

Teaching Tamil Online : Scope and Challenges

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Abstract

Tamil is being taught at the University of Pennsylvania for the past two decades through the Department of South Asia and Regional Studies and Penn Language Center. With funds from a number of resources, we were able to build a comprehensive online resource for teaching and learning of Tamil to supplement the regular Tamil courses. The Web site for teaching and learning of Tamil (<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/tamilweb/>) has been in existence for the past five years and it is being used extensively by students around the world. This site contains pedagogic materials for beginning, intermediate and advanced learners of Tamil, and it is being improved continuously to meet the needs of online community. Development of an online pedagogic dictionary for English-Tamil Verb is almost over and is to be released to the public in a near future. The most challenging part of implementing the study of Tamil on the Web is development and presentation of multimedia enhanced materials in a pedagogically relevant fashion. In my presentation I will demonstrate some of the promising features of teaching Tamil online along with some of the significant steps to be taken to overcome the limitations in this new way of teaching. Although the Web can be used effectively to teach the passive skills of language, there is very little that one can do with regard to teaching the active skills such as speaking and writing. However, it is possible to structure the pedagogic materials in such a way that improving the passive skills in a coherent manner supplement the development of active skills. I demonstrate in my presentation a number of strategies that we have implemented along these lines to use the Web effectively for teaching Tamil.

Introduction

Internet has made an immense impact not only among the entrepreneurs but also among the academicians of various kinds. Dissemination and sharing of information across the world with a greater efficiency than ever before have become possible due to internet technology. Especially, from the point of view of teaching and learning of languages internet has established a wide range of possibilities that enable one to give a new dimension to distance education. Particularly for the diaspora communities world wide internet fills a wide gap in retaining their tradition and culture. Internet based news papers, radio broadcasting, deploying literature materials online are some of the activities that benefit the diaspora community in many ways.

As far as building online resources for learning and Teaching of a language is concerned special attention is to be paid both for the creation of pedagogically relevant instructional materials and also for the appropriate use of technology. This paper attempts to outline a number of issues concerned with the preparation of online pedagogic materials for Tamil using various components of multimedia as opposed to preparation materials for class room teaching. Unlike

the other areas of studies, learning and teaching of languages involves achieving skills in speaking and writing. These two skills undoubtedly need class room contexts with an involvement of instructors. Neither the advances in internet technology nor any other multimedia enhanced instruction can replace this aspect of language learning at any cost. However, effective use of internet and other multimedia enhanced materials can supplement the class room instruction, and thus can reduce the amount of hours to be spent in class room. The other significant advantage of the use of multimedia enhanced instructional materials is that it provides a new dimension to the process of learning and teaching of languages. In most part, this new type of instructional materials are substantial in promoting learner autonomy and self-instruction.

Development of online pedagogic materials for Tamil and significance of spoken variety:

Easy use of digitized video, audio, hypertext, online-exercises etc., are some of the significant components of the Web that supports learner autonomy and self-instruction. Especially, from the point of view of learning the Tamil language, one requires more time to master this than any other language due its nature of complexities both in terms of its syntax and also in terms of the other features including sociolinguistic features such as use of dialects, its diglossic nature and so on. From the point of view of Tamil diaspora, the significant aspect of development of lessons for teaching Tamil language is isolating the variety of language to be taught. Literary variety of Tamil is taught at Tamil Nadu schools and there is no need for teaching the spoken variety there because the language of state is Tamil and by default every student is presumed to be having the skill in spoken Tamil. But, in the case of instruction of Tamil to heritage students in foreign countries teaching the spoken language becomes more significant than teaching the literary variety of language, as Tamil is not the language used in social contexts. This implies that the online materials to be prepared for heritage learners should focus on providing authentic audio files containing spoken conversations rather than audio files with reading of Tamil texts. Suitable hypertext environment may be created in such a manner that the learners can simultaneously compare both written and spoken variety of any given text in order to master both the spoken and literary language simultaneously. To site one example, the page entitled "Conversational exchanges" at the URL

<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/tamilweb/conv/convers.html>

provides a sequence of graded speech contexts with a capability to compare both spoken and written variety of the language, besides giving the learners an opportunity to listen to the spoken Tamil using necessary audio files. Although the Tamil lessons taught at the Tamil Nadu schools do not advocate teaching of Tamil in spoken variety, it becomes necessary in the context of heritage learners' learning the Tamil language mainly due to the fact that improving spoken skill is more important than literary variety.

Role of Multimedia in preparation of Online Pedagogic Materials:

The most significant aspect of using internet and digitized media is the capability to use various multimedia features such as the use of audio, video, hypertext glosses, online forms, chat rooms, synchronizing reading and listening and so on. These features can no doubt play a significant role in the process of learning. However, what is important in the context of using

multimedia for learning and Teaching of Tamil is that its appropriate use as opposed to using them randomly without any pedagogical relevance. Use of glosses and pictures to enhance reading comprehension (cf. <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/tamilweb/sujatha.htm> and <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/tamilweb/yukam/yukamcol.html>), use of suitable self-check exercises to understand grammar (cf. <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/tamilweb/framemul.html>), implementing animations and language games to help motivate students in their process of learning (cf. <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/tamilweb/sandhi/am.html> and <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/tamilweb/wordgame/gameslot.html>) etc., are some of the innovative ways of using the Web for language teaching and learning. More importantly, the technology that one uses for this purpose must be user-friendly and self-explanatory, otherwise the intended lessons would not reach the audience appropriately.

Effective use of Interactivity of the Web:

The other important aspect of using the Web for learning a language is making use of its nature of interactivity. Enabling Tamil in email exchanges (cf. <http://www.tamilanjai.com>), use of chat pages (<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/larrc/chat/>), message boards, instructor-student interactive pages for improving writing skill (<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/tamilweb/trans/trans3.html>) etc., are some of the other innovative ways of using the web for language learning. Obviously, these various possibilities of teaching language online make it necessary to plan the development of learning materials in a different perspective than the conventional ways of making teaching materials.

Formal versus Informal methods of teaching

Although it is possible to make use of the Web for teaching Tamil in a number of different innovative ways as cited above, the question remains as to how one can integrate the two processes viz., the formal method of teaching in class rooms and the process of teaching online. As already mentioned, web based learning materials are effective for promoting self-instruction and learner autonomy but it is not so efficient in any sense in fully implementing it in place of formal class room instruction. No matter what kind of security methods one can implement, web is not an ideal tool for testing and evaluation. Further, web may be ideal for improving one's receptive skills of language viz., listening and reading, but can not be very effective to improve the active skills such as speaking and writing. However, depending upon the different needs of language learners, the online pedagogic materials can be more effective to certain levels of learners, such as novice and intermediate levels but less effective for advanced and superior levels of learners.