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Table of Contents

ARTICLES

	Pages	
<i>Teacher cognition on pronunciation teaching and testing in the Tunisian EFL context</i> Nadia Bouchhioua	48-69	PDF
<i>Revitalizing Tamil in Singapore: Pedagogical Caveats and Community-Based Possibilities</i>	70-92	PDF
Selim Ben Said		

Teacher cognition on pronunciation teaching and testing in the Tunisian EFL context

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Abstract

The present paper reports research results on teachers' cognition of pronunciation teaching and testing in the Tunisian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context. Insight into teachers' knowledge, beliefs and practice of pronunciation teaching and assessment were obtained through semi-structured interview questions, classroom observation, and document analysis. While teachers possessed a sound knowledge of the content of their courses, their practice of pronunciation teaching reflects a traditional view of this skill rather than the research-based communicative view. This traditional view is manifested in the use of Audiolingual drills, in setting native-like pronunciation as objective of instruction, and in giving precedence to segments over prosody. Classroom observation sessions demonstrated that teachers' knowledge and beliefs about pronunciation instruction are clearly reflected in their teaching practice. Analysis of previous tests used by the participant teachers to assess the pronunciation gains of their students reveals an alarming confusion in their testing practice. Many of the tests in the analyzed sample appeared to lack validity and balance. These insights into the issue require effective intervention from teacher trainers and stakeholders to provide assistance and training for these teachers in order to improve teaching and assessment of pronunciation and to highlight its salience for successful communication.

Key words: *Teacher cognition, pronunciation teaching, assessment, Tunisian context*

1. Introduction

Pronunciation is considered a key element of phonological competence. It involves the acquisition and mastery of various components of the sound system of the target language. It is an important skill that leads to fluency and to successful communication in the target language. Lack of mastery over basic segments (consonants and vowels) and suprasegmental features (stress, intonation, and rhythm) in L2 English (English as a second language) can affect a learner's intelligibility which is a main goal of communicative language teaching. Intelligibility and comprehensibility are today key concepts in L2 pronunciation research. Intelligibility is defined by Derwing and Munro (2005, p.385) as "the extent to which a listener actually understands an utterance" while comprehensibility is "a listener's perception of how difficult it is to understand an utterance", respectively. They represent reasonable goals in teaching pronunciation to L2 learners because they evade the frustration of trying to sound native-like imposed by traditional teaching methods such as the Audiolingual Method. Although research in L2 pronunciation has reached advanced levels and has clearly proved the efficiency of pronunciation instruction, especially when

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pronunciation is considered as a cognitive skill and is taught in the context of meaningful interaction rather than as an isolated skill (Couper, 2003, 2009, 2011; Fraser, 2000, 2006a, 2006b), its outcomes have not been implemented in most classrooms by pronunciation teachers who do not seem to benefit from results of research in this field. Many language teachers tend to avoid teaching pronunciation due to various factors, mainly lack of training, lack of exposure to research in this field, or lack of confidence in their abilities to teach this skill. Therefore researching teacher cognition of pronunciation teaching is necessary.

1.1. Teacher cognition

Studying or researching teacher cognition is one of the most complex studies that can be undertaken because it requires inspection of various cognitive dimensions such as cognition of language knowledge, teachers' experiences, their beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes, most of which are elusive concepts that are generally difficult to measure or assess. Most of these dimensions have been explored by different researchers under the term teacher cognition and have been related to practice of teachers in their classrooms. According to Borg (2009, p.164), "teacher cognition research is concerned with understanding what teachers think, know and believe." In an earlier study, Borg (2006, p.35) presents second language teacher cognition as "an often tacit, personally-held practical system of mental constructs held by teachers and which are dynamic-i.e. defined and redefined on the basis of educational and professional experiences throughout teachers' lives". Research into teacher cognition should therefore address what teachers have cognitions about, i.e. their knowledge and beliefs, the way these cognitions develop, the way they interact with teacher learning, as well as the way they interact with classroom practice (Borg 2003, p. 81). Most of these aspects of teacher cognition are investigated in teacher education research as teacher cognition is considered crucial to better grasp and understand the link between teachers' mental lives and their practices (Barnard & Burns, 2012; Borg, 2006). Backer (2011) is one of the most comprehensive studies on teacher cognition of L2 pronunciation instruction as it addressed most of the aspects of this construct and showed that postgraduate education positively affected experienced L2 teachers' cognition in her study and influenced their classroom practice. She therefore calls for including L2 pronunciation pedagogy in teacher education programs. Teacher cognition is in most of the cases measured through semi-structured interviews, classroom observation, as well as questionnaires and recall interviews. Teacher cognition, however, should not only cover their knowledge and beliefs or attitudes on how to teach the language but also it should encompass knowledge on how to appropriately test language skills and how to measure the progress of their learners. Unfortunately, most of the studies that tackle the issue of second language teacher cognition discard teachers' knowledge of how to effectively assess the performance of their students in pronunciation learning and measure their progress in appropriate ways. Actually, in most L2 pronunciation research, pronunciation testing is the area on which literature is scarce and research is considered in its infancy stage.

According to Celci-murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (2010, p.308), testing and evaluation are “undeniably interwoven and essential to the entire process and cycle of curriculum development and teaching”. Although a large body of literature has discussed evaluation and testing of speaking skills in general (Luoma, 2004), there is less literature that tackles the issue of what to test when we assess pronunciation development and how this should be done. Teachers of pronunciation are left to their own intuition in trying to assess and measure the progress and achievement of their learners in terms of pronunciation learning. Apart from Celci-murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (2010), a few textbooks and resource manuals provide useful criteria on how to measure pronunciation achievement. In addition, in most studies which suggest innovative ways of pronunciation instruction, rarely is the issue of how to measure pronunciation progress and teachers’ awareness of it are discussed. The present study, therefore, aims to explore some aspects of Tunisian teachers’ cognition about English pronunciation teaching, as well as their knowledge and practices in testing pronunciation. Before stating the research questions and presenting the methodology of data collection for this study, it is worthwhile providing an overview about the Tunisian EFL context.

1.2. The Tunisian EFL context and pronunciation teaching

The Tunisian sociolinguistic context is a case in point of a typical multilingual context for language acquisition. In this context, children speak Tunisian Arabic as their mother tongue and the language used for everyday social interaction. They start learning Modern Standard Arabic (the official language of the country) at school at the age of six, learn French later (at the age of eight) as a second language (L2), and then learn English as a foreign language (L3). Daoud (2011, pp.9-10) describes the sociolinguistic situation in Tunisia:

For the last one hundred years or so, and particularly in the period following independence from France in 1956, the language situation had evolved into a diagglossic/multilingual one characterized nowadays by a mitigated maintenance of Arabic, the national/official language, an ongoing ideological, sociocultural rivalry between Arabic and French, an intensified pragmatic, functional competition between French and English, and an overall sense of deteriorating competence in all these languages among the younger generations, coupled with an unsettled cultural orientation.

In this complex language situation, Tunisian EFL learners generally profit from their knowledge of French at the lexico-semantic level. Knowledge of French as L2 would facilitate their comprehension and processing of cognate vocabulary such as the words, *hotel*, *passport*, or *information*. However, at the phonological level the previously learnt languages (Arabic and French) seem to make the process of acquiring English pronunciation much more

difficult as demonstrated by Ghazali and Bouchhioua (2003) and Bouchhioua (2016), where both Tunisian Arabic and French were found to affect the pronunciation of Tunisian EFL learners especially in word stress placement and in the production of nasalized vowels. Actually, in the Tunisian EFL context research in pronunciation instruction is scarce in comparison to other areas such as morpho-syntax, reading and writing skills, and vocabulary learning. In addition, teachers do not receive any training in how to teach pronunciation to EFL learners. At the middle and high school levels, students have three hours of English a week on average. An official book designed by the Ministry of Education is used. Pronunciation teaching is almost absent. At the end a few units of the textbook, activities such as “Put S (similar) or D (different) for the underlined sounds: *though-thief*”, or “Circle the stressed syllable: *photo-photography-photographic*” are presented to learners without any oral input, just from orthography. According to Elkassami’s (2014) survey, EFL secondary school teachers of English, who are 100% non-native speakers, admit that they generally overlook pronunciation teaching. Some of them see it is not necessary to teach pronunciation and students will learn it by themselves. Others acknowledge its importance, but report that they always have no time for it and prefer to cover “much more important” skills in the syllabus such as grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing. The testing system itself contributes to reinforcing this negligence as in the distribution of marks in the English test, only few marks (2%) go to pronunciation, if it is tested at all. This neglect of pronunciation teaching and the underestimation of its importance for communication resulted in the failure of many learners to develop an intelligible pronunciation (Ghazali & Bouchhioua, 2003). Even students who choose to major in English report to feel embarrassed to present any assignments orally because they think their pronunciation is poor (Elkassmi, 2014).

At the tertiary level, that is in English departments where students major in English to become future teachers of English or use it as the main language in other jobs such as translation, interpretation, or whatever filed in which communication is achieved through English, the common practice in teaching English pronunciation is that either pronunciation is taught as articulatory phonetics (where students generally learn *about* the sounds and not how to pronounce the sounds themselves), or a pronunciation book is adapted and some production and/or perception activities are chosen and practiced in ad-hoc ways. Many Tunisian EFL learners as a result of this practice have not been effectively aided to develop accuracy in pronunciation, and were not able to achieve their goals of becoming successful communicators in the English language.

Because teachers are the real mediators of the learning process and play a significant role in its success or failure, their cognition about pronunciation teaching and testing needs to be investigated in order to gain more insight into the issue and to allow detecting the areas that require further

exploration and assistance. The present study, thus, aims to explore the following research questions:

1. What knowledge and beliefs do Tunisian teachers of English hold about pronunciation teaching and testing?
2. Are their knowledge and beliefs reflected in their teaching practices and in their pronunciation tests?

2. Methodology

The research design consisted of semi-structured interviews with four teachers of English pronunciation, classroom observation, and analysis of 15 sample tests used by teachers to measure the achievement of their students during the last three academic years (2015-2018).

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study were four female non-native speaker teachers of English aged between 38 and 45 years old. They were all Tunisians employed by the ministry of Higher Education in Tunisia to teach general English as a minor subject at different Tunisian universities (they are known with the French term 'Tronc commun' teachers, which means that they can serve both as teachers in secondary schools within the Ministry of Education, or teachers of English as minor subject in different higher education institutions). Many of those teachers, however, were sent to universities with languages departments such as the English department where English is a major subject and students receive intensive education to become English teachers, translators, or interpreters. Subjects taught to this type of students include the four language skills (reading-writing-speaking-listening), pronunciation, as well as literature (drama, poetry, fiction, literary theory), linguistics (phonetics, phonology syntax, morphology, semantics, etc.) and culture studies of English speaking countries (British and American culture and history, mainly).

Teachers who teach English major students at the English department are supposed to hold a PhD degree in linguistics, literature, or culture studies or at least hold an MA degree and should be at an advanced stage in their PhD research process. Because of the great lack of English language teachers holding PhD degrees in the areas mentioned, head of departments and deans or directors resorted to the help of non-PhD holders and general English teachers ('Tronc commun') to teach what they consider 'minor' subjects that require less qualification such as language skills and pronunciation. The four participants in this study were of this category as they were directly involved to help with pronunciation teaching in the English department in a well-known Tunisian university, though none of them holds an MA degree in TESOL, Applied Linguistics, or any other field of English language studies. Table 1 below provides background information about these four female teachers.

Table 1
Participants' background information

Teachers	University degree	Years of Teacher experience	Subjects taught	Mother Tongue
Aey	Maitrise (BA)	13	Pronunciation/Reading/writing	Tunisian Arabic
Bee	Maitrise (BA)	12	Pronunciation	Tunisian Arabic
Cee	Maitrise (BA)	10	Pronunciation	Tunisian Arabic
Dee	Maitrise (BA)	14	Pronunciation/grammar/reading/writing	Tunisian Arabic

2.2. Classroom observation

The second instrument of data collection for this study consisted of sessions of non-participant classroom observation with the four teachers for each level they teach (Level 1 and Level 2). Level 1 corresponds to the second year of the 'License' (equivalent to BA) degree of these students, while Level 2 corresponds to the third year, which is the final year of the 'License' degree in English. The researcher observed each level three times during the course² with each teacher. One time at the beginning of the course, one time at the middle of the course and one time at the end of the course, which results in 3 sessions of observation with 4 teachers for Level 1 students and 3 sessions with 4 teachers for Level 2. The total number of classroom observation sessions was 24. During each session the researcher sat at the back of the language laboratory and collected information on target features using an observation sheet.

2.3. Document analysis

A sample of 15 previous tests used by the participant teachers to measure the achievements of their students at the end of each term during the academic years 2015-2018 were obtained in order to analyze what teachers do in order to measure pronunciation gains of their students and to check whether what they report in the semi-structured interview about their testing practices is reflected in their tests.

2.4. The semi-structured interview questions

The semi-structured interview consisted of yes/no and open-ended questions that were meant to elicit the information needed from the respondent teachers. The rationale behind opting for a semi-structured interview and not a return questionnaire is to enable the researcher to prompt and probe

²The course is spread over 24 weeks in an academic year which comprises two terms of 12 weeks each.

the participants for further clarifications about certain questions and provide them with the opportunity to express themselves on any points they want to raise about their experiences with teaching pronunciation (see Appendix A).

2.5. Data analysis:

Data collected from the semi-structured interviews, the 24 sessions of classroom observation, as well as the previous tests obtained from teachers were analyzed qualitatively and/or quantitatively depending on the point investigated.

3. Findings

3.1. The Semi-structured interview results

As stated in the method section above, the background questions about the participant teachers revealed they are of almost of the same age and of almost the same years of teaching experience; 41.5 mean ages, and 12.25 mean of teaching experience years. Three teachers, Aey, Bee, and Cee, were students in the same department they are currently teaching in. They all hold the same university degree (Maitrise= four years BA) and none of them has an MA in TESOL, Applied Linguistics, or any other area of English language studies. Responding to interview question 2 “*Did you choose to teach pronunciation?*” the four teachers reported they did not choose to teach this subject. When the researcher asked, “*How did you land on pronunciation then?*” they all said that they were assigned the course by the head of department as soon as they joined the teaching team. One of them, Teacher Dee, said that she was assigned a grammar course first and then, the head of department told her that she will be given a pronunciation course as well. Teachers Bee and Cee say that when they joined the department, there were no native-speaker pronunciation teachers, and the only experienced native-speaker teacher who used to coordinate the pronunciation laboratory course was going to retire and they had to join and help with teaching the course. The answer to question 3 of the interview “*have you ever had any training on how to teach pronunciation?*” was “NO” for the four participants. None of the fourth teachers had any training in pronunciation teaching. Teachers Bee and Cee report that the experienced native speaker colleague showed them how to use the language lab, which is a traditional language laboratory that comprises a set of booths, each providing a cassette deck, and an accompanying microphone and headphones as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The language lab where the participants teach the pronunciation course

The native speaker teacher provided them with a course he had personally designed and told them to follow it exactly. The NO answer to this question by teachers Bee and Cee shows that they do not consider this as training on how to teach pronunciation. Surprisingly, when asked whether they enjoy teaching pronunciation (Question 4: *do you enjoy teaching pronunciation?*), they all answered “YES”. Though, they did not choose to teach the subject and had no pedagogical training on how to teach this skill, the four teachers seemed to enjoy their experience of pronunciation teaching. The next question (Q5) was: *“If you were offered the opportunity of training in pronunciation teaching, would you consider it?”* The answer to this question was YES by the four teachers.

The second part of the semi-structured interview addressed teachers’ cognition of pronunciation teaching approaches, methods, focus, and objectives. Question 6 was *“what approach do you follow in your pronunciation course?”* The four teachers used the words “listen and repeat”. Teacher Cee, added, “I think it’s called the Audiolingual Approach”. Question 7 was *“what teaching method do you follow in teaching pronunciation?”* Teacher Aey used the terms “transcribing, listening, repeating”, Bee answered “students listen to a tape, they identify and produce sounds, stress, and intonation”. Teacher Cee used the terms, “Audiolingual method, or direct method...?” which revealed her uncertainty about the name of the method she is using. Teacher Dee resorted to the same description of “listening and repeating”. It seems here that most of the participants are not familiar with the technical terms used in pronunciation pedagogy, which is not surprising since none of them had training in pronunciation teaching. When prompted further to see if any other ways of teaching are used in the lab course, Teacher Aey said that they also make students play conversations in pairs. The researcher asked “how does the way students are seated, that is in separate booths, allow playing conversations or dialogues?” Teacher Aey then answered: “we ask them to come in pairs to whiteboard, next to the teacher’s desk, face their peers, and role play the conversations”. When asked about which textbook(s) they use in teaching pronunciation

(Question 8), the four teachers mentioned that they use a variety of books and internet resources. When probed by the researcher to give at least the title of one of the books they use, none of the teachers could remember a single title. Teacher Aey said that she “can’t remember any titles because it’s a collection of photocopied units from different books”, and added that she can check when she goes home and send the researcher the name of some of the textbooks she uses. Teacher Bee reports that in addition to the material from various text books, she also uses “a former course I had when I was a student”. Teacher Cee also said that she uses in addition to teaching units from multiple books, the course designed by the experienced native speaker colleague who introduced her to the pronunciation course and who was her teacher when she was an English major student in the same English department. It is worth mentioning, however, that teachers Aey and Bee were also students of the same colleague teacher who introduced them to the course. Both of them are now using parts of his course to teach the subject. The next part of the semi-structured interview attempted to investigate teachers’ cognition of the content of the pronunciation syllabus. The answers of the four teachers show that both segments (vowels and consonants), as well as suprasegmental features such as stress and intonation are taught. Teachers added when they are asked whether their course covered any other aspects of English pronunciation that they also teach linking, syllable structure, and they do a lot of phonetic transcription of Standard British English as the norm accent chosen in their course. In response to question 10 (*What do you start with, segments or suprasegmental features?*), all teachers replied that they teach segments to Level 1 students and suprasegmental features to level 2 students. When asked about the rationale behind this choice, none of the teachers provided a scientific or pedagogical reason. They say that they are following the tradition of the native speaker teacher who introduced them to the course. The semi-structured interview tried also to elicit information from the teachers about their objectives from teaching pronunciation (Q11). Teachers Aey and Cee report that they want to help their students to become fluent and native-like. Teachers Aey and Dee provided no answer to this question. The following question (Q12) was “*do you think that it’s enough for your students to be intelligible and comprehensible even with a foreign accent or do you want them to sound native-like?*”. Teachers Aey and Cee, who have just mentioned that their objective is to help their students become fluent and native-like, answered that they can tolerate that their students’ speech is simply intelligible and comprehensible enough to native speakers, but they prefer that students opt for native-like British English pronunciation. Teachers Bee and Dee, however, insisted that their students sound native-like. The last part of the semi-structured interview tackled the issue of testing pronunciation. Teachers were asked: “*How do you measure the progress of your students in terms of pronunciation learning?*” (Q13). Teachers Bee and Cee simply replied that they use “regular testing exercises”. Teachers Aey and Dee were more precise as they added that they test their students’ perception and production of English sounds. When they were further probed to specify what forms of tests they use to assess progress in

pronunciation acquisition (Q14). Teacher Cee said that she makes them identify sounds to test their perception and makes them produce utterances to test their production of “wh-questions, and yes/no questions”. Teacher Aey reported that she tests “everything from the shortest sound to the intonation of sentences”. She added that she asks them to identify sounds within speech and to produce these sounds “with the right stress and intonation, all of those through oral and written tests”. Teacher Dee also mentioned that she uses both oral and written tests to measure her students’ perception and production of English sounds and prosody. In order to further explore these teachers’ testing practices a collection of pronunciation tests used by these teachers over the last three years was collected for analysis. Results of this analysis are reported after reporting classroom observation.

3.2. Classroom observation

The main objective of the observation sessions was to see whether teachers’ knowledge and beliefs of pronunciation teaching (which they reported in the semi-structured interview) are reflected in their teaching practices inside the classroom. Throughout the 24 sessions, the focus of the researcher was the method used in the language laboratory, the teacher’s focus (prosody, segments, syllables, or linking), the way the lesson proceeds, and teachers’ feedback on students’ pronunciations. Table 2 displays the distribution of the classroom observation session with the four participant teachers.

Table 2
Distribution of classroom observation sessions

	Teacher Aey		Teacher Bee		Teacher Cee		Teacher Dee	
	Level 1	Level 2						
Observation Sessions	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Total	24 sessions							

For Level 1 students and just as the four teachers agreed in a common course outline, focus of teaching progressed from segments (vowels and consonants) at the beginning of the course to syllables and a few other issues such as how to say numbers in English in the middle of the course, to word stress practice at the end of the course with the aim of helping students become “more fluent and native-like”, as specified in the course description. The accent used as norm accent was Standard British English. Each lesson starts by the teacher providing handouts for students to use and follow. Although participants reported using a collection of printed material from different textbooks, the only handouts used in most of the sessions observed with Level 1 students (10 out of 12 sessions) were those provided by their previous native speaker teacher. Teacher Dee, who was not a student of this teacher, was the only teacher who used different handouts in two out of three of the lessons observed. The general way each lesson proceeds was that teachers explained place and manner of articulation and

the voicing state of certain consonant, for instance, show students how to transcribe it phonemically, and then ask students to listen and repeat in an Audiolingual way after a tape in the booths using their headphones.

One striking remark is that in most of the sessions, where segments such as separate vowels were taught, teachers tended to provide extensive technical explanation about tongue position and height for the vowels [i:] versus [ɪ], for instance, but did not raise students' awareness of the importance of producing the right vowel in word pairs such as *live* and *leave* for meaning and successful communication. Pronunciation teaching in most of Level 1 lessons seems to be detached from meaning and communication, hence teachers' choice of the phrase "listen and repeat" to describe their teaching method. In most of the observation sessions teachers did not give feedback to students about their pronunciation of segments. However, with saying numbers and word stress patterns, teachers often interfered using their control desk to give feedback to their students. When asked about the content of the feedback they gave to their students, teachers Aey and Cee reported that they corrected students' pronunciation of numbers and their assignment of stress to the wrong syllable by providing the accurate pronunciation.

The course outline for Level 2 students specifies that the major focus of the course is to help students master the various intonation patterns of English (in statements, different types of questions, and connected speech). Mastery of these intonation patterns should be achieved through the use of English idioms in English conversations as specified in the course description (see Appendix B). The 12 sessions of classroom observation of Level 2 students with the four teachers reflected the clear focus on prosody through heavy drills (listen and repeat) of various English tones and intonation contours. Students were provided by handouts that present detailed information about the characteristics of each intonation pattern and when it is used, illustrated by hand drawn curves for pitch contours. Teachers used a small white board in the Lab to draw intonation contours and explain where rises and falls should take place. Students are then asked to listen and repeat after a tape for practice. The four teachers use the same handouts which were provided by the same native speaker retired teacher. No other materials from any other books were used for intonation Lab drills. While Teacher Aey and Dee intervened frequently through their control desk to talk to students while they were practicing, Teachers Bee and Cee rarely intervened. Focus on drills with Level 2 students took place at the beginning and the middle of the course. At the end of the term, the four teachers started to use the idioms part. According the course description, "Students are introduced to a number of idioms through listening to everyday life conversations of the Johnson's family. They learn their meaning and use. At the end of each course, a few students are asked to re-enact the conversation they did before and to pay special attention to pronunciation and intonation" (see Appendix B). However, what was noticed during the 4 sessions of classroom observation with the four teachers is that higher emphasis is placed on the meaning and use of these idioms than on the way intonation is used in conversations. It seemed that students' and teachers'

focus shifted to meaning rather than to the appropriate use of intonation patterns. In addition, only a limited number of students (about four out of 32 in each class observed, 12.5%) were asked to practice the conversations in pairs during the lab session. For the majority of students the idioms lessons were much more vocabulary lessons than pronunciation lessons. Furthermore, in none of the lessons observed where conversations were played by students did any teacher raise students' awareness of the importance of using the right intonation patterns for discourse and meaning. Teachers' comments were of the kind "you have to raise your pitch a little bit here", "your pitch is very high, lower it and repeat the utterance", "no, here it's rather a fall that should be used". The communicative function of intonation was, unfortunately, not imparted to students.

3.3. Document analysis

In order to determine whether teachers' knowledge and beliefs are reflected in their testing practice, a collection of printed pronunciation tests, which were used by these teachers to measure the progress of their students, were analyzed. No random sampling was possible as the researcher could not have access to all the tests teachers used during their teaching experience. The sample analyzed, therefore, contained only 15 previous tests participants used to measure the achievements of students at the end of each term during the academic years 2015-2018.

Questions 13 and 14 of the semi-structured interview tackled the issue of pronunciation testing. Teachers were asked about the way they measure the progress of their students in terms of pronunciation learning. The four teachers reported that they used both oral and written forms of tests in which they use different types of items to assess the perception and production of their students. They also mentioned that they assess their students' pronunciation gains through phonemic transcription tasks. The scrutiny of the 15 sample tests containing a total of 47 test items shows that what teachers reported exists in these samples, as most tests included items that assess students' production and perception of English speech as well as phonemic transcription items. However, sample analysis reveals an uneven distribution of the items that test perception, production, and phonetic transcription. Table 3 below provides descriptive statistics that display discrepancy in item distribution.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics of test item distribution of 15 sample tests containing a total of 47 items

Perception test Items			Production test items			Phonemic transcription test items		
Mean	%	SD	Mean	%	SD	Mean	%	SD
4.5	6.3	0.36	26.70	43.7	18.9	36.2	49.8	21.94
	%		%	%			%	

It is clear from Table 3 that the most recurrent test items are phonemic transcription, followed by oral production items. Perception test items were, yet, the least present in the sample studied (6.3%). Analysis of the content of

most test items shows that what is being tested is students' knowledge of articulatory phonetics rather than their ability to produce and perceive English sounds and prosody. For instance, students are asked in some test items about the rules of the pronunciation of the "ed" morpheme in regular past tense English verbs. They are asked to answer in a written form by adding "d/id/t" (see Appendix D). Students might provide the correct answer to this task through theoretical knowledge of these rules, but this by no means shows they are able to produce these sounds when they use them while speaking English. Furthermore, most of the phonemic transcription test items in the sample test the ability of students to map sounds with spelling in English but do not reflect their ability to pronounce English words since students were not asked to produce these words. Instead, they were either asked to transcribe them phonemically or find the word from its phonemic transcription. Another problematic area is when test items, for instance, require students to "give the stress pattern of the following sentence: I know her but I don't know him" through a written form with no audio input (see Appendix C). There are different ways of placing stress depending on the speaker's focus or intention of what to highlight to convey the appropriate meaning in such an utterance. The question that arises here is what teachers would consider as an appropriate answer since no oral input was provided to students. It seems again that what is being tested is students' theoretical knowledge of stress rules rather than their ability to use sentence and word stress appropriately.

The course description and personal interaction with the participant teachers specifies that the major aim from teaching idioms is to enable students use appropriate intonation contours by playing conversations in which idioms are used. Strikingly, teachers used test items that ask the students through a written test to "fill in the blanks with the right idiom", which is a vocabulary knowledge testing item rather than a pronunciation testing one (See Appendix B). A basic knowledge about the validity of language tests is that a test is said to be valid only if it measures what it supposed to measure. Teachers in this study seem to have confused testing practices. The following section is devoted for the discussion of the results of the present study.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study was designed to explore the knowledge, beliefs and practices of Tunisian teachers of English about pronunciation teaching and testing. It also attempted to determine whether this knowledge and beliefs are reflected in the assessment of their students' progress. A series of semi-structured interview questions were developed in order to get an insight into some aspects of teachers' cognition of pronunciation teaching and testing. Four Tunisian experienced teachers, who teach English pronunciation in an English department in one of the Tunisian universities, participated in this study. Their answers to the interview questions were qualitatively analyzed. The results show a great similarity about the teachers' experience and cognition of pronunciation instruction. Although none of them has chosen to teach pronunciation or had training in pronunciation instruction

pedagogy, they all reported that they enjoy teaching the skill. The situation of pronunciation teachers in the Tunisian EFL context is not much different from the situation of their colleagues in the international context since many studies report that EFL/ESL teachers receive no training in pronunciation instruction and have no confidence in teaching it (Backer, 2011, 2014; Setter & Jenkins, 2005, for instance). In addition, the four teachers expressed their willingness to be trained if offered the opportunity. Despite the long years of teaching experience, the attitude of the participant teachers in this study reflects their awareness of the importance of training in pronunciation pedagogy that is not always offered in programs that prepare students to be language teachers.

When asked about the approach and method they use in pronunciation teaching, most teachers were unable to provide the specific technical terms to describe their teaching approach and method. The use of the phrase “listen and repeat” to describe their method reveals lack of knowledge about the theories of language teaching. Theoretical knowledge about language teaching methods is generally taught at the MA level in Applied Linguistics or in TESOL. But since none of these teachers has an MA degree or had training in language teaching by professionals in ELT, they were not able to use the appropriate technical terms of the drills they use, the teaching approach or method. Hence derives the importance of continuous teacher training programs. Teachers’ cognition of the focus of pronunciation instruction was revealed through their answers to questions 9 and 10. They reported teaching both segments and suprasegmental features. Precedence is given to segments because they start teaching them to Level 1 students and postpone the teaching of prosodic features such as stress and intonation to Level 2 students. This tendency reflects a traditional view of pronunciation teaching. Modern research-based approaches invite pronunciation instructors to give precedence to suprasegmentals because research has proved that they have a more important role in the development of fluency and are a key factor for successful communication (Derwing, Munro & Wiebe, 1998; Gordon *et al.*, 2013; McNerney & Mendelsohn, 1992). The participants’ classical view of pronunciation instruction is also depicted from their answers to the goal of pronunciation teaching. All of them prefer their students to sound native-like, but tolerate intelligible and comprehensible speech. Though this might be a legitimate target for English major students, research results on goals, norms, and models of pronunciation teaching call for setting intelligibility and comprehensibility as goals of instruction rather than the frustrating goal of native-like pronunciation, which is often difficult to reach especially in EFL contexts (Jenkins, 2000, Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994). Teachers’ traditional views of the focus and goals of pronunciation instruction derive from the wide gap between research in second language acquisition and classroom practice. Little of research results reach teachers who often remain skeptical and hesitant about implementing these results in their classrooms.

The results of classroom observation with the four teachers corroborate their knowledge and beliefs about pronunciation teaching. Actually, the use of Audiolingual drills, extensive theoretical explanation, and the absence of link

between pronunciation and communication observed in the lab course highlight the traditional views teachers hold about pronunciation instruction. These traditional views are further reflected in the choice of Standard British English as a norm accent rather than a model accent that students have to mimic accurately. Students are not exposed to any other accent or variety of English by native or non-native speakers. In addition, teachers' tendency to stick to the handouts provided by the experienced native speaker British teacher (who was their teacher and colleague) reveals a sense of security and confidence they have towards this teacher who not only represents authentic English pronunciation for them, but also an authority as previous mentor. Research in second language teacher cognition development has shown that teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practice is often influenced by their own teachers or colleagues (Sengupta & Xiao, 2002). The practice of the four Tunisian teachers in this study is also in conformity with Backer (2011) who states that "for teachers with limited or no teacher training in PrP (pronunciation pedagogy), the textbook and/or collaboration with a colleague appeared to have the greatest impact on their teaching of pronunciation" (p.89). Teachers' use of corrective feedback by intervening through their control desks to correct students' pronunciation is quite acceptable at this stage because students are still at the level of controlled practice where teachers' feedback is recommended (Celci-murci, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010). At the communicative stage, where a few students were asked to play a conversation in which they use idioms paying attention to the production of the right intonation contours, teachers interfered frequently to comment on the students' use of pitch, which is undesirable because feedback should be delayed at this stage not to hamper communication. This tendency reflects lack of knowledge about the role and use of corrective feedback in pronunciation teaching. Actually, the use of the "idioms" part as practice for intonation patterns seems to have escaped the control of teachers. Instead of using conversations as a means to practice intonation contours and raise students' awareness of the importance of intonation in conveying the right meaning and attitude, teachers' focus shifted to explaining the meaning of idioms and transformed the lesson into a vocabulary lesson instead. This calls for a review of this part of the course as it does not have clear objectives and is misused by teachers. Conversations for intonation practice should not have much new vocabulary so that students' and teachers' focus remains on the suprasegmental aspects and their roles in overall communication rather than on lexical aspects and meaning disambiguation.

The last part of the semi-structured interview investigated teachers' cognition of pronunciation assessment since evaluation is definitely a crucial element and closely linked to curriculum development and teaching. Teachers' cognition of how to measure progress of their students differed from what the analysis of previous tests revealed. Teachers reported that they test both perception and production of their students through written and oral tests. The researcher understood from the use of the term "written tests" by teachers that dictation tasks are used, which is a common method to test students' perception of English sounds and the way they map sounds

to orthography. However, results of the 15 sample tests showed a great confusion in the teachers' practice of pronunciation assessment. Teachers use written tests to test students' knowledge of articulatory phonetics and not their pronunciation of English sounds and prosody, which are completely different. A student might know all the rules of stress placement in different types of English words, but this does not mean that s/he is able to produce lexical stress correctly. In addition, a student may theoretically know that yes/no questions in English end with a rising pitch. Yet, this does not mean that s/he can produce this rise appropriately. In addition, asking students to provide the right stress pattern for a sentence with no oral input is meaningless as the same sentence can be produced with stress being placed on various words depending on the intention of the speaker. Items of this kind show a serious confusion in the teachers' cognition and practice of pronunciation testing. Furthermore, the ability to transcribe sounds phonemically (often used as test items in the sample analyzed) reflects theoretical phonetic knowledge and not necessarily accurate production. Perception, which is an essential element that leads to correct and acceptable pronunciation, was the least element tested. The most oddly used test item was the "fill in the blanks with the right idiom" item which is supposed to measure progress in pronunciation acquisition. This item clearly tests vocabulary knowledge rather than pronunciation learning. The analysis of the 15 sample tests was not meant to determine the validity and reliability of the tests used through analyzing the discriminating power of the items, for instance. It was rather meant to see if teachers' cognition of pronunciation testing is reflected in their tests. The analysis, however, showed that the tests themselves lacked validity as many items used to test pronunciation in the sample do not really test it. These alarming results require serious interference from decision makers to help teachers who do not receive any training in pronunciation pedagogy, either in their education as students or as practitioners, revisit their pronunciation teaching practice and testing of this skill.

The importance of pronunciation for successful communication in English as a second/foreign language has become widely recognized through research results that have progressively created a significant shift from a traditional practice of pronunciation instruction to the research-based modern approach. This modern approach places emphasis on suprasegmentals and sets comprehensibility and intelligibility as goals of pronunciation achievement. The weakest link in the pronunciation instruction chain, however, is the teacher who often suffers from lack of guidance and training on how best to teach this skill. Teacher cognition research would hopefully raise the awareness of stakeholders and decision makers in ESL/EFL contexts of the need to empower teachers who strive with their own means and who are left to their own intuition in designing pronunciation courses and in creating their own tests. Continuous training sessions may be effective tools to bring research results to the classroom and help teachers benefit from innovation and various techniques used in the field. Teachers are the mediators of the learning process and require the right guidance and assistance, especially when they themselves express their need for training and desire for guidance. It is therefore essential that pronunciation pedagogy is imparted to

teachers through teacher education programs or through continuous training sessions, and that the right equipment and the required technology is provided to teachers to enhance their teaching and testing practice.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Semi-structured interview with teachers of English pronunciation

Background Information

Gender: F/M

Age:

University Degree:

1. How long have you been teaching pronunciation?
2. Did you choose to teach pronunciation? If the answer is NO, explain how you came to teach it?
3. Have you ever had any training on how to teach pronunciation?

NO/YES

If yes, where, by whom, and for how long?
4. Do you enjoy teaching pronunciation?
5. If you were offered the opportunity of training in pronunciation teaching, would you consider it?
6. What teaching approach do you adopt in teaching pronunciation?
7. Which teaching method do you follow in teaching pronunciation?
8. What textbook (s) do you use in teaching the subject?
9. What do you focus on when you teach pronunciation?

Segments (consonants and vowels)
Suprasegmental features (stress, intonation, rhythm, etc.)
Other (please specify)
10. What do you start with, segments or suprasegmental features?
11. What are your objectives from teaching pronunciation?
12. Do you think that it's enough for your student to be intelligible and comprehensible even with a foreign accent or do you want them to sound native-like?
13. How do you measure the progress of your students in terms of pronunciation acquisition?
14. What forms of pronunciation tests do you use with your students?

Appendix B

Third year course:

Idioms course:

Each week students are introduced to a number of idioms through listening to the everyday life conversations of the Johnson's family. They learn their meaning and use. At the end of each course, some students are asked to re-enact the conversation they did the week before, paying special attention to pronunciation and intonation.

Intonation course:

- Introducing the basic tones in the English language: high, medium and low –
- Identifying the rising and falling intonation (steps and glides)
- Short sentences with one stressed syllable (fall of intonation on the stressed syllable)
- / short sentences with two stressed syllables (high tone on the first stress and falling tone on the second stress)
- Normal pattern for the wh-questions (high tone which continues till the last stress where it falls sharply)
- Wh-questions expressing surprise and disbelief (start low and go on rising)
- Wh-questions expressing anger, exasperation or disappointment (continuous steep fall in intonation)
- Yes/no questions expressing sympathy, friendliness and interest (rising tune at the end)
- Stressing important words in questions in response to statements seeking additional information (the word adding the new information carries the fall in intonation)
- Stressing important words in sentences in response to questions (the fall in intonation depends on the position of the important word)
- Sentences with short pause in the middle when someone says something but has more in mind that qualifies and explains what the speaker said in the first part (rising tune in the first part and falling tune after the short pause)
- Questioning pattern of the question tags expressing uncertainty (rising intonation)
- Questioning pattern of the question tags expressing concern and worry (high tone on the modal or auxiliary and on the last important stress of the sentences, with a rising intonation on the question tag)
- Affirmative pattern of the question tag seeking agreement (falling pattern)
- Stress and implication: how stress affects the meaning
- Emphatic questions expressing polite incredulity or insistence on the truth (sharp fall on the first stress of the sentence and then a gradual low rise towards the end)

Appendix D

Laboratory Test : 1 2nd Year

Name : Group :

ID number : Mark :

1- Write the corresponding words :

a - /kɒŋkri:t / :

b - /dʒɜ:nɪ / :

2- Numbers:

a- Change the following number into an ordinal one:
Your exam will be 11 , December .
.....

b- Write the following fraction in letters :
You 've got 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ in your maths test.
.....

3-How is the (ed) pronounced in the following sentences ?

a- Ted pigged (.....) out on hot dogs , then he got a stomach ache .

b- Nicole wanted (.....) Ted to ask his friends to vote for her.

4- Change the voiceless plosives into voiceless fricatives:

a- True :

b- Power :

c- Cold :

d- tick :

Revitalizing Tamil in Singapore: Pedagogical Caveats and Community-Based Possibilities

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Abstract

Despite Singapore's bilingual education policy, which accords Tamil the status of an official language alongside English, Malay, and Mandarin, recent indicators such as census figures and sociolinguistic studies suggest that Tamil is declining in usage (with the exception of educational domains, where it is maintained under Singapore's mother tongue policy). In order to redress this imbalance researchers and stakeholders have called for provisos in Tamil pedagogy and campaigned for the creation of opportunities for a more dynamic and working use of Tamil in classrooms as well as in social domains. In order to enhance the quality of Tamil language teaching in school curricula and policy, it is of primary concern to examine the current pedagogical practices in Tamil language teaching. Addressing this gap, the article examines current pedagogical practices in Singaporean Tamil language classrooms. These findings are subsequently problematized in light of language revitalization frameworks and suggestions pertaining to classroom practices and particularly community-based initiatives are discussed.

Keywords Singapore, mother tongue, Tamil, language education policy, revitalization

1. Introduction

The bilingual education language policy of Singapore which promotes English as a first language and the subsidiary use of a mother tongue (MT) as a second language was introduced in 1956. Under the provisions of this policy, English was selected to serve as a link language of convenience and lingua franca between different ethnic groups and was 'a priori' dissociated from issues of ethnicity (Wee, 2002); it nonetheless remains a fact that English is the working language of Singapore and is used in government administration, and legislation. English also indexes socioeconomic advancement, and occupational mobility. Although Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil were used by only 18.6 per cent of the population in 1957 (Pennycook, 1994, p. 233), they were designated as official MT languages due to their symbolic power and propensity to index ethnic affiliation and identity, and also as precautionary 'gate-keeping' measures to counter the hegemonic influence of English and the resulting Westernization of society thereof (Liu, Zhao, & Goh, 2007, p. 137). In this respect, state-sponsored initiatives to create a space for MT languages were aimed at bringing about intra-ethnic cohesion and national harmony. Despite the saliency and privileged status offered to these four official languages², the bilingual policy evolved in such a manner that English gained ascendancy over the other languages (Chew, 2017) and MT languages experienced a steady decline mostly attributed to

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² Particularly when compared to the other Chinese, Malay, and Indian dialects found in Singapore.

the growing use of English in commerce, banking, government offices, public transportation, and tourism.

As the home language of 43% of ethnic Indians in Singapore (Saravanan, et al., 2007), Tamil is overall decreasing in terms of numbers of speakers (Rajeni, 2018). Although Tamil is accorded the status of an official language in Singapore, recent surveys indicate that shift away from Tamil is evident in several domains. Specifically, use of Tamil as a home language has been declining in the last decade (from 40% in 2000 to 36.7% in 2010) (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2016). Other research (Rajeni, 2018; Shanmugam, 2015) reports similar decrease within other social domains where English is becoming the preferred language. Studies on use of Tamil by younger age groups indicate Tamil is exclusively used in the religious domain and for worshipping purposes (Saravanan, 1999). According to these studies, English was also the preferred language in a variety of other social contexts (Saravanan, 2001, 2004). A large-scale project revealed a significant loss in the use of Tamil (Vaish, Jamaludeen, & Roslan, 2006), largely attributed to the use of English in most aspects of life and particularly in daily activities (i.e. watching television, reading books, etc.).

Several factors potentially account for this decline. Historically, the low socioeconomic status of Tamil migrant workers, often laboring on estates, plantations, and recently in the construction and transport industries, has contributed to the perception of Tamil as a low prestige language (Saravanan, 1998). Consequently, Tamil is believed to offer inadequate career opportunities and its mastery does not guarantee access to socioeconomic privileges. Paradoxically, although Tamil is conferred official status, it is rarely encountered in governmental and judicial publications or heard in official spoken announcements. Tamil does not have a status similar to English or Mandarin, because it does not hold a similar “economic value” (Wee, 2003, p. 217). Additionally, since Tamil is a diglossic language, there is a discrepancy between the spoken variant and the highly codified written classical/literary Tamil. This difference creates a supplementary layer of difficulty for speakers due to the lack of mutual intelligibility between the two codes (Lakshmi & Saravanan, 2011).

The diglossic situation of Tamil represents an additional challenge to educators and epitomizes one of the essential causes of decline in school curricula. Teachers as well as textbook developers mainly promote Literary Tamil (LT) (Saravanan, et al., 2007), but LT is never used in authentic informal oral communication (Schiffman, 2007) and cannot become the language of the home. Thus, there is sharp disconnect between what is taught in schools and what is spoken in everyday situations. Furthermore, language activities in the classroom are designed with little emphasis on the spoken functional utility of Tamil outside the classroom (Shanmugam, 2015). Tamil is thus regarded by the younger generation only as a classroom language that has limited significance in their everyday life. As such, the downward spiral observed in the use of Tamil is a predictable phenomenon as a limited use of this language in daily situations is likely to contribute to its loss (MOE, 2005).

This idea is taken-up by Saravanan et al. (2007), who state that “teaching and learning of Tamil in Singapore have been confronted with issues of functionality and relevance” (p. 60). To address the issue of decline in the use of Tamil, research conducted by Shanmugam (2015), Saravanan, et al. (2007), and the Tamil Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee (TLCPRC) (MOE, 2005) has called for substantial improvements in Tamil language pedagogy. In view of these findings and debates, it was concluded that changes were required both in Tamil syllabus and pedagogy, which entailed amendments to current curricular and pedagogical practices in the teaching of Tamil.

1.1. Language Planning and Language Revitalization

This paper draws on the notion of language revitalization not as a mere enterprise of ‘undoing’ language obsolescence, but as the effort to promote the status and use of a language in terms of language policy and planning initiatives (King, 2001). Revitalization here is conceptualized as fostering effective classroom practices to promote a contextual and socially-sensitive pedagogy for the use of Tamil in Singapore (McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008). Language revitalization (LR) as defined by King (2001) is “the attempt to add new linguistic forms or social functions to an embattled minority language with the aim of increasing its uses and users” (p. 199). As explained by King, LR always involves some degree of language planning. While language policy is official planning promulgated by a ruling authority, language planning is the concrete formulation and materialization of these top-down advocacies and involves three aspects: (1) status planning, (2) corpus planning, and (3) acquisition planning. This article is oriented towards describing, evaluating, and proposing amendments to current pedagogical practices in the teaching of Tamil in Singapore, and therefore is more focused on considerations of acquisition planning³. It will also incorporate suggestions for the revitalization of Tamil which have connections to status and corpus planning.

The official language policy of Singapore has always stressed the importance of placing all MT languages on equal footing; however, there is an imbalance that favors Mandarin to the detriment of Malay and Tamil. The state introduced the ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign in 1979, which aimed to eradicate the widespread use of Chinese dialects, and actively pushed for more use of Mandarin as a MT language and as a way to foster Singapore’s economic ties with China. State-sponsored efforts at promoting MT languages do not privilege all languages but target the language of the ethnic majority. As a result, Singapore’s support for Mandarin, considered as the language of the predominantly Chinese population (77% of the population), is not echoed by similar provisions for Malay and Tamil. In this respect, this article also peripherally points to the imbalance of top-down discourses, politics, and allocations of resources in the promotion of MT languages. While this policy actually reflects the effect of the dominant Chinese ethnic group in shaping Singapore’s official language policy, it also calls for a

³ For a discussion of shortcomings in Singapore’s status planning of MT languages see Kaplan & Baldauf (2003).

correction of language inequalities with respect to the acquisition planning of MT languages and particularly of Tamil. While at the top-down level, redressing inequalities is rarely a motive for language policy considerations (Ager, 2001), attributing equal rights to the acquisition of languages can be promoted by initiating, developing, and sustaining LR initiatives 'from below'. Specifically, while there is a diversity of mechanisms, situations and contexts where LR can be enacted, the most obvious environment where such initiatives materialize is the educational domain of instructional settings, schools, and learning centers.

Education is the domain which most often bears the entire burdens of language planning decisions (Ferguson, 2006), through its curricula, schools and educational institutions. While top-down policies may create allocations for minority languages, bottom-up initiatives are equally crucial factors, which will enable a language to be successfully sustained. Reflecting on this notion, Fishman (1991, 2001) explains that the community's role is pivotal in guaranteeing that the revitalization of a language takes place. In addition, Fishman also mentions an idea germane to the current situation of Tamil within Singapore's educational system. As he points out, although teaching a threatened language will undoubtedly elevate its status, promote its functional range, and foster its cultural and historical awareness, it does not *per se* guarantee that this language would be also adopted outside the schooling system. This idea is important to understand the divide between school and home languages, which was shown to be a major source of the loss of Tamil in Singapore (Lakshmi, 2001; Saravanan, et al., 2007). Adapting King's (2001) LR framework to the situation of Tamil in Singapore, this article aims to both unveil problematic pedagogical aspects related to the pragmatic classroom situation, but more importantly makes practical recommendations for Tamil revitalization outside the classroom infrastructure.

1.2. *The Study*

Several studies (Lakshmi, Vaish, & Saravanan, 2006; Perumal & Rajendran, 2002; Rajah, 2018; Rajeni, 2014; Saravanan, et al., 2007) have examined pedagogical practices in the Tamil language classroom. While these studies provide a commendable effort at delving into current educational practices in the teaching of Tamil in Singapore, they provide partial insights into the teaching of Tamil as they focus on particular facets of Tamil language pedagogy. This study developed from an earlier and more comprehensive project (Shegar & Abdul Rahim, 2005), offers a description of the classroom dynamics and teaching practices in Tamil language classrooms.

2. Method

2.1. *Participants and setting*

Quantitative classroom observation data were collected from a total of 33 schools consisting of 19 primary (grade 5) and 14 secondary (grade 9) schools. The age of students in these two different levels ranged from 11 to 15 years old. These schools were selected using random stratified sampling based on school achievement.

2.2. *Procedures and data analysis*

During the classroom sessions, teachers of Tamil were observed for one unit of lessons. Typically, a unit of lesson is defined on the basis of the thematic units set out in Tamil language textbooks. A unit usually comprises 2 to 8 periods of lessons with each period ranging from 35 to 45 minutes in duration. Each lesson typically has several phases. Phases in lessons refer to distinctive patterns of classroom activity with a minimum duration of 5 minutes (Luke, Cazden, Lin, & Freebody, 2004). The classroom activity could take the form of a lecture, group discussion, individual seat work, etc. Altogether, 565 phases of lessons were observed in these classes. In the lessons observed at primary grade level, there were 360 phases in all, and at secondary grade level, there were 205 phases. Altogether, 81 lessons were observed at primary level and 42 lessons were observed at secondary level, constituting a total of 123 lessons. Microphones were placed in the classroom and teachers were also equipped with audio recorders. Only selected audio recordings were transcribed. But those selected for transcription were first of all determined to be representative samples based on cluster analysis.

The Singapore Pedagogy Coding Scheme (SPCS) (Luke, et al., 2004) was used to code the lessons. The SPCS's overarching theoretical framework is derived from Bernstein's (2000) two basic axes of "pedagogic discourse", namely classification and framing. Additionally, a discourse analysis, based on the framework of Sinclair & Coulthard (1992), was carried out on two representative classroom transcripts both at primary and secondary levels which consisted of a total of 6 lessons. This mixed-design study, which involved both quantitative data and analysis of classroom discourse, therefore aimed for balanced representation of data gathering and analysis. In the section that follows, a description will be given of selected findings of Tamil pedagogical practices. The data will be interspersed with comments outlining potential areas of problematic classroom practices, which are representative of current teaching trends in the teaching of Tamil in Singapore.

3. Findings

3.1. *Issues and Caveats in Classroom Practices*

The findings here focus on three particular areas: (1) Social Organization of the Classroom, (2) Students Level of Engagement and Themes Covered, and (3) Classification of Knowledge.

3.2. Social organization of the classroom

Table 1
Social Organization of the Classroom

Social Organisation of the Classroom	Classroom Time (%)
Whole Class Answer Checking (IRE) Teacher solicits, student responds, teacher evaluates; repeated pattern	23.1%
Whole Class Elicitation and Discussion Conversation between students and teachers with substantive questions, open-ended questions, and extended student talk	16.9%
Individual Seatwork Individual work by students (no discussion amongst students)	15.1%
Small Group Work Students work in small groups	14.8%
Whole Class Lecture Monologue by teacher with no sustained dialogue or exchange	10.9%
Student Demonstrations/Presentations Student report back, demonstration at whiteboard, show and tell; presentation of students' writing or text	10%
Choral Repetition or Oral Reading Chanting, singing, choral response, reading aloud singly or together of pre-prepared texts	5%
Whole Class Demonstration or Activity Teacher initiates and guides whole class game, activity	3.2%
Test Taking Students take tests, quizzes or examination	1%

The terms 'open-ended' and 'closed' are used in this paper to refer to questions which either (a) elicit a one-possible-response or unequivocal answer (i.e. closed) or (b) elicit a variety of possible answers (i.e. open-ended). Discourse analysis of the six selected lessons, which involved quantifying types of teacher questions, showed that during Whole Class Elicitation and IRE, 66% of the teachers' questions addressed to students tended to be closed. Even if open-ended questions were asked about 58.7% of the time, students' utterances were short and semantically and lexically simple. This is evident in Transcript A in lines 1 and 2, the teacher asks students two open-ended questions, but the students provide a one-word answer which is lexically and semantically simple as evident in the response in line 3. Though the teacher framed her questions to elicit more than one possible answer regarding the things one can find in the park and activities that take place in a park, the teacher willingly accepts a short answer response as if it was a closed question that was posed and allows the interaction to follow the same pattern. This pattern again recurs in line 8 onwards.

Transcript A

- 1 ஆசிரியர்: சரி பூங்கால என்னான்ன இருக்கு? என்னான்ன செய்யலாம்
2 அங்க போய்?
Teacher:Ok. What can you see in the park? What are the things you can do in the park?
- 3 மாணவர்: நடக்கலாம்
Student 2: We can walk
- 4 ஆசிரியர்: ஆ .. நடக்கலாம். வேற என்னன்ன செய்யலாம்
Teacher: yes we can walk? What else can we do?
- 5 மாணவர்: ஓடலாம்
Student 3: We can run.
- 6 ஆசிரியர்: ஓடலாம் very good.
Teacher: We can run. Very good.
- 7 மாணவர்: விளையாடலாம்
Student 4 : We can play.
- 8 ஆசிரியர்: வேற
Teacher: What else?
- 9 மாணவன்: Jogging
Student 5: Jogging
- 10 ஆசிரியர்: Jogging என்னன்னு சொல்வீங்க. ம். . joggingவந்து
- 11 மெதுவோட்டம்
Teacher: Tell me what is jogging. Jogging is Methuvatham (word for jogging in Tamil)
- 12 மாணவர்: மெதுவோட்டம்
Student: Methuvatham (Word for jogging in Tamil)

The notion of scaffolding is based on key ideas of “vicarious consciousness” (Bruner, 1978) and the “zone of proximal development” (Chaiklin, 2003). These refer to the support that teachers give students to complete a task that they are unable to accomplish on their own. Although limited in the possibility of answers they can elicit, scaffolds provided after ‘open-ended’ questions can be a starting platform to foster a more ‘conversational’ interaction which would go beyond the few words that students utter. From the transcript above, it is evident that there is little attempt by the teacher to provide scaffolding in order to extend student utterances beyond the few words they utter as a reply to a specific question. Instead of providing scaffolds with one student to extend their contributions, the teacher gets different students to answer the targeted question thereby restricting their ability to participate in longer interactions. At times, a question is posed but the teacher does not wait for students’ response and supplies the answer as

in line 11. Therefore, in a nutshell, there is limited opportunity for students to really interact in the Tamil language classroom or to produce extended utterances or sentences, which are lexically, semantically and syntactically complex.

The discourse analysis carried out on the two classrooms' transcripts, also revealed that within the lessons, there were altogether 369 IRE exchanges. Out of these exchanges, 278 involved closed questions and only 70 involved open-ended questions. Examination of the answers to the questions showed that most of the answers supplied by the students were accurate demonstrating that they could comprehend the teacher. Where there were inaccuracies, it was due to not knowing the right answers. This indicates again, as previously shown from the transcript, that students' interaction in the classroom was minimal. Students were therefore not provided with proper scaffolds to generate extended spoken discourse and which are important for language learning (Antón, 1999).

Though Small Group Work comprised 14.8% of observed classroom time, there was minimal interaction amongst the group members. One reason for this was poor physical arrangement of groups where students were required to sit in rows. This accounted for 31% of physical arrangements in Tamil language classes, which was not conducive to task discussion as a group. Apart from the physical arrangement of students in the class, group work was also not organized effectively on the basis of cooperative learning techniques (Jacobs, Power, & Loh, 2002) where every individual is given a role to play in the accomplishment of a task. Due to lack of proper assignment of roles, some students participated actively in the group work while others took a back seat. Consequently, in student presentations, the tendency was for those students who had completed the task to also present the content.

3.3. *Students level of engagement and themes covered*

With respect to the interactional dynamics of the classroom and the degree of students' involvement, 87% of classroom talk was again teacher-initiated and consisted in 'curriculum-related talk' dealing with actual content/skills to be taught during lesson. On the other end of the spectrum, the lowest levels of interaction consisted in informal talk representing only 0.1% of the total classroom interactions. The amount of time spent on informal chat was minimal. When the transcripts were analyzed to further examine the nature of informal talk, it was found that this type of interaction was limited to teacher-student greetings at the beginning of the class but also describing teacher asking students about absentees. As noted below, the minimal exposure of students to 'real-life' or informal speech is a major shortcoming that teachers are facing in the teaching of Tamil in Singapore.

Student engagement measures the proportion of students who are paying attention or doing class work instructed by the teacher. Where student engagement was concerned, the data collected indicate that there was 100% student engagement for 34% of the phases observed, and for another 63.2% of the phases, student engagement was at 75%. Engagement in this context

refers to students paying attention to the teacher and carrying out all tasks required of them. Generally, the student engagement level was high. In spite of these high engagement levels, the ‘texts’ and particularly the themes introduced and covered in Tamil language classrooms could be argued mostly to be “dead” rather than “alive” (Wallace, 2006, p. 74). In this context, texts refer to “all the materials which readers work with which carries communicative meaning in content” (Wallace, 2006 p. 77). One of the main reasons for the above evaluation was that the ‘texts’ in majority of the Tamil language classrooms were firstly not topical in the lives of the students lacking in both currency and relevance. The students were not given ample opportunities to interpret and “re-author” texts on the basis of their lived experiences. Examples of such units of lessons are ‘Mythological Stories’ and ‘Religious Literature’. The texts were often treated as neutral products to be consumed rather than a trigger for discussion of social issues that concern students’ lives. Therefore, the texts though authentic, can be argued to be lacking contextual relevance for students and particularly were not germane to their daily lives. This is also clearly borne out by the transcripts. In the unit on the theme of ‘Clothes’, for instance, the teacher starts off by examining a Tamil proverb relating to man and clothes and explores its meaning. The proverb states that a man not clothed is a ‘half man’. The teacher elicits the literal meaning of the proverb without going into its figurative meaning in the real world and whether it is applicable to the present world. Following this, other factual information about clothes are disseminated, namely, the different types of clothes, when traditional clothes are worn and how clothes are made. The teacher therefore does not invite students’ responses to these issues even when there are opportunities to do so. In this respect, a large part of students’ attention is spent on getting information out of the texts while little or no attention is paid to developing their critical reading skills. For example, there were opportunities for eliciting student opinions when discussing fashion but the teacher chose not to engage in this type of interaction. One teacher, however, was an exception. The topic she dealt with was ‘Diseases and Hygiene’. During the unit, she referred to contagious diseases such as the bird flu and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which were current issues impacting their lives at the time of data collection.

3.4. Knowledge classification

The category of *Knowledge Classification* indicates the nature of knowledge that is imparted to students and how students manipulate the knowledge given to them. Information elicited based on the SPCS was collected based on three separate dimensions, namely *Depth of Knowledge*, *Knowledge Criticism*, and *Knowledge Manipulation*. *Depth of Knowledge* referred to both the nature of knowledge transmitted to students but also indicated the processes whereby students acquired the knowledge imparted by the teacher. *Knowledge Criticism* is connected to students’ critical stance vis-à-vis the knowledge communicated to them by the teacher. With respect to *Knowledge Manipulation*, it indicated the degree to which students manipulated, interacted with, and applied knowledge received in the class. These variables were measured through a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0

= nil, 1 = happens a little, 2 = happens sometimes, and 3 = happens almost always (see Table 2).

Table 2
Knowledge Classification

Depth of Knowledge		
(a)	Basic/Rote	Knowledge of discrete isolated content elements. Connections between ideas are not made
(b)	Procedural	Skills and knowledge of algorithms, techniques, and processes
(c)	Conceptually Advanced	Going beyond just knowledge of the definitions towards making links between pieces of information and through creation of relationships between existing knowledge and the new information
Knowledge Criticism		
(a)	Truth	Only one answer (usually the teacher's answer)
(b)	Comparison	Compare and contrast information from various sources
(c)	Critique	Active challenge of the validity of knowledge sources and knowledge claims are made
Knowledge Manipulation		
(a)	Reproduction	Students simply reproduce what had been taught
(b)	Interpretation	Students are required to make their own explanation of what they have read or been taught
(c)	Application	Knowledge is applied across contexts
(d)	Generation	Students generate new knowledge by elaborating new perspectives and developing their own insights

In the category *Depth of Knowledge*, the data collected indicate that the emphasis was predominantly on basic facts and rote learning processes in the Tamil language classroom (Table 3). In fact, in the large majority of classroom phases (65.9%) basic/rote knowledge was the salient mode of classroom teaching/learning. With respect to the category *Knowledge Criticism*, results indicated that to a large extent (63.9%) knowledge communicated to students was presented in the form of 'Truth' statements and accounts (Table 4).

Table 3
Depth of Knowledge

Depth of Knowledge	% of Phases			
	Nil	A Little	Sometimes	Almost Always
Basic/Rote	20.6	6.2	7.3	65.9
Procedural	93.6	2.1	3.7	.6
Advanced	97.3	2	.7	0

Table 4
Knowledge Criticism

Knowledge Criticism	% of Phases (n = 565)			
	Nil	A Little	Sometimes	Almost Always
Truth	29.4	1.4	5.3	63.9
Comparison	92.7	3.4	2.5	1.4
Critique	96.6	2.8	.4	.2

In the category *Knowledge Manipulation*, the data show that in the majority of cases (56.7%) students were predominantly involved in the reproduction of knowledge rather than its interpretation and application (Table 5). These indicators pertaining to the dissemination of knowledge in the Tamil language classroom are actually interconnected as the conception of the processes whereby knowledge is transmitted, construed, and applied in the classroom is largely affected by the degree to which the teacher’s persona is presented to students as a knowledge detainer and infallible source of facts. In this respect, these empirical findings corroborate the unidirectional characteristics of Tamil language classrooms where knowledge imparted from teachers to students is taken as truth and where students’ agency and propensity to be active contributors in knowledge exploration is diminished. This fact is again largely attributable to the prevalent teacher-centeredness of classroom practices as well as to the authoritativeness attributed to the teacher.

Table 5
Knowledge Manipulation

Knowledge Manipulation	% of Phases (n = 565)			
	Nil	A Little	Sometimes	Almost Always
Reproduction	28.5	5.9	8.9	56.7
Interpretation	76	10.3	11.9	1.8
Application	95.2	2.1	2.1	.6
Generation of New Knowledge	98.6	.9	.5	0

The data also provide evidence that knowledge disseminated in the Tamil language classroom tended to be presented as ‘truth’ and not subject to

interpretation, application and critique. For instance, in the thematic unit on 'Thriller Stories' at grade 9 level, the teacher begins by showing a video clip on a horror story. This is then followed by the teacher examining a horror story in the written form. Using the written text as a base, the teacher explores how horror stories are written by going through its discourse features as well as some of the literary devices used by the author. Students were not given opportunities to interpret or evaluate the horror story. Neither were they given opportunities to comment on the effectiveness and impact of the story and the literary devices utilized. As such it can be argued that there was little critical evaluation of the content. Subsequent to this, when students were asked to invent a horror story, they were given guidelines for the content and as such there was no opportunity to explore comparable narratives they might have encountered in real life. Therefore, there was little opportunity to relate the content in the classroom to real life circumstances or anecdotes.

4. Discussion of classroom findings

Data pertaining to the social organization of classrooms reveal that the teaching of Tamil follows an IRF (Initiation, Response, Feedback) or IRE (Initiation, Response, Evaluation) structure with a preponderance of closed questions. As already suggested in the pedagogical literature examining IRE/IRF and teacher-fronted approaches (Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Vaish, 2008), monologic teaching approaches give little agency to students and represent a point where pedagogical practices need to be amended. In fact, the teacher plays a key role particularly when it comes to the E/F component of the IRE/IRF approach as constructive feedback and evaluation may lead to a less monologic classroom and to extended oral narratives, engagement, and critical thinking on the part of the students. As evident in the present data, although this approach may have a teacher-fronted basic structure, it is up to the teacher to actually transform it into a more communicative method of teaching. However, it was shown that Tamil classrooms were predominantly teacher-fronted and dominated and that the opportunity for students to interact was not exploited. Discourse analysis also revealed that teachers mostly asked closed questions rather than open-ended questions thus limiting the amount of student output which is essential for language acquisition (Muranoi, 2007). The transcripts also show that when students had difficulty getting ideas across, teachers often supplied answers rather than provided minimal scaffolding in order to facilitate the process for students to reach the answers themselves.

Though comprehension is necessary for language acquisition, to acquire a language successfully, language learners also need to participate in meaningful interaction in the target language. Meaningful interaction involves learners actively engaged in producing the target language during interaction and modifying it when communication is hindered and negotiating for meaning when communication fails. In the classroom, this is characterized by active interaction between teacher and students and among students themselves. Students should be given opportunities by teachers to engage in language production and scaffolds should be provided by the teacher to assist students in formulating extended utterances wherever

necessary. To encourage interaction in the classroom among students it is important that the content discussed is topical in the lives of the learners and the texts are “alive” rather than “dead” (Wallace, 2006). Following the examination of the 33 topics discussed in Tamil language classroom, it was observed that only a few topics selected for discussion had currency in the lives of the students. An instance of such a topic was Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

It is not surprising that classroom interaction levels and students’ degree of involvement are concomitant with the interest they ascribe to the topics covered in the classroom. As an illustration, in their discussion of SARS, students relied on their personal experiences in order to participate actively in the discussion of the seriousness of SARS in Singapore. In doing so, they actively participated in the classroom discussion, displayed more agency, personal involvement, and provided constructive arguments and practical solutions to contain the disease. Language acquisition and use is promoted by authentic or naturalistic applications of the language (Fishman, 2001) whereby students interact using authentic forms of the language in real-life situations. In the Tamil language classroom, an additional possible site to develop authentic and non-literary forms of the language is through informal chat and regulatory talk between teachers and students. However, as evident here, these types of interactional situations constitute a very small amount of classroom time. The findings under knowledge classification also seem to suggest that the nature of knowledge transmitted to students does not generate discussion and therefore interaction. This is because Tamil students are mainly engaged with rote learning and most of the knowledge in the Tamil language classroom is presented as ‘truth’. Students hardly have any opportunity to compare and contrast or critique the content disseminated to them. Where knowledge manipulation is concerned, students are mainly involved in reproducing knowledge rather than interpreting or applying it. When students are involved in rote learning and knowledge reproduction, the opportunities for ‘pushed’ output is not optimized. Thus, according to Swain (2005), these types of classroom dynamics do not constitute an optimal environment conducive to felicitous language acquisition.

5. Some possibilities for revitalizing Tamil in Singapore

In addition to the classroom practices that need to be amended, attitudes, beliefs, and initiatives need to also take place outside the classroom in order to optimize and promote the learning of Tamil in Singapore. As argued by McCarty (2008), although LR initiatives cannot be sustained without help from the educational institutions, yet “schools are secondary to the primary language implanting and expanding institutions of family and community” (p. 61). Bearing on this notion and drawing on LR research, King (2001) posits that several scenarios can be created not only in the classroom context but also within the social sphere of language users which have a positive repercussion on LR. King offers a framework, consisting of nine guiding principles, which when successfully developed can help to foster and promote the working use of a ‘threatened’ language. The following section

selects key elements from this framework and introduces some essential considerations that need to be addressed in an effort to dynamize the status of Tamil in Singapore.

5.1. *Encouraging early exposure*

According to second language research findings, second language learners need large amounts of exposure to the language to be acquired. In Tamil language classrooms, students are given official exposure to the target language from the age of 7 to 12 for at least five hours a week. Examining language immersion and revitalization in the Araphao Native American populations of Wyoming, Greymorning (1997) argued that a minimum of 6 hours of language exposure per day is still insufficient for developing language fluency. Based on these criteria, more intensive instruction of Tamil is needed in primary school and would require increasing the amount of exposure to the language to nearly 20 hours per week. King (2001) explains that this process of language exposure should not necessarily be initiated at the time learners access instructional settings but should be introduced early on. However as explained earlier in the introductory section of this paper, the use of Tamil at home is now starting to be replaced by a growing use of the English language. This fact complicates the situation further and represents a conundrum which impedes Tamil LR initiatives.

Contextualizing King's findings for the context of Singapore, it is nonetheless still possible to promote a working use of the language outside home and classroom settings by allocating more resources for the use of Tamil in preschool and day-care centers which by the same token also serve the role of socialization centers. In addition, the involvement of adults as sources of language input in these centers allows younger learners to be exposed to authentic and 'home-like' language patterns thereby reducing the gap between literary and vernacular forms of the language. Currently, Tamil is offered as a subject in a growing number of kindergartens in Singapore so that Tamil students are not denied a head start in their second language when they begin primary school. In addition, since day care centers are literally mushrooming in different areas of the country, it is foreseeable that the creation of child care centers using Tamil as a medium of communication is the next required step in promoting a working use of Tamil before school.

5.2. *Supporting proactive language immersion programs*

Adopting an aggressive and almost 'militant' stance in the support of LR efforts can in fact bear fruit. Both research and practice have shown the important role that language immersion plays in equipping learners with a considerable command of the language in a relatively short time (Hinton & Hale, 2001; Jones & Ogilvie, 2014; Koohan Paik, 2006). It is of paramount importance to develop support structures in the form of language immersion centers and programs where learners will be exposed to the formal variety of the language through the teaching and learning of content material. In addition, learners would also be exposed to a less formal variety through class discussions and casual conversations with other participants. Findings from a report (MOE, 2005, p. 55) which describes how Tamil is taught and

used in the Umar Pulavar Tamil Language Centre (MOE, n.d.), a centralized Tamil language learning center, indicate that similar initiatives which aim to immerse students in Tamil language and culture are also taking place in Singapore. Collaborating with local media and stakeholders UPTLC has initiated several programs that resonate with the lives of young people. One such program encourages Tamil students to engage in Indian cultural activities (e.g. Indian dance, singing, and orchestra) as part of their extra-curricular programs. The report also revealed that one of the objectives of the center is to organize overseas immersion programs in cultural sites both in India and Malaysia in order to nurture into students the Tamil culture and tradition. Another immersion initiative started by this center is to instill in students more familiarity with the Tamil community by participating in the celebration of festivals and visiting neighborhoods with a majority-Tamil speaking population. Additional initiatives which are being implemented to establish Tamil in the local Singaporean context as a ‘home language’ relate to its use in the audiovisual (i.e. films, radio, and television programs), print media (i.e. newspapers, newsletters, etc.) and on-line computer-based media. It is therefore in view of such initiatives of immersion that LR may successfully flourish and as King (2001, p. 116) notes be “interactive and grounded in the real experience of the children at school, at home, and in the community”.

5.3. *Addressing issues of disparity between linguistic varieties*

A factor which often limits LR initiatives is the existence of different and sometimes competing forms of the same threatened language. The literature on LR (Hinton, 2013; King, 2001) mentions that this pitfall complicates the LR process due to the fact that debates pertaining to the legitimacy of a variety over another can be at the crux of community-based conflicts and generational divides. As explained in the introduction, due to the diglossic nature of the language, two varieties co-exist in Singapore, namely formal or Literary Tamil (LT) and Spoken Tamil (ST). While LT is predominantly used in writing and is the language adopted in educational settings and for classroom oral examinations, ST is used in everyday spoken interactions. This situation is problematic due to the discrepancy between ST being the variety used at home and LT which is prevalent in schools. As a consequence, even learners receiving prior exposure to Tamil at home and before entering the educational scene will face difficulties when adjusting to the complex and sophisticated LT which is practiced in schools. In an effort to circumvent this pitfall, educators and stakeholders will need to discuss this diglossic situation and take measures to address it in each stage of planning, design, and implementation (Schiffman, 2007). These measures are already starting to take place in Singapore. The TLCPRC (MOE, 2005), commissioned by the Ministry of Education, identified some of the challenges brought about by the diglossic situation and particularly pointed out how there is a need to incorporate more ST in the new curriculum. To this effect, their report (Lakshmi & Saravanan, 2009) mentions that the new Tamil language curriculum should ensure a strong grounding in ST so that students can comfortably switch registers between ST and LT. In addition, current acquisition planning initiatives as evidenced by the TLCPRC report

are pushing for the development of learners' proficiency in the two varieties, traditionally perceived as mutually exclusive, and to teach both ST and LT. In addition, when it comes to other language varieties in Singapore, it can be argued that some varieties are 'more equal than others'. In fact, while Tamil is, alongside English and Mandarin, an official language of Singapore, it is still not allocated similar resources and state support as these other two languages. It is therefore desirable that state-sponsored initiatives which are promoting the use of English (Speak Good English Movement) and Mandarin (Speak Mandarin Campaign) by showing their crucial economic importance (Wee, 2003) and capital should also have equal counterparts when it comes to the advocacy and diffusion of Tamil.

5.4. *Involving the community*

At different phases of the LR process, the role of the community is of primordial importance. Having a wide array and network of participants in the LR prospect guarantees not only a support system which has a more consolidated future, but also creates a sense of continuity in the formation of future leaders and educators. Following extensive consultation with teachers, students, parents, Tamil community organizations, and the media, the TLCPRC reports that apart from the school, parents and the community both need to play their part as well. The community needs to create opportunities for students to use Tamil meaningfully, while parents are given the responsibility to motivate their children to use the language at home. While the recruitment of different members from the community can be enacted both formally (community meetings) and informally (personal encounters, conversation between neighbors), it has the more important merit of sensitizing the community on how the LR project becomes their 'own' endeavor, thereby giving the community a sense of ownership and responsibility.

5.5. *Sensitizing parents in using the language at home*

In addition to the active involvement of the community as a macro-sociolinguistic entity in promoting LR, the role of the family cell and particularly the parents as a micro-sociolinguistic entity is crucial. Fishman (1991) points out that the family/home sphere is the crucible where LR initiatives can be witnessed first-hand. The transmission of the MT by parents plays a major role in the maintenance and therefore revitalization of the threatened language by children. Findings from the TLCPRC report reveal that among learners who are currently involved in Tamil language schools, 51.4% speak English as a first language and Tamil as a second language. Another important finding from this commission reveals that Tamil has ceased to be the dominant home language in Singapore as the majority of learners are bilinguals and English is used more frequently. While this fact has already been referred to as symptomatic of the current Tamil language shift which Singapore is experiencing, it can be elucidated by the incongruity between parents' positive attitudes towards Tamil and their felt need to maintain this language and their use of English as a home language. This trend is encountered in different LR contexts and is mentioned in King (2001, p. 228) as an issue which needs to be addressed

by bridging the “gap between stated language preference and actual language practice”.

6. Conclusions, implications, and recommendations

Bearing on the findings outlined in King (2001) which promote different measures to revitalize a threatened language, it is evident that changes are necessary in Tamil pedagogical practices and community action. These changes are likely to have a positive impact on language acquisition which subsequently may impact language revitalization. With respect to the changes which need to be initiated within instructional settings, a crucial amendment that needs to take place in Tamil language classrooms is the increase for opportunities in student interaction. This increase can be brought about in several ways. One of the key changes that have to be initiated is transforming the classroom from a teacher-dominated one to one that is more student-centered. As evidenced from the literature on LR (Hornberger, 2002; King, 2004; McCarty, 2003; McCarty, Yamamoto, Watahomigie, & Zepeda, 2001), teachers play a pivotal role in every LR initiative. In fact, the relative success or failure of the revitalization of threatened languages is to a large extent connected to the role that teachers play in this process.

A practical way of assisting learners to interact in the classroom is for teachers to ask more open-ended questions rather than closed ones. Having asked open-ended questions, the teacher should only be contented with extended answers. Should students have difficulty in formulating such answers, the teacher must be prepared to scaffold the process (Graves & Graves, 2003). Teachers should be focused on getting students to generate output and not be too quick to prompt or recast utterances. They should also be willing to provide feedback that allows linguistic uptake and student generated repair (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Teachers should also encourage more student-initiated interactions. To encourage students to initiate interaction in the classroom, more opportunities have to be given to them to comment or query the content that is being disseminated. Student-student interaction can be nurtured through effective group work organization and the use of co-operative learning techniques (Jacobs, et al., 2002). Where curriculum is concerned, there is a need for teachers to reexamine the thematic topics that are selected for discussion in class. The content selected for discussion should be relevant to the students' lives thus captivating their interest and generating discussion (Wallace, 2006). Even if the topic has to do with India, or is related to philosophy, or religious literature, the teacher must find ways to modify, contextualize, or relate the content to the students' environment so that it has applicability and relevance in their lives. Therefore, there is a need for teachers to reexamine these materials with a view to supplementing or modifying them so that the 'texts' in the Tamil language classroom are “alive” rather than “dead”. While dealing with the content teachers need to reduce the dissemination of information as factual truth. Instead students should be engaged in knowledge interpretation, application and criticism. This will generate greater discussions thus increasing student interaction in the Tamil language classroom.

As stated by Ferguson (2006) revitalization demands considerable ideological commitment, as a corollary to this idea, efforts aiming at revitalizing and redesigning current pedagogical practices in Tamil education in Singapore also require shifting teachers' attitudes vis-à-vis their pedagogical practices and educational roles. In this light, encouraging attitudes whereby teachers take "pedagogical responsibility" (Comber & Kamler, 2006) seems to be a crucial prerequisite for the revitalization of Tamil in Singaporean schools/classrooms. As Comber & Kamler (2006, p. 27) argue: "Taking responsibility is a key move in redesigning pedagogy and curriculum and it appears to be contingent upon teachers' capacity to see children differently". Brown (2010) takes the notion of teachers' responsibilities further by advocating that they take the active role of language-policy actors in the school context echoing thereby Ricento & Hornberger (1996) who consider the teacher to be "at the heart of language policy" (p. 417). The teacher is not simply the medium through which language policy is applied but an active participant who self-appropriates language policy. Although teachers traditionally buy into the ideology that they must abide by top-down policies without critically voicing their own agendas (Shohamy, 2006, pp. 141-142), a more active role of teachers would imply – as Levinson, Sutton & Winstead (2009) argue - "ways that creative agents interpret and take in elements of policy, thereby incorporating these discursive resources into their own schemes of interest, motivation, and action" (p. 779).

Finally, revitalization initiatives are often faced with the lack of continuity between educational measures and common societal communication trends. In this respect, for Tamil to survive outside the classroom, a support system needs to be established which will operate before and after schooling, as "bilingual education cannot deliver language maintenance by itself" (Baker, (2003, p. 97).

In summary, the proposed possibilities have the potential not only of improving the teaching of Tamil but also furthering its use in the Tamil language classroom. If these principles are implemented successfully, they are likely to increase students' acquisition of Tamil language which in turn may have an impact in revitalizing the use of the language outside the classroom. It is important however, to note that there is a caveat as King (2001) states that for these micro level changes in the classroom to have an impact on language revitalization, they must be supported by macro level changes in the larger linguistic society as suggested by Hornberger (2001). Though the above study pertains to Tamil language classrooms in Singapore, it is hoped the framework adopted to describe the pedagogical practices as well as the suggestions to improve language acquisition and language revitalization, will find resonance in other language classrooms and contexts.

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