Literacy Practices of Tamil Youth in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the literacy skills of Singapore youth in Tamil and their experiences with literacy. Despite Tamil being one of the four official languages in Singapore, the community is documented to be experiencing language shift (Gopinathan, Lakshmi, & Saravanan, 2019). It is therefore important to understand the factors that influence the acquisition of literacy practices at various stages of one's life. To do so the study adopts Barton's (2007) ecological framework of analysing reading and writing skills through three stages: home (emergent), school and youth and if youth literacy practices were influenced by emergent and school literacy practices. Interviews were conducted with ten Tamil youth between 21-30 years of age from varied backgrounds to understand their language learning experiences at the three different stages. This study reveals that the literacy practices of youth are influenced by home support, religious practices and parents' attitude towards the language more than school practices. The finding of this study can inform researchers in the field of language maintenance and shift studies to use Barton's framework of literacies as an additional methodology.

Keywords: Emergent literacy practices, School literacy practices, Youth literacy practices, Tamil language education

INTRODUCTION

Rather than viewing literacy as an autonomous set of skills of reading and writing, this paper takes the perspective that literacy is a set of socially situated practices that is shaped by prior experience (Schwab, 2018). Barton (2007) categorises three main stages of these socially situated practices for individuals to be emergent, school and out-of-school literacy (referred to as youth literacy in this paper). Emergent literacy focuses on the part a child's family and household plays in developing a child's literacy. School literacy is built on the level of expertise a child has obtained at home; they do not function separately as an institution that teaches literacy alone. Values, character, various essential skills are also learnt in schools, along with reading and writing. School literacy is truly a success only when what is learnt at school is translated and merged with the literacy events that take place at home. The youth literacy is literacy that is mainly taught for economic purposes and acquired through out-of-class activities.

The three stages of literacies (emergent, school, youth) can be studied by examining the factors that influence literacy events and the associated literacy practices. Barton (2007) defines literacy events as "actual instances where people use reading and writing in their day-to-day lives" (Barton, 2007, p. 26). Individual literacy practices have been studied by researchers like Dagenais and Toohey (2006) who studied a multilingual student at school found that teacher's expectations of the child affected the success of a multilingual child acquiring literacy practices in the vernacular.

Bloome, Katz, Solsken, Willett, & Wilson-Keenan (2000) found that the two-way mirroring of literacy practices at home and school to be an important factor in creating a conducive environment for acquiring literacy practices. Their study documented and analysed low-income families' active engagement with storytelling and literacy practices at home and an initiative where parents were invited to be part of storytelling and literacy practices in the classrooms. This resulted in parents emulating school practices and schools embracing some of the literacy practices of students' homes.

A supportive home environment that is rich in literacy practices is regarded as an important factor in developing literacy skills (Heath, 1982; Bloome et al., 2000; Roberts, Jergens, & Burchinal, 2005; Ren and Hu, 2011). An inclusive school environment that considers student's home literacy practices is another factor that supports developing and maintaining literacy (Bloome et al., 2000; Schiffman, 2003; Dagenais & Toohey, 2006; Teo, 2008; Saravanan et al., 2009).

The emphasis in literacy studies has been on how home literacy practices influence and if they have a bearing on school literacy practices as well as how schools can create a positive learning environment beyond the teaching of reading and writing as a skill to embracing the various literacy practices that multilingual students bring to the classroom. However, factors that impact youth literacy once they have left the school system, especially in the case of a non-vernacular language of the society needs to be studied further.

The Tamil youth in Singapore for instance have been identified as increasingly shifting away from English despite having institutional support and resources in place to support the learning of Tamil (Gopinathan & Mani, 1983; Saravanan, 1995; Vaish, 2007; Kadakara, 2011; Gopinathan et al., 2019). While these studies have documented language shift at home, schools and the community, they have not studied the impact of how emergent (home) and school youth literacy practices influence Tamil youth in Singapore. Such a study can also provide a deeper insight to why the usage of Tamil is declining over the years (Rajeni, 2018)

LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF TAMIL IN SINGAPORE

During his 8th December 1959 speech, shortly after Singapore's independence, Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew, declared that the study of mother tongue is important to "keep (their) links with (their) cultural heritage" and mother tongue education should be placed in an equal position with English language (Lee,1959). Tamil being the language spoken by the majority of Indians in Singapore at 54%, (Department of Statistics, 2015) was selected as one of the four mother tongue languages to be taught in school as a part of the Bilingualism Policy (1966).

Despite having institutional support through the Bilingualism policy, the decline in Tamil usage seems counter-intuitive. Singapore's 2015 consensus reported that 29.2% of youth (aged 15 to 24) spoke Tamil at home while 56.2% of the same age group spoke English language at home (Department of Statistics, 2015, p. 20). This is largely indicative of subtractive bilingualism; an occurrence that takes place when an ethnolinguistic minority group give their own language less priority "to develop minimal competence in a national or prestigious international language" (Mani and Gopinathan,1983), in the community as early as 1983. This could be a result of unsupportive home and school literacy practices that contribute to the maintenance of Tamil. Literacy practices mould the depth of knowledge and proficiency one has of the language. Therefore, to understand the state of Tamil and the reason behind the decreasing proficiency of the language it is imperative to understand the factors that influence it at home, school and out-of-school.

The study aims to answer the following research questions:
   a. What are the emergent (home), school, and youth (out-of-school) literacy practices of Tamils in Singapore?
   b. Which of the factors of emergent (home) and/or school literacy practices that influence youth literacy practices?

METHODOLOGY

In order to understand how childhood literacy practices have affected the current literacy practices of the Tamil youth in Singapore, an interview was conducted in 2019, with ten Tamil youth who belong to Tamil speaking families. Participants were first selected through convenience sampling, also known as selecting people who are easily available and accessible (Salkind, 2012, p. 74). The selected youth were between 21 to 30 years old.

These interviewees were chosen from different walks of life. They were also selected from different religions given that religion was found to have played a role in supporting literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2005, Moore, 2012, Papen, 2018) albeit in English for Catholic children (Papen, 2018) and Arabic for Muslims (Moore, 2012) and Tamil in the case of Tamil children in religious classes in the UK (Lytra, Gregory, & Ilankuberan 2016).

A detailed description of the interviewees is provided in Appendix A. Pseudonyms that is representative of the interviewee's religion and gender have been assigned to each interviewee to ensure that the data remained confidential.

A set of ten open-ended interview questions were framed around the three stages: emergent, school and youth literacy practices. The questions were adapted from Barton's (2007) framework for studying literacy practices of individuals and communities. The questions are designed to let

the interviewees talk about their experiences openly without straying away from the aim of this study. Interviews were conducted in person, in English and the interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees at a place and time convenient for them. Follow up was done through text messages for further clarifications. (Refer to Appendix B for the interview questions.)

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This section presents the literature review from previous studies with findings of this study, based on the literacy practice of the youth at three stages: emergent, school and youth/out-of-school.

EMERGENT LITERACY PRACTICES

Barton (2007) states that childhood literacy development primarily needs the involvement of parents. For instance, during storytelling, the interaction between the child and the reader, through asking and answering questions, plays a salient role in developing the child's literacy level. This in turn affects how the child performs in school.

PARENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN CHILDHOOD LITERACY PRACTICES

The opportunities and materials that parents present to their children aid strongly in their literacy skills. According to Ren and Hu (2011), the social and human capital of the parents have a positive impact on the child. Early access to books and the instructions that parents give to their children is strongly co-related to the socioeconomic status of the parents (Mascarenhas, Moorakonda, Agarwal, Lim, Sensaki, Chong, & Daniel, 2016). This further supports the need to have parents or any other adult that guides a child with his/her second language acquisition. More than half of the interviewees in my study reported that their parents were actively involved in reading books to them.

> "They did read both English and Tamil books but those were just random titles they got from the library…I did remember reading about *Vikramaadityan*, *Akbar* and *Birbal*." (Rebecca)

As shown in the quote above, parents' involvement in introducing and nurturing Tamil literacy skills was palpable during the childhood stage. Similar findings were reported in another study conducted in Singapore, where Yeo et al., (2014) reported that active engagement with children was found to be an important factor for predicting the success of the children's acquisition of literacy.

Apart from storytelling, the parents were also involved in the children's learning of the language. The consistent support of parents is essential in developing the child's literacy (Ren & Hu, 2011). Heath (1982) had a similar finding, where she showed that greater involvement by parents enabled children to perform better at school. This was evident in the interviewees from my study, Anjali and Rebecca described how their mothers guided them though the learning of Tamil. The interviewees were able to associate the literacy skills learnt at home to their performance at school.

"I think they did play a good role cause even though we converse mostly in English, at least my mum got prioritize Tamil a fair bit la." (Anjali)

 "I would say home first, but school widened and broadened my foundation. So, it was the encouragement given by my teachers." (Waheeda)

"Cause I feel that if my mum didn't put in the effort to give me the foundation I would have struggled like my peers too." (Anjali)

Both Waheeda and Anjali were able to attest to the benefits parents' support and encouragement to be the reason that they performed well in school.

PARENTS' MINDSET AND CHILDHOOD LITERACY PRACTICES

Parents' positive mindset about storybook reading and related literacy practices is found to influence children's motivation to engage with text and affected home literacy practices (Saçkes, Işıtan, Avci, & Justice, 2016). Hence it is quite telling when participants were read English books first although their parents supported their Tamil learning during their childhood. This is reflected in their parent's attitudes towards learning Tamil.

"But my dad always used to tell … *speak to me in English, speak to your mum in Tamil*" (Radha)

"They were always speaking in Tamil; they did scold me when I did not reply in Tamil … because I needed to do well in school for Tamil…It was more of a requirement." (Rebecca)

"I think it's more of an obligation (learning Tamil) ah, not to affect my school results." (Mala)

As seen in the quotes above, the need to perform well in school as expressed by Radha, Rebecca and Mala affects parents' mindset towards Tamil learning. For instance, Kadakara's (2011) study of Tamil in family domain also emphasised that parents' impression in language learning affected the usage of the language. Kadakara found that Tamil and English-speaking parents mostly prioritised academic excellence above preserving their mother tongue when choosing to speak a language to their child. The findings were replicated in a study by Curdt-Christiansen (2016) which also shared of that parents had ambitions for their child to excel in their mother tongue while the linguistic practices at home, contradicted their goals. This displays the importance given to English which is the first language in schools.

Another example is that Naren talked about his mother bringing more English books such as Enid Blyton series than Tamil books. While on the surface, this may seem like parents do not prioritize Tamil as much as they do English, it is also possible that as Dixon, Zhao, Quiroz, & Shin (2012) found Tamil parents in Singapore do not have access to as many Tamil books and educational materials as they do English ones.

INVOLVEMENT IN RELIGIOUS EVENTS

The role which religion plays in developing literacy practices was also expressed by Waheeda during this study's interview.

> "But from the age of 6 I attended religious class (in Tamil) in the mosque, it did help me speak and read Tamil a bit more. Since the notes were in Tamil." (Waheeda)

Waheeda's statement shows that attending religious classes had impacted her emergent literacy practices in a positive way. The religious classes that were held twice weekly played an important role in shaping her Tamil as the language was inculcated in her on a regular basis with proper guidance.

The occurrence of literacy events at home is largely influenced by the parents' impression of the language, which is attributed by the role of the language such as economic use. Though Tamil takes a backseat in most households, compared to English language, parents who are motivated about academic excellence do take efforts to hone their children's literacy skills. In addition to that, religion has also played a part in introducing the language to the children.

SCHOOL LITERACY PRACTICES

Literacy taught at school is done with a routine that all students adhere to and teaching takes place according to students' abilities (Barton, 2007). The effect of literacy skills honed in school spills over to the youth literacy skills too, making school literacy a bridge connecting the home and youth literacy practices.

CLASSROOM PRACTICES

The type of lessons provided to a student heavily influences a child's education. In a child-centred pedagogy, students' interest is prioritised while maximising their potential which enhances learning and literacy level (Lim, 2010). The teaching methods used by the teacher affects the learning experience of the students, in turn affecting their interest in the language. Students found their primary school Tamil classes much more engaging than their secondary school or Junior College Tamil classes, as evidenced by the interviewees' quotations below.

> "Okay so in primary school right, the learning...the experience was more enriching. It was more like we look forward to going to Tamil class because it was more vibrant, more people." (Robin)

> "I think in terms of primary school it was more fun. The teachers were quite supportive." (Naren)

> "Secondary school, it was more individual. There weren't any group projects … in secondary school." (Robin)

The different impressions each education level had left on Robin and Naren show that teachers play a key role in shaping their students' interest in Tamil, and that Primary school teachers seem to make the classes more engaging which in turn encourages the students to perform better.

WASHBACK EFFECT: FOCUS ON EXAMS AND COMPLETION OF THE SYLLABUS

Students' expertise and background knowledge can be tapped on to make the lesson more meaningful as it allows students to "construct knowledge and produce discourses" (Teo, 2008, p. 413). Moreover, a study by Schiffman (2003) which analysed the decline in Tamil usage among

Singapore Tamils stated that students should be taught to appreciate the language by learning special features of the language.

But in the case of the participants in this study, their classrooms were affected by the washback effect, where "tests are held to be powerful determiners of what happens in classrooms" (Alderson & Wall, 1993, p. 115). Said (2019) too found that Tamil classrooms were focused on completing the syllabus and the lessons that were observed in his study, lacked the facilitation of thinking, usage of evaluation or critiquing skills. Gopinathan et al. (2019)
This sentiment was echoed by participants in the current study, as they felt that their secondary and JC Tamil teachers were focused on completing the syllabus and drilling them for good grades as they did not tap on the students' knowledge as shown in the quotes below.

> "In secondary school there was like, because like they assess teachers and their class performance, so my Tamil teacher … just wanted to hit the 100% distinction." (Radha)

> "I think JC was just purely doing well for A levels." (Waheeda)

But this was not the case in many other Tamil classrooms, as others like Prakash and Fabian had experienced teachers who were not focused on exams. Their teachers included interesting activities, which resulted in a positive experience. It is likely that both Prakash and Fabian benefited from the "more student-centred, lively and innovative instructional strategies are being utilised increasingly" (Gopinathan et al. 2019, p. 124) recently in the Tamil classrooms while many other Tamil classrooms were observed as being ones where "… there is still a lack of confidence in moving beyond textbooks and exploring radio, television and media-based resources" (Gopinathan et al. 2019, p. 123).

ADDITIONAL INITIATIVES IN SCHOOLS

Botzakis and Malloy's (2006) study on Singapore's education initiatives towards students' literacy practices revealed that initiatives like Strategies for Effective Engagement for Development of pupils (SEED) were implemented to gradually monitor a student's progress during their first two years of primary education. This largely helps in providing a good foundation for the development of student's literacy levels. Similarly, participants also mentioned other organisations that helped them hone their Tamil literacy skills during their school years, such as Nanyang Technological University's Tamil Literary Society (NTU TLS).

> "In University, I joined NTU TLS. So, I sort of like interacted with the students … they will share where the literature comes from, they will talk about movies" (Radha)

Joining Tamil related extra-curricular activities and competitions helped Radha improve her Tamil literacy skills.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL LANGUAGE

Barton (2007) states that school literacy is truly a success only if it complements the home literacy practices. A recent study on Tamil student's language use in Singapore recommends that pre-schools and day-care centres would benefit from the "involvement of adults as sources of language input in these centres (as it) 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"
(Said, 2019, p. 83)

Most interviewees in the current study were able to relate the Tamil they had learned in school to the Tamil they had acquired at home. Naren's experience shows how in some cases home and school experiences are inter-connected.

> "In compositions or oral I can relate whatever that happens at home (when my parents read to me and talk to me) and am able to articulate, express it in Tamil." (Naren)

Home literacy practices where parents emulated formal language taught in schools through reading supported school literacy practices of participants.

Not surprisingly, it was noted that three out of four interviewees found that the Tamil taught in schools to be more formal than the variety they spoke at home. These interviewees were from English speaking homes. One possible reason for this could be that the language variety used in school did not mirror the language used at home (Barton, 2007). This observation was echoed by Saravanan et al. (2009) who studied Tamil classrooms in Singapore and emphasised on the urgent need for teachers to shift from literary Tamil to standard spoken Tamil. This highlights not just the different variety in Tamil but also the need to adapt to a language form that is more comprehensive for the students. This also helps them connect the Tamil used at home and school.

> "So, it was kind of difficult to relate actually cause in school they really teach you much more Tamil like reading Tamil like that right. So, I can't relate it to what my mum speaks, or we speak at home and everything…she speaks in broken Tamil." (Robin)

> "My parents would relate it back from what we learnt from school la. But we don't really use (Tamil) a lot at home so I don't relate my home experiences to school." (Fabian)

Robin and Fabian had faced difficulties in the Tamil taught in school due to the lack of exposure to Tamil language at home and of the different varieties of Tamil. It is troubling that perhaps Robin's perception of his mother speaking 'broken Tamil' comes from his understanding that the variety of Tamil used in the Tamil classroom is the prestigious variety. Gopinathan et al. (2019) posit that the "positioning the mother tongues (in this case Tamil language) as heritage languages could have contributed to the bias towards privileging of the literary variety" (p. 122) in the community.

The importance of school literacy is evident from the responses of the study. School becomes a place where the language is learnt formally with step-by-step guidance, therefore, it is important for teachers and parents to work hand-in-hand to support a child's literacy development.

YOUTH LITERACY PRACTICES

Literacy helps with upward occupation mobility (Nordquist, 2017). The functional use of a language is prioritised to stay relevant and competent in the current world (Barton,2007). Therefore, the success of youth is strongly associated with effective childhood and school literacy practices.

LITERACY AND OCCUPATION

But for youth, functional literacy takes precedence. This is the literacy needed to cope in the everyday life. Karlsson (2009), found that the educational level of a worker, his/her occupation, and the level of literacy required to complete the required job were strongly related. This means that the literacy skills of a person built through his/her childhood will influence and perhaps limit their career choices. This was also the basis of argument in MacDougall and Foon's study (1976) that eloquence in English language was favoured in Singapore, as it allowed for occupational mobility. Except Waheeda, a trainee Tamil teacher, and Anjali, a Translator, who used Tamil widely due to their job's requirement, most participants of this study also expressed that they use English more at work as shown in the quotes below,

> "I think Tamil has little to no place in my sector. Unless you are working for a Tamil newspaper." (Mala)

> "Honestly, I feel right, in a corporate world I don't think Tamil language has a place. Because to be honest we all converse in English or Chinese." (Robin)

Like Mala and Robin, most of the participants had also conveyed that Tamil has stopped being of used in their working world. However, five of the interviewees rendered that their Tamil reading and writing skills were still the same level or needed a bit polishing. Three of the five interviewees expressed a decrease in their Tamil writing skills as compared to their reading skills.
> "Writing I think is more of a problem compared to reading." (Fabian)

> "Currently I don't have much practice in Tamil, but I think I can still pull off writing a bit but not perfectly… Reading I can still read perfectly cause I'm still speaking Tamil at home." (Naren)

Most of the interviewees, like Anjali and Sharan, attributed their current Tamil literacy skills to their home literacy practices rather than school literacy practices.

> "I feel that if my mum didn't put in the effort to give me the foundation, I would have struggled like my peers too." (Anjali)
> "I think home you didn't realise because every day you speak in Tamil, so you just carry on ah. I don't think school made a big impact on me." (Sharan).

INVOLVEMENT IN RELIGIOUS EVENTS

Similar to previous studies on the influence of religion on Tamil students' literacy practices (Lytra, et al. 2016, Saravanan, 1999), many participants continued to engage with literary texts in religious classes when they were older. For instance, Robin shared that,

> "The hymns are in Tamil. The hymns are all in old Tamil language. So you learn all the hymns there so that also a kind of reading…You learn a lot of new Tamil words there… So in that once every month I sing over there… there's a bit of literacy cause you are singing from the lyrics given to you. It's all in Tamil. Even the PowerPoint they play is in Tamil." (Robin)

Based on Robin's interview, it can be understood that religious activities helped him stay in touch with Tamil and gave him a chance to use Tamil beyond school, while strengthening his faith.

This has brought some improvement to his youth literacy practices. Though not everyone had the opportunity to hone their Tamil literacy skills through religious activities, the benefits one gets from participating in the religious events adds value to their literacy levels.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS TAMIL LITERACY PRACTICES

Perceptions about a language influence literacy practices and people's attitudes towards literacy. A study on the social identity on Tamil-English speakers in Singapore by Saravanan (1994), found that Tamils preferred speaking English as it was associated with socioeconomic elitism as opposed to Tamil. The participants of this study also expressed similar sentiments regarding the mindset towards Tamil.

> "Tamil is not considered an economically beneficial language … whether it's useful." (Radha)

> "We just have to ignore whatever people are saying about us speaking Tamil, either it can be not us being "atas" (high-brow) or…. just because we are speaking Tamil." (Prakash)

> "Learning Tamil is by compulsion; born into a Tamil family you will have to learn Tamil to communicate with them." (Mala)

Though not directly related to home and school literacy practices, Radha, Prakash and Mala's experiences and attitude about the lack of utilitarian benefits of learning Tamil has a direct bearing on their Tamil literacy practices.

CONCLUSION

The study found that in the case of Tamil youth in Singapore the factors that influenced their success in the development of literacy skills: parents' engagement with children through storytelling, creating a nurturing home environment where Tamil is spoken, parents' positive attitude towards learning Tamil, whether literacy practices at home mirrored school practices as well as engagement of the child in religious practices.

At school, the focus of the teachers in the class (exam-focused vs engaging lessons) and the inclusion of additional activities to engage learners in the language and culture were two factors that supported literacy practices in Tamil.

In relation to youth, to some extent their job scope and current environment determined if they used Tamil actively in their daily lives. But it was those who had a positive home environment who were more likely to continue to find ways to engage with the language. Their attitude towards Tamil was shaped by their parents' perception of Tamil. Their engagement with religion in fact continued to play a greater role in their desire to engage with literacy practices rather than the school environment.

In summation, the study found that literacy practices of youth are influenced by supportive factors in the home environment at the emergent literacy stage, continued engagement with religious literacy practices that were started at home and their current job more than school literacy practices.

Though this exploratory study is not a full representation of the Tamil youth population the findings of this paper will be of interest to researchers studying emergent literacy practices as it would be worthwhile to compare how emergent literacy practices at home contribute to youth literacy practices. The study also shows how Barton's ecological framework can be used as an additional lens to analyse and explain the factors that affect language use in a community.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEWEES

Interviewee 1: Anjali
Anjali, 28 years old, is from a Tamil Hindu family and speaks English at home. She has a positive attitude towards speaking in Tamil and is willing to use it whenever the need arises.
Family: Her father studied Malay as his second language in school but is able to speak fluent Tamil. Her mother has guided her in her Tamil learning. Tamil has been Anjali's strong subject in school.
Education: University graduate – Mass Communication
Out-of-School activities: At university, Anjali took a Tamil elective about translation which sparked her interest in Translation.
Current Job: Language specialist (Translator) for Tamil language and as part of her job she is required to read and write in Tamil.

Interviewee 2: Fabian
Fabian, 28 years old, is from a Tamil Christian family but the dominant language used at home is English. Fabian is eager to be involved in Tamil related events despite not having great proficiency in the language.
Family: Fabian speaks in Tamil to his grandmother when needed. On the other hand, his parents do not speak in Tamil to him or his siblings.
Education: University graduate – Engineering
Out-of-School activities: Though, Tamil was not his strong subject in school, Fabian was actively involved in his university's Tamil Language Society (TLS).
Current Job: After graduating from university, Fabian is now working as a research engineer.

Interviewee 3: Mala
Mala, 23 years old, is from a Tamil Hindu family that mainly converses in English language. Tamil has been Mala's strong suit even though she does not converse much in Tamil. Mala feels Tamil does not help one progress in their career, therefore, making it unnecessary to learn Tamil.
Family: Both her parents have been involved in her Tamil language learning since her childhood. Mala uses Tamil only with her grandmother, who calls her once a week.
Education: University graduate - Communications
Out-of-School activities: Not Applicable

Current Job: Reporter for an English news daily, here she requires a strong proficiency in English and the ability to be able to communicate in Mandarin.

Interviewee 4: Naren
Naren, 23 years old, comes from a Tamil Hindu family. Tamil has been Naren's strong subject in school. Naren has a lot of passion and interest towards the Tamil language.
Family: His mother has supported his Tamil learning since young through books and reading. His family converses in Tamil at home until today.
Out-of- School activities: Naren joined his University's Tamil Literary Society (TLS), therefore, involving in Tamil related events.
Education: Undergraduate - Physics
Current Job: Not applicable

Interviewee 5: Prakash
Prakash, 24 years old, belongs to Tamil Hindu family. Prakash is comfortable using Tamil if the situation calls for it. He is comfortable speaking in Tamil to his friends and colleagues.
Family: His parents have always spoke to him in Tamil, however, he often talks to them in English.
Out-of-school activities: Prakash used to be a member of his polytechnic's Indian Cultural Society (ICS).
Education: Undergraduate - Engineering
Current Job: Police officer and his job requires him to use Tamil at times.

Interviewee 6: Rebecca
Rebecca, 21 years old, is a from a Tamil Christian family. However, she speaks in English with her family and friends. Rebecca did well in Tamil language in school and went on to do higher Tamil during her secondary school days. She hardly talks in Tamil, currently.
Family: Rebecca's family mostly converses in English. They did support her Tamil learning during her childhood days.
Out-of-school activities: Not Applicable
Education: Currently a part-time Law student
Current Job: Paralegal. Her job does not require her to use Tamil.

Interviewee 7: Radha
Radha, 23 years old, comes from a Tamil Hindu family. Her family usually use English as their mode of communication. Radha is effectively bilingual in both English and Tamil. She is very interested to improve her proficiency and knowledge in Tamil.
Family: Both her parents did not learn Tamil in school therefore a lot of reading and writing of Tamil was taught to her by her elder sister. Her father has emphasized on acing English language in school as it provides more economic benefits.
Out-of-school activities: During her university days, Radha has been an active member of the Tamil Literary Society (TLS). She has gained knowledge about Tamil through the society and speaks to her friends in Tamil.
Education: University graduate – Sociology major
Current Job: Research Assistant. Radha does not need Tamil in her work.

Interviewee 8: Robin
Robin, 25 years old, belongs to a Tamil Christian family. However, English is the dominant language used in his home. Robin uses Tamil with his friends but does not seem to be interested to increase his proficiency in the language.
Family: His parents converse in English mostly, but his mother talks to him in Tamil, at times. Robin always communicates to his family in English.
Out-of-school activities: Going to a Tamil Church since young also helped Robin use Tamil beyond school and improved his literacy skills. Singing hymns in Tamil and reading the Bible in Tamil has kept him in touch with Tamil language.
Education: Undergraduate - Business
Current Job: Not Applicable

Interviewee 9: Sharan
Sharan, 27 years old, belongs to a Tamil Hindu family. He uses Tamil to communicate with his family members. He is not ashamed to use Tamil and thinks that Tamil language is still very widely used among his circle of friends and family.
Family: Sharan's mother is a Tamil teacher, therefore, she has always guided Sharan in his Tamil language learning. His mum also reads Tamil books during leisure time. So, his whole family uses Tamil widely.
Out-of-school activities: Sharan joined his University's Tamil Literary Society (TLS).
Education: Graduate - Engineering
Current Job: Engineer who does research and development in assistive technology. Sharan does not need him to be proficient in Tamil. In the event where Tamil is needed in his work, it is usually simple Tamil that can be Google Translated.

Interviewee 10: Waheeda
Waheeda, 25 years old, is from a Tamil Muslim family who have always encouraged her to speak and read in Tamil. Having a strong background in Tamil, Waheeda was able to excel in Tamil in school too. Waheeda also took Higher Tamil (H2 Tamil) in Junior College and went on to pursue a degree in Tamil language. She is very involved in Tamil literacy practices.
Family: Waheeda's family has always emphasized speaking in Tamil. They have supported her throughout her Tamil learning.
Out-of-school activities: Attending religious classes in the Mosque from the age of six has also impacted Waheeda's Tamil language skills positively. Waheeda was a member of her university's Tamil Language Club (TLC).
Education: Undergraduate - Tamil language
Current Job: Trainee Tamil teacher

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Emergent literacy
* Did your parents read to you when you were a child? If so, what were the books that they read? What were they?

- Did your parents encourage you to read and write in Tamil at home? How much Tamil was used in your home? Did this help you to become far more proficient in Tamil?
- What role did your parents play in supporting your literacy development in Tamil?

School literacy

- Could you describe your language learning experience in the Tamil language classroom?
- Could you describe your experience in the Tamil language classroom when tasked to write compositions, open-ended comprehension responses and complete the synthesis and transformation component.
- Could you describe your experience in the Tamil language classroom during reading lessons namely reading aloud, understanding comprehension passages and completing cloze passages?
- Did you face any difficulties in completing the reading and writing tasks, if any? What were they? How did you overcome it?
- Were you able to relate Tamil language that you were taught at school to the Tamil language that you acquired at home?
- What were the difficulties you faced in learning Tamil language in school and has that affected your language proficiency today?

Youth literacy

- How would you describe your current Tamil reading and writing skills?
- How much of home and school influence do you see in your current Tamil literacy skills today?
- Do you think Tamil language has a place in the working world? If so, how? (If not, does this demotivate you from using Tamil language widely?)
- What can be done to ensure that Tamil language proficiency of youth are still being practiced outside home or school or more widely?

These questions are adapted from David Barton's research as outlined in *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language* (Barton, 2007, pg. 141,157,185,191).