

Motivation in Learning Tamil as a Foreign Language: A Case Study at UPSI

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Abstract

The importance of foreign language competence among students increasingly becomes the focus of the community. The School of Education, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, foreign language classes compulsory for all students. However, not much empirical evidence to explain the real factors of a student registering for Foreign Language (Tamil) classes. Hence, this study was undertaken to determine the motivating factors that encourage school students enrolled for the subject Foreign Language Tamil. There are two sub-studies. The study I conducted on 96 students found that one-third (32%) of the respondents said that students will not be enrolled Tamil class subject if the subject is not required. Meanwhile, a second study conducted on 87 students found the main motivating factor is the ability to communicate respondents want to use Tamil. Overall, the level of students' motivation to learn a foreign language Tamil class was at a moderate level. The findings of this study imply that the element of motivation should be given attention so that students can learn foreign languages effectively.

Keywords: Motivation, Foreign Language, Tamil

Background of Study

Although Tamil is offered as a foreign language in several Malaysian universities, limited empirical research has examined students' underlying motivation to enroll in Tamil classes. Past studies (Ainol Madziah et al., 2007; Ying Zheng, 2008) have addressed effectiveness of foreign language programs and anxiety in language learning, but few have focused specifically on Tamil in the Malaysian higher education context. This gap highlights the importance of investigating motivational factors—both intrinsic (e.g., interest, self-development) and extrinsic (e.g., career prospects, academic requirements)—that shape students' decisions.

Foreign language proficiency among students regardless of school or in higher education institute gaining attention (Christian & Rhodes, 2005). It is seen by the Malaysian Educational

Blueprint to encourage students in Malaysia to learn additional languages other than their mother tongue (Ministry of Education, 2013). In line with this objective, the ministry actively been increasing the number of teachers who teach Mandarin, Tamil and Arabic (Ministry of Education, 2013). According to the National Higher Education Strategic Plan Beyond 2020, skills in foreign languages are important for developing the nation towards k-economy and move them to be a better competitor internationally.

In Malaysia, institutions of higher learning such as Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia and Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris offer Tamil classes to their students (Ainol Madziah, Isarji & Mohamad Sahari, 2007). Class is conducted either elective or as the subject of public universities. Leaders of academic institutions stressed the need to promote foreign language skills between learners (Ainol et al., 2007). Despite implementation of learning and teaching Tamil at either the school or institution of higher learning in the context of Education has implemented over a long time. However, there is a lack of empirical research student learning documentation.

In learning a foreign language such as Tamil, of course there are different admission of students. Among the challenges is such anxiety (Hu & Wang, 2014). Anxiety is caused because they are too focused on accuracy and fluency in speech so much that their confidence level to master a foreign language was dropped. Furthermore, there are students who are shy to make a mistake in using a foreign language is learned. Anxiety has become one of the main variables in determining the success of second language and foreign language teaching among all the learning disabilities (Yin Zheng, 2008)

There are many factors that can be attributed in learning a foreign language such as Tamil. These factors can generally be divided into two main factors, namely intrinsic factors (eg: satisfaction, self-development, etc.) as well as extrinsic factors (eg, career, exam grades, salary etc.). The School of Education, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, foreign language classes compulsory for all students. However, not much empirical evidence to explain the real factors of a student registering for classes Foreign Language (Tamil). Thus, a study should be done to get a real image of the students' motivation in learning Tamil classes.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both educational practice and policy. By identifying the motivational drivers of students, the findings can help lecturers adopt more engaging teaching strategies, while also guiding universities in designing curricular that align with students' needs and aspirations. Furthermore, the study enriches existing literature on additional language learning in Malaysia by focusing specifically on Tamil, a less-studied but culturally significant language.

This study contributes to the growing field of foreign language motivation by offering empirical insights into why Malaysian undergraduates choose to learn Tamil. Unlike previous studies that examined foreign language programs in general (Ainol Madziah et al., 2007), this research highlights the unique sociocultural and communicative reasons behind Tamil language learning. The contribution of this study is twofold: (i) it documents students'

willingness to study Tamil beyond institutional requirements, and (ii) it explores how intrinsic and extrinsic motivations interact in shaping their learning behavior.

Research Gap

Previous studies on Tamil language learning have largely examined general linguistic, cultural, or pedagogical aspects, with limited emphasis on the motivational factors influencing learners' engagement and achievement. While motivation has been extensively explored in relation to major world languages such as English, Mandarin, and Spanish, there remains a lack of empirical research addressing how motivational constructs—both intrinsic and extrinsic—affect the learning of Tamil as an additional or foreign language. Furthermore, studies exploring the interplay between learners' motivation and affective factors such as anxiety or attitude toward Tamil are scarce, particularly within Asian educational contexts. This gap underscores the need for further investigation into the motivational dynamics that drive learners' interest and persistence in learning Tamil.

Research Objectives

This article will cover the two studies. Study I was carried out to identify their willingness to enrol Foreign Language Class should if it's not the requirement of university. Meanwhile, Study II are carried out to examine at the motivation of the respondents in the study of a foreign language (Tamil).

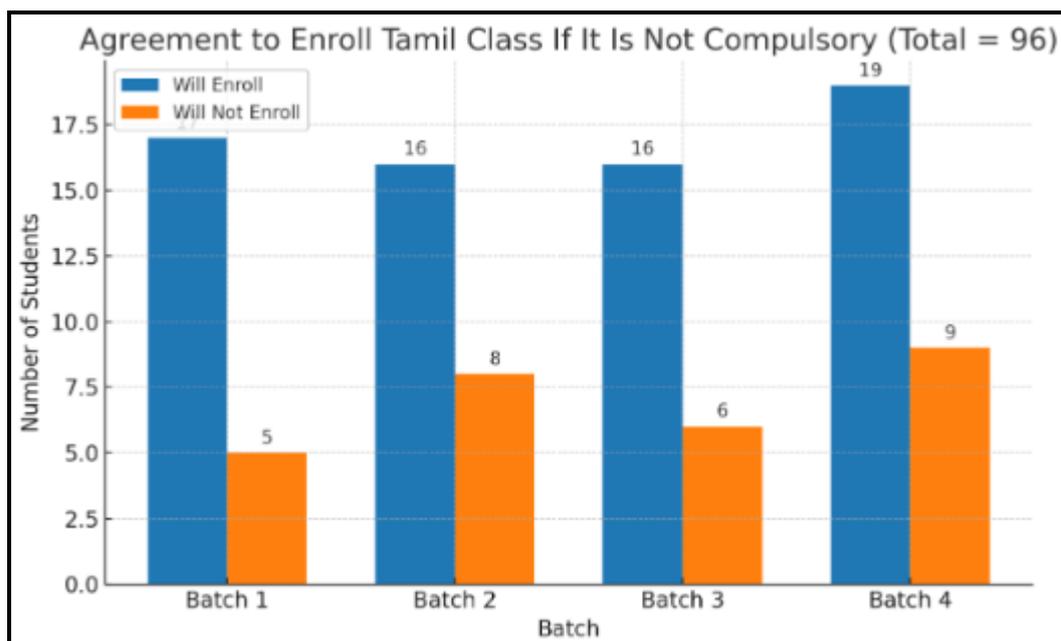
Methodology

Study I comprised 96 participants, representing four distinct batches from various academic departments. Meanwhile, 87 people were randomly selected sample of students involved in Study I. In Study II, the participants were asked to answer a questionnaire related to the motivation to learn a foreign language (Tamil) consisting of 7 items. The scale of these items is a 4-point likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Agree 4 = Strongly Agree). For Study I, the student response is calculated based on the frequency and percent while for Study II, the level of motivation for each item based on the mean value. Level min classified as follows; 1:00 to 2:33 (low level); 2.34-3.67 (moderate); 3.68-5.00 (high level).

Result

Study I

According to the chart above, 17 students (77.3%) from Batch 1 (2021) expressed their willingness to enroll in Tamil classes, while 5 students (22.7%) stated they would not if the subject were not compulsory. In Batch 2 (2022), 16 students (66.7%) indicated their intention to enroll, whereas 8 students (33.3%) would not. For Batch 3 (2023), 16 students (72.7%) were willing to enroll, while 6 students (27.3%) were not. Finally, in Batch 4 (2024), 19 students (67.9%) reported their willingness to enroll, compared to 9 students (32.1%) who would not. Overall, 68 students (70.8%) were willing to enroll in Tamil classes, while 28 students (29.2%) were not.



Study II

The descriptive analysis of items for Study II found that there are three items had a mean height (item M1, M4 and M5), and 4 had a mean value of simple items (items M2, M3, M6 and M7). Specifically, the main motivating factors of students enrolled in Tamil classes is due to their interest to speak Tamil, wants to communicate with a Indian friend and also because they feel they need to learn additional languages. The items which recorded a mean of simple describe other motivating factors that encourage students to register for classes in Tamil is due to work requirements, the suggestion of lecturer and a friend factor.

Table 1

Item Analysis on Motivation towards Additional Language

Code	Item	Mean [Level]
M1	I am learning Tamil to communicate with Indian friends	3.10 [high]
M2	Some of the job need Tamil Language	2.85 [moderate]
M3	I enrolled Tamil because it's compulsory subject in UPSI	2.72 [moderate]
M4	I need to learn an extra language (Tamil)	3.09 [high]
M5	I want to speak Tamil	3.14 [high]
M6	My lecturer suggest to enrol Tamil course	2.74 [moderate]
M7	All of my friends enrolling Tamil course	2.89 [moderate]

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the findings from Study I and Study II, concluded the motivation of students to enrol for the subject of Additional Language (Tamil) is moderate. This is evidenced by Study I show that one-third of 30% of the respondents would not register Tamil classes if the subject is not required by the university or faculty.

Specifically, the findings of the Study II showed the motivation that drives people to attend Tamil classes is because of their desire to speak Tamil and want to communicate with Indian friends. This may be due to the sensitivity of the respondents that the process of communication with Indian students or friends will be more smoothly if they dominate

Indian. Desire respondents who want to speak Tamil is also due to Indian control to their advantage in certain situations such as purchase and selling situation with Indian trader.

In addition, the mean value of the work is not recorded motivation. This is because the respondents are students pursuing Bachelor of Education specializing different Programe. Hence, the importance of mastering Tamil to be applied in the context of a real career as a teacher later is not so significant to this respondent group.

Motivating factor in learning can be classified into intrinsic and extrinsic (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Both these factors are important and have a unique role. Past studies proved that the intrinsic motivation to help students to meet the challenges of learning better (Walker, Greene, & Mansell, 2006), and factors extrinsic motivation makes one student remains perform learning activities should be rewarded (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Vansteenkiste Lens, & Deci, 2006).

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