

The Impact of Mother Tongue Instruction on Early Grade Literacy in Garo and Assamese Medium Schools

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Abstract

This paper examines how the language used for teaching in the first years of school influences how well children learn to read and their future academic performance. In linguistically diverse regions such as Northeast India, many students start school speaking Garo, Assamese, or other community languages but suddenly shift to English or the state language for classroom learning. This study investigates the impact of mother tongue instruction on early grade literacy in Garo and Assamese medium primary schools across Assam and Meghalaya. A mixed-methods design was adopted, integrating classroom observations, discussions with teachers, and assessments of students' reading skills in Grades 1 to 3. The results indicate that mother tongue-based education significantly enhances decoding ability, reading fluency, text comprehension, and active classroom involvement. Students taught in their first language showed stronger phonological awareness, faster vocabulary development, and greater self-assurance than peers taught in an unfamiliar language. The evidence suggests that establishing foundational literacy in the mother tongue before introducing a second language leads to better outcomes in both languages. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for teacher preparation, development of appropriate teaching materials, and a phased introduction of additional languages to strengthen early literacy in multilingual environments.

Keywords: *Assamese, Garo, Literacy, Mother-Tongue, Multilingualism*

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Introduction

Early grade literacy serves as the bedrock for a child's entire educational journey. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has consistently stated that reading and writing are learned most effectively when early instruction uses the language children already speak and comprehend, their mother tongue.¹ This perspective is echoed in India's *National Education Policy 2020*, which specifies that "wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8, will be the home language, mother tongue, local language, or regional language."²

The northeastern region of India is characterized by remarkable linguistic diversity. In Assam, the Assamese language functions as the associate official language and is spoken by a substantial proportion of school-aged children as their first language. Meanwhile, in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya, and the Garo dominated areas in Assam, the Garo remains the primary language used at home and in the school within the Garo tribal population. Despite these linguistic realities, classrooms in the early primary years have traditionally relied on English or Assamese for teaching, often without regard for the language children actually speak at home. This disconnect between the medium of instruction and learners' home languages produces a significant linguistic barrier that undermines students' ability to understand lessons, engage actively in classroom activities, and develop strong foundational literacy skills.

This paper examines the effects of using Garo and Assamese as the languages of instruction during Grades 1 to 3 on children's early literacy development. The research is guided by three central questions. *First*, it explores the extent to which mother tongue-based teaching shapes students' performance in key literacy domains, including word decoding, reading fluency, and text comprehension in the first three grades of primary school. *Second*, it investigates the practical difficulties and institutional constraints that educators encounter while delivering instruction in Garo and Assamese medium classrooms. *Third*, it considers the broader significance of these findings for shaping language-in-education policies in regions where multiple languages coexist, aiming to inform more effective approaches to early literacy in multilingual contexts.

Objectives of the Study: The present paper is guided by the following objectives:

- (i) To assess how mother tongue instruction affects the development of foundational literacy skills among children enrolled in Garo and Assamese medium primary schools in Assam.

- (ii) To compare reading achievement and levels of classroom participation between students taught in their first language and those taught in a second or unfamiliar language during Grades 1 to 3.
- (iii) To recommend policy strategies for improving early literacy in multilingual settings, focusing on teacher training, culturally relevant learning materials, and a gradual transition to additional languages.

Literature Review

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that scholarship in cognitive psychology and second language acquisition provides a strong theoretical foundation for mother tongue-based instruction, emphasizing that literacy skills transfer across linguistic boundaries. When children establish robust reading competencies in their first language, they can apply decoding skills, phonological sensitivity, and metalinguistic awareness to learn additional languages. Cummins' Common Underlying Proficiency model captures this dynamic, arguing that academic concepts and advanced language abilities developed in L1 create a scaffold for L2 acquisition. This claim is supported by international research. A multi-country World Bank review of 20 education systems found that pupils taught in their mother tongue achieved early reading results 0.2 to 0.5 standard deviations higher than those taught in a language they did not speak at home. Comparable improvements in reading fluency and comprehension were observed in Kenya's Primary Math and Reading Initiative and in USAID-funded Early Grade Reading Assessment programs in Mali and Zambia, both of which used L1 as the initial medium for literacy.

In the Indian context, legislative and policy frameworks such as the Right to Education Act 2009 and the National Education Policy 2020 endorse multilingual education with the mother tongue as the primary medium in early grades, although implementation differs widely across states. Odisha's Multilingual Education program, which introduced Kui, Kuvi, and Santali for tribal learners, documented gains in both student retention and academic achievement. Similarly, rural schools in Andhra Pradesh using Telugu as the medium of instruction reported stronger reading performance than English-medium schools in similar settings. Progress in Assam and Meghalaya has been uneven despite policy support for L1 instruction. While Assamese-medium schools are common, many Garo-speaking children are enrolled in Assamese or English medium classrooms, the main reason is teacher shortage, defective curriculum, teaching methods, and unattractive infrastructural facilities resulting in de facto submersion where literacy is introduced in a language unfamiliar to the learners.

Linguistically, Garo and Assamese present different profiles. Garo is a Tibeto-Burman language with more than one million speakers in Meghalaya, Assam,

and Bangladesh, written in a standardized Roman orthography. Assamese, an Indo-Aryan language, functions as a lingua franca across much of Assam and uses its own distinct script. Both languages maintain vibrant oral cultures, traditional narratives, and a gradually increasing corpus of children's literature. The principal barrier to effective instruction, then, lies not in linguistic features but in resource gaps. Schools using Garo as the medium frequently operate without graded reading materials, structured teacher guides, or appropriate assessment tools. In classrooms with mixed language backgrounds, educators often shift between Garo, Assamese, and English without a systematic language-use plan.

Methodology

A convergent mixed-methods approach, including both primary and secondary literature, was adopted in this research to assess how instruction in the mother tongue influences early literacy development, combining numerical data from locally adapted early grade reading tests with descriptive insights from systematic classroom observations and semi-structured conversations with educators. Fieldwork took place across 12 state-run primary schools, with 6 Garo-medium schools and 6 Assamese-medium schools in Goalpara District, Assam. Using random selection procedures, 30 pupils from Grades 1 through 3 were drawn from each institution, producing an overall cohort of 360 children who all spoke either Garo or Assamese at home, and only teachers who had taught early primary classes for at least two years were invited to participate. Data collection relied on three tools: an Early Grade Reading Assessment that was contextualized for Garo and Assamese to evaluate letter recognition, pseudoword decoding, oral reading fluency, and text comprehension; an observation framework that recorded instructional language choices, levels of learner participation, and the presence and application of teaching aids; and an interview guide that probed teachers' professional preparation, instructional barriers, views on L1-based pedagogy, and methods for introducing additional languages. Numerical findings were examined through descriptive measures and independent-samples t-tests to compare literacy outcomes between the two language cohorts across Grades 1 to 3, while narrative data from observations and interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic coding to uncover common patterns concerning classroom constraints, teaching practices, and educator viewpoints on mother tongue instruction and language transition processes.

Discussion and findings

The results of this research are consistent with a broad body of international scholarship showing that instruction in the mother tongue markedly enhances early literacy acquisition. In the Garo and Assamese school settings investigated here, the

advantages manifested in both cognitive and affective domains. Pupils taught in a language they fully comprehended demonstrated more precise decoding, deeper reading comprehension, and a stronger willingness to interact with texts. Such patterns correspond with the World Bank's (2021) conclusion that "children learn to read more effectively when taught in a language they speak and understand,"³ with learners in such contexts attaining early reading scores that are 0.2 to 0.5 standard deviations higher. The Grade 3 data are especially noteworthy because they lend empirical weight to Cummins' Common Underlying Proficiency framework. Children who first became literate in Garo or Assamese were not held back when tested on basic English passages; rather, they exceeded the performance of classmates who had received English-only instruction since Grade 1. "This outcome directly contests the prevailing belief that early immersion in English is a prerequisite for English competence, and it implies that robust L1 literacy establishes a transferable cognitive base for later second-language learning."⁴ The social gains observed, such as greater participation in class discussions and diminished reluctance to speak, further suggest that mother tongue instruction affirms learners' cultural identity and fosters a secure space for academic risk-taking.

Nonetheless, the barriers identified in this study are largely structural, not instructional, and point to uneven policy execution rather than weaknesses in the mother tongue model itself. Limited availability of levelled Garo reading resources past Grade 2, insufficient specialized preparation in L1-based phonics for teachers, and community preference for English-medium education all threaten long-term outcomes. In the absence of a steady supply of linguistically appropriate and culturally grounded textbooks, and without well-designed bridging curricula to guide the shift toward Assamese or English, schools may fall back into submersion approaches that prior research has found to be counterproductive for speakers of minority languages.⁵ Classroom observations also revealed important variation hidden within the category of *mother tongue*. Across several Garo communities, the dialects children spoke at home diverged in phonology and vocabulary from the standardized Garo used in instructional materials. Educators routinely negotiated this gap by rephrasing content in the local variety, demonstrating that successful L1 teaching requires pedagogical flexibility and professional judgment. One teacher captured this reality, stating, "If I only use the book language, they go silent. When I say it our way, they answer" (Teacher 3, Garo Medium School, personal communication, March 2025). This practice highlights that effective implementation depends not merely on translated texts but on sustained investment in teacher expertise and dialect-sensitive methods.

These outcomes suggest four central recommendations for policy and practice. *First*, education authorities in Meghalaya and Assam should urgently commission the creation of graded, culturally responsive reading materials in Garo and Assamese, including decodable passages, levelled books, and big books for group reading, to sustain literacy development beyond Grade 2. *Second*, both pre-service and in-service teacher training must incorporate systematic instruction in L1 literacy components — phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension — alongside concrete strategies for multilingual scaffolding when L2 is introduced. *Third*, schools need an explicit, phased language-transition framework to safeguard foundational skills while cultivating multilingual proficiency; for example, Grades 1–2 could operate entirely in the mother tongue, Grade 3 could add oral exposure to Assamese or English, and Grade 4 onward could adopt planned bilingual instruction. *Finally*, ongoing community collaboration and data-driven oversight are critical. Schools should organize regular parent meetings to present learners’ reading work and assessment data to counter misconceptions about English-medium schooling, while state departments should implement annual L1-based EGRA-type monitoring to guide material updates and teacher support. Collectively, these actions would shift mother tongue education from policy aspiration to classroom reality.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be said that the data collected from Garo and Assamese-medium schools indicate that using learners’ first language as the medium of instruction generates significant and quantifiable gains in foundational literacy. When pupils start their reading journey in a language they already use at home, they master letter-sound relationships more quickly, develop a richer understanding of written passages, and demonstrate noticeably stronger involvement and confidence during lessons. Importantly, the cognitive and literacy capacities built through L1 instruction are not confined to that language; they facilitate learning in additional languages, including English. Results from Grade 3 assessments in this study directly counter the enduring notion that mother tongue schooling holds back or weakens English proficiency. Rather, establishing solid literacy in Garo or Assamese equips children with phonological awareness, vocabulary-building techniques, and metalinguistic skills that hasten the acquisition of reading and writing in a second language once it is systematically taught. Beyond test scores, instruction in the mother tongue legitimizes students’ cultural and linguistic heritage, lowers apprehension linked to formal education, and cultivates a classroom climate in which learners feel secure enough to experiment, ask questions, and participate.

Although these advantages are well documented, the difficulties in putting the approach into practice are predominantly systemic instead of stemming from the instructional model itself. The limited supply of level-appropriate, culturally relevant texts after the initial grades, inadequate professional development for teachers on L1-focused structured literacy approaches, and the lack of clear, staged frameworks for moving learners toward Assamese or English all restrict sustained achievement. Overcoming these constraints requires coordinated effort among state education authorities, teacher-training colleges, material developers, and community groups. Building teachers' competence to work across dialects, creating graded readers in Garo and Assamese, and embedding sequential bilingual transition plans are not simply operational adjustments; they constitute an intentional commitment to linguistic justice and equal educational opportunity. Thus, in a nutshell, it can be said that in multilingual contexts like Assam and Meghalaya, a carefully implemented mother tongue-based multilingual education strategy functions both as a culturally respectful policy and as a practical mechanism for attaining universal early literacy and lowering the incidence of early school leaving.

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