

Strategies for Teaching Indian Languages in the Diasporic Context

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Introduction

We are living in the era of globalization and information revolution. Human societies have borne witness to the continuous process of progression from hunting, food gathering stage to agrarian, to industrial, and industrial to current knowledge-based society. All over the world, mind is replacing the muscle; knowledge has become the highest form of power: the ultimate substitute to characterize a new system in human progression (Singha Roy 2014:2). The contemporary knowledge society distinguishes itself from the previous societies as the institutions and organization of this society enable people and knowledge/information to be developed without limits, and open opportunities for all kinds of knowledge to be mass-produced and mass utilized throughout the world.

ICT and globalization are crucial constituents of knowledge society and have emerged to be indispensable for its sustenance and expansion. The ICT are no longer about simple computing, word processing or tele-talking but about living and about the very essence of experience where life itself becomes all about being digital (Paschal, 2001 cited in Roy 2014:11).

The Modern World is characterized, on the one hand, by globalization and ICT and on the other hand, by massive movement of human beings, for social, economic and security reasons. The planet Earth has, as a result, has become 'small', but has emerged as complex multi-lingual and multi-cultural societies that need specific strategies to maintain the cultural and linguistic diversities as human heritage.

ICT technologies are very widely used in language teaching industries, particularly in the case of world's major languages as MT (Mother Tongue), SL (Second Language) or FL (Foreign Language) and also in case of acquiring specific professional skills, for instance, ESP (English for Special Purposes). But till today, very little is known about the maintenance and the transmission of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the diasporic populations, both at the institutional and societal levels. In the absence of enough empirical quantitative studies on the "language of origin" of the diasporic communities, we have to stick to some of the generalizations on the maintenance and shift of language and cultural identities among the diasporic communities. At present, generally we go by assumptions as to what could be the best way to teaching and learning of the language of origin of the diasporic communities. In this context, this paper analyses the strategies for teaching Indian languages in the Diasporic context, particularly of the indentured Indian diaspora or the Old diaspora, using ICTs.

Indian Diaspora

This era has witnessed a huge movement of population from one place to another place in an unprecedented manner. Since the very basic characteristic feature of globalization is mass movement of foods and man power, it is a natural choice for anyone to move away from the place of origin to another place for economic betterment. But the reasons for migration of Indian population during earlier eras were entirely different from the present migration. The Indian diasporas constitute one of the largest diasporas in the world. According to the government of India, more than 30 million Indians are present in 123 countries. They may be classified into three different categories: 1) the indentured / agricultural Indian diaspora, 2) the industrial and 3) the Information Technological. The Indians migrated as indenture labour to far-off places due to recurring natural calamities such as famines, floods, etc., and decaying native industries. Moag (2003) classified overseas Indian communities into two, viz., (1) post-indenture communities and (2) those composed of so-called NRI. The migration of current generation could not be dispensed with since it also faces a kind of identity crisis as other migrants. Hence, the Indian diaspora over generations can be categorized on the basis of the social development as (1) Agricultural based generation, (2) Industrial based generation, (3) e-generation. All these generations vary in terms of key resources, source of power, key tools, pace of change. This will be briefed in the following sections.

Agriculture Generation

The post-indenture communities were the earliest diasporic people from India. After the abolition of slavery, the European colonial rulers needed cheaper agricultural workers to replace the slave workers in the plantations. More than a million Indians, mostly from the rural agricultural areas, were engaged as agricultural labourers in plantations all over the world. Most of the people belong to this category and came from rural background and they were brought to third world countries as coolies. Singaravelu (1990) reports that the Indian population of Reunion, Guadeloupe and Martinique are still essentially rural. Gillian (1977) places Fiji Indians socio-economically between the expatriate white community and native Fijian. All of them were brought in organized ship loads. The key resources for this generation are natural resources and they depend on land, animal and other natural resources and geographical things. Their major tools are plough and other agricultural implements. The pace of change among this generation is very slow.

They were mainly recruited from villages and rural areas of different regions like Bihar, Madras Presidency, Bombay and Calcutta. On their arrival at different regions of the world, they were kept together in depots irrespective of their caste, religion and language and were arbitrarily dispatched to various plantations. The need for communication in new multilingual settings that are particularly austere / harsh/severe- conditions, they had to switch to a new language as lingua franca which has resulted in language shift very quickly. After more than a century and a half, most of the languages of origin of the Indian indentured immigrants have all been reduced to symbolic vestiges of identities. These languages, devoid of any communicative function, have all become “sacred” and accompany many ancestral rituals. The need for communication made them overcome their linguistic and cultural differences. Their regional languages are merged to form border categories like Hindustani or Madarasi. They maintain their mother tongue and certain cultural practices to some extent.

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Industrial Generation

Unlike the agricultural generation, the people belonging to this generation migrated to other countries on their own. The key resource of this generation is physical labour and the source of power is either steam engine or electricity. They depend on machine tools that belong to industrial workers. Moag (ibid) called these communities as NRI communities. He further states that these NRI communities are socially diverse comprising illiterate farmers, professionals like physician, advocate, urban sophisticates with Doctorate and university professors whose families enjoy high status at home.

Another critical factor is that the post-indentures' experience broke all bonds of kinship and, for the most part caste as well, whereas the more recent immigrant experience of the NRI's has allowed the preservation of both (Page 1). Unlike the agricultural generation who settled in hamlets, this group settled around major industrial centres. Some of them were settled in technologically advanced western countries. This group has some kind of contact with the mainland and they established association to preserve their language and culture. The internal cohesion is much less compared to agricultural generation (Moag: ibid).

E - Generation

This era shows extensive mobility of the people from rural to urban, urban to bigger cities, and then to Western countries as experts predominantly for economic reasons. Technical knowledge has emerged to occupy the central stage in the same way what coal and iron were to the industrial revolution and the plough was to agriculture. ICT is the present-day equivalent of electricity of industrial era. The major chunk of the people has ICT knowledge and their key resources are mental and intellectual capability. Their source of power is internet. The ICTs have helped to annihilate the barriers of geographical divides for making a virtual world a reality. The combination of ICTs and globalization has helped to expand the scope of cross border trade and service and inter-connected world with new culture and social organizations. Knowledge workers use their brain and intellect to convert their knowledge resource into action. They use their mental power more than physical to produce goods and services for the society. Even though this group migrated and settled in Silicon Valley, they are well connected with the native place through internet. Their roots are well connected with place of origin but with a tag of global citizen. English is the language for global travel and economic prosperity. The pace of change in this group is very fast and encompassing. As far as the language and culture are concerned, they are more prone to lose them in the second generation itself, as unification of languages and unification of cultures are consequences of globalization.

Identities Through Generations

Knowledge society has produced diverse varieties of identities which are different from that of the industrial and the agrarian societies. This generation has shown levels of identity, namely, regional, religion, caste, nation, etc. They depend upon the context. Castells (1997) has provided an elaborate description of the formation of identity. He categorized those identities as

1. Legitimizing identity: introduced by the dominant institutions of the society to extend and rationalize their dominance vis-à-vis social actors.

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2. Resistance identity: generated by those actors that are in position devaluated or stigmatized by logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance.
3. Project identity: when social actors on the basis of whatever cultural material available to them build a new identity that redefines their position in the society.

The domination of Brahmins' in Social and Religious practices through scriptures and priest are examples for legitimizing identity as far as India is concerned. The protest of Dalits' and subaltern people to oppose the dominance in the name of caste and cultural practices are the example for resistance identity. The practices condemned by the dominant groups were taken by the subaltern people as their unique property which is projected for redefining their status falls under project identity. The situation in Guadeloupe falls under project identity through which the community identifies themselves with their relic cultural practices in worship and food habits.

But, in the case of agrarian generation, even though those communities belong to different languages and cultures, there has been a tendency towards group unification (Moag, 1979). Languages of these communities tended to disappear in two or three generations leaving broad categories of Hindustani, indicating North Indian origin and Madarasi from South Indian origin. However, there are cases of maintaining separate identity depending on the power and population of the host place. Though this generation loses their language in three to four generations, they kept their religious practices, temples and rituals to some extent as identity markers.

As far as the NRI community is concerned, the process of group unification is barely perceptible. Moag (1979), after analyzing the Indian immigrants in US and UK, states that they are still divided along regional, religious and linguistic lines. This is an evidence of their strategy in identity construction and religious, linguistic and caste are used as identity markers. To some extent, the NRI groups seem to have a better organized system or structure of identity construction than the previous agrarian / indentured/ old Indian diasporic groups. The Indian-ness is the secondary identity for NRI communities behind their primary regional linguistic and religious identities.

From the foregoing analysis, one can infer that the common thread among these three generations is the cultural and religious practices in the case of language loss.

Language Maintenance among Diaspora

One basic question that arises here is how to evaluate the real role of languages in diasporic identity construction. But we have to assume that language is one of the elements in identity construction. We have seen among the South Asian diasporic communities the religion related practices and rituals have been largely maintained and they play a dominant role in the process of identity construction (Vertovec and others). In many cases the religious practices are accompanied by prayers and songs in the respective languages and are mutually legitimizing the role of each other.

Before attempting any teaching strategies for teaching a language, the status of maintenance of Indian languages in Diaspora has to be studied. The studies on language

maintenance show that there is a clear trend towards their loss of languages in the Diasporic context. Many regional languages of Diasporic population are giving way to major regional language of the population. Some Diasporic Indians are adopting major languages of the host country. The degree of maintenance of language depends on their relative status in the migrated place. This can be explained by taking Tamil Diaspora as an example (cf Murugaiyan).

From the available Diasporic studies, Tamils living in different countries have different degrees of language maintenance. That may be categorized as follows:

1. Tamils in Sri Lanka
2. Tamils in Malaysia / Singapore
3. Tamils in other Developed countries
4. Tamils in Mauritius
5. Tamils in other regions like Guadeloupe, Fiji and other Caribbean islands, etc.

Tamil Diaspora in Guadeloupe

The Tamil diaspora in Guadeloupe seems to depict a few peculiar features in my observation during my visit in 2015. One could not identify a Tamil by appearance. Guadeloupe, like many other islands like Martinique, La Réunion, is a blend of many cultures, peoples and languages. First, the Tamil population, in course of time as endogamous marriage became less frequent, is a métis population at various degrees due to mixed marriage. Due to ethnic and racial mixing, Tamils look like African or English. Secondly, the total number of Guadeloupians of Tamil origin is less significant. Due to social mobility they were dispersed, and they had to move to different areas of the island. This social mobility on its turn weakened again the role of and the use of Tamil language. Slowly, within a period of two generations, the use of Tamil language is strictly and exclusively associated with the religious and ritual practices. Thus, the Tamil language has become a ‘sacred language’ of prayers during the ceremonies of Mariyamman and other regional deities and in the performance of dramas during the rituals and funerals. The only feature that Tamils still maintain is the temples, prayer at temples and the songs in praise of Mariamma and other native deities of Tamil Nadu. The identity is also expressed through the food they offered to the ancestors during certain occasions.

The idols in the temple in Guadeloupe are kept in a typical Christian way. There exist an altar and the Mariamma or Kali is placed on the raised platform with a typical decoration of white cloth. Instead of oil lamps, candle like lamps are lighted. Pujari or the priest also performs puja just like priests performing ritual in the Church. He wears a loose white dress which is not a “casual” dress and *mala* beads before entering the temple.

While one comes across many Guadeloupians of Indian descent, what is more striking is the enormous means of adaptation and the ways in which the Tamil or Indian cultural elements have been accustomed to the local ecological and cultural environments. The adaptation of Tamil patronyms, the food habit, the kuḷambu has been re-baptized as ‘colombo’ and has been accepted by all as the national food, the specific way of celebrating some of the family rituals like funerals, and above all the ceremonies and offerings offered by individual families in honor of Māriyamman, Kālī are all living examples of cultural adaptation. This is what is called by French

anthropologists as '*métissage culturel*'. We are tempted to understand that this very cultural adaptation might be the strategy that has paved the way to the survival of the Tamil cultural elements in these regions even after a century or more. It is to be reminded here, that French citizens of Indian – Tamil descent have lived without any direct contact with their country of origin for more than a century¹. The temple priest sings songs in praise of god / goddess and finally breaks the coconut to symbolize the end of the puja or offering. Singaravelu (1990) reports that all Indians were today nominally Roman Catholic, but they continue to practice a form of village condition based on worship of the mother goddess. Ghasarian (2003) also gives a fascinating account of how this Hinduism in the form of nominal Christianity is practiced in La Reunion today.

Most of the people in Caribbean island have lost their language in almost all domains of use except in religious and cultural practices. The songs they sing during these occasions are highly influenced by phonetic systems of the creole and French languages. For an untrained listener, even though he is a native Tamil speaker, these prayers and songs in Tamil language are hardly recognizable.

In this context the teaching methods and strategies have to be framed keeping in mind their needs and proficiencies. The Indian languages in these diasporic communities are used only as symbolic means of cultural identity and thus have no communicative function. In other words, the learning of Tamil or other Indian languages is motivated only by the cultural identification. So, we need to model language teaching materials and methods based on cultural models and cultural innovations that would reinforce a Tamil cultural identity in multicultural and multilingual contexts.

Teaching Platforms

The growth of ICT paved way for many kinds of platforms to teach language. Earlier, class room-teaching and broadcasting were the two major platforms available for teaching. Now due to the advent of internet and computers, there is a change in the medium as well as the mode of teaching. Face to face teaching with black board, notebooks moved to audio lingual methods during industrial period. In this era, audio-visual, multimedia and bigger platforms like MOOC, Moodle are created for reaching large number of people. Virtual class rooms with more interactivity are created using technology.

Computers and internet as the potential social transformer have been penetrating at a high speed all over the world. Among all these technologies like telephone and computer, the technologies like internet and mobile have occupied the key position as the ever-greater communicators to revolutionize the process of production, storage, processor transference of knowledge. Creation of content for teaching language and culture through mobile and computer is the challenging task of this era. Integrating various language teaching tools like Dictionary, grammar and other related links are very much essential for teaching to be more efficient. Single platform with more add-on applications and lots of links are essential strategy as far as teaching is concerned in this technological period.

¹ Personal communication from A. Murugaiyan

Learner-centered Approach

Language teaching for large population through modern technologies needs huge amount of content ranging from grammar to culture of that language. When such contents are integrated with powerful technologies, learners are allowed to personally interact with content and learn new things. Integrating technology in this manner places the major responsibility of negotiating meaning in the hands of the learners. This kind of learner centered approach allows learners to start with what they know and build their own understanding of culture.

Strategies

The common observation in Guadeloupe situation is that the Tamil songs they preserve as cultural markers are highly influenced by the creole phonetics. They preserve these practices till date since their forefathers brought these. In this context, the following questions come naturally before planning any strategies for teaching.

1. Is it appropriate to correct the language they think that is right and highly sacred one? The songs the priest sings during puja and other occasion are considered to be very sacred.
2. Does the community really want to revive their language? If yes for what purpose?
3. The attitude of the community towards the variety they speak and the main learning variety.
4. Is it the language or the cultural values, they want to revive?
5. A survey of the culture practices still followed should be collected for building content for teaching.

As far as the situation in Guadalupe is concerned the Tamil community has the following assumptions on the Tamil language. Namely 1) The language is sacred. 2) They wish to address their prayers to the Gods, 3) They want to revive their ancestor's language to understand what is sung in India and by the Indians and 4) They feel and are aware of the fact that the Tamil / Indian language they use is phonetically changed and so they want to "correct" their pronunciation. They want also first-hand information on their ancestral culture. The content creation for teaching Tamil should address all those assumptions.

Content and Preparation of Cultural Capsule in Multimedia

True content of the foreign language course is not the grammar and the vocabulary of the language, but the culture expressed through that language. Teachers spend the greatest amount of time and efforts on teaching grammatical and lexical component of the language. Learning culture is the weakest component.

There are principles like known to unknown, easy to difficult, etc., in the selection and introduction of content in language teaching situation. As far as cultural content is concerned, known forms of culture are some aspects of material culture like dress, food items etc., and certain values of culture like belief system and kinship, etc.

- Generating e-content on language and culture as small capsules.
- Making available all the knowledge modules in the cyber space.
- Preparing multimedia knowledge modules on food, festival, music, dance, dress, kinship addressing manners, welcoming, etc., as cultural capsules.
- Dubbing available video contents in creole into Tamil in colloquial form.

In language teaching methods, two important principles were followed in the preparation of materials and evolving teaching strategies, namely, simple to complex and known to unknown. The same principles may be adopted in the diasporic context as well. We have to design teaching materials from the competency of the community. The competency of the Caribbean population in Tamil is almost minimum. They retain Tamil language in the religious songs and in some religious practices. In such cases, the starting point should be like a new community which intends to learn a language. Hence, set phrases in greetings, welcoming, bidding farewell, etc., may be introduced.

As far as technology is concerned, the social media like Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook may be used as platform to teach language. In WhatsApp application phrases like Vanakkam, Nalama, Eppadi Irukkinga, etc. may be introduced in the Roman alphabet. This may be later changed to Tamil script.

Twitter platform is the best medium as far as teaching for diasporic context as it has provision to give content 140 characters. Both these applications may be made use of for teaching personal communications. The provisions to form groups also can be made use of teaching language depending on the learners' proficiency level.

Culturally loaded words and phrases with reference to religion, culinary, cuisine, festival, etc., may be identified and propagated through social networks in Tamil script as well as in Roman.

YouTube is another technology that may be used as audio-visual media to teach Tamil. The popular video clippings in creole may be dubbed and uploaded in the YouTube. Tamil cuisine, the preparation methods, ingredients can be given in the Roman letter as subtitles. Similarly, French Cuisine may be taught to Tamil voiceover with subtitles.

Cultural practices which are retained still in Caribbean Islands are to be recorded for developing content for teaching through YouTube.

Some of the Questions Related to Content Selection

1. Is it appropriate to give standard Tamil materials for Diaspora?
2. Tamil being a diglossic language, should the lessons be introduced in the spoken variety, then slowly moving to written variety?
3. In spoken language also, lots of dialect variations exist. The standard spoken variety which is close to the form of standard written variety may be considered.

In our globalized, ICT world, time and space are no more barriers. Making available all the information related to their cultural practices in the Internet would help the community to know and learn more about their language and culture.

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