

THE HERITAGE LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND ETHNIC IDENTITY AMONG THE SECOND-GENERATION TAMIL IMMIGRANTS IN CANADA: IMPACTS, ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Abstract: This paper investigates the effect of heritage language education on the ethnic identities of second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA). This was done through a study in which six second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants were interviewed on their experiences in Tamil language education and their thoughts on their identities. The results show that while second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants consider language a significant marker of identity, their language education did not profoundly impact their identity building. Several shortcomings of Tamil language classes were identified such as a lack of engaging and relevant material, and a lack of teacher support.

Keywords: Heritage Language Education, Ethnic Identity, Second-Generation Immigrants, Tamil Immigrants in Canada, Language Retention, Cultural Identity, Bilingualism, Multilingualism, Immigrant Communities in Canada, Language and Identity Formation, Identity Negotiation, Diaspora Studies, Language Loss and Maintenance, Intergenerational Language Transmission, Multiculturalism in Canada, Sociolinguistics of Immigrant Populations, Tamil Heritage Language Learning in Canada, Identity Challenges among Tamil Youth

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Introduction

The ethnic minority Tamil populations in Sri Lanka have been a long victim of violence, which escalated into a formal war between the majority Sinhalese state and separatist group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from 1983 to 2009. This decades-long conflict resulted in over ten thousand war casualties and one million refugees (Ibrahim et al., 2021), as well as a large-scale displacement within the country and beyond, with a vast majority of the displaced being Tamil (Muthulingam, 2021; Hyndman, 2003, p. 255). Toronto and the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) is now home to one of the world's largest Sri Lankan Tamil diasporas as a result of this mass migration (Cheran, 2003; Wayland, 2004).

The second-generation immigrants who were a part of this migration have a unique positionality in comparison to second-generation immigrants of other ethnic groups. While there is a wealth of literature on the experiences of second-generation Sri Lankan Tamils and second-generation immigrant identities, there is limited literature specifically examining the relationship between language and identity in the Tamil diaspora in Canada, as well as on Tamil language education within the diaspora. In order to fill this gap, this study makes an attempt to generate scholarship on Tamil language education in Canada and its relationship with ethnic identity.

The purpose of this paper will be to investigate the effect of heritage language classes on the identity building of second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants in the GTHA. The research questions guiding this paper include whether an ethnic identity name for a language requires skills in that language for membership. Can this connection to ethnic identity be supported by language education? This paper will begin with a literature review covering topics such as identity and identity formation, and heritage language education, before moving on to the findings and discussion of the current study by Muthulingam (2022). This study includes interviews with six Tamil individuals from the GTHA who have previously taken part in some form of Tamil language education. This section will review and discuss the participants' answers regarding their experience with Tamil language education, participants' thoughts on markers of identity, language, and Tamil identity, and finally discuss the effect of language classes on one's Tamil identity as seen in the study. This study attempts to fill the gaps in academic literature on heritage language education in the Tamil community, specifically in Canada.

Background

The origins of the violence and conflict to Tamils in Sri Lanka are multi-faceted, with language being a predominant factor. The Sri Lankan state was set up under the rule of the majority Sinhalese following British independence in 1948, leading to vast inequities and ethnic discrimination against the Tamil population through division policies such as the “Sinhala Only Act”. This particular policy raised the minimum required grades for university admissions only for Tamil students and introduced a Sinhalese language requirement for public service employment (Holt, 2011). While various parliamentary negotiations were sought to win social status for the Tamil language, they were repeatedly unsuccessful. The state's continuous repression of Tamil people led to a consolidation of Tamil identity and belonging, as demands grew for a separate, autonomous, Tamil state called Tamil Eelam. These calls eventually became a full-fledged political movement and later, a military campaign against the state (Nadarajah & Sentas, 2012; Ibrahim et al., 2021; Amarasingam et al., 2016; Canagarajah, 2013).

The civil conflict resulted in a tremendous impact on the ethnic Tamil identity. For several decades, including outside of the ‘official’ war, Tamils in Sri Lanka feared for their lives simply due to their ethnic identity. From this fear and discrimination arose the need for a more cohesive Tamil identity (Muthulingam, 2022). When examining the effect of the war on the ethnic identities of Tamils in Sri Lanka, Thurairajah (2020) found varying perspectives. Many felt regrets over the loss of identity as survival was prioritized, while others felt that the politicization of the Tamil identity led them to want to detach themselves from their identity. The last perspective that was recognized was looking to the future – some felt that a strong Tamil identity could finally be built and that they could "return to the path they were on before they were ‘interrupted by the war’" (Thurairajah, 2020, p. 576).

Second-generation Tamil immigrants who are a part of the mass migration and diaspora have a unique experience. Although most of this diaspora are geo-physically removed from the conflict, they remain bound by the *emotional dominant* of the war. Ibrahim et al. (2021) describes this emotional dominant as a social or common knowledge that binds a community – it allows for trauma to circulate in the form of testimony through media, peers, and familial networks, and for later generations to absorb the trauma of those who have experienced it preceding them. This emotional dominant is critical in the shaping and negotiation of self-identity in the second-generation (Muthulingam, 2022).

Literature Review

The concept of identity is extremely broad and multi-faceted, with scholars offering a variety of definitions to capture its complexity (Muthulingam, 2022). Some define identity as a subjective experience, where individuals hold or claim characteristics that distinguish them from others (Leet et al., 1996), while others view it as a person's understanding of their relationship to the world and how that relationship is shaped (Norton, 2000). Djite (2006) frames identity through categorical markers like gender, ethnicity, nationality, and social status, whereas Crawshaw et al. (2001) emphasize its fluid, ever-evolving nature. These diverse definitions highlight not only the layered dimensions of identity but also the tension between viewing it as a fixed set of traits versus a dynamic, constantly shifting process. In navigating these perspectives, it becomes clear that identity cannot be pinned down to a single definition; rather, it exists at the intersection of personal experience, societal constructs, and ongoing transformation.

As noted by Oriyama (2010), each various definition of identity showcases that it is a concept that is dynamic, fluid, and multi-faceted as it is continuously being formed, negotiated, modified, and reconstructed. The negotiation of one's identity is a transactional process in which individuals in intercultural situations will attempt to assert, define, modify, challenge, or support their own and others' desired self-images through social interactions (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). This process is ongoing throughout one's lifetime as identities are not fixed, but shaped and constrained by various sociohistorical contexts, ideologies, power relations, and institutional policies (Leeman, 2015) – this is particularly true for immigrants and second-generation immigrants who navigate within and among different communities (Val & Vinogradova, 2010).

An individual's ethnic identity is typically understood as one's alignment with or membership of a particular ethnic group – this can include the emotional and/or cultural ties an individual may have with that ethnic group (Mu, 2015). For second-generation immigrants, daily identity negotiation now involves the interplay of racial and ethnic labels imposed by external society (Feliciano & Rumbaut, 2018) and the negotiating of a place in between cultures (Liu, 2015). As a result, second-generation immigrants often face a disconnect in their identity when comparing their private socialization to their public socialization, as socialization at home is often rooted in ethnic language and culture, such as native food or customs (Liu, 2015).

Language is often seen as an essential aspect of identity negotiation and construction (Mu, 2015). The home and parental contexts tend to play a considerable role in the language acquisition of second-generation immigrants as many ethnic parents help to continuously negotiate tensions between social language policies and the norms of their family linguistics (Mu, 2015). A space can be created for hybrid identities when different aspects of one's ethnolinguistic identities are combined in new ways, allowing for diverse paths for identity construction (Noels, 2013). Bilingual speakers have unique experiences due to their situation in a language continuum where their choice of language depends on social-cultural contexts – they have the ability to choose which language they would like to develop and express (Val & Vinogradova, 2010). This is a constant and ongoing process that takes place in every interaction and, in turn, it contributes to the identity-building process of bilingual speakers.

Symbolic ethnicity allows second-generation immigrants to create a connection to a culture or traditions without necessarily incorporating it into their everyday behaviour (Gans, 1979) and, similarly, without necessarily having fluency in their heritage language. This can include participating in or consuming ethnic goods, such as customs or foods. Symbolic ethnicity allows second-generation immigrants to express their identity in ways that suit their individual needs and can be easily transplanted into their host country (Amarasingam, 2008). The ways in which a second-generation immigrant experiences their various cultures and intertwining identities can vary greatly, showcasing the need for further study on the contextual factors contributing to identity building.

A heritage language learner is someone who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken and who, at a minimum, understands the language to any extent (Valdes, 2001). This understanding of the language is usually developed in the home prior to exposure to the majority language (Leeman, 2015). Those who seek out heritage language education often feel that ethnic identity is embodied in language and hope to (re)claim their ethnic identity through language study. In other cases, parents and educators may also encourage children to further develop their heritage language in an effort to create a connection to their culture. Community language schools are often set up and run by immigrant communities for this reason (Nordstrom, 2022).

Although heritage language learners will already have some base level of proficiency or understanding, they are often met with several obstacles such as time and access, lack of motivation, and fear of criticism (He, 2010; Cho, 2015). Cho (2015) found that heritage language learners may be turned off from continuing their education due to feelings of

discouragement, self-consciousness, and anxiety that are often inflated by the high expectations and negative attitudes of proficient speakers.

Research Methodology

The current study by Muthulingam (2022) sought to investigate the relationship between heritage language and the identity building of second-generation Tamil immigrants in the GTHA, and the effect that heritage language classes had on the identities of these individuals. Through interviews with six second-generation Tamil immigrants, the research questions that guided Muthulingam's study were: how do heritage language classes contribute to second-generation immigrants' proficiency in their heritage language? Does this proficiency (or lack of) contribute to developing their identity? Do heritage language classes impact their identity outside of the realm of language (Muthulingam, 2022)?

All participants of this study grew up in the GTHA and have previously attended some form of Tamil language class. For the purpose of this study, the term 'second-generation immigrant' was defined as those who were born outside of Sri Lanka to at least one Sri Lankan Tamil parent, and those who were born in Sri Lanka to at least one Sri Lankan Tamil parent but migrated prior to the age of 7. This study sought participants between the ages of 18-30. This range was chosen due to the historical context of the Tamil diaspora in Canada. The mass migration of Sri Lankan Tamils to Canada can be categorized in four stages, beginning in the 1960s prior to the outbreak of the civil war. The second, much larger stage, consists of those arriving as the violence peaked from the 1980s-2000s (Sandercock et al., 2004). As such, many of the second-generation immigrants resulting from this wave would currently be in the age range of 18-30 today.

All participants were interviewed verbally, and audio recordings were conducted. These audio recordings were manually transcribed upon completion of the interviews. An inductive, semantic approach was taken to analyze the collected data thematically, by progressively refining each theme or category. Each transcription was coded for keywords, phrases, or passages that were relevant to the overall research topic of language maintenance and identity negotiation. Thirty-five low-level codes were initially identified in the transcripts. Some of the codes include fluency, communication, first language, social, improvement, teaching, community, arts, family, history, location, media, religion, translating, exclusion, extracurriculars, conflict, change, future, and more. These low-level codes were then reviewed and grouped into the overarching categories found in this paper

which include participant characteristics, Tamil class experience, language maintenance factors, and markers of identity and language.

This study is very limited due to its small sample and narrow recruitment criteria. Although the study sought participants between the ages of 18-30, all six recruited participants were between the ages of 24-30. Similarly, the study initially sought participants widely from the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA); however, all participants were located in Toronto and Scarborough. Of the six recruited participants, five identified as women while only one identified as a man. Future studies will benefit from a larger and more diverse sample to obtain a more accurate representation of the Tamil diaspora population in Canada.

Tamil Diaspora in Canada

The Tamil diaspora community in Canada, and specifically the GTHA, is seen to have a relatively high ethnolinguistic vitality. Ethnolinguistic vitality is a conceptual tool used in the ethnolinguistic identity theory (EIT) proposed by Giles et al. (1977). Ethnolinguistic vitality contains three dimensions: demographic variables (geographical concentration, patterns of immigration), institutional supports (recognition of group and its language in media, education, and government), and status factors (prestige and sociohistorical status) (Harwood et al., 1994; Giles & Johnson, 1987). When a group is strong in each of these three factors, they are said to have high vitality. The higher the vitality of an ethnolinguistic group, the more likely that the group will thrive as a collective entity, maintain their ethnolinguistic identity, and be more disposed to acquiring native-like proficiency (Giles & Byrne, 1982; Harwood et al., 1994).

The City of Toronto and the GTHA are home to a very large Tamil population due to the mass migration that began in the 1990s. As the Tamil population in the area grew, as did the presence of institutional support such as Tamil businesses, media outlets, community groups and organizations, and public Tamil language classes (Sandercock et al., 2004). There is also Tamil representation in the Canadian government, with the first Tamil Member of Parliament being elected in 2011 (Monsebraaten, 2011). In addition, the Tamil community in the GTHA showcased its readiness to participate in collective action through the worldwide political demonstrations of 2009. During the final stages of the war, from late 2008 to May 2009, the Tamil diaspora mobilized to protest and bring awareness to the continuing humanitarian concerns of Tamils in Sri Lanka (Vimalarajah & Cheran, 2010; Kanagalingam,

2012). However, due to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and its focus on language as a dividing factor, the Tamil language may have a lower status for some – this may be heightened for second-generation Tamils as they also must compare the Tamil language to the majority language of English.

Considerable research has been done on the relationship between ethnic language achievement of second-generation immigrants and their identity with differing results per each language and its community. Some studies (Wei, 2017; Kang & Kim, 2012) show a positive relationship between language proficiency and ethnic identities, while others (Oriyama, 2010) found that heritage language proficiency does not always translate to a positive ethnic group identification.

Various studies have also examined this relationship in second-generation Tamil immigrants specifically, such as the works of Amarasingam (2008), Thurairajah (2017), and Bloch and Hirsch (2017). Both Amarasingam (2008) and Thurairajah (2017) found that an overwhelming majority of their participants felt that the Tamil language is fundamental to their ethnic identity. However, many youths in the diaspora still engaged with and celebrated their identity despite not having proficiency in the language by embracing ‘minor’ differences from the majority of society, such as cultural festivals, watching Tamil movies, and eating Tamil food.

Canagarajah’s (2013) study found that many participants used emblematic uses of Tamil and code-switching to represent their ethnic identity – this can be viewed in a similar vein to the use of symbolic ethnicity found in Amarasingam’s (2008) work. The code-switching found in Canagarajah’s study included the use of various lexical items and phrases that may not be understood for their literal meaning, but purely for symbolic reasons. Many families and children used these performative acts and use of emblematic Tamil to display their heritage language proficiency and commitment to the community. This study helps to form the idea of a reconstructed heritage language. For migrant and diaspora communities that see so much change over generations, heritage language does not necessarily need to stand stable throughout time in order to be representative of one’s identity (Canagarajah, 2013). As noted by He (2010), heritage language is dynamic rather than static and is constantly undergoing transformations by its learners and users (p. 77). Canagarajah’s work found that, in the case of the Tamil diaspora, practices are now seen as more influential than language fluency, leading many parents to opt for a practice-based orientation to language transmission.

Findings and Discussion

Relationship between Tamil Ethnic Identity and Tamil Language

The diversity of the backgrounds and upbringings of participants showcases that language maintenance is a highly complex topic. Several factors of language maintenance with differing degrees of influence on participants' fluency in Tamil were identified; the factors identified the most include home, family, and media. Almost all participants noted the importance and influence of family and upbringing on their fluency in Tamil. For example, one participant noted that their spoken proficiency developed considerably as a result of living with elderly grandparents (Muthulingam, 2022). Outside of Tamil language education and family, media, such as TV shows, movies, and music were also identified as a means of gaining knowledge of the Tamil language. Participants noted that they were able to gain an appreciation for these forms of media, as well as acquire new vocabulary and information on the Tamil language.

Other factors like watching a lot of Tamil movies is the reason I speak Tamil so well. I've watched every Vijay¹ movie like ten times. It just became a part of the words I used. (Participant A, 25, Woman).

I think something else that helps a lot is also being exposed to Tamil movies, and Tamil shows – watching them with my parents. Also listening to Tamil music – not only did it improve my language skills, but it teaches me to value the language even more. (Participant B, 26, Woman).

This study hypothesized that language plays a significant role in the identity-building of second-generation Tamil immigrants; as such, participants were asked what ethnic identity means to them (Muthulingam, 2022). Many noted the importance and influence of family and community in their ethnic identity negotiation. Although Toronto is home to the highest Tamil diaspora in Canada (Hyndman et al., 2021), the concentration of Tamil populations varies throughout the city. This was seen in the participants' perception of their identity.

¹ Popular South Indian Tamil actor in the Indian Kollywood film industry.

Because I grew up downtown, I feel that I didn't have too much contact with other Tamil people. So even the Tamil people that I knew, they came from a similar perspective, growing up downtown. (Participant A, 25, Woman).

To me, being surrounded by so much family and so many people that are from the same village as me – there's a sense of community. They're there if I wanted to draw from them. I think that's why I love Scarborough. Scarborough to me means community. Tamil is also all about community. You're able to find that community in Scarborough, but you can't really find it elsewhere. (Participant B, 26, Woman).

Others feel that their identity is something that is passed down to them from family; they take inspiration from their parents' journey and attribute their parents' lived experiences to their own identity.

To me, my biggest sources of inspiration when it comes to my identity are my parents. A lot of that has to do with their own sacrifices and struggles that they made for me. That takes a lot of resilience. It requires learning how to communicate and exist in a whole new country where the language is different – that's a sacrifice. (Participant B, 26, Woman).

Culture, arts, community, religion, location, and family were all concepts that were also mentioned. To many, 'culture' does not strictly refer to celebrations or religious aspects, but practices, and morals held by Tamils in addition to other factors such as clothing, food, and arts.

When I think of culture, I think clothing. Even things in the arts, like playing an instrument. Your identity can grow from these things. (Participant D, 30, Woman).

I think, the older I get, the more I appreciate and respect parts of our culture. Like sangeetham, Carnatic violin.² I think there's so much beauty in it. I think it's a really

² Sangeetham or Carnatic music is a form of Indian classical music that is commonly associated with various states in India and in Sri Lanka.

awesome and incredible way of being more immersed in your culture. (Participant B, 26, Woman).

An underlying element to all these actors is language - all participants agreed that language is a crucial aspect of their identity, albeit with varied reasonings. For many, language works in combination with other markers of identity, such as history and art – fluency of the Tamil language helps to strengthen their knowledge and understanding of other aspects of culture and in turn, participating in art and other various forms of culture can aid in proficiency of the Tamil language (Muthulingam, 2022).

I think it's very important. Because language is the main way you can communicate with people. I would say they go hand in hand. I feel like being able to speak Tamil also really helps with identifying who I am. Tamil people can have different villages, different religions, or different backgrounds. But the one thing that brings you all together is the language you speak. I think being able to speak in Tamil and communication with my parents and family also brought me closer. (Participant A, 25, Woman).

I think the reason I feel connected is because of language. I'm able to converse easily and understand. That's a strong reason as to why I feel more connected to my Tamil identity. (Participant D, 30, Woman).

I think being able to speak Tamil has been a driving factor to why I identify so much with being Tamil. I think it particularly has to do with the fact that I have always been the go-to translator. I feel like my language tied me back to my parents which then tied me back to my Tamil identity in a stronger way. I feel like, if I wasn't always in that translator role, I would have just been in la la land as a kid – I don't think I would have connected as strongly with my Tamil identity. (Participant F, 24, Woman).

In addition to the typical markers of identity, many participants felt that family connections, and the political and historical contexts of the Tamil diaspora are unique aspects of the collective 'Tamil identity'. All participants grew up during the time of some of the heaviest barrages of conflict and feel that the backdrop of the Sri Lankan Civil War had a

profound impact on their identity; they acknowledge the challenges and impact of the unrest on their own lives, such as intergenerational trauma, despite growing up in Canada and physically removed from any direct impacts of the war.

I think it's just a part of who I am. Mostly because my parents left the war, just like a lot of Tamil people did. We don't really identify as being Sri Lankan. I think Tamil is more than a language – it's our identity now. It's pretty much who I am. It's kind of like what we use to try to explain our background. I think just saying you're Tamil means "okay, you guys fled a civil war." Especially because it's so hard for us since we don't really have a home. Like Canada is our home, but we're not white. But we're also not Sri Lankan. I think Tamil identity is kind of what we use to fit in. (Participant A, 25, Woman).

I personally identify Tamil people a lot with oppression. I always say we're the oppressed group. I do feel like our identity is tied to oppression, just going back all the way in history. But once you take away that oppression and all the after-effects of colonization, everything that happened with the civil war – if you take all that away, I feel like Tamil people are super talented. I like to associate being Tamil with being very talented. (Participant F, 24, Woman).

I think to me the first words that come to mind is resilience. I think of struggle. I think of community. I think of sacrifice. (Participant B, 26, Woman).

Many participants feel that their identity as second-generation immigrants means that they do not have a place to truly call home; they do not feel comfortable using either 'Canadian' or 'Sri Lankan' as an identifier. This is because, although they were born and raised in Canada, they are settlers on this land and, although their parents are from Sri Lanka, they were forced out of the country for their safety. Therefore, second-generation immigrants must use 'Tamil' as a signifier and a bond for the community to create this space for them.

Despite this strong connection to this aspect of their Tamil identity, many still feel like an “outsider” in many situations, both in Sri Lanka and Canada. In Sri Lanka they would often feel unwelcome, although the participants acknowledge that this may have been due to difficulties in communicating in Tamil. Others stated that they felt excluded by the Tamil

community in Canada at the time, also acknowledging that this may not have been intentional (Muthulingam, 2022). In both cases, many feelings of unbelonging stemmed from a lack of fluency in Tamil or not being able to communicate effectively in the language.

I don't know if it's necessarily excluded, but I definitely did feel different. The way that I spoke Tamil at the time wasn't as fluent. I would include a lot of English words or mix English and Tamil together. So I think to Tamil people there, that was very odd. (Participant D, 30, Woman).

I think my family there would make fun of me. Sometimes, the way I would communicate, like in Tanglish. I don't think it was ill-intent. But I did feel othered. (Participant B, 26, Woman).

I would say yes, I have felt excluded. Even sometimes now, I feel like I still do feel that way. I think it's a little bit of feeling excluded by the community, but also a little bit of me not wanting to be a part of that community sometimes. (Participant F, 24, Woman).

Those participants who did not mention any instances of exclusion or negative feelings were more fluent in the language or more involved with cultural activities and art.

I've been able to fit in very well with Tamil people. In Tamil class, or even the high school I went to had a lot of Tamil people, so a lot of Tamil people were my friends. Same with university. So I've never felt othered or separated from them. (Participant D, 30, Woman).

I think a lot of that has to do with my roots. I think you have a natural gravitation to Tamil people when you're more in tune with your culture. Whereas, I can see some people I know that aren't as welcoming, or as engaged, or understanding of the culture, who people might consider to be white-washed or a coconut³ or something. But not in my experience. I naturally feel at home with people that are Tamil. (Participant B, 26, Woman).

³ Slang term used to symbolize feeling “white on the inside, brown on the outside”.

Overall many participants, regardless of their fluency in the language, feel that their connection to their Tamil identity has strengthened over time. This can be attributed to the multicultural environments that they grew up in and wanting to showcase their culture and identity to others. Another crucial factor is the rise in social media and greater access to resources and knowledge to allow for their own learning (Muthulingam, 2022).

I think just going to school, meeting people, and other knowledge you learn, it really shapes your way of thinking. I think my perspective has changed for the better. I think it's because I'm exposed to more people and knowledge. (Participant A, 25, Woman).

People are really proud of who they are and celebrate where they're from. We see a lot on social media. It's definitely changed. (Participant D, 30, Woman).

Many scholars, such as Shin (2016), Leeman (2015), and Val & Vinogradova (2010), have noted the importance of language in identity negotiation. This is seen in the current study as many participants have noted that they have had to learn and unlearn various notions about the Tamil identity, and have come to embrace this identity more as they have gotten older and learned more about the history and culture (Muthulingam, 2022).

Impacts of Tamil Language Education

As per the selection criteria, all participants have attended Tamil language classes. At the elementary level, all participants attended classes hosted by the Toronto District School Board. Three participants continued their Tamil language education at the secondary level; these classes were hosted by the Toronto District School Board, the Toronto Catholic District School Board, and a private school. They all noted that the classes were lecture-heavy and very minimally interactive with a focus on reading and writing as opposed to speaking. They noted having to read long passages which used a quite old and very formal tone of Tamil that is not used in modern day-to-day communication (Muthulingam, 2022).

I do remember that they would give you exercises to do; maybe they'll write it on the board or in paper form. Whether it's learning the letters or sounds. We may have had activities, but from what I remember they were solo activities. Like, are you able to write out the word? Or practice writing letters. (Participant C, 28, Man).

I think it was more grammar, writing, and reading. Now that you're making me think back, I think I spoke in English among my peers and even sometimes to my teachers. No conversations were happening in Tamil. (Participant F, 24, Woman).

I think the teacher would try to enforce speaking in Tamil but we would always speak in English with each other. I think just because that's what we were comfortable with. (Participant D, 30, Woman).

Some participants recall a few lessons on topics such as culture, the Tamil background, and holidays, such as Thai Pongal, Deepavali, and Tamil New Year⁴, however, these were very minimal; other participants made no mention of such lessons.

Yes, I think we definitely did learn about Tamil culture and our background in general. For example, one lesson was about hosting and giving food. When people come over, the act of making food and having a feast, inviting people. That's something that's practiced as a part of our culture. Those are some things that Tamil class helped me understand and bring light to. (Participant D, 30, Woman).

I think one thing I would say the classes gave me was a better understanding of Tamil culture. Like hospitality. That was the first lesson we learned every year. Also our celebrations. I got a better and deeper understanding of things like that. What I remember learning about the most are the celebrations and about hospitality. (Participant F, 24, Woman).

For some students, the classes played an important role in learning and gaining a deeper understanding of certain Tamil customs, traditions, and culture. However, It is crucial to note that all participants noted the lack of history or societal issues in the curriculum. One

⁴ Thai Pongal is a multi-day Hindu harvest festival celebrated by Tamils in India and Sri Lanka. Deepavali (also known as Diwali) is a festival of lights celebrated by Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists. Tamil New Year is the first day of the year on the Tamil calendar and is typically celebrated by Tamil Hindus.

participant noted that this was especially surprising, given the political climate in Sri Lanka at the time.

I feel like we never really delved that much into other things like the history and culture. I don't think we really talked about the history of things. Especially during that time, there was the war still happening, but we never really talked about that. (Participant E, 24, Woman).

When asked about the level of enjoyment of the class, many participants spoke more about the social aspect rather than the lessons or content of the classes. Three participants saw these evening or weekend classes as a space and time to continue to hang out with their friends after regular school hours. Other participants voiced unsatisfactory views; some noted the lax nature of the classes. For two participants in particular, the learning environment was especially unfavourable; due to their irregular attendance (one began classes at an older grade, while the other had a gap of four years in between) and a lack of placement criteria, they felt they were at a different proficiency level in comparison to their classmates, which led to feelings of cluelessness and falling behind. In both situations, they had difficulty engaging with the material appropriately and felt a lack of support from teachers which led to further discouragement.

I did it from kindergarten until grade 4. And then I didn't do it for a few years. I resumed again in grade 8 for one year, and that was my last year. In grade 8, they probably expected me to know the language and learn to write. But I guess because I skipped a few years, it was kind of difficult for me. At that level, it was more reading passages and writing paragraphs, but I wasn't there – here I am at a grade 4 level. I enjoyed it growing up, until grade 4. But when I got to grade 8, not so much. I was kind of lost. (Participant C, 28, Man).

I remember hating them. I think it also has to do with the fact that I didn't go to classes in my early years so in grade 5, I felt like all my peers knew so much more than I did so I just felt behind. I think from grade 5, I felt very behind and clueless. I felt like there wasn't much effort made – the teacher didn't really care that I was behind and didn't really put in an effort into catching me up to speed or at least telling

me where I can improve. I just always felt like I was behind. I felt that way all the way until grade 12. There was never really any sort of enjoyment that I got out of it honestly. (Participant F, 24, Woman).

There were no additional supports. Either you understood it or you didn't. And if you didn't, there wasn't anyone there to support you. So filling in those gaps. I started in grade 2, I didn't necessarily start in kindergarten. As the grades go on, the student who doesn't understand at that point, they're just going to fall behind even further. (Participant D, 30, Woman).

This led many participants to feel that the classes were insufficient in increasing their knowledge of the language. Most participants noted that they are not confident in their reading and writing of Tamil, despite the emphasis on these skills. Many also noted that the individual and monotonous nature of the work did not motivate them to learn. The overall unmotivated and discouraged feeling that was seen across participants can be seen as a critical factor that inhibited their language development (Muthulingam, 2022). As noted by Cho (2015), a low anxiety-provoking environment and engaging material is required for a student to effectively learn and increase competence in a second language. In some cases, high expectations from native speakers or family often inhibit and discourage heritage language learners (Cho, 2015). In this case, it was not necessarily the expectations of the more proficient students, but the environment that was created by being surrounded by those of different skill levels.

Effect of Tamil Language Education on Ethnic Identity

As expected, participants' views on the impact of Tamil language classes on their identity varied greatly. Those who had a positive experience feel that the classes had a positive impact, one specifically noted the environment of the class as a beneficial aspect. These participants strongly associate language as a crucial part of their identity negotiation.

I definitely think Tamil class had something to do with my Tamil identity. I don't think it was while I was attending but now when I'm looking back, I don't think I would be the same person I am today if I didn't go. Not even just going to Tamil class and

learning, but just being around Tamil people. I think in hindsight, I definitely wouldn't have connected with my Tamil identity as I do now. (Participant D, 30, Woman).

Those who did not have a positive experience feel that the classes either had no impact on their current lives, or a negative impact. These participants were not able to grasp and engage with the material in class and feel that they were able to gain a stronger grasp of the language through other means such as family or media (Muthulingam, 2022). Some also noted unpleasant social experiences in relation to these classes; these negative experiences actually hindered their desire to embrace their Tamil identity and presented a setback.

I don't think it changed my identity. I think a lot of it has to do with the environment I was raised in. Do I value it more as I got older, and do I think I would persuade my future generations to go? Yes. But when it comes to my identity, a lot of it has to do with my home. (Participant B, 26, Woman).

When I think of Tamil class, I don't have any good memories from it. To be honest, I think it was because of my experience with those classes that took me so long to embrace my identity as a Tamil girl. I was very much in touch with what's going on back home and stuff like that, but still for some reason I felt like I don't belong and I think it has to do with my social experience in those classes. (Participant F, 24, Woman).

All participants, regardless of their view of and experience in Tamil language classes, attribute much of their knowledge of the language to their parents and home upbringing. Abdelhadi (2017) and Hudyma (2012) noted similar practices with their respective participants, and both emphasize the importance of the home domain in language maintenance. One participant in the current study noted that their grasp of the Tamil language developed as a result of their role as the translator of the family (Muthulingam, 2022).

Conclusion

The data gathered in this study shows that second-generation Tamil immigrants regard language highly in relation to their ethnic identity. Although other prominent markers of identity were identified, such as family, media, geographical location, culture, and arts,

language remained an undercurrent to many of these markers. This spotlight on language is primarily due to the historical and political factors of the Tamil diaspora, such as the Sri Lankan Civil War. Participants acknowledge the effects of the war on their lives today as second-generation immigrants and feel that language is crucial to maintaining their connection to their identity.

The findings of this study show that, although language is an established critical marker of identity, Tamil language education did not have a remarkable impact on the identity building of second-generation immigrants. This is seen to be a result of several shortcomings of Tamil language classes such as a lack of engaging and relevant material, poor placement of students of different proficiency levels, and a lack of support from teachers. For some participants, Tamil language classes were also a source of negative social experiences which hindered their desire to learn the language and embrace their Tamil identity. Therefore, to be genuinely beneficial, Tamil language classes need to be restructured to consider the fluid identity and experiences of second-generation Tamil immigrants.

All participants of this study noted that substantial changes to the Tamil class curriculum and format can allow for greater benefits for students. These changes include more engaging material, more content on history and culture, and more sincere teachers. It was seen that the classes attended by the participants did not consider the experiences of second-generation immigrants who exist in a state of in-between cultures. There is a generational shift in language transmission, as seen in Canagarajah's study on language maintenance in Sri Lankan Tamil migrants (2013) – the ways in which second-generation Tamil immigrants acquire the Tamil language and involve themselves with their identity have drastically changed. Moving forward, Tamil language education needs to reflect this change in students by focusing on material and content that reflects their experiences, fills their gaps in knowledge, and engages with students in meaningful ways that will allow them to deepen their connection to their Tamil identity.

The results of this study provide a number of future directions for both research and policy. It would be useful to validate this study with a larger, and more diverse sample. It would be greatly beneficial to further explore other factors of language maintenance such as socio-economic factors, gender identification, and migration status, and how they potentially affect second-generation Tamil immigrants' identity negotiation. It would also be intriguing to examine other aspects of language acquisition in this community more closely, including embodiment and diglossia. This study also showcases the importance of a consistent and

flexible pedagogy and curriculum in relation to heritage language teaching as each participant's experience in Tamil language classes varied so greatly. As participants noted, differing learning styles, baseline knowledge between students' needs, as well as the fluidity of students' identities, should be acknowledged in a supportive environment to facilitate heritage language learning. This is an additional area for future research that can, in turn, be used to create positive changes in heritage language education policy to benefit Tamil students.

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