M.Ed. In TESL Program
Language Group Specific Informational Reports

Produced by Graduate Students in the M.Ed. In TESL Program
In the Feinstein School of Education and Human Development

Language Group: Tamil
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About the Tamil Language

- Tamil has a long and ancient literary tradition dating to over 2,000 years ago.
- Tamil is a member of the Dravidian language family, which includes thirty languages.
- There are over 66 million native Tamil speakers worldwide.
- 92% of Tamil speakers live in India’s southern Tamil Nadu State.
- It is an official language in India, Singapore, and Sri Lanka.
- Tamil has been influenced by other languages, including Sanskrit and English.

(Chakraborty, 2009)
Where Tamil is Spoken

- India
- Northern Sri Lanka
- Malaysia
- Singapore
- Fiji
- South Africa
- Great Britain
- The United States
- Canada
- Trinidad
- Guyana
- Mauritius

Tamil has six regional dialects:
- East
- West
- North
- South
- Central
- Sri Lanka

(Chakraborty, 2009)
Writing System

Tamil is written in an alpha-syllabic system comparable to many other South Asian languages.

- It derives from the Ashokan Brahmi script.
- Tamil has 18 consonants, 12 vowels, and one special character called the aytam.
- The vowels and consonants combine to form 216 compound characters.

(www.lmp.ucla.edu)
Diglossia

- Tamil is a diglossic language.
  - The written and spoken form of Tamil are very different.
  - Differences include grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.
  - English learners may favor an over-elaborate or over-formal style in written English.

- Classical (Written) vs. Colloquial (Spoken) Tamil
  - Classic Tamil is used in all writing and most types of public speech.
  - The written form is considered to be prestigious.
  - The spoken form is used in everyday conversation and informal settings.
  - Most variations in dialect occur in the colloquial form, varying with region and social status.

(Chakraborty, 2009)
(Swan, 2001)
(Durai & Krishnan, 2009)
Linguistic Features of Tamil

- Tamil has a distinctive stress pattern in which syllables with long vowels and closed syllables ended in geminated consonants bear the stress.
  - Speakers who have learned English from studying written texts may tend to pronounce each word as a separate unit, so that no sentence rhythm emerges.
- Tamil verbs use suffixes to show person, number, mood, tense, and voice.
  - English learners may have considerable difficulty grasping concepts and distinctions of English, such as aspect, modality, auxiliary, adjective, adverb, and preposition.

(Chakraborty, 2009)
(Swan, 2001)
Language Distinctions in Phonology

### Vowels
- Tamil speakers have difficulty distinguishing and producing the vowels in *cot, caught*, and *coat*. There are no close equivalents in Tamil.
- The vowel in *pat* may be confused with *pot* or *part*.
- Diphthongs are commonly produced as two short vowels.
  - *paint* – *pe(y)int*
  - *pound* – *pa(w)und*
- Vowels may be shortened or lengthened in accordance with pronunciation patterns.

### Consonants
- Tamil words do not usually end in consonants; therefore, learners may add a week /u/ at the ends of some English words to facilitate pronunciation.
- There are no aspirated consonants. The English /p/, /t/ and /k/ are hard for learners to produce correctly and may sound like /b/, /d/ and /g/.
  - *Pear, ten* and *could* may be heard as *bear, den, and good*.
- There is no /z/ in Tamil.
  - *Maze* may sound like *mace*.
- There is no /f/ in Tamil and it may be pronounced as /p/.
  - Confusion between *full* and *pull*

(Chakraborty, 2009)
(Swan, 2001)
Language Distinctions in Syntax

- Tamil lacks limited relative pronouns.
  - “Call the boy who learned the lesson” will be said in Tamil as “That lesson learned boy call”.
  - English learners may say “living next door people” instead of “the people who live next door”.
- The most common sentence structure order is Subject-Object-Verb.
  - Tamil speakers may have difficulty understanding the ways in which English words are structured into clauses and sentences.
- Tamil sentences do not always have subjects.

(Chakraborty, 2009)
(Swan, 2001)
A Tamil sentence, however complex, only has one finite verb at most. Learners may carry this over into English, using -ing forms instead of finite verbs in subordinate clauses.

Tamil speakers may find the use of auxiliaries for questions and negatives hard to learn.

- Question tags may be replaced by a single negative marker, such as “You will come, no?”


Swan, 2001
Language Distinctions in Morphology

- Tamil has a complex system of tenses, with meanings that do not always correspond closely to those in English.
  - English learners may say “In young age I play a lot” instead of “When I was young I played a lot.”
  - They may say “Tomorrow I will win a prize” rather than “I wish I could win a prize tomorrow.”

- Tamil speakers may overuse English emphatic and reflexive pronouns.
  - “When he was young itself he lost his father.”
  - “It was he himself who stole the book.”

- Tamil has no articles.
  - Learners may find the article system difficult. They may use one instead of a/an or may leave out the.

- There is no distinction between adjectives and adverbs in Tamil.
  - English adjectives and adverbs may be confused with each other, or with nouns or verbs.

(Chakraborty, 2009)
(Swan, 2001)
Social Language

- Indirect style of communication is preferred over direct.

- Telling someone “no” is considered rude. In order to be polite, Tamil speakers may say “yes” to a question while bobbling their head. This usually means “no”.

- Tamil speakers generally maintain a personal space of 3 to 3 ½ feet during conversation.

- Touching between men and women is not appropriate.

- Tamils greet each other by saying “vanakkam”. This means, “may you be blessed with a long life”.

- Ears are considered sacred, so pulling or boxing one’s ears may be regarded as an insult.

- Sustained eye contact is not common, especially a woman looking at a man.

- Information or requests may not be expressed directly.

(Chakraborty, 2009)
Cultural and Language Considerations

- Tamil speakers generally pick up objects and eat only with the right hand. The left hand is considered to be unclean.
- In Tamil culture, social order and status are very important. The father or oldest male is considered to be the head of household.
- Answering questions with “no” to Tamil speakers may come across as rude. It is important to answer questions sensitively.
- Build rapport with Tamil speakers. It is considered impolite to jump straight into business.

(Chakraborty, 2009)
Cultural and Language Considerations (Continued)

- Tamil speakers are often non-confrontational.
- Tamil dress and culture are very conservative.
- Personal honor and dignity are very important. Publicly reprimanding or criticizing a Tamil speaker can be hurtful.

http://panchatatva.wordpress.com/tamil-culture-and-practices/

(Chakraborty, 2009)
Resources

Books

Internet Sites and Images
Resources (Continued)


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