

Making children speak Tamil

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Disclaimer

These are the opinions of a person successful in this goal. Some might not consider this a worthwhile goal. Some might consider their own situation to be different. Please accept my apologies in those case.

Keep the following as guide lines.

- Never make fun of the child's attempt.
 - Do not try to show why anything is better or superior.
 - Correct the mistakes without being offensive.
 - Recognize the child's attempt with non-material as well as material rewards.
 - Start at day one. It becomes harder every day.
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- Is not the mother tongue in their blood, W'ont they know it without even teaching?
 - Is not Tamil a difficult language compared to others? Is that not the reason for most Tamil children not speaking their mother tongue, unlike other Indian and non-Indian linguistic groups?
 - Would the child's performance in other academic areas be compromised, if part of the effort goes to learning Tamil?
 - How do I convince the child that it is worth learning Tamil, while the whole world speaks English (in their view)?
 - How do I deal with other children of Tamil origin, who speak in English with my child?
 - How do I deal with my Tamil Nadu friends, who insist on speaking only in English with my child?
 - What is the best age to start encouraging the child to speak Tamil?
 - How do we deal with the peer pressure in school?
 - We (parents) use Tamil, when we want to keep some information away from the child. What do we do now?

Is not the mother tongue in their blood, Won't they know it without even teaching?

An emphatic No. Every child in the western world masters the local language with no problem. Most of those children are totally blank when it comes to the language of their parents. It takes an enormous effort on the part of parents to make the children speak Tamil. The parents also need a lot of discipline and a determination.

Is not Tamil a difficult language compared to others? Is that not the reason for most Tamil children not speaking their mother tongue, unlike other Indian and non-Indian linguistic groups?

This is a common view propagated by many Tamils and non-Tamils alike. However, I am ignorant as to how one can measure the level of difficulty of learning a language. All that I know is that traditionally, children all over the world start speaking any language, the easiest or the most difficult at about the same age, around 9 to 12 months. Thus if Tamil was the most difficult language, those Tamil children must have been super intelligent :-).

Would the child's performance in other academic areas be compromised, if part of the effort goes to learning Tamil?

This seems to be a common misconception among Tamilians in Asia as well as in the western world. Studies in French north America have shown that, the children who are bi(multi)lingual, right from the time of birth seem to do better in all other studies. Perhaps their brain develops a more versatile connectivity among the neurons. Instead of relating one word with one concept or image (as it would be in a totally unilingual environment), they develop a reasoning approach to relate it to many and set up logic to make choices under different circumstances.

How do I convince the child that it is worth learning Tamil, while the whole world speaks English (in their view)?

The major obstacle is to convince yourselves first. Expose them (and your own selves too) to non-English environments. There is no need to expose them to a lot of Tamil environment, to make your point. In fact, most of your relatives in Tamil Nadu may insist on talking in English only to the child. That can weaken your case. Go often to Mexico if you are close. Come to inexpensive, beautiful and feel almost like USA Quebec and watch all the children converse in their mother tongue.

How do I deal with other children of Tamil origin, who speak in English with my child? Just ignore. Consider them just like any other child with English as mother tongue. However insist that your child should speak to you only in Tamil, even in their presence. You also try to say a few words in Tamil to the other child, then only if the child pulls a blank face, explain in English.

How do I deal with my friends, who insist on speaking only in English with my child?

This is a difficult problem to tackle. Most of those adults will usually ignore your repeated requests. Some may even argue against your struggle. Make repeated humble requests. Do not ever give up. I see no better solution.

What is the best age to start encouraging the child to speak Tamil?

Age 0. Perhaps even before the child is born :-). It becomes harder to start every day, as the child grows. Once in school, if you have not already made the child respond to you in Tamil, it is often too late. Actually, the child will try to stop replying in Tamil at that age. The parents need a lot of discipline not to switch themselves to English.

How do we deal with the peer pressure in school?

I heard that in Asia, some schoolteachers advise their students not to talk in Tamil at home. At least in North America, you will not have that problem. Most schoolteachers usually are impressed by the child's multi-lingual ability. They compliment and encourage the child. There may be other Indian and non-Indian students, who may exert a peer pressure on the child. Spending lots of time with the child with activities that the child likes helps a lot. This home education continues until the child enters university. From then on, it is the child's own conviction that can improve or worsen the knowledge of Tamil. It is at this stage that you can pass on your own feelings of enjoyment of the

beauty of the language. Let them know, how lucky they are to have had the opportunity to speak such a language.

We (parents) use Tamil, when we want to keep some information away from the child. What do we do now?

Do not talk secrets in front of the child. If there is anything to be kept away from the child, it should be done in his/her absence. This is a general rule, whether the child knows Tamil or not.

Most severe: Short and long vowels mixed up.

English in roman script uses the same vowel for short and long depending on the word. In all Indian languages, they have different symbols. In fact, practically every common word has entirely different meaning, if the vowel is short or long. This is very critical. This will remove more than half of mis-pronunciations. So it is advisable that the person makes a note of short/long vowels. There is a popular typable readable Romanized convention followed commonly in Romanized texts.

Palatal consonant pronounced as a dental consonant.

All Indian languages have two forms of 't'. One consonant has the tongue touching the palate and another the teeth. English unilinguists should realize that, these are entirely different consonants. In addition, the south Indian languages have the dental and palatal forms of 'l'. All south Indian languages, use both these consonants a lot, and the meanings become entirely different if a wrong consonant is used.

Aspiration in consonants ignored.

This mis-pronunciation is common among all Tamilians, because Tamil does not use the aspirated consonants. Other south Indian languages, use the aspirated consonants for Sanskrit origin words. In Tamil, the Sanskrit (as well as Latin and Greek) origin words are Tamilized, according to certain rules established more than 2000 years ago.

However, in all south Indian languages, it is very rare that a wrong usage will lead to a different meaning. In my opinion, this is the least critical error. However, there are some, who lay undue importance to this error, while ignoring the critical errors above.

Mis pronunciation of the letter 'zh' in Tamil and Malayalam.

It is not found in north Indian languages. It has been discontinued in other south Indian languages in the last 300 years. It is in Russian. The French pronounce 'j' with a similar sound. Some English speakers pronounce the 'r' with this sound. All Malayalees pronounce it perfectly. However, a lot of Tamilians, both Indian and Sri Lankan, mis-pronounce and get away with it. Correct pronunciation of this consonant is very important for the meaning.