

Language Competency in Mizo: A study of High School students in Aizawl City

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Abstract

The study seeks to assess the Mizo language competency of high school students in Aizawl city. Mizo language competency refers to the knowledge and skills an individual possesses in the Mizo language, developed through prior learning. The research sample includes 200 students from seven (7) schools, five (5) of which are government-run and two (2) are deficit-funded. Mizo Language Competency Test for High School Students developed by the researcher was administered to the students and the data was analysed by using appropriate statistical techniques. The findings reveal that out of 200 students, 44 (22%) demonstrate low level of Mizo language competency, 123 (61.5%) show average level of competency, and 33 (16.5%) exhibit high level of competency. The study also found a significant gender difference, with female students displaying higher level of language competency than male students. Additionally, students from deficit schools exhibited higher level of language competency in Mizo compared to those in government schools.

Keywords: *Mizo language competency, high school student, Aizawl city*

Introduction:

Language plays a crucial role in education, serving as the main tool in the teaching-learning process. There are many challenges that students face in their education, and language competency can be a contributing factor that determines the success and failure of a student in their academic career. The notion of language competency was first developed in the mid -1960s by Naom Chomsky, an American linguist. Chomsky identified language competency as an idealized linguistic ability to under-

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stand and comprehend words and sentences (Belletti & Rizzi, 2003). Hence, we can simply say that language competency is the knowledge and skills of a language that a student is expected to have at their level, or we can simply put it as the ability to use language effectively in terms of the four major skills (Collins dictionary). The study on Language Competency has proven to be an important tool as it sheds light on problem areas faced by students and provides comprehensive results upon which teaching module of remediation can be developed as given by Keshavarz (2008).

Mizo Language Competency

Mizo language competency refers to the knowledge and skills an individual possesses in the Mizo language, developed through prior learning. As the dominant language spoken by the Mizo people residing in Mizoram, one of the north-eastern states of India, Mizo language plays a crucial role in preserving and promoting the cultural practices and traditions unique to its speakers. The mother tongue, whether Mizo or another language, is essential in maintaining these cultural values.

For students, the Mizo language is not only a means of communication but also a key factor in their academic success, fostering a sense of unity and harmony among its speakers. Additionally, Mizo is included in the school curriculum as one of the subjects, with its primary objectives focusing on the development of essential language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Therefore, the competency level of students in Mizo language can reflect the significance placed on teaching and learning in their mother tongue, as evidenced by the knowledge and skills they acquire. Additionally, having a good competency in mother tongue builds strong foundations for a child's cognitive development, improves communication skills, and helps them create an emotional connection with their learning environment. More importantly, children who are competent in their mother language tend to perform better academically in the long run. Besides, supporting mastery of the first language also promotes the cognitive development needed to learn a second language more easily. This means learning one language well actually aids the learning of a second language—be it English or any other language (UNICEF, 2021).

Review of Related Literature

In a study conducted by Farooque (2005), the language competency in different subjects was measured and identified, and it was found that almost every teacher working at an English medium school in Kannur district was not trained and lack adequate proficiency in the English language, which significantly affect the academic performance of the students.

Aguelo (2017) conducted a study on enhancing students' language competencies through collaborative learning. The findings show that collaborative learning activities enhance the four skills of the students. The participants consider this approach motivational as they engaged and interacted with others. This indicates that students develop their language competencies as they rely on one another while engaging in meaningful language activities.

Subha et al. (2019) in their study on the English Language Competency of the First Year Tamil Medium Engineering Students found that, based on the performance of the learners in activities such as mini presentations and group discussions, activity-based teaching was deemed appropriate for the target learners. Since the learners were from Tamil medium background, they faced challenges in using the second language. The researcher found that the level of competency of the learners was not satisfactory. They designed activities based on the competency level of the learners in the entry-test. Finally, the researcher found that activity-based teaching enhanced the performance of the learners in the exit-test. The study can be applied to improve the English language skills of students from other regional language backgrounds.

Siarni and Chuaungo (2021) conducted a study on English Language Competency among Model English School Students in Aizawl City to assess the English language competency of class VII students of in Model English medium schools in Aizawl and to compare their English language competency in relation to their gender. The English language competency test, constructed by the investigators, was administered to 83 students. The statistical analysis revealed that 57% of class VII students showed unsatisfactory results in English language competency, 23% possessed an average level and only 6% showed a satisfactory level of English language competency.

Ramhlupuii et al. (2023) in their study on proficiency in Mizo language among higher secondary students in Aizawl found that most students demonstrated an average level of competency in the Mizo language. Moreover, the research revealed no significant difference in Mizo language proficiency with respect to gender. It was also discovered that students attending government schools had a higher level of proficiency in the Mizo language compared to their counterparts in private schools. In addition, it was also observed that students from science stream had a higher competency in Mizo language than students from arts and commerce streams.

Rationale of the Study

One of the primary reasons for teaching the mother tongue, or first language, as a school subject is to equip learners with proficiency and competency in their native language. This involves expanding their vocabulary and developing the four foun-

dational language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Mastery of these skills goes beyond mere fluency or correct usage; it also includes the ability to engage in eloquent communication and convey thoughts with clarity and precision. Children need to learn not only how to speak, write, and read, but also when and why to use language meaningfully. This includes developing the capacity to listen actively and appreciate others' perspectives.

As Michael Halliday (1975) observed, language is acquired through social interaction that children either observe or take part in. Cognitive development, which allows children to explore and make sense of their surroundings, is closely linked to language acquisition and communication skills as they interact with others. The importance of teaching the first language, even at the secondary school level, should not be overlooked; the development of skills in the mother tongue significantly influences students' cognitive, personal, social, and cultural identity. A strong foundation in their native language enhances students' ability to express themselves effectively, which in turn supports their academic success and achievement.

However, many students, even in secondary school, struggle to fully understand and articulate their ideas in their native language. This difficulty can hinder their academic performance in their first language and beyond. Furthermore, a review of existing literature reveals a gap in research regarding first-language competency among high school students, particularly in the Mizo language, and it would not be wrong to say that no study on language competency has been conducted done among high school students even though it which is a very important stage of schooling for learning their mother tongue. Recognizing this gap, the researcher has identified a need to assess Mizo language competency among high school students, with the following objectives:

Objectives of the Study

1. To find out the level of Mizo language competency of high school students in Aizawl city.
2. To compare Mizo language competency of high school students in Aizawl city with respect to gender.
3. To compare Mizo language competency of high school students in Aizawl city with respect to type of school management.

Null Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference in Mizo language competency of high school male and female students in Aizawl city.

2. There is no significant difference in Mizo language competency of Deficit and Government high school students in Aizawl city.

Methodology

Research method

The study is basically a descriptive survey method as it tries to find out the Mizo language competency among high school students in Aizawl city.

Population and Sample

The target population includes all the high school students enrolled in purely government and deficit schools in Aizawl city. Sample for the study consists of 200 high school students randomly selected from seven (7) schools in Aizawl city out of which five (5) schools are purely government and two (2) schools are deficit. Out of the 200 samples, there were 96 males and 104 female students.

Table-1.
Sample Distribution

Type of School	Male	Female
Government	56	64
Deficit	40	40
Total	96	104

Tools Used

“Mizo Language Competency Test for High School Students’ developed by the researcher was used for the present study. After standardizing the test, it was administered to high school students. Their scores were analysed, and the mean score was calculated to be 33.67, with a standard deviation of 6.92. Based on these results, students were grouped into three levels of competency.

Students who scored more than one standard deviation above the mean were classified as having a high level of Mizo language competency, labelled as “high competency.” Those who scored less than one standard deviation below the mean were classified as having a low level of Mizo language competency, labelled as “low competency.” Students whose scores fell within one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean were categorized as having an average level of Mizo language competency, labelled as “average competency.”

Procedure of Data Collection

The researcher sought permission from principals and headmasters of the selected schools, explaining the importance of the study being conducted. After, taking permission from the authority, the researcher then collected data from the students with an assurance that their responses would be strictly kept confidential and will be used solely for the research purpose.

Statistical Techniques Used

To analyse the data, the researcher employed various statistical methods such as percentage, mean, standard deviation and t-test.

Analysis and Interpretation

The data were analysed based on the objectives and are presented as follows:

Objective No.1: To find out the level of Mizo language competency of high school students in Aizawl city.

High school students were classified into three groups based on their level of competency in Mizo language and they are shown in the following table -2

Table-2
Level of Mizo Language Competency of High School Students in Aizawl City

Level of Competency	Number	Percentage
High competency	33	16.5%
Average competency	123	61.5%
Low competency	44	22%

The above Table 2 shows that out of 200 high school students, only 33 (16.5%) possess a high level of competency in the Mizo language. The majority of the students i.e. 123 (61.5%) demonstrate an average level of competency, while 44 (22%) students exhibit a low level of competency in the Mizo language.

Objective No.2: To compare Mizo language competency of high school students in Aizawl city with respect to gender.

The mean and standard deviation of the scores of male and female students were calculated in order to compare the level of Mizo language competency. The mean differences of these two groups were tested by applying t-test and the details are presented in the following table no 3.

Table-3
Comparison of Mizo Language Competency of High School Male and Female Students in Aizawl City

Gender	Number	Mean	SD	SED	t-value	Sig level
Male	96	31.76	7.27	0.94	3.90	0.01
Female	104	35.43	6.09			

As per table No-3, the mean score of high school male students is 31.76 and standard deviation is 7.27 respectively. Whereas, the mean score and standard deviation of high school female students is 35.43 and 6.09 respectively. The SED shown in the table is 0.94 with degrees of freedom 198, and the calculated value of “t” is 3.90.

Since the calculated “t” value is 3.90 which is greater than the critical “t” value at 0.01 level of confidence, the null hypothesis, “There is no significant difference in Mizo language competency between high school male and female students in Aizawl city” is rejected since the two groups differed significantly at 0.01 level of confidence. A comparison of their mean score shows that the mean score of female students is higher than the mean score of male students which indicates that female students have higher level of Mizo language competency.

Objective No-3. To compare Mizo language competency of high school students in Aizawl city with respect to type of school management.

The mean and standard deviation of the scores of deficit and government students were calculated in order to compare the level of Mizo language competency. The mean differences of these two groups were tested by applying t-test and the details are presented in the following table no 4.

Table-4
Comparison of Mizo Language Competency of Deficit School and Government School Students in Aizawl City

Type of school management	Number	Mean	SD	SED	t-value	Sig level
Deficit	80	35.16	6.19	0.94	4	0.01
Government	120	32.16	6.99			

A review of Table No-4 reveals that the mean score for students in deficit schools is 35.16, with a standard deviation of 6.19, while the mean score and standard deviation for students in government schools are 32.16 and 6.99, respectively. The standard error of the difference (SED) reported in the table is 0.94, with 198 degrees of freedom, and the calculated t-value is 4.

Since the calculated t-value of 4 exceeds the critical t-value at the 0.01 level of confidence, the null hypothesis stating that “There is no significant difference in Mizo language competency between Deficit and Government high school students in Aizawl city” is rejected. This indicates there existed a statistically significant difference between the two groups at the 0.01 level of confidence. A comparison of the mean scores shows that deficit school students have a higher mean score than government school students, suggesting that deficit school students possess a higher level of Mizo language competency.

Major findings and discussion:

1. From the overall findings, 33 (16.5%) demonstrate a high level of competency in the Mizo language, 123 (61.5%) possess an average level of Mizo language competency and, 44 (22%) students exhibit a low level of competency in the Mizo language.

Discussion: It was observed that the majority of students exhibit an average level of Mizo language competency, with only a few demonstrating a high level of proficiency in their mother tongue, Mizo. This finding is somewhat satisfactory, as most students fall within the average range, however; it is a notion that students would be more competent in their first language and perform well in the way they are expected to achieve at their current level. The underlying causes of this outcome are not entirely clear, but it may be influenced by the teaching styles and methods employed by the teachers, the allocation of time for Mizo subject in the time table wherein it is the only subject where they can learn and develop language skills and knowledge in their own mother tongue as the medium of instruction in high school are mainly English, and it can also be the students’ own learning styles and attitude towards Mizo language where most of the adolescent these days admire English which led to the negligence of their mother tongue.

Additionally, family dynamics could be a contributing factor. Many parents today are increasingly influenced by the second language, resulting in a greater use of the second language at home. This shift may lead to a decreased emphasis on using the mother tongue, which could in turn affect students’ Mizo language competency.

2. The female students are having significantly higher level of Mizo language competency than the male students.

Discussion: A plausible reason for this observation could be due to biological differences in boys and girls where girls tend to acquire languages earlier and easier than their counterparts. Furthermore, cultural norms frequently urge girls to be more communicative, emotionally expressive, and relational, fostering a favourable setting

for language development. The school context may also play a role; in classroom environments, girls are more collaborative and actively participate in discussions and question-and-answer sessions, which can further enhance their language skills.

3. Students from deficit schools possess higher level of Mizo language competency than government school students.

Discussion: Deficit schools in Mizoram are primarily managed by various religious denominations, where the administration and organization of these institutions are often conducted in a disciplined manner. The main reason behind this finding could be due to the teaching methods and techniques employed by the teachers from deficit schools. It is believed that teachers in government and deficit schools are qualified trained teacher who will clearly know the aims and objectives of teaching mother tongue or Mizo subject. Consequently, the emphasis on practical teaching strategies in the said subject, which allow more room for the students' participation likely fosters the development of students' four language skills. However, the limited application of theoretical frameworks in curriculum transaction, with a predominant focus on content explanation rather than language skill development may hinder the competency levels of student in the Mizo language. This approach could contribute to the relatively lower language competency observed among students in government schools.

Suggestions and recommendations:

1. It is suggested that training of teachers taking Mizo subject should be organized wherein the aims and objectives of teaching the subject, methods and different techniques applicable such as debate, discussion, quiz, role play etc. in the classroom setting may be re-highlighted.
2. It is recommended that MBSE as well as concerned committees may revise the existing syllabus as well as the textbooks for Mizo subject to give more emphasis on the development of the four language skills through the content and exercises in the textbook.
3. Awareness on the importance of mother tongue and the correct use of Mizo language could be given to the community.
4. Organizing language workshop by inviting resource persons and experts in Mizo language is suggested to every school so that both the teachers and students will be benefited and will foster their language competency.
5. Debate, article, essay, or any writing competition can be organized on a selected topic in the school level or inter-school level with a good prize for promoting and enhancing the Mizo language.

6. Students should be encouraged to read, listen and watch the programmes organized in Mizo language in television, newspaper, and through social media which will enhance them to have a better competency.
7. Mizo Language Club can be established in every school so as to take necessary measures for the promotion and preservation of Mizo language.
8. It is suggested to every schools that enough time should be kept for Mizo subject in the school time table. Moreover, it is also recommended to provide library period twice a month for Mizo section and that, the students can be asked to write down the salient features or the main idea on what they have read in Mizo language. This technique will surely level up the Mizo language competency of students.

Conclusion:

Based on the findings, the suggestions and recommendations provided are believed to be both applicable and practicable for all stakeholders involved in the development and preservation of the Mizo language. The Mizo language serves as the primary cultural identity for native speakers residing in Mizoram, and no one else will safeguard it on our behalf. Therefore, it is imperative that we take immediate action and contribute in any way possible to promote and sustain our language.

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