
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Assessing the Role of Language Skills in Shaping Early Literacy Competence Among Grade One Learners

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| ABSTRACT

This study assessed Grade One learners' language and literacy skills and the level of parents' involvement, and determined the relationship between language and literacy as the basis for developing a Literacy Skills Enhancement Plan. A descriptive–correlational design was employed at Canduman Elementary School, Mandaue City, during SY 2025–2026. Using purposive sampling, teacher-raters evaluated sixty-one learners. The instrument comprised an ECCD-aligned teacher checklist with brief one- to-one tasks covering receptive and expressive language, letter–sound knowledge, rhyming words, and letter-name recognition, alongside a simple parent-involvement log. Data were treated using frequency, percentage, weighted mean, standard deviation, and Pearson product–moment correlation. Findings revealed varied performance across language and literacy indicators and a positive association between language skills and early literacy outcomes, while parent involvement showed uneven consistency in home practice and dialogic reading. The study concluded that strengthening expressive language, consolidating letter–sound and rhyming skills, and elevating purposeful parent participation were necessary to accelerate literacy growth. It recommended implementing a context-responsive Literacy Skills Enhancement Plan featuring brief daily classroom routines, ECCD-aligned baseline midline endline monitoring with flexible regrouping, and parent micro-workshops coupled with weekly home prompts and feedback loops to sustain learning beyond school.

| KEYWORDS

Language skills, receptive language, expressive language, literacy skills, letter-sound recognition, rhyming words, letter-name identification

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Introduction

Reading is one of the most critical skills that young learners must develop during the early years of formal education, as it serves as the foundation for lifelong learning and academic success. Oral reading, in particular, bridges the gap between word recognition and comprehension by enabling learners to connect written symbols to their corresponding sounds, leading to fluency and understanding (Alcazar & Defeo-Baquial, 2022; Riad, 2023). However, reading is not an automatic process; it requires systematic development of both language and literacy skills. Many children, especially those in the early grades, struggle with decoding words, recognizing letter sounds, and constructing meaning from text due to limited vocabulary exposure and inadequate early literacy instruction (Jago, 2025; Henry & Veenendaal, 2022). These challenges underscore the urgent need to strengthen foundational reading instruction to prevent long-term literacy difficulties.

The ongoing debate in literacy education centers on whether phonics-based or meaning-based approaches are more effective in developing reading fluency and comprehension. Phonics instruction emphasizes systematic teaching of letter–sound relationships, while meaning-based approaches prioritize word recognition and comprehension through contextual understanding (Imperial & Ong, 2021; Hidayatullah, 2023). Contemporary research suggests that an integrated approach combining both methods is most effective in developing reading fluency and comprehension (Kim et al., 2021; Cunningham & Carroll, 2022). In the Philippine context, however, learners continue to demonstrate reading difficulties, as reflected in the 2019 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which revealed that Filipino students ranked among the lowest in reading comprehension (OECD, 2020). Contributing factors include insufficient access to developmentally appropriate materials, large class sizes, and limited teacher training in early language and literacy pedagogy (Diaz et al., 2022; Lopez & Reyes, 2023). These realities highlight the pressing need for school-based assessments to diagnose language and literacy gaps among beginning readers.

Language development plays a pivotal role in literacy acquisition, as both receptive (listening and understanding) and expressive (speaking and word use) skills form the foundation for reading and writing (García & Cain, 2021; Lin et al., 2024). Receptive language allows learners to comprehend spoken instructions and vocabulary, while expressive language supports sentence formation, storytelling, and word recall all of which are critical precursors to fluent reading (Taylor et al., 2023). Studies have shown that children with strong oral language skills tend to perform better in reading comprehension and phonological awareness tasks (Hjetland et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021). Conversely, deficiencies in these domains often result in slower literacy growth and persistent reading difficulties (Yeung et al., 2022; Harris et al., 2023). Assessing these two dimensions of language among early-grade learners is therefore vital for identifying learners at risk of reading failure and designing responsive literacy interventions.

In addition to oral language, early literacy skills such as letter-sound recognition, rhyming awareness, and letter-name identification are essential indicators of reading readiness. Research has established that mastery of letter–sound correspondence predicts success in decoding and word recognition (Anthony et al., 2020; Lonigan et al., 2022), while familiarity with rhyming patterns enhances phonemic awareness the ability to recognize and manipulate sounds within words (Lervåg & Aukrust, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). Likewise, knowledge of letter names serves as a strong predictor of later reading fluency and spelling proficiency (Cunningham & Carroll, 2022). Despite the importance of these skills, many Filipino learners in the primary grades demonstrate inconsistent progress in these areas, partly due to limited diagnostic assessments and insufficient integration of phonological awareness activities in classroom instruction (Santos & dela Cruz, 2024; Canuto & Lumidao, 2024).

Despite the growing body of research on early reading development, there remains a significant research gap in understanding how language skills particularly receptive and expressive abilities relate to early literacy outcomes such as letter-sound knowledge, rhyming, and letter-name recognition among Filipino learners. Most studies have focused on reading comprehension and fluency in English or Filipino (Imperial & Ong, 2021; Riad, 2023), with little emphasis on the foundational language competencies that support these higher-order literacy skills. Furthermore, few empirical investigations have examined these relationships within actual classroom contexts where teachers directly assess learners' abilities. Addressing this gap is essential for developing context-responsive and evidence-based literacy programs that support children's oral language and reading growth concurrently. Hence, this study assessed the language and literacy skills of Grade One learners to determine their levels of receptive and expressive language, their proficiency in early literacy indicators—letter sounds, rhyming words, and letter names and the relationship between these domains. The findings aim to serve as a basis for strengthening early reading instruction and designing targeted literacy interventions in primary education.

Literature Review

Language development especially receptive (listening and understanding) and expressive (speaking and using words) skills—is widely recognized as foundational for children's literacy growth. For instance, research by Vehkavuori et al. (2021) found that children's early receptive and expressive lexicons significantly predicted pre-literacy skills at age 5.0. Likewise, Barton-Hulsey et al. (2018) observed that receptive language, expressive vocabulary, and phonological awareness were interrelated and each contributed to early literacy outcomes among preschool children. These findings underscore that learners who better understand and use language tend to enter reading with more robust foundations. Early literacy skills such as letter-sound knowledge, rhyming awareness, and letter-name recognition form the scaffolding for decoding and word recognition. Studies demonstrate that phonological awareness (including rhyming) is a strong predictor of reading success; for example, Majorano et al. (2025) emphasized the importance of blending, segmentation, and print knowledge in early literacy tasks. Additionally, review evidence suggests that children's familiarity with letters and print serves as a bridge from oral language to reading and writing (Head Start, 2025). However, while there is clear evidence linking oral language skills to broad literacy outcomes, less is known about how specific literacy tasks (such as rhyming words and letter-name recognition) relate to discrete language domains especially among learners in multilingual or under-resourced settings.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive-correlational research design to assess the language and literacy skills of Grade One learners at Canduman Elementary School, serving as the foundation for a proposed Literacy Skills Enhancement Plan. The respondents were the Grade One teachers, purposively selected due to their direct instructional involvement and familiarity with their learners' developmental progress. Data were collected using a teacher survey checklist adapted from the Department of Education's Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Checklist (DepEd Order No. 33, s. 2014) to measure receptive and expressive language, alongside a Comprehensive Rapid Literacy Assessment that evaluated learners' proficiency in letter-sound recognition, rhyming words, and letter-name identification. The language assessment employed a five-point Likert scale (1.00–1.80 = Not Skilled to 4.21–5.00 = Highly Skilled), while the literacy assessment used a three-level scoring range (0–3 = Beginner, 4–7 = Intermediate, 8–10 = Advanced). Teachers rated each learner based on classroom observations and one-on-one performance-based tasks, ensuring authentic assessment of real learning behavior. Quantitative data were analyzed using frequency counts, weighted means, and simple percentages to describe proficiency levels, while the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (Pearson r) determined the strength and direction of the relationship between language and literacy skills. Ethical protocols were strictly observed, including informed parental consent, administrative approval, and confidential handling of data.

Results

Table 1. Level of language skills of the learners in terms of receptive language

Indicators	WM	SD
Points to a family member when asked to do so.	3.79	1.27
Points to five body parts on himself when asked to do so.	3.75	1.26
Points to five named pictured objects when asked to do so	3.66	1.25
Follows one-step instructions that include simple prepositions (e.g. in, on, under, etc.)	3.57	1.28
Follows two-step instructions that include simple prepositions.	3.03	1.21
Aggregate Weighted Mean	3.56	
Aggregate Standard Deviation		1.25

The results presented in Table 1 show that the Grade One learners demonstrated a moderately skilled level of receptive language ability, as indicated by an aggregate weighted mean of 3.56 and a standard deviation of 1.25. This suggests that while most learners are able to understand and respond to simple verbal instructions, some still experience challenges in comprehending more complex or sequential directions. The highest-rated indicator, "Points to a family member when asked to do so" (WM = 3.79), implies that learners readily understand familiar and context-based commands, reflecting functional listening comprehension in routine situations. Similarly, their ability to identify body parts (WM = 3.75) and named pictured objects (WM = 3.66) demonstrates developing recognition and vocabulary understanding. However, lower mean scores in "Follows one-step instructions that include simple prepositions" (WM = 3.57) and "Follows two-step instructions that include simple prepositions" (WM = 3.03) indicate that some learners have difficulty processing sequential information or spatial language concepts. These results imply that while learners show emerging comprehension skills, there remains a need for continuous support in strengthening their auditory processing, attention, and understanding of spatial and sequential instructions. Teachers can enhance receptive language by incorporating listening and direction-following games, story-based comprehension activities, and guided interactive discussions. Reinforcing these skills is essential, as receptive language competence serves as the foundation for phonological awareness, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension, all of which are critical to early literacy success.

Table 2. Level of language skills of the learners in terms of Expressive Language

S/N	Indicators	WM	SD
1	Uses five to 20 recognizable words	4.08	1.07
2	Uses pronouns (e.g. I, me, <i>ako</i> , <i>akin</i>)	4.10	1.04
3	Uses two- to three-word verb-noun combinations (e.g., <i>hingi gatas</i>)	4.08	1.04
4	Names objects in pictures	4.34	1.05
5	Speaks in grammatically correct two- to three word/sentences	3.97	0.98
6	Asks "what" questions	3.93	0.98
7	Gives account of recent experiences (with prompting) in order of occurrence using past tense	3.75	1.03
Aggregate Weighted Mean		4.04	
Aggregate Standard Deviation			1.03

The results presented in Table 2 reveal that the learners demonstrated a skilled level of expressive language ability, with an aggregate weighted mean of 4.04 and a standard deviation of 1.03. This indicates that most learners are able to communicate effectively using short phrases and simple sentences, showing progress in vocabulary development, sentence formation, and basic grammatical use. The highest-rated indicator, "Names objects in pictures" (WM = 4.34), suggests that learners possess a strong ability to identify and label familiar items, reflecting growing word retrieval and semantic understanding. Similarly, high mean scores in "Uses pronouns (e.g., I, me, *ako*, *akin*)" (WM = 4.10) and "Uses two- to three-word verb-noun combinations" (WM = 4.08) demonstrate that learners are developing functional language patterns and beginning to use basic grammatical structures correctly. However, the lowest mean score, "Gives account of recent experiences (with prompting) in order of occurrence using past tense" (WM = 3.75), indicates that some learners find it challenging to narrate events sequentially and apply appropriate verb tenses skills that require more advanced linguistic organization and temporal understanding. The moderate variability (SD = 1.03) suggests differences in expressive ability across learners, possibly influenced by home language exposure and opportunities for verbal interaction. These findings imply that while learners have developed a solid foundation in expressive language, continued reinforcement is needed to enhance their narrative abilities, grammatical accuracy, and sentence complexity. Teachers may integrate guided storytelling, picture-sequencing tasks, and structured speaking activities into classroom routines to provide learners with opportunities to practice expressive communication in meaningful contexts. Strengthening expressive language not only improves oral fluency and confidence but also supports reading comprehension, writing development, and overall literacy growth.

The results in Table 3 show that the learners demonstrated an overall intermediate level of literacy skills in terms of letter-sound recognition, with a mean score of 6.38 and a standard deviation of 2.60. The majority of learners (37.70%) were categorized as Intermediate, while a substantial proportion (44.26%) reached the Advanced level, indicating that many learners could accurately identify and associate letters with their corresponding sounds. However, 18.03% of the learners were classified as Beginners, suggesting that a small group still struggles with consistent sound-letter associations, a key skill in early phonics development.

Table 3. Level of literacy skills of the learners in terms of letter sound

Level	Scoring Range	f	%
Advanced	8-10	27	44.26
Intermediate	4-7	23	37.70
Beginner	0-3	11	18.03
Total		61	100.00
Mean		6.38	
St. Dev.		2.60	

These results suggest that most learners have developed foundational phonemic awareness, which enables them to decode simple words and begin building fluency in reading. The presence of a strong number of *Advanced* learners reflects effective exposure to phonics-based instruction and classroom literacy activities. However, the gap between advanced and beginner performers implies the need for targeted intervention for those still developing this skill. Teachers may strengthen letter-sound correspondence through explicit phonics instruction, multisensory learning strategies, and daily blending and segmenting exercises. Enhancing letter-sound recognition is essential, as it serves as the cornerstone of word decoding, spelling accuracy, and reading fluency. By providing consistent reinforcement and differentiated instruction, educators can help all learners progress toward automaticity in letter-sound knowledge an important predictor of later reading success and comprehension.

Level	Scoring Range	f	%
Advanced	8-10	1	1.64
Intermediate	4-7	23	37.70
Beginner	0-3	37	60.66
Total			100.00
	Mean	61	2.21
	St. Dev.		2.74

Table 4. Level of literacy skills of the learners in terms of rhyming words

The results in Table 4 reveal that the learners exhibited a generally beginner level of literacy skills in terms of rhyming words, with a mean score of 2.21 and a standard deviation of 2.74. The majority of learners (60.66%) were classified as Beginners, indicating that most had difficulty identifying or producing words that share similar ending sounds. Meanwhile, 37.70% of the learners were rated as Intermediate, suggesting partial awareness of rhyme patterns but with limited consistency, and only 1.64% reached the Advanced level, demonstrating mastery of this phonological skill. These results indicate that phonological awareness, particularly rhyming ability, remains an area of challenge for many learners. Rhyming skills are a crucial component of early literacy because they strengthen children's ability to recognize sound patterns and manipulate phonemes, which are essential for reading and spelling development. The low overall performance may reflect insufficient exposure to rhyming activities, such as songs, poems, and word-play exercises, both at home and in classroom settings. To address this gap, teachers are encouraged to incorporate daily phonological awareness routines, including rhyming games, nursery rhymes, sound-matching tasks, and rhythm-based storytelling. Such activities can make learning more engaging while improving auditory discrimination and sound manipulation skills. Developing rhyming awareness at this stage not only supports phonemic proficiency but also lays the groundwork for fluency, decoding, and comprehension as learners progress through higher levels of literacy.

Table 5. Level of literacy skills of the learners in terms of letter names

Level	Scoring Range	f	%
Advanced	8-10	23	37.70
Intermediate	4-7	36	59.02
Beginner	0-3	2	3.28
Total	Mean	61	6.82
	St. Dev.		1.70

The results presented in Table 5 indicate that the learners demonstrated an overall intermediate level of literacy skills in terms of letter-name recognition, with a mean score of 6.82 and a standard deviation of 1.70. The majority of learners (59.02%) were classified as Intermediate, showing that most could correctly identify and name several letters of the alphabet but might still experience confusion with similar-looking or less familiar letters. Meanwhile, 37.70% of the learners reached the Advanced level, displaying strong mastery and quick recall of letter names, while only 3.28% were identified as Beginners, reflecting minimal familiarity with letter naming. These results suggest that the learners have developed a solid foundation in alphabet knowledge, which is essential for building reading and spelling skills. However, the presence of a small group of Beginners indicates the need for additional reinforcement through multisensory and repetitive alphabet-learning strategies, particularly for struggling learners. Strengthening letter-name recognition is vital, as it directly supports phonics acquisition, decoding accuracy, and vocabulary development. Teachers may enhance this skill by integrating alphabet games, flashcard drills, interactive songs, and digital literacy tools that promote active engagement and repeated exposure. Consistent reinforcement of letter identification within meaningful reading and writing contexts can further solidify learners' alphabetic knowledge, preparing them for more complex literacy tasks such as word recognition and spelling proficiency.

The data presented in Table 6 show the test of relationship between the learners' language skills and literacy skills. The computed r -value of 0.630 indicates a moderate positive correlation, suggesting that learners with stronger receptive and expressive language abilities tend to perform better in literacy tasks such as recognizing letter sounds, identifying rhyming words, and naming letters. The corresponding p -value of 0.000, which is less than the 0.05 level of significance, confirms that this relationship is statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_0), which states that there is no significant relationship between language skills and literacy skills, is rejected. This finding implies that language proficiency plays a critical role in the development of early literacy, reinforcing the idea that oral language serves as the foundation upon which reading and writing skills are built. Learners who possess well-developed receptive language (listening and understanding) are better able to comprehend instructions and grasp phonological patterns, while those with strong expressive language (speaking and word use) can apply vocabulary and syntax in decoding and meaning-making tasks. The moderate correlation further indicates that while language skills substantially influence literacy outcomes, other factors such as phonemic awareness, instructional quality, home literacy environment, and learner motivation may also contribute to literacy development. This result aligns with previous studies showing that oral language competence significantly predicts literacy achievement (García & Cain, 2021; Kim et al., 2021). Similarly, Cunningham and Carroll (2022) emphasized that integrating listening, speaking, and phonics instruction enhances reading fluency more effectively than isolated teaching approaches. Thus, the findings highlight the need for teachers to design integrated literacy instruction that simultaneously develops both oral language and foundational reading skills. Incorporating strategies such as shared reading, storytelling, vocabulary-building games, and interactive phonics exercises can strengthen this link, leading to improved fluency, comprehension, and overall literacy growth among early-grade learners.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a clear relationship between the learners' language proficiency specifically receptive and expressive language and their literacy development, as shown by the moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.630$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that as learners' oral language skills strengthen, their literacy abilities, such as letter-sound recognition, rhyming, and letter-name identification, also improve. This is consistent with the work of García and Cain (2021), who found that oral vocabulary and syntactic knowledge strongly predict literacy outcomes, particularly reading fluency and comprehension. Similarly, Kim, Petscher, and Vorstius (2021) demonstrated that both receptive and expressive language significantly contribute to children's ability to decode and understand text. The results of this study further support Foorman et al. (2015), who reported that oral language explains much of the variance in reading comprehension among early-grade learners. Moreover, the stronger performance in expressive language compared to receptive comprehension reflects patterns observed by Hjetland et al. (2020), where expressive abilities particularly in vocabulary and sentence construction emerged as vital predictors of reading accuracy and fluency. These findings collectively affirm that oral language serves as the cornerstone of early literacy development and that effective instruction must target both listening and speaking competencies to support reading growth.

However, the results also highlight important instructional gaps that must be addressed to achieve balanced literacy proficiency. The learners' relatively low performance in rhyming words suggests limited development of phonological awareness an essential skill for decoding and spelling (Anthony et al., 2020; Lonigan et al., 2022). According to Castles, Rastle, and Nation (2018), children's ability to detect sound patterns, such as rhymes and alliteration, directly influences their word recognition and reading fluency. The moderate correlation found in this study indicates that while oral language supports literacy, other factors such as phonics instruction, home literacy practices, and teaching quality play a significant role in shaping reading outcomes (Lervåg & Aukrust, 2020; Harris et al., 2023). This aligns with Cunningham and Carroll (2022), who argued that integrated approaches combining phonological awareness, vocabulary instruction, and guided oral reading produce stronger literacy gains than isolated strategies. Therefore, for effective literacy instruction, teachers must emphasize language-rich, interactive learning experiences such as shared reading, storytelling, rhyming games, and phonics-based activities. As Santos and Dela Cruz (2024) further emphasize, strengthening both receptive and expressive domains within early education not only fosters reading fluency but also builds comprehension and communication skills, forming the foundation for lifelong literacy success.

Table 6. Test of relationship between the language skills and the literacy skills of the learners

Variables	r -value	Strength of Correlation	p - value	Decision	Remarks
Language Skills and Literacy Skills	0.630*	Moderate Positive	0.000	Reject H_0	Significant

*significant at $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed)

Conclusion

The study concludes that learners demonstrated moderately skilled receptive language, skilled expressive language, and intermediate literacy skills in letter-sound and letter-name recognition, but a beginner level in rhyming ability. The moderate positive correlation between language and literacy skills indicates that stronger receptive and expressive abilities contribute to better literacy performance. However, other factors such as phonemic awareness, teaching quality, and home literacy exposure also influence reading development. These findings emphasize that language and literacy must be developed together through integrated instruction. Teachers should foster language-rich environments using storytelling, rhyming games, and phonics-based activities, alongside consistent monitoring and home-school collaboration. Strengthening both oral and written language lays the foundation for reading fluency, comprehension, and long-term academic success.

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