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**Bridging faith, languages and learning in London: A faith teacher reflects upon pedagogy in religious instruction classes**

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**Abstract**

In this article we examine a faith teacher's reflections on faith literacy teaching and learning and how they shaped his pedagogy in the context of Hindu/Saiva religious instruction classes for students of Sri Lankan Tamil heritage. The data are part of a larger multi-site three-year team ethnography of children's faith literacy learning in places of worship, religious education classes and homes across four ethno-linguistic communities in London (Bangladeshi Muslim, Polish Catholic, Ghanaian Pentecostal and Tamil Hindu/Saiva). In this article, we focus on one of the Hindu/Saiva faith teachers by combining an in-depth semi-structured interview with the teacher in question with participant observations and video-recordings of faith lessons. Drawing on the faith teacher's reflections, we identify the changes in the nature and scope of faith literacy learning across time and in the London diasporic setting and demonstrate how the faith teacher responded to them by adopting flexible language practices where English (the majority language) was used alongside Tamil (the community and devotional language) as a learning resource. The faith teacher's pedagogic approach emerged as a pragmatic and contextual response to the students' diverse capabilities in class, with the purpose of making faith literacy learning accessible and relevant to their lives.

**Key words:** faith as a social practice, team ethnography, pedagogy, teacher reflections, Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora

**Introduction**

In this article we examine a faith teacher's reflections on faith literacy teaching and learning and how they came to shape his pedagogy in the context of Hindu/Saiva[[1]](#footnote-1) religious instruction classes for students of Sri Lankan Tamil heritage in London. We situate our work in an emergent field of inquiry within literacy studies that views faith as a cultural practice. It has called attention to the role of faith in children's language and literacy learning, their socialisation and the development of their personal and collective identities across settings (Heath 1983; Gregory and Williams 2000; Lytra, Volk, and Gregory 2016). This focus comes as a response to dominant discourses in Western societies that often ignore, trivialize or render problematic learning in and through faith compared to those languages, literacies, heritages and identities commonly valued in schools (Genishi and Dyson 2009; Gregory, Long, and Volk 2004; Long forthcoming 2016; Skerrett 2013). Within this body of work, scholars have started to document the pedagogic routines and practices as well as the cultural, linguistic, scriptal and embodied resources, strategies, knowledge and frameworks of interpretation faith teachers may draw upon in faith lessons (e.g. Baquedano-López 2008; Fader 2009; Moore 2013; Peele-Eady 2011; Rosowsky 2008, 2013; Volk and de Acosta 2001).

Our paper extends current research on teaching and learning in religious education classes in two ways: First, it focuses on the faith teacher's biography, his personal and professional trajectory as he makes sense of how faith literacy learning has changed over time and in London. Faith teachers are crucial mediators of faith literacy learning; yet their voices are frequently ignored in literacy studies. Examining their reflections alongside their pedagogic approaches can help us better understand the role of faith and faith literacies in students' lives and how they contribute to their learning across contexts challenging the divide between school-based and out of school-based literacies. Moreover, this research focus allows us to examine the faith teacher as a situated social actor and how his pedagogy has been shaped by the opportunities and constraints of the institutional and diasporic contexts in which the faith lessons are embedded. Second, previous empirical research on teaching and learning in religious education classes has mainly examined Christian, Muslim and Jewish faith classes. To our knowledge, this is the first investigation of teaching and learning in Hindu/Saiva faith classes in the diaspora. A recent report of the Commission of Religion and Belief in British Public Life (2015, 24) highlighted the need for a deeper understanding not only of Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) but also of Dharmic religions (Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism), which are generally under-researched in the UK. We see our focus on the Tamil Hindu/Saiva religious education classes as a step towards that direction.

The data presented in this paper are part of a multi-site three-year team ethnography of children's language and literacy learning through faith in places of worship, religious education classes and homes across four ethno-linguistic communities in London (Bangladeshi Muslim, Polish Catholic, Ghanaian Pentecostal and Tamil Hindu/Saiva). In this paper, we focus on one of the faith teachers teaching the advanced Hindu/Saiva faith class in a Tamil complementary school run by a Sri Lankan Tamil faith-based voluntary community organisation. We combine an in-depth semi-structured interview with the faith teacher with participant observations and video-recordings of faith lessons. We propose a syncretic frame to faith as a cultural practice that weaves together elements from language socialisation and sociocultural approaches (Lytra, Gregory and Volk, 2016) to examine the following questions: (a) How has the context of migration and diasporic life changed the nature and scope of faith literacy learning over time and in the London setting? (b) How has the faith teacher adapted and transformed his teaching practices to respond to these changes?

In the following sections, we start by situating our paper within existing studies that have viewed faith as a cultural practice and have investigated faith teachers' pedagogic practices and beliefs. This is followed by a discussion of collaborative team ethnography as our methodological approach. We proceed with the context of study followed by our findings.

**Theoretical Perspectives**

This paper contributes to studies, which view faith as a cultural practice underpinning the lives of many children and adults (Heath 1983; Gregory and Williams 2000; Gregory, Long, and Volk 2004; Lytra, Volk, and Gregory 2016). As such, we regard faith as embedded in specific local and global contexts that provide children and adults with membership and a sense of belonging in the faith community through active participation and apprenticeship, which is often mediated intergenerationally. Our understanding of faith as cultural practice allows us to explore how adults and more knowledgeable community members use languages, scripts, embodied resources and bodies of knowledge to socialise children into the faith community's linguistic, social and cultural practices, values and moral dispositions. What makes this learning unique is its purpose. Indeed, the purpose of faith literacy learning is not the acquisition of language and literacy skills per se; rather the knowledge, competences and performances learnt and perfected over time are the means to building a relationship with a higher and eternal being (Gregory and Lytra 2012).

A number of existing studies that take faith as a cultural practice have investigated faith teachers' pedagogies. They have examined how through language faith teachers come to socialise children into ways of thinking, feeling, and communicating as children learn to become capable members of their respective faith communities. For instance, Peele-Eady (2011) showed how Sunday school teachers in a Black Church in the US made use of pedagogic routines, such as question and known-answer sequences, repetition and memorization as well as drawing connections between the lesson content and the children's experiences. She argued that through these routines they successfully mediated religious and doctrinal learning and prepared children to become active and competent members of the Black Church. In Baquedano-López (2000), the author illustrated how two Mexican Catholic faith teachers drew on the religious narrative tellings of Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico and by extension Latin America, in Spanish to construct a unique collective diasporic Mexican identity in Los Angeles, in the US. These scholars have been concerned with how faith teachers' pedagogic practices might empower children and minority ethnic communities, which have experienced hardship and discrimination.

Several studies of faith as a cultural practice in bi/multilingual faith settings in particular have focused on the language interrelationship in the teaching and learning of faith. For example, Moore (2013) examined the interrelationship between Qur'anic Arabic (the liturgical language of Islam) and Fulfulbe (spoken as a first language by the Fulbe of Northern Cameroon) in faith teachers' delivery of Qur'anic school sermons. The embedding of the two languages served a dual purpose: Qur'anic Arabic gave the faith teachers' sermons religious and moral authority while the use of Fulfulbe sought to make the meanings of the sacred texts accessible to children and relevant to their everyday lives. In his comparative study of three faith settings, a Jewish Cheder, a Sikh Gurdwara and a Muslim Mosque in the UK, Rosowsky (2013) showed how faith teachers emphasized the decoding of liturgical languages and the importance of interpreting meaning in a symbolic and aesthetic framework than a purely referential one. At the same time, he argued that the language interrelationship between liturgical languages, English and spoken and literate community languages in each multilingual setting depended on the migration trajectories and historical and social background of each faith community. These studies have demonstrated how faith teachers' language practices were influenced by institutional, social and ideological forces at a local level as well as broader political and historical processes of migration, globalisation and post-colonialism (see also Auleear Odowally and Unjore 2013; Baquedano-Lopez and Ochs 2002; Moore 2011).

This emergent line of research on teaching and learning in faith classes is situated largely within language socialisation and sociocultural approaches. Lytra, Volk and Gregory (2016, 3) discuss how the two approaches have different starting-points: "studies stressing a language socialization approach put language at the center of their work (as the term suggests) and work outwards towards the context in which learning occurs; other studies refer to the sociocultural context in which learning takes place as key and focus on the context of learning in which language is just one part (as the term suggests)". They contend that the study of faith as a cultural practice can provide a frame for syncretizing both approaches (ibid, 4). In this study, we propose a syncretic frame that draws attention to the faith teacher as mediator of faith literacy learning and the sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts in which faith learning and teaching is enacted as well as to the language interrelationship between Tamil (the community and devotional language) and English (the majority language). We argue that through this syncretic frame we bring together a long view drawing on the faith teacher's reflections on his personal and professional trajectory as we inquire into what has changed in faith literacy teaching over time and in the London diasporic setting with the here-and-now through examples of pedagogic practice in faith lessons.

**Methodology**

The data reported in this paper are part of a larger study entitled "Becoming Literate in Faith Settings: Language and Literacy Learning in the Lives of New Londoners" which was funded by the Economic and Social Council, UK (Gregory et al. 2009). To our knowledge, this is the first collaborative multi-site team ethnography spanning a period of three years and exploring how sixteen children aged between four and twelve at the onset of the study from Bangladeshi Muslim, Ghanaian Pentecostal, Polish Catholic and Tamil Hindu/Saiva faith communities developed their languages, literacies and identities through faith activities in contemporary London. From 2009 to 2013 we formed a team of eleven researchers sharing a range of linguistic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, age, gender, professional and educational circumstances, religious and non-religious beliefs and worked with four families from each faith community, their faith leaders and faith teachers as well as older members of the faith communities. We took a collaborative case study approach, working in four research pairs where a new researcher who was a member of the faith community (in three out of the four case studies) was paired with a more senior research partner who was not (in three out of the four case studies). In the Tamil Hindu/Saiva case study, Vally Lytra and Arani Ilankuberan worked together as a research pair and Eve Gregory was Principle Investigator for the project.

In this paper, we chose to report on one of the Hindu/Saiva faith teachers participating in the Tamil Hindu/Saiva case study. Our focus on one faith teacher only was to provide a comprehensive portrait of the teacher's reflections on faith literacy learning and his pedagogy rather than an attempt to compare him with other faith teachers in our study or generalise beyond. The faith teacher in question had a long and sustained community engagement in a range of institutional roles, including that of faith teacher and head teacher in the Tamil school where the faith classes took place. The data presented are drawn from an in-depth semi-structured interview with the faith teacher teaching the advance faith class coupled with participant observations and video-recordings of faith lessons. The data were collected as part of a multi-method approach to data collection, which was developed in collaboration with the children and their families, the faith leaders and faith teachers and other members of the faith communities (see Gregory and Lytra 2012 and Lytra et al. forthcoming 2016 for further details of the project methodology).

One of the key questions we investigated in our team ethnography was the way in which faith literacy practices had changed over time and in the London setting and how these changes were perceived across generations. To examine change, in all interviews with research participants we adopted a reflective approach by "asking questions that not only give information to the researcher but also stimulate teachers to reflect on why they engage in a particular activity" (Moran and Hakuta 1995 reported in Probyn 2001, 253). The interview with the faith teacher in this paper was conducted in English. It lasted approximately 60 minutes and was audiorecorded and transcribed. It was analysed following a thematic analysis and coded according to changes the faith teacher had observed in the teaching of faith, the curricular objectives, the languages used and the children and families' participation in faith activities at home and in the faith setting. Further codes included comparisons between "now" (present-day London) and "then" (the country of origin, when he was growing up) and different periods in the history of the faith setting as well as personal narratives of change throughout his teaching trajectory.

We combined the interview data with participant observations throughout the duration of the ethnography and three video-recordings of faith lessons. We adopted a multi-layering approach to data analysis (Gregory and Williams 2000; Gregory, Lytra and Ilankuberan 2015). Starting from an analysis of the outer layer we discuss two themes that emerged in the interview with the faith teacher: change in the purpose of faith literacy learning in order to meet the cultural, social, moral and spiritual needs of mainly British born children growing up in present-day London and change in the children's frequency and degree of engagement with faith literacy learning. Then, we move to the middle layer to examine how the faith teacher responded to these changes by adapting and transforming his pedagogy. Finally, we discuss the inner layer focusing on a detailed analysis of the language interrelationship in one recurring faith literacy activity, namely exploratory discussions of key principles, beliefs and values of the faith. The activity we unpick explores the role and significance of Temple worship in children's lives.

**The Context of Study**

***Sri Lankan migration in the UK***

Sri Lankan Tamil migration to the UK is not a new phenomenon. It took place in three major migration waves (Daniel and Thangaraj 1995). The first migration wave occurred around and after Sri Lankan independence from British rule in 1948 and included mainly professionals and students from upper class backgrounds. The introduction of discriminatory measures against the Tamil minority by the Singhalese-dominated majority triggered the second migration wave. This gathered momentum in the 1960s after legislation was passed that made Sinhala the only official language of the country and inter-ethnic relations deteriorated into rival nationalisms. The armed conflict between government forces and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealem (LTTE) from 1983 onwards led to civil war and the mass exodus of Tamils many of who fled their homes and arrived in the UK as refugees. The 25-year civil war ended in 2009 with the defeat of the LTTE. The first two waves secured positions in the public sector, white-collar jobs and in the professions. Subsequent waves have been active into other areas of economic activity, particularly in small business. Although no official census data exist, the UK Tamil population is estimated between 70,000-100,000 with the majority living in London (see Van Hear, Pieke and Vetrovec 2004 for further details). While there are important differences in terms of education, socio-economic status, political and religious affiliation between and within the different migration cohorts which have caused tensions, Sri Lankan Tamils have been united in their desire to preserve and keep alive their contested language, culture and identity. Similar to other diasporic communities in the UK, one way this has been sought is by creating an extended network of community-based organisations, places of worship and Tamil complementary schools across London.

***The Hindu/Saiva faith classes***

One such community-based organisation is the Saiva Munnetta Sangam.[[2]](#footnote-2) Set up in 1977, this Sri Lankan Tamil faith-based voluntary organisation was conceived on the principles, beliefs and values of Saivaism. Among other services, it runs the Nalvar Tamil Academy, the Tamil school, where the faith classes described in this paper take place. Reflecting the diversity of the Tamil diaspora in London, the Tamil school brings together newly arrived and second/third generation British born children of Tamil heritage with ancestral ties from different regions mainly in Sri Lanka and to a lesser extent from the state of Tamil Nadu in India. Besides Hindu/Saiva families, several Christian and Muslim Tamil families send their children to the Tamil school.

Hindu/Saiva faith classes take place on Sundays following the two-hour Tamil community language classes and they are optional. Most Hindu/Saiva children attend these classes on a regular basis. Faith classes are age-based, accommodating 20-30 children in each class. There are three levels separated into beginners (5-7 year olds), intermediate (8-10 year olds) and advanced (11-16 year olds). In the beginners' class, the emphasis is on repeating, memorising and practising the singing of Tamil devotional hymns and the chanting of Hindu mantras in Sanskrit. Sometimes, the faith teachers tell religious stories to the children and the children act out scenes from these stories. In the intermediate class, the focus is on developing an understanding of the social, cultural and historical contexts in which the devotional hymns the children learned to sing were created. The children learn about the history of the hymns and stories about the lives of the saints who created them. They also start to explore religious concepts and sometimes engage in short discussions about them. In the advanced class, attention is shifted to developing a deeper understanding of the meanings of the devotional hymns and religious concepts. The faith teachers guide the children in a close analysis of the devotional hymns in terms of the language used and their content. Through exploratory discussions they investigate what the devotional hymns mean, their purpose in the larger canon of religious texts and their importance to daily worship in present-day London. Therefore, there is progression across the three faith classes in terms of religious content as well as in the range and cognitive complexity of faith literacy practices and skills students are expected to learn, practice and perform.

Each faith class has one principle faith teacher and sometimes one or two assistants may occasionally contribute. Faith teachers acquire their religious knowledge through self-study. It is important to point out that faith teachers teach on a voluntary basis motivated by their passion and commitment for sustaining Tamil language and culture and the Hindu/Saiva faith in the diaspora. Over the years, the faith teachers have developed a set of guidelines outlining the religious content taught in each class as well as a bank of teaching materials from India for each level, which they periodically revise and update. Although the faith teachers meet regularly to discuss organisational issues (e.g. substitute teaching arrangements), to date there appears to be less discussion about developing common pedagogic principles and approaches. Faith literacy teaching across the three levels seems to be highly individualised with each faith teacher bringing his/her own unique teaching style in the delivery of the lesson. Nevertheless, the faith teachers share an inherent aspiration to improve pedagogy and look for inspiration in teaching methods from mainstream schools in the UK.

During faith lessons, faith teachers flexibly use vernacular and literate forms of Tamil and English to enable students to learn and develop their understanding of the religious curriculum. Faith teachers tend to teach the same group of students over several years and they know well most of the students and their families. They are cognisant that students' language and literacy capabilities in Tamil vary within and across the faith classes, ranging from limited to more proficient while English is the language students are most comfortable and competent in. While faith teachers have high expectations of the students' moral and spiritual development, they do no expect students to be able to access the religious curriculum in Tamil only, especially as the content of the faith lessons becomes cognitively and linguistically more demanding in the intermediate and advanced classes.

**Findings**

***Outer Layer: Change in Faith Literacy Learning across Time and in the London Setting***

The faith teacher featured in this paper is Ananth Master.[[3]](#footnote-3) Born in Sri Lanka, Ananth Master immigrated to the UK in the mid 1970s to study. He is Religious Secretary of the Saiva Munnetta Sangam and head teacher of the Tamil school. Since settling in London, he has been teaching Tamil and in the last decade he has also been leading the advanced faith class. He speaks Tamil, English and Sinhala (the native language of the Sinhalese, the largest ethnic group in Sri Lanka) and understands Sanskrit for devotional purposes.

The move of practising Hinduism/Saivaism from its original historical, cultural and social context in Sri Lanka to London brought about changes in the purpose as well as in the frequency and degree of engagement with faith literacy learning. In his interview, Ananth Master emphasised that the purpose of faith classes was to guide children to become competent members of the Hindu/Saiva faith community. At the same time, the faith community was understood to be embedded in broader British society whose members mainly shared other religious or non-religious beliefs. Therefore, another important purpose of faith literacy learning was to guide children to become responsible adults and citizens. For Ananth Master, this dual purpose allowed children to experience "living in simultaneous worlds" rather than experiencing the two languages and cultures, Tamil and English, as separate (Kenner 2004, 43). To achieve this dual purpose, the faith teacher sought to impart to children key principles, beliefs and values of Hinduism/Saivaism that would equip them with a moral compass to read and interpret life's experiences through the lens of faith and navigate present and future challenges. Ananth Master explained:

 So any children who are willing to know about faith, religion and culture, I think it's important for those children to have a knowledge, a basic understanding about God and Temple worship and how those things will help them in their later life when they're going through daily stress, and issues, so we need something to fall back in this kind of lifestyle.

His explanation foregrounded the affiliative dimension of faith literacy learning. The faith teacher repeatedly emphasised how faith literacy learning was intimately linked with children knowing their roots and providing them with a strong foundation for individual and collective belonging in order to become both competent members of the faith community and responsible individuals and citizens. This dimension of faith literacy learning resonates with what Peede-Ealy (2011, 57) has called developing a "membership identity" in the Black Church context understood as "the intersection of what children learn and how they come to represent this knowledge in the church context". This affiliative dimension becomes all the more important due to changes in the scope of faith literacy learning in London. In particular, Ananth Master reflected on change in the frequency and degree of engagement in faith literacy learning comparing children being brought up in present-day London with his own experiences of growing up as a child in Sri Lanka:

 Because the way of life, I don't know whether things, things could have changed now in Sri Lanka but back home when I was a child, religion was kind of a daily lifestyle, so going to a faith class wasn't something like you [are] going to physics tuition or chemistry tuition, so it's, it's just like, I don't know, it's just a common practice, and then you learn religion and then you come home you practice it and then you go to Temple you practice it, so it was part and parcel of lifestyle. But here religion has become once a week, faith class has become once a week, a 45 minutes class.

 Ananth Master remarked how when he was growing up "back home" religion permeated every aspect of children's lives and socialisation and that there was seamless continuity in faith practices across home, Temple and faith class. Although he briefly acknowledged that this may not still be the case in present day Sri Lanka, he claimed that this continuity had been disrupted for many children growing up in London nowadays. He intimated that this might be due to the fact that the boundaries between the religious and the secular in broader society had become more demarcated and religion seemed to have a more peripheral role in individuals', families' and communities' everyday lives than in the past. Within this context, learning about one's faith had been reduced for many children to "a 45 minute class" likened to any other tuition class they may attend during the week. In the next sections, we explore how the faith teacher responded to these changes by adapting and transforming his pedagogy and imparting to students "a basic understanding about God and Temple worship" drawing on their full linguistic repertoire.

***Middle Layer: Change in Pedagogy in Faith Classes***

The diversity of Hinduism is reflected in the transformation of indigenous languages, such as Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam and Telugu, into devotional languages (Jacobs, 2010). Although Sanskrit retains a special place in Hinduism as liturgical language, numerous sacred texts can be found in these languages too, dating in the case of devotional literature in Tamil as early as the 7th century A.D. and pointing to the inextricable link between the Tamil language, culture and the Hindu/Saiva faith. Ananth Master elaborated on this link, reflecting on how when learning about faith one is concurrently learning to become literate in Tamil and vice versa:

 Tamil and Hinduism are hand in hand, most of the Tamil scripts and Tamil literature has some association with the religion. So all our religious scripts, when we are teaching, they're in Tamil. So somebody who wants to learn Tamil thoroughly they'll learn something about our religion, somebody who wants to learn religion thoroughly they have to know Tamil.

For the faith teacher, Tamil had been traditionally viewed and continued to be regarded in London as the devotional language of Hinduism/Saivaism. It is the language of sacred texts as well as the language of mediation of religious experience, practices and beliefs. This view seemed to echo a fixed and essentialised relationship between language, culture, ethnicity and religion as markers of identity (see Souza 2016 for a review of the literature). Yet, Ananth Master argued that English, the language the children were most comfortable and competent in had to be used alongside Tamil as a learning resource. Teaching the religious curriculum by drawing on the students' full linguistic repertoire emerged as a pragmatic and contextual response to their heterogeneous language and literacy competences in Tamil:

 I think we need to have use of both languages. If you stick to only Tamil, say we are Tamils we got to speak to the children in Tamil, you're going to lose out some of the children, because if the children can't understand what we are saying, especially in terms of faith, we are, we are missing out, we, we'll be losing a good opportunity, and children will be losing interest, and if they can't understand, obviously, they're not going to come to the classes.

Ananth Master reported using English alongside Tamil to negotiate meaning and facilitate the children's comprehension, particularly when discussing highly abstract and complex religious concepts in a short period of time ("a 45 minute class") as well as to get and maintain their attention. He identified the flexible use of Tamil and English as the first and foremost adaptation in his pedagogy over the years in order to successfully address the diverse competences of his student population. He further explained this and other adaptations he made in his teaching as follows:

 Because if you start teaching in Tamil only, or fluent Tamil they wouldn't have a clue, so you have to change your language style so they can understand. And then knowing that they're already behind with their religious knowledge, there is no point giving [them] highly fluent stories or theories and leaving it at that, so you have to give it in bits and pieces they can chew, ok, so it has to be small pieces. Not on huge chunks you will choke them. And also keep on asking questions and so they can come up with doubts. Because there is so much doubt, religion is a huge thing and our religion is so ancient and old and there aren't written answers for everything.

His reflections indicated an awareness of the cognitive and linguistic demands faith literacy learning placed on students to access the religious curriculum in Tamil only or in what the faith teacher referred to as "fluent Tamil", especially for students he perceived to be "already behind with their religious knowledge". In addition, his reflections illustrated a recognition that while Tamil school had been set up to maintain and promote a persecuted language, culture and identity in the country of origin (Sri Lanka), the main focus of faith lessons was not Tamil language and literacy development per se. Although learning about faith enhanced children's receptive and productive abilities in oral and written forms of Tamil too, the main focus of faith lessons was the development of their knowledge of the principles, beliefs and values of Hinduism/Saivaism embedded in Tamil culture and history and address students' "doubts" about their faith in contemporary London. This is an important difference from the emphasis on language and literacy learning placed in community language classes.

***Inner Layer: Flexible Language Practices in An Exploratory Discussion of Temple Worship***

In our participant observations we noticed that the flexible juxtaposition of Tamil and English in the advanced religious education class was combined with a mainly teacher-fronted, lecture-style delivery. Ananth Master delivered the lesson in the form of exploratory discussions through a series of question-response sequences which sought to elicit children's prior religious knowledge, personal faith experiences and interpretations of the topic at hand. At the same time, we noted that he was particularly attentive to the children's questions or what he referred to as "doubts" irrespective of the language the children used (Tamil or English or both). Similar to previous studies (e.g. Baquedano-López 2000; Moore 2013), he addressed their questions by using metaphors and drawing explicit connections between the topic and children's everyday lives. The children sat quietly around tables in groups of four and five and listened to him attentively. The table-tops were devoid of books, note books, pens and pencils and the faith teacher did not ask them to take down notes.

In the following extracts, we examine the beginning and the end of one such discussion which focused on the role and significance of Temple worship in children's lives. Although Temple worship is not mandatory in Hinduism, children growing up in London are socialised to praying at the Temple with family members regularly as well as on auspicious holidays. As we had observed in other faith lessons, Ananth Master started the lesson by going around the classroom and asking each student why they should worship at the Temple. Although he specified at the beginning of the discussion that the students' responses must be in Tamil, "Thamil kathaikanum" <you must speak in Tamil>, he did not police language boundaries. Modeled after Initiation-Response-Feedback sequences in mainstream classrooms (Mehan 1979; Luk 2008), Ananth Master asked one student at a time for their opinion, each student provided a short response and the faith teacher repeated or rephrased and evaluated it, all at a quick pace.

Extract 1: *Why should we go to the Temple?* [[4]](#footnote-4)

1 Teacher Ok **en Koillukku pohonum naangel?**

 Ok *why should we go to the Temple?*

2 Soshthrikan **Saamikku keeke ungalunde padippukku** help **panne**

 *To ask God to* help *with your studies*

3 Teacher **Sari, appe ungede padippukku Swamikite keta** help **pannuvaar,** alright **sari, Krithika, naangel en Koillukku pohonum?**

 *Ok, so if you ask God he will* help *you with your studies,* alright *ok, Krithika, why should we go to the Temple?*

4 Krithika **Erm, Koillukku pohe thevele veetileye kumbidelaam**

  *Erm, you don’t have to go to the Temple you can pray at home*

5 Teacher **Koillukku?**

 *For the Temple?*

6 Krithika **Veetile er** house **ileye kumbidelaam**

 *At home er you can pray in your* house

7 Teacher **Appe neenge Koillukku pohathevele endu sollureengel?** Right, **appe ava Koillukku poha thevele endu sollura, ah?** Right, ok, **appe veetile kumbita pothum,** ok, right. Sorry, **enneku ungada per theriyaathamma? Ungada per enne?**

  *So you are saying you don’t need to go to the Temple?* Right*, so she is saying that it is not necessary to go to the Temple, ah?* Right, ok, *so it is enough to pray at home,* ok, right. Sorry*, I don’t know your name dear? What’s your name?*

8 Parmila Parmila

9 Teacher **Parmila! Ah en Koillukku pohonum?**

 *Parmila! Ah why should we go to the Temple?*

10 Parmila Um, calms, it calms you down

11 Teacher **Appe manathai amaithiyaahe vaithirupathatku, en Koilluku pohonum?**

 *So to keep your mind calm, why should we go to the Temple?*

While the faith teacher asked students to respond in Tamil, both he and the students seemed to flexibly draw on both Tamil and English to express their opinions, maintain student engagement and keep the discussion moving. For instance, students embedded English words in their responses in Tamil (e.g. turn 2, "help" and turn 6, "house") which reflected the flexible and dynamic language practices we observed in children's and adults' language use across settings. Moreover, when one student, Parmila, responded in English (turn 10), the faith teacher treated her response as a legitimate contribution, swiftly rephrasing it in Tamil and moving on to the next child (turn 11). Rephrasing student's English utterances into Tamil emerged as an important pedagogic tool in the faith lessons we observed in order to expand what students already knew how to say in one language into the other, thereby supporting and enhancing their understanding in both languages (see also excerpt 2). In the next excerpt, Ananth Master gradually shifted the discussion from the students' personal experiences and interpretations of Temple worship to the moral and spiritual message he was seeking to draw out, the importance of showing one's gratitude to God.

Excerpt 2: *To say thanks*

1 Teacher **Kadavulle** respect **pannurathakku,** **sari uppe muthalaavathu kelvi vanthu, orale thavire, oru aal sollipottaa, neer solleleye, en Koillukku pohonum endu?**

  *To* respect *God, ok so the first question was, apart from one person, one person said, you haven’t answered, why do we have to go to the Temple?*

2Student To learn about your religion

3Teacher Uh?

4Student **Unge** religion **e petti padike pohonum**

 *You have to go to study about your* religion

5Teacher Religion **e petti theringukolle**,ok, Seronika**, en Koillukku pohonum?**

 *To learn about your* religion*,* ok*, Seronika, why do we have to go to the Temple?*

6Seronika **Er Angilathile sollelvaa?**

 *Er can I say it in English?*

7Teacher **Ippe Thamilile kelvi kekirai, pirahu Angilathile solluvathu en? Thamil nalla theringe pille thaane? Koillukku en pohonum?**

  *Now, you are asking this question in Tamil, so why do you want to answer in English? You know Tamil well don’t you? Why should we go to the Temple?*

8Seronika **Em** appreciate **panne**

 *Em to* appreciate

9Teacher (Small laugh) right, **sari, appe Koillukku Saami kumbude pora kaaranam, naangel pora kaaranam muthale, orukka poi nandri sollitu vaaruvathu, athukku thaan Koilukku porathu, sariyaa?** Right, **appe neenge athukaahe Saami kumbudekle neenge kekire ellam kellunge ippe inthe vaiyesille kekekulle ini konje naalukku pirahu enne solluveenge?**

  (Small laugh)right*, ok, so the reason for going to the Temple, the first reason we go is, we go once just to say thank you and come back, that’s why we go to the Temple, ok?* Right*, so you, because of that when you pray you can ask whatever you want at this age, now after some time then what will you say?*

10 Children Thank you

11 Teacher **Kadavul thanthathukku nandri, appe ulahathile miha periya pavam ennathu?**

 *Thank you for what God has given, so in this world what is the biggest sin?*

12 Child Don't forget to say thanks

13 Teacher Ungratefulness, **appe ippe oru ke kelvile oru pahuthi thaan mudichirukirem, Koilukku en porom?**

 Ungratefulness, *so now we’ve only just answered one part of one question, why do we go to the Temple?*

14 Children To say thanks, thank you to God

15 Teacher To, yeah, to show, to show Him how grateful we - Hello! We are grateful to what He has given us, right? He's the owner, He's the Saviour and everything came from Him, so whatever we are enjoying, whatever we are going through, whatever we are having, everything belongs to Him, so to show our gratefulness, appreciation, we're supposed to worship Him. To worship Him we can do it at home but it won't be a quality thing, to specialise and worship we have to go to **Koil** [*Temple*]

In this excerpt, a student's response in English elicits a clarification request on the faith teacher's part prompting the student to rephrase his utterance in Tamil (turns 2-4). The request for clarification appears to have a scaffolding function, to encourage the student to express his opinion in the heritage language, thereby developing his linguistic capabilities in both languages. In a similar vein, when another student, Seronika, explicitly asked to faith teacher in Tamil if she could respond in English Ananth Master queried her language choice and encouraged her to use Tamil as she had done on other occasions (turn 7). In her response, it became clear that Seronika's request to speak in English was triggered by her lack of a particular vocabulary item. As a result, Seronika embedded the English word "appreciate" in her response in Tamil (turn 8). As we repeatedly observed, the faith teacher accepted the student's response, rephrased and elaborated it in Tamil. In his elaboration the faith teacher introduced the moral and spiritual message of the discussion, the importance of being thankful to God. He presented his message first in Tamil through a series of questions, which sought to elicit a group response (turns 9, 11, 1) and to which the students collectively reiterated the gist of the message in English (turns 10, 12, 14). During this time, he switched to English twice to emphasise "ungratefulness" as the "biggest sin" (turn 13) and finally to conclude the discussion (turn 15). On both occasions the teacher-led switches to English served the discursive functions of reinforcing (turn 13) and extending his message (turn 15).

A close analysis of the faith teacher's last turns (turns 9-15) indicates that his final turn in English did not simply repeat the message in another language but extended it by providing a theological explanation as to the importance of expressing one's gratitude to God: "He's the owner, He's the Saviour and everything came from Him, so whatever we are enjoying, whatever we are going through, whatever we are having, everything belongs to Him". This observation echoes the work of Blackledge and Creese (2010, 108) on translanguaging pedagogies in complementary schools in the UK where they argued that "both languages are needed simultaneously to convey the information, .... each language is used to convey a different informational message, but it is in the bilingualism of the text that the full message is conveyed". In this respect, the use of flexible language practices became an important pedagogic resource to socialise the students into developing appropriate feelings and dispositions towards Temple worship which would have what the faith teacher called "a very practical meaning" for their everyday lives in contemporary London. At the same time, this pedagogic approach valorised the students' full linguistic repertoire and bilingual identities.

**Concluding Discussion**

In this paper, we argued that a syncretic frame to faith as a cultural practice that weaves together elements from language socialisation and sociocultural approaches can illuminate how change in the migration and diasporic contexts shapes faith literacy teaching and learning in religious instruction classes. Methodologically, we focused on how one particular faith teacher experienced and reflected upon these changes and how they affected his pedagogy over time and in the London diasporic setting. The faith teacher considered how the purpose of faith literacy learning as well as the frequency and degree of engagement with the Hindu/Saiva faith had changed and how faith classes had been reduced for many students to a "45 minute class". He attributed these changes to people having busy and fast-moving life-styles with less time to devote to religious and spiritual matters. One important way in which the faith teacher responded to these changes was to adapt this pedagogic approach by using flexible language practices. While evoking the intimate link between Tamil language, culture and ethno-religious identity and the need to sustain it, he simultaneously acknowledged that the religious curriculum could not be successfully delivered in Tamil only but would need to be adapted to his students' diverse language and literacy competences. In adapting his pedagogy, the faith teacher employed flexible language practices as a pedagogic tool to scaffold the religious curriculum and to this end used clarification questions, rephrasing and elaboration as discursive strategies (see excerpts 1-2). Language-wise, the use of flexible language practices enabled students to develop and extend their understanding of religious knowledge and express their opinion in both languages. Socially and culturally, it enabled students to participate in and engage with faith literacy learning leveraging their full linguistic repertoires and in culturally appropriate ways. Spiritually and morally, it enabled students to develop appropriate in the context of the faith moral and spiritual beliefs and dispositions for membership in the faith community and in the broader British society.

The changing and adaptive nature of faith literacy teaching and learning in the London diasporic context raises important questions about the evolving relationship between Tamil (the community and devotional language) and English (the majority language) in contemporary London. In a recent comparative study of several Muslim Madrassahs over 15 years, Rosowsky (2016) ascertained a steady declining of spoken and literate forms of community languages (such as Urdu or Punjabi) and the use of mainly English for religious instruction and in teaching materials. In the case of Tamil, its use in religious instruction classes appears to be secure for now. One of the reasons may be that Tamil serves as both community and devotional language and it is not in competition with another more highly regarded devotional language, such as Sanskrit or Arabic as is the case of the Muslim communities in Rosowsky's study. Indeed, as Perera (2015) postulated in her study on language maintenance and shift of Sri Lankan languages in Australia, a higher degree of devoutness may contribute to Tamil language maintenance in a diasporic setting. At the same time, Canagarajah's (2012, 124) comparative investigation of language practices among Sri Lankan Tamil youth in diasporic communities in Canada, the US and Britain highlighted that the younger generation is increasingly adopting English for everyday communication while maintaining receptive proficiency in Tamil and developing nonverbal participatory practices. As faith teachers guide the next generation of believers into the faith might the increasing adoption of English by the younger generation lead to a shift over time from English alongside Tamil to mainly English for religious instruction?

While addressing this question would require conducting a future longitudinal study, we consider how our investigation of Ananth Master's reflections on faith literacy learning and his pedagogic practices may contribute to our understanding of bilingual teacher agency. Rather than prioritizing language ideologies of ethnolinguistic essentialism and insisting on the use of Tamil only, Ananth Master implemented flexible language practices. One may argue that the application of these practices was facilitated by his esteemed positions as faith teacher of the advanced religious education class and as head teacher of the Tamil school. Undoubtedly, both institutional positions enabled Ananth Master not only to create instructional spaces for flexible language use in the advanced religious education class but also to shape some of the flexible language practices we observed across the three faith classes. Our study buttresses findings from Conteh and Riasat (2012) Kenner and Ruby (2012), Schwartz et al. (2015) among others that have documented how bilingual teachers assert agency in shaping, adapting and transforming their language practices to open up opportunities for bilingual teaching and learning.

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**8,561 (all inclusive)**

1. Saivaism is a devotional branch of Hinduism. Saivaites believe that Lord Siva is the ultimate deity and all other deities are avatars of Him, an incarnation or manifestation of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All names are in the original at our participants' request. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We employ the name and term of address children, parents, other teachers and community members at the Tamil School used to address the faith teacher. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Transcription conventions: Tamil in bold, English in regular and English translation in italics. Tamil is transcribed phonetically as per the Sri Lankan Tamil vernacular spoken by our participants. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)