Developing confident speakers of Tamil Language in Singapore

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Abstract

Singapore emphasizes a lot on the acquisition of Mother Tongue language due to its role in preserving traditional values. However, a language shift from Mother Tongue towards English is noticeable amongst people from all ethnic groups, especially the Tamil-speaking Indians. This language shift can be detrimental to the survival of Tamil language in Singapore. Therefore, the current study aims to explore the various sociocultural factors such as home, school and community and their effects on Tamil proficiency amongst the youths. 10 youths were interviewed and 50 youths were surveyed. The study found 5 main themes from the interview which include 1) Identity and Culture, 2) Events and Celebrations, 3) Media, 4) Motivation and encouragement and 5) Stereotypes and Values. The main findings from the survey are (1) children whose parents are very supportive of them learning Tamil, would grow up to become confident Tamil speakers, (2) children with very supportive Tamil teachers would grow up to become confident Tamil speakers, and lastly, (3) children are more likely to become confident Tamil speakers when they are highly exposed to Tamil language through community factors such as media and community events. A few ideas have also been proposed to ensure that more children would start developing interest in Tamil Language and therefore, start speaking confidently in the future.

ஆய்வுக் சுருக்கம்

பாரம்பரிய மதிப்புகளைப் பாதுகாப்பதன் பங்கு காரணமாக தாய்மொழி மொழியைப் பெறுவதில் சிங்கப்பூர் நிறைய வலியுறுத்துகிறது. இருப்பினும், தாய்மொழியிலிருந்து ஆங்கிலத்தை நோக்கி நடைபெறும் மொழி மாற்றம் அனைத்து இனத்தவர்களிடையேயும், குறிப்பாக தமிழ் பேசும் இந்தியர்களிடையே காணப்படுகிறது. இந்த மொழி மாற்றம் சிங்கப்பூரில் தமிழ் மொழியின் பிழைப்புக்கு தீங்கு விளைவிக்கும். எனவே, இந்த ஆய்வானது வீடு, பள்ளி மற்றும் சமூகம் போன்ற பல்வேறு சமூக கலாச்சாரக் காரணிகளையும், இளைஞர்களிடையே தமிழ்ப்புலமை மீதான பற்றினையும், அவற்றின் விளைவுகளையும் ஆராய்வதை நோக்கங்களாகக் கொண்டுள்ளது. இதற்காக் 10 இளைஞர்கள் நேர்காணல் செய்யப்பட்டனர்; மற்றும், 50 இளைஞர்கள் ஆய்விற்கு உள்ளாக்கப்பட்டனர். அவர்களிடையே பின்வரும் துறைச்சார்ந்த வினாக்கள் கேட்கப்பட்டன; இவற்றுள் 1) அடையாளம் மற்றும் கலாச்சாரம், 2) நிகழ்வுகள் மற்றும் கொண்டாட்டங்கள், 3) ஊடகம், 4) உந்துதல் மற்றும் ஊக்கம் மற்றும் 5) ஸ்டிரியோடைப்ஸ் மற்றும் மதிப்புகள் ஆகியவை அடங்கும். கணக்கெடுப்பின் முக்கியப் கண்டுபிடிப்புகள் பின்வருமாறு அமைகின்றன; (1) பெற்றோர்கள் தமிழ் மொழியைக் கற்க மிகவும் ஆதரவளிக்கும் குழந்தைகள், நம்பிக்கையுள்ள தமிழ் பேசுபவர்களாக வளர்வார்கள், (2) மிகவும் ஆதரவான தமிழ் ஆசிரியர்களைக் கொண்ட குழந்தைகள் நம்பிக்கையுள்ள தமிழ் மொழி பேசுபவர்களாக வளர்வார்கள், கடைசியாக, (3) ஊடகங்கள் மற்றும் சமூக நிகழ்வுகள் போன்ற சமூக காரணிகளின் மூலம் குழந்தைகள் தமிழ் மொழியை அதிகம் வெளிப்படுத்தும்போது அவர்கள் நம்பிக்கையுள்ள தமிழ்ப் பேசுபவர்களாக மாற வாய்ப்புள்ளது. அதிகமான குழந்தைகள் தமிழ் மொழியில் ஆர்வத்தை வளர்க்கத் தொடங்குவார்கள் என்பதையும், எதிர்காலத்தில் நம்பிக்கையுடன் பேசத் தொடங்குவதையும் உறுதிசெய்ய சில யோசனைகள் முன்மொழியப்பட்டுள்ளன.

திறவுச் சொற்கள்: தமிழ் மொழி, நம்பிக்கையான பேச்சாளர்கள், குழந்தை பருவ அனுபவங்கள்
Keywords: Tamil Language, confident speakers, childhood experiences

Introduction

Singapore is a multilingual society that has embraced a bilingual education policy since 1959. This policy entails a strong emphasis on the acquisition and usage of English as well as one's respective Mother Tongue language. Although English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil are recognized as official languages in Singapore, English enjoys the most privileged position as it is the language of law, administration, education, commerce, science, technology, and global communication (Curdt-Christiansen, 2016; Tupas, 2007). English has been implemented as the medium of education across all subjects while Mother Tongue has been relegated to the position of second language (Saravanan, Lakshmi, & Caleon, 2007) whereby only a limited curriculum time is allocated to it.

Despite the increasing global demand for English, Singapore still emphasizes on the acquisition of Mother Tongue due to its role in preserving and strengthening traditional values and a sense of belonging (Sim, 2016; Lakshmi, 2012; Gopinathan & Mani, 1983). In fact, campaigns are held annually to promote people to speak in their own Mother Tongue language. Yet, a language shift from Mother Tongue towards English is noticeable among all ethnic groups (Curdt-Christiansen, 2016; Zhao & Liu, 2008), especially the Tamil-speaking Indians (Dixon, 2005; Rajan, 2014). According to Singapore Department of Statistics (2015), 44.3% of Indians spoke English most frequently at home, while the rest of the 37.7% used mainly Tamil. In fact, as compared to 2010, the use of English as the main spoken language at home has increased by 3.9% among Indian youths aged 15-24.

This language shift can be detrimental to the survival of Tamil language in Singapore due to its existing status. Tamil is a minority language among the four official languages in Singapore. This is due to the ethnic composition of Singapore where Indians take up only a total of 9.1% of all residents (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2015). This 9.1% of Indians are inclusive of Tamil and non-Tamil speakers from South Asia. Therefore, the number of Tamil speakers in Singapore is significantly lesser as compared to those who speak other mother tongue languages. This claim is further supported by Saravanan (1993) who explained that the prestigious status of English, the numerical dominance of Chinese speakers and the currency of Malay as a regional language allow these languages to thrive in Singapore, leaving Tamil to be in a precarious position. Therefore, this highlights the need for Tamil-speaking Indians to actively speak in Tamil to ensure that Tamil remains a living language in Singapore. Researches have shown that the ability to do well in a language is dependent on a complex combination of home and school variables that may vary from child to child (Li, 2007). Hence, this study aims to explore the various factors that contribute to how confidently youths speak in Tamil, specifically focusing on the sociocultural factors during their childhood.

Exploring the sociocultural factors would deepen our understanding about the role that exposure plays in determining how confident an individual becomes in speaking Tamil. Exposure refers to the total amount of time an individual has had contact with a language, may it be in verbal or written form, formal or informal ways of communication (Magno et al., 2009). According to Gathercole, Thomas, and Hughes (2008), language acquisition is highly dependent on the level of exposure to the language. The amount of input received is strongly related to a child's proficiency in it. The greater the input a child gets, the better the performance on language skills such as vocabulary, reading and writing (Duursma, Romero Contreras, Szuber, Proctor, Snow, August, & Calderón, 2007). Having high exposure to both English and Tamil allow the children to become proficient in both the languages in the future. Consequently, these children would grow up to become confident English and Tamil speakers. This is mainly because having a greater vocabulary knowledge allows an individual to better understand and use the language more confidently. Therefore, it is important to explore the environment of youths outside school, such as home and community, to better understand their level of exposure to Tamil language.

SCHOOL FACTORS AND USE OF TAMIL LANGUAGE

Even though the Singapore government claims bilingualism as a cornerstone of its education system, students do not get equal exposure to English and their Mother Tongue. Mother Tongue is usually taught as a subject for two to four hours weekly whereas English is taught as a subject as well as the medium of instructions for all the other subjects as mentioned earlier (Curdt-Christiansen, 2016). For some students,

the curriculum time allocated to second language in school is the only period where they are exposed to that language. This is due to several reasons such as the influence of English in society, and the limited use of that language at home (Lakshmi, 2012). In addition, a prescriptive, language-cantered attitude tend to dominate in schools, making Tamil more of a 'classroom language'. This subsequently decreases the likelihood of it being used for daily conversation outside school (Saravanan, 1993). This further emphasizes the need for ethnic languages, especially Tamil, to be taught in an engaging way so that students become more interested in that language and converse in it more frequently. Therefore, teachers play an imperative role in shaping the children's motivation in the acquisition of the ethnic language. Tamil teachers have to be engaging as well as motivate their students to speak freely in class so that they can become more confident in speaking and expressing their opinions in the classroom.

A student's motivation is highly affected by the difficulty of the language and many students tend to feel that Tamil is difficult. One of the reasons for it is because Tamil is characterized as a diglossic language (Britto, 1986). There are two main varieties of Tamil – the formal variety or Written Tamil (WT) and the spoken variety of Standard Spoken Tamil (SST). SST is used by educated Tamil speakers to communicate in informal and home settings. Although there are community groups based and geographical locations based dialects, SST is an acceptable variety within the Spoken Tamil varieties. In contrast, WT is used in formal situations and in writing which requires formal training as it involves a more complex method of expression which can be difficult for students with a weak background in Tamil.

In Singapore, SST has long been in use by Tamil speakers. It is the variety that is being used among individuals in work settings, Tamil movies and dramas in India as well as Singapore. SST was recommended in 1996 by the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA) Tamil Education Review Committee (Arun, 1996). However, SST was not adopted in the classroom setting until recently in 2006, following the review of the Tamil language curriculum and pedagogy in 2005. Ministry of Education introduced its Primary Syllabus in 2008 and it provided the explanation and need for the use of SST in Tamil classroom. This change was made due to the inability of the students from English-speaking homes to use SST as they had been exposed to only the WT variety of Tamil taught in classrooms. In fact, many students had complained that it was difficult for them to speak in Tamil due to the difference between WT which was being taught in classrooms and SST which was used in other settings. Therefore, through this change, MOE aimed to bridge the gap between the different varieties to increase the number of students speaking in Tamil outside classrooms and develop them into confident and effective bilinguals. The study done by Lakshmi (2012) showed that the students enjoyed using SST more than WT and this has reduced the stress associated with learning Tamil. However, despite the changes in the curriculum, language shift is still apparent amongst Tamil students. This may highlight the need for Tamil teachers to be more inspiring and to conduct their lessons in a more exciting way. It may also highlight the need for a realignment of the Mother Tongue curriculum with the present-day concerns, where more focus is given to reading and oral communication. This allows the acquisition of Tamil language to be more relevant to the youths' practical lives, making it easier for them to speak in Tamil more confidently and frequently. It is not only important for teachers to educate their students for good grades but should also promote a lifelong usage of the Tamil language by providing them with a literacy-rich environment in class and engaging them in language-rich interactions and activities.

FAMILY FACTORS AND USE OF TAMIL LANGUAGE
Parental involvement
Parental involvement strongly influences children's language acquisition and abilities. Having active parent-child interaction, which includes reading to the children and having structured lifestyle with rules regarding television (TV) watching would help in the development of children's literacy skills. This is supported by Dixon et al. (2012) who recommended early childhood educators to provide parents with picture books to encourage them to interact with their children in both languages in order to provide them with greater exposure and input in both languages.

In a study that used Tamil, Chinese and Malay families in Singapore, Saravanan (2001) found that

when mothers used English as the main language at home, their children's Mother Tongue language proficiency was negatively affected. On the other hand, a study done by Duursma et al. (2007) showed that proficiency in English did not require parental use of English at home in the US. However, proficiency in Spanish required both social support from home and school. He explained that the low social status of Spanish in the US has led to a lesser exposure to the language. Since the input for Spanish is less available outside home in the US, home support is crucial for its development. Similarly, Tamil students in Singapore have fewer opportunities to use the language outside home and Tamil class due to the low numerical strength of Tamil-speaking individuals. Therefore, family support is important for children's development of Tamil.

A study done by Li (2007) which examined the effects of the home variables in the acquisition of second-language, highlighted that the parents' inability to provide quality support and involvement in a language impacted the children's learning experiences. In this study, four Chinese immigrant families in Canada were studied and the findings highlighted that children gained more exposure to English language when their parents tried to build a social network in their community, especially with the English-speakers. Examples of such social network established by one of the families were being part of the bible study group, attending piano classes taught by English-speaking teacher and attending Christmas parties. These allowed the parents and children to get more exposed to English language as well as learn more about the culture of the language. On the other hand, parents who did not know English, were unable to initiate reading and writing at home and were unable to understand the children's school activities that were in English. This study then showed that the parents' inability to speak a language can directly interfere with the children's exposure to the language outside school, which subsequently affects their ability to excel in it. Hence, children whose parents have not taken Tamil language as their Mother Tongue might be at a disadvantage. This is because they have a lesser overall understanding of the language and its culture. In addition, parents who do not build a social network with the Tamil-speaking community for their children could be preventing their children from acquiring sufficient knowledge about Tamil and its culture.

Socioeconomic status

Many researches have shown that a family's socioeconomic status (SES) can be related to the acquisition of the languages. SES is usually conceptualized as a combination of family income, parents' education level, and job status (Dixon et al. 2012). Income becomes the means for having access to more language learning resources or experiences such as books, movies and the ability to hire tutors to improve the performances in both first and second languages. Hence, students from higher SES households could have a greater advantage over those from lower SES households mainly due to the increased accessibility and exposure to resources. Consequently, children from low SES enter preschool with low levels of language and literacy skills (Lindholm-Leary, 2014). Researches have also shown that children from high SES households tend to have a larger vocabulary and are more likely to perform better in schools (Dixon et al. 2012). Parental income is also highly correlated to their own education level. It is highly likely for parents who are well educated to earn more and hence, their children are more likely to have greater exposure to language learning resources. Subsequently, these children would be stronger in both the languages as compared to children of less-educated parents.

Parental attitudes

Although the primary school curriculum claims to have an 'equal' emphasis on subjects – English, Mother Tongue, Mathematics, and Science, the demand for English proficiency is higher than that of Mother Tongue as it directly affects children's academic performance. Hence, parents would rather prefer their children to spend more time on other subjects than to spend time on their Mother Tongue (Lakshmi, 2012). In fact, most parents believe that high exposure to ethnic languages can interfere with children's competence in English (Linguistic Society of America, 2019). Therefore, these parents are hesitant to expose their children to their ethnic language and converse in it. In a study done by Curdt- Christiansen (2016), a few Singaporean bilingual families' daily conversations were recorded and analysed. Focus group sessions were also held to find out about the views that parents had on languages. The results showed that some parents

strongly believed that exposure to ethnic languages could interfere with their children's competence in English. Therefore, they deliberately chose English in their daily linguistic practices even though they knew that it was going to affect their child's proficiency in his Mother Tongue language (Curdt-Christiansen & Sun, 2016). However, other researches have shown that speaking in ethnic language at home had no effect on the children's competency in English as long as they get the same level of exposure for both languages (Dixon et al. 2012; Linguistic Society of America, 2019). Dixon et al. (2012) also explained that even though it is more common for bilinguals to be more dominant and capable in one language over the other, it is indeed possible for people to be highly proficient in both English and ethnic language. Therefore, it is important for parents to speak to their children in Tamil language in order to ensure that they get sufficient exposure to both these languages and subsequently be proficient and confident when speaking in them.

Community
Community plays an important role in children's language acquisition. Community factors may create many opportunities for bilingual children to enhance their use of ethnic language.

Societal support
Singapore is one of the multilingual societies that places high value on maintaining Mother Tongue languages. Many organizations have attempted to increase youths' appreciation for their ethnic languages as well as tackle the issue of declining number of Tamil speakers. For example, in 1996, SINDA requested the MOE to establish a committee to review the teaching and acquisition of Tamil language for which the MOE responded by forming the Tamil Language Review Committee (TLRC). TLRC was set up to identify the various measures to improve the acquisition of Tamil language. This led to the high emphasis on cultural activities and on linguistics skills, and the provision of more opportunities for the students to acquire better proficiency in Spoken Tamil to address the declining use of Tamil in Singapore (Saravanan, Lakshmi, Caleon, 2008). Another prominent initiative by the government is the formation of Tamil Language Council (TLC) in 2000. TLC was formed under the auspices of the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA) to promote awareness and greater use of Tamil language amongst Singaporeans. It aims to popularize the Tamil language amongst the youths.

Student organizations in Universities
In the recent years, many student societies in Universities have been formed with the main aim of celebrating and promoting Tamil language through various cultural events. Examples of such organizations are Nanyang Technology University Tamil Literary Society (NTU TLS) and National University of Singapore Tamil Language Society (NUS TLS). These student societies have organized several events for youths and children such as Vanigavettai and Kuriyeedu Vilaiyaadu. Vanigavettai is an entrepreneurship programme organized by the Tamil Representative Council Youth Wing and the NTU Tamil Literary Society to provide youths with a platform to gain guidance from industry experts on starting up companies as entrepreneurs whereas Kuriyeedu Vilaiyaadu is a computation thinking and game designing workshop for Primary 5 students.

By organising these events, the student organisations in universities are constantly trying to help youths to understand the importance of Tamil language while getting them to learn new skills that are necessary in this dynamic world.

Role models
Having political office holders, leaders and celebrities speaking in Tamil confidently in public can inspire the younger generations to overcome their hesitance to speak in Tamil. An example of a prominent figure would be the Minister of Communication and Information, Mr. S. Iswaran who speaks fluent Tamil. He represents an emerging group of prominent Tamil speakers. Another prominent figure would be the minister of Home Affairs and Law, Mr. K. Shanmugam who has given speeches in Tamil, which includes National Day Messages. These politicians and Tamil speaking celebrities have raised the status of the language by

speaking it with command in public and to the media. This further encourages the younger generation to look up to these figures and be more confident when speaking Tamil (Sriganesh 2018).

Media
In Singapore, Tamil language is maintained by three main media platforms – radio, television and newspaper (Rajan, 2014; Saravanan, 1993). These platforms have undergone significant changes in response to the advancement of technology in the modernized Singapore to better promote Tamil language and ensure Tamil remains to be a living language in Singapore.

Television. On 19th October 2008, 'Vasantham' television channel was launched. The channel was dedicated to Indian programmes which are predominantly in Tamil. The air time devoted for Tamil and other Indian languages increased exponentially from about 29 hours to 68 hours per week (Sankaran & Pillai, 2011). This extension of air time was a milestone that paved the way for bolstering Tamil language, making it as prolific as the Malay channel in terms of air time (Rajan, 2014). This allowed Tamil speakers to gain access to Tamil programmes produced in South India via cable television, leading to higher exposure to Tamil. Many local programmes have also been broadcasted in Vasantham for people of all age groups to watch and enjoy.

Radio. The Tamil radio station, Oli 96.8 FM, is currently a 24-hour broadcast service which was previously allocated only a 4 hours' time-slot. This media platform has played a significant role in promoting Tamil language. Oli 96.8 FM has also organized many events to promote the use of Tamil such as Tamizhil oru sutrula. Tamizhil oru sutrula is a learning journey planned for primary school students arranged by the radio jockeys to boost primary school students' interest in the language.

Newspaper. Tamil Murasu is Singapore's only Tamil language newspaper, which was launched in 1935. The former editor of Tamil Murasu summed up one of main purpose of Tamil Murasu is to 'preserve Tamil language especially for the younger generation' (AsiaOne News September 4 2010). Therefore, these three platforms have created many initiatives beyond their basic objectives to further promote Tami language amongst the youths.

The current study aims to find out more about how various sociocultural factors could affect one's confidence when speaking in Tamil language. By conducting interviews and surveys, this study wants youths to reflect on their childhood experiences with regards to the Tamil Language as well as reflect on their current ability to speak in Tamil. The interview and survey mainly focus on these three research questions:

- What is the role that family play in motivating children's acquisition and usage of Tamil?
- What is the role that teachers play in motivating students' acquisition and usage of Tamil?
- How do community factors affect children's motivation in the acquisition and usage of Tamil?

Methods
Participants
Participants were mainly recruited from various tertiary institutions. 50 participants were recruited – 10 of the participants were interviewed and all 50 participants were surveyed. They were all selected through convenience sampling. The ages of the participants ranged from 21 to 25. The participants were all Singaporeans who had taken Tamil as their Mother Tongue language. Both confident and non-confident Tamil speakers were recruited in this study.

Apparatus And Materials
In order to gain breadth and depth, both interviews and surveys were conducted to collect qualitative and quantitative data respectively. The data was collected online.

Interview
Participants were required to read through the PDF version of the informed consent form and had to sign on them if they agreed to participate in the study. After signing on the informed consent, the semi-structured qualitative interviews were carried out. The interviews were conducted to better understand the various sociocultural factors that contribute to participants' level of confidence when speaking in Tamil. A total of 10 Tamil speaking youths with different level of proficiency in Tamil language were interviewed. Responses were obtained on several aspects of their childhood experiences such as (1) home, (2) school, and (3) community factors.

Survey
The survey was then disseminated to 50 Tamil speaking youths. Participants were required to read through the PDF version of the informed consent form and had to sign on them if they agreed to participate in the study. After signing on the informed consent, the participants were given the online survey which consisted of 34 questions covering 5 main components. This included (1) Proficiency in Tamil language, (2) Exposure to Tamil language, (3) Role of parents, (4) Role of teachers and, (5) Attitude towards Tamil language.

Proficiency in Tamil language. The questions under 'Proficiency in Tamil language' were self-constructed. These questions aimed to understand the participants' level of confidence when speaking in Tamil. There was a total of 5 questions in this section. The examples of items created were "My friends would describe me as a confident Tamil speaker" and "I would not hesitate to speak in Tamil to my Tamil speaking friends". The proficiency in Tamil language was measured on a 5-point Likert scale on how much they agree to the statements (1= Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree).

Exposure to Tamil language. The questions under 'Exposure to Tamil language' were self-constructed. These questions aimed to understand the extent to which the participants were exposed to Tamil language when they were younger. There was a total of 5 questions in this section. The examples of items created were "I had/have Tamil speaking friends." and "As a student, I had Tamil tuitions". The exposure to Tamil language was measured on a 5-point Likert scale on how much they agree to the statements (1= Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree).

Role of parents. The questions under 'Role of parents' were self-constructed. These questions aimed to understand the level of encouragement that the participants got from their parents when they were younger. There was a total of 9 questions in this section. The examples of items created were "My parents always encouraged me to speak in Tamil" and "My parents have always preferred me to spend more time on other subject than Tamil". The role of parents was measured on a 5-point Likert scale on how much they agree to the statements (1= Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree).

Role of teachers. The questions under 'Role of teachers' were self-constructed. These questions aimed to better understand the participants' experiences with their Tamil teachers. There was a total of 8 questions in this section. The examples of items created were "I had very supportive Tamil teachers" and "My Tamil teachers were very patient with me while clearing my doubts in Tamil". The role of teachers was measured on a 5-point Likert scale on how much they agree to the statements (1= Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree).

Attitude towards Tamil language. The questions under 'attitude towards Tamil language' aimed to understand the participants' overall attitude towards speaking in Tamil. There was a total of 7 questions in this section. The examples of items created were "Everyone should use Tamil regularly with other Tamil speakers" and "Being able to speak Tamil is an advantage in the present time". The attitude towards Tamil language was measured on a 5-point Likert scale on how much they agree to the statements (1= Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree).

Design
This quantitative aspect of this study had a non-experimental design which used correlational analysis to mainly find out about the relationship between 1) youths' level of confidence when speaking in Tamil and their level of exposure to the language during childhood, 2) the encouragement youths received from their parents and their level of confidence when speaking in Tamil, 3) the youths' experience with their Tamil teachers and their level of confidence when speaking in Tamil and, 4) the youths' attitude towards Tamil language and the their level of confidence when speaking in it.

Results

The current study aims to find out more about how various sociocultural factors could affect one's proficiency in Tamil language. By conducting interviews and surveys, this study aims for youths to reflect on their childhood experiences with regards to the Tamil Language as well as find out more about their current ability to speak in Tamil.

Interview
From the interviews, a total of 5 themes were generated 1) Identity and Culture, 2) Events and Celebrations, 3) Media, 4) Motivation and encouragement and 5) Stereotypes and Values.

Survey
There were a total of 50 Tamil speaking youths aged from 21 to 25 who participated in this study. They were all recruited through convenience sampling. None of the participants' data was excluded in this study. There were no missing data. The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software.

Reliability Analysis
Reliability analysis on the 5-item scale on Proficiency in Tamil language revealed that it has good internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alpha, $\alpha = .908$. Reliability analysis on the 5-item scale on Exposure to Tamil language revealed that it has good internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alpha, $\alpha = .810$. Reliability analysis on the 9-item scale on Role of parents revealed that it has somewhat good internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alpha, $\alpha = .770$. As deletion of any question does not result in a drastic increment in the Cronbach's alpha and all questions are deemed relevant in measuring the role that parents play in their children's level of proficiency in speaking Tamil, all items in that scale were therefore retained. Reliability analysis on the 8-item scale on Role of teachers revealed that it has good internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alpha, $\alpha = .954$. Reliability analysis on the 7-item scale on Attitude towards Tamil language revealed that it has good internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alpha, $\alpha = .888$.

Correlation Analysis
Every individual's responses on all the 34 items were averaged to form the composite score for each respective component of the survey which were used in correlational analysis.
A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to investigate the hypothesized relationship between the key variables of the study (refer to Table 1). Proficiency in Tamil language and Exposure to Tamil language were very strongly and positively correlated, which was statistically significant, $r(50) = .761$, $p < .01$. Proficiency in Tamil language and Role of parents were moderately and positively correlated, which was statistically significant, $r(50) = .579$, $p < .01$. Proficiency in Tamil language and Role of teachers were very strongly and positively correlated, which was statistically significant, $r(50) = .668$, $p < .01$. Proficiency in Tamil language and Attitude towards Tamil language were very strongly and positively correlated, which was statistically significant, $r(50) = .658$, $p < .01$.
Exposure to Tamil language and Role of parents were very strongly and positively correlated, which was statistically significant, $r(50) = .708$, $p < .01$. Exposure to Tamil language and Role of teachers were very strongly and positively correlated, which was statistically significant, $r(50) = .631$, $p < .01$.

Exposure to Tamil language and Attitude towards Tamil language were very strongly and positively correlated, which was statistically significant, r (50) = .640, p < .01.

Attitude towards Tamil language and Role of parents were very strongly and positively correlated, which was statistically significant, r (50) = .633, p < .01. Attitude towards Tamil language and Role of teachers were very strongly and positively correlated, which was statistically significant, r (50) = .632, p < .01.

Table 1 Pearson Correlation of the key variables

	Proficiency in Tamil language	Exposure to Tamil Language	Role of parents	Role of teachers	Attitude towards Tamil language
Proficiency in Tamil language	-	.761**	.579**	.668**	.658**
Exposure to Tamil Language	.761**	-	.708**	.631**	.640**
Role of parents	.579**	.708**	-	.685**	.633**
Role of teachers	.668**	.631**	.685**	-	.632**
Attitude towards Tamil language	.658**	.640**	.633**	.632**	-

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Discussion
Interview
About 10 Tamil speaking youths were interviewed to find out more about their opinion on the declining rate of Tamil language. Questions about childhood sociocultural factors were asked to find out how these factors affected their level of confidence in speaking Tamil. From the interviews, a total of 5 themes were generated 1) Identity and Culture, 2) Events and Celebrations, 3) Media, 4) Motivation and encouragement and 5) Stereotypes and Values.

Identity and Culture
A lot of the interviewees viewed Tamil language as part of their identity. They believed that accepting Tamil as part of identity allows people to display a strong sense of language loyalty, whereby they start speaking in Tamil more often. This would then subsequently lead to a greater confidence when speaking in it.

Events and Celebrations
A lot of the interviewees suggested that the use of Tamil language can be proliferated when more youths participate in cultural events organised within and outside of school. They believe that organising such events would allow youths to have a greater knowledge about the importance of Tamil and its culture. A better appreciation for the culture might lead to a greater use of the language.

Media
Many of the interviewees agreed that the multimedia platforms play an important role in reaching out to the Tamil community. In fact, a handful of them felt that media platforms such as Vasantham and Oli 96.8 FM are doing a great job at promoting the use of Tamil language in Singapore. However, a few of them felt that these multimedia platforms should develop programmes of better quality to attract more Tamil speakers to watch and listen to them. Despite these opposing views, all of them agreed that these multimedia platforms lead to a greater exposure to the language. They also agreed that these platforms are necessary for youths to speak Tamil confidently.

Motivation and Encouragement
All the interviewees strongly felt that in order for more youths to start speaking in Tamil, they should be given sufficient level of support, motivation and encouragement from their parents, teachers and community. This includes giving equal importance to both English and Tamil and being less critical and more patient during language acquisition. When high emphasis was given for English, the children's attitude towards Tamil was negatively affected whereby they start undermine the importance of Tamil language.

Stereotypes and Value
One of the common issues that interviewees had regarding Tamil language was the preconceived notion that Tamil was a language of a lower social status. Many felt that they were unconformable using Tamil in public due to the negative stereotype that surrounds the language. Some also felt that speaking in Tamil was uncommon and might be considered socially unacceptable.

A few interviewees also felt that learning Tamil was not going to benefit them in their future in aspects such as career and self-development.

Survey
A reliability test was run to find out the reliability of the scale that was used. The reliability test showed that the variables had high internal consistency reliability. Therefore, these scales are consistent and can be replicated.

Pearson correlation was used to find out the relationship between the key variables such as 1) Proficiency in Tamil language and Exposure to Tamil language, 2) Proficiency in Tamil language and the Role of parents, 3) Proficiency in Tamil language and the Role of teachers, 4) Proficiency in Tamil language and the Attitude towards Tamil language, 5) Exposure to Tamil language and the Role of parents, 6) Exposure to Tamil language and the Role of teachers, 7) Exposure to Tamil language and the attitude towards Tamil language.

Additional correlational analyses were done between 1) Role of parents and the Attitude towards Tamil language, 2) Role of teachers and the Attitude towards Tamil language to find out if they were interlinked. This study aims to find out the role that sociocultural factors play in affecting youths' level of confidence when speaking in Tamil language. Therefore, factors such as exposure, parents and teachers were studied along with the attitude towards Tamil language to better understand the relationship between them.

The overall results showed a positive and significant correlations between all the factors, highlighting that they are all interlinked. As this was a non-experimental, correlational study, causations cannot be assumed. Children whose parents supported their children's acquisition of Tamil language are more likely to provide them with necessary exposure and encourage them to do well in their Mother Tongue, which could have led to a good proficiency in Tamil language. Likewise, students with supportive, encouraging and motivating teachers who urge them to do well and learn from mistakes, are more likely to inspire their students to speak confidently in Tamil. Students are also more likely to be confident Tamil speakers when their learning took place over exciting activities and events, allowing them to have greater exposure to Tamil language and its culture.

One of the key findings is that the correlation between Exposure and Proficiency in Tamil language was the highest as compared to the correlations between any other pairs of the key variables. This highlights the importance of exposure to a language. Past researches have supported the findings as they have indicated that language proficiency and fluency are determined by the level of language exposure (Sheela & Ravikumar, 2016; Lubega, 1979).

A few key findings from the survey is that 86% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed when they were asked if they liked watching Tamil TV shows or movies. This highlighted the importance of media in the lives of youths. Their existing preference for shows and movies highlighted that these media

platforms had a better reach to the local Tamil youths. Therefore, this emphasises the need for more Tamil shows and movies catered just for children and youths to watch.

Another key finding from the survey is that 44% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed whereas only 22% disagreed or strongly disagreed when they were asked if their parents preferred them to spend more time on other subjects other than Tamil. This showed that some parents are indeed more concerned about the other examinable subjects as compared to Tamil language. The parents' attitude towards Tamil language can greatly affect the children's proficiency in the language which might eventually affect their level of confidence when speaking in Tamil language.

Hence, the main findings are (1) children whose parents are very supportive of them learning Tamil, would grow up to become confident Tamil speakers, (2) children with very supportive Tamil teachers would grow up to become confident Tamil speakers, and lastly, (3) children are more likely to become confident Tamil speakers when they are highly exposed to Tamil language through community factors such as media and community events.

Suggestions

Based on the responses from the survey and interview, a few recommendations have been suggested to combat the issue of declining rate of confident Tamil speakers.

1. Having more children and youths' centric films, short films and TV shows might help to increase the number of confident Tamil speakers in Singapore. Due to the advancement of technology, many youths are being exposed to Tamil language through different platforms of media. Specifically, through the interview and survey, it is evident that youths are more inclined towards watching Tamil TV shows and movies. Therefore, local TV channels such as Vasantham should broadcast good quality Tamil shows and movies that are appropriate for children and youths. In addition, a study done by Cho and Krashen (2000) highlighted that ethnic-language television viewing played a crucial role in determining the children's competence in speaking their ethnic language. Hence, more TV shows and movies should be produced and broadcasted in local channels for Tamil-speaking Singaporean youths to watch and develop their proficiency in Tamil language. Vasantham has been broadcasting shows such as 'Primary Six', 'San Genie', 'Janani D/O Madhavan and 'Mat YoYo. Having more of these children and youths-centric shows would further increase the probability of them watching the shows. This would subsequently allow these children and youths to be more confident in speaking Tamil.

2. In the interview, many respondents highlighted the effectiveness of competitions in attracting Tamil youths. They mentioned that youths are more inclined to participate in events that include competitions and challenges. This includes many types of competitions that allow children and youths to showcase their talents such as drawing, singing, story-telling, acting, role playing, poetry writing and many others. Competitions should reflect and highlight the importance of Tamil language and its culture. An example stated by Sriganesh (2018), is the competition called 'Edhugai' organised by the famous music composer Shabir. Edhugai is a song writing competition for the youths and its objective is to increase the youths' interest in Tamil language by bringing students of varying levels of linguistic and music abilities together to create an original work. Taking part in these competitions would also expose youths to more Tamil speakers with similar interests and talents. This would further increase their overall exposure to Tamil language. Therefore, these youths are more likely to become proficient Tamil speakers in the future.

3. Changing the stereotypes and negative notions regarding Tamil language in Singapore is a key step towards developing confident Tamil speakers. In the interview, participants mentioned that it is important to change the negative perception about Tamil in Singapore. Since there are lesser opportunities for youths to speak in Tamil, one of the interviewees mentioned that it might not be socially acceptable for them to be speaking in Tamil language in public as compared to Mandarin

speakers who are more likely to speak in Mandarin in public. In fact, speaking in Mandarin is deemed as socially acceptable and common in Singapore. Changing stereotypes can be very difficult. Schools can make it compulsory for all the students to learn the basic words of all four main languages in Singapore. Most people are aware of basic Mandarin and Malay words. However, lesser people could understand Tamil words. This initiative would allow all students to develop a better appreciation for Tamil language. In addition, leadership programmes can be conducted for Tamil students so that they would be better equipped with leadership skills for the future. When there are many Tamil speakers representing schools, universities, or even political parties, these negative stereotypes associated with Tamil language would be less likely to be prevalent.

4. It is extremely important to inculcate appreciation for Tamil language and its culture. Many respondents, regardless of their level of confidence in Tamil language, mentioned that they consider Tamil language to be very important because it is part of their identity. However, some of them mentioned that the lack of opportunities to use Tamil language outside class, prevents them from practicing the language and becoming proficient or confident in it. This highlights the need for Tamil language and its culture to be taught outside school. Tamil teachers should try their best to make the class fun and exciting. They can share stories, literary works and histories about prominent figures in Tamil language such as Bharathiyaar and Auvaiyaar to make the classes interesting. They can also organise events and activities outside school during weekends or holidays to teach the students about Tamil culture, especially during festive periods such as Pongal, Deepavali and Tamil New Year. Making it compulsory for students to attend these events would benefit them in a long run. They would become more knowledgeable about Tamil culture and start appreciating their cultural heritage and moral values as well as accept Tamil language as part of their identity. In Singapore, Malays have always been known to display a strong sense of language loyalty because they tend to consider their language to be an enduring symbol of identity (Gopinathan & Mani, 1983). Likewise, perhaps if more students start considering Tamil language as part of their identity, they might start taking Tamil language more seriously and be less hesitant when speaking in it. Hence, teachers should develop the students' proficiency in Tamil as well as transmit the relevant culture and traditional values. Another key point made by one of the interviewees is the importance of publicity. Many organisations have organised events for the residents to celebrate during festive period. However, most of these events are not hugely publicised. Therefore, the lack of awareness of these events have led to a low turnout rate. Due to this, the expected benefits of these events have not been achieved.

5. One of the interesting suggestions given by one of the interviewees is for schools to focus on developing a strong foundation in oral skills at lower primary level and then subsequently proceed on to teaching the overall linguistic skills at the upper primary level. This would allow students to be proficient Tamil speakers as teachers have helped to build their oral skills from the very beginning of their schooling years. This might be a better approach towards developing Tamil proficiency. This is because, in the interview, those who had a good grasp of spoken Tamil, usually found it easier to learn the overall language. Therefore, instead of focusing on the oral skills just a few days before oral exams, this approach could be considered in order to ensure that students become confident Tamil speakers as well as be proficient in the overall Tamil language.

6. Parents could practise 'one-parent-one-language' style of language acquisition. This style of learning has been adopted in many households with parents who give equal importance to both English and Mother Tongue languages. This would ensure that children get equal exposure to both the languages and therefore, be proficient in both languages. This might also help children to develop the perception that both the languages are equally important.

Limitations
There are a few limitations to this study. (1) All the analyses done in the quantitative part of the study were all correlational; therefore, no causal relationship could be established, (2) The data were all self-reported and (3) the participants were asked to answer questions about their childhood factors. Therefore, this required them to reflect on the past, which can be subjected to memory distortions.

Future Studies
Future studies can study the sociocultural factors longitudinally because these factors are constantly changing and are dynamic. Future studies can be conducted using an experimental design so that causation can be established between the factors that were examined in this study.

Conclusion
As a bilingual society, it is important for Singapore to show equal importance to both English and all three Mother Tongue languages. Due to the low numerical strength of Tamil speakers, Tamil language is in a precarious state in Singapore. In order to ensure its existence in the future, more opportunities should exist for people to use them and greater value should be given to the language. Even though the government has constantly been trying to combat the issue of declining rate of confident Tamil speakers, changes implemented should focus more on involving children and youths as many childhood sociocultural factors can have a lasting impact on children's linguistic ability and confidence in Tamil language.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1.What is the language that you speak mostly at home with your family? Tamil or English. Why?

2.In 10 years' time, if you become a parent, what do you think are the actions needed to be taken to ensure that your children would develop an interest in Tamil and be confident Tamil speakers?

3.Researches have shown that the use of Tamil language has been declining in Singapore. What do you think are the possible reasons for this situation? 4.Do you think it's important to speak in Tamil? Why OR why not?

5.Would you describe yourself as a confident Tamil speaker? Why or why not?

6.How would you describe your experience learning Tamil when you were younger in terms of:
   a. Difficulty of language:
   b. Support from teachers
   c. Support from parents
   d. Curriculum

7.If you had the opportunity to become a Tamil teacher, what would you do to ensure that your students would develop an interest in Tamil and be confident Tamil speakers?

8.How do you think mass media channels such as Vasantham, Oli 96.8 FM and Tamil Murasu can improve itself to increase the number of people speaking in Tamil confidently?

9.What kind of efforts can be put in to sustain the Tamil language in Singapore? (Based on Home, School, Community)

SURVEY

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

Proficiency in Tamil Language
1. I would not hesitate to speak in Tamil in front of a crowd.
2. My friends would describe me as a confident Tami speaker
3. I tend to reply in English even when my friends/family members speak to me in Tamil
4. I would not hesitate to speak in Tamil to my Tamil speaking friends
5. I am a confident Tamil speaker

Exposure to Tamil Language
6. As a kid, I liked reading Tamil storybooks
7. I like watching Tamil TV shows/movies
8. As a kid, I had Tamil speaking friends
9. I spent a lot of time learning Tamil
10. As a kid, I was highly exposed to Tamil language

Role of Parents

11. My parents have always encouraged me to speak in Tamil
12. My parents would buy me Tamil assessment books/story books when I was a kid
13. As a kid, I had Tamil tuitions to improve my Tamil
14. My parents have always encouraged me to do well in Tamil
15. My parents view Tamil language as an important aspect of our culture.
16. My parents speak Tamil confidently
17. My parents have always preferred me to spend more time on other subject than Tamil
18. My parents have always believed that bilinguals have many cognitive benefits
19. My parents have always believed that exposure to ethnic language could interfere with my competence in English.

Role of Teachers

20. I had very supportive Tamil teachers
21. My Tamil teachers always motivated me to do well in Tamil
22. My Tamil teacher encouraged me to speak confidently in front of the class
23. I am always hesitant to ask for my Tamil teachers' help
24. I had a lot of fun in Tamil classes
25. My Tamil teachers have inspired me to speak in Tamil
26. My Tamil teachers were very patient with me while clearing my doubts in Tamil
27. My Tamil classes were very fun and enjoyable.

Attitude towards Tamil language

28. I like to speak in Tamil
29. Learning Tamil is important
30. Being able to speak Tamil is an advantage in the present time
31. All students should learn their Mother Tongue.
32. Learning Tamil will help to develop mind
33. Everyone should use Tamil regularly with other Tamil speakers
34. I learn Tamil to make good academic progress.