

# VOICES OF STUDENTS

## Three Languages, Three Paradigms

Ashvin Srivatsa



I have some degree of familiarity with three languages: English, Tamil, and Japanese. English is my native tongue - I've learned it since I was born, and it has been the medium of instruction in all of my schooling. Tamil is the language spoken by my family at home - though I've never received formal instruction in Tamil, I have been exposed to it on my yearly vacations in India. Unlike Tamil and English, my only exposure to Japanese is in the classroom. Each of these languages has influenced my intellectual development in a different way, and I shall herein attempt to describe my experience with each of these languages.

English is nothing new to me - as a resident of the US, I have been exposed to this language since birth. I would consider myself a proficient speaker, reader, and writer of the English language. Naturally, multiple factors have contributed to this. No single educational approach would have imbued me with the competence that I now possess. My experience with English began when I was but a wee lad - my parents read to me frequently when I was young. This provided me with the solid basis from which I could later proceed to expand my knowledge of English.

Prior to the beginning of my formal schooling at age five, I was exposed to all sorts of English-language stimuli, ranging from books and billboards to television and conversations and even to vehicular license plates. It is my firm belief that interacting with English from such a wide variety of sources was absolutely fundamental to my development. By absorbing all the information I could from my surroundings, I became well-prepared for the formal phase of English instruction that began upon my entrance to the primary school system.

Ever since entering kindergarten, I have been formally taught English. Though there has been a gradual shift in focus over the years, with ever-greater emphasis being placed on the analysis of English literature rather than

the mechanical aspects of the English language, the analytical and mechanical components of the language are inseparable - a firm basis in the mechanics of English is a prerequisite for conducting sophisticated analysis, while performing analysis will invariably leave one with a greater appreciation for the mechanics of the language. The synergistic effect of these two aspects of learning seems to have been of great value to my acquisition of English.

The final and most crucial component of my journey to acquire English has been my insatiable desire to read. Ever since learning how to read as a youth, I have always felt the urge to study the written word. During some parts of my life, I had eyes only for almanacs and encyclopedias; at other times, I preferred whimsical tales of fantastic adventure. No matter what I read, I was furthering my knowledge of English, acquiring new vocabulary one day and perusing a unique sort of diction the next.

It is this holistic way of learning English - one that incorporated instruction in the classroom, parental aid, and self-directed inquiry - that provided me with the proficiency in the English language that I today possess. My experience with English has been one that is an example of fully-realized potential - an example of the great knowledge one can achieve given the appropriate strategy. Indeed, the inclusive and effective way I learned (and continue to learn) English has served as a model for the way I now choose to approach my own education.

But for all that I might say about my understanding of English, I can say none of the same about Tamil - I can neither read nor write it and my comprehension of spoken Tamil is rudimentary at best. Though my parents have always used some Tamil in speaking with me, this has been the extent of my exposure to the language. Whereas I was continuously exposed to English and able to assimilate new knowledge on a

regular basis, the same cannot be said for Tamil. I never had access to Tamil publications, scarcely had the opportunity to interact with other Tamil speakers, and had no practical reason to learn Tamil. Even when visiting my relatives in India, I could survive without ever speaking a word of Tamil.

In the absence of any need to speak Tamil, I felt no motivation to put in the effort necessary to become a skilled Tamil-user, despite the occasional overtures by my parents indicating their desire that I try to speak Tamil more often. Today, I certainly recognize the value of learning a language as an intellectual pursuit if for no other reason, but as a youth, such advanced reasoning was absent. Faced with both a lack of resources and a lack of motivation, my Tamil never progressed to a sophisticated level, though there is certainly no impassable barrier stopping me from learning the language. To me, Tamil stands as an example of what could have been, but was not - potential left unrealized due to mere logistical factors.

The way I have approached the Japanese language is in some ways a middle-ground between my experiences with Tamil and English, and in some ways completely unique. To the best of my knowledge, I am the first person in my family to have learned anything more than a rudimentary sort of Japanese. For this reason, I had absolutely no experience with the language until a class in Japanese was offered by my school from the seventh grade onwards. I entered that class with no idea of what to expect, no foreknowledge of what Japanese would be like and what I would learn from that class. Having studied it for four-and-a-half years now, I can say that in addition to teaching me Japanese, this class broadened my horizons in a way I never expected. In addition to presenting me with a look into Japanese society, a singular culture like none else, it influenced the way I learned in general: I found myself able to apply the pedagogical strategies I acquired to my other classes, indubitably enhancing the way I learned anything.

My school's Japanese language curriculum is unlike the curriculum for many of the other foreign languages

taught at my school, in that it prescribes teaching not only of the mechanical aspects of the Japanese language, but also of the ways in which the Japanese language is relevant to both historical Japanese society and contemporary Japanese culture.

From the very beginning, the new phrases we learned were placed in a context that made them significantly more memorable and relevant to my life. Within the first few weeks of class, we learned how to ask and answer questions such as "Where is the bread?" This information was swiftly followed up with a video of an interaction between a grocery store customer and clerk with the customer inquiring as to the location of a particular comestible and the clerk answering the customer's query, entirely in Japanese. There is no doubt in my mind that this demonstration of the relevancy of the grammatical structure we had just learned was immensely helpful in cementing that structure in my mind.

This process has continued over the years, despite the increasing abstraction of the lingual elements studied - for example, Japanese is a highly honorific language and usage of the proper vocabulary in the proper situations is crucial to being able to function in Japan. Rather than treating honorific terminology as something entirely abstract, we were presented with social situations in which certain honorifics were appropriate, sometimes in the form of video and sometimes in the form of a skit.

Throughout my study of the Japanese language, reinforcement of the practical ties between the language and its societal implications was crucial to making the things I learned more memorable. Beyond the immediate consequences of understanding Japanese as it would pertain to being able to operate in Japanese society, learning Japanese taught me to think in a new way - to develop analogies between the English language with which I am intimately familiar and the Japanese language which was once entirely foreign to me; to approach the complexities of Japanese society by examining how each aspect of Japanese society relates to its language. Japanese has

also taught me to think about writing in a completely new way, for its writing system is syllabic and pictographic, rather than the alphabetic and alphabet-like systems so much more familiar to many. Though learning a new language may not yield this *particular* benefit, there are sure to be other hidden rewards from studying any language at all.

In looking back at the languages I have learned, it seems that each language can be characterized in a unique way - English, for example, was the language that was inextricable from and inherent to my way of life. I have learned English both in the classroom and in a freeform manner, such as when I read for my own pleasure.

I have only learned Japanese in the structured environment of the classroom, on the other hand, and have never been exposed to a wide variety of stimuli beyond that which is presented in the classroom. Though this has left me with a firm understanding of the Japanese I have so far learned, it has limited my ability to innovate in Japanese -this will remain so until I receive significant exposure to Japanese outside the classroom. Of course, this is not to say that my Japanese is bound to remain forever inadequate -in some cases, this sort of firm basis is all that is necessary.

Tamil, in this sense, is completely the opposite of Japanese. Though I have never received formal instruction

in the language, I have been exposed to it since I was born and have received a good deal of exposure to the language in the form of conversation with my family. This has left me with little but the ability to think effectively about learning Tamil. Indeed, it is this that I make my goal - using the skills I have gained from my study of Japanese, I hope to learn Tamil in a somewhat structured environment. Because I have experience with Tamil as a sort of native language, it is my hope that someday, my knowledge of Tamil may rival my knowledge of English. For, after all, if knowing three languages is alone enough to help one learn, would not knowing three languages *well* help even more?

*Ashvin Srivatsa is a lifelong learner and a gifted student who is passionate about Mathematics, the Sciences, Japanese and Music. To accelerate his pace of learning, Ashvin has taken a suite of advanced placement courses (college level courses) both from his school as well as from Stanford University's Educational Programs for Gifted Youth and North Western University's Center for Talent Development. In fall 2009, Ashvin is entering his senior year at Sycamore High School in Cincinnati, Ohio. He is an avid reader who likes to read just for learning, loves a hearty laugh, and travels to India every year to visit his family. He can be contacted at [ashvin.21@gmail.com](mailto:ashvin.21@gmail.com)*

