

# Journeys in Language Learning as Adults: A Kannadiga Learning Tamil and a TAMILIAN Learning Kannada

**Brinda U. Rao | [brindaurao@gmail.com](mailto:brindaurao@gmail.com)**

Brinda U. Rao provides support for continuous professional development of teachers of Sri Ramakrishna Vidya Kendra, a rural school in Karnataka run by Ramakrishna Mission, Shivanahalli. She enjoys translating educationally relevant literature from English to Kannada.

**Key Words:** Language learning in non-tutored settings, Adult language learning, Learning local languages

## Abstract

This is a narrative about two people who each learnt an unfamiliar language as adults. Both felt that they had to learn the language because the situations they were in demanded it, and both got ample support in acquiring the languages. In this article, I have discussed how, in addition to the felt necessity and the support they received, it is their personal motivation and voluntary effort that led to the learning of the new language.

## Introduction

I am presenting here the journeys of two adults who each learnt a new language in very different circumstances. Both were proficient in their respective home languages and English. They had little to no prior exposure to the language that they learnt as adults. Both learners learnt the new language in the State of the Indian Union where it was spoken by the majority of the people. They were happy to narrate their experiences, and have permitted me to use their names. I am grateful to Sridharan S. and Akila R. for sharing their experiences and making this article possible.

## A Mysorean Engineer Learns Tamil

Sridharan S. lived in Mysore (now Mysuru), Karnataka. He studied in a Kannada medium school where he consistently scored good marks, got into an English medium high school, and eventually got admission in a prestigious engineering college. He graduated at the age of 22, following which he was selected for a job in a public sector company called National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) in 1986. Up to this point in his life, he had lived in Mysore in a completely Kannada environment. His first posting was at Neyveli, Tamil Nadu. Sridharan went there all excited and happy.

"After the first couple of days, I felt totally lost in this little town," says Sridharan. He could not get himself from home to work because all the bus signboards were in Tamil. His attempts to ask people for help, using English, were met sometimes with a smile, sometimes with a frown, and

sometimes, people simply pointed towards the signboards. He imagined that the local people thought he was illiterate; this was a blow to Sridharan's pride. He felt he had no choice but to learn Tamil, and to learn it quickly. He bought a book with the title *Learn Tamil in 30 Days*. The first thing he did was to memorize the letters of the Tamil alphabet so that he could read the names of the places on the bus signboards.

Being an entry level engineer, he was expected to work on-site, where he had to interact with construction labourers and contractors, who were all Tamil-speaking monolinguals. This he considers as a blessing in disguise. At the field office, his colleagues helped him to speak in Tamil by teaching him new words that he needed to use and sometimes by correcting him as he spoke.

Neyveli, being a small town, had very few options for entertainment other than Tamil movies in theatres. Sridharan watched many Tamil movies. He watched some movies more than once. According to him, Tamil movies refined his language. He understood the right ways of putting across feelings and ideas through these movies. He says there were times when he offended his colleagues with malapropisms; for instance, using the word *mattai* (coir fibre that covers the coconut) for *mottai* (bald head). He was not able to distinguish the subtle differences among many such words when native speakers uttered them, but he was able to distinguish the same words and understand them in the context of movies. He was able to connect this learning with his conversations with people.

By his estimate, it took him at least six months to learn the language, and two years to attain mastery over it. He now says he possesses native-like competency in listening and speaking. He can read well and understands most of what he reads, even though his reading is

limited to newspapers and magazines, which could be termed as "light" reading. He can write reasonably well, but is not very confident of his writing skills. When asked specifically if all out-of-state employees at NTPC-Neyveli had knowledge of Tamil, Sridharan said there were a few north Indians who managed to work there without learning the language.

Sridharan now lives in Kadiri, a small town in Andhra Pradesh. He does not understand Telugu as well as he understands Tamil. He says he is able to manage without knowing the local language. He regrets that even after almost two years in Andhra Pradesh, he is unable to read or write Telugu. He barely manages to understand and speak the language. When asked the reason for his not being able to read the Telugu script, which is very close to the Kannada script, his response was that he thinks he has not learnt it precisely because they are so similar. He is able to read by guessing at the words, and hence has not put in the effort to understand the differences between the two scripts and gain competency in the Telugu script. He says that he has not been able to invest the time to learn Telugu.

## A Tamilian Teacher Educator Learns Kannada

Akila R. lived in Chennai in a monolingual Tamil environment, except for the exposure to English that her school provided. When she was 17, a new family moved into the house next to hers. The neighbour had a cute one-year-old infant. The child had not started speaking yet, and he understood only Kannada. Akila became friends with the family and tried to learn Kannada in order to be able to communicate with the infant. Her attempts to speak Kannada were supported wholeheartedly by the family.

Along with the language Akila was also introduced to the culture and cuisine of Karnataka. In fact, the family went to great lengths to teach her Kannada. For example, the grandmother in the family, while sharing a recipe, showed her the ingredients as well as the "*paavu*" (a unit of measure for volume), to help her understand the words. While Akila learnt many words through these interactions, she was still not able to make sentences on her own. Her journey in learning Kannada had begun. But she did not gain any proficiency in Kannada and could at best manage to communicate with her neighbour's family.

Five years later, Akila got married and moved to Bangalore (now Bengaluru). In Bangalore, she stayed in an area that had a large Tamil-speaking population. During her stay in Bangalore, she taught at a junior college. She was the only person in the staff room who did not speak Kannada. She got to listen to a lot of Kannada that was being spoken around her, but she herself always spoke in English. Gradually, her Kannada vocabulary expanded, and she was able to understand Kannada for the most part. She even took part in a Kannada play put up by the lecturers for the students. For her role in the play, Akila memorized the dialogues. However, in spite of all this exposure, her spoken Kannada did not improve much.

Despite the language barrier, Akila had no trouble for most transactions except when she had to catch the bus to commute from home to work. She was unable to read the bus signboards. According to her, in the year 1999, the bus route numbers and the destination names were displayed only in the Kannada script. So, she bought a book and learnt to read the numbers in the Kannada script. She knew the bus numbers for her route and managed her commute by reading the bus numbers in Kannada. At that time, she didn't go farther than that; she did not learn the letters of the Kannada alphabet

because she did not feel the need to learn them. Akila remembers that her interactions with vegetable vendors, the landlady and others were in Tamil. Their Tamil was somewhat broken and far from proficient, but since they were able to communicate with each other, she made very little progress in learning Kannada.

Akila and her husband moved out of Bangalore for four years and then moved back in 2003 with their one-year-old daughter. This time they moved into a locality where there were plenty of Kannada speakers. Their daughter wanted to play with the children in the neighbourhood who spoke only Kannada. Akila, who was now a stay-at-home mom, had no choice but to come out with her child and make friends. Since most of the people she interacted with—neighbours, mechanics, helpers, vegetable vendors—were predominantly Kannada-speaking, Akila had to get out of her comfort zone and start speaking in Kannada.

A year later, Akila started working with R.V. Educational Consortium (RVEC). Among other things, RVEC worked with government school teachers, many of whom were Kannada monolinguals. As part of her job, Akila had to interact with the Kannada-speaking teachers. Some of these teachers were from different parts of Karnataka and spoke Kannada in different accents. It became impossible for Akila to carry on her work without her colleagues helping her out. So, she decided to step up her efforts to become more fluent in Kannada. In order to improve her language skills, she started speaking only in Kannada with her colleagues. She feels there was a very positive environment which helped her become fluent in Kannada. Within a year she became a confident speaker. This happened in 2005 when Akila was 28 years old.

Akila continued to work with RVEC for a few more years and was even exposed to

Kannada literature during the poetry and story reading sessions. During these sessions, Akila estimates that she was able to understand most of the subject matter, but still needed clarifications for about 20 per cent of the content. She still does not read or write Kannada. She says that she plans to start practicing reading and writing in Kannada.

Finally, Akila added that her husband has lived in Bangalore for 20 years and still does not speak Kannada. At his work place he needs to speak only in English, and his social interactions at home are either in Tamil or in English. When he has to do transactions such as buying vegetables, he either goes to supermarkets where he can pick his own vegetables, or chooses to interact with people who can speak Tamil or English. Akila feels that since her husband is able to manage at work as well as at home without having to speak Kannada, he has not put in the effort to learn the language. This is why even though he has lived for a long period of time in a Kannada-speaking area, he has not learnt Kannada.

## Some Observations about the Two Language Learning Journeys

There are a lot of similarities in the language learning journeys of Sridharan and Akila. The two learners made real progress in the language they were learning when they felt an absolute need to learn it and were willing to put in the effort. Akila had an opportunity to learn Kannada in Chennai when she was 17 years old, and again five years later when she first moved to Bangalore. However, she became a fluent speaker of Kannada only the second time the family moved to Bangalore, when she chose to put in all the required effort. The motivation for her

was that she felt it was absolutely essential to learn Kannada as a teacher educator. The reason she suggests for her husband's lack of Kannada skills also corroborates this. According to Akila, he does not feel the need to put in the required effort.

This is also similar to Sridharan's experience with Telugu. Sridharan has now lived in a small town in Andhra Pradesh where he is surrounded by Telugu-speaking people. Although he has been living there for two years, and despite the many similarities between the Kannada and the Telugu languages, he has not learnt Telugu the way he earlier learnt Tamil. It is pertinent to note that according to Sridharan his Hindi-speaking colleagues in Neyveli did not learn Tamil. They managed to live and work there

without learning Tamil, while Sridharan felt compelled to learn the language.

It can be seen that when these two learners, Akila and Sridharan, wanted to acquire the language that they were surrounded by, they made use of the opportunities that were available to them. Both of them felt they had to shed their inhibitions and so they made an effort to do so. Further, both received plenty of help and encouragement from friends and co-workers. Akila and Sridharan felt they absolutely needed this intensive learning environment for about six months to one year to become confident speakers. The opportunities presented to them, coupled with their motivation and effort, helped them to find success in their language learning journeys.