

EARLY LANGUAGE EXPERIENCES AND PRESCHOOL LANGUAGE ECOLOGY IN ECCE CENTRES OF GARO HILLS, MEGHALAYA

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Abstract

Early language experiences during the preschool years provide the foundation for later literacy, communication, and cognitive development. In multilingual regions such as Meghalaya, early childhood education must address the relationship between children's home language and the language of formal schooling. Guided by the principles of the National Education Policy (2020) and NIPUN Bharat (2021), this study explored language experiences among preschool children attending Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centres in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya. A qualitative naturalistic design was adopted involving observations of sixty preschool Garo/ A'chik children aged three to six years, together with caregiver and Anganwadi worker interactions over one academic cycle. The study examined home language practices, classroom language ecology, caregiver-child conversations, and bilingual experiences between A'chiku (language spoken by Garo/ A'chik) and English. Findings indicate that although children develop age-appropriate oral language in A'chiku, opportunities for conversational interaction, print exposure, and meaningful bilingual learning remain limited. Children receiving frequent caregiver interaction demonstrated stronger vocabulary growth, storytelling ability, and emergent literacy behaviours than those experiencing limited verbal engagement. The study concludes that strengthening mother-tongue-based interaction while gradually introducing English through planned bilingual strategies offers an effective pathway for improving foundational literacy in Meghalaya. Practical implications are suggested for caregivers, ECCE teachers, teacher educators, and policymakers.

Keywords: *Early language development; Foundational literacy; ECCE; A'chik language; Bilingual education*

1. Introduction

The first six years of life represent the most critical period for language acquisition and cognitive development. During this period children develop vocabulary, grammar, communication skills, phonological awareness, and emergent literacy that influence later academic achievement. Research consistently demonstrates that language develops through meaningful social interaction, responsive caregiving, storytelling, play, and participation in everyday experiences rather than through formal instruction alone (Hart & Risley, 1995;

Hoff, 2014; Owens, 2016). Consequently, the quality of children's early language environment has become a major concern for educational policy across the world. In India, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognises Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as the foundation of lifelong learning. The policy identifies the Foundational Stage, covering children from three to eight years of age, as the period during which language, literacy, numeracy, socio-emotional development, and cognitive growth should be nurtured through play-based, activity-oriented learning. Complementing this vision, NIPUN Bharat (2021) emphasises that children should attain foundational literacy and numeracy by Grade III through developmentally appropriate pedagogy, active participation, and the effective use of children's home language. The multilingual context of Meghalaya makes language planning particularly important. Children belonging to Khasi, Jaintia, Garo, Hajong and other communities enter preschool with diverse linguistic backgrounds. In the Garo Hills, A'chik (A'chiku) is the principal language spoken in homes and communities, whereas English functions as the language of formal schooling. This transition from home language to school language presents both opportunities and challenges. When the transition is poorly planned, children may experience reduced classroom participation, weaker vocabulary development, and difficulties in literacy acquisition. Conversely, research suggests that a strong foundation in the mother tongue facilitates second-language learning and promotes overall academic success (Cummins, 1979, 2000). Language learning does not occur in isolation but within a broader ecological environment comprising the family, preschool, community, and culture. Children acquire language while interacting with caregivers during daily routines such as eating, playing, storytelling, household work, and conversations. These experiences build vocabulary, conceptual understanding, and communication skills long before formal reading begins. Similarly, preschool classrooms that encourage songs, rhymes, storytelling, picture books, and active participation provide rich opportunities for language growth. Although the Government of Meghalaya has expanded access to Anganwadi Centres and preschool education, relatively little empirical research has examined how language experiences within homes and ECCE centres contribute to children's foundational literacy. Existing studies largely focus on enrolment, nutrition, or school readiness, with limited attention to language ecology and bilingual development. Understanding these processes is essential for designing culturally responsive ECCE programmes aligned with NEP 2020 and NIPUN Bharat. Against this background, the present study investigates early language experiences among preschool children in the Garo Hills by examining the interaction between home language practices,

caregiver-child communication, classroom language environments, and bilingual learning. Rather than viewing A'chiku and English as competing languages, the study considers how the mother tongue can become the foundation for gradual English acquisition and stronger foundational literacy.

2. Review of Literature

Early Language Development

Language development begins in infancy through caregiver interaction and progresses from babbling to speech, vocabulary growth, sentence formation, and narrative competence. Oral language developed during the preschool years forms the foundation for later literacy achievement (Berk, 2013; Hoff, 2014; Owens, 2016). Children exposed to rich conversations, questioning, storytelling, and explanations develop stronger vocabulary and expressive language. Phonological awareness develops through songs, rhymes, storytelling, and sound play before formal reading instruction begins (Goswami & Bryant, 1990; Snow et al., 1998). These early experiences support later decoding, comprehension, and writing.

Mother-Tongue-Based Bilingual Education

Research supports mother-tongue-based education because children learn more confidently through their home language. UNESCO (1953) recommended early schooling in the first language, while Cummins' (1979, 2000) Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis explains that concepts and literacy skills developed in the first language can transfer to a second language with proper support. Thus, bilingual education should strengthen rather than replace children's home language. This is especially relevant in the Garo Hills, where A'chiku is children's first language in the Garo/ A'chik families and English is the medium of formal schooling. A gradual, meaningful transition to English is likely to be more effective than immediate English-only instruction.

Caregiver Interaction and Language Learning

Caregiver-child interaction strongly predicts early language development. Hart and Risley (1995) found that children in richer conversational environments developed larger vocabularies, while later studies confirmed that responsive talk, questioning, speech expansion, and shared storytelling improve vocabulary and language competence (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2001; Rowe, 2012; Fernald & Weisleder, 2015). Conversational turn-taking supports speaking practice, feedback, and meaning-making, making it especially valuable in multilingual communities where children learn language through family and community participation.

Emergent Literacy in ECCE

Emergent literacy is children's early understanding that spoken and written language carry meaning. Before formal schooling, print awareness develops through book handling, drawing, scribbling, storytelling, songs, and shared reading (Clay, 1975; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Print-rich classrooms help children connect sounds, words, pictures, and symbols, supporting later reading achievement. In multilingual settings, emergent literacy improves when print materials reflect children's home language while gradually introducing a second language, promoting confidence, participation, and sustained literacy development.

3. Objectives of the Study

The study aimed at:

1. Examine preschool children's early language experiences in ECCE centres of the Garo Hills.
2. Explore how caregiver interaction and home language practices influence language development.
3. Analyse ECCE language ecology, especially A'chiku-English bilingual experiences.
4. Identify strategies to strengthen mother-tongue-based bilingual education and foundational literacy in line with NEP 2020 and NIPUN Bharat.

4. Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative naturalistic research design to investigate early language experiences among Garo/ A'chik preschool children in government Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centres in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya. The design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to observe children's language behaviour within authentic home and preschool environments rather than under controlled experimental conditions. Language development was viewed as a socially situated process influenced by interactions among children, caregivers, teachers, and the surrounding community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978).

Participants

The study involved sixty Garo/ A'chik preschool children between three and six years of age enrolled in government Anganwadi Centres and pre-primary classes across the Garo Hills. Caregivers and Anganwadi workers were also included because they constitute the children's primary language environment. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure representation of different home language contexts, caregiver backgrounds, and preschool settings.

Data Collection

Data was collected over one academic cycle through non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews with caregivers and Anganwadi workers, document analysis, and field notes. Classroom observations focused on children's vocabulary use, participation in conversations, storytelling, responses to questions, songs, rhymes, and interactions during play activities. Home visits examined caregiver-child conversations, storytelling practices, book availability, and everyday language experiences. The use of multiple sources of evidence strengthened the credibility of the findings through triangulation.

Data Analysis

The collected information was analysed thematically. Observation notes and interview transcripts were organised into recurring themes reflecting children's language development, caregiver interaction, classroom language practices, bilingual experiences, and emergent literacy. The themes were interpreted in relation to established theories of language acquisition and bilingual education.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the investigation. Informed consent was obtained from caregivers, while assent was respected for participating children. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by removing identifying information from all records. Observations were conducted without disrupting normal classroom activities or children's daily routines.

5. Findings and Discussion

Home Language as the Foundation of Early Learning

The study found that A'chiku is the principal language of Garo/ A'chik preschool children's earliest oral communication. Most children showed age-appropriate listening and speaking abilities in their home language before formal schooling. Daily conversations with family members helped children acquire vocabulary related to household routines, farming, nature, festivals, and community life. However, the quality of language experiences varied. Children who regularly conversed with caregivers displayed richer vocabularies, greater speaking confidence, and better sentence construction than those with limited adult interaction. Caregivers who named objects, explained actions, narrated stories, answered questions, and encouraged conversation created language-rich environments that promoted communication skills. These findings support research showing that language develops best through responsive interaction rather than passive exposure to speech (Hart & Risley, 1995; Tamis-

LeMonda et al., 2001; Rowe, 2012). They also reinforce Bronfenbrenner's ecological view of the family as the child's first and most influential learning environment.

Language Ecology within ECCE Centres

Observations conducted in ECCE centres revealed that A'chiku remained the dominant medium of interaction during most classroom activities. Rhymes, songs, storytelling, and routine classroom communication were generally conducted in the mother tongue, reflecting the linguistic background of the children. This practice was consistent with the recommendations of NEP 2020 and international research supporting mother-tongue-based education. Research on early childhood language ecology emphasises that children learn best when classroom communication connects with their home language, cultural experiences, and familiar social practices. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective further support the view that language develops through interaction within meaningful family, community, and school contexts. Nevertheless, the quality of classroom interaction varied considerably. Teachers commonly narrated stories and recited rhymes, but opportunities for children to actively participate were comparatively limited. Many classroom sessions remained teacher-directed, with children responding collectively rather than individually. Opportunities for questioning, discussion, picture description, role play, and storytelling by children were less frequent than expected. Meaningful language learning requires children to become active participants rather than passive listeners. Vygotsky (1978) argued that knowledge develops through social interaction and guided participation. Similarly, conversational turn-taking allows children to practise vocabulary, sentence construction, and reasoning while receiving immediate feedback from adults. The limited opportunities for dialogue observed in several centres therefore represent an important constraint on children's language development.

Vocabulary Growth and Conversational Interaction

A consistent finding across the study was the close relationship between caregiver-child interaction and vocabulary development. Children who experienced regular conversational exchanges at home demonstrated broader vocabularies and greater expressive language competence than those receiving minimal verbal interaction. This finding is supported by Hart and Risley (1995), who showed that language-rich home environments contribute significantly to vocabulary growth, and by Rowe (2012), who emphasised that the quality of child-directed speech strongly predicts later language outcomes. Responsive caregivers encourage children to ask questions, describe experiences, explain events, and participate in

family discussions. Such interactions occurred naturally during meals, household chores, agricultural work, visits to local markets, and walks through forests and villages. These everyday experiences became valuable opportunities for contextual vocabulary learning. In contrast, children whose communication consisted mainly of instructions or routine commands displayed slower vocabulary growth, shorter responses, and less tendency to initiate conversations or narrate personal experiences. Similar findings by Tamis-LeMonda et al. (2001) and Fernald and Weisleder (2015) indicate that responsive talk, conversational turn-taking, and meaningful verbal engagement strengthen early language competence. Thus, the present findings confirm that the quality of language input is more important than mere exposure to words. Meaningful conversations help children organise thoughts, connect concepts, and develop expressive language abilities that later contribute to literacy achievement.

Emergent Literacy and Print Exposure

The study also identified considerable differences in children's exposure to books, pictures, and print materials. Homes possessing children's books, drawing materials, newspapers, or religious literature provided more opportunities for children to recognise symbols, identify letters, and understand that print carries meaning. Children from such environments were more likely to engage in pretend reading, drawing, scribbling, and storytelling. Within many ECCE centres, however, access to print-rich materials remained limited. Picture books, bilingual storybooks, labelled classroom objects, and literacy corners were not consistently available. Classroom activities frequently emphasised repetition and memorisation rather than exploration of books, picture discussions, and child-generated storytelling. Research on emergent literacy demonstrates that young children learn about reading and writing long before formal instruction begins. Shared reading, picture talk, drawing, and playful interaction with print enable children to understand relationships between spoken and written language (Clay, 1975; Snow et al., 1998). Strengthening these experiences within ECCE centres would therefore enhance children's preparedness for primary education.

A'chiku–English Bilingual Experiences

An important finding concerns the relationship between A'chiku and English. Most children communicated confidently in A'chiku but used English mainly through isolated words in songs, greetings, colours, numbers, and routines rather than meaningful conversation. This reflects research showing that young children learn additional languages best when new vocabulary is linked to familiar concepts, interaction, and context. Rather than indicating a

language deficit, the findings suggest that A'chiku provides the linguistic base for gradual English development. Cummins' (1979, 2000) Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis explains that concepts and literacy skills acquired in the first language can transfer to a second language when supported through appropriate scaffolding. The finding also aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) view that language learning develops through guided social interaction. When teachers explain ideas in A'chiku, introduce related English words, and revisit meanings through conversation, children can connect both languages without losing comprehension or confidence. Overall, children's language development in the Garo Hills is shaped by home language practices, caregiver responsiveness, preschool participation, and meaningful bilingual experiences. Consistent with NEP 2020, NIPUN Bharat, and research on mother-tongue-based multilingual education, ECCE programmes should strengthen A'chiku oral language while introducing English gradually through conversation, stories, print-rich activities, and structured bilingual scaffolding.

6. Discussion

Early language development among preschool children in the Garo Hills is shaped by home language practices, caregiver responsiveness, classroom experiences, and bilingual learning opportunities. Although most children showed age-appropriate oral communication in A'chiku, vocabulary, sentence formation, storytelling, and emergent literacy varied with the quality of interaction in their environment. Caregiver-child conversation was especially important. Children engaged in regular dialogue developed richer vocabularies, greater confidence, and stronger narrative skills. Everyday conversations during meals, work, play, and community activities created learning opportunities beyond formal instruction, supporting earlier research on responsive interaction and Bronfenbrenner's view of language as socially embedded (Hart & Risley, 1995; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2001; Rowe, 2012). The study confirms the value of mother-tongue-based learning. Children showed greater confidence, participation, and comprehension when taught in A'chik. Consistent with UNESCO and Cummins' (1979, 2000) theory, strengthening A'chiku supports, rather than delays, English literacy by building a strong cognitive and linguistic foundation. The study also found constraints in ECCE practice. Classroom language activities were often teacher-directed, giving children limited chances to ask questions, retell stories, describe experiences, or engage in dialogue. Since Vygotsky (1978) emphasised learning through guided participation, ECCE classrooms need to shift from passive listening to active participation to meet Foundational Stage goals. Emergent literacy was another concern. Many ECCE centres

lacked age-appropriate books, bilingual print materials, picture cards, and literacy-rich spaces, limiting children's print awareness before primary school. Because early exposure to books, drawing, shared reading, and environmental print supports later reading (Clay, 1975; Snow et al., 1998), literacy resources in Anganwadi centres and homes should be strengthened. Overall, the main challenge is not multilingualism but the lack of systematic bilingual support. A'chiku should be used as a strong foundation while English is introduced gradually through meaningful bilingual experiences, in line with NEP 2020, NIPUN Bharat, and international evidence on multilingual education.

A Framework for Strengthening A'chiku-English Language Development

The study proposes six linked strategies to strengthen early language development in ECCE programmes. First, caregivers should engage children in daily conversations by naming objects, describing events, asking open-ended questions, and encouraging storytelling. Second, shared reading at home and in Anganwadi centres should use A'chiku storybooks with selected English vocabulary to support both languages. Third, bilingual classroom activities should begin in A'chiku and gradually introduce English through songs, games, stories, picture talk, and role-play. Fourth, teachers should increase children's active participation through discussions, storytelling, questioning, dramatic play, picture description, and peer talk. Fifth, teachers should use strategic code-switching by explaining concepts in A'chiku, introducing English vocabulary, and revisiting meanings through interaction. Finally, homes and ECCE centres should create print-rich spaces with bilingual labels, picture cards, local stories, alphabet charts, and children's drawings. Together, these strategies support NEP 2020 and NIPUN Bharat language goals in Meghalaya's multilingual context.

7. Educational Implications

The findings have important implications for improving foundational literacy through culturally responsive language education.

Implications for Caregivers

Parents and caregivers represent children's first teachers. Daily conversations should therefore become an intentional component of early childhood learning. Talking about household activities, local festivals, farming, forests, markets, animals, and community events provides meaningful vocabulary learning rooted in children's lived experiences. Storytelling, singing traditional songs, reading picture books, and encouraging children to narrate personal experiences can significantly strengthen oral language and confidence.

Rather than replacing A'chiku with English, caregivers should establish a strong foundation in the mother tongue while introducing simple English vocabulary naturally during routine interactions.

Implications for ECCE Teachers and Anganwadi Workers

Teachers should create classrooms that encourage children to speak, question, explain, and participate actively rather than merely repeat information. Storytelling sessions should become interactive through questioning, prediction, picture discussion, and retelling activities. Daily classroom schedules should include songs, rhymes, conversations, shared reading, dramatic play, drawing, and bilingual language games. Locally developed A'chiku-English teaching materials can make learning culturally meaningful while supporting gradual bilingual development.

Implications for DIETs and Teacher Education

District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) have an important role in strengthening ECCE practices through professional development programmes. Training should equip Anganwadi workers and preschool teachers with practical strategies for promoting conversational learning, emergent literacy, bilingual pedagogy, and culturally responsive classroom interaction. Demonstration lessons, mentoring, and locally developed resource materials can help teachers translate policy into effective classroom practice.

Implications for Educational Policy

The study supports the continued implementation of mother-tongue-based multilingual education during the Foundational Stage. State agencies should prioritise the development of bilingual storybooks, picture dictionaries, classroom libraries, environmental print materials, and locally relevant teaching-learning resources in A'chiku and English. Investment in teacher capacity-building and community participation will further strengthen the goals of foundational literacy envisioned under NEP 2020 and NIPUN Bharat. Such initiatives will contribute not only to improved literacy outcomes but also to the preservation of indigenous language and cultural identity within Meghalaya.

8. Conclusion

Early childhood is the most influential period for language acquisition and the development of foundational literacy. This study demonstrates that preschool children in the Garo Hills generally develop age-appropriate oral language skills in A'chiku; however, differences in vocabulary growth, narrative competence, and emergent literacy are strongly associated with the quality of caregiver interaction, classroom participation, and opportunities for bilingual

learning. Children who experienced frequent conversations, storytelling, shared reading, and meaningful participation at home and in ECCE centres exhibited stronger language development than those with limited interaction. The findings reaffirm that the mother tongue is not an obstacle to English acquisition but rather an essential foundation for successful bilingual learning. Consistent with Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis and the multilingual vision of NEP 2020, the study demonstrates that strengthening children's first language enhances conceptual understanding, confidence, and readiness for second-language literacy. A'chiku should therefore remain the principal language of communication during the Foundational Stage while English is introduced progressively through developmentally appropriate bilingual experiences. The study also highlights the importance of transforming ECCE classrooms into language-rich learning environments. Songs, rhymes, storytelling, conversations, dramatic play, picture discussions, shared reading, and environmental print should become integral components of everyday teaching. Greater emphasis on children's active participation, rather than teacher-centred instruction, will improve vocabulary development, oral communication, phonological awareness, and emergent literacy. The proposed framework for strengthening caregiver interaction, bilingual pedagogy, classroom participation, and print-rich environments provides practical guidance for Anganwadi workers, preschool teachers, DIET faculty, curriculum planners, and policymakers. These recommendations align closely with the objectives of NEP 2020, NIPUN Bharat, and the Meghalaya State Curriculum Framework by promoting culturally responsive, inclusive, and child-centred language education. Although the present investigation employed a qualitative observational approach with a purposive sample, it contributes important evidence regarding early language ecology in one of India's multilingual regions. Future longitudinal studies may further examine the relationship between early A'chiku language proficiency, English literacy development, and academic achievement across the primary grades. Such research would strengthen the evidence base for multilingual early childhood education and support the development of contextually relevant language policies throughout Meghalaya.

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