

# Challenges in the Teaching and Learning of Tamil Literature at the Secondary School Level and Strategies for Improvement

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## Abstract

Tamil literature is an important cultural heritage of the Tamil community and plays a key role in shaping identity, moral values and critical thought among young learners. In Malaysian secondary schools, Tamil literature introduces students to literary works with aesthetic and educational value. However, its teaching and learning continue to face several challenges, including students' low interest, difficulty understanding classical Tamil, teacher-centred instruction, limited creative teaching aids and insufficient literary activities beyond the classroom. This compact paper identifies the major challenges in the teaching and learning of Tamil literature and proposes improvement strategies through the Tamil Literature Pedagogical Transformation (TPKT) Model. The model, grounded in constructivist theory, emphasises multimedia integration, student autonomy, scaffolding, creative pedagogy and wider support from schools, families and communities. These strategies are expected to transform Tamil literature from a static academic subject into a dynamic learning experience that strengthens cultural identity and student engagement.

**Keywords:** Tamil Literature, Teaching And Learning, Challenges, Improvement Strategies, Tpkt Model

## Introduction

Tamil literature is a vital branch of Tamil language, culture, and identity. It serves not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a medium through which the values, traditions, beliefs, and historical experiences of the Tamil community are preserved and transmitted across generations. Through literary genres such as poetry, short stories, novels, and drama, students are exposed to the aesthetic richness of the Tamil language as well as the moral, philosophical, and cultural dimensions embedded in literary works. These texts allow students to understand human experiences, social realities, ethical values, and the worldview of the Tamil community in both traditional and contemporary contexts (Arumugam, 2015).

This study aims to examine the main challenges faced in the teaching and learning of Tamil Literature at the secondary school level and to suggest suitable strategies for improvement. Specifically, the study focuses on students' declining interest in literary texts, difficulties in

understanding literary language and style, limitations of teacher-centered teaching approaches, and the need for more creative and student-centered learning strategies (Krishnan, 2018). The scope of the study is limited to the teaching and learning of Tamil Literature in secondary schools, particularly in relation to classroom practices, student engagement, language comprehension, teaching methods, and strategies that can enhance students' appreciation of Tamil literary works.

In the school curriculum, Tamil literature plays an important role in strengthening students' language proficiency and appreciation of culture. Literary texts encourage students to engage with vocabulary, figurative language, narrative structures, and expressive forms that may not commonly appear in everyday communication. At the same time, the study of literature develops higher-order thinking skills, as students are required to interpret meanings, analyze characters, evaluate themes, and relate literary messages to real-life situations. Thus, Tamil literature contributes not only to language learning but also to the development of critical thinking, emotional intelligence, cultural awareness, and moral reasoning among students.

Despite its educational and cultural significance, the teaching and learning of Tamil literature at the secondary school level face several challenges. One of the most prominent issues is the declining interest among students (Murugan et al., 2021). Many contemporary learners are more attracted to social media, digital games, films, and short-form visual content than to lengthy literary texts that require sustained attention and deep reading. This shift in reading habits has affected students' willingness to engage with literary works, particularly texts written in classical or highly poetic Tamil. As a result, Tamil literature is often perceived as difficult, outdated, or less relevant to students' daily lives.

Another major challenge is students' difficulty in understanding the language and style of literary texts. Many Tamil literary works contain classical vocabulary, symbolic expressions, poetic devices, and complex sentence structures. Students who have limited exposure to such language may struggle to understand the literal meaning of the text, let alone interpret its deeper messages, themes, and aesthetic qualities. This difficulty may reduce their confidence and motivation, causing them to depend heavily on memorized notes or teacher explanations rather than developing their own interpretations and appreciation of the text.

In addition, traditional teacher-centered approaches may limit students' active involvement in the learning process. When literature lessons focus mainly on reading, explanation, and examination-oriented responses, students may not have sufficient opportunities to discuss, perform, question, create, or connect literary works with their own experiences. Such approaches can make literature appear static and abstract rather than dynamic and meaningful. Therefore, there is a need to redesign the teaching of Tamil literature using more creative, interactive, and student-centered strategies.

To make Tamil literature more accessible and relevant, teachers should integrate approaches such as group discussion, role play, drama performance, storytelling, multimedia resources, digital tools, and contextualized learning activities. These strategies can help students visualize literary situations, understand characters more deeply, and relate literary themes to contemporary issues. By transforming literature lessons into active and meaningful learning experiences, students may develop greater interest, confidence, and appreciation for Tamil

literary heritage. Hence, improving the teaching and learning of Tamil literature is essential to ensure that this cultural legacy remains meaningful, engaging, and relevant to younger generations.

### **Problem Statement**

The teaching and learning of Tamil literature at the secondary school level are affected by multiple interconnected linguistic, pedagogical, technological and sociocultural challenges. Although Tamil literature has strong cultural and educational value, students' engagement with the subject is gradually weakening due to declining reading habits, limited exposure to literary activities and the growing influence of digital entertainment. Contemporary students are increasingly surrounded by social media, digital games and short-form visual content, which often compete with the sustained reading, interpretation and reflection required in literary learning. Recent research has shown that students' reading habits are closely related to academic achievement and learning outcomes, suggesting that weak reading culture can directly affect students' ability to understand and appreciate literary texts (Abid et al., 2023). This issue is particularly significant in Tamil literature because students are expected not only to read the text, but also to interpret themes, values, symbols, characters and aesthetic elements.

Another major concern is students' difficulty in understanding classical Tamil. Many literary texts contain archaic vocabulary, poetic expressions, symbolic meanings and complex sentence structures that differ from the Tamil used in students' daily communication. As a result, students may struggle to understand both the surface meaning and the deeper literary message of the text. This difficulty can reduce motivation, weaken confidence and cause students to depend heavily on memorised notes rather than developing their own interpretation. The uploaded journal also identifies weak student interest, difficulty understanding classical Tamil, limited reading habits and insufficient literary exposure as major barriers in the teaching and learning of Tamil literature at the secondary school level.

Pedagogical practice further contributes to the problem. In many classrooms, Tamil literature is still taught through conventional teacher-centred methods, where lessons depend heavily on textbook explanation, summary writing and examination preparation. Such approaches may help students recall facts, but they provide limited opportunities for discussion, questioning, performance, creative response and personal interpretation. Studies on adolescent reading comprehension interventions indicate that instructional practices that actively promote engagement are important in supporting students' reading involvement and comprehension development (Anderson et al., 2021). Therefore, when Tamil literature lessons remain passive and examination-oriented, students may fail to experience literature as a meaningful, creative and living form of cultural expression.

The lack of multimedia and digital learning resources also affects the effectiveness of Tamil literature instruction. Literary texts, especially classical works, can be made more accessible through visualisation, audio narration, animation, video, digital storytelling, interactive discussion and collaborative activities. However, when teachers depend mainly on printed texts and verbal explanation, students who struggle with language or abstract literary concepts may find the lesson difficult and unappealing. A recent systematic review on ICT integration in secondary education highlights that technology can support teaching and

learning when it is meaningfully integrated, although its effectiveness depends on teachers' readiness, appropriate pedagogy and availability of resources (Msafiri et al., 2023). Similarly, UNESCO (2023) emphasises that technology should not replace teachers, but should support learner-centred, engaging and human-guided learning experiences.

There is also a broader systemic issue. When Tamil literature is treated mainly as an optional, examination-oriented or lower-priority subject, students and parents may not recognise its wider value in developing identity, language appreciation, moral reasoning, cultural continuity and critical thinking. This perception may lead to reduced enrolment, weak commitment and limited support for literary activities in schools. Heritage language education is closely connected to identity formation and cultural belonging, and recent discussions in heritage education continue to emphasise the importance of connecting learners with cultural knowledge in meaningful and developmentally appropriate ways (Zheng & Guo, 2024). Therefore, Tamil literature should not be positioned only as an academic subject for examination, but as a cultural and intellectual space through which students engage with language, history, values and community identity.

In view of these challenges, there is a need for a more holistic, creative and student-centred pedagogical response. Tamil literature teaching should be redesigned to improve students' motivation, strengthen comprehension of classical language, encourage active interpretation and connect literary themes with contemporary life. Approaches such as constructivist learning, multimedia-supported instruction, drama, storytelling, collaborative analysis, differentiated learning and digital resources can help transform Tamil literature from a static textual subject into a dynamic learning experience. This is aligned with current educational thinking that supports appropriate technology use, active learner participation and culturally meaningful learning. Hence, improving the teaching and learning of Tamil literature is essential not only for academic achievement, but also for preserving Tamil literary heritage among younger generations.

#### *Research Objective*

1. To identify the challenges in teaching Tamil literature at the secondary school level.
2. To examine the factors influencing students' interest in Tamil literature.
3. To propose strategies to improve the teaching and learning of Tamil literature.

#### **Literature Review**

Literature education helps learners develop language proficiency, cultural awareness and critical sensitivity. Carter and Long (1991) argue that literature teaching should not only enhance language learning but also cultivate humane values and interpretive thinking. In Tamil education, literature is especially important because it preserves cultural identity, moral values and historical memory. However, previous studies show that students often struggle with classical Tamil, complex literary structures and unfamiliar cultural references.

Teacher pedagogy also strongly influences student engagement. Highly teacher-centered instruction and memorization-based learning reduce opportunities for students to interpret, discuss and recreate meaning. Interactive methods such as discussion, role-play, dramatic performance, character analysis, digital storytelling and collaborative text interpretation can

make literature more meaningful. The use of visual materials, multimedia and technology may also support comprehension, particularly for students with weaker language proficiency.

### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to understand the experiences, perceptions and challenges faced by teachers and students in Tamil literature classrooms. Data was gathered through library research, document analysis, classroom observation and informal interviews with teachers and students. Academic books, journal articles, research reports and relevant educational materials were reviewed to support the discussion.

Observation was used to examine teaching approaches, student participation and classroom interaction. Informal interviews provided insight into students' learning difficulties and teachers' pedagogical constraints. The data was analysed descriptively to identify major themes related to challenges, influencing factors and practical improvement strategies.

### Findings

The findings indicate that the challenges in Tamil literature learning are not caused by a single factor. They involve student interest, linguistic difficulty, pedagogy, teaching resources, home environment, social perception and examination culture. The main findings are summarised below.

Table 1

*Summary of key findings*

| Aspect            | Finding  |
|-------------------|--|
| Student interest  | Many students show low interest because they prefer digital entertainment and view literary reading as difficult.                    |
| Classical Tamil   | Archaic vocabulary, poetic expressions and complex sentence structures create cognitive barriers.                                    |
| Teaching method   | Lessons are often teacher-centered, text-based and examination-oriented, and limiting active student interpretation.                 |
| Teaching aids     | Creative and digital materials such as videos, illustrations, mind maps and multimedia resources remain limited.                     |
| Literary exposure | Drama, poetry recitation, writing workshops and school literary programs are not conducted consistently.                             |
| Systemic factors  | Socioeconomic background, lack of reading culture at home, optional subject status and examination pressure influence participation. |

### Discussion and Proposed Improvement Strategies

The study suggests that Tamil literature should be transformed from a static subject into a dynamic and lived classroom experience. A constructivist perspective is useful because students construct meaning through interaction, prior knowledge, social dialogue and active engagement. When students are given opportunities to interpret characters, connect themes with current realities, dramatize scenes and recreate literary texts, their interest and understanding are likely to improve. Several strategies are recommended:

- Use creative pedagogy such as group discussion, storytelling, role-play, drama, student presentations and literature games.
- Integrate technology, including videos, animations, audio narration, digital slides and online resources to clarify plot, character and context.

- Develop creative teaching aids such as illustrated texts, comics, mind maps and simplified glossaries for classical Tamil expressions.
- Organise school-based literary activities, including poetry recitation, drama performance, Tamil literature week and creative writing workshops.
- Provide professional development for teachers in creative pedagogy, digital tools and student-centred literary instruction.
- Strengthen support from school leaders, parents and the community by providing resources and encouraging reading culture.

### *Tamil Literature Pedagogical Transformation (TPKT) Model*

The proposed TPKT Model is grounded in constructivism and aims to shift Tamil literature from a rigid ancient artefact into a dynamic living experience for students.

Table 2

#### *Pedagogical Transformation (TPKT) Model*

| <b>Component</b>        | <b>Focus</b>   | <b>Expected Outcome</b>   |
|-------------------------|--|---|
| Input: Challenges       | Classical language, low interest, passive pedagogy and limited digital resources.                | Clear identification of barriers to effective learning.             |
| Process: Constructivism | Multimedia, student autonomy, scaffolding, collaborative interpretation and creative production. | Active meaning-making and stronger engagement.                      |
| Output: Learning impact | Improved intrinsic motivation, organic appreciation of moral values and cultural sustainability. | Tamil literature becomes relevant, meaningful and identity-forming. |

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study is limited by its focus on selected secondary school contexts and may not fully represent all Indian students across Malaysia. The proposed model also depends on the availability of digital infrastructure, which may differ between urban and rural schools. In addition, short-term observation may not be sufficient to assess long-term changes in students' interest and cognitive development. Future research should involve a wider national sample, including schools from different socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to examine whether student interest and comprehension remain sustainable over time. Further research could explore low-cost offline applications, mobile learning tools, augmented reality and artificial intelligence to provide real-time linguistic support for classical Tamil texts.

### **Conclusion**

The teaching and learning of Tamil literature at the secondary school level face challenges related to student interest, classical language difficulty, passive pedagogy, limited resources and weak literary ecosystems. These challenges make Tamil literature appear distant from students' everyday experiences. The TPKT Model offers a constructive way forward by combining technology, creative pedagogy, student-centred learning and cultural relevance. Its success depends on innovative teachers, supportive schools, active parental involvement

and sustained efforts to make Tamil literature a living cultural experience for the younger generation.

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