

Multi-Sensory Approaches to Foundational Literacy: A Phenomenological Study of Language Learning Among Underprivileged Learners

Ayush Soni^{1*}, Dr. Ritu Tripathi Chakravarty²

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of sensory-motor activities in enhancing foundational literacy and cognitive engagement among early-grade learners from marginalized communities through a qualitative, phenomenological lens. The researcher designed and implemented a series of structured interventions focusing on experiential, multi-sensory learning to address gaps in attention, language acquisition, motor development, and classroom participation. Activities ranged from air writing, finger tracing, phonics drills, and storytelling to concept-based drawing, vocabulary games, and real-world exposure exercises. The purpose was to examine how tactile and kinesthetic engagement contributes to more meaningful understanding and retention of academic content, especially in resource-constrained educational environments. Data were collected through session documentation, observational field notes, student response analysis, and feedback from peer facilitators. Triangulation was used as the primary method of data interpretation to ensure depth, validity, and multi-perspective insights. The results indicated a measurable increase in student attentiveness, language comprehension, memory recall, and interactive participation. Additionally, the study highlighted broader developmental gains such as improved self-expression, confidence, and curiosity among learners. The researcher also observed personal professional growth in terms of instructional adaptability, reflective practice, and effective communication with stakeholders. The findings underscore the significance of integrating sensory-based strategies into foundational learning models and suggest their potential to bridge developmental disparities in underprivileged settings. This research contributes to the growing discourse on inclusive pedagogy and calls for more teacher-preparation programs to embed sensory-motor pedagogies as standard practice. It advocates for sustainable, context-sensitive educational frameworks that are both child-centric and grounded in active learning methodologies.

Keywords: *Sensory-Motor Learning, Foundational Literacy, Experiential Education, Marginalized Communities, Qualitative Phenomenological Research*

Foundational literacy serves as the cornerstone of all future learning. It is not limited to the ability to read and write but extends to how children engage with language, decode meaning, and interact with their surroundings. In the formative years, especially at the

¹Student, AIE, Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus.

²Associate Professor, AIE, Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus.

*Corresponding Author

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elementary level, children's brains are highly responsive to experiential and sensory input. Traditional teaching methods often rely heavily on verbal instruction and rote memorization, which may fail to support all learning styles particularly among learners from marginalized or underserved communities. These students often face additional cognitive and environmental challenges that hinder their academic engagement and progress. As a result, there is a need to design pedagogical approaches that are developmentally responsive, inclusive, and tailored to the diverse needs of early learners.

One such approach gaining increasing relevance is sensory-motor learning, a method that combines physical movement and sensory engagement with cognitive instruction. By integrating activities like finger tracing, back writing, air drawing, and movement-based vocabulary games, children are given the opportunity to interact with language in a multi-dimensional way. Sensory-motor activities stimulate multiple areas of the brain, aiding memory retention, comprehension, and attention span. For children in resource-constrained environments, these strategies are particularly valuable as they do not require expensive materials but rely on creativity, interaction, and presence.

The rationale for exploring sensory-motor learning in this study is grounded in the observation that foundational concepts are better internalized when learners can physically enact or visually trace their learning. Children who may struggle with conventional modes of instruction often show renewed interest and motivation when learning becomes playful, tangible, and movement-driven. Sensory engagement also helps build fine motor skills, spatial awareness, and emotional regulation all of which are critical in early childhood education. The interactive nature of these activities creates an inclusive classroom environment, reducing the pressure of performance and encouraging collaborative learning.

This research, rooted in qualitative inquiry with a phenomenological lens, investigates the lived classroom experiences of students exposed to sensory-motor-based foundational literacy activities. Instead of relying on numerical test scores, the study focuses on reflective sessional documentation, observational analysis, and interpretative triangulation to understand the deeper impact of such approaches. The aim is to highlight not just cognitive gains, but the emotional, behavioral, and social dimensions of learning outcomes through these activities. Over a structured eight-week period, the study captures a transformative shift in student engagement and participation within a low-resource educational context.

In doing so, the paper positions sensory-motor learning not as an alternative, but as an essential complement to foundational literacy development. It challenges rigid, one-size-fits-all teaching models and proposes a more empathetic, movement-rich, and sensory-responsive pedagogy. The findings intend to serve as an advocacy tool for curriculum designers, educators, and policy-makers working to create more inclusive and child-centered educational spaces.

Rationale of the Study

Foundational literacy is not merely about teaching letters and sounds; it is about nurturing a child's ability to make sense of the world through language. In many classrooms, especially those serving underprivileged or marginalized groups, literacy instruction often becomes mechanical, repetitive, and disengaging. The researcher, during field engagement and internship, observed how young learners responded differently to traditional versus sensory-integrated approaches. Many children in early grades displayed signs of restlessness,

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inattentiveness, or disinterest when confined to textbook-based teaching. However, when given the opportunity to move, interact, or use their senses through activities like finger painting, back writing, or storytelling, these same children exhibited focus, excitement, and genuine curiosity. This shift in behavior and attitude became the primary motivation for exploring how sensory-motor activities could be a meaningful bridge to foundational literacy learning.

This study is rooted in the need to make learning more inclusive, joyful, and developmentally appropriate. In resource-constrained settings, where access to advanced digital tools or expensive learning materials is limited, low-cost sensory-motor strategies become not just alternatives but powerful tools. The researcher chose to document and reflect upon this approach through a phenomenological lens, capturing real classroom interactions and children's lived experiences. This research seeks to advocate for a literacy pedagogy that values movement, creativity, and expression honoring how children naturally learn. By foregrounding the effectiveness of such practices, the study aspires to support teachers, policymakers, and curriculum designers in reimagining foundational education as something that touches both the mind and the body.

Significance of the Study

This research holds considerable significance in the realm of foundational literacy development, especially within marginalized and under-resourced educational contexts. It seeks to address the critical need for sensory-motor-based pedagogical interventions in early language learning. By engaging children through interactive activities like air writing, finger tracing, word games, and storytelling, the study emphasizes that foundational literacy must move beyond conventional rote methods to become a more experiential, engaging, and child-centered process. The research affirms that language acquisition in early childhood is deeply connected with physical, emotional, and cognitive interaction especially in environments where traditional teaching methods dominate.

The practical and theoretical relevance of this study is supported by recent educational literature. Twomey (2018) observed that multi-sensory teaching approaches significantly enhance alphabetic knowledge, phonemic awareness, and recall among early-grade learners when compared to standard textbook-led instruction. In a similar study, Rani (2021) explored foundational literacy practices in government schools and found that integrating motor-based activities led to improved classroom engagement and better decoding skills among Class 1 students. The evidence gathered by Sharma (2020) in her qualitative research on experiential learning in Indian classrooms further supports the assertion that early learners exhibit greater participation and concept retention when allowed to “do, feel, and reflect” within flexible learning environments.

This study is also pedagogically significant for educators, pre-service teachers, and curriculum planners. It highlights a set of low-cost, replicable classroom strategies that can be scaled across various contexts without the need for sophisticated infrastructure. The findings resonate with the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020), which advocates foundational literacy and numeracy as an urgent and non-negotiable priority. Thus, this research is not only a contribution to academic inquiry but also an applied intervention that enhances inclusive education practices, promotes student agency, and supports evidence-informed teaching approaches that are responsive to learners' developmental needs.

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Objectives of the Study

- To explore the effectiveness of sensory–motor-based activities in strengthening foundational language skills among early-grade learners.
- To identify the types of interactive and experiential activities that contribute to improved vocabulary retention, phonemic awareness, and written expression.
- To examine the impact of multi-sensory teaching strategies such as air writing, back tracing, finger painting, and storytelling on student engagement and participation in language learning.
- To document the pedagogical value of low-resource, activity-based interventions in classrooms serving children from marginalized communities.
- To assess how such experiential activities influence attention span, classroom interest, and long-term comprehension in early literacy development.
- To provide practical recommendations for pre-service teachers and educators to adopt inclusive, child-centric literacy practices grounded in qualitative observations.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Foundational literacy in early education has drawn considerable academic attention in recent years, particularly within the context of low-resource and marginalized communities. The role of sensory–motor integration in enhancing early cognitive and language skills has been emphasized across educational neuroscience and pedagogical studies. Bhargava (2019) observed that incorporating tactile and kinesthetic strategies like sand tracing and air writing significantly improved letter recognition and phoneme blending skills among children aged 5 to 7 years. Similarly, Nair and Joseph (2020) reported enhanced vocabulary retention among primary students engaged in finger painting and visual storytelling exercises in Kerala government schools.

In the Indian context, the foundational literacy gap persists among early-grade learners, especially in underprivileged areas. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2022) pointed out that over 40% of Class 3 students in rural India struggle to read basic text, suggesting a dire need for innovative, child-friendly methodologies. Gupta and Menon (2021) conducted an intervention-based study in Uttar Pradesh that found activity-based language sessions such as storytelling with visual aids and action rhymes resulted in improved reading fluency and classroom engagement.

Internationally, the benefits of multi-sensory approaches have been explored through various frameworks. Hall and Case-Smith (2007) demonstrated how sensory-based classroom modifications positively influenced attention and literacy in early learners. Meanwhile, Piaget’s theory of cognitive development continues to influence how educators perceive the role of sensorimotor experiences in cognitive schema formation during early childhood (Fisher, 2016). A cross-cultural study by Singh and Nambiar (2021) compared sensory-motor strategies in Malaysian and Indian schools, noting that students exposed to experiential learning techniques demonstrated higher comprehension scores and better classroom behavior.

The importance of qualitative, experiential learning models has also been emphasized by UNESCO (2020), which advocates for inclusive education that adapts to a child’s developmental stage and cultural context. Overall, the literature reflects a growing consensus that activity-based, multi-sensory instructional methods are not merely supplementary but

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essential for foundational learning, particularly in linguistically and socioeconomically diverse environments.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a **qualitative research design** within a **phenomenological framework** to explore how sensory–motor-based learning activities impact early language development among children from marginalized communities. The phenomenological approach allows the researcher to understand the lived experiences and behavioral shifts of learners as they engage with multi-sensory instructional strategies. The focus is not on numerical data but on the depth, richness, and meaning of the children’s responses during the intervention.

Setting and Participants

The research was conducted over **eight weeks** in an educational support center serving underprivileged children aged 6–10 years, enrolled in Classes Nursery to 5. The setting provided a real-world context where foundational literacy challenges are common due to limited access to quality early education. A cohort of 25–30 students participated in both guided instructional sessions and activity-based learning under the researcher’s facilitation.

Table 1: Theoretical Teaching Sessions

SN	Topic	Description	Duration
1	Hindi Alphabets	Introduction and recognition of vowels and consonants	45 mins/session
2	Vocabulary Building	Word enrichment via daily oral vocabulary routines	30 mins daily
3	Sentence Framing	Word arrangement and sentence construction exercises	45 mins/session
4	Phonetics Awareness	Sound-letter association through rhyme and rhythm	40 mins/session
5	Reading and Pronunciation	Guided group reading with articulation correction	45 mins/session
6	Game-Based Revision	Bingo and flashcard games for reinforcement	1 hour/week

Table 2: Activity-Based Sensory–Motor Learning Sessions

SN	Activity Name	Brief Description	Materials Used
1	Air Writing	Finger movements in air to form letters visually and kinesthetically	None
2	Finger Painting Letters	Painting letters to improve memory through tactile and visual input	Chart paper, paint
3	Back Writing	Tracing letters on each other’s backs to boost sensory recall	None
4	Alphabet Bingo	Sound-letter matching through a game format	Bingo sheets, counters
5	Rhymes with Actions	Singing and acting out rhymes for auditory-motor coordination	Rhyme printouts, speakers
6	Pass the Word	Vocabulary relay to build recall speed and oral fluency	Word flashcards

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SN	Activity Name	Brief Description	Materials Used
7	Storytelling with Puppets	Narration using visual props for imagination and language flow	Puppets, short stories
8	Picture Reading	Describing images to build language and interpretation	Flashcards, charts
9	Role Play	Enacting real-life scenarios to develop communication	Basic props
10	Drawing & Labeling	Associating visuals with words through drawing tasks	Drawing sheets, crayons
11	Reading Circle	Rotational group reading to build confidence and fluency	Books, printed material
12	Traffic Rules Walk	Outdoor activity to explain traffic signals and signs	Observation forms

Data Collection Tools: Data was gathered through:

- Observation logs and reflective notes
- Samples of student work
- Feedback from teachers and peers
- Activity photographs and progress charts

These multi-source inputs helped to validate emerging insights and track progress effectively.

Data Analysis: The study uses **data triangulation** to analyze the impact of each activity. Thematic patterns were drawn from various sources to ensure authenticity and reliability. Insights were developed by cross-verifying observational notes with actual student responses and recorded artifacts.

INTERPRETATION THROUGH TRIANGULATION

Evidence revealed that sensory–motor interventions produced tangible outcomes. Students initially hesitant in participation showed increased involvement and clarity in letter recognition after activities like air writing and finger painting. Vocabulary relay games significantly enhanced word retrieval and fluency. Rhyming with actions improved pronunciation and listening. Visual documentation, written outputs, and oral performance confirmed improved learning consistency across sessions.

Cross-verifying teacher input, classroom evidence, and student reflections showed:

- Growth in foundational vocabulary and sentence construction.
- Improved confidence in public speaking and expression.
- Increased attention span and willingness to participate in structured group tasks.

This convergence of insights affirms that multi-sensory pedagogy enhances not just literacy, but overall language engagement in early learners.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

In alignment with the qualitative and phenomenological nature of this study, data analysis was conducted using a triangulation method to ensure accuracy, credibility, and depth. The data was collected from three primary sources: (1) direct classroom observations, (2) feedback from student interactions during activity-based sessions, and (3) reflective journals maintained throughout the internship period. These multiple data points enabled a

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comprehensive understanding of how sensory-motor learning strategies influenced foundational literacy development among early-grade learners.

The triangulation method facilitated the cross-verification of findings and allowed the researcher to identify recurring patterns, behavioral responses, and learning outcomes. Observations revealed that when students engaged in sensory-rich activities such as air writing, sand tracing, finger painting, and back writing their ability to recall letters, associate sounds, and recognize patterns improved significantly. These insights were reinforced by student responses, where learners showed increased enthusiasm, confidence, and retention when taught through hands-on, interactive experiences.

Furthermore, the reflective journal notes indicated a clear shift in classroom dynamics, where learners who previously displayed hesitation or disinterest began actively participating. Students with differing learning speeds were seen progressing with improved focus when tactile and kinesthetic methods were employed. Each activity not only aligned with the cognitive level of learners but also addressed their sensory preferences, making the learning experience more inclusive and impactful.

The interpretation of data highlighted that integrating sensory-motor activities into foundational learning can bridge attention gaps, enhance memory retention, and foster student engagement. This supports the research objective that sensory-motor strategies positively affect early literacy skills. The findings also validate the theoretical framework that multisensory input strengthens neurological pathways involved in early reading and writing development.

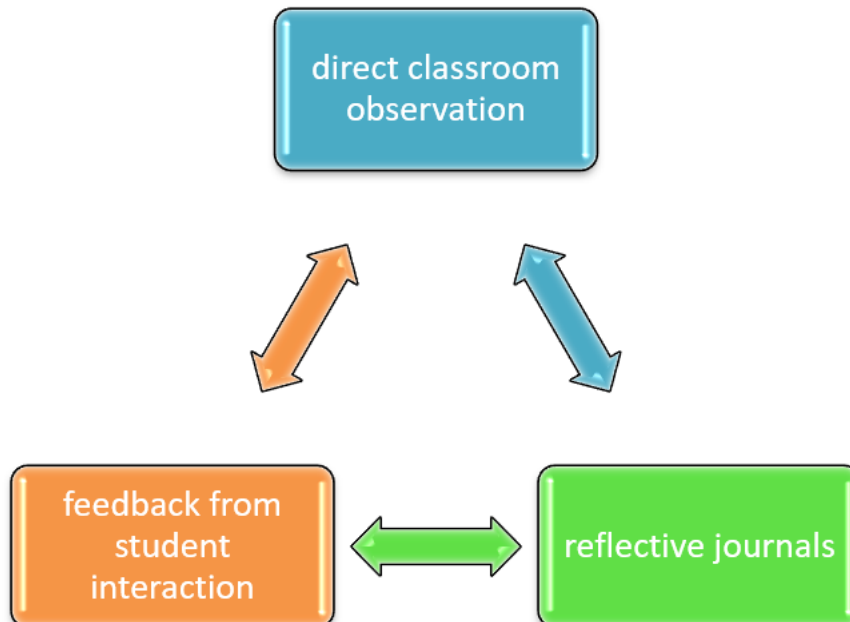


Figure 1: Triangulation Framework showing the interconnection between direct classroom observation, student interaction feedback, and reflective journaling as primary data sources.

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The findings of this study revealed that sensory-motor-based activities significantly enhanced students' engagement, attention span, and foundational learning outcomes in early-grade

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classrooms. Activities such as Air Writing, Finger Painting Letters, Back Writing, and Pass the Word allowed children to associate physical movement with cognitive processing. Through direct classroom observation, it became evident that learners began recognizing letters and sounds more quickly and retained information for longer periods. These physical activities supported multisensory engagement, catering to different learning styles and enabling children to move from passive reception to active participation in the learning process.

The study also found that language development improved notably when interactive and movement-based games were embedded into daily instruction. Daily Oral Vocabulary, Storytelling Sessions, and Interactive Rhymes with Actions contributed to better pronunciation, vocabulary recall, and sentence formation. Students who initially showed reluctance began participating more confidently during oral sessions. Feedback gathered through student interactions confirmed that many children related the words to real-life objects or actions, improving contextual understanding. This behavioral shift was particularly noticeable among students with minimal exposure to structured learning environments prior to joining the NGO.

Another significant finding was the positive impact of these activities on social and emotional development. Students displayed increased cooperation, peer bonding, and confidence through group-based tasks like Role Plays, Drawing Competitions, and Classroom Games. Reflective journaling by the researcher indicated that shy and withdrawn students gradually began volunteering, asking questions, and initiating interactions. The safe and stimulating environment created through sensory-based tasks allowed children to express themselves more freely and develop a sense of belonging within the classroom space an essential factor in inclusive education.

Overall, the triangulation of data from classroom observation, student feedback, and reflective notes clearly illustrated that sensory-motor-based activities are not merely enriching but essential for building strong educational foundations. These methods helped in creating a deeper connection between the learner and the content, leading to more meaningful learning. The holistic growth - cognitive, linguistic, emotional, and interpersonal demonstrated that when foundational education is aligned with how children naturally learn through movement and play, it leads to authentic, long-lasting outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This research highlights the undeniable impact of integrating sensory-motor-based activities into foundational classroom instruction, particularly when working with children from underserved and marginalized communities. Through a phenomenological lens, the study explored how movement-based, interactive, and tactile learning strategies supported early literacy, language development, and cognitive engagement. The findings underscore that when learning is aligned with the natural sensory pathways of young learners, it fosters deeper understanding, better retention, and more joyful participation.

The success of this approach lies in its ability to bridge the gap between abstract academic content and the concrete learning needs of children. The physical involvement of learners through structured play, rhythm, and hands-on experiences helped internalize concepts that are often difficult to grasp through conventional methods. The activities used in the study did not require advanced technology or high-cost materials, proving that meaningful education can be both resource-conscious and effective when driven by thoughtful pedagogy.

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This study affirms the importance of designing inclusive and developmentally appropriate learning environments. By acknowledging the diverse learning styles and sensory needs of students, educators can shift from passive to active teaching models. The results advocate for a reimagining of classroom practices one where foundational education is not limited to rote instruction, but enriched through motion, play, interaction, and joy. As classroom learning continues to evolve, this research offers a compelling case for the broader adoption of sensory-motor-based pedagogies in early childhood and primary education.

Educational Implications

The findings of this research carry significant implications for early childhood and elementary education, especially in contexts where learners come from diverse socio-economic and developmental backgrounds. Integrating sensory-motor-based activities into foundational teaching can bridge critical gaps in attention, comprehension, and engagement. This study demonstrates that learning, when made experiential and movement-oriented, helps students better internalize concepts that are often abstract or disconnected from their lived realities. It emphasizes that education must cater to the body and mind simultaneously, especially during formative years.

For educators, this approach encourages the design of lesson plans that integrate physical movement, multi-sensory input, and playful interaction into the daily learning process. Teachers are not merely transmitters of content but facilitators of experience-based knowledge construction. As seen in the sessions conducted during this study, even simple strategies like air writing, back tracing, and hand-eye coordination games significantly enhanced language retention and phonemic awareness among young children. These approaches should not be seen as add-ons, but rather as core strategies for inclusive and responsive teaching.

At the institutional level, teacher training programs should incorporate modules on sensory-motor integration and child-centered pedagogy. This would equip future educators with practical tools to address diverse classroom needs. Furthermore, curriculum developers should consider embedding such activities within textbook structures and teaching guidelines, making them accessible even in resource-constrained schools.

Lastly, educational policymakers and school administrators must acknowledge the developmental importance of movement, play, and multisensory engagement. When implemented at scale, such methodologies can foster equitable learning outcomes, reduce early academic stress, and promote a lifelong love for learning. This research, therefore, contributes meaningfully to the ongoing dialogue around experiential learning and offers a sustainable model for effective foundational education, especially in underserved communities.

Educational Implications and Recommendations

The present study reveals the significant impact of sensory-motor activities on foundational learning, especially among children from underserved communities. Engaging students through multisensory strategies such as air writing, object-based storytelling, finger tracing, and movement games enhanced their comprehension, vocabulary, attention span, and classroom participation. These methods address the cognitive diversity of learners and foster deeper connections with the curriculum, proving essential in early childhood education.

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Educators must now rethink conventional teaching approaches. Instead of relying solely on rote memorization and textbook-based learning, classrooms should be spaces of exploration where learning is hands-on and inclusive. The use of simple, low-cost, and locally available materials can make sensory learning both feasible and effective, especially in resource-limited settings. The positive student responses observed during the intervention highlight the need to institutionalize such practices across foundational grades.

It is recommended that teacher training institutions incorporate sensory-based instructional design in their coursework. Schools should also organize workshops to equip educators with practical tools and strategies for implementing multisensory learning. Policymakers must recognize the value of integrating sensory-motor techniques into the formal curriculum, ensuring that these practices are not just add-ons but core components of early education frameworks.

Finally, long-term success depends on continuous assessment, teacher reflection, and community engagement. Regular feedback from students, educators, and parents can guide improvements and adaptation. By making sensory-motor learning a norm rather than an exception, education systems can bridge learning gaps, foster inclusivity, and promote holistic development in young learners.

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Conflict of Interest

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