

RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

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

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Tamil Informational Report

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TESL 539: Language Acquisition & Learning

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About the Tamil Language

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

Where Tamil is Spoken



(<http://tamilanhub.hubpages.com/hub/Tamil-Language>)

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

Tamil has six regional dialects:

- East
- West
- North
- South
- Central
- Sri Lanka

(Chakraborty, 2009)

Writing System

- Tamil is written in an alpha-syllabic system comparable to many other South Asian languages.
- It derives from the Ashokan Brahmi script.
- Tamil has 18 consonants, 12 vowels, and one special character called the *aytam*.
- The vowels and consonants combine to form 216 compound characters.

(www.lmp.ucla.edu)

அ	ஆ	இ	ஈ	உ	ஊ
a	ā	i	ī	u	ū
எ	ஏ	ஐ	ஒ	ஔ	ஔள
e	ē	ai	o	ō	au
க	ka	த	tha	ல	la
ங	ñ [ŋ]	ந	na	வ	va
ச	cha	ப	pa	ழ	zha
ஞ	ñ [ɲ]	ம	ma	ள	la(!)
ட	ta	ய	ya	ற	ṛ, R
ண	ṇ [ɳ]	ர	ra	ன	ṇ, N

(<http://c-radhakrishnan.info/alphabet.htm>)

Diglossia

- Tamil is a diglossic language.
 - The written and spoken form of Tamil are very different.
 - Differences include grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.
 - English learners may favor an over-elaborate or over-formal style in written English.
- Classical (Written) vs. Colloquial (Spoken) Tamil
 - Classic Tamil is used in all writing and most types of public speech.
 - The written form is considered to be prestigious.
 - The spoken form is used in everyday conversation and informal settings.
 - Most variations in dialect occur in the colloquial form, varying with region and social status.

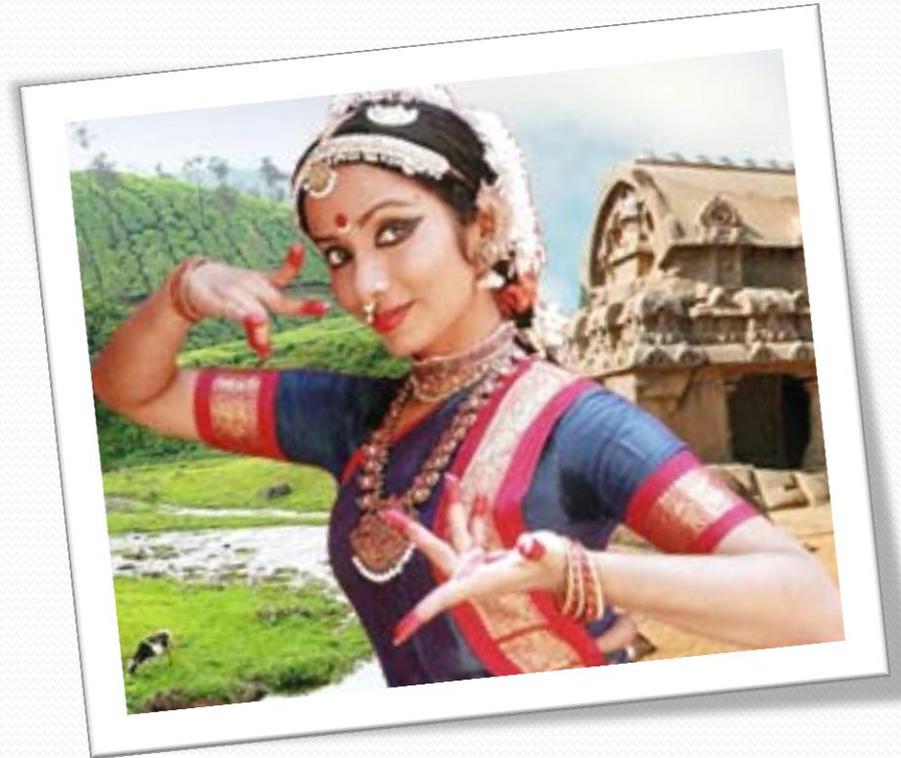
(Durai & Krishnan, 2009)

(Chakraborty, 2009)

(Swan, 2001)

Linguistic Features of Tamil

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



(<http://www.bharatonline.com/tamilnadu/tamilnadu-photo.html>)

(Chakraborty, 2009)

(Swan, 2001)

Language Distinctions in Phonology

Vowels

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

Consonants

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

Language Distinctions in Syntax

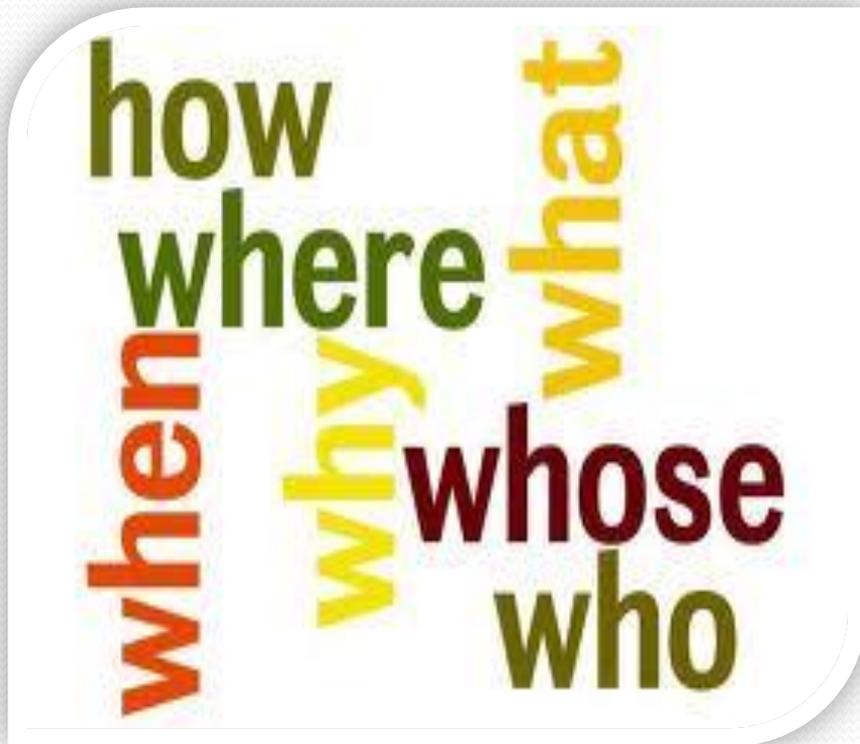
- Tamil lacks limited relative pronouns.
 - “*Call the boy who learned the lesson*” will be said in Tamil as “*That lesson learned boy call*”.
 - English learners may say “*living next door people*” instead of “*the people who live next door*”.
- The most common sentence structure order is Subject-Object-Verb.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



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tamil_Culture.jpg

(Chakraborty, 2009)
(Swan, 2001)

Language Distinctions in Syntax (continued)



- A Tamil sentence, however complex, only has one finite verb at most. Learners may carry this over into English, using *-ing* forms instead of finite verbs in subordinate clauses.
- Tamil speakers may find the use of auxiliaries for questions and negatives hard to learn.
 - Question tags may be replaced by a single negative marker, such as “*You will come, no?*”

Language Distinctions in Morphology

- Tamil has a complex system of tenses, with meanings that do not always correspond closely to those in English.
 - English learners may say “*In young age I play a lot*” instead of “*When I was young I played a lot.*”
 - They may say “*Tomorrow I will win a prize*” rather than “*I wish I could win a prize tomorrow.*”
- Tamil speakers may overuse English emphatic and reflexive pronouns.
 - “When he was young *itself* he lost his father.”
 - “It was *he himself* who stole the book.”
- Tamil has no articles.
 - Learners may find the article system difficult. They may use *one* instead of *a/an* or may leave out *the*.
- There is no distinction between adjectives and adverbs in Tamil.
 - English adjectives and adverbs may be confused with each other, or with nouns or verbs.

(Chakraborty, 2009)

(Swan, 2001)

Social Language

- Indirect style of communication is preferred over direct.
- Telling someone “no” is considered rude. In order to be polite, Tamil speakers may say “yes” to a question while bobbling their head. This usually means “no”.
- Tamil speakers generally maintain a personal space of 3 to 3 ½ feet during conversation.
- Touching between men and women is not appropriate.
- Tamils greet each other by saying “vanakkam”. This means, “may you be blessed with a long life”.
- Ears are considered sacred, so pulling or boxing one’s ears may be regarded as an insult.
- Sustained eye contact is not common, especially a woman looking at a man.
- Information or requests may not be expressed directly.

Cultural and Language Considerations

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

Cultural and Language Considerations (Continued)



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

Resources

Books

- Swan, M., & Smith, B. (2001). *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems*. Second Edition. Cambridge: University Press.

Internet Sites and Images

- Chakraborty et al. (2009). *Tamil Language and Culture Guide*. Retrieved February 16, 2012, from:
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- Question Words [Image]. (2011). Retrieved March 18, 2012, from:
<http://cerij.wordpress.com/2011/04/08/questioning-the-question/>
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