

LITERACY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH MOTHER-TONGUE INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Literacy development is most secure when children can make sense of the language used for teaching, talk about ideas with confidence, and connect written symbols with a familiar oral language. In linguistically diverse education systems, however, many learners begin school in a language that is not used regularly at home. This mismatch can make early reading instruction more difficult because children are expected to learn new concepts, understand classroom directions, recognize sounds and symbols, and participate in assessment through an unfamiliar language. Mother-tongue instruction addresses this challenge by using the learner's first or most familiar language as a foundation for early learning and by building planned bridges to additional languages.

This paper uses a qualitative, literature-based approach to examine the contribution of mother-tongue instruction to foundational literacy. It reviews research and policy guidance on oral language, phonological awareness, decoding, vocabulary, comprehension, biliteracy, classroom participation, teacher preparation, learning materials, assessment, and language transition. The analysis follows an instructional sequence that begins with language mapping and community consultation, develops reading and writing in a familiar language, introduces additional languages through oral and written bridging, monitors progress in both languages, and revises implementation through local evidence.

The review finds that mother-tongue instruction can strengthen early literacy when it is implemented as part of a well-designed multilingual pathway rather than as an isolated language policy. Effective programmes require a clear understanding of local language use, adequate instructional time, culturally meaningful texts, teachers who can teach literacy in the relevant language, and assessment systems that measure comprehension rather than only performance in a dominant language. The paper concludes that mother-tongue instruction should be understood as an equity-oriented literacy strategy that supports both foundational learning and the gradual acquisition of regional, national, and international languages.

Keywords: Mother-Tongue Instruction, Foundational Literacy, Multilingual Education, Early Grade Reading, Biliteracy, Language of Instruction, Inclusive Education, Teacher Preparation, Learning Materials, Educational Equity

1. INTRODUCTION

Literacy is not limited to the ability to recognize letters or reproduce words. It includes the capacity to understand spoken language, connect speech with print, use vocabulary to interpret meaning, read with fluency, write for a purpose, and participate in classroom dialogue. These abilities develop through interaction with language. When the language of instruction is familiar to children, they can use prior knowledge, family experiences, stories, songs, and everyday vocabulary to understand what they read and write. When it is unfamiliar, the same children may appear weak in literacy even when they

possess rich knowledge and communication skills in their home language [1, 2, 4].

The language used in school is therefore a central condition of educational inclusion. In multilingual societies, a child may speak one language at home, hear another in the neighbourhood, encounter a regional language in public life, and meet a national or international language in textbooks and examinations. These linguistic realities are not a deficit. They are a resource for learning. The difficulty arises when schooling treats a single dominant language as the only legitimate starting point and provides no structured support for learners who are still developing proficiency in that language [5, 6].

Mother-tongue instruction refers to teaching and learning that begins in the language a learner understands best, often described as the home language, first language, or language of the community. The term should be used with care because children may have more than one familiar language and language practices can change across families and places. In this paper, mother tongue is used as an educational term for the language or languages that provide the strongest initial basis for comprehension, oral participation, and early literacy development. The objective is not to isolate children from additional languages. It is to build literacy through a language they know and then extend that learning through an additive multilingual pathway [1, 3, 11].

International guidance increasingly recognizes that multilingual education based on learners' familiar languages can support inclusion, participation, and meaningful learning. Evidence also shows that implementation matters. A policy statement alone will not improve literacy when teachers lack materials, classroom time is limited, languages have not been mapped carefully, or children are moved too quickly into a new medium of instruction. The present study examines how mother-tongue instruction can contribute to literacy development while identifying the conditions needed for responsible and sustainable implementation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The educational value of teaching through familiar languages has been discussed for decades. Early international work on vernacular language education emphasized that children learn more effectively when school begins with a language they can understand [5]. Later research on bilingual and multilingual education extended this argument by showing that linguistic knowledge developed in one language can support learning in another when instruction deliberately builds connections between them. Oral language, conceptual understanding, metalinguistic awareness, reading strategies, and confidence can transfer across languages, although the form and speed of transfer depend on the languages involved, their writing systems, and the quality of instruction [6, 7].

Contemporary research places mother-tongue instruction within a broader mother-tongue-based multilingual education approach. In such models, learners develop literacy in a familiar language while additional languages are introduced in a planned sequence. The goal is not to delay access to a wider language of communication; rather, it is to prevent children from being asked to acquire foundational literacy, subject knowledge, and a new language all at the same time without adequate support. Reviews of language-of-instruction studies in low- and middle-income settings indicate that evidence is diverse and context-specific, but that instruction in a language children understand can improve literacy-related learning when programmes are adequately resourced and transitions are carefully managed [3, 8, 9].

The literature also warns against simplistic interpretations. Mother-tongue instruction is not automatically successful merely because a local language is named in policy. A programme may fail when teachers are not confident in written forms of the language, when orthography is unsettled, when locally relevant texts are unavailable, when classrooms contain many languages, or when families understandably worry that their children may lose access to employment-oriented languages. These concerns make implementation design essential. Successful systems communicate the value of early home-language learning while ensuring that learners gain strong competence in the additional languages required for further study, mobility, and participation in public life [10, 11, 12].

2.1 CONCEPT AND SCOPE OF MOTHER-TONGUE INSTRUCTION

- Mother-tongue instruction uses the learner's most familiar language or languages to support comprehension, participation, and the development of early reading and writing.
- It may be implemented through a single home language, a community language, a bilingual model, or a multilingual classroom strategy that recognizes more than one language resource.
- The approach is most effective when it includes explicit teaching of oral language, phonological awareness,

decoding, vocabulary, comprehension, writing, and purposeful classroom talk.

- Mother-tongue instruction differs from a temporary translation practice because it treats the learner's language as a planned medium for building literacy rather than as an occasional aid.
- A mother-tongue-based multilingual programme includes a clear transition or bridging plan so that learners develop additional languages without losing access to meaningful learning in the first language.

2.2 PATHWAYS FROM FAMILIAR LANGUAGE TO LITERACY

- Familiar oral language supports comprehension of instructions, stories, questions, and new concepts before children are expected to work independently with print.
- Sound awareness can be taught more clearly when teachers use words, rhymes, and syllable patterns that children already know and can manipulate orally.
- Vocabulary growth is stronger when new words are connected to meaningful experiences, local objects, family knowledge, and prior language resources.
- Reading comprehension improves when learners can discuss a text, predict events, explain ideas, and relate information to their lives in a language they understand.
- Planned comparisons between languages can develop metalinguistic awareness, helping learners notice similarities and differences in sounds, scripts, words, grammar, and text conventions.

2.3 INCLUSION, IDENTITY, AND LANGUAGE POLICY

- Language of instruction affects whether children can participate visibly in class, ask questions, demonstrate knowledge, and develop confidence as readers and writers.
- Respect for home and community languages can strengthen links between schools, families, local knowledge, and

cultural expression without reducing the value of wider communication languages.

- National and regional language policies should be paired with school-level language mapping because the language named in policy may not be the language used most confidently by every learner.
- Assessment systems should distinguish between a learner's literacy difficulty and difficulty caused by being tested through an unfamiliar language.
- Equitable multilingual education requires sustained investment in teachers, books, orthography development where needed, inclusive digital content, and long-term monitoring rather than short pilot projects.

3. OBJECT OF STUDY

The present study examines literacy development through mother-tongue instruction as a social, cognitive, and pedagogical process. The object of study is not a single school system, language community, or grade level. Instead, it considers representative early-learning contexts in which children enter school with varying degrees of alignment between their home language and the language used for instruction. The analysis focuses on how language choice, classroom practice, materials, assessment, family engagement, and transition planning shape opportunities for children to become confident readers and writers.

The theoretical basis of the study is that foundational literacy should be built through meaning before complexity is increased. Children are more likely to understand print when they can connect it with known speech, concepts, experiences, and purposes for communication. This does not imply that literacy occurs only in one language. It implies that early instruction should use familiar linguistic resources strategically, then expand learners' linguistic repertoires through carefully scaffolded bilingual or multilingual teaching. The study therefore treats literacy, language development, inclusion, and access to later learning as interconnected outcomes.

3.1 LEARNING CONTEXTS AND INSTRUCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS

TABLE 1. LEARNING CONTEXTS, MOTHER-TONGUE INSTRUCTION PRIORITIES, AND LITERACY SAFEGUARDS

S.No.	Learning Context	Instructional Priority	Literacy Process	Key Safeguard
1	Rural or community school	Use the familiar community language for	Build phonological awareness, decoding, vocabulary, and	Provide graded books and teacher

	with a widely shared local language	oral interaction and initial reading instruction	comprehension through local stories and daily experiences	guides in the language used by children
2	Urban classroom with several home languages	Map languages used by learners and employ flexible multilingual talk with a common instructional bridge	Use visuals, peer discussion, bilingual word walls, and structured oral-language routines before independent reading	Avoid treating one dominant language as evidence of ability; assess understanding through multiple modes
3	Indigenous or tribal language community	Strengthen the local language while introducing regional or national languages additively	Develop community-authored texts, songs, oral histories, and print-rich materials linked to the local environment	Involve community language experts and protect the language from being reduced to a token activity
4	Migrant, displaced, or mobile learner group	Recognize changing language repertoires and provide immediate comprehension support	Use oral bridging, picture-based texts, peer support, and accelerated language-development routines	Ensure continuity of learning rather than requiring instant fluency in the school language
5	System with an early shift to a dominant language	Plan the transition gradually and teach cross-language connections explicitly	Maintain first-language literacy while building oral proficiency and emergent reading in the additional language	Do not remove the familiar language before children can understand and use the new medium confidently

3.2 STUDY OBJECTIVES

- To examine the relationship between mother-tongue instruction and the development of oral language, decoding, vocabulary, comprehension, writing, and classroom participation.
- To identify how language mismatch between home and school can affect foundational literacy and the interpretation of learner performance.
- To compare instructional requirements across relatively homogeneous community schools, linguistically diverse urban classrooms, indigenous-language settings, mobile learner groups, and systems with early language transition.
- To evaluate the role of teachers, materials, assessment, family engagement, language mapping, and policy support in making mother-tongue instruction effective.
- To develop a practical framework for literacy instruction that uses familiar languages as a foundation while supporting successful acquisition of additional languages.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative and literature-based research methodology. It synthesizes

international guidance on multilingual education, research on language-of-instruction policy, foundational literacy studies, and scholarship on bilingual development. This approach is appropriate because the research question concerns the relationships among language familiarity, classroom processes, teaching resources, social inclusion, and literacy outcomes rather than the measurement of a single numerical effect. The study does not present primary survey or experimental data; its findings are interpretive and are intended to provide a structured framework for teaching, planning, and future empirical research.

The methodological framework follows a literacy-development sequence. It begins with identifying the languages learners use and understand, then considers oral-language enrichment, initial reading and writing, development of comprehension, introduction of additional languages, ongoing assessment, and revision of practice. This sequence recognizes that language policy is implemented in real classrooms. It must therefore account for teacher knowledge, material availability, family expectations, local language variation, school leadership,

and the practical constraints of timetables and examinations.

4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN (QUALITATIVE ANALYTICAL APPROACH)

- The study follows a qualitative and comparative design based on established educational literature, multilingual education guidance, and documented implementation principles.
- The analysis compares instructional settings according to language alignment, teacher preparedness, availability of materials, learner mobility, transition demands, and assessment practices.
- A social-constructivist perspective is used to connect oral interaction, cultural knowledge, classroom participation, and print literacy.
- Findings are interpreted through planning and teaching principles rather than through a controlled experiment or a statistically representative survey dataset.

4.2 MOTHER-TONGUE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

- Language mapping identifies which languages children use at home, in the community, with peers, and in school, including variations within the same locality.
- Curriculum planning links oral-language development with explicit reading and writing instruction in a language learners can understand.
- Materials development includes decodable texts, shared reading books, informational texts, writing prompts, teacher guides, and digital or audio resources that reflect local contexts.
- Bridging instruction introduces additional languages through meaningful oral interaction, contrastive teaching, shared concepts, and gradual expansion of reading and writing demands.
- Assessment monitors comprehension, decoding, oral language, writing, and cross-language development so that language unfamiliarity is not mistaken for low ability.

4.3 LEARNER, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT

- Learners are considered in relation to their home-language repertoire, prior exposure

to print, family literacy practices, mobility, disability inclusion, confidence in classroom participation, and access to additional languages.

- Teachers are considered in relation to their proficiency in the instructional language, knowledge of literacy pedagogy, access to training, workload, and ability to use multilingual strategies without stigmatizing learners.
- Schools are considered through class size, textbook availability, classroom libraries, language displays, local partnerships, timetable flexibility, and leadership support for multilingual practice.
- Communities are considered as sources of oral literature, environmental knowledge, cultural expression, feedback on language use, and support for reading at home.

4.4 PARAMETERS OF ANALYSIS

The following cognitive, pedagogical, social, and institutional parameters are evaluated:

- Degree of alignment between learner language, teacher language, textbook language, and assessment language.
- Availability and quality of early-grade reading materials in the language learners understand best.
- Opportunities for oral interaction, listening comprehension, phonological awareness, decoding, vocabulary growth, text discussion, and writing.
- Teacher preparation for multilingual literacy instruction, including use of local language resources and bridging to additional languages.
- Timing, pace, and pedagogical quality of the transition to regional, national, or international languages.
- Family participation, community legitimacy, learner confidence, attendance, and the perceived relevance of school literacy practices.
- Capacity for monitoring, responsive support, material revision, and policy adjustment based on classroom evidence.

4.5 PROCEDURE OF STUDY

- Review literature on language-of-instruction policy, early literacy, bilingual education, multilingual pedagogy, and education equity.
- Identify recurring pathways through which language mismatch can affect

participation, comprehension, reading, writing, and assessment performance.

- Compare representative learning settings according to linguistic diversity, material needs, teacher capacity, and transition requirements.
- Connect each setting with practical instructional, material, assessment, family-engagement, and policy responses.
- Interpret the combined evidence to formulate a mother-tongue literacy development framework.
- Develop recommendations that can guide local language mapping, classroom planning, teacher support, monitoring, and future field-based research.

4.6 ANALYTICAL APPROACH

- Qualitative comparison of language-aligned and language-mismatched learning conditions across representative school contexts.
- Interpretation of how oral language, print instruction, cultural relevance, teacher practice, and assessment interact in literacy development.
- Assessment of the relationship between transition planning, instructional continuity, learner confidence, and longer-term multilingual learning.
- Identification of adaptable interventions for government schools, community schools, multilingual urban classrooms, indigenous-language settings, and mobile learner populations.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

The qualitative analysis indicates that mother-tongue instruction supports literacy most directly by making classroom language comprehensible. Children who understand the language of teaching can respond to questions, retell stories, predict outcomes, explain their reasoning, and connect new vocabulary with familiar concepts. These oral-language activities are not separate from literacy; they provide the meaning base that allows print to become purposeful. When children are expected to decode words in a language they do not yet understand, they may learn to repeat sounds or memorise text without developing reliable comprehension. A familiar instructional language reduces this barrier and permits teachers to observe what learners actually know [1, 2, 4].

A second finding is that early reading instruction is stronger when sound-symbol relationships are taught through known words and meaningful text. The effectiveness of this process depends on the writing system and on the availability of a usable orthography, but the principle is broad: learners benefit when teachers can move from spoken language to print using vocabulary they recognize. Songs, rhyme, oral storytelling, local place names, family terms, and everyday objects can be used to develop listening discrimination, syllable awareness, phoneme awareness where appropriate, letter knowledge, and early spelling. This allows decoding to be linked with understanding rather than treated as a mechanical exercise detached from language use [7, 11, 13].

The analysis also shows that the quality of learning materials determines whether mother-tongue instruction becomes a genuine literacy programme or only a verbal accommodation. A classroom needs more than a translated textbook. It needs graded readers, decodable texts, informational passages, shared reading materials, writing prompts, teacher guidance, and opportunities for learners to see their language in print. Materials should reflect local life without becoming narrowly local. Children also need access to science, health, environment, civic, and imaginative texts that expand vocabulary and knowledge. When materials are developed with teachers, writers, artists, and community language experts, they are more likely to be linguistically accurate, culturally meaningful, and suitable for the intended grade level.

Teacher capacity emerges as a decisive factor. Teachers may speak a community language fluently yet have limited experience teaching its orthography, explaining phonological patterns, selecting texts, assessing writing, or guiding a transition to another language. Training should therefore address both language proficiency and literacy pedagogy. Teachers need practical routines for read-alouds, shared reading, guided reading, writing conferences, vocabulary instruction, multilingual group work, formative assessment, and intentional bridging. They also need time to adapt materials and discuss classroom evidence with colleagues. Without these supports, teachers may return to a

dominant language even when policy encourages mother-tongue instruction [8, 10, 12].

Another finding concerns transition to additional languages. A rapid switch to a new medium of instruction can interrupt literacy development by replacing meaningful learning with vocabulary memorisation. A stronger approach introduces the new language orally, develops listening and speaking confidence, links familiar concepts across languages, and gradually expands reading and writing in the additional language. The first language should remain available as a resource during this process. Learners can compare sounds, scripts, word order, and text patterns, translate ideas rather than individual words only, and use bilingual reading tasks. This additive approach supports access to wider languages while protecting comprehension and identity [3, 6, 9].

The analysis further indicates that assessment can either reveal or hide the benefits of mother-tongue literacy. If a child is assessed only in an unfamiliar language, low performance may reflect limited language proficiency rather than weak reasoning or literacy foundations. Schools should use age-appropriate measures of oral comprehension, decoding, reading fluency, reading comprehension, writing, and classroom participation in the language of instruction, while also monitoring growth in additional languages. Assessment results should guide teaching and support rather than impose a single high-stakes language standard on early learners.

Finally, the evidence suggests that mother-tongue instruction has a social dimension. Children participate more readily when their language is heard, respected, and represented in school texts. Families are better able to support learning when they can understand homework, read simple materials with children, share stories, and communicate with teachers. At the same time, language practices should not be romanticized. Communities may contain social hierarchies, dialect differences, and unequal access to prestigious languages. Effective programmes therefore combine respect for local languages with transparent commitments to multilingual competence,

educational progression, and equal opportunity.

6. DISCUSSION

The analysis confirms that mother-tongue instruction is best understood as a literacy foundation rather than a barrier to learning additional languages. Children do not need to choose between a familiar language and wider linguistic opportunities. They need a sequence that allows them to understand, read, write, and think while they acquire new languages. This is especially important in the early grades, when learners are establishing concepts about print, building vocabulary, and forming expectations about whether school is a place where they can participate successfully. An additive multilingual model uses the familiar language to build these foundations and then extends learning outward.

A central implication is that language policy must be operational rather than symbolic. A declaration that schools will use local languages has little effect if teachers receive only a one-day orientation, books are unavailable, and examinations are held entirely in another language. Policy needs a practical implementation chain: language mapping, orthography and terminology support where required, curriculum alignment, materials development, teacher recruitment and training, classroom coaching, assessment design, family communication, and budgeted monitoring. The absence of any one element can create a gap between policy promise and classroom reality.

The discussion also highlights the need for contextual design. In a school where most children speak one community language, the main task may be to develop a high-quality sequence of oral-language and literacy materials and a bridge to regional or national languages. In a multilingual urban classroom, a single mother-tongue medium may not be feasible. Teachers may instead need flexible multilingual pedagogy: structured use of visuals, peer explanation, bilingual vocabulary resources, home-language discussion, and a common language bridge. The principle remains the same: learners should not be denied access to meaning because the school assumes that one language fits every child.

Equity must remain central. Dominant-language instruction can sometimes be defended as preparation for higher education, employment, or mobility. Those goals are legitimate, but they should not require children to sacrifice comprehension in the first years of school. A system that introduces additional languages too quickly may advantage children who already encounter those languages at home or through private tutoring while widening the gap for rural, indigenous, low-income, migrant, and first-generation learners. Mother-tongue instruction can reduce this inequity when it is paired with strong pathways into additional languages and with the same quality of curriculum, assessment, and teacher support available in dominant-language schools.

Digital learning tools offer new possibilities but also require care. Audio stories, local-language e-books, interactive vocabulary activities, and community-created recordings can extend access to print and oral language resources. However, digital content should not replace teacher-child interaction or be used to impose an inappropriate language. Technology is most useful when it supports locally validated materials, accessible formats for learners with disabilities, offline access where connectivity is limited, and teachers' ability to track progress and adapt instruction. It should complement, not substitute for, the human relationships through which children learn language and literacy.

The study supports adaptive monitoring. Schools and education authorities should collect evidence on attendance, classroom participation, oral language, reading, writing, transition outcomes, teacher use of materials, family feedback, and perceptions of language relevance. Monitoring should ask whether learners understand what they are expected to learn, not merely whether textbooks have been distributed. It should also recognize that different languages and communities may require different pacing, resources, and teaching approaches. A responsive system will

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revise materials, provide coaching, and adjust transition plans when evidence shows that children are losing access to meaningful learning.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined literacy development through mother-tongue instruction as an integrated educational process. It showed that foundational literacy depends on children being able to understand classroom language, use their oral knowledge, connect speech with print, discuss texts, and write for meaningful purposes. When instruction begins in a language children know, teachers can build these capabilities more directly and can distinguish genuine literacy needs from difficulties created by an unfamiliar medium of instruction. Mother-tongue instruction therefore supports not only early reading and writing but also participation, confidence, family engagement, and inclusion.

The analysis found that effective implementation requires more than policy recognition of local languages. It requires language mapping, well-designed materials, trained teachers, sustained use of the familiar language for meaningful learning, fair assessment, and a carefully paced bridge to additional languages. Rural community schools, urban multilingual classrooms, indigenous-language settings, migrant populations, and early-transition systems will require different combinations of these measures. No single model can be transferred without adaptation.

Mother-tongue instruction can contribute to stronger literacy, multilingual competence, and educational equity when it is treated as a long-term instructional commitment. Its value lies in enabling children to begin learning from what they already know while preparing them to participate confidently in wider linguistic, academic, and social worlds. A literacy system that respects children's languages while expanding their repertoires is better positioned to ensure that language becomes a bridge to learning rather than a barrier to it.

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