



Preschool to Proficiency: Assessing Foundational Literacy Skills among Grade I Children in Mizoram's Distinct Government Schools

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Abstract

This paper examines the fundamental literacy levels of Grade I students in Mizoram's government primary schools, with an emphasis on fundamental speaking, writing and reading abilities. The purpose of the study was to assess how well early childhood education prepares these young students for upcoming academic challenges. The researcher evaluated literacy levels to find gaps in the current system revealing both strengths and weaknesses in various competencies among children. Many children exhibited basic oral expression and emergent reading abilities, such as conversing and listening to stories, but more complex skills like sequencing of stories were underdeveloped. The findings indicate limited proficiency in expressing feelings, creativity, and detailed storytelling, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions. Some children demonstrated solid foundational writing skills, but many struggled with creative expression in drawing and writing. These results underscore the necessity of incorporating diverse and engaging activities in early education to enhance comprehensive language and literacy development, ultimately better preparing children for future academic success.

Keywords: Foundational Literacy, Oral Expression, Reading Skills, Writing Skills, Distinct Government Schools.

Introduction

Foundational learning is the basis for all future learning upon which other skills are built. If these basic skills of reading and writing with comprehension and doing basic mathematics operations are not achieved, it results in an unprepared child who may not

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acquire the skills to deal with the curriculum beyond the third grade. Children who do not learn to read with understanding in the foundational years find themselves unable to pick it up in the subsequent years (IFC, 2001). Research shows that if low learning levels in children are allowed to continue, chances of ever recovering become close to nil leading to high dropout rates resulting in the creation of an unemployable educated class of graduates in the long run (IFC, 2001).

Literacy is more than just the ability to read and write. It involves the skills and abilities needed to make meaning of what is being read or spoken, think critically and express oneself effectively (NCERT, 2022). It is of utmost importance that children in the early grades have emergent literacy. Emergent literacy means print awareness such as sound-letter combinations, reading and writing readiness through print rich environment (NCERT, 2017). The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) 2022 indicates that children acquire oral language most rapidly during the first eight years of life, highlighting the importance of not missing sensitive periods for language development during this time. Delaying language learning during these formative years can hinder children's ability to acquire new languages later on. While first spoken language typically develops naturally for children, but written language is less instinctive. Therefore, reading and writing must be explicitly taught through targeted instruction and practice, as they involve mastering various symbols. Early literacy skills develop best and most quickly on a foundation of strong oral language skills (NSCNCF, 2022).

Language and communication are vital requirements for school and both are very important in the development of the child. Because, language supports the child's ability to communicate their needs, to be understood, follow instructions and understand what is being said. This makes language the foundation for most learning. Research conducted in the recent past has also revealed that use of familiar language instructions improves overall school performance, cognitive development, problem solving, and creativity (Francis, Matafwali & Banda, 2019). Despite the acknowledgement that children learn and comprehend non-trivial concepts most swiftly and thoroughly in their home language. But it is unique in Mizoram that the mother tongue was found to be neglected in the sampled pre-schools.

To aid early-grade learning, the National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes the implementation of quality education in the early grades through the National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy Bharat Programme (NIPUN BHARAT) which was launched in July 2021. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) 2023 suggests that the Foundational Stage be considered as a single curricular and pedagogical phase for children between 3-8 years which is flexible, multilevel, play and activity-based (NSCNCF, 2023). The Curricular goals are divided into five parts and several competencies against each goal are outlined. The curricula for developmental domains are Physical development, Socio-emotional and Ethical development, Cognitive development, Language and Literacy Development, and Aesthetic and Cultural development.

Rationale of the Study

Mizoram is a state with high literacy rate. This has an implication that people are aware about the importance of education and schooling. After significant achievement in terms of literacy, the need for quality school education rises automatically. Mizoram stands out as a state with a unique socio-economic and cultural landscape where female participation in the workforce and service sectors surpasses that of males. According to the Deccan Herald, Mizoram had the highest ratio of female-to-male workers (70.9 percent) among those in senior official and also has the highest proportion of women occupying managerial jobs at 40.8 percent (PTI, 2022). The high participation of women in Mizoram's workforce has significantly increased the demand for pre-school education. This surge in demand, coupled with a preference for quality education, has led to a decline in enrollment in government primary schools as parents seek better educational opportunities for their children. Consequently, the government permitted primary schools to introduce pre-school sections starting in the 2014-15 academic year, (letter no. B.14011/31/2013-EDN dated February 4th, 2015). The government allowed only 66 government primary schools but 115 primary schools had been recorded as having introduced pre-school programs, the actual number may be higher as many schools did not seek permission before starting these programs. According to the information available to the author, specialized teachers with formal training in pre-school education were not recruited. This raises concerns about the quality of early childhood education provided. Other parts of the country also studies found that despite children participating in pre-primary programme, they are not developing adequate competencies because of low-quality programmes (Kaul et al. 2014; NEUPA, 2014). As a result, children are entering schools without adequate readiness, with increasing risk of low learning achievement, behavioral problems, no enrolment, late school entry or drop out after Grade I or Grade V. This situation often contributes to low wage jobs and unemployment (CDPHE & CDHS, 2004). In this context, it was crucial to understand how these schools ensure educational quality in the absence of specifically trained pre-school teachers. This situation raised concerns about whether children were adequately learning and prepared for the transition to primary school. To investigate these issues, a study was initiated to assess the language readiness skills of children in these schools.

Research Question

What is the level of language skills among the Grade I students of government primary schools who have completed pre-schools from the same schools?

Objectives of the Study

- i. To find out if children in grade I demonstrate oral expression.
- ii. To find out if children in grade I display emergent reading skills.
- iii. To find out if children in grade I display emergent writing skills.

Operational Definitions of Key Terms

The key terms used in the title, research question and objectives are defined as below:

- a) **Preschool:** Preschools refer to the schools established for children of 3 to 6 years age group. Here preschools term stand for government primary school which started preschool section with government approval.
- b) **Proficiency:** It denotes the accomplishment of task performance with efficiency. Here it stand for acquisition of foundational literacy among the students.
- c) **Foundational literacy:** It is the acquisition of basic skills in oral expression, reading, and writing.
 - i. **Oral expression:** It is the skill of communicating thoughts and concepts using spoken language, making new words, phonological awareness and comprehension of what others communicate.
 - ii. **Reading skills:** It is the skill of understanding the relationship between sounds, words, and pictures. It also involves awareness about convention of print, comprehension of words and print awareness and the ability to listen attentively.
 - iii. **Writing skills:** It includes early attempts at writing to convey thoughts and meaning through scribbling, drawing and writing.
- d) **Mizoram's Distinct Government Schools:** Mizoram is a state with distinct educational features such as starting of preschool section within the premises of primary schools which was a unique establishment in the country especially before NEP 2020 in the year 2014-15. Some of the preschool sections were established beyond the government approval and funded by primary schools' teachers themselves. Therefore, such preschool was termed in this research as distinct government of schools.
- e) **Assessing:** Assessing refers to the process of evaluating or estimating the quality, value, or extent of something. In this research assessing was based on Vidya Pravesh Guidelines developed by NCERT for the grade I children.

Methodology of the Study

Method of the Study: Assessment of foundational literacy was a part of comprehensive research work following the mixed-method approach. Although the mixed method is not applicable on the content presented in this paper, a few facts are triangulated to support the facts on assessment of foundational literacy. Specific to the method in this research paper, it was a kind of 'evaluative survey' (Fox, 1969).

Population of the Study: Population of the study comprised of the 66 government primary schools who were given permission to run pre-schools by the Government of Mizoram schools during 2014-15. All teachers, schools, and infrastructure were included as part of a broader research study. The focus of this specific paper is on grade I students enrolled in these government primary schools.

Sample of the Study: Random drawings were used to pick 50% of the Government Primary Schools in Aizawl, Lunglei, Kolasib, and Champhai districts that were granted permission by the Government of Mizoram to run a Pre-school program in 2014. All grade I students from the sampled 33 schools were included for sample of the study. The researcher used the incidental sampling technique and sampled 263 students who were available on the data collection days.

Tools for Data Collection: For the present study, language competencies highlighted in the assessment framework for tracking of children's preparedness for schools given in Vidya Pravesh Guidelines developed by NCERT were used to assess the grade I children. The assessment framework was divided into three different categories comprising: - Demonstration of Oral Expression, Demonstration of Emergent Reading Skills, and Demonstration of Emergent Writing Skills. The children were assessed using a three-point rating scale and were assessed against the criteria- rarely, sometimes, and always. The tool was based on criteria set by NCERT for school readiness. The validity of the tool was pre established and predicted as NCERT is an authoritative institution in school education. Moreover, the researcher presented the selected language related items before five experts for content validity. For the administration of the tool and working with the children the researcher took the help of pre-school teachers.

Findings and Discussion

Objective 1: Findings Related to Demonstration of oral skills by grade I children in Government Primary Schools of Mizoram:

The development of oral language skills through instruction combined with frequent exposure to rich oral language opportunities throughout the school day lays the foundation for learning to read and write. Effective literacy instruction must include teaching that fosters oral language development, especially for students who enter kindergarten with weak spoken skills and English language learners (Calderon, 2011). Children learn language by listening and speaking before they learn to read and write. It is important to expose children to the language through listening and speaking (NCERT, 2022). To find out the oral expression skills of the children in the sampled schools, the children were assessed against the oral language skills outlined in the Vidya Pravesh Guidelines developed by NCERT, and the result is tabulated as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 indicates varied levels of proficiency among children in demonstrating oral skills. Many children demonstrated proficiency in oral expression skills, such as engaging in open conversations with both adults and peers. They effectively expressed their feelings and needs, displayed curiosity, spoke clearly in complete sentences, provided creative responses, and showed comprehension by answering questions after listening. This reflects a positive development in their communication abilities. However, only a small number of children (21.67 %) had developed skills such as identifying, blending, and segmenting syllables. They also faced challenges in recognizing the beginning, middle, and ending sounds of common words, as well as in describing and retelling stories with rich details in complete sentences. Moreover, they struggled to engage in meaningful conversations and to create new words by adding or substituting syllables. These are the skills that are required for curricular preparedness and the matter may not be taken lightly because these skills are necessary prerequisites for developing competencies associated with language and foundational literacy. This data suggests that there remained a need for increased effort and variety in the types of activities implemented.

Table 1: Demonstration of Oral Expression

SN	Demonstration of Oral Expression	Rarely		Sometimes		Always	
1	Talks freely with adults and children	31	11.79%	107	40.68%	125	47.53%
2	Expresses feelings, needs and shows interest (through verbal and non-verbal gestures)	35	13.31	126	47.91%	102	38.78%
3	Speaks clearly in complete sentences	31	11.79%	103	39.16%	129	49.05%
4	Comprehends short texts by listening	13	4.94%	75	28.52%	175	66.54%
5	Describe and retells any event or visual in short sentences	29	11.03%	121	46.01%	113	42.97%
6	Identifies, blends, and segments syllables	102	38.78%	104	39.54%	57	21.67%
7	Identifies beginning and end sounds of common words	93	35.36%	104	39.54%	66	25.10%
8	Expresses/ answers creatively	52	19.77%	119	45.25%	92	34.98%
9	Comprehends and answers after listening	19	7.22%	91	34.60%	153	58.17%
10	Describes and retells using rich details in complete sentences	85	32.32%	108	41.06%	70	26.62%
11	Engages in meaningful conversations	47	17.87%	113	42.97%	103	39.16%
12	Identifies the beginning, middle, and end sounds of words	116	44.11%	94	35.74%	53	20.15%
13	Makes new words by adding or substituting syllables	149	56.65%	89	33.84%	25	9.51%

Incorporating a broader range of engaging activities could significantly enrich the language development experience for children. For instance, through dramatic play, children learn to express themselves, understand different perspectives, and build crucial social skills like cooperation, sharing, and problem-solving (Ambrosio, 2023). Similarly, engaging in play like command games that require listening and following instructions enhances communication skills, including reading accuracy, active listening, and proficient execution of both written and verbal directions. Show and tell nurtures confidence in public speaking Huzefa (2024), while story telling enhanced imagination to help visualize spoken words, improved vocabulary, and more refined communication skills (Yabe et al., 2018). By expanding the repertoire of activities beyond those commonly practiced, schools could further support and

enhance students' oral language abilities, ensuring a more comprehensive approach to language development.

Objective 2: Findings related to Demonstration of Emergent Reading Skills

As children become ready to read, they must be familiarized with what print looks like, how print is connected to sounds, and how print has meaning (NCERT, 2022). To find out whether the children in Mizoram demonstrate emergent reading skills, they were assessed against the reading skills outlined in the Vidya Pravesh Guidelines developed by NCERT, and the result is tabulated as shown in percentage below:

Table 2: Demonstration of Emergent Reading Skills
in the Government Primary Schools of Mizoram

SN	Demonstration of Emergent Reading Skills	Rarely		Sometimes		Always	
1	Explores and engages with pictures, books, and other print materials	48	18.25%	141	53.61%	74	28.14%
2	Listens attentively to stories and rhymes	11	4.18%	101	38.40%	151	57.41%
3	Names objects in the picture	21	7.98%	120	45.63%	122	46.39%
4	Identifies words in a sentence	67	25.48%	107	40.68%	89	33.84%
5	Identifies rhyming words	142	53.99%	87	33.08%	34	12.93%
6	Recognizes sound symbol association	121	46.01%	84	31.94%	58	22.05%
7	Attempts to read words	80	30.42%	105	39.92%	78	29.66%
8	Identifies convention of print such as left to right writing, reading from top to bottom	24	9.13%	91	34.60%	148	56.27%
9	Identifies punctuation marks like full stop and commas in the print	129	49.05%	75	28.52%	59	22.43%
10	Independently reads simple text in full sentences	129	49.05%	74	28.14%	60	22.81%
11	Retells a familiar story with the beginning, middle and end events in a sequence	98	37.26%	117	44.49%	48	18.25%
12	Comprehends pictures	29	11.03%	100	38.02%	134	50.95%
13	Comprehends words	97	36.88%	107	40.68%	59	22.43%

An analysis of table 2 indicates varied levels of proficiency among children in reading skills. Some children perform quite well in skills like listening attentively to stories and rhymes (57.41%), naming objects in the pictures (46.39%) and identification of the convention of print (56.27%). However, majority of the children did not perform well in other skills like

identifying words in a sentence, identification of rhyming words (57.99%), recognizing sound and symbol association, attempting to read words, reading simple text in full sentences, identification of punctuation marks, reading simple texts independently, retelling a familiar story with beginning, middle and end and comprehension of words. In terms of the skill required for exploring and interacting with pictures, books, and other print materials, attempting to read words, identification of punctuation marks, reading of simple texts and comprehension of words children were not performing very well. Triangulation with the school observation which was part of a larger study revealed that none of the sampled schools possessed a sufficient collection of children's books and picture books or a designated reading corner where children could engage in such activities. It was also found that the schools in the sample implemented an insufficient number of visual discrimination activities, thereby omitting a vital component crucial to developing early reading proficiency. Lack of relevant resources in the classroom affects children in different ways, such as making it difficult for them to learn to their fullest potential (Maffea, 2020). The effect of print richness in terms of developing literacy skills is further supported by Behera (2024), who established that a print-rich environment has a strong impact on enhancing reading skills and fostering the skill of literacy by encouraging learners to work autonomously in different learning activities.

Despite these efforts to incorporate reading activities into the curriculum, the outcomes appear to fall short of expectations, as evidenced by children's performance in reading skills. A significant number of children struggled with the identification of rhyming words, which was a crucial component of phonological awareness. This skill is fundamental for reading development as it establishes the foundation for advanced phonemic awareness skills crucial for literacy development, including reading and spelling (Ahrndt, 2023). This study revealed that many children faced challenges in recognizing sound and symbol associations, a skill essential for linking sounds to their corresponding letters or groups of letters.

The inability to read simple texts in complete sentences highlights a major gap in children's literacy skills. Reading simple texts requires a combination of skills, including word recognition, understanding punctuation, and following the structure of sentences. Children who did not achieve proficiency in these areas might struggle with comprehension and might miss the inherent meaning within the text. As per this study, the challenges faced by children in rhyming recognition, sound-symbol association, and reading full sentences collectively underscored the necessity for targeted interventions and instructional strategies designed to enhance these foundational skills. Chaudhary and Kaul (2019) in their study also revealed that the dominant curricular practice across both private and government pre-school centers in Andhra Pradesh, Assam and Rajasthan was formal and teacher-controlled teaching of reading, writing, and number work with maximum time devoted to it in the daily routine thus tending to push out developmentally appropriate practices. This practice was also prevalent in the pre-school scenario of Mizoram. Teacher-centered teaching of the three R's in pre-school years can at best add limited value and at worst be detrimental to children's cognitive and language readiness for school despite children's regular attendance in a pre-school programme.

Objective 3: Findings related to Demonstration of Emergent Writing Skills

Writing begins when children scribble, draw and invent spellings to represent the physical and social world around them. This developmental aspect of children learning to write is emergent writing (Nixon & Topping, 2001). Expressing oneself in written forms is an important milestone for children to become effective communicators. An emergent writer talks about their writing by making connections and communicating their experiences with others (NCERT, 2022). To find out whether the children demonstrate emergent writing skills, the children were assessed against the language skills outlined in the Vidya Pravesh Guidelines developed by NCERT, and the result is tabulated as shown in percentages below:

Table 3: Demonstration of Emergent Writing Skills
in the Government Primary Schools of Mizoram

SN	Demonstration of Emergent Writing Skills	Rarely		Sometimes		Always	
1	Holds pencil properly	18	6.84%	24	9.13%	221	84.03%
2	Does tracing on sand/ air etc.	92	34.98%	91	34.60%	80	30.42%
3	Scribbles or draws to represent thoughts, situations, events, etc.	129	49.05%	103	39.16%	31	11.79%
4	Holds writing or coloring tool with better grip	8	3.04%	23	8.75%	232	88.21%
5	Uses writing tool appropriately	5	1.90%	27	10.27%	231	87.83%
6	Reads one's drawing and explains it using simple words	40	15.21%	100	38.02%	123	46.77%
7	Tries to express ideas in words and drawings	148	56.27%	74	28.14%	41	15.59%
8	Attempts to write alphabets and numbers	31	11.79%	107	40.68%	125	47.53%
9	Uses tools with ease to convey meaning through drawing	112	42.58%	106	40.30%	45	17.11%

The analysis of table 3 indicates that children perform quite well in holding a pencil properly which is an important feature in early writing skills. They also did quite well in holding a writing or coloring tool, using writing tool appropriately and in reading or explaining their own drawings using simple words. Majority of them showed interest in writing alphabets and numbers as they were found attempting to write the alphabets and numbers. It is surprising to note that essential skills such as scribbling or drawing to represent their thoughts (11.79%), as well as the ability to express their ideas through words or illustrations and utilize writing or coloring tools to convey meaning through drawing (17.11%), were observed in only a small number of children. These skills are foundational for creative expression, as they enable children to communicate their ideas and emotions before they fully develop verbal language. When children can create drawings that correspond to their thoughts, they engage in a meaningful process of representation that fosters critical thinking and imagination. The limited occurrence of these crucial skills among children indicated a potential area for

improvement and emphasizing activities that promote scribbling, drawing, and the use of various writing tools and letting them express their feelings and thoughts could greatly benefit children's expressive abilities and overall learning experiences. Scribbling is an instinct, hard-wired and crucial to human brain development (Roches, 2024.). Drawing is a language-based impulse that lays the groundwork for reading, writing, and a host of other skills. While drawing, children hone other cognitive skills, such as thinking creatively, visualizing outcomes, taking risks, solving problems and organizing (Roches, 2024). This highlights an opportunity for primary schools to enhance their focus on these creative and dexterity-building activities, which are crucial for promoting children's fine motor development.

Conclusion

The assessment of children's language, reading, and writing skills indicates both strengths and weaknesses across various competencies. In this study many children displayed basic oral expression and emergent reading skills, demonstrating abilities such as engaging in conversation and listening to stories, but more complex skills remained underdeveloped. The limited proficiency in expressing feelings, creativity, and detailed storytelling suggested a need for targeted interventions to foster these essential competencies. Similarly, children's writing skills reflected a solid foundation in basic tasks such as holding writing tools, yet a significant number struggled with expressing thoughts creatively through drawing and writing. Overall, these findings highlight the importance of incorporating diverse and engaging activities in early education in Mizoram to enhance children's comprehensive language and literacy development, ultimately preparing them more effectively for future academic success. This natural way of learning reading and writing was often hampered by continuous drills of letters which might make no sense to the children, and this was an ongoing practice in the majority of schools in Mizoram. Learning in the schools had been taken far away from the life of the child and it was high time that the school system takes steps to stimulate children's natural way of learning, especially in language acquisition. Singh and Chaudhary (2019) in their observations of the curriculum transaction in the classroom in India revealed that learning in the schools had been taken far away from the life of the child. They emphasized that it was high time that the school system takes steps to stimulate children's natural way of learning, especially in language acquisition. That the entire constructivist approach and developmental appropriateness of the curriculum emphasized for pre-primary and early grades in the National Curriculum Framework 2005 did not get implemented which was a prevalent scenario in Mizoram as well.

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