

Article

First Language Competencies and Reading Readiness Among Kindergarten Learners in Boljoon District: Implications for Early Literacy Program Development

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Abstract: This study determined the relationship between First Language (Cebuano) Competencies and Reading Readiness among Kindergarten learners in the Boljoon District, Division of Cebu Province, during School Year 2026–2027, as basis for a Kindergarten Reading Readiness Program. It employed a quantitative descriptive-correlational research design and was conducted in 10 public elementary schools representing central, rural, coastal-adjacent, upland, and far-flung communities in the district. Universal sampling or complete enumeration was used, involving all 30 Kindergarten teachers as respondents. Data were gathered through a structured, researcher-adapted survey questionnaire guided by the MATATAG Kindergarten Curriculum and the Revised Philippine Early Childhood Development Checklist. Frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, Shapiro–Wilk test, and Spearman’s rank-order correlation were used in analyzing the data. Findings showed that oral expression and visual literacy were highly demonstrated, while auditory discrimination, emergent literacy, and fine motor readiness were demonstrated. Vocabulary and phonics were demonstrated, whereas phonemic awareness, fluency, and reading comprehension were partially demonstrated. Overall First Language Competencies were not significantly associated with overall Reading Readiness, although vocabulary showed a significant positive relationship. The study concluded that learners had established Cebuano language foundations but uneven reading readiness. It recommended the implementation of the proposed Kindergarten Reading Readiness Program to strengthen priority early literacy competencies.

Keywords: First Language Competencies, Cebuano, Reading Readiness, Kindergarten Learners, Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Vocabulary

Introduction

Language and early literacy development during the kindergarten years had been recognized as essential foundations for later reading achievement and successful participation in formal schooling. For multilingual learners, literacy

development had involved the interaction of oral language, phonological awareness, vocabulary, print knowledge, decoding, fluency, and comprehension across the languages available to them. Kittle et al. (2024) emphasized that oral language, phonological awareness, decoding, fluency, and comprehension had been central components of literacy development among multilingual learners. Similarly, Zheng et al. (2021) reported that the use of children's home languages through translanguaging, interaction, and culturally responsive strategies had supported multilingual development in early childhood education. These findings had established the importance of examining children's first-language competencies as possible foundations for reading readiness.

Globally, foundational literacy had remained a major educational concern. The World Bank et al. (2022) reported that approximately 70 percent of 10-year-old children in low- and middle-income countries had been unable to read and understand a simple text, compared with 57 percent before the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this figure had involved older children, it had reflected the consequences of insufficient early literacy development. UNESCO and UNICEF (2024) further reported that without substantial progress, more than 300 million children worldwide could fail to achieve minimum reading proficiency by 2030. These concerns had supported the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 4, particularly Target 4.2, which had called for universal access to quality early childhood development and pre-primary education to ensure children's readiness for primary schooling.

At the national level, literacy conditions in the Philippines had likewise emphasized the need to strengthen children's foundations. The Philippine Statistics Authority (2025) reported that the country had recorded a 90.0 percent basic literacy rate, while functional literacy among persons aged 10 to 64 years had been 70.8 percent in the 2024 Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey. The 5–9-year-old age group had also recorded the highest proportion of individuals unable to read and write at 20.1 percent. Although these statistics had not directly measured Kindergarten reading readiness, they had demonstrated that literacy difficulties were already evident among younger school-age children.

The longer-term national picture had also remained concerning. Results of PISA 2022 showed that only 24 percent of Filipino 15-year-olds had attained at least Level 2 proficiency in reading, compared with the OECD average of 74 percent (OECD, 2023). These results had reinforced the importance of addressing literacy difficulties before they accumulated across grade levels. In response, the Department of Education had emphasized foundational literacy and numeracy through the MATATAG Curriculum, while early childhood organizations such as the Early Childhood Care and Development Council, UNICEF, UNESCO, and SEAMEO INNOTECH had continued to promote quality early learning, school readiness, language development, and developmentally appropriate instruction. The multilingual nature of Philippine classrooms had made first-language

development particularly relevant. Young learners commonly entered school with linguistic knowledge developed through the language used at home and in the community. Chapman de Sousa and Lennon (2024) found that the inclusion of home languages during early childhood instructional conversations had increased participation and supported concept and language development among multilingual children. More specifically, Cheah et al. (2024), in a study involving 94 Cebuano-speaking children aged three to five years in Cebu, found that an integrated language, literacy, and numeracy intervention had significantly improved receptive vocabulary, syllable matching, and letter-name knowledge. Their findings had demonstrated that the early literacy competencies of Cebuano-speaking children could be strengthened through systematic and contextually appropriate intervention.

At the regional level, the literacy situation had further established the relevance of the study. The Philippine Statistics Authority Regional Statistical Services Office VII (2025) reported that Central Visayas had achieved a 92.2 percent basic literacy rate but only a 67.6 percent functional literacy rate. Within the region, Cebu Province had recorded a basic literacy rate of 90.62 percent and a functional literacy rate of 63.1 percent. Although these figures had represented broader populations rather than Kindergarten learners, they had shown that literacy remained an important concern within the province where the study had been conducted.

Within the Boljoon District, Division of Cebu Province, limited localized evidence had been available regarding how Kindergarten learners performed in the specific competencies that preceded formal reading. Classroom observations had shown that some learners could communicate effectively in Cebuano and recognize familiar pictures and symbols but still experienced difficulty in isolating sounds, blending phonemes, applying letter-sound relationships, reading simple decodable words, sequencing story events, and understanding narratives. These variations had highlighted the need to examine whether learners' existing First Language (Cebuano) Competencies were associated with their Reading Readiness. Although studies from 2021 to 2025 had explored multilingual development, home-language support, vocabulary, phonological awareness, and literacy interventions, limited research had simultaneously examined Cebuano First Language Competencies and Reading Readiness among Kindergarten learners in a local public-school district in Cebu. In particular, little evidence had addressed auditory discrimination, oral expression, emergent literacy, fine motor readiness, and visual literacy alongside phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension in the Boljoon District. Therefore, the study had aimed to determine the relationship between First Language (Cebuano) Competencies and Reading Readiness among Kindergarten learners during School Year 2026–2027, describe the profile of the teacher-respondents, assess learners' competencies across the identified dimensions, determine whether a significant relationship existed

between the two variables, and use the findings as the basis for developing a Kindergarten Reading Readiness Program responsive to the learners' strengths and instructional needs.

Literature Review

Research on early literacy shows that children's first-language competence provides an important foundation for later reading development. Oral language, sound discrimination, print awareness, vocabulary growth, and opportunities to express meaning all contribute to the transition from spoken language to beginning literacy. Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) emphasized that emergent literacy develops through the interaction of oral-language and code-related skills, while Storch and Whitehurst (2002) found that early oral language and code-related abilities are significant precursors of later reading. Lonigan et al. (2000) likewise showed that emergent literacy skills developed during preschool are strongly related to subsequent reading achievement. Phonological awareness is especially important because children need to recognize and manipulate sounds before they can successfully connect speech to print (Anthony & Francis, 2005). Alphabet knowledge and early print learning also support this transition by helping children understand how written symbols represent spoken language (Piasta & Wagner, 2010). Fine-motor competence further contributes to Kindergarten readiness because visual-motor coordination and controlled hand movements support early writing and classroom performance (Cameron et al., 2012). These findings support the assessment of Cebuano competencies in auditory discrimination, oral expression, emergent literacy, fine-motor readiness, and visual literacy.

Reading readiness also depends on a coordinated set of skills that allow beginning readers to recognize sounds, decode written words, build vocabulary, read with increasing automaticity, and understand text. Ehri et al. (2001) found that phonemic-awareness instruction significantly improves children's ability to learn to read, while Ehri (2020) emphasized the importance of systematic phonics instruction in developing accurate word recognition. Castles et al. (2018) further explained that reading development requires both word recognition and language comprehension, showing that decoding alone is insufficient for successful reading. Vocabulary is another essential component because knowledge of word meanings supports comprehension and the integration of information during reading (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014). Lervåg and Aukrust (2010) also demonstrated that vocabulary knowledge strongly influences reading-comprehension growth, particularly among language learners. More recently, Duke and Cartwright (2021) argued that reading development involves the interaction of decoding, language comprehension, fluency, background knowledge, and executive processes.

Methodology

The study employed a quantitative descriptive-correlational research design to determine the perceived levels of Kindergarten learners' First Language (Cebuano) Competencies and Reading Readiness and to examine the relationship between these

variables. The respondents consisted of 30 Kindergarten teachers from 10 public elementary schools in the Boljoon District, Division of Cebu Province. Universal sampling or complete enumeration was used to include all eligible Kindergarten teachers. Data were gathered through a structured, researcher-adapted survey questionnaire based on the MATATAG Kindergarten Curriculum and the Revised Philippine Early Childhood Development Checklist. The instrument contained three parts: teacher profile, First Language (Cebuano) Competencies, and Reading Readiness. First Language Competencies were assessed in terms of auditory discrimination, oral expression, emergent literacy, fine motor readiness, and visual literacy, while Reading Readiness was measured through phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension. A four-point scale ranging from Not Yet Demonstrated to Highly Demonstrated was used.

Data gathering was conducted in preliminary, actual, and post-data gathering phases. Required permissions and informed consent were secured before questionnaire administration, and confidentiality and data privacy were observed throughout the study. The completed questionnaires were checked, coded, tabulated, and encoded for analysis. Frequency and percentage were used to describe the respondents' profile, while mean and standard deviation were used to determine the perceived levels of the learners' competencies. The Shapiro–Wilk test was applied to assess normality. Since the data did not fully satisfy the assumption of normal distribution, Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient was used to determine the strength, direction, and significance of the relationship between First Language Competencies and Reading Readiness at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings served as the basis for developing a proposed Kindergarten Reading Readiness Program.

Results

Table. Auditory Discrimination

Indicators	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
1. Identifies and distinguishes subtle speech sound variations in spoken Cebuano.	3.33	0.71	Highly Demonstrated
2. Isolates initial, medial, and final sounds in familiar Cebuano words.	3.03	0.67	Demonstrated
3. Recognizes rhyming sound patterns in native chants, rhymes, and songs.	3.27	0.69	Highly Demonstrated
4. Accurately distinguishes similar-sounding local words (e.g., puno vs. funo).	3.20	0.66	Demonstrated
5. Claps and segments spoken Cebuano words into distinct syllables.	3.37	0.76	Highly Demonstrated
Grand Mean	3.24	0.50	Demonstrated

The table shows that the learners' auditory discrimination was generally Demonstrated, with a grand mean of 3.24 and SD of 0.50. The highest mean was obtained for clapping and

segmenting Cebuano words into syllables (3.37), while isolating initial, medial, and final sounds received the lowest mean (3.03). This implies that learners possess developing auditory skills but may still need focused activities in sound isolation and discrimination to strengthen readiness for beginning reading.

Table 2. Oral Expression

Indicators	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
1. Expresses personal needs, feelings, and thoughts fluently using native Cebuano.	3.57	0.68	Highly Demonstrated
2. Constructs grammatically appropriate sentences during classroom conversations.	3.33	0.66	Highly Demonstrated
3. Uses descriptive vocabulary to explain objects, pictures, or events.	3.17	0.65	Demonstrated
4. Asks and answers questions confidently during group discussions in L1.	3.27	0.69	Highly Demonstrated
5. Retells daily experiences or simple local stories using coherent oral language.	3.40	0.62	Highly Demonstrated
Grand Mean	3.35	0.51	Highly Demonstrated

The table shows that the learners' oral expression was Highly Demonstrated, with a grand mean of 3.35 and SD of 0.51. The highest mean was recorded for expressing personal needs, feelings, and thoughts in Cebuano (3.57), while using descriptive vocabulary obtained the lowest mean (3.17). This implies that learners generally communicate confidently in their first language, although vocabulary enrichment activities may further strengthen their ability to describe objects, pictures, and experiences more precisely.

Table 3. Emergent Literacy

Indicators	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
1. Shows awareness that printed symbols carry meaning and represent spoken words.	3.20	0.55	Demonstrated
2. Demonstrates proper book-handling behaviors	2.83	0.70	Demonstrated
3. Tracks print directionality from left-to-right and top-to-bottom	2.67	0.71	Demonstrated
4. Identifies common environmental print, logos, and signs.	3.07	0.45	Demonstrated
5. Distinguishes between text print and picture illustrations.	3.23	0.57	Demonstrated
Grand Mean	3.00	0.48	Demonstrated

The table shows that the learners' emergent literacy was Demonstrated, with a grand mean of 3.00 and SD of 0.48. The highest mean was obtained for distinguishing text print from picture illustrations (3.23), while tracking print directionality from left-to-right and top-to-bottom received the lowest mean (2.67). This implies that learners possess basic print-awareness skills but may still need more guided activities in book handling and print directionality to strengthen early reading readiness.

Table 4. Fine Motor Readiness

Indicators	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
1. Maintains proper tripod pencil grip and finger control.	3.07	0.83	Demonstrated
2. Traces and copies basic lines, strokes, and geometric shapes.	3.27	0.74	Highly Demonstrated
3. Demonstrates hand-eye coordination when coloring.	3.20	0.76	Demonstrated
4. Executes precise fine motor movements (e.g., cutting with scissors).	3.30	0.65	Highly Demonstrated
5. Reproduces pre-writing patterns and letter strokes.	3.17	0.53	Demonstrated
Grand Mean	3.20	0.56	Demonstrated

The table shows that the learners' fine motor readiness was Demonstrated, with a grand mean of 3.20 and SD of 0.56. The highest mean was recorded for executing precise fine motor movements such as cutting with scissors (3.30), while maintaining a proper tripod pencil grip and finger control obtained the lowest mean (3.07). This implies that learners generally possess adequate fine motor skills, although continued practice in pencil control and pre-writing activities may further strengthen writing readiness.

Table 5. Visual Literacy

Indicators	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
1. Matches identical objects, shapes, symbols, and letter forms visually.	3.57	0.68	Highly Demonstrated
2. Detects subtle visual differences between similar shapes or symbols.	3.40	0.67	Highly Demonstrated
3. Interprets meaning and narrative details from picture illustrations.	3.17	0.59	Demonstrated
4. Categorizes and groups visual stimuli based on shared traits.	3.10	0.55	Demonstrated
5. Follows visual sequences and tracks visual paths.	3.27	0.58	Highly Demonstrated
Grand Mean	3.30	0.47	Highly Demonstrated

The table shows that the learners' visual literacy was Highly Demonstrated, with a grand mean of 3.30 and SD of 0.47. The highest mean was obtained for matching identical objects, shapes, symbols, and letter forms (3.57), while categorizing and grouping visual stimuli based on shared traits received the lowest mean (3.10). This implies that learners possess strong visual recognition skills, although activities involving visual classification and interpretation may further strengthen their readiness for beginning reading.

Table 6. Phonemic Awareness

Indicators	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
1. Isolates the initial sound heard in target spoken words.	2.33	0.55	Partially Demonstrated
2. Blends individual spoken phonemes together to form complete words.	2.17	0.59	Partially Demonstrated
3. Segments a spoken word into its individual component sounds.	2.23	0.63	Partially Demonstrated
4. Identifies and produces rhyming word pairs in reading activities.	2.21	0.62	Partially Demonstrated
5. Manipulates sounds by adding, deleting, or substituting phonemes.	1.93	0.52	Partially Demonstrated
Grand Mean	2.18	0.38	Partially Demonstrated

The table shows that the learners' phonemic awareness was Partially Demonstrated, with a grand mean of 2.18 and SD of 0.38. The highest mean was obtained for isolating initial sounds in spoken words (2.33), while manipulating sounds through adding, deleting, or substituting phonemes received the lowest mean (1.93). This implies that learners still need focused and systematic activities in sound blending, segmentation, rhyming, and phoneme manipulation to strengthen their readiness for formal reading.

Table 7. Phonics

Indicators	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
1. Identifies and names uppercase and lowercase alphabet letters.	2.90	0.55	Demonstrated
2. Matches printed letters with their corresponding speech sounds.	2.63	0.76	Demonstrated
3. Distinguishes visually and phonically between similar letter forms.	2.33	0.66	Partially Demonstrated
4. Applies graphophonic knowledge to decode simple CVC words.	2.43	0.57	Partially Demonstrated
5. Uses letter-sound relationships to attempt reading simple decodable print.	2.23	0.68	Partially Demonstrated
Grand Mean	2.51	0.49	Demonstrated

The table shows that the learners' phonics skills were Demonstrated, with a grand mean of 2.51 and SD of 0.49. The highest mean was recorded for identifying and naming uppercase and lowercase letters (2.90), while using letter-sound relationships to read simple decodable print obtained the lowest mean (2.23). This implies that learners recognize letters fairly well but still need systematic practice in letter-sound correspondence, decoding, and reading simple words.

Table 8. Vocabulary

Indicators	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
1. Comprehends age-appropriate target words introduced during story read-alouds.	2.23	0.43	Partially Demonstrated
2. Correctly names common objects, actions, and concepts.	2.70	0.75	Demonstrated
3. Uses target vocabulary words appropriately during classroom conversations.	2.57	0.57	Demonstrated
4. Connects new target words to familiar home or first-language concepts.	2.60	0.62	Demonstrated
5. Demonstrates understanding of basic descriptive words.	2.50	0.57	Partially Demonstrated
Grand Mean	2.52	0.34	Demonstrated

The table shows that the learners' vocabulary was Demonstrated, with a grand mean of 2.52 and SD of 0.34. The highest mean was obtained for correctly naming common objects, actions, and concepts (2.70), while understanding target words introduced during story read-alouds received the lowest mean (2.23). This implies that learners have basic vocabulary knowledge but may still need richer contextual activities, repeated exposure, and explicit word instruction to strengthen comprehension and word use.

Table 9. Fluency

Indicators	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
1. Recites familiar nursery rhymes and decodable chants smoothly.	2.40	0.50	Partially Demonstrated
2. Demonstrates automaticity in recognizing high-frequency sight words.	2.30	0.60	Partially Demonstrated
3. Reads simple decodable texts without excessive hesitation.	1.97	0.41	Partially Demonstrated
4. Uses appropriate voice modulation and pitch during shared reading.	2.53	0.57	Demonstrated
5. Tracks printed text smoothly from left to right while reading aloud.	2.24	0.64	Partially Demonstrated
Grand Mean	2.29	0.38	Partially Demonstrated

The table shows that the learners' fluency was Partially Demonstrated, with a grand

mean of 2.29 and SD of 0.38. The highest mean was recorded for using appropriate voice modulation and pitch during shared reading (2.53), while reading simple decodable texts without excessive hesitation obtained the lowest mean (1.97). This implies that learners still need repeated oral reading, sight-word practice, and guided decodable-text activities to improve automaticity, smoothness, and confidence in beginning reading.

Table 10. Reading Comprehension

Indicators	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
1. Answers literal questions about stories read aloud.	2.80	0.55	Demonstrated
2. Retells the main events of a story in correct chronological sequence.	2.10	0.40	Partially Demonstrated
3. Identifies main characters, setting, and basic plot elements.	2.28	0.45	Partially Demonstrated
4. Makes logical predictions about story outcomes based on pictures.	2.30	0.47	Partially Demonstrated
5. Relates story events and themes to personal life experiences.	2.70	0.65	Demonstrated
Grand Mean	2.44	0.26	Partially Demonstrated

The table shows that the learners' reading comprehension was Partially Demonstrated, with a grand mean of 2.44 and SD of 0.26. The highest mean was obtained for answering literal questions about stories read aloud (2.80), while retelling story events in correct sequence received the lowest mean (2.10). This implies that learners understand basic story information but still need guided activities in sequencing, identifying story elements, predicting outcomes, and connecting ideas to strengthen comprehension.

Table 11. Significant Relationship Between First Language Competencies and Reading Readiness

Reading Readiness Pillar	Spearman's rho	p-value	Degree of Relationship	Remarks	Decision
Phonemic Awareness	0.165	.384	Very Weak Positive	Not Significant	Fail to Reject H_0
Phonics	0.146	.442	Very Weak Positive	Not Significant	Fail to Reject H_0
Vocabulary	0.394	.031	Weak Positive	Significant	Reject H_0
Fluency	0.166	.381	Very Weak Positive	Not Significant	Fail to Reject H_0
Reading Comprehension	0.132	.486	Very Weak Positive	Not Significant	Fail to Reject H_0
Overall Reading Readiness	0.306	.100	Weak Positive	Not Significant	Fail to Reject H_0

*Significant at $p < 0.05$.

Table 11 shows that the overall relationship between First Language (Cebuano) Competencies and Reading Readiness was weak positive and not statistically significant, with Spearman's $\rho = 0.306$ and $p = .100$. Thus, the null hypothesis was not rejected. Among the reading-readiness pillars, only vocabulary showed a significant relationship with First Language Competencies, with $\rho = 0.394$ and $p = .031$, indicating a weak positive association. Phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and reading comprehension all showed very weak positive and non-significant relationships. These findings imply that stronger Cebuano competencies may particularly support vocabulary development, while the other reading-readiness skills may also depend on additional instructional, developmental, and literacy-related factors.

Discussions

The findings showed that the Kindergarten learners generally demonstrated developing First Language (Cebuano) Competencies, with stronger performance in oral expression and visual literacy. Auditory discrimination, emergent literacy, and fine motor readiness were also generally demonstrated, although some specific skills still required reinforcement. Learners showed relative strengths in expressing needs and ideas in Cebuano, matching and distinguishing visual symbols, segmenting words into syllables, and performing basic fine motor tasks. However, lower results were observed in isolating sounds, using descriptive vocabulary, following print directionality, and maintaining proper pencil grip. These findings indicate that the learners already possessed several foundational language, visual, and motor skills that could support literacy development, but they still needed structured activities to strengthen weaker pre-reading competencies.

Reading Readiness, however, showed more noticeable areas for improvement. Phonemic awareness, fluency, and reading comprehension were only partially demonstrated, while phonics and vocabulary were generally demonstrated. Learners performed better in naming letters, identifying common words, answering literal questions, and using appropriate voice modulation, but they experienced more difficulty in phoneme manipulation, decoding simple words, reading decodable texts smoothly, sequencing story events, and making predictions. The relationship analysis showed that overall First Language (Cebuano) Competencies had a weak positive but non-significant relationship with overall Reading Readiness. Only vocabulary showed a significant positive relationship with First Language Competencies. This suggests that stronger Cebuano skills may particularly support vocabulary development, while other reading-readiness areas may require direct, systematic, and targeted instruction.

Conclusion

The study concluded that the Kindergarten learners generally demonstrated strong

First Language (Cebuano) Competencies, but their Reading Readiness remained uneven, particularly in phonemic awareness, fluency, and reading comprehension. The results showed that first-language competence did not consistently translate into stronger performance across all reading areas, although it appeared relevant to vocabulary development. These findings supported the need for more explicit, differentiated, and developmentally appropriate early literacy instruction and provided a basis for the proposed Kindergarten Reading Readiness Program and related school-level literacy initiatives.

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