6. What do we do to increase the number of words actively used by the students at the Bachelor's degree level? What types of words should be presented to students as additional vocabulary? How do we teach them and how do we test their use? I suggest that new vocabulary should be culled out from magazines, journals and newspapers apart from textbooks and research articles, etc., for this purpose. These vocabulary items may be arranged under semantic headings with grammatical categories indicated. In addition, a good number of proverbs and idioms and idiomatic phrases must be identified and presented. A common list of technical terms used in weather reports, industry, water supply, cinema and TV operations, medical communication, etc. should be prepared and students asked to master these through actual oral practice and writing.

Mastery of Sentence Structures

7. Mastery of a variety of sentence structures. This mastery must be connected with the forms of arguments, statements, conditional clauses, double negatives, escape clauses, court records, lawyer's reports, etc. I suggest these because most students do not go to the Masters level and they seek jobs at the end of the bachelor's level. They need to have competence in Tamil to carry out and improve upon necessary expressive skills.

Textbook Writers

The textbook writers need to focus on what we could do to improve upon the language competence and language performance of our students at the Bachelor's level. They should possess competence in Modern Tamil for Communication Purposes. The textbook writing group should not be selected based on seniority, and such other factors, but on demonstrated competence and interest in modern communication. Knowledge and competence in literary content are useful but membership should not be based only on these items. The members should have competence in Modern Tamil for Communication Purposes.

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Provide Choice

Why should we use the same Tamil textbook in all colleges and regions? Why not produce a few different textbooks with varying focus on different aspects of Tamil for Communication Purposes, and allow individual colleges to choose what textbook they would use in their colleges? If we present four or five different textbooks for the same class, teachers will be able to choose what is required for their students. Even with common syllabus, it is possible to produce and have a variety of textbooks. Even with common examination for the entire state of Tamilnadu, it is possible to have a variety of textbooks which would deal with the common syllabus. Textbooks will present the syllabus items in novel ways, thus helping students to learn and use Tamil effectively to meet the modern needs of communication.

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M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.
Faculty
University of Phoenix, AZ, USA
msthirumalai3@gmail.com

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