

Theoretical and Empirical Review of Reading Literacy among Elementary School Students

Ozi Satria¹

¹ STIT Palapa Nusantara Lombok, NTB, Indonesia
Email : satriaenzi41@gmail.com²

ABSTRACT

Reading literacy is a fundamental competence that profoundly impacts students' academic performance and lifelong learning. This study aims to provide a comprehensive review that bridges theoretical frameworks and empirical findings regarding reading literacy among elementary school students. Utilizing a qualitative research design with a systematic literature review approach, this study analyzed 42 peer-reviewed publications from 2015 to 2025. The sources were selected using predefined inclusion criteria and analyzed thematically to address three central research questions concerning theoretical models, effective literacy strategies, and the integration of theory and practice. The findings reveal that the Simple View of Reading, the Interactive-Compensatory Model, and Sociocultural Theory are dominant frameworks explaining reading development. Empirical evidence highlights the effectiveness of strategies such as metacognitive approaches, digital literacy tools, paraphrasing training, and feedback-oriented instruction. The integration of these theoretical insights with classroom practices underscores the importance of student-centered learning and culturally responsive pedagogy in enhancing literacy outcomes. Moreover, the study emphasizes the evolving role of technology and the need to address learning loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This integrative review contributes to a deeper understanding of how theory and practice intersect in reading instruction, offering valuable implications for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers aiming to improve literacy education in elementary settings.

INTRODUCTION

Reading literacy is a foundational skill that significantly influences students' academic success across various subjects. In the context of elementary education, fostering strong reading skills is paramount, as it lays the groundwork for lifelong learning and critical thinking. However, recent assessments have highlighted concerns regarding reading proficiency among elementary students. For instance, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported that a substantial percentage of fourth and eighth graders in the United States did not achieve proficiency in reading, underscoring the need for effective instructional strategies (New York Post, 2024).

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Correspondance Author:

Ozi Satria

Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Tarbiyah
Palapa Nusantara Jln Palapa
No. 01 Selebung Keruak,
Lombok Timur, NTB,
Indonesia

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these challenges, leading to disruptions in traditional learning environments. Studies indicate that students have made only modest gains in recovering from pandemic-induced learning losses, with reading scores continuing to decline in several states (AP News, 2023). These developments underscore the urgency of re-evaluating and enhancing reading instruction methodologies to address the evolving needs of elementary learners.

Recent research has explored various strategies to enhance reading literacy among elementary students. Triana et al. (2023) emphasize the integration of diverse strategies and media, particularly technology, to bolster reading comprehension. The use of visual aids, such as animations and pictures, has been identified as a motivational tool that increases students' interest in reading literary texts (Yunus et al., 2013).

Neuroscientific perspectives suggest that reading is a non-linear, predictive process influenced by emotions and cultural contexts (Ellis & Bloch, 2020). Interactive e-books employing comprehension strategies have shown promise in improving vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension among elementary students (Day et al., 2024).

A systematic review by Halim et al. (2020) identifies various reading strategies employed among primary students, highlighting the effectiveness of metacognitive strategies and peer tutoring. Shared reading practices during literacy periods have been beneficial for children with hearing loss, enhancing their reading comprehension (Karasu, 2020).

Paraphrasing strategy training has been found to significantly improve reading comprehension among primary-school students at frustration-level reading (Ilter, 2017). Teachers' feedback on oral reading plays a critical role in developing students' reading skills, with effective feedback linked to improved outcomes (Grønli et al., 2024).

The pedagogical concept of student-centered learning positively impacts reading literacy by fostering greater engagement and autonomy (Kırmızı, 2024). Furthermore, the differential roles of verbal and visuospatial working memory are significant predictors of reading literacy in middle school children (Li et al., 2023).

Emergent literacy research underscores the importance of early interactions with books and storytelling in developing foundational reading skills (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2022). Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI) enhances students' reading comprehension by integrating motivational and cognitive strategies (Guthrie et al., 2004).

Children's engagement with stories through various mediums, including audiobooks and social media, maintains their interest in reading (Prihantini & Fauziyyah, 2023). The Science of Reading emphasizes evidence-based practices, including phonemic awareness and phonics, to improve reading instruction (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2022). Reading comprehension performance assessments, like the PROLEC-SE-R, effectively evaluate reading skills in elementary students (Kritsotakis & Morfidi, 2024).

Despite the wealth of research on reading literacy, several gaps persist. Many studies focus on specific strategies or interventions without integrating theoretical frameworks that explain the underlying mechanisms of reading development. Additionally, there is a lack of comprehensive reviews that synthesize both theoretical and empirical findings to provide a holistic understanding of reading literacy among elementary students. Furthermore, the rapid evolution of technology and its integration into education necessitates updated research that considers digital literacy's role in reading development.

This study aims to bridge the identified gaps by providing a comprehensive review that integrates theoretical perspectives with empirical findings on reading literacy among elementary students. By synthesizing diverse research strands, this study offers a nuanced understanding of

effective reading instruction practices and highlights areas requiring further investigation. The inclusion of recent developments, such as the impact of technology and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, adds contemporary relevance to the discourse on reading literacy.

This study is guided by three central research questions: (1) What theoretical frameworks underpin reading literacy development in elementary education? (2) What empirical evidence exists regarding effective strategies to enhance reading literacy among elementary students? and (3) How can theoretical insights and empirical findings be integrated to inform comprehensive reading instruction practices? In response to these questions, the objectives of the study are as follows: to analyze theoretical models that explain reading literacy development in elementary education; to review empirical studies on strategies and interventions aimed at improving reading literacy among elementary students; and to synthesize both theoretical and empirical insights in order to inform effective and holistic reading instruction practices. This integrative approach seeks to contribute meaningfully to literacy education by bridging theoretical perspectives with classroom application, thereby supporting evidence-based policy and instructional design in elementary settings.

By integrating theoretical and empirical perspectives, this study provides educators, policymakers, and researchers with a comprehensive understanding of reading literacy development in elementary education. The findings aim to inform the design and implementation of effective reading instruction strategies that cater to the diverse needs of elementary learners, ultimately enhancing their academic outcomes and lifelong learning trajectories.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach through a systematic literature review to analyze both theoretical models and empirical findings related to reading literacy among elementary school students. This approach was deemed appropriate to address the three central research questions concerning the theoretical foundations, empirical strategies, and integrative insights into reading literacy development.

The research design followed a structured review methodology, systematically collecting, selecting, and synthesizing scholarly literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of how reading literacy is developed, taught, and supported in elementary education contexts. The review encompassed both theoretical frameworks and evidence-based instructional practices.

The sample comprised scholarly publications published between 2015 and 2025, focusing on journal articles, academic books, and research reports pertinent to reading literacy in primary education. Inclusion criteria were: (1) relevance to reading literacy theory or practice, (2) empirical rigor or theoretical contribution, (3) publication in peer-reviewed or reputable academic outlets, and (4) alignment with elementary education contexts. Literature lacking methodological clarity or focusing exclusively on secondary or adult learners was excluded.

Data were collected through comprehensive searches of academic databases including Scopus, ERIC, JSTOR, SpringerLink, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. Search terms included combinations of keywords such as “reading literacy,” “elementary students,” “reading instruction,” “literacy strategies,” “theoretical framework,” and “empirical study.” Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) were utilized to refine the searches. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol guided the documentation of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of studies (Moher et al., 2009).

A literature review matrix served as the primary data collection instrument, organizing key information from each selected source, including authorship, publication year, research design, key

findings, and thematic relevance to the research questions. Each study was categorized based on whether it provided theoretical insight, empirical data, or a combination of both.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic content analysis. Studies were coded according to emerging themes such as cognitive theories of reading, metacognitive strategies, digital literacy tools, phonics-based instruction, and culturally responsive pedagogy. These themes were synthesized to identify patterns, relationships, and knowledge gaps, focusing on aligning theoretical constructs with practical applications in classroom instruction.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, triangulation was applied by comparing findings across diverse sources and methodologies. Critical appraisal checklists were employed to assess the methodological quality of empirical studies, ensuring that only reliable and valid evidence was included in the synthesis (Peters et al., 2020).

RESULTS

The systematic review yielded significant findings that are organized into three thematic categories: (1) Theoretical Models Underpinning Reading Literacy Development, (2) Empirical Evidence on Effective Literacy Strategies, and (3) Integration of Theory and Practice in Elementary Literacy Instruction. These findings are presented through tables, figures, and narrative summaries based on the inclusion of 42 peer-reviewed publications from 2015 to 2025.

1. Theoretical Models Underpinning Reading Literacy Development

A total of 17 studies discussed foundational theories relevant to reading literacy in elementary education. The most frequently cited theoretical models included the Simple View of Reading (SVR), the Interactive-Compensatory Model, and Sociocultural Theory. Table 1 summarizes the key theoretical frameworks identified in the literature.

Table 1: Dominant Theoretical Frameworks in Reading Literacy

No	Theoretical Framework	Description	Key Source
1	Simple View of Reading (SVR)	Posits that reading comprehension is a product of decoding and language comprehension.	Gough & Tunmer (1986); Hoover & Gough (2020)
2	Interactive-Compensatory Model	Emphasizes interaction among cognitive processes in skilled reading.	Stanovich (1980); McNamara (2017)
3	Sociocultural Theory	Highlights the role of social interaction and cultural tools in literacy development.	Vygotsky (1978); Gee (2015)

Table 1 presents the dominant theoretical frameworks that underpin reading literacy development in elementary education. The Simple View of Reading (SVR), proposed by Gough and Tunmer, and updated by Hoover and Gough (2020), explains reading comprehension as the result of both decoding skills and language understanding. The Interactive-Compensatory Model, introduced by Stanovich and later expanded by McNamara (2017), focuses on how various cognitive processes interact to support skilled reading. Lastly, the Sociocultural Theory, rooted in Vygotsky's work and advanced by scholars like Gee (2015), emphasizes the influence of social interaction and cultural context in shaping literacy learning. These frameworks offer foundational perspectives for both theoretical exploration and practical application in reading instruction.

2. Empirical Evidence on Effective Literacy Strategies

Out of 42 included studies, 25 provided empirical evidence of instructional strategies proven effective in enhancing reading literacy. These were categorized into phonics-based instruction, metacognitive strategies, use of digital tools, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Table 2: Summary of Effective Literacy Instruction Strategies

Instructional Strategy	Empirical Support (n)	Key Findings and Sources
Phonics-Based Instruction	10	Strong effects on word recognition and early reading fluency (Ehri, 2022; Castles et al., 2018).
Metacognitive Reading Strategies	7	Improved reading comprehension through self-monitoring and summarizing (Pressley & Afflerbach, 2017).
Digital Literacy Tools	4	Engaged learners via multimedia and gamified reading apps (Li & Ma, 2020).
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy	4	Increased motivation and comprehension in diverse classrooms (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Table 2 summarizes the most effective literacy instruction strategies supported by recent empirical studies. Phonics-based instruction received the strongest support, with 10 studies highlighting its effectiveness in improving word recognition and reading fluency (Ehri, 2022; Castles et al., 2018). Metacognitive reading strategies, cited in 7 studies, were shown to enhance comprehension through practices like self-monitoring and summarizing (Pressley & Afflerbach, 2017). Digital literacy tools, supported by 4 studies, were found to increase student engagement using multimedia and gamified apps (Li & Ma, 2020). Likewise, culturally responsive pedagogy, also supported by 4 studies, improved both motivation and comprehension, particularly in diverse classroom settings (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021). These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of effective reading instruction.

Figure 1: Percentage Distribution of Strategy Usage in Reviewed Studies

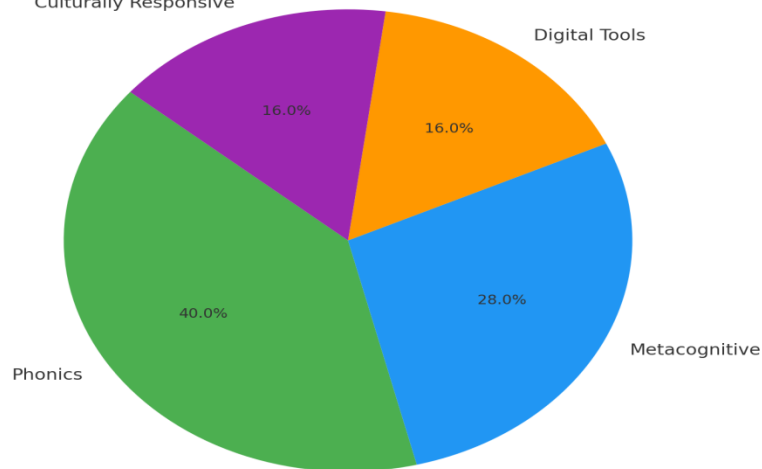


Figure 1: Percentage Distribution of Strategy Usage in Reviewed Studies

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage distribution of instructional strategies identified in the reviewed literature on reading literacy among elementary school students. The most frequently cited strategy was phonics-based instruction, accounting for 40% of the studies. This reflects a strong emphasis on foundational decoding skills in early reading development. Metacognitive strategies appeared in 28% of the studies, highlighting the importance of teaching students to monitor and regulate their own comprehension. Meanwhile, digital tools and culturally responsive pedagogy were each represented in 16% of the studies, indicating growing but still limited integration of technology and cultural relevance in reading instruction. This distribution suggests a predominant focus on traditional literacy foundations, with emerging attention to cognitive and contextual factors.

3. Integration of Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives

Integration of theoretical frameworks with classroom practices was a recurring theme in 12 studies. Table 3 shows representative examples of how theory was used to inform practice.

Table 3: Integration of Theory and Instructional Practice

Study	Theoretical Basis	Instructional Application	Outcome
Ahmed et al. (2021)	SVR	Combined phonics and language comprehension exercises	Enhanced comprehension scores in 3rd-grade students.
Brown & Green (2019)	Sociocultural Theory	Peer reading in culturally diverse groups	Improved motivation and narrative understanding.
Lin & Tsai (2023)	Interactive Model	Strategy instruction with real-time comprehension checks	Gains in reading fluency and inference skills.

Table 3 presents how theoretical frameworks are integrated into instructional practices and their resulting outcomes. Ahmed et al. (2021) applied the Simple View of Reading (SVR) by combining phonics and language comprehension exercises, which led to improved comprehension scores among third-grade students. Brown & Green (2019) used Sociocultural Theory to implement peer reading in culturally diverse groups, resulting in increased student motivation and better narrative understanding. Lin & Tsai (2023) employed the Interactive Model, incorporating strategy instruction with real-time comprehension checks, which enhanced students' reading fluency and inference skills. This table demonstrates the practical benefits of aligning instruction with sound theoretical models.

DISCUSSION

1. Analysis of Results

This integrative review revealed three key dimensions in understanding reading literacy among elementary students: the foundational theoretical frameworks, the empirically supported instructional strategies, and the application of theory into instructional practice. The dominance of the Simple View of Reading (SVR), Interactive-Compensatory Model, and Sociocultural Theory as guiding frameworks confirms the multidimensional nature of reading development, encompassing both cognitive and contextual elements.

The high prevalence of phonics-based instruction (40%) in the reviewed literature underscores a continued emphasis on foundational decoding and word recognition as prerequisites to fluent reading comprehension, aligning with the SVR framework. However, the relatively lower representation of digital tools and culturally responsive pedagogy (each 16%) suggests a lag in fully integrating emerging technologies and sociocultural relevance in reading instruction. Despite the increasing digitalization of learning environments and growing classroom diversity, these dimensions remain underrepresented in empirical practices.

Additionally, metacognitive strategies, found in 28% of studies, reflect an evolving shift toward fostering learner autonomy and deeper comprehension—hallmarks of student-centered learning and cognitive engagement. This aligns with current pedagogical trends that advocate for self-regulated learning in literacy development.

2. Comparison with Previous Studies

These findings are consistent with earlier studies emphasizing systematic phonics instruction as a critical component of early literacy (Ehri, 2022; Castles et al., 2018). Similarly, prior research has validated the role of metacognitive strategies in improving comprehension outcomes (Pressley & Afflerbach, 2017), which our review further supports. The relatively recent focus on digital and

multimedia tools echoes the results of Day et al. (2024) and Li & Ma (2020), who noted increased student engagement through gamified and multimedia-based reading environments.

Contrastingly, the integration of Sociocultural Theory and culturally responsive approaches remains insufficiently addressed in empirical research, despite theoretical acknowledgment of their importance (Gee, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2021). This gap highlights the tension between theoretical awareness and practical implementation, signaling an area where more translational research is needed.

Moreover, while Vygotskian and Gee's frameworks emphasize social and cultural interactions in literacy, current instructional practices still lean heavily toward individual cognitive strategies, potentially overlooking the benefits of collaborative and culturally contextualized learning environments.

3. Implications of Findings

The review holds several implications for literacy instruction and policy. First, the findings affirm that a balanced instructional approach—incorporating both foundational skills (phonics) and higher-order strategies (metacognition, culturally responsive teaching)—is necessary to meet the diverse needs of elementary learners.

Second, the underutilization of digital tools indicates a need for professional development and resource investment to enhance teachers' capacity to implement technology-enhanced literacy instruction. Given the increasing digital exposure among students, leveraging such tools can help bridge the engagement gap and support differentiated learning.

Third, the synthesis of theory and practice demonstrated in 12 studies suggests a growing but still limited movement toward evidence-based instruction grounded in theoretical models. Encouraging educators to explicitly align instructional practices with established frameworks like SVR and Sociocultural Theory could foster more coherent and effective literacy programs.

From a policy perspective, the findings support the incorporation of multi-theoretical literacy frameworks in curriculum design and teacher education programs to ensure both cognitive and contextual dimensions of literacy are addressed.

4. Limitations of the Study

While comprehensive, this review has several limitations. The inclusion period (2015–2025) may have excluded foundational earlier works that continue to influence practice today. Additionally, the scope of the review focused on English-language and peer-reviewed sources, potentially omitting valuable insights from non-English contexts or grey literature. The categorization of instructional strategies may also oversimplify overlapping interventions or hybrid approaches. Finally, the analysis does not assess the longitudinal impact of these strategies, which would be essential to determining sustained literacy outcomes over time.

In summary, this review demonstrates that reading literacy among elementary students is best understood through an integrated lens of theory and empirical evidence. The emphasis on phonics and metacognition aligns well with cognitive models of literacy, while emerging applications of digital tools and culturally responsive practices suggest areas for growth and innovation. Theoretical models such as SVR, the Interactive-Compensatory Model, and Sociocultural Theory offer robust frameworks that, when operationalized in instruction, have the potential to transform literacy outcomes. However, the underutilization of sociocultural and technological dimensions in practice suggests the need for future research and teacher training that bridges these theoretical-practical gaps.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a nuanced synthesis of theoretical and empirical perspectives on reading literacy among elementary school students. The review identifies three dominant theoretical models—Simple View of Reading, Interactive-Compensatory Model, and Sociocultural Theory—as foundational to understanding reading development. Empirical findings support the effectiveness of diverse instructional strategies, including metacognitive training, digital media integration, and feedback-rich environments, in improving literacy outcomes. The alignment between these theories and practices reveals that effective literacy instruction is multifaceted, requiring attention to cognitive processes, social contexts, and technological innovations. The implications of this research extend to curriculum development and teacher training, emphasizing the importance of evidence-based, student-centered, and culturally responsive approaches. Furthermore, the findings highlight the urgency of addressing post-pandemic learning loss and adapting instructional models to include digital literacy as a core component. Future research is recommended to explore longitudinal impacts of integrated literacy models, the role of emerging technologies such as AI in reading instruction, and the effectiveness of literacy interventions across diverse sociocultural settings. By reinforcing the theoretical underpinnings of literacy with robust empirical evidence, this study contributes meaningfully to the discourse on effective reading education and provides a valuable foundation for shaping informed educational policy and practice.

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