

# The Tamil Language in Singapore: Challenges and Strategies for Maintenance in a Multilingual Society

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# INTRODUCTION

- The experience of the Tamil community in Singapore, representing 5% of the total population, highlights the complexities of maintaining a minority language in a multilingual environment.
- As part of a larger Indian demographic, which constitutes about 9% of Singapore's residents, the Tamil language's status is critical for understanding language dynamics in the country.
- Singapore's bilingual education system supports Tamil alongside Chinese and Malay, yet challenges persist, particularly in the educated segments of the Tamil community.
- The rise of English usage has led to a decline in Tamil as a home language, particularly among children, who often engage in code-switching and language shifting.
- This presentation will explore the current challenges facing the Tamil language in Singapore and suggest strategies for its preservation and increased usage within the community.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

This part of research provides a range of literature relevant to the research.

- **Key Theories:** Mother tongue shapes a child's identity and literacy (Cummins, 2001). The concept of bilingualism possesses fluid semantics. There are numerous definitions that continue to emerge without any significant advancement as the list grows. Baker (2011) elucidated that 'perfect foreign-language' does not lead to the loss of one's native language in bilingualism, yet he also noted that it is impossible to quantify the level of perfection. Mackey (1972, 2000) concurred that bilingualism involves the use of not just one, but two or more languages by the same person, who can then be classified as bilingual. In partial agreement, Grosjean (2010) suggested that bilingualism should not be defined by fluency, but rather by the regular utilization of languages. Mackey (2000) and Baker (2011) reiterated that language is not merely an abstract concept, but a practical tool for communication. They highlighted a functional definition of bilingualism that shifts the emphasis from linguistic competence to language performance, which refers to language use in everyday contexts and situations. An alternative perspective considers bilingualism as a characteristic of a nation, where two living languages coexist side by side, each spoken by a distinct national group, representing a significant portion of the population (Austin, Blume & Sanchez, 2015). This perspective emphasizes the presence of neighboring unilingual communities rather than focusing solely on bilingual speakers (Austin, Blume & Sanchez, 2015).
- **Previous Research on the Tamil language in Singapore:** Research on the Tamil language in Singapore has been extensive, particularly through the work of S. Gopinathan and his colleagues, who have provided a comprehensive analysis of its status, especially in the educational context (Gopinathan, 1994; Gopinathan & Mani, 1983; Gopinathan, Pakir, Kam, & Saravanan, 1998). Following the adoption of English as the primary medium of instruction in schools in 1979, there has been a significant shift away from linguistic diversity, raising concerns about the future of the Tamil language (Gopinathan et al., 2004). Studies indicate a troubling trend of diminishing interest in Tamil, with many students opting to study the language solely to meet examination requirements rather than for genuine engagement (Saravanan, 1994; Zhao et al., 2008; Shegar & Rahman, 2005).
- **Research Gap:** Despite the extensive research on mother tongue acquisition, particularly regarding Tamil in Singapore, there is a notable gap in studies that provide structured strategies for the language's maintenance. This research aims to investigate the factors contributing to the diminishing use of Tamil in Singapore and to propose effective solutions to promote its continued relevance and usage.

# METHOD

- This research utilizes qualitative methods to analyze publicly available government data alongside information from various media sources concerning the decline of the Tamil language in Singapore.

# FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

- The findings and discussion of this research revolve around several key aspects. Firstly, it explores students' perspectives on the significance of their Tamil mother tongue in their education and identity. Moreover, it examines the roles and responsibilities of Tamil teachers in fostering a connection to the mother tongue. The study also addresses the medium of instruction and its impact on language acquisition. Furthermore, it highlights the challenges faced by families in using the mother tongue within the home environment, as well as the limitations of community initiatives aimed at promoting Tamil language use.

# FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

## **Perspectives of Students Regarding their Tamil Mother Tongue:**

- Many Tamil school children in Singapore often question the necessity of studying the Tamil language, perceiving it as irrelevant to their career advancement. They view English as the global language that opens doors to economic opportunities and social mobility, while they regard Tamil primarily as a vessel of ancient wisdom and cultural heritage. However, these students overlook the fact that their mother tongue, Tamil, is integral to their identity and values. Despite their proficiency in English, their foundational values are deeply rooted in Tamil and the broader spectrum of Eastern philosophies.

# FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

## **The responsibilities of Tamil teachers in relation to their mother tongue:**

- The role of Tamil teachers in nurturing students' character and personality is crucial. These educators must prioritize ensuring that every child develops a solid foundation in the Tamil language, moving away from an exam-centric approach to one that emphasizes skill-based language acquisition. By adhering to the prescribed Tamil curriculum, teachers can effectively engage students with the historical richness of the language, fostering a genuine interest in learning their mother tongue. This approach not only enhances language proficiency but also instills a sense of cultural pride among students.
- The qualifications of Tamil mother tongue teachers in Singapore's childcare and early education sectors present significant challenges. A considerable number of these educators lack professional training, while others who are trained often struggle with fluency in Tamil. It has been noted that many trained teachers frequently resort to using English instead of Tamil during lessons, which undermines the effectiveness of mother tongue instruction. Given the critical role that early childhood plays in language acquisition, it is essential for the childcare and primary education sectors to uphold high standards for qualified and trained teachers.

# FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

## Medium of instruction:

- Comparing Singapore and Malaysia reveals interesting insights into the Tamil-speaking populations in both countries, as Tamils migrated to these regions during British colonial rule. Both nations provide robust support for the preservation of the Tamil language among their Indian communities. However, the usage of Tamil has been declining in Singapore compared to Malaysia, where the language enjoys a more prominent status due to its incorporation as the medium of instruction in primary education for Indian students. This educational approach in Malaysia fosters a strong command of spoken Tamil, while in Singapore, English serves as the primary language of instruction, relegating Tamil to a second language. To counteract the decline of Tamil in Singapore, the Ministry of Education should consider implementing Tamil as a medium of instruction in basic education.

# FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

## **Challenges associated with the use of mother tongue in the home environment:**

- In Singapore, the Tamil-speaking community can be divided into two distinct categories. The first group consists of families who have resided in Singapore for many years. These families, primarily educated in English, often neglect the use of their mother tongue at home, leading to a decline in Tamil fluency over time. Interracial marriages within this group further complicate the situation, as children face challenges in choosing and using their heritage language. In contrast, the second category comprises recent Tamil expatriate families who actively maintain the use of Tamil at home. These families, rooted in Tamil medium education, prioritize their mother tongue, ensuring that their children are encouraged to speak and embrace Tamil as a vital part of their identity. Thus, the first category aligns with English-speaking families, while the second remains firmly within the Tamil-speaking community.

# FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

## **Limitations of community initiatives:**

- The Tamil community in Singapore has launched several initiatives aimed at enhancing Tamil language proficiency among school children, particularly during the month of April, which is dedicated to promoting the language nationwide. Despite these efforts, challenges arise from external factors, as many community organizations tend to prioritize events like debate competitions that mainly benefit those already fluent in Tamil. This situation highlights the need for the community to reevaluate its strategies and create programmes that also cater to children with lower levels of Tamil fluency, thereby fostering inclusivity and encouraging wider participation.

# CONCLUSION

- The role of mother tongue teachers is vital in preserving the Tamil language in Singapore. To effectively fulfill this responsibility, Tamil teachers must possess strong fluency and comprehensive training in the language. Moreover, these educators should work to shift students' perceptions, emphasizing the advantages of learning Tamil, which not only enhances literacy but also fosters a connection to rich cultural values rooted in the Tamil heritage.
- Primary education should be delivered in the mother tongue to ensure effective learning of Tamil Language.
- It is essential to foster a supportive Tamil-speaking environment at home, as parental involvement plays a crucial role in this process.
- Schools should implement a curriculum that enhances Tamil language learning, incorporating assessments that reflect students' fluency levels. Additionally, increasing class hours dedicated to Tamil instruction can significantly improve teaching quality by aligning with a focused curriculum plan.
- The community should also organize a variety of events that encourage the use of the Tamil language among school children, moving beyond traditional debate competitions to create a more engaging and immersive experience.

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