

Early Literacy Strategies in the Initial Training of Future Teachers: Didactic Explorations and Pedagogical Reflections

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Abstract

Keywords:

early literacy; emergent literacy;
initial teacher training;
pedagogical reflection; teaching
scenarios.

This article explores the importance of integrating early literacy strategies into the initial teacher education curriculum for preschool and primary education. In an educational context marked by the need to develop linguistic competencies from the earliest years of life, the research proposes an analysis of the teaching practices used in student training, with a focus on interactive, interdisciplinary, and child-centered methods. The study includes pedagogical reflections on the effectiveness of these strategies, as well as suggestions for improving university programs to support early functional literacy. Concrete examples of activities, teaching scenarios, and future educators' perspectives are presented, accompanied by proposals for curricular adaptation and formative assessment. The conclusions highlight the necessity of a systemic and reflective approach in initial professional training that equips teachers with relevant tools to support literacy development in early childhood.

1. Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Recent international assessments (PISA) highlight low performance levels among Romanian students in the domain of functional literacy, deepening educational inequalities between urban and rural environments—especially for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. In this context, early literacy becomes a strategic priority in the initial training of future teachers. According to *PISA 2022 Results – Volume I*, Romania recorded a significant decline in reading performance between 2018 and 2022, both in overall average scores and in the distribution across proficiency levels. The percentage of students performing below the minimum competency level (Level 2) increased, while the proportion of high-performing students (Levels 5 and 6) decreased (OECD, 2023). These results underscore the urgent need for systematic intervention within initial teacher education to support functional literacy from the earliest stages of childhood.

Early development of linguistic and literacy competencies is grounded in vocabulary enrichment, phonological awareness, and children's familiarity with the alphabet (Foulin, 2005). Longitudinal studies have demonstrated the positive impact of these interventions on later academic outcomes (Mol & Bus, 2011), as well as the connection between language development and both academic and socio-emotional progress (Dickinson & Porche, 2011). Therefore,

high-quality early interventions, conducted through playful activities such as reading, games, and sustained conversations, significantly contribute to the development of emergent literacy (Aram & Bar-Am, 2016; Clipa, coord., 2023; Demir-Lira et al., 2019; Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Foulin, 2005; Mol & Bus, 2011).

In the Romanian context, studies emphasize the importance of the initial training of early childhood education teachers (Clipa, 2023). It is necessary to prepare them not only theoretically, but also practically, through the integration of pedagogical reflection and early intervention strategies (pp. 22–23). Furthermore, the use of educational technologies, such as digital applications and interactive materials, has been shown to significantly support the development of language and literacy at early ages (Aram & Bar-Am, 2016; Demir-Lira et al., 2019). Research in the field of educational sciences highlights the importance of integrated strategies for teaching reading. For example, studies conducted by Duke and Pearson (2002) have shown the effectiveness of combining active reading strategies with the development of prior knowledge in order to increase students' reading comprehension. Other research (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) has shown that metacognitive instruction, which helps students become aware of their own cognitive processes during



reading, can contribute to improving school performance.

2. Methodology

The research has a qualitative, exploratory character and was carried out during the sixth semester of the 2023–2024 academic year, within the optional course *Early Literacy Strategies*, held at Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca.

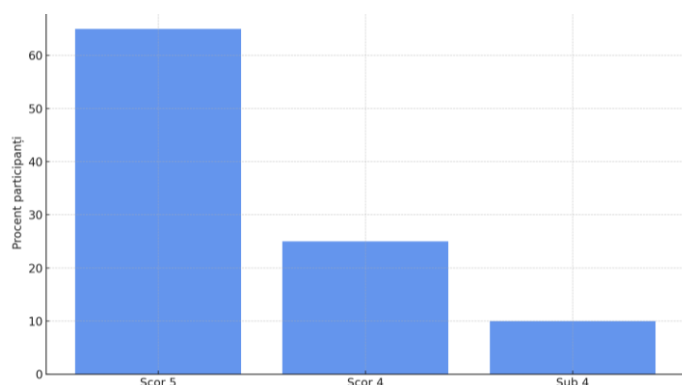
The participants in this study were students who chose to attend this optional course. They were familiarized with the theoretical foundations of literacy through guided reading and analysis of relevant texts from the specialized literature, such as articles authored by Temple et al. (2002), which provided a scientific perspective on the teaching of reading and writing and on the importance of early educational intervention. Based on these references, the students explored resources available on the *Toți copiii citesc* ("All Children Read") platform and engaged with examples provided by the *Școli cu scLipici* ("Schools with Sparkle") program, identifying digital tools and interactive materials tailored to the preschool and primary education levels.

3. Initial Stage – Diagnostic Assessment

At the beginning of the semester, the students completed a diagnostic evaluation questionnaire, developed based on the course objectives and the specialized literature. The assessment focused on their understanding of literacy and early reading instruction, the role of the educator, knowledge of PISA assessments, and interactive teaching methods.

Figure 1

Initial Stage: Diagnostic Assessment



Additionally, the students solved a literacy test designed for 8th-grade students, freely available on the BRIO platform. The purpose of the activity was to familiarize the participants with the structure of a standardized assessment focused on the development of reading comprehension skills, rather than to

evaluate their academic performance. The test generated an individual report, with scores ranging from 60 to 100 points. Lower scores (60–70) were interpreted in students' written reflections as resulting from superficiality, haste, or lack of attention. This experience served as a valuable starting point for discussions on assessment, learning, functional literacy, and professional responsibility.

The graph reflects students' strong appreciation of early literacy: 65% gave the maximum score (5), while 25% rated it as 4. This attitude confirms a general interest and openness to learning, even though conceptual understanding was only partial.

The chart includes responses regarding the importance of literacy, self-assessment of learning progress, and the methods applied. A high theoretical appreciation is noted (90% scored 4–5), but with gaps in methodological diversity (the analytic-synthetic phonetic method and other traditional approaches remain dominant). The average accuracy rate of responses was 72% for understanding the concept of literacy, 65% for differentiating literacy from alphabetization, and 60% for emergent literacy. A clear understanding of the educator's role was demonstrated by 85% of participants, and 90% expressed openness toward the topic. Knowledge of PISA and educational equity was moderate (50–68%).

4. Formative Activities

The formative approach took place in an applied and reflective framework, aiming to foster a deep, coherent, and responsible understanding of early literacy among students during the sixth semester of the 2023–2024 academic year. Activities were designed to stimulate both critical thinking and the capacity for didactic transfer, providing future educators with a comprehensive experience of professional learning.

The theoretical component included interactive lectures and case studies drawn from specialized literature, focusing on key concepts such as emergent literacy, functional reading, vocabulary development, phonological awareness, and the educator's role as a facilitator of learning. These were supported by guided readings of foundational texts (Temple, Dolean, Duke & Pearson), which provided relevant conceptual and methodological reference points.

During the seminars, students engaged in practical activities such as teaching simulations, child-centered lesson planning, exercises for adapting educational materials, reflective observation activities, and

collaborative work. They also explored and analyzed resources available on the educational platforms *Toți copiii citesc* (“All Children Read”) and *Școli cu scLipici* (“Schools with Sparkle”), being encouraged to create their own teaching materials and align them with early education curriculum objectives.

A key moment in the training process was the meeting with Mrs. Maria Kovacs, a special guest who offered students valuable practical insights on emergent literacy based on her experience in implementing the “Schools with Sparkle” program. This external contribution had a significant impact on strengthening the connection between theory and practice and was frequently mentioned in students’ written reflections.

Overall, the formative activities aimed to develop an integrated approach to literacy, combining scientific knowledge with didactic innovation and the professional responsibility of future educators.

5. Emergent Literacy Activities in Preschool Education

To exemplify emergent literacy activities implemented at the preschool level, two age groups were addressed. Thus, activities were designed for the older and middle preschool groups, centered around themes with high potential for fostering language development, communication skills, and early reading and writing behaviors. Each scenario started from a story. For each activity, behavioral indicators were selected from the *Fundamental Landmarks in the Learning and Early Development of the Child from Birth to 7 Years* (2024).

Example 1: “Inventors’ Week”

On the first day of the week, the children discovered in the middle of the classroom a large, colorful, and luminous box, as if it had come from another time. On it was written in large, shiny letters: “Inventors’ Week.”

They all gathered around it, full of curiosity. What could be inside? Carefully, they lifted the lid and... surprise! Inside were images of brave, imaginative people who, with patience and creativity, had invented things that make our lives easier: the light bulb, the airplane, the telephone, and many others. Among these were several books, each containing a story for one of the five days of the week.

Thus, they learned that Monday would be called “Small and Big Inventors.” Through the images, the children discovered what it means to be an inventor,

the amazing ideas people had, and how a simple question—“*What if...?*”—can lead to something incredible.

After learning about famous inventions, each child had the opportunity to imagine and draw their own invention—something never seen before, something born from their imagination: a flying car, a singing umbrella, or a friendly robot that cleans.

Learning center activities included:

- Construction: “*Little Inventors’ Workshop*” – building a futuristic car using blocks;
- Science: “*Inventors’ Notes*” – creating graphic representations;
- Role play: transforming into scientists in “*The Inventors’ Laboratory*.”

Example 2: “*A Journey into the World of Telephones*”

Another day’s theme was “*A Journey into the World of Telephones*.”

Using an animated digital resource created by the educator in the Cutter Pix app, the character TelePhone introduced the topic and learning objectives. The children were given a four-stage mission, with a task to solve at each stage. Once completed, they would discover the digits of a secret phone number.

- In the first stage, to find the first three digits, children had to complete activities in the learning centers:

- Write down numbers from cue cards (Phonebook activity);
- Paint “Colorful Telephones” using specified colors;
- Word Search with keywords found later in a secret message revealed by the character.

- The second stage involved listening to “*The Story of the Telephone*”, focused on its invention and evolution. Comprehension strategies were emphasized, requiring the children to formulate complete, well-developed answers to questions.

- In the third stage, they created a “landline telephone” using collage techniques and had a structured conversation on the given topic, enriching vocabulary through newly introduced words.

- The final stage included two games: “*Jumping Numbers*” and “*The Whispered Telephone*”

(Telephone Game), which helped them uncover the final digit of the secret number.

At the end of the mission, the discovered number was dialed, revealing the secret character and its message to the children. Throughout the didactic journey, all dimensions of literacy development were addressed.

Example 3: "Remarkable Women of the World"

Another integrated activity scenario, implemented with the middle preschool group and focused on developing early reading and writing skills, was titled "*Remarkable Women of the World.*"

To open the week, the children discovered a gigantic book placed in the center of the classroom. This book contained stories of extraordinary women who had changed the world for the better. Each page represented a new day of the week, revealing a different inspirational story.

Monday, the first chapter, was marked by an integrated activity titled "*With Gratitude to the Remarkable Women of the World!*"

Children were introduced to the task of the day: to become familiar with several remarkable women through illustrations and books they read together. They identified the "stars of the week" and also learned the song "*Thank You*", used to practice social behaviors and express gratitude.

Literacy and Language Development Indicators – Integrated Activity Example

Verbal and Symbolic Communication

- D.1.1.385 – Follows two- or three-step instructions that are unconnected and not related to familiar contexts.

- D.1.1.387 – Uses dialogue in symbolic play.

- D.1.2.410 – Initiates a conversation and participates appropriately in discussions with children or adults.

- D.1.2.411 – Adjusts speech according to the interlocutor (uses simpler words and a different speaking rhythm with younger children).

- D.1.2.413 – Expresses an idea in multiple ways.

- D.1.2.414 – Uses intonation when dramatizing a story and playing a role.

Phonological and Graphophonemic Awareness

- D.2.2.504 – Demonstrates increased awareness of the initial and final sounds of a word by identifying them without support.

- D.2.2.514 – Recognizes uppercase and lowercase printed letters and matches them with the corresponding sound.

Compulsory Reading Moment – "Extraordinary Women Who Performed Miracles"

Listening and Comprehension

- D.1.1.368 – Listens with pleasure to literary texts (stories read by adults or through digital resources, poems for rhythm and rhyme awareness).

- D.1.1.369 – Participates for more than 20 minutes in story reading or storytelling activities.

- D.1.1.384 – Asks about the meaning of unknown words.

- D.1.2.412 – Asks for clarification and information, and answers questions.

- D.2.1.474 – Understands the book's title, who the author and illustrator are, and recognizes pagination.

Environmental Understanding – Thematic Reading: "Remarkable Women" (Reading Images)

- D.1.2.412 – Asks and answers questions for clarification and understanding.

- D.1.2.434 – Uses correct gender, number, person, and tense agreement in speech.

- D.1.2.437 – Demonstrates logical sequencing in spoken sentences.

- D.1.2.463 – Uses complex and developed sentences and phrases.

- D.2.1.476 – Talks with peers about what they have learned from books.

Music Education (DEC)

Songs: "*Thank You!*" and listening activity: "*The Compositions of Pianist Clara Schumann*"

- D.1.1.384 – Asks about the meaning of unknown words.

Tuesday – "Mother Teresa, the Savior of Children"

- D.1.1.385 – Follows two- or three-step instructions that are unconnected and not related to familiar contexts.

The “Tuesday” chapter reveals the story of the extraordinary Mother Teresa, known as the savior of children. Because she dedicated her life to helping people and educating children in African villages, the children will travel through the portal of the magic book into Africa.

Once there, they will be invited to rebuild the African village, create African masks for children’s dances, and trace symbolic graphic marks in African soil. Later, they will help the children of Africa learn the sound and shape of the letter “T”. The day ends with a dance session to “African Rhythms”, using the previously created masks.

Learning Center Activities

- Sand and Water Center: “*Letters in African Soil*” – tracing patterns in kinetic sand.
- Art Center: “*African Mask*” – collage/gluing activity.
- Construction Center: “*The African Village*” – building using natural materials.

Indicators of development targeted through these activities:

- D.1.1.385 – Follows unconnected, multi-step instructions.
- D.1.2.412 – Asks for and answers clarification and information questions.
- D.2.2.514 – Recognizes uppercase and lowercase printed letters and matches them to their associated sound.
- D.2.2.515 – Identifies the initial sound of a given word and counts the number of sounds it contains.
- D.2.3.527 – Recognizes uppercase and lowercase letters and numbers in different contexts and differentiates between them.
- D.2.4.561 – Draws printed letters.
- D.2.4.564 – Uses a wide variety of writing instruments (pencil, pen, crayons, computer, tablet).

Reading Moment – Required by the Early Education Curriculum (2019)

Story title: “*The Little Girl Who Saved Love*” – read aloud by the educator

Targeted Indicators:

- D.1.1.368 – Listens with pleasure to literary texts (stories read by adults or digital resources, poems supporting rhythm and rhyme awareness).

- D.1.1.369 – Participates for more than 20 minutes in activities involving reading or storytelling.

- TUESDAY Chapter will reveal the story of the extraordinary Mother Teresa, the savior of children. Since she spent her life helping people and educating children from African villages, the children will travel through the portal of the magic book to Africa. Once there, they will have to rebuild the African village, create African masks for children's dances, and draw various graphic signs in the African soil. Afterwards, they will help the children of Africa learn the sound and the letter “T”. The day will end with a dance to “African Rhythms”, using the previously created masks.

- At the interest centers, the following activities will take place:
Sand and Water: “Letters from the African soil” – tracing graphics in kinetic sand;
Art: “African Mask!” – gluing;
Construction: “African Village!” – building with various natural materials.

- D.1.1.385. Follows instructions with two or three unrelated steps, disconnected from known contexts;

D.1.2.412. Asks for clarification and responds to questions;

D.2.2.514. Recognizes uppercase and lowercase printed letters and matches them to their associated sound;

D.2.2.515. Can identify the initial sound of a certain word and determine how many sounds are in a word;

D.2.3.527. Recognizes lowercase and uppercase letters and digits in different contexts and distinguishes between them;

D.2.4.561. Draws printed letters;

D.2.4.564. Uses a variety of writing tools (pencil, pen, crayons, computer, tablet).

- Reading moment required by the “Early Childhood Education Curriculum 2019”
“The Little Girl Who Saved Love” – teacher read-aloud

D.1.1.368. Enjoys listening to literary texts (stories read by adults or using digital resources, poems for rhythm and rhyme awareness);

D.1.1.369. Participates for more than 20 minutes in activities where stories and narratives are read aloud;

D.1.1.384. Asks what unknown words mean;

D.1.2.412. Asks for clarification and responds to

questions;

D.2.1.474. Understands the title, who the author and illustrator are, and page numbering;

- “Mother Teresa, the savior of children!” – integrated activity;

DLC – Language development: “Sentences-words-syllables-sounds” – game-exercise;

D.2.2.504. Demonstrates increased awareness of initial and final sounds of a word by identifying them unaided;

D.2.2.505. Separates words into syllables with help;

D.2.2.514. Recognizes uppercase and lowercase printed letters and matches them with the associated sound;

D.2.2.515. Can determine the initial sound of a given word and how many sounds are in a word;

D.2.3.530. Understands that a message is read/written from left to right, top to bottom;

D.2.4.564. Uses a variety of writing tools (pencil, pen, crayons, computer, tablet);

D.2.4.565. Adjusts writing posture, how they grip the writing tool, and the position of the paper;

- DPM – Psychomotor education: “African Rhythms” – rhythmic gymnastics;

D.1.1.385. Follows instructions with two or three unrelated steps, disconnected from known contexts;

D.1.2.410. Initiates a conversation and participates appropriately in discussions with children or adults;

D.1.2.415. Uses polite expressions in everyday speech;

D.1.2.458. Can define certain known words with help (e.g., the dog is an animal with four legs);

D.1.2.460. Demonstrates understanding of specialized vocabulary in certain fields (in the medical field, talks about dentist and pediatrician);

- DLC – Language development: “Say who it is and how it is!” – didactic game;

D.1.1.385. Follows instructions with two or three unrelated steps, disconnected from known contexts;

D.1.2.434. Uses correct gender, number, person, and tense agreement in speech;

D.1.2.437. Demonstrates the use of logically sequenced sentences;

D.1.2.460. Demonstrates understanding of specialized vocabulary in certain fields (in the medical field, talks about dentist and pediatrician);

D.1.2.463. Uses developed sentences and phrases in speech.

6. Final Stage

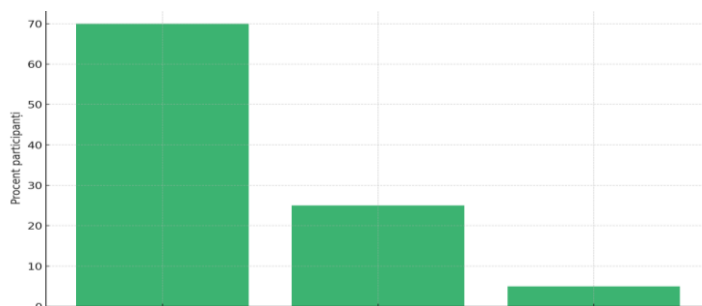
In the final stage of the program, students were invited to carry out a self-assessment of the

professional progress achieved, referring to the competencies acquired in the field of early literacy. The evaluation activities included reflective essays, applied portfolios, and didactic scenarios, all reflecting an in-depth understanding of the concepts of emergent literacy and functional reading.

The chart below synthesizes students' self-assessments regarding perceived progress, highlighting the personal and professional transformations that occurred as a result of completing the course.

Figure 2

Final Stage: Pedagogical Reflection and Personal Progress

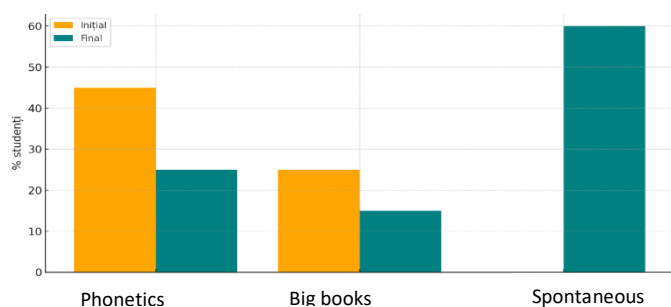


According to the data presented in the chart, 70% of the students reported significant progress, while 25% indicated moderate progress. These results validate the effectiveness of an applied and reflective training approach. Additionally, there is a noticeable diversification of the teaching methods applied in practice: students integrated child-centered strategies such as guided storytelling, spontaneous writing, and phonological games, demonstrating flexibility, creativity, and the assumption of an active role in supporting early literacy.

7. Comparative Analysis of Teaching Practices

To highlight the impact of the educational intervention on students' professional development, a comparison was made between the teaching methods reported at the initial stage and those applied in the final stage of the training.

The comparative chart illustrates the transition from a traditional didactic approach, focused on phonetic methods (such as analytic-synthetic phonics – 45%) and classical materials (big books – 25%), to a modern, participatory approach. In the final stage, students integrated innovative strategies such as spontaneous writing and guided storytelling (each 20%), reflecting a deeper understanding of early literacy.

Figure 3*Comparative Analysis: Teaching Methods Applied*

This methodological evolution confirms a paradigm shift in professional training: from mechanical letter teaching to the promotion of a communicative, expressive, and reflective model, in which the educator plays an active role in facilitating literacy and critical thinking. Moreover, the adoption of written pedagogical reflection and the use of specific evaluation tools demonstrate students' commitment to an authentic educational practice tailored to the real needs of the child.

8. Conclusions

The results of the research reflect a significant transformation in the understanding and application of concepts related to early literacy among students. Initially, their approaches were predominantly technical, focused on the recognition of letters and sounds. Following the educational intervention, participants gradually integrated a complex and dynamic vision of literacy, oriented toward communication, context, and the holistic development of the child.

The adoption of methods such as spontaneous writing, guided storytelling, and emergent literacy indicates the assumption of an active role as facilitator of authentic expression, in which the educator is no longer a mere transmitter of knowledge, but a co-constructor of meaning alongside the child. This reconfiguration of the pedagogical relationship reflects a necessary paradigm shift in initial professional training.

Specific evaluation tools for literacy, initially absent or used occasionally, were integrated in an applied manner through guides and digital platforms such as *Toți copiii citesc* ("All Children Read"). The pedagogical reflection essay, nonexistent in the initial stage, became a central element of analysis and professional development, supporting conceptual clarity and the assumption of a conscious and practice-based didactic style.

A fundamental change was also observed in terms of professional responsibility: if at the beginning literacy was perceived as the exclusive responsibility of the primary school teacher, by the end, students recognized the defining role of the early childhood educator in supporting literacy from the earliest years of a child's life.

The studied materials – from the texts of Charles Temple to educational platforms and resources from the *Școli cu scLipici* ("Schools with Sparkle") program – contributed to the development of a critical perspective on educational inequities and to the identification of modern didactic solutions. The activities carried out, including written reflections and teaching scenarios, demonstrated the real transfer of theory into practice.

The analysis of the training stages confirms the value of an educational intervention based on reflection, application, and professional responsibility. From a superficial understanding of literacy at the beginning of the course, students went through a complex and formative learning process, culminating in relevant educational projects and the assumption of an active role in supporting early literacy.

Authors note:

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Monica Coste is a preschool teacher, licensed in Pedagogy, with certification in developing skills in the field of parent education and in the socio-emotional development of children and adolescents through EREC programs. She has had as a permanent concern finding optimal strategies for the education and harmonious development of preschool children. Currently she is also an associate lecturer at the

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