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An Overview of Web Assisted Learning and Teaching of Tamil (WALTT) at the Penn Language Center

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Abstract

This resource description explores a web-assisted learning and teaching approach for Tamil facilitated by the Penn Language Center. Tamil is an ancient language spoken predominantly in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. The language has significant cultural and linguistic relevance. However, due to limited resources and geographical constraints, access to high-quality Tamil language instruction has often been challenging for learners outside Tamil-speaking regions. To address these challenges, the Penn Language Center developed the WALTT program, which integrates web-based technologies into Tamil language learning and teaching. This web resource description aims to examine the structure of the syllabi in detail. Overall, this resource description aims to decode the presence of web-assisted learning resources in the field of Tamil language education, as well as provide valuable resources for the broader community of web-assisted language learning and teaching practitioners and beginners of the language.

Keywords: Web Resource, Self-Learning, Teaching, Tamil Language, WALTT, Penn Language Center

In the internet era, Tamil has come online and many learn the Tamil language with eagerness. Even though there are plenty of Tamil learning websites, blogs, apps, videos, premium-based soft classes and MOOCs (see Appendix), certain websites are phenomenal and peculiar in style for learning and teaching the Tamil language. One such site is the online Tamil learning and teaching website *Web Assisted Learning and Teaching of Tamil* (WALTT) by Penn Language Center, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. The website is designed with ample materials to learn and teach the Tamil language in interesting ways. Basic language knowledge, additional information, unit-wise syllabus, html and pdf versions of study materials, interesting ways of learning and teaching methods using stories, novels, jokes, videos, reference materials and so on are in the online database to help the learner and teacher to become deeply involved in the learning-teaching process. This article is a description of the website to highlight the credibility of the Tamil learning process produced by the reputed Penn Language Centre for learners of the Tamil Language.

Background

In India, Tamil is a language with an extended chronology of ancient literary tradition. Nearly ninety per cent of the people who speak this language live in Southern Tamil Nadu. It is estimated that the Tamil language has 48 million first-language speakers in the world. There are also millions of second-language speakers of Tamil in the southern part of the Indian subcontinent. Sri Lanka, South Africa, Malaysia, Singapore, Fiji, Mauritius, Great Britain, the USA, and Canada have Tamil-speaking people. According to Penn Language Centre, the total number of Tamil speakers, including second-language speakers of Tamil, reaches nearly sixty-six million people (Penn Language Center, 2014). Tamil literature has the longest literary tradition and dates back to 200 BC or more (Penn Language Center, 2014). Usually, Tamil speakers use two types of language: literary Tamil and spoken Tamil. A wide variety of Tamil language (Senthamil) is used in writing, teaching, research, media, radio, television, debates and other formal purposes. A low type of Tamil (Kodunthamil) is used in daily discourse, movies, politics and informal situations. The Penn Language Center at the University of Pennsylvania is a reputed center teaching a multitude of languages from around the world. It offers courses for many languages, and Tamil is one of them. This resource description aims to explore WALTT, a web resource that contains teaching materials that are suitable for studying modern spoken and written Tamil with or without a native teacher.

WALTT - A Brief Review

WALTT begins with lessons on the Tamil alphabet. It continues with making syllables to easily read and pronounce the words in simple conversational Tamil (spoken form) and provides Tamil folk tales (written form - intermediate level). The materials provided in WALTT to teach and learn Tamil give opportunities for spoken Tamil comprehension for beginners of Tamil. It contains three main units: Beginning level, Intermediate level, Advanced level, and one miscellaneous unit to teach and learn Tamil language.

In Unit I, the first lesson, *Alphabet* gives a clear description of Tamil vowels, consonants, and the blend of vowels and consonants in the Tamil Language. The Tamil language consists of 12 vowels (Uyir Eluthukkal), 18 consonants (Mei Eluthukkal), and 216, which are a combination of vowels and consonants (Uyir-Mei Eluthukkal). In total, there are 247 letters and sounds in the Tamil Language. Animation techniques are employed to show the Tamil letters and aid understanding of the alphabet. Audible and visual chances of

learning these letters make the lessons easily accessible for teachers and learners. WALLT is designed for learners to practice at many speed levels by displaying the letters at three-speed levels. To help the learner improve the acquisition level of the Tamil language, practice activities consist of reading the letters aloud and seeing the letters shift one by one.

Next, to improve the conjunction of the words, learners are taught syllabification. For example, how consonants are merged with vowels and how a vowel-consonant letter in Tamil is made, along with seven basic examples. Then, the sandhi rules (combination of words) are also detailed with three examples to clarify the working pattern of sandhi in making another word. Additionally, a *Vocabulary Drill* is created for a list of basic Tamil words that are in daily use and near-meaningful words in English are provided. It consists of words that help the learner to speak Tamil faster. The practice of tense formation gives an easy way to acquire the tense patterns of the language.

The module *Preliminary Lessons* gives some portions of basic Tamil sentences and more complex sentences to introduce common vocabulary in use. It is a complete preliminary study resource for spoken Tamil and has been designed for beginners of the language. The module introduces very simple vocabulary used in a classroom or at home. The activities are formulated as questions (yes or no type), deictic expressions (this/that/which), simple negations, locations, dative cases, and negatives in the Tamil Language. Sentences with present tense and markers and expressions on existential locations revealing the place of office or residences are taught to the learners. Moreover, future tenses using a human noun in subject positions are utilized for better understanding in the Tamil language.

There are also practical exercises for tense formation in Tamil. It includes class 3 verbs, class 6 verbs and listening comprehension with the use of custom expressions and tense markers in the Tamil language. At the end, a translation drill is provided for the learners. A special font, *Tamil Net*, has to be installed on the computer, and one can practice writing Tamil in Roman script. A box is provided to type the Roman letters to be changed into Tamil. For example, see the *Translation Drill* exercise (<https://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/tamilweb/lessons/drill.html>).

Unit II is an intermediate level and consists of a Tamil reader, comprehension tests, proficiency tests, cloze tests, tale-telling, spoken vs. written activities, folk tales, jokes, exam practice activities, Tamil writing projects, a skit by Tamil students, a Tamil skit video, *Bharatha Naatyam* – a Tamil student project, a Tamil storyboard, a vocabulary review activity using Java Applet, and activities on the use of imperatives and the use of the present tense.

The writing exercises are based on 48 lessons in the English language to be translated into Tamil by the learner to complete the lessons. In the comprehension test area, advanced-level exercises using an analysis of a story, the use of words and phrases and the use of sentence patterns with Tamil-English and vice versa are provided to strengthen the learning process. In the proficiency test, multiple-answer questions are given to test the proficiency of Tamil grammar at the 2nd year level. There is a test for the use of appropriate modal forms, aspectual forms and adjectival participle forms that can add proficiency to the learner in the language. In the cloze test pattern, two practice exercises are provided to test proficiency in the appropriate use of a person, number and gender with connection to the linking verb –‘iru’ in Tamil. The ‘folk tales’ part is highly interesting, and it contains eight short stories – Indian fables to give an exercise for reading comprehension. The stories are provided with an English glossary to appear on the top of the window if one clicks on any Tamil word. It is helpful to understand the language in the form of folk tales with a moral-cultural touch. The ‘Tamil exam’ part gives a clear idea of written Tamil and a few pages written by a learner for perusal. It gives the learner confidence to move further in writing skills.

The *Tamil Project* section provides a page for the learner to write their essay in Tamil. The topic can be about anything, and it should be uploaded. A transliteration table, *Signing a Guest book in Tamil* (<https://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/tamilweb/project/level1get.html>) is also provided for writing Tamil in text. A Tamil skit is also provided. In the *Bharatha Naatyam* section, the biographies of dancers Divani and Karani have been given in Tamil for inspiration and to portray the cultural dance. In the *Tamil Story Board*, hotspots with underlined words to click are given with sounds, pictures and gloss to improve the learning process. Moreover, a transliteration tab is also provided for easy typing online. For vocabulary improvement, a Java Applet is provided, and the learner is asked to create and provide pictures of each word they select. In the use of imperatives, audio help is provided for Tamil words. In the section, present tense marker, how different verbs have been pronounced in the Tamil language has been provided through the help of audio.

Unit III is considered the site’s advanced level of the Tamil learning process. It consists of *Yuga Santhi* - a novel, *Rice* - a short story, radio plays, corpus learning, online grammar activities, video clips, and video song clips from Tamil movies. Dr. Sirkali Govindarajan’s songs are provided as learning materials to extend a detailed study of the Tamil language from literary and media perspectives.

In *Yuga Santhi*, pre-reading and reading and comprehension exercises are given to develop reading and writing proficiency in the Tamil language. It motivates the learner to

move forward more easily. In the same manner, the short story *Rice* is also provided with certain exercises to increase the perceptive ability of the student. The *Radio Plays* section gives a tagged corpus with sounds to help the learning process. Such radio plays are recorded on air and have been made into teaching materials for further practice. The learner can hear the sound and see the transcription to get a better understanding. The learner is provided with a glossary and set of tagged items about the cultural notes, and some exercises based on the particular story have to be completed.

The *Corpus* section has a corpus of modern Tamil text to boost learning methods. It is linked to a tagged corpus of modern Tamil prose text. This helps to search various sentence patterns of the learner's choice in Tamil. There are sentences with specific tense markers, participle forms, modal forms, etc., to practice the language better. A list of options is also provided for the learners to select easily. This section also contains texts of two short novels, *Yuga Santhi*, a novel by Jeyakanthan and another novel *Kangkaa Snaanam*, by Akilan, to improve corpus-based learning methods.

The *Online Grammar* section consists of reference grammar in spoken Tamil, with apt examples given in Tamil script with its transliteration. A simple grammar learning method of spoken Tamil prepared by Prof. Harold F. Schiffman has been rendered for pedagogic purposes. The first chapter consists of phonology and transliteration; the second chapter consists of the nominal system; the third chapter consists of Tamil verb phrases; the fourth chapter consists of pronouns and pro-forms; chapter five consists of adjectives; the sixth chapter consists of syntax, and the final seventh chapter consists of complex syntax and miscellaneous topics. All of these are eminently prepared to get the core knowledge of the Tamil language to get amplified spoken and written skills.

Tamil video clips are given as videos and dialogues from the movies *Karnan* and *Roja* to learn Tamil. Another movie, *Mouna Ragam*, is also provided for its dialogue to the same target process. An MP3 song with its text is provided for audio and reading legibility in Tamil. In this part, Dr. Sirkali Govindarajan's song collection has been provided for the learner to learn Tamil.

Finally, a Miscellaneous part contains the following resources;

- Unicode Tamil fonts that support the exercises found on the site,
- Macintosh software downloads that contain 105 lessons,
- Tips for sending e-mails in Tamil,
- A guest book,

- An interactive editing page, and
- A mailing list that may be helpful to the learners and teachers.

Conclusion

To conclude, the web resource WALLT by Penn Language Centre for Tamil learning can be a useful resource for beginner, intermediate and advanced level learners with the help of English translation, transliteration of Tamil and the original Tamil script. It is an interesting web resource to learn Tamil effectively through self learning. Nowadays, Tamil education from websites is a new medium for learners and teachers, and innovative and authentic study materials can be widely accessed via the Internet. The Internet has changed the teaching and learning of Tamil in various ways. Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge the importance of WALLT to understand its easy nature in learning and teaching Tamil.

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Notes on the Contributor

Dr. D. Maheswari is the Editor-in-Chief of the journal *International Journal of Tamil Language and Literary Studies*, Pandian Educational Trust (ROR ID - <https://ror.org/05e7jee26>), Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu, India. She has been an advisor to many Tamil research institutes for ethical academic publishing methods in Tamil Nadu. She also offers not-for-profit consultancy services for research scholars. Her core research interests are in the field of Tamil language, Tamil literature and Tamil digital publishing.

Resources

1. *Chosen lessons Unit I, II, III and miscellaneous* by Harold F. Schiffman and Dr. Vasu Renganathan (1998). <https://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/tamilweb/tamil.html#introduction>
2. Web Assisted Learning and Teaching of Tamil (WALTT). *A Project of Penn Language Center. The Consortium for Language Teaching and Learning*. University of Pennsylvania by Harold F. Schiffman and Dr. Vasu Renganathan (1998).
3. Penn Language Center (2014). *Tamil*. <https://plc.sas.upenn.edu/tamil>

Appendix

Premium-Based Soft Classes

1. Tamil Cube Academy - <https://academy.tamilcube.com/>
2. Udemy - <https://www.udemy.com/course/complete-tamil-course-learn-tamil-for-beginners/>
3. Edzym - <https://edzym.com/tamil/>
4. Alison - <https://alison.com/course/tamil-for-beginners>
5. Henry Harvin - <https://www.henryharvin.com/tamil-language-course#content-7972>
6. Preply - <https://preply.com/en/online/tamil-tutors?skippresearch=true>
7. Amity - <https://amityonline.com/bachelor-of-arts-tamil-online>