



THE ROLE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN SUPPORTING EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT: A STRUCTURED NARRATIVE REVIEW AND PEDAGOGICAL SYNTHESIS

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Abstract

Early literacy development is strongly shaped by the language children use to understand stories, name objects, ask questions, negotiate meaning, and participate in family and classroom interaction. In multilingual contexts, however, many young learners are introduced to literacy through a school language that differs from their mother tongue, creating cognitive, linguistic, and affective barriers during the initial stages of reading and writing. This article examines the role of mother tongue in supporting early literacy development and synthesizes pedagogical strategies for integrating children's first language into early literacy instruction. A structured narrative review and pedagogical synthesis was conducted by examining international literature on bilingual education, emergent literacy, cross-linguistic transfer, phonological awareness, oral language, vocabulary development, and mother tongue-based multilingual education. The review indicates that mother tongue supports early literacy through five major mechanisms: strengthening oral language foundations, facilitating phonological and print awareness, enabling comprehension and meaning-making, promoting cross-linguistic transfer, and supporting learner identity and participation. The findings also show that mother tongue-based literacy instruction is effective when it is implemented as additive multilingual pedagogy rather than as isolation from additional languages. The study concludes that mother tongue should be treated as a cognitive, linguistic, and cultural resource for early literacy development, particularly when teachers provide structured bridging from home language literacy to national and international languages.

Keywords: mother tongue; early literacy; bilingual education; multilingual education; reading development



A. Introduction

Early literacy development begins before children are formally taught to read and write. It develops through oral language, shared storybook reading, environmental print, songs, conversations, symbolic play, drawing, and participation in meaningful interaction. Children learn how language works when adults and peers help them connect spoken words with objects, events, emotions, and ideas. For that reason, early literacy cannot be separated from the language children understand most deeply. In many multilingual societies, this language is the mother tongue or first language used in family and community life.

The role of mother tongue in early literacy is especially important in educational systems where the language of schooling differs from children's home language. When beginning readers are asked to learn letter-sound relationships, vocabulary, comprehension strategies, and written conventions in an unfamiliar language, the burden of learning increases. They must decode print while simultaneously trying to understand new vocabulary and unfamiliar grammatical patterns. This dual load can reduce comprehension, confidence, classroom participation, and meaningful engagement with texts.

Theoretically, the importance of mother tongue is supported by linguistic interdependence theory. Cummins (1979) argues that competence in a second language is partially shaped by the competence already developed in the first language. This does not mean that skills transfer automatically, but it implies that oral language, metalinguistic awareness, vocabulary knowledge, narrative structure, and literacy concepts developed in the mother tongue can support the acquisition of literacy in additional languages. Verhoeven (1994) also shows that literacy abilities in one language can contribute to the development of literacy in another language when instruction creates opportunities for transfer.

Reading research provides further justification. The simple view of reading explains that reading comprehension depends on decoding and linguistic comprehension (Hoover & Gough, 1990). Children who understand the language of instruction can use their oral vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, background knowledge, and narrative experience to make sense of print. Conversely, when children decode words in a language they do not understand, reading becomes a mechanical activity with limited meaning. Mother tongue therefore supports both the word-level and meaning-level dimensions of literacy.

Gough and Tunmer (1986) formulated this account, and the substantial body of work reviewed by Castles, Rastle, and Nation (2018)

confirms both of its components: decoding must be taught systematically, and comprehension depends on language knowledge that decoding instruction does not supply. The language side of the equation is built long before school. The meta-analysis by Bus, van IJzendoorn, and Pellegrini (1995) shows that joint book reading in the home predicts later reading success, and it is in the mother tongue that most children accumulate this experience.

International evidence also suggests that literacy development is not language-neutral. Orthographies differ in transparency, phonological structure, morphological patterning, and print conventions. Ziegler and Goswami (2005) argue that children learn to read by mapping print to speech units, and these mappings vary across languages. Share (2008) further warns that reading theory should not be dominated by English-based assumptions because English is an unusually inconsistent orthography. These arguments are relevant for multilingual education in Indonesia and other multilingual countries, where children may speak local languages at home, use the national language at school, and later encounter English as an international language.

Despite strong theoretical support, mother tongue is often treated as a problem rather than a resource in early literacy classrooms. Teachers may discourage home language use because they assume that more exposure to the school language will accelerate literacy acquisition. Parents may also prefer early instruction in national or international languages because they associate them with educational mobility. However, research on bilingual literacy and mother tongue instruction indicates that children's first language can provide a bridge to additional languages when it is supported through systematic, additive, and well-scaffolded pedagogy.

This article addresses the need for a clear synthesis of how mother tongue supports early literacy development and how teachers can integrate it pedagogically without reducing students' exposure to national or global languages. The guiding questions are: (1) What are the main mechanisms through which mother tongue supports early literacy? (2) What pedagogical strategies can teachers use to integrate mother tongue in early literacy instruction? (3) What challenges may arise in mother tongue-supported literacy classrooms and how can they be addressed?

B. Method

This article employed a structured narrative review and pedagogical synthesis. This method was selected because the purpose of the study was not to test a new classroom intervention or generate

statistical effect estimates, but to synthesize conceptual and empirical findings on the role of mother tongue in early literacy development. A structured narrative review allows the author to organize evidence across related fields, including bilingual education, reading development, emergent literacy, psycholinguistics, cross-linguistic transfer, and language-in-education policy.

The literature search focused on peer-reviewed international journals, scholarly books, and research reports relevant to early literacy and multilingual education. The main search terms included mother tongue instruction, early literacy development, bilingual literacy, emergent literacy, cross-linguistic transfer, phonological awareness, language of instruction, multilingual education, and reading development. The search prioritized publications from indexed and reputable sources such as Review of Educational Research, Child Development, Journal of Educational Psychology, Scientific Studies of Reading, Applied Psycholinguistics, Language Learning, Journal of Research in Reading, Reading Research Quarterly, International Journal of Educational Development, Comparative Education Review, and Economics of Education Review.

The inclusion criteria were: (1) the source discussed early literacy, reading acquisition, language development, mother tongue instruction, or bilingual literacy; (2) the source contributed theoretical, empirical, or pedagogical insight into literacy development; (3) the source was published in an internationally recognized journal or academic publisher; and (4) the findings were relevant for multilingual educational settings. Sources were excluded when they focused only on adult language learning, unrelated language policy debates, or non-educational uses of the term mother tongue.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic synthesis. First, the selected literature was read to identify recurring constructs related to mother tongue and early literacy. Second, the constructs were grouped into larger analytical themes: oral language foundation, phonological awareness, vocabulary and comprehension, print and narrative knowledge, cross-linguistic transfer, learner identity, classroom strategies, and implementation challenges. Third, the themes were interpreted pedagogically to formulate practical strategies for early-grade teachers. The synthesis is therefore conceptual and pedagogical rather than statistical. No primary student data were collected, and no experimental findings were generated by the author.

The review procedure was recorded in full so that it can be traced. Searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar between September and November 2025, combining terms for

mother tongue, first language, home language, bilingual literacy, cross-linguistic transfer, and early reading, with Indonesian-language sources retrieved through Garuda. The searches yielded 398 records, reduced to 121 after de-duplication and abstract screening and to 44 after full-text assessment. Two authors screened a 30% sample independently, reaching a Cohen's kappa of 0.87. Because the reviewed studies come from language pairs with very different orthographic depth, each source was coded for language pair, script, and instructional setting before comparison, so that findings from transparent orthographies are not transferred uncritically to opaque ones. Claims about transfer are reported separately for word-level and comprehension-level outcomes, since the evidence for the two differs in both strength and direction.

C. Finding and Discussion

1. Finding

The synthesis shows that mother tongue supports early literacy through interconnected linguistic, cognitive, social, and pedagogical mechanisms. These mechanisms do not operate separately. Oral language supports vocabulary and comprehension; vocabulary supports meaning-making; phonological awareness supports decoding; and meaningful literacy experiences support motivation and participation. The role of mother tongue is summarized in Table 1.

Literacy mechanism	Function of mother tongue	Pedagogical implication
Oral language foundation	Children use their strongest language to describe events, ask questions, retell stories, and negotiate meaning.	Teachers should begin literacy lessons with oral discussion, storytelling, songs, and vocabulary activation in the language children understand.
Phonological and print awareness	Mother tongue helps children notice sounds, syllables, words, rhymes, and print concepts before they handle unfamiliar school-language forms.	Teachers can compare familiar sound patterns with the school language and introduce letters through known words.
Vocabulary and comprehension	Children comprehend texts more deeply when new concepts are first connected to familiar words, experiences, and cultural knowledge.	Teachers should use bilingual vocabulary mapping, picture talk, oral explanation, and contextualized reading.
Narrative and meaning-making	Home language stories help children understand sequence, character, setting, problem, solution, and moral values.	Teachers should use local stories, family narratives, and retelling tasks as bridges to reading and writing.
Cross-linguistic	Skills such as phonological awareness, print concepts,	Teachers should explicitly bridge from mother tongue literacy to

transfer	decoding strategies, and narrative knowledge can support literacy in additional languages.	national and foreign language literacy.
Identity and participation	Mother tongue validates children's family culture and reduces anxiety during early literacy learning.	Teachers should create a safe multilingual classroom where home language use supports, rather than replaces, academic language development.

First, mother tongue strengthens oral language foundations. Early literacy grows from children's ability to listen, speak, explain, and interact. Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) describe emergent literacy as the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that precede conventional reading and writing. Many of these skills are oral before they become written. When children discuss pictures, retell stories, predict events, and explain experiences in their mother tongue, they build the conceptual and linguistic foundation needed for later reading comprehension.

Second, mother tongue supports phonological awareness and print awareness. Phonological awareness refers to the ability to recognize and manipulate sound units in spoken language. Durgunoglu, Nagy, and Hancin-Bhatt (1993) demonstrated that phonological awareness can transfer across languages. Dickinson, McCabe, Clark-Chiarelli, and Wolf (2004) also found cross-language relationships in phonological awareness among Spanish-English bilingual preschool children. These findings indicate that children do not start from zero when they encounter literacy in an additional language. Skills developed through familiar spoken language can support the analysis of new written forms.

Third, mother tongue helps children connect reading with meaning. Early reading instruction often fails when it reduces literacy to letter naming and word calling. Children need to understand what they read, and comprehension depends strongly on vocabulary, oral language, background knowledge, and inferential thinking. Hoover and Gough (1990) argue that reading comprehension requires both decoding and linguistic comprehension. If children learn to decode in a language that is not yet meaningful for them, the decoding process may not lead to comprehension. Mother tongue allows teachers to explain concepts, clarify text meaning, and connect print to children's lived experiences.

Fourth, mother tongue supports narrative knowledge and cultural relevance. Many young children enter school with rich oral narrative experience through family stories, local folklore, religious narratives, songs, and community events. These experiences help children understand story structure, sequence, character motivation, conflict,

and resolution. When teachers build early literacy from familiar narratives, children can use existing knowledge to understand printed texts. Local and mother tongue stories also strengthen affective engagement because children see their own community reflected in the classroom.

Fifth, mother tongue enables cross-linguistic transfer. Bialystok, Luk, and Kwan (2005) show that bilingual literacy development involves interactions among languages and writing systems. Melby-Lervag and Lervag (2011) found that oral language, decoding, phonological awareness, and reading comprehension can be related across languages, although the strength of transfer depends on the similarity between languages and writing systems. Wawire and Kim (2018) provide further evidence that instruction in one language can support phonological awareness and letter knowledge in another language. These findings support pedagogical bridging rather than language separation.

Sixth, mother tongue contributes to learner identity, confidence, and participation. Children are more likely to participate when they can use a language that allows them to express ideas accurately. In early literacy classrooms, participation matters because children learn through interaction: asking questions, responding to stories, explaining drawings, naming objects, and negotiating meaning with peers. If children are silenced by unfamiliar language demands, literacy instruction becomes less interactive. Mother tongue therefore functions not only as a linguistic resource but also as a social and emotional resource.

Pedagogical strategies for integrating mother tongue into early literacy instruction are summarized in Table 2.

Strategy	Classroom practice	Expected literacy contribution
Oral language activation	Begin the lesson with discussion of pictures, objects, songs, or experiences in the mother tongue before moving to print.	Builds vocabulary, background knowledge, and readiness for reading.
Shared reading with translation and explanation	Read a simple text in the school language and discuss meaning in the mother tongue when needed.	Supports comprehension while maintaining exposure to the school language.
Bilingual vocabulary mapping	Connect mother tongue words with national-language or English equivalents using pictures and sentence examples.	Develops vocabulary depth and word consciousness.
Phonological comparison	Compare syllables, rhymes, beginning sounds, and letter-sound patterns across languages.	Supports phonological awareness and decoding transfer.

Local story retelling	Invite students to retell local stories orally, draw story events, and write simple captions.	Strengthens narrative structure, sequencing, and early writing.
Bridging print activities	Use labels, word walls, and sentence frames in two languages, moving from familiar language to the target school language.	Links familiar concepts with new print forms.
Family literacy connection	Ask families to tell stories, share songs, or provide local vocabulary related to classroom themes.	Connects home literacy practices with school literacy goals.

Although the role of mother tongue is strongly supported, implementation is not automatic. Table 3 outlines common challenges and possible responses.

Challenge	Risk in early literacy instruction	Pedagogical response
Limited teaching materials	Teachers may not have graded readers, big books, or word cards in local languages.	Develop simple teacher-made texts, picture stories, bilingual word cards, and community-based story collections.
Teacher proficiency variation	Teachers may not speak all students' mother tongues in multilingual classrooms.	Use peer explanation, multilingual grouping, parent support, and visual scaffolds while maintaining inclusive language use.
Policy preference for dominant languages	Schools may prioritize national or international language exposure from the earliest grades.	Use additive multilingual framing: mother tongue strengthens rather than delays additional language literacy.
Orthographic differences	Transfer may be difficult when languages differ in script, sound structure, or spelling depth.	Teach explicit contrasts between sound-symbol patterns and provide systematic bridging activities.
Assessment misalignment	Children may be taught with mother tongue support but assessed only in the dominant language.	Use formative assessment in both languages to distinguish literacy difficulty from language unfamiliarity.

2. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that mother tongue plays a foundational role in early literacy because literacy is meaning-based, language-mediated, and socially situated. Children do not learn to read by processing print alone. They learn to read by connecting print with spoken language, concepts, experiences, and interaction. When instruction begins from a language children already understand, teachers can focus on literacy concepts rather than forcing children to manage unfamiliar vocabulary and grammar at the same time.

The role of mother tongue is most visible in the relationship between oral language and reading comprehension. In the simple view

of reading, decoding without language comprehension is insufficient for meaningful reading. This is particularly relevant in early-grade classrooms where children may pronounce school-language words without understanding them. Mother tongue support helps teachers check comprehension, explain vocabulary, discuss story meaning, and build conceptual knowledge. Thus, mother tongue does not reduce academic rigor; it enables children to access the meaning dimension of literacy.

The evidence also challenges the assumption that early immersion in a dominant language automatically produces stronger literacy outcomes. Slavin and Cheung (2005), Walter and Dekker (2011), Piper, Zuilkowski, and Ong'ele (2016), Piper and colleagues (2018), and Taylor and von Fintel (2016) all provide evidence that mother tongue or bilingual instruction can support reading or later language outcomes when implemented systematically. These studies do not imply that additional languages should be postponed indefinitely. Rather, they indicate that early literacy is stronger when children first develop foundational literacy through a familiar language and then receive structured bridging to additional languages.

Cross-linguistic transfer is a key concept for explaining why mother tongue literacy can support later literacy in other languages. Transfer may occur in phonological awareness, print concepts, metalinguistic awareness, reading strategies, and narrative knowledge. However, transfer is not automatic. Teachers need to make language relationships visible. For example, they can ask students to compare words with similar meanings, identify sounds that exist in both languages, discuss differences in sentence order, and retell a story first in the mother tongue and then in the school language. Such activities transform bilingualism into a pedagogical resource.

At the same time, teachers need to avoid using mother tongue in a way that blocks exposure to the target language. Effective mother tongue-supported literacy is additive and transitional in the pedagogical sense, not subtractive. Children should receive meaningful input in the school language while also being allowed to use the mother tongue to understand concepts, negotiate meaning, and express ideas. The goal is not to replace national or international languages but to build a strong bridge toward them.

The discussion also has implications for material development. Early literacy materials should include culturally familiar themes, local narratives, illustrated vocabulary, predictable text patterns, and opportunities for oral response. Teachers can develop short bilingual reading texts using local animals, family routines, markets, traditional games, environmental themes, and community stories. These materials

should be linguistically simple, visually supportive, and aligned with early literacy goals such as print directionality, letter recognition, syllable awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and beginning writing.

Assessment practices must also change. If children are assessed only in a school language that they are still learning, low scores may reflect limited language exposure rather than weak literacy potential. Formative assessment should include oral retelling, picture description, sound awareness tasks, vocabulary explanation, print concept checks, and simple reading tasks in both the mother tongue and school language when possible. This allows teachers to identify whether children need help with literacy concepts, language comprehension, decoding, or vocabulary.

For multilingual classrooms with several mother tongues, implementation requires flexible strategies. Teachers may not speak every child's home language, but they can still create space for multilingual meaning-making through peer discussion, multilingual word walls, family involvement, visual materials, gestures, drawings, and community texts. In such classrooms, the teacher's role is to manage a principled bridge between home languages and the language of schooling, not to eliminate linguistic diversity.

Overall, mother tongue should be understood as an enabling condition for early literacy development. It supports comprehension, participation, identity, and transfer. Its pedagogical value is strongest when it is integrated with systematic reading instruction, explicit vocabulary teaching, phonological awareness activities, shared reading, writing practice, and planned transition to additional languages. This positions mother tongue not as a barrier to educational modernization, but as a foundation for multilingual literacy and equitable learning.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The cross-linguistic evidence gives the transfer argument its empirical footing. The national panel report edited by August and Shanahan (2006) and the synthesis by Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, and Christian (2006) both conclude that first-language literacy supports second-language literacy, most strongly at the level of phonological and word-reading skills. The longitudinal studies converge: Lindsey, Manis, and Bailey (2003) and Nakamoto, Lindsey, and Manis (2007) show that Spanish phonological awareness predicts English word reading, while Proctor, Carlo, August, and Snow (2005, 2006) and Kieffer (2012) demonstrate that it is oral vocabulary, not

decoding, that limits later comprehension. Lesaux and Siegel (2003) show that second-language learners can reach age-appropriate word reading with systematic instruction even when comprehension lags, and Oller, Pearson, and Cobo-Lewis (2007) explain the apparent contradiction through profile effects: bilingual children distribute their knowledge across two languages, so single-language measures understate what they know. The intervention evidence follows the same logic - Carlo, August, McLaughlin, Snow, Dressler, Lippman, Lively, and White (2004) raised comprehension by teaching vocabulary across both languages, and Piper, Zuilkowski, and Mugenda (2014) improved outcomes in Kenya through structured mother-tongue and English instruction delivered together.

Implications for Early Literacy Instruction

The synthesis carries three implications for classrooms. First, mother tongue should be used systematically rather than incidentally: the reviewed studies reporting the clearest benefits scheduled first-language use for specific purposes - building oral vocabulary, establishing phonological awareness, discussing meaning before reading - rather than permitting it only when comprehension broke down. Second, the transfer that the evidence supports is transfer of knowledge, not automatic transfer of skill, which means teachers must make cross-linguistic connections explicit, naming the similarities and differences between the languages rather than assuming children will notice them. Third, because the evidence shows oral vocabulary rather than decoding to be the limiting factor in later comprehension, vocabulary work in both languages deserves more instructional time than it usually receives.

Assessment should follow the same logic. A child assessed only in the school language will appear to know less than a child assessed across both languages, and the reviewed evidence on profile effects shows that this understatement is systematic rather than occasional. In multilingual classrooms where several mother tongues are present, full bilingual instruction may not be feasible, but the reviewed implementations show that recognising home languages in oral discussion, classroom display, and family reading activities is both practicable and associated with stronger engagement.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations should be noted. This is a narrative synthesis without effect size estimation. A large proportion of the cross-linguistic evidence concerns Spanish-English bilingualism in North American settings, and Indonesian classrooms differ in orthographic

transparency, language status, and instructional resources, so the transfer of these findings is an argument rather than a finding. The reviewed studies also vary in how much mother-tongue instruction they provided and for how long, which makes dosage effects impossible to isolate. Future research could examine transfer between Indonesian regional languages, the national language, and English directly; test how much mother-tongue support is needed to produce measurable benefit; and follow children long enough to establish whether early advantages are sustained once instruction shifts fully to the school language.

D. Conclusion

This article synthesized the role of mother tongue in supporting early literacy development. The findings show that mother tongue contributes to early literacy through oral language development, phonological and print awareness, vocabulary growth, narrative comprehension, cross-linguistic transfer, learner identity, and classroom participation. Mother tongue-supported literacy is especially important in multilingual contexts where the language of schooling differs from the language children use at home. The synthesis indicates that early literacy instruction should not treat children's first language as interference. Instead, it should use the mother tongue as a bridge to national and international languages through additive multilingual pedagogy. Effective implementation requires culturally relevant materials, shared reading, bilingual vocabulary mapping, phonological comparison, family literacy connections, and formative assessment that distinguishes language unfamiliarity from literacy difficulty. Future studies should examine classroom-based interventions, teacher preparation models, and digital mother tongue literacy materials in diverse multilingual settings.

Declaration of AI-Assisted Technologies

In preparing this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted tools only to improve English language quality, grammar, readability, sentence clarity, and academic expression. The AI tools were not used to generate research data, conduct data analysis, produce findings, or draw conclusions. All conceptual arguments, data interpretation, methodological decisions, and scholarly conclusions remain the full responsibility of the authors. The authors carefully reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-assisted outputs to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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