The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching: Implications for the Teaching of Tamil

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This paper is an essay into the future - what should be and, to a very much lesser extent, what it is. The ambiguity contained in the second half of the title is a pointer to this. Is one to consider the relevance of the communicative approach to the teaching of Tamil as a native or first language, as a second, third or foreign language? Within the education system it is easy to cite examples of the different contexts in which Tamil is taught and learned.

A definition of terms is a prerequisite to a clear understanding of the discussion. An approach - any approach is viewed as a set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of language and the nature of language teaching and learning. Further, an approach states a point of view, a philosophy, an article of faith   something which one believes but cannot necessarily prove (Anthony, 1971·93-97). In Professor Anthony's view a *method* is procedural and is derived from the linguistic assumptions of the approach He defines a *technique* as being implementational - that which actually takes place in the classroom - a particular trick or stratagem used in the classroom to achieve an immediate objective

A call for the use of an alternative approach for the teaching and learning of Tamil in the Malaysian context implies that there is something amiss with the present approach, methdology and techniques Is it possible to discern or perceive an approach and related methodology in the teaching of the Tamil language in this country?

Stern (1970:78) compares 'the fascinating parade of methods, reforms and revolutions' in the history of foreign language teaching to 'the rise and fall of hemlines in the fashion journals' The changes in approach and methods have been brought about by a number of factors The first of these is the shift of objectives. Next is the dissatisfaction of teachers with the results obtained through current methods The last is said to be the constant desire of teachers to improve their language teaching through experimentation with new classroom practices One hopes that this holds true for the fraternity of Tamil language teachers

A cursory look at the history of language teaching shows the emergence of a regular parttern - that of the swing of the pendulum.

> If we now glance back to the development of language teaching method, we see that it first swings from the active oral use of Latin in Ancient and Medieval times to the learning by rule of the Renaissance grammars back to oral activity with Comenius, back to grammar with Plotz and back again to the primacy of speech in the Direct Method. (Mackey, 1965.157).

From the above quote it is possible to extrapolate that teaching methods can be divided into two major groups 'according to the attitude they represent toward teaching by rules or teaching by oral activity' Firstly if in the teaching process emphasis is placed on rules, the underlying theory can be

assumed to be *mentalistic*. This approach reflects the view that language use and language learning are largely mental activities involving the ability to reason and to apply rules. The second group includes methods which attempt to teach language mainly through active oral practice. The methods in this group are based on the assumption that language is essentially a physical activity which - as with many other skills has to be acquired by imitative and repetitive practice. Such a theory is termed *mechanistic*

Is it possible to perceive a similar pattern in the history of Tamil language teaching? Tamil is said to be rich in literary and grammatical traditions (Agesthialingom, 1967:VI). The earliest extant Tamil work *Tolkaupiyam* is a grammatical treatise which is considered to have been written before the beginning of the Christian era (Meenakshisundaran, 1965.51). The works of latter day scholars like Beschi, Pope, Arden lend credence to the importance of grammar in the teaching and learning of Tamil. A more recent work *A Descriptive Analysis of a Dialect of Tamil* by Subramoniam (1957) is considered to be the first descriptive grammar of spoken Tamil making use of modern structural methodology Prof. Agesthialingom's *A Generative Grammar of Tamil* is, on the other hand, seen as a first attempt to write a generative grammar for Tamil using transformational methodology (Agesthialingom, 1967·p x).

The vast array of grammatical treatises is evidence of the importance accorded to grammar Faced with the paucity of literature on methodology one is forced to conclude that learning by the application of rules must have been the major means of teaching the language. There is evidence enough that textbook writers in this country have followed this noble tradition faithfully

An exception to this tradition of rule giving are the materials developed for the teaching of Tamil as a second language. The first mention of a method is to be seen in Subramoniam's introduction to his book, *Tamil-An Intensive Course* (1973). In his introduction to the course he refers to the 'cognate method' as being principally useful in selecting words, phrases, and sentence frames for lessons To a limited extent this method can also be used in explaining difficult vocabulary items on points of grammar (Subramoniam, 1973:p. x). Following the structuralist tradition of the times, his lessons are made up mainly of pattern practice followed by notes on grammatical points

Except for the notes on grammar this course is an exemplification of the mechanistic approach. Dr Rama Subbiah's *An Introduction to Written Tamil* (1966) does not seem to follow the tradition of the times - structuralism. It is unmistakably grammar-based from start to finish. Latest in the line of materials designed to teach Tamil as a second language is *Conversational Tamil* by N Kumaraswami Raja and K. Doraswamy (1981). Needless to say these materials are based on the audio-lingual approach. and pattern practice in the form of variation drills seems to be the central core of the materials, with grammar rules given at the end.

The above survey, though cursory, shows the emergence of a methodology for the teaching of Tamil, be it by rule giving or pattern practice In the face of this, is there a need for an alternative approach for the teaching of the language? If so, what are the benefits to be derived by following such an approach? Both the above approaches, learning the language through the acquisition of rules and learning the language as a set of habits or patterns have

had their fair share of criticism. The quote below is one example of the criticism levelled at grammar teaching

'Though sentences are made up of discrete units only a fool would dream of teaching the units of language one by one. No mother ever tried it that way with her chidren so why try it in the classroom?' (Kelly, 1969:40). No one would argue that a 'knowledge' of grammar is unimportant for learning a language Even as early as the seventeenth century Comenius pointed out the importance of grammar for learning a language.

'All languages are easier to learn by practice than from rules. But rules assist and strengthen the knowledge derived from practice' (Stern, 1983:78). Even in the communicative approach to language teaching the role of grammar is acknowledged as seen in this quote from Keith Morrow. 'Communicating involves using appropriate forms in appropriate ways. The acquisition of forms is therefore very important' (Johnson & Morrow, 1981:65). Widdowson (1978) is of the opinion that the ability to produce sentences is a crucial one in the learning of a language. He stresses that it is not the only ability that learners need to acquire. Someone knowing a language knows more than how to understand, speak, read and write sentences. He also knows how sentences are used to achieve a communicative effect or purpose.' (Widdowson, 1978:2).

It cannot be denied that the learning of a language involves acquiring the ability to compose correct sentences. This is only one aspect of the matter The more important aspect involves acquiring an understanding of which sentences or parts of sentences are appropriate in a particular context. Using our knowledge of the language system of Tamil we can produce strings of sentences unrelated to context, as in the following examples.

malai payirkalai nācamākkiyatu
pūṇai pāyiṇmēl uṭkārntatu
pāvam rāmu ōṭi vittāṇ
vēlu cītavai kātalikkirāṇ
eṇ naṇparkaḷ celvantarkaḷ

These can be taken to be instances of correct Tamil *usage*. In our daily lives we are not called upon simply to manifest our knowledge in this way. We have to use our knowledge of the language system to achieve some kind of communicative purpose. We are generally called upon to produce instances of language *use*, we do not simply manifest the abstract system of the language, we at the same time realize it as meaningful communicative behaviour (Widdowson, 1978:3). Widdowson states usage as being related to Chomsky's concept of competence - which has to do with the language user's knowledge of abstract linguistic rules. This knowledge has to be put into effect as behaviour, it has to be revealed through performance or use. Usage is one aspect of performance, the aspect which makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his knowledge of linguistic rules. Use is considered to be another aspect of performance: that which makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his ability to use his knowledge of linguistic rules for effective communication

In the light of the above discussion, teaching the language through the giving of rules and pattern practice or a combination of both may be viewed as teaching usage rather than use to achieve a communicative purpose. The published materials for the teaching of Tamil as a second language make this

clear A good example is the following exercise from *Tamil. An Intensive Course* (Subramoniam, 1973 1)

Lesson 1. Exercise 1

	puttakam
	peena
	pencil
itu	mecai
	naarkali
	Keeralam
	Cennai

This is an attempt to teach a basic linguistic rule in the language through pattern practice. Consider the occasions in life in which a learner would need to produce an utterance of this nature outside the classroom. One does not need to identify things and objects which are common knowledge to people in the community An utterance such as *itu Keeralam* could serve a communicative purpose or serve as an occasion for *use* only in a context where one was showing someone else, possibly a child, the location of Keeralam on a map of India.

As a further example of teaching usage let us consider the following variation drill from *Conversational Tamil* (N. Kumaraswami Raja and K. Doraswamy, 1981).

ayyā vīttil irukkirārā?
ayyā enkē irukkirār?
ayyā inkē irukkirār?
ayyā inkē irukkirārā?

rājā inkē irukkirārā?
rājā enkē irukkirār?
unkal manaivi enkē irukkirārkal?
en manaivi enkē irukkiral?

The learner of the language may be able to produce well-formed sentences such as these. But does he have the knowledge as to the appropriate use of these, especially the last two questions? A question based on this pattern can function appropriately as an instance of *use* if the situation is such that in producing such a sentence the speaker is at the same time performing an act of communication like asking for information or giving information that the other person does not have.

If there is a compelling need to opt for the communicative approach in the teaching of Tamil as a first or second language then the question arises as to which areas of use would appear to be the most suitable for each situation. This could best be done through a needs analysis which provides a profile of language use in the different domains - family, neighbourhood, school, work, politics. The needs profile would be an inventory of language use or functions which the language fulfills in everyday life One could order these

functions in terms of Halliday's categories:

1. Instrumental function - language allows speakers to get things done, ask for things, cause things to be done through use of language.
2 Regulatory function - language used to control events once they happen.
3. Representational function - communicate knowledge about the world, explain relationships, relay messages.
4 Interactional function - language used to ensure social maintenance.
5 Personal function - express individual's personality - express feelings.
6 Heuristic function - language used as an instrument itself in order to acquire knowledge and understanding.
7 Imaginative function - used to create imaginary systems - literary works, philosophical systems.

What is the relevance of all this for the methodology of teaching the language and making it 'truly communicative'. Broadly speaking, mechanical language learning exercises such as pattern practice, substitution tables, and oral drills need to be avoided. In the language classroom the learner should be presented with a series of task or problem solving activities which involve genuine information gaps. Language development should be directly related to these tasks, with the learner acquiring only that language needed to carry them out. The level of difficulty of the task will indicate the level of the language. The nature of the tasks should be practical so that the learners are able to see the relevance of language learning to life.

The new Tamil Language syllabus for primary schools claims to be skill-based, designed to teach pupils the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (*Sukatan Pelajaran Sekolah Rendah Bahasa Tamil* (1983):viii). It cannot be denied that the syllabus is partly functional and partly grammar-based What is sadly lacking is a link between the functional elements and the formal or grammatical elements. It is left to the ingenuity of the classroom teacher to pick the formal elements which are needed to realise the stated functions A form-function link would be invaluable to the teacher striving to teach *use* and appropriateness. This would enable the learner to acquire the sociolinguistic competence needed for performance in life.

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