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Revitalizing Tamil Language Among Urban Youth in Chennai A Community-Based Digital Preservation Initiative

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ABSTRACT

This community service project addresses the declining proficiency in Tamil language among urban youth in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Despite Tamil being one of the world's oldest classical languages with rich literary heritage, younger generations increasingly favor English and Hindi in daily communication. This initiative implemented a six-month digital preservation program involving 150 youth participants aged 15-25 from three urban communities in Chennai. The program integrated mobile applications, social media campaigns, and interactive workshops to enhance Tamil language skills and cultural appreciation. Methods included collaborative learning sessions, digital storytelling, and intergenerational dialogue facilitated by community elders and language experts. Results demonstrated significant improvements in participants' Tamil reading comprehension (42% increase), writing skills (38% improvement), and cultural awareness (65% enhancement). The program successfully created sustainable community networks and digital resources for ongoing Tamil language preservation, providing a replicable model for linguistic revitalization in urban Indian contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Tamil, recognized as a classical language by UNESCO and the Government of India, represents one of humanity's oldest surviving languages with a continuous literary tradition spanning over 2,000 years (Krishnamurti, 2003; Steever, 2019). As the official language of Tamil Nadu and one of India's 22 scheduled languages, Tamil serves as the mother tongue for approximately 75 million speakers worldwide. However, contemporary sociolinguistic dynamics in urban centers like Chennai reveal concerning trends of language shift, particularly among younger generations who increasingly prioritize English and Hindi for educational, professional, and social advancement (Ramaswamy, 2021).

Chennai, the capital city of Tamil Nadu, exemplifies the complex linguistic landscape of modern India where traditional languages coexist with, and often compete against, dominant global languages. Urban youth face unprecedented pressure to acquire English proficiency for economic mobility, while simultaneously experiencing diminished opportunities for authentic Tamil language use in educational and professional contexts (Mohanty, 2019) and (Muhsyanur, 2023). This linguistic transition poses significant threats not only to Tamil language vitality but also to the transmission of cultural knowledge, traditional values, and community identity embedded within the language (Annamalai, 2018).

Research consistently demonstrates that language loss among youth populations occurs rapidly in urban environments where dominant languages pervade educational institutions, media consumption, and digital communication platforms (Fishman, 2001; Crystal, 2014). In Chennai's metropolitan context, English-medium schools have proliferated, while Tamil-medium institutions face declining enrollment and resource allocation. Consequently, many young people develop functional literacy in English while possessing only basic conversational skills in their heritage language, creating what scholars term "subtractive bilingualism" where second language acquisition occurs at the expense of first language maintenance (Cummins, 2017).

The implications of Tamil language decline extend beyond communication to encompass cultural continuity, cognitive development, and community cohesion. Scholars emphasize that heritage language maintenance contributes to enhanced cognitive flexibility, stronger cultural identity, and improved academic outcomes across multiple domains (Bialystok, 2018). Furthermore, language preservation serves as a vehicle for transmitting indigenous knowledge systems, traditional ecological wisdom, and cultural practices that have sustained Tamil communities for millennia (Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010).

Previous language revitalization efforts in Tamil Nadu have primarily focused on formal educational reforms, literary preservation, and political advocacy for Tamil language rights. While these institutional approaches remain important, they often fail to engage urban youth who increasingly inhabit digital spaces and seek interactive, technology-mediated learning experiences (García & Wei, 2020).

Contemporary language preservation initiatives must therefore adapt to the digital age, leveraging social media, mobile applications, and participatory technologies that resonate with young people's communication preferences and learning styles.

This community service project emerged from collaborative discussions between university researchers, community organizations, and Tamil language advocates who recognized the urgent need for innovative youth-centered interventions. The initiative aimed to develop sustainable, community-based mechanisms for Tamil language revitalization by combining digital technologies with traditional knowledge transmission, thereby creating meaningful connections between urban youth and their linguistic heritage while addressing contemporary challenges of language maintenance in rapidly globalizing contexts.

METHOD

This community-based participatory research project employed a mixed-methods approach integrating quantitative assessments and qualitative ethnographic techniques to implement and evaluate the Tamil language preservation initiative (Muhsyanur, 2024). The study received ethical approval from the University of Madras Institutional Review Board and obtained informed consent from all participants and guardians of minor participants. The intervention was conducted over six months from January to June 2024 across three urban neighborhoods in Chennai: T. Nagar, Adyar, and Anna Nagar, selected for their diverse socioeconomic compositions and varying degrees of Tamil language use among youth populations.

Participant recruitment utilized purposive sampling through community centers, schools, and local organizations, ultimately enrolling 150 youth aged 15-25 years (mean age = 19.3, SD = 2.8; 58% female, 42% male). Inclusion criteria required participants to have Tamil-speaking parents or grandparents, reside in Chennai for at least five years, and demonstrate willingness to commit to the six-month program duration. Baseline assessments measured Tamil language proficiency using standardized tests adapted from the Tamil Nadu State Board curriculum, evaluating reading comprehension, writing skills, speaking fluency, and cultural knowledge across four proficiency levels (Subrahmanian, 2020). Additional surveys assessed language attitudes, daily language use patterns, and cultural identity using validated Likert-scale instruments (Padilla & Borsato, 2008).

The intervention comprised three integrated components designed collaboratively with community stakeholders and informed by contemporary theories of language revitalization and youth engagement (Hinton et al., 2018). First, digital learning modules utilized a custom-developed mobile application featuring interactive Tamil lessons, vocabulary building exercises, and gamified cultural content delivered through micro-learning formats optimized for youth attention patterns. Second, community workshops convened bi-weekly, facilitating intergenerational dialogue between youth participants and Tamil language experts, traditional storytellers, and community elders who shared oral histories, classical

literature, and cultural practices through participatory activities. Third, social media campaigns encouraged participants to create Tamil-language content including short videos, digital stories, poetry, and artwork shared across Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp, fostering peer-to-peer learning and community visibility for Tamil language use.

Data collection occurred at baseline, midpoint (three months), and endpoint (six months) through comprehensive assessments including standardized language proficiency tests, semi-structured interviews with 30 randomly selected participants exploring their language learning experiences and attitude changes, focus group discussions with community stakeholders evaluating program implementation, and analysis of digital content created by participants measuring quantity, quality, and engagement metrics (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Quantitative data were analyzed using paired-samples t-tests and repeated-measures ANOVA to assess changes in language proficiency scores over time, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework to identify patterns in participants' experiences, motivations, and perceived outcomes. The mixed-methods integration employed convergent parallel design, allowing quantitative and qualitative findings to mutually inform interpretation and provide comprehensive understanding of the intervention's effectiveness and mechanisms of impact.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Enhanced Tamil Language Proficiency Among Youth Participants

The intervention demonstrated significant improvements in Tamil language proficiency across multiple domains among participating urban youth. Statistical analysis of pre-test and post-test assessments revealed substantial gains in reading comprehension ($M_{pre} = 58.3$, $SD = 12.4$; $M_{post} = 82.7$, $SD = 9.6$; $t(149) = 18.45$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.24$), writing skills ($M_{pre} = 52.1$, $SD = 14.2$; $M_{post} = 71.9$, $SD = 11.3$; $t(149) = 13.87$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.56$), speaking fluency ($M_{pre} = 64.5$, $SD = 11.8$; $M_{post} = 79.3$, $SD = 10.2$; $t(149) = 11.23$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.34$), and cultural knowledge ($M_{pre} = 48.7$, $SD = 15.3$; $M_{post} = 80.4$, $SD = 12.1$; $t(149) = 19.67$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.28$). These effect sizes indicate substantial practical significance, suggesting the intervention effectively addressed multiple dimensions of language competency rather than isolated skills.

Qualitative analysis of participant interviews revealed that digital learning platforms particularly resonated with youth preferences for self-paced, interactive content. One 18-year-old participant explained, "The app made learning Tamil fun because I could compete with my friends and see my progress. It didn't feel like studying; it felt like playing games while learning my language." This sentiment aligns with García and Wei's (2020) and (Muhsyanur et al., 2022) translanguaging theory, which posits that effective language learning occurs when pedagogical approaches align with learners' natural communication practices and technological fluency. The gamification elements embedded in the mobile application leveraged

intrinsic motivation through achievement badges, progress tracking, and social comparison features that transformed language learning from obligatory task to engaging activity.

The intergenerational workshop component proved particularly valuable for developing cultural literacy and authentic language use contexts (Muhsyanur, Manivannan Murugesan, 2024). Participants reported that interactions with community elders provided meaningful exposure to formal Tamil registers, classical literature, and traditional knowledge systems rarely encountered in everyday urban environments. According to Fishman's (2001) Reversing Language Shift framework, intergenerational transmission represents the most critical mechanism for language vitality, as it ensures continuity of linguistic and cultural knowledge across generational cohorts. The workshops created structured opportunities for such transmission while simultaneously validating the knowledge and experiences of elder community members, strengthening social bonds and community cohesion.

Social media content creation emerged as an unexpectedly powerful driver of language learning and identity development. Participants produced over 450 Tamil-language posts across platforms, collectively reaching approximately 12,000 viewers and generating 8,500 engagements (likes, comments, shares). This digital visibility normalized Tamil language use among peer networks and challenged prevailing linguistic hierarchies that typically privilege English in online spaces. As Canagarajah (2013) argues, digital communication platforms enable youth to negotiate complex multilingual identities and resist dominant language ideologies through creative translingual practices that assert the legitimacy and relevance of heritage languages in contemporary contexts.

Transformation of Language Attitudes and Cultural Identity

Beyond measurable proficiency gains, the intervention catalyzed significant shifts in participants' attitudes toward Tamil language and their cultural identity as Tamil speakers. Pre-intervention surveys revealed that 67% of participants viewed Tamil primarily as a language for home and family communication, with limited relevance to professional aspirations or modern life. Post-intervention assessments showed dramatic attitudinal changes, with 89% of participants expressing pride in Tamil language, 82% recognizing its value for career development in fields like media, translation, and cultural heritage management, and 76% intending to transmit Tamil to their future children.

These attitudinal transformations reflect what Lambert (1974) termed "additive bilingualism," wherein second language acquisition enhances rather than diminishes first language valuation. Participants increasingly recognized that Tamil proficiency complemented rather than competed with English skills, enabling them to access wider cultural and professional opportunities. One 22-year-old university student stated, "I used to think Tamil was old-fashioned and English was modern. Now I understand that knowing both languages makes me more versatile and connected to my heritage while succeeding in global contexts."

The intervention's emphasis on contemporary Tamil language applications proved crucial for reshaping youth perceptions. Workshop sessions featuring Tamil language professionals working in technology, film, journalism, and international organizations challenged prevailing assumptions that Tamil proficiency lacks economic value. As May (2012) argues, language revitalization initiatives must address not only linguistic competency but also the socioeconomic structures and ideologies that marginalize minority languages, demonstrating tangible benefits of heritage language maintenance for individual advancement and community development.

Cultural identity development emerged as a central outcome, with participants reporting enhanced sense of belonging, connection to Tamil heritage, and pride in regional identity. The Tamil Language Attitude Scale administered at baseline and endpoint showed significant increases across all dimensions: cultural pride ($M_{pre} = 3.2$, $M_{post} = 4.6$, $p < .001$), language loyalty ($M_{pre} = 2.9$, $M_{post} = 4.3$, $p < .001$), and behavioral intentions to use Tamil ($M_{pre} = 3.1$, $M_{post} = 4.5$, $p < .001$), measured on 5-point Likert scales. These findings align with research demonstrating strong positive correlations between heritage language maintenance and ethnic identity consolidation among diaspora and minority youth populations (Phinney et al., 2001).

Attitude Dimension	Pre-Intervention Mean (SD)	Post-Intervention Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value	Effect Size (d)
Cultural Pride	3.2 (0.8)	4.6 (0.5)	16.82	<.001	2.08
Language Loyalty	2.9 (0.9)	4.3 (0.6)	14.33	<.001	1.83
Behavioral Intentions	3.1 (0.7)	4.5 (0.5)	18.24	<.001	2.29
Perceived Utility	2.7 (0.8)	4.2 (0.6)	17.45	<.001	2.14
Intergenerational Value	3.4 (0.7)	4.7 (0.4)	19.86	<.001	2.31

Table 1. Changes in Tamil Language Attitudes (N=150)

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Participants also demonstrated increased critical awareness of language politics and linguistic discrimination. Focus group discussions revealed sophisticated understanding of how language hierarchies marginalize Tamil in institutional contexts and perpetuate social inequalities. This critical consciousness, which Freire (1970) identifies as essential for transformative education, empowered participants

to advocate for Tamil language rights in educational institutions, workplaces, and public spaces, extending the intervention's impact beyond individual proficiency to collective linguistic activism.

Sustainable Community Networks and Digital Resources

A primary objective of this initiative involved establishing sustainable mechanisms for ongoing Tamil language preservation beyond the formal intervention period. The project successfully created self-sustaining community networks including three neighborhood-based Tamil language clubs with regular meeting schedules, designated coordinators, and activity plans developed collaboratively by youth participants. These clubs continue to organize weekly conversations practice, monthly cultural events, and collaborative projects that maintain momentum generated during the intervention phase.

Digital resources developed through the project remain accessible to broader communities, with the mobile application downloaded over 3,000 times beyond initial participants and social media accounts attracting 5,500 followers who engage with Tamil language content regularly. This digital infrastructure provides ongoing support for informal language learning and creates visible representation of Tamil language vitality in online spaces. As Warschauer and Grimes (2007) argue, digital technologies can democratize language revitalization by enabling community-based content creation and distribution that bypass traditional gatekeepers and reach geographically dispersed populations.

The intergenerational networks established through workshop sessions evolved into lasting relationships between youth participants and elder community members. Several participants initiated independent oral history projects documenting elders' life experiences, traditional knowledge, and linguistic practices, creating valuable archival materials while strengthening intergenerational bonds. These initiatives exemplify what Hornberger and King (2001) term "implemented language planning," wherein grassroots community actions complement institutional policies to create robust ecosystems supporting language maintenance.

Sustainability emerged as a key consideration throughout project design and implementation. The intervention prioritized building local capacity rather than creating dependency on external experts or resources. Training modules equipped youth leaders with skills to facilitate language learning activities, moderate online communities, and organize cultural events, ensuring program continuity beyond formal research timelines. This capacity-building approach aligns with Fishman's (2001) emphasis on intergenerational intimacy and autonomous community-based language use as fundamental prerequisites for reversing language shift, recognizing that external interventions can catalyze but cannot substitute for community-driven language maintenance efforts.

CONCLUSION

This community-based Tamil language preservation initiative demonstrates the effectiveness of integrated approaches combining digital technologies, intergenerational dialogue, and youth-centered pedagogies for revitalizing heritage languages in urban contexts. Significant improvements in Tamil language proficiency, transformation of language attitudes, and establishment of sustainable community networks indicate that carefully designed interventions can successfully engage urban youth with their linguistic heritage while addressing contemporary challenges of language maintenance. The project provides a replicable model adaptable to other linguistic communities facing similar pressures of language shift, offering practical strategies for leveraging digital platforms, fostering intergenerational knowledge transmission, and cultivating youth leadership in language revitalization. Future research should examine long-term maintenance of language gains, expansion strategies for reaching larger populations, and integration of such community-based initiatives with institutional language policies to create comprehensive ecosystems supporting linguistic diversity in India's rapidly urbanizing landscape.

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