**Enhancing the Process of Learning Tamil with Synchronized Media**
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**Introduction:**

The process of learning Tamil as a second language has been as complex as the language itself. With the advent of new technological resources that augment the process of  learning a second language, it becomes more of a challenge as to how one would make use of technology for language learning in a very prudent manner, so one can make sure that technologically advanced lessons are pedagogically sound in all manner.  The term 'multimedia' has been a buzz word in the second language pedagogy ever since technology was incorporated into second-language curriculum.  What are all the media that constitute multimedia?  Obviously, audio and video constitute the two primary media, but they have been part of language learning process ever since the analog tapes of both audio and video were invented.  Presumably, the web technology gave a  fresh new dimension to how these two media can be used for the purposes of language learning.  Besides, there are also other methods of learning using web media including the use of web forms, chat rooms, message boards etc., which should also be considered to be part of 'multimedia'.  This paper attempts to study such web enhanced media that are popular in language learning curriculum and discuss how each of such media are pedagogically sound, particularly in the context of Tamil learning.   Suitable illustrations are made from the website "Tamil Language in Context" accessible at: http://www.thetamillanguage.com/ or http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/tamil/.

**Synchronized media and Diglossia:**

As part of the language learning task, a learner prefers to have access to multiple media namely audio, video, glosses, grammar notes and cultural notes in a user-friendly environment.  Keeping this in mind, Tamil lessons are provided in this site for the learner to learn the language in a graded fashion from simple to complex form of the language.   Tamil being a diglossic language, any Tamil learner is obligated to learn multiple registers of the language along side of the distinctions based on formal literary variety and  informal spoken variety; standard spoken form versus dialect forms and so on. Further, learning and using any diglossic language entails understanding of both culture as well as speech contexts on the part of the learner.   Schiffman (1978:100), for instance, claims with suitable illustrations that  learning a diglossic language presupposes a competence on the part of a speaker to evaluate each situation and come up with socially appropriate linguistic forms.    The screenshot provided as below (fig. 1) illustrates how this is achieved by presenting the lessons in such a manner that the student uses the same page to get access to various dimensions of the language using a number of media namely audio, video, glosses, ability to switch between spoken and written form of the script, and access to corresponding grammar and cultural notes.    Particularly, use of videos shot with conversations of native speakers in real contexts capture not only cultural information, but also socially appropriate linguistic forms.  Another advantage of using videos for learning any language is that it

allows learners to get to know both linguistic as well as non-linguistic information like body language, which plays an important role in using the language in an authentic manner.

Any curious language learner can come up with a variety of questions during the process of their learning of a language and such questions may range from grammatical explanations, phonetic information, glosses for vocabularies, pronunciation issues and so on.  In the case of Tamil, though, the type of questions tend to be more due to its supplemental complexities in terms of its diglossic nature based on informal versus formal distinctions, agglutinative nature of word formation and so on.  Keeping these complexities in mind, the lessons in this site are prepared in such a way that answers for such questions are presented to the learner in a user-friendly manner.  The mouse-over gloss allows the learner to place the mouse in any word of their choice and get the meaning of the word while reading dialogues.  This process, which is called "incidental vocabulary learning" by Hulstijin et al (1996),  allows the learner to build their vocabulary during the process of their listening and reading activity.  This is as opposed to memorizing vocabularies in isolation, which does not give the learner an opportunity to correlate the use of vocabularies in contexts.  Further, glosses are supplemented with suitable links to let students get the translations of dialogues along side of each line, if they prefer.  Navigation bar in the QuickTime video window allows students to listen/watch any piece of the dialogue multiple number of times at their own convenience.   Grammar and cultural lessons that correspond to each dialogue in the lessons allow them to browse the respective information synchronously while listening to any particular dialogue.  Especially, this ability allows students to pace their learning on different stages so they can learn the lessons with or without such pedagogical aids on a gradual fashion.
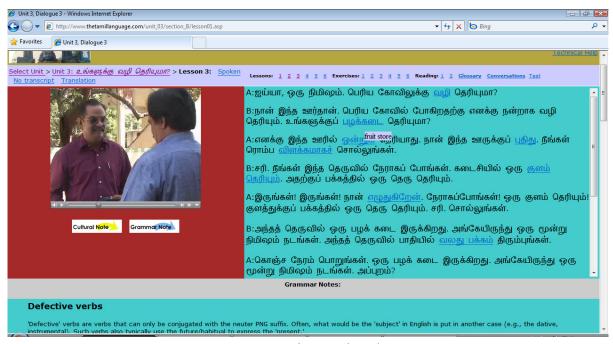


Fig. 1.  Synchronized media

This site offers a total of thirty six lessons for first year and another thirty six lessons for second year, and every lesson is built in a synchronized fashion with video, audio, glosses and so on as discussed above.

**Preparation of Grammar and Culture Lessons for Diaspora students**

Grammar and cultural lessons are presented in a graded fashion so a progress in learning can be monitored suitably with reincorporation of both vocabulary and grammatical information. Subsequently, each of these lessons is followed by suitable comprehension exercises that are designed to test student's skill that is acquired from each lesson. Each video lesson comprises of a dialogue, depicting a authentic speech situation, like conversations in a store, conversing with auto drivers, asking for directions etc. Grammatical information presented in each dialogue would focus on a particular topic in grammar, and a piece of cultural information is included along with it based on the nature of conversation. A detailed explanation on cultural information is included with illustrations on the same page, so it gives an opportunity for students to watch the video paying special attention to such information, either grammar or culture. Thus, imparting both cultural and grammatical information is necessary in language classrooms in general and Tamil language class rooms in particular for the reason that Tamil classrooms in any diaspora setup are always mixed with both true learners as well as heritage learners with different proficiency levels. In an earlier paper (Renganathan 2008) I discussed how the proficiency levels of students who take Tamil classes in the US context are always heterogeneous in nature and how defining a single profile encompassing all of the students in any particular level is impractical. Unlike in the countries like Singapore and Malaysia, exposure to Tamil language for heritage learners in the US is limited only to their homes where their parents are the only source for Tamil speech context. Also, in a multi-ethnic country like England and US, many families have parents whose mother tongues are different – with Tamil and Hindi, Tamil and English, Tamil and Kannada and so on. In those cases, the students who come from such families are left with even less exposure to contexts for Tamil speech situations. Often, despite their heritage background, their understanding of Tamil is like any true learner, who do not have any background knowledge whatsoever related to both culture and grammar of Tamil. In this sense, making any technologically-enhanced language lessons should not only be self-explanatory in all respects, and they should also be able to cater the needs of all students whose proficiency level falls in various degrees. Often, Tamil lessons developed, keeping in mind the learners of Tamil classes in Tamil Nadu, fail to address the needs of diaspora students adequately. In any diaspora context, introducing vocabularies, grammar and cultural information should be done in a gradual fashion from simple to complex forms with a step-by-step instruction on how to comprehend and use them in actual context. This is otherwise called a bottom-up learning, as opposed to top-down learning where lessons are made with a random choice of vocabularies and grammar, and make the students decipher them gradually.

**Use of the Tamil Website in Smart classrooms:**

Smart classrooms are equipped not only with playing audio and video files, they also have enough resources to connect the class room computers to networked labs, which allow the faculty to incorporate lab resources in their instruction. In this sense, the classrooms that are used for language teaching purposes at the University of Pennsylvania are furnished with enough technology including big-screen projectors connected to computers, DVD players, audio players, besides the university wide local network. All of the resources provided in the Tamil website are made use of effectively in this type of classrooms, and in this respect, an ideal environment for multimedia-enhanced teaching can be

achieved. This is as opposed to traditional classroom teaching where students and teachers are left with very limited resources for learning and teaching respectively. Story board, text as well as audio message boards, synchronous chat environments etc., are some of the technological advances that enable language learning a more convenient process than before. Particularly, these resources can be best implemented only in the context of smart classrooms.

Research has shown that CMC motivates learners to engage themselves in meaningful communication in the target language and leads to effective language learning (Brown, 1994; Hanson-Smith, 2001; Meskill & Ranglova, 2000). CMC can be synchronous or asynchronous; it can be text-based (email, online discussion forums, chat rooms and so on) or voice-based (voicemail, audio-enabled chat rooms and message boards). One of the advantages of smart classrooms is that audio-enabled Wimba board (http://www.wimba.com/) conversations can be played-back in classrooms and can thus be integrated with language lessons. In this respect, CMC and class room teaching can be integrated successfully. Typing in Tamil has been a problem among students as they are not used to any of the typing methods as well installation of appropriate software in their computers. In this respect, the Transliteration based Tamil typing that is implemented with Unicode characters and Javascript application in the Tamil website enables students to type conveniently in Tamil in order to participate with other students in CMC environments both synchronously and asynchronously. Thus, both voice and Tamil text chat can be integrated successfully for Tamil.

Thus, any technology-enhanced language lessons must be developed in such a manner that various media are synchronized to provide a pedagogically sound environment. In this respect, the Tamil website at the University of Pennsylvania makes use of audio, video, glosses, comprehension exercises, transliteration application and a host of other pedagogically relevant methods in order to bring forth a synchronized media for Tamil language learning.

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