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 languages[2], 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 worshiping 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 planning[3]. 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, polities, 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

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[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:   விளயாடலாம்
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 Methuvotham (word for jogging in Tamil)

12 மாணவர்:   மெதுவோட்டம்
Student: Methuvotham (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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