**Journal of Basic Education Research**
Vol. 6, No. 2, May 2025, pp. 106~115
ISSN: 2716-3725, DOI: 10.37251/jber.v6i2.1635


# Cross Language Sight Word Recognition of Multilingual Learners

**Leonardo D. Tejano**
College of Teacher Education, Mariano Marcos State University, Philippines

**Article Info**

***Article history:***

Received Apr 9, 2025
Revised Apr 22, 2025
Accepted May 3, 2025
OnlineFirst May 12, 2025

***Keywords:***

Early language learning
Multilingual education
Multilingual learners
Sight words

**ABSTRACT**

**Purpose of the study:** This study explores the most frequently encountered sight words among multilingual learners in early education. It aims to compare their recognition skills across three languages—first language, national language, and English—highlighting the complexities of sight word acquisition in multilingual settings and addressing a gap in existing research.

**Methodology:** This study employed a cross-language explanatory sequential design to examine sight word recognition among multilingual learners, specifically Ilokano speakers in the Philippines, where multilingualism is common. The study analyzed the frequency of sight word occurrence in educational materials and assessed recognition abilities in Ilokano, Tagalog, and English.

**Main Findings:** The data shows that sight word recognition improves across grades, initially varying by language but converging by Grade 3. Multilingual learners' recognition rates differ based on their language background, with early proficiency in certain languages impacting initial recognition. As learners progress, proficiency in one language influences others, explaining differences in Grade 1 and Grade 2 performance. By Grade 3, recognition rates converge, reflecting research that suggests multilingual learners achieve similar proficiency levels across languages over time.

**Novelty/Originality of this study:** The study contributes by examining sight word recognition in multilingual contexts, highlighting how early language proficiency and language transfer impact literacy development. It reveals the progression from varied initial recognition rates to converging proficiency levels, emphasizing the role of multilingual education in shaping literacy development across different languages.



***Corresponding Author:***
Leonardo D. Tejano
Early Childhood and Special Needs Education Department, College of Teacher Education,
Mariano Marcos State University,
A. Castro Avenue, Laoag City, Ilocos Norte, Philippines
Email: ldtejano@mmsu.edu.ph

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Early literacy development plays a vital role in a learner's academic success, with sight word recognition serving as a key component of this stage. As Lonigan and Phillips [1] emphasize, early literacy skills—including phonological awareness, vocabulary, and letter recognition—are strong predictors of future academic achievement. Expanding on Amalia's findings [2] sight words, which are high-frequency terms, must be instantly recognized by learners to facilitate fluent reading and ease of comprehension. The ability to quickly identify these words helps learners navigate spelling complexities, associate words with their meanings and pronunciations, and ultimately enhance both vocabulary mastery and reading comprehension.

Moreover, the study by Duyck et al. [3] highlights that multilingual learners do not fully separate their languages during visual word recognition, allowing for cross-lingual interactions. This ability to recognize sight words in multiple languages supports their development as readers, enabling them to draw on knowledge from all their languages and improve their reading skills in diverse linguistic contexts. Words such as "the," "and," or "it" in English—along with their equivalents in other languages—appear frequently in texts and are essential for beginning readers.

The Dolch Sight Word List, introduced by Edward William Dolch in the 1930s, remains a widely used tool in literacy instruction. It categorizes common words based on school grade levels, from Kindergarten through Grade 3 [4]. However, this list primarily caters to English-speaking learners and often overlooks the needs of learners in multilingual settings. Hutchison et al. [5] critique the Dolch Basic Sight Word List for failing to reflect contemporary language practices, its limited applicability in multilingual contexts, and its inadequate representation of culturally diverse texts. They argue that this may lead to inaccurate assessments of multilingual learners' sight word recognition.

Thus, the recognition of sight words becomes more complex in classrooms where learners are exposed to multiple languages. In countries like the Philippines, where learners are developing literacy in their first language, a national language like Filipino, and English simultaneously, this complexity is even more pronounced. Research indicates that repeated exposure to sight words across several languages strengthens vocabulary and reading fluency [6]. However, there is limited knowledge about the specific sight words that multilingual learners encounter most frequently or how their recognition skills differ between languages. Most studies have concentrated on English sight word acquisition, leaving a gap in understanding how multilingual learners develop this skill. Beck and McKeown [7] emphasize the need to explore how sight word recognition functions in different linguistic settings, particularly for learners who engage with more than one language.

This study investigates sight word recognition in multilingual contexts, focusing on how early language proficiency and language transfer influence literacy development. It aims to identify the most frequently encountered sight words among multilingual learners in early education and to compare their ability to recognize these words across their first language, the national language, and English.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. The Role of Sight Words in Early Literacy Development for Multilingual Learners

Sight words are foundational in early literacy development, particularly for multilingual learners, as they help facilitate reading fluency and comprehension across multiple languages. Sight words are commonly encountered words that learners recognize by sight rather than through phonetic decoding. This method enables quicker recognition and reduces cognitive load, allowing readers to focus on understanding the text rather than decoding each individual word [8]. According to the National Reading Panel [9], sight words are essential to reading proficiency, as they contribute to the development of fluency, which in turn improves comprehension and academic success. For multilingual learners, identifying high-frequency sight words across different languages is crucial for enhancing early literacy skills. Focusing on commonly encountered words helps reduce the cognitive demands of decoding, allowing learners to engage more deeply with the content and improving overall literacy development.

### 2.2. The Dolch Sight Word List and Its Application in Multilingual Contexts

The Dolch Sight Word List, created by Edward William Dolch in the 1930s, remains a key resource in early literacy education. The list categorizes essential sight words by grade level, spanning from Kindergarten through Grade 3, and has been widely used in English-speaking educational contexts [4]. While the Dolch List is an effective tool for English learners, it does not address the complexities faced by multilingual learners. Fry [10] notes that while the Dolch List is effective in English contexts, it overlooks the linguistic diversity of multilingual learners. The list's focus on a single language highlights a significant gap in supporting multilingual learners who must navigate multiple languages simultaneously. This study aims to fill this gap through the development of a more inclusive sight word list that reflects the linguistic diversity of multilingual learners, helping to create educational materials that address the needs of learners learning to read in more than one language.

### 2.3. Multilingualism and Early Literacy Development in Cross-Language Contexts

Multilingual learners face unique challenges in early literacy development, particularly in recognizing sight words across different languages. Research indicates that multilingual learners often need to navigate multiple linguistic systems at once, which can complicate sight word recognition [11]. Hoff [12] suggests that managing sight words across various languages can impact overall reading fluency and comprehension. Understanding these challenges requires a nuanced approach to literacy instruction that takes into account the multilingual context of learners. For example, multilingual learners may benefit from differentiated instruction

that addresses specific challenges related to recognizing and using sight words in different languages. This study explores how multilingual learners engage with sight words in various linguistic contexts and how their abilities in one language influence their recognition of words in other languages.

## 3. RESEARCH METHOD

### 3.1. Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential research design, as outlined by Creswell and Creswell [13]. This two-phase approach begins with the collection and analysis of quantitative data, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data to help explain the quantitative findings. In the first phase, quantitative data was gathered to identify the most frequently encountered sight words among multilingual learners in early education settings. The second phase involved comparing sight word recognition abilities across the languages used in the learners' school environment.

### 3.2. Population and Sampling

The participants in this study were Kindergarten to Grade 3 learners at Mariano Marcos State University Laboratory Elementary School, Laoag City, Ilocos Norte, Philippines. The study specifically focused on Ilokano learners, who are native speakers of Ilokano, one of the major languages spoken in the Philippines. A total enumeration sampling method was used, meaning every learner within this age range at the school was included in the study. This approach ensured a comprehensive sample that accurately represented the entire student body, enabling the results to be generalized to the broader population of multilingual learners within the school.

The Ilokano language is widely spoken in the northern part of the Philippines, particularly in the Ilocos region. It holds significant cultural and historical importance as the lingua franca of the region. The language situation in the Philippines is characterized by multilingualism, where most Filipinos speak at least two languages: their first language, such as Ilokano, Cebuano, or Hiligaynon, along with Filipino (the national language) and English, which are commonly used in formal education, government, and media.

In the case of Ilokano learners, they generally speak Ilokano as their first language at home and within their communities. However, in school, they are also taught Filipino and English as part of the formal curriculum. This multilingual context presents both challenges and opportunities for learners, particularly when it comes to sight word recognition across these different languages.

### 3.3. Data Gathering Procedure

The first step of the data gathering process involved analyzing the frequency of sight word occurrence in the teaching materials and student reading exercises used during the first grading period. The materials reviewed included textbooks, modules, and daily classroom resources, while non-daily educational materials such as storybooks and pamphlets were excluded from the analysis. This step aimed to identify the frequency with which specific sight words appeared in the materials used by learners, providing a foundation for understanding the exposure to sight words within the curriculum.

After the frequency analysis, the researcher compiled a list of the most common sight words based on the collected data. This list highlighted the words that appeared most frequently across the analyzed materials, providing a focused set of sight words for further evaluation. This compilation was essential for identifying the words that learners encountered most often and forming the basis for the subsequent phases of the study.

Once the most common sight words were identified, the next phase involved administering sight word recognition tests to multilingual Ilokano learners in Ilokano, Tagalog, and English. These tests were integrated into regular classroom activities, such as drills and the "unlocking of difficulties" portion of lessons, ensuring that the testing process was non-disruptive. The goal of the tests was to assess learners' recognition of the identified sight words in each of the three languages, allowing for a thorough evaluation of their cross-language sight word recognition abilities. Following the administration of the recognition tests, the researcher compared the results to identify areas of strength and weakness in sight word recognition across the three languages—Ilokano, Tagalog, and English.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

The analysis of the data involved several stages. First, a frequency count was conducted to identify the most frequently encountered sight words in the teaching materials and student reading exercises. This focused on daily materials, excluding non-daily resources. Next, the recognition test results were analyzed by tallying the number of correct responses for each language. The percentage of sight words correctly identified in each language was calculated, allowing for a comparison of recognition rates across Ilokano, Tagalog, and English.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Frequently Encountered Sight Words Among Multilingual Learners

The researcher examined the frequency of sight words in teaching materials and student reading exercises, categorizing them by language (Ilokano, Filipino, and English) and by grade level (Kindergarten through Grade 3). The findings reveal that the most commonly encountered sight words in each language are organized into thematic categories.

Table 1. Frequently encountered sight words among multilingual (Ilokano) learners.

| Language | Kindergarten | Grade 1 | Grade 2 | Grade 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ilokano | siak, isuna, sika, -tayo, -da, adda, awan, balay, eskuela, kalsada, danum, makan, libro, maestro, nagannak, gayyem, agtug-tugaw, agdaldalus, aldaw, rabii, bigat, oras, ima, saka, kama, mata, silaw, bulan, bituen, innaldaw, saan, wen, malem, umuli, naimbag, naragsak, bassit, dakkel, baro, daan, kayat, saan, sagpaminsan, kanayon, kadi, ditoy, idiay, daytoy | ketdi, ngem, kasta, kunak, ti, kayat, ditoy, idiay, nalaka, saan, maysa, dua, tallo, ad-adu, amin, sabali, bigat, tanghali, hapon, rabii, sumangbay, nakalipas, mangyari, tumulong, usaren, agtrabaho, aramiden, tulong, mapan, umuli, ngato, baba, kannigid, kannawan, napigsa, nababain, kaabay, naimbag, napintas, nakaro, ad-adu, bassit | mabalin, panawen, panangkitkita, napintas, bukod, tao, lugar, banag, tunggal, naragsak, bilang, naikkat, asideg, adayo, timmulong, agbiruk, naragsak, naimbag, nalaka, narigat, ngato, baba, daan, saan, sigurado, boses, damag, sungbat, subukan, uray, agyaman, agluto, mangan, pasensia, panunoten, apagbiit, nalpasen, sidaen, mangited, agbasa, naragsak, makabasol, agdaldalus, aguray, balasang, baro | panakaammo, saan, uray, agkakapada, baro, dagiti, no, iti, maala, dadduma, sagpaminsan, basaen, kakabsat, nagannak, gayyem, maawatan, sumali, ragsak, napintas, rigat, damag, sungbat, panagadal, aramiden, pasaray, daan, ngato, baba, kannigid, kannawan, wen, ngem, uray, nasayaat, awan, tunggal, kada, bigat |
| Filipino | ako, siya, ikaw, tayo, sila, ako'y, mayroon, wala, bahay, paaralan, kalsada, tubig, pagkain, libro, guro, magulang, kaibigan, laruin, laro, araw, gabi, umaga, oras, daliri, paa, kamay, mata, ilaw, buwan, bituin, araw-araw, hindi, oo, hapon, umuwi, maganda, masaya, maliit, malaki, bago, luma, gusto, gusto ko, ayaw, paminsan, madalas, minsan, dito, doon | na, ngunit, kaya, sabi, ng, gusto, dito, doon, madali, hindi, isa, dalawa, tatlo, higit, lahat, ibang, umaga, tanghali, hapon, gabi, kinabukasan, nakaraan, mangyari, tumulong, gamitin, magtrabaho, gawin, tulong, pumunta, umuwi, taas, baba, kanan, kaliwa, mabilis, mabagal, kasama, maganda, masarap, marami, konti | maari, panahon, pagkakakita, napaka, sarili, tao, lugar, bagay, bawat, sabik, bilang, matagal, malapit, malayo, tumulong, maghanap, masaya, maginhawa, madali, komplikado, mataas, mababa, karaniwan, hindi, sigurado, boses, tanong, sagot, subukan, kahit, salamat, magluto, kumain, pasensya, naisip, saglit, tapos, ulam, magdala, magbasa, masaya, malungkot, maglaro, sandali, abala, bago | kaalaman, hindi, huli, pareho, bago, mga, kung, pag, sa, mahanap, minsan, paminsan-minsan, babasahin, kapatid, magulang, magkaibigan, naiintindihan, sumali, natutuwa, napaka, hirap, tanong, sagot, pagaaral, gumawa, paminsan, luma, taas, baba, kanan, kaliwa, o, ngunit, kahit, mahalaga, walang, tuwing, kailan, umaga |
| English | all, am, are, at, ate, be, black, brown, but, came, did, do, eat, four, get, good, have, he, into, like, must, new, no, now, on, our, out, please, pretty, ran, ride, saw, say, she, so, soon, that, there, they, this, too, under, want, was, well, went, what, | after, again, an, any, as, ask, by, could, every, fly, from, give, going, had, has, her, him, his, how, just, know, let, live, may, of, old, once, open, over, put, round, some, stop, take, thank, them, then, | always, around, because, been, before, best, both, buy, call, cold, does, don't, fast, first, five, found, gave, goes, green, its, made, many, off, or, pull, read, right, sing, sit, sleep, tell, their, these, those, upon, us, use, very, wash, which, why, | about, better, bring, carry, clean, cut, done, draw, drink, eight, fall, far, full, got, grow, hold, hot, hurt, if, keep, kind, laugh, light, long, much, myself, never, only, own, pick, seven, shall, show, six, small, start, ten, |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | white, who, will, with, yes | think, when | walk, | were, | wish, write, your | work, | would, | today, warm | together, | try, |

The analysis further grouped these sight words into key themes foundational to early literacy and language development.

A critical starting point in language learning is the mastery of Personal Pronouns and Possessives, which help learners understand identity and relationships. Justice and Pence [14] emphasize the importance of these elements in constructing meaningful sentences and facilitating communication. In Ilokano ("siak," "isuna"), Filipino ("ako," "siya"), and English ("I," "he," "she"), such words express relational roles across contexts, highlighting their universal function in early language development. As learners acquire these, they are better equipped to progress toward understanding Common Verbs and Actions.

Common Verbs and Actions play a vital role in vocabulary expansion and sentence construction. Konishi et al. [15] underscore that exposure to action verbs enhances children's ability to describe events and interactions, promoting syntactic growth. Words like "agtug-tugaw" (sit) in Ilokano, "laruin" (play) in Filipino, and "am" in English allow learners to describe their surroundings and actions, thereby enriching expressive language. Interactive activities such as games and storytelling support this learning by encouraging sentence formation through real-life scenarios. Once learners gain confidence with verbs, they move naturally to understanding Common Nouns.

Common Nouns are crucial in helping children name and categorize the world around them. Hoff et al. [12] argue that early noun acquisition supports categorization and object recognition. Examples include "balay" (house) in Ilokano, "bahay" in Filipino, and "house" in English. Activities such as labeling pictures and hands-on object manipulation strengthen these associations, enabling learners to link language with experience. This foundational knowledge supports learning in more abstract categories, such as Time and Frequency Words.

Time and Frequency Words help children understand routines, sequence, and duration. Bialystok and Craik [16] found that familiarity with these terms enhances cognitive and narrative skills. Ilokano ("aldaw" for day), Filipino ("araw"), and English ("day") offer parallel examples of how learners begin to frame their daily experiences. Tools like visual schedules and sequencing games help embed these concepts into their developing language system. Building on this understanding, learners can then grasp Quantifiers and Numbers.

Quantifiers and Numbers are essential for understanding quantity, size, and basic mathematical ideas. Salminen [17] notes the strong link between early number sense and later math achievement. Examples include "maysa" (one) in Ilokano, "isa" in Filipino, and "one" in English. Through interactive counting and sorting activities, learners build number literacy alongside language development. As this competency grows, students begin to use Descriptive Adjectives to elaborate on nouns.

Descriptive Adjectives enhance expressive skills by allowing children to describe objects, people, and feelings more richly. Puspitasari et al. [18] highlight the role of adjectives in developing narrative ability and reading comprehension. Words like "naimbag" (good) in Ilokano, "maganda" (beautiful) in Filipino, and "beautiful" in English deepen learners' descriptive capacity. Activities like storytelling or visual descriptions help reinforce these concepts. Once mastered, learners begin exploring Prepositions and Conjunctions.

Prepositions and Conjunctions are vital for understanding spatial and logical relationships between ideas. Geva [19] stresses their importance for both comprehension and expression. Examples include "ditoy" (here) in Ilokano, "dito" in Filipino, and "at" (and) in English. Through spatial games and sentence-building tasks, learners learn how to connect ideas more fluidly. This understanding supports the use of Affirmative and Negative Responses.

Affirmative and Negative Responses enable learners to participate in basic dialogues and express preferences. Jurkic et al. [20] show that these types of responses—such as "wen" (yes) in Ilokano, "oo" (yes) in Filipino, and "yes" in English—are essential for social interaction and cognitive growth. Incorporating choice-making and response activities into lessons helps build conversational fluency. This communicative skill supports the use of vocabulary related to Common Objects and Materials.

Common Objects and Materials provide concrete reference points for new vocabulary. Ayana et al. [21] emphasize that tangible learning experiences improve vocabulary retention. Words like "libro" (book) in Ilokano and Filipino, and "book" in English, are easily taught using real-life objects or visual materials. These strategies make abstract language more relatable and meaningful. As vocabulary grows, children are also introduced to terms that describe Emotions and States.

Emotions and States support social-emotional learning and self-expression. Bosch [22] explains that a robust emotional vocabulary enhances children's ability to manage emotions and relate to others. Words like "naragsak" (happy) in Ilokano, "masaya" in Filipino, and "happy" in English help children articulate their inner experiences. Techniques such as guided discussions and role-playing help foster emotional literacy while reinforcing language skills.

Table 2. Sight Words by Theme and Language.

| Theme/Category | Ilokano | Filipino | English |
|---|---|---|---|
| Personal Pronouns and Possessives | siak, isuna, sika, -tayo, -da, nagannak | ako, siya, ikaw, tayo, sila, guro | I, he, she, we, they, his, her, our |
| Common Verbs and Actions | agtug-tugaw, agdaldalus, agtrabaho, agluto, agyaman, mapan | laruin, gawin, tumulong, umuwi, magluto, umalis | am, are, do, eat, get, go, have, like, make, must, say, see, take, want, work |
| Common Nouns (People, Places, Things) | balay, eskuela, kalsada, danum, libro, maestro, gayyem | bahay, paaralan, kalsada, tubig, pagkain, libro, guro, kaibigan | all, book, boy, girl, house, school, water, work |
| Time and Frequency | aldaw, rabii, bigat, oras, sumangbay, naglabas, malem | araw, gabi, umaga, oras, paminsan, madalas | day, night, morning, time, today, tomorrow, yesterday |
| Quantifiers and Numbers | maysa, dua, tallo, ad-adu, bassit, dakkel, bassit | isa, dalawa, tatlo, higit, lahat, konti, malaki, maliit | all, any, five, first, four, more, much, one, one hundred, some |
| Descriptive Adjectives | naimbag, naragsak, bassit, dakkel, baro, daan, napintas | maganda, masaya, maliit, malaki, bago, luma | good, happy, small, big, new, old, beautiful |
| Prepositions and Conjunctions | ditoy, idiay, kadi, ngem, ketdi | dito, doon, at, na, ngunit | at, in, on, under, with, by, but, because |
| Affirmative and Negative Responses | wen, saan | oo, hindi | yes, no |
| Common Objects and Materials | libro, danum, kalsada | libro, tubig, bahay, kalsada | book, water, house, street |
| Emotions and States | naragsak, naimbag, bassit, dakkel | masaya, maganda, maliit, malaki | happy, good, sad, big, small |

In summary, the frequency data and thematic analysis of sight words demonstrate that Ilokano multilingual learners consistently encounter foundational vocabulary across all three languages. These words, categorized into core linguistic functions such as personal pronouns, verbs, nouns, and time expressions, reveal clear patterns in early literacy development. The results provide direct answers to the research problem, offering strong evidence of how early language exposure and cross-linguistic themes support the acquisition of sight words in a multilingual educational context.

### 4.2. Sight Word Recognition Across Languages

Once the list of common sight words was established, the researcher administered sight word recognition tests to multilingual Ilokano learners in Ilokano, Tagalog, and English. These tests were conducted in a non-disruptive manner, seamlessly integrated into daily classroom activities like drills and the "unlocking of difficulties" component of the lesson. This approach ensured that the tests were embedded within the regular instructional process, minimizing disruption and allowing for a natural assessment of sight word recognition across the different languages.

The sight word recognition test revealed that not all basic sight words could be recognized by the learners. This indicates a significant need for early language learning materials focused on sight words, especially for learners from multilingual backgrounds. Table 3 shows the recognition rate of sight words among multilingual (Ilokano) learners across different languages.

Table 3. Recognition rate of sight words among multilingual Ilokano learners across different languages (Ilokano, Tagalog, and English).

| | Recognition Rate (%) | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Ilokano | Filipino | English |
| Kindergarten | 57.7 | 48.1 | 57.7 |
| Grade 1 | 53.7 | 53.7 | 68.3 |
| Grade 2 | 76.1 | 65.2 | 67.4 |
| Grade 3 | 92.7 | 92.7 | 92.7 |

The data from Table 3 provides insights into sight word recognition across the languages Ilokano, Filipino, and English, comparing proficiency at different grade levels.

In Kindergarten, both Ilokano and English exhibit the same recognition rate of 57.7%, while Filipino lags behind at 48.1%. This finding is somewhat unexpected, given that Filipino and Ilokano are closely related

languages, sharing significant overlap in vocabulary, grammar, and structure. One possible explanation for Filipino's weaker performance is its more limited use in the local community compared to Ilokano. Learners are more likely to encounter Ilokano in everyday communication, which may reinforce familiarity and recognition of Ilokano words from an early age. In contrast, Filipino—despite its national status—may be less frequently spoken at home or in informal settings, reducing learners' exposure and slowing early word recognition. This pattern supports research on language exposure and transfer, which suggests that regular use and interaction with a language are critical to developing foundational literacy skills [23]. As Walter and Dekker [24] highlight in their case study of Lubuagan, children perform better when instruction incorporates the actual mother tongue used in their communities, which creates a stronger foundation for literacy. Similarly, Pinnock and Vijayakumar [25] argue that language policies often overlook the importance of aligning school language with the home and community language, potentially disadvantaging learners in multilingual contexts. Furthermore, Cummins [26] emphasizes that language proficiency is best developed through meaningful interactions in socially and cognitively engaging environments—something that is more likely to happen with Ilokano in local settings than with Filipino. Together, these perspectives underscore the importance of real-world language exposure in shaping early literacy outcomes and suggest that the dominance of Ilokano in the local linguistic landscape may give it an advantage over Filipino in the early grades.

In Grade 1, English shows a notable increase in recognition rate, reaching 68.3%, surpassing both Ilokano and Filipino, which remain at 53.7%. This suggests that English instruction in formal school settings plays a significant role in early literacy development. The structured and frequent exposure to English in classroom activities likely contributes to its dominance in sight word recognition at this stage. Despite being less prevalent in home environments, English benefits from its institutional role in education, reinforcing the idea that the medium of instruction can significantly influence literacy outcomes. This supports theories of cross-linguistic influence, where early proficiency in an instructional language can also support literacy development in additional languages [27]. However, as Mahboob and Cruz [28] argue, the long-standing dominance of English in Philippine education has shaped societal attitudes that favor English over local languages, which may pose a challenge to the integration of local languages into the classroom. These entrenched attitudes can lead to the resistance or undervaluing of local languages, making it more difficult for them to be effectively used in literacy instruction. As García [29] points out, the English-speaking world often dismisses the value of languages other than English due to the global prestige of English as a language of empire and globalization. This mindset, echoed in English language education, can result in the marginalization of students' multilingual resources. Therefore, for local languages to be better supported in early literacy development, a principles-based approach to language policy is necessary to shift these ingrained perceptions and to truly recognize the value of multilingualism in educational contexts.

By Grade 2, Ilokano becomes the dominant language in sight word recognition, with a rate of 76.1%, while English and Filipino follow at 67.4% and 65.2%, respectively. This shift may reflect learners' increasing reliance on and comfort with their mother tongue as they develop stronger foundational reading skills. Given Ilokano's prevalence in daily life, it is likely reinforced not only at home but also in community interactions, providing additional opportunities for practice beyond formal education. This observation is supported by Herrera and Luzon [30], who found that learners in Butuan City developed reading proficiency more effectively when strategies in the mother tongue—such as storytelling and translation—were employed, reflecting the value of everyday linguistic familiarity in literacy acquisition. Similarly, Lopez and Lopez [31] emphasized the importance of culturally and linguistically relevant assessment tools in capturing the reading development of Ilokano-speaking children, highlighting how alignment between instructional and home language boosts learning outcomes. This finding also aligns with the goals of mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), which emphasizes the importance of building literacy first in the learner's most familiar language [32]. Furthermore, according to the Department of Education [33], using the first language, especially at an early age, enhances the learning process by presenting concepts in a language that students are most familiar with. This approach, through MTB-MLE, promotes the development of essential cognitive and reasoning skills, allowing children to function effectively in multiple languages, starting with their mother tongue.

By Grade 3, recognition rates in all three languages—Ilokano, Filipino, and English—converge at 92.7%. This convergence suggests that with sustained and balanced instruction, learners can achieve similar levels of literacy across multiple languages. It reflects the cumulative effect of consistent literacy development and balanced multilingual education, where earlier disparities in recognition are gradually resolved. By this point, learners likely have had ample exposure to each language through both school and community, enabling them to build parallel skills. This pattern aligns with findings by Filippi et al. [34], who observed that while multilingual learners may initially lag behind monolingual peers in academic performance, they tend to catch up by later stages—demonstrating that multilingualism is not a long-term disadvantage and challenging assumptions about prolonged academic delays among multilingual students. Similarly, UNESCO [35] highlights the positive effects of multilingual education, asserting that when implemented effectively, such programs lead to improved learning outcomes across all languages. Their report emphasizes that multilingual learners, through balanced instruction,

tend to develop stronger cognitive and academic skills, allowing for the convergence of literacy rates over time. Furthermore, the Center for Applied Linguistics [36] notes that multilingual learners benefit from integrated language instruction, where literacy skills are developed across multiple languages simultaneously. This supports the idea that with consistent exposure and instruction, learners can achieve proficiency in several languages. William et al. [37] found that bilingual education programs, particularly in the Philippines, significantly boost literacy development, especially when mother-tongue instruction is used in the early grades. This aligns with Abocejo [38], who confirms that the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program enhances English literacy skills in Philippine schools, suggesting that early proficiency in the mother tongue helps facilitate later language acquisition and literacy development in other languages.

These findings show a clear progression in sight word recognition, shaped by the interplay of language exposure, instructional practices, and the sociolinguistic environment. While English shows early advantages due to its institutional support, Ilokano emerges as a strong foundation language by Grade 2, likely because of its dominance in learners' everyday lives. Eventually, all three languages reach high proficiency levels by Grade 3, underscoring the potential of a well-implemented multilingual curriculum to support balanced literacy development. The study offers new insights by examining three languages simultaneously across four grade levels, a perspective that remains underrepresented in existing research. However, limitations include the regional focus and the exclusive emphasis on sight word recognition, which does not encompass other critical aspects of literacy such as comprehension or fluency. Future research should explore broader literacy dimensions and consider longitudinal designs to better understand how literacy in multiple languages evolves over time. These results highlight the importance of maintaining strong multilingual support throughout early education and tailoring instruction to the linguistic realities of learners' communities.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify the most frequently encountered sight words among multilingual learners in early education and to compare their ability to recognize these words across their first language (Ilokano), the national language (Filipino), and English. The findings revealed that learners encounter a diverse set of high-frequency sight words across all three languages, with recognition patterns shaped by language exposure, instructional support, and the sociolinguistic context in which each language is used. While recognition varied in the early grades, convergence by Grade 3 indicates that with sustained and balanced instruction, multilingual learners can achieve comparable levels of sight word recognition across languages.

Beyond addressing the study's objectives, the results suggest the development of a conceptual model of cross-linguistic scaffolding, where literacy in one language supports and enhances acquisition in others. This concept expands on existing theories of language transfer and highlights the role of instruction in facilitating these connections. In multilingual contexts such as the Philippines, where multiple languages coexist in both education and daily life, this model offers a dynamic perspective on multilingual literacy development.

The implications of these findings are both practical and significant. For educators, the results underscore the importance of creating linguistically responsive instruction that uses the learners' mother tongue as a foundation for learning Filipino and English. For policymakers, the study supports the continued implementation of mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) while emphasizing the need for balanced exposure to all three languages. Future research could build on these findings by exploring long-term effects, testing the cross-linguistic scaffolding model in other regions, or integrating digital tools to enhance sight word acquisition.

Promoting early literacy through multilingual sight word recognition not only improves reading proficiency but also strengthens learners' linguistic identities and promotes educational equity in diverse linguistic settings.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the learners, teachers, and administrators of Mariano Marcos State University Laboratory Elementary School.

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