

# The Use of Children's Literature in Improving ESL Learners' Reading Skills Systematic Literature Review (2019-2023)

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## Abstract

This paper presents a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of pertinent past studies about the use of Children's Literature in improving ESL learners' reading skills from the year 2019 to 2023. This SLR seeks to answer a research question; how does the use of children's literature improve ESL learners' reading skills? Seventeen studies have been systematically reviewed and included in this paper. The results portrayed that the use of children's literature in improving ESL learners' reading skills can be put into three aspects which are the improvement in comprehension skills, the improvement of reading fluency and proficiency, as well as promote enjoyment, engagement, and motivation in reading skills. The limitation of this paper is that there were a limited number of recent studies related to children's literature and ESL classrooms, especially in the Malaysian context. For further research recommendations, it is necessary for other researchers to conduct more research related to children's literature covering any other language skills.

**Keywords:** Children's literature, reading skills, ESL learners

## 1. Introduction

Children's Literature is not an oddity in the English syllabus since it was first introduced by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2003 for upper primary school pupils and was fully implemented in 2004. The children's literature equipped pupils with enjoyable learning experiences to improve their English skills through the literature components provided in the module such as short stories and poems. Pupils can experience that learning English is not just sticking to one material, which is the textbook only, but the materials can vary including the literature. The implementation of children's literature in Malaysian Primary Schools has brought a lot of positive impacts to the pupils despite different proficiency levels, even though it was not being tested formally in the School Based Assessment (SBA). Xolmurodova (2021) in her article mentioned that fairy tales, which are a part of stories in children's literature, have brought positive impacts on learners during language learning.

Alternatively, the enforcement of children's literature in Malaysian Primary Schools has covered all the basic English skills; listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar. These are the skills that must be developed by teachers in language lessons to produce proficient English language users (Xolmurodova, 2021). While listening and reading skills are involved in linguistics comprehension, speaking and writing are related to linguistic production (Nan, 2018). All of these four skills are equally important in producing individuals who are highly proficient in the English language. However, when it comes to the

first step in learning the English language, listening and reading skills are more important because, without comprehension, learners will not have the capability to use the language. However, it is stressed here that the mastery of all language skills is vital to mold an English language user who can excel at the international level. Reading skills, which can be stated as the most important basic skill to be mastered in the English language are one of the skills covered throughout the CCL's lessons. Most activities and materials provided in the CCL module require pupils to "read". In every lesson, first thing first, pupils are required to read before proceeding with other activities or tasks. "Reading" is a skill that seems impossible to be left out. According to Xolmurodova (2021), reading is "the key" to developing other language skills as through reading learners can get a lot of knowledge and moral values.

To this day, the implementation of the CCL module is still ongoing. However, some educators and pupils might have forgotten the importance of CCL in English as a Second Language (ESL) learning, especially the positive impacts that it offers on reading skills. Most second language learners have difficulties understanding the texts in the form of their second language since they do not have sufficient vocabulary and this may be caused by the lack of reading. According to Simpson and Cremin (2022), reductionist literacy practices are used with children who struggle with reading, which further limits their potential. EFL learners struggle with reading, especially when learning more complex reading techniques, which has a negative impact on their reading comprehension and leads to poor academic performance. This is presumably due to several things, including the student's inability to read effectively (Ahmed, 2021). Based on the findings of a study conducted among ESL learners in Pakistan, revealed that lack of vocabulary, poor knowledge of English as a second language, trouble pronouncing words, text selection, and lack of pleasure in reading are the key factors affecting English reading skills (Shah et.al, 2022). Additionally, in another study conducted in Saudi, the results showed that the majority of EFL students and their teachers practice learning and teaching second language reading abilities to pass exams, pay greater attention to bottom-up approaches, and stick to the required reading resources while ignoring extracurricular ones (Alshammari, 2021). Nearly all of the observations and interviewees' comments suggested that the second language reading skills' inadequate learning or teaching practices have an impact on the assessment measures and it was argued that better teaching practices must come before better assessment tools for second language reading abilities (Alshammari, 2021). The primary causes of reading comprehension difficulties are a lack of collaborative learning, exposure to factual literature, students' prior knowledge, and punctuation errors (Moloi & Adegiori, 2021). To conclude, many factors affect the acquisition of reading skills among second language learners. One of the most similar factors that has been gathered from the previous studies is the lack of enjoyment in reading. It is believed that the types of reading texts given or provided for second language learners play an important role in encouraging them to read.

Thus, reading children's literature can fulfil such demand as most children's literature books or texts are colourful, and full of illustrations and the use of words in it is much simpler and easy to comprehend. For example, picture books are one of the components of children's literature and the majority of people imagine picture books when they think of books for kids since they are written at a level that young children can understand but cannot yet read (Prater et.al, 2006). According to a study conducted by Baker (2002), reading children's literature of literary quality involves using a metacognitive technique. He also added that the metacognitive strategy may make the child more active, self-confident, successful, and a participant, taking responsibility for his planning, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-regulation processes, it was discovered that students had a better comprehension of books throughout the

process of reading a qualified book (Baker, 2002). Early storybook reading could be a crucial first step in fostering a lifelong love of reading (Kozak & Recchia, 2019).

## 2. Research Objectives and Research Questions

The objective of this Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is to discover the use of Children's Literature in improving ESL pupils' reading skills through various evidence found in past related studies and research. The research question that will be conveyed in this paper is:

RQ1: How does the use of CL improve ESL learners' reading skills?

## 3. Literature Review

### 3.1 Definition of Children's Literature

The literature, children, and adult critics are the three main components in the study of children's literature, according to Hunt (1999). According to Oberstein (1999), "children's literature" refers to a group of novels that are meant to have a particular connection with children. Additionally, Oberstein (1999) emphasised that children's literature is made up of "books which are good for children" and contains concepts that are tailored specifically for young readers.

The Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) defines children's literature as, works that are intended to be widely read, seen, and heard by young children to foster their imagination. Children's literature, according to Cheng (2008), can be defined as works that are intended to be read, seen, or heard by kids because they are entertaining and can instil moral ideals in them. Children's literature is frequently less clear than adult literature, according to Marimuthu (2014), whereas contemporary alludes to current themes. Furthermore, Marimuthu (2014) remarked that the content is typically more straightforward and unambiguous, reflecting the feelings and experiences of today's kids as seen from their perspective.

### 3.2 The Use of Children's Literature in English as a Second Language Classroom

It suggests that the new generation spends less time reading books because of the redundant use of technology for purposes other than reading books; parents and other key stakeholders in education need to be aware of this problem to help their children form effective reading habits (Ahmad et.al, 2021). There is no doubt that these days, technology and devices can be said to have been slowly "abolishing" the use of "real books". The "book" itself can be accessed through various technological devices such as mobile phones, tablets, laptops, and computers anytime, anywhere. Thus, the implementation of technologies in the classroom undeniably brings a lot of positive impacts to the education world by the alpha generation. However, the use of technologies in the classroom is not an option for teachers who are teaching in a rural area or areas with no internet access. Therefore, "real books" are still the most relevant materials to be used during the teaching and learning session. Taking primary school as the main subject in this paper, Children's Literature is one of the "extra" materials in English lessons that can be used in the classroom by the teachers and the pupils. The materials provided in the Children's Literature module by the Ministry of Education of Malaysia (MOE) are captivating, fun, and enjoyable enough to be used as materials when teachers are out of technological resources. The CCL is a complete module that provides teachers with the guidebook or lesson plans, as well as materials such as flashcards and worksheets for pupils for every topic. Teachers just need to adapt the given lesson plans and worksheets to suit their pupils' learning styles and performance levels.

The Ministry of Education has allocated five hours per week for English lessons in accordance with the second shift in the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) which is to ensure that every child is proficient in Malay and English language. Thus, the implementation of children's literature during English lessons is one of the proactive strategies to encourage the pupils to learn English as well as to attract the pupils' interest in English. The CCL that has been introduced for upper primary school pupils (Year 4 to 6) is being implemented in the classroom every week or in cycles, as a Language Arts lesson which also inculcates other language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing as the complementary skills.

The CCL has been implemented in Malaysian English classrooms for quite some time. It is not new for Malaysian teachers and students. However, there are some pros and cons regarding the implementation of CCL in Malaysia. One of the pros of the enforcement of the CCL as stated by Cheng (2007), literature can provide enjoyment, but at the same time, it develops the pupils' imagination. According to a study conducted by Baker (2002), reading children's literature of literary quality involves using a metacognitive technique. He also added that metacognitive strategy may make the child more active, self-confident, successful, and a participant, taking responsibility for his planning, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-regulation processes, it was discovered that students had a better comprehension of books throughout the process of reading a qualified book (Baker, 2002). Early storybook reading could be a crucial first step in fostering a lifelong love of reading (Kozak & Recchia, 2019).

### 3.3 Reading Skills in the Children's Literature

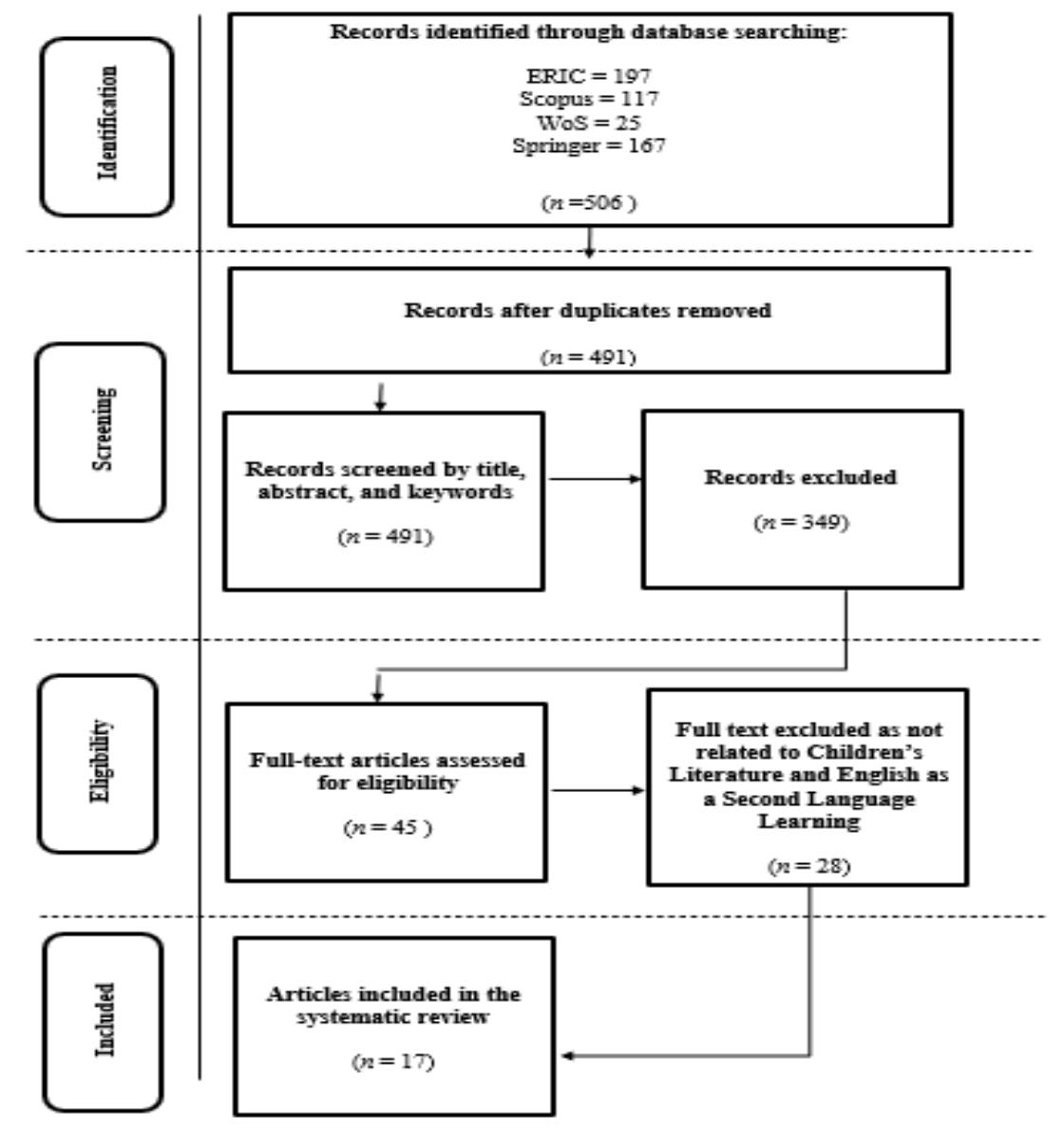
Reading skill is the most important skill in learning languages, especially the second language. Without literacy in reading, it is quite difficult to master the language as reading can lead to any other skills in English such as vocabulary, grammar, and writing. Children's literature is one of the components in teaching English because it encourages pupils to do a lot of reading, as an extensive reading programme to inculcate reading habits among pupils. Besides that, children's literature also promotes enjoyable reading experiences and encourages students to collaborate. According to Morgan (2012), this gives teachers a tool that focuses on excellent children's literature, emphasises the value of collaboration, and can be organised into sessions that use cooperative learning to let students practice collaboration. In the context of Malaysian ESL classrooms, the books or modules suggested by the Curriculum Development Centre of Malaysia (CDC) consisted of Anthology of poems for Year 4,5,6, graphic novels, and short stories. By the end of their six years of primary schooling, they are expected to read at least 28 poems, three short story books, and three graphic novels. It is quite a sufficient amount of reading if they manage to read all of it, considering that they are young second-language learners.

For instance, all of the provided modules are full of colourful illustrations and graphics which are eye-catching especially for children and it somehow attracts their attention and interest to read. Besides, the illustrations and graphics included in the children's literature modules can help pupils get ideas and give some insights into what they are reading even though they do not understand what they are reading. Additionally, the use of children's literature could improve the pupils' reading comprehension as along the reading, they will get to share their feelings and insights about the text they are reading. Apart from that, reading the literary text in children's literature also could provide pupils with the opportunity to learn about language structures, other cultures, social skills, and personal feelings.

#### 4. Methodology

This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is adapting the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) model as the method. In this SLR, there are four processes involved which are identification, screening, eligibility and included as portrayed in Figure 1. The PRISMA model is commonly used by researchers as it allows researchers to improve the reporting of systematic reviews as well as meta-analyses. Figure 1 shows the process of this systematic literature review (SLR).

Figure 1. PRISMA systematic review adapted from M.J. McKenzie et al.



##### 4.1 Identification Phase

Based on the PRISMA guidelines, the first phase of the SLR is the identification phase. In this SLR, four databases have been chosen which are the Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC), Scopus,

Springer Link, and Web of Science (WoS). The keywords in this SLR have been chosen carefully to adhere to the objectives of the SLR and the articles to be reviewed. Words related to Contemporary Children's Literature in improving reading skills were included. Table 1 shows the search string used for this SLR. All in all, there are 506 articles identified using the automotive search in the first phase.

**Table 1. Search string**

Database	Search string
ERIC	Developing reading skills through children's literature
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY(( "children's literature" OR "CCL" ) AND ( "ESL" OR "English language learning*" OR "EFL" OR "English as foreign language" OR "English as second language" ))
Springer Link	Children's Literature to Improve Reading Skills
Web of Science	TITLE-ABS-KEY(( "children's literature" OR "CCL" ) AND ( "ESL" OR "English language learning*" OR "EFL" OR "English as foreign language" OR "English as second language" ))

**4.2 Screening Phase**

According to the PRISMA model, the second suggested phase is the screening phase. During this phase, the duplicate articles which were appearing in more than one database are removed. Therefore, after excluding seven duplicates, there were 491 articles for another screening. The articles were screened again based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria stated in Table 2 below. Overall, 142 articles were rejected as they were not journal articles, not related to ESL/EFL, not related to children's literature and reading skills, and could not be accessed. Thus, there were 349 articles left to be further screened.

**Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.**

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Studies conducted between 2019 and 2023 (5-year timespan)	Studies conducted before 2019
Journal articles	Book, book chapter, systematic review, conference proceedings, reports
Journal articles written in English Language	Journal articles are not written in English Language
Peer-reviewed articles	Non peer-reviewed
Journal articles related to English as Second Language Learning or EFL, Children's Literature,	Journal articles are not related to English as Second Language Learning or EFL, Children's Literature and



and Reading Skills	Reading Skills
Accessible	Inaccessible

### 4.3 Eligibility Phase

In the third phase, which is the eligibility phase, the selected articles are thoroughly checked to make sure they meet the inclusion criteria mentioned above. This is vital in ensuring the data obtained from the study has good quality and reliability. Of the 349 articles remaining, another 304 articles rejected, which makes the remaining articles to be a total of 45 articles. Another 28 articles were rejected since the articles were not related to Children's Literature and English as Second Language.

### 4.4 Included Phase

The articles for this review focus on the use of Children's Literature in improving reading skills. Only 17 articles were being included in this SLR. Based on Table 3, 17 articles were extracted, 5 articles from Scopus, 1 from WoS, 9 from ERIC, and 2 from SpringerLink. The majority of the studies were carried out at preschools, primary schools, and higher education levels, including universities and colleges.

## 5. Results and Discussion

The results after conducting the above-mentioned phases have shortlisted 17 articles to be reviewed and further read. The 17 included articles were presented and summarised in the form of a table (Refer to Table 3) by including the author's name, the research design, the number of participants, the database used, and the results of each study. The results of the reviewed articles from the Systematic Literature Review (2019 to 2023) can be categorised into three sub-categories, as well as to answer the research question; how does the use of children's literature improve the ESL learners' reading skills? These are the following subcategories based on the results of the reviewed articles:

### 5.1 Improve Comprehension

According to a pilot study conducted by Laliena et.al (2022), using children's literature in the form of picture books can improve reading comprehension. Damayanti et.al (2021) also came up with the same notion where the results of their study have proven that reading children's literature in the form of picture books helps learners to comprehend the contents of the text. Rawian et.al (2022) also stated that the use of big books as in children's literature can enhance ESL learners' reading comprehension skills. Furthermore, Kaowiwattanakul (2021) discovered that literature-based reader response theory activity using children's literature books increased the learners' reading comprehension ability. On the other hand, reading fiction to youngsters is a potential strategy to improve their reading comprehension (Pfof & Heyne, 2022). Instead of reading plain books, reading fiction which is a part of children's literature can also help learners comprehend a text better especially when the topic they are reading is their interest.

### 5.2 Improve reading fluency and proficiency

The findings of this SLR show that through children's literature, second language learners could improve their reading skills as it also improves their reading fluency and proficiency. As mentioned by Sairattain & Thawarom (2022), the length of the children's literature text is very convenient and suitable especially for students with pre-intermediate language skills to finish reading without encountering any lan-

guage difficulties. At the same time, based on the result of a study conducted by Shuqair & Dashti (2019), only 6.1% of participants disagreed with the overwhelming majority (91%) who thought children's books may aid in enhancing youngsters' reading abilities. In addition, the development of children's conversational language, their early reading abilities, and their future reading proficiency have all been consistently shown to be significantly influenced by frequent exposure to literature through book sharing and reading opportunities (Shuqair & Dashti, 2019). Adam et.al (2019) supports this notion by stating in their article that, the development of children's conversational language, their early reading abilities, and their future reading proficiency have all been consistently shown to be significantly influenced by frequent exposure to literature through books sharing and reading opportunities. Meanwhile, in a study conducted by Wissman (2021), the results highlight the intricate interplay between strategies intended to make use of students' linguistic and cultural resources in the classroom and strategies intended to promote measurable improvement in students' reading skills using children's literature. Thus, it can be concluded that the use of children's literature aids in improving reading fluency and proficiency among ESL learners.

**5.3 Promotes enjoyment, engagement, and motivation in reading**

The use of children's literature in learning English as a second language promotes enjoyment and motivation in reading among learners. Rawian et.al (2022) in their article mentioned that reading children's literature can enhance literary enjoyment among learners which also leads to motivation to read more. Learning about literacy through literature would foster receptive and responsible reading attitudes as well as the growth of readers (Simpson & Cremin, 2022). McGeown et.al (2020) stated in their article that children's reading motivation differed considerably among the various types of texts, in which the majority of the reasons children gave for reading were directly tied to the various types of texts they read, such as children's books. Ajaj (2021) also agrees with this notion by stating in his article that Children's literature inspires students to read because it links reading to enjoyment. Literary instruction is the foundation for youngsters to receive and learn that reading is enjoyable and can lead to the discovery of many valuable things (Prachagool, 2021). It is believed that the implementation of children's literature in an ESL classroom promotes enjoyment and motivation in reading.

**Table 3. Summary of past related studies**

No.	Article/Study/ Author	Research design	Number of participants	Database	Results (How Children’s Literature Improve Reading skills?)
	Xiaomei Sun (2023)	Case Study	10 teachers	Scopus	Demonstrates how including reading and writing into the study of literature in a second language encourages critical thought about the material read as well as the internalisation of language.



	Daniel Laliena, Rosa Tabenero, Jose M.Yebra (2022)	Pilot Study	18 bilingual state schools' teachers	Scopus	Using Children's Literature in a form of picture books can improve reading comprehension
	Ika Lestari Damayanti, Nicke Yunita Moecharam, and Firly Asyifa (2021)	Multimodal Approach	Not mentioned	Scopus	Reading children's literature in the form of picture books aids readers in comprehending the content of the story.
	Rafizah Rawian, Mohamad Fadhili Yahaya, Dedi Sanjaya & Azrul Abdullah (2022)	Case Study	150 Year 4 students	Scopus	The study's findings demonstrated the importance of Big Books in enhancing both the literary enjoyment and reading comprehension of ESL students.
	Kelly K.Wissman (2021)	Case Study	five emergent bilinguals	Scopus	The results highlight the intricate interplay between strategies intended to make use of students' linguistic and cultural resources in the classroom ("get proximate" and "get connected") and strategies intended to promote measurable improvement in students' reading skills ("get moving" using children's literature).
	Alyson Simpson, Teresa Mary Cremin (2022)	Case Study	Not mentioned	WoS	Learning about literacy through literature would foster receptive and responsible reading attitudes as well as the growth of readers.
	Sarah McGeown, Jane Bonsall, Valentina Andries, Danielle Howarth, Katherine Wilkinson (2020)	Case Study	33 children	ERIC	Children's reading motivation differed considerably among the various types of texts. The majority of the reasons kids gave for reading were directly tied to the

					various types of texts they read, such children's books.
	Sukanya Kaowiwat-tanakul (2021)	Quasi-experimental	47 second-year English major students (10 males and 37 females)	ERIC	This study discovered that after engaging in literature-based Reader-Response theory activities, the EFL students' reading comprehension and critical thinking abilities greatly increased.
	Muneer Ajaj (2021)	descriptive analytical approach	(64) students, (44) class teachers and (22) kindergarten majors	ERIC	Children's literature inspire students to read because they link reading to enjoyment.
	Maximilian Pfost, Nora Heyne (2022)	Empirical research	Not mentioned	SpringerLink	Reading fiction to youngsters is a potential strategy to improve their reading comprehension.
	Shelley Stagg Peterson, Red Bear Robinson (2020)	Empirical research	Not mentioned	ERIC	Teachers can help students develop cultural awareness and respectful connections with all peoples by reading the indigenous children's books.
	Patricia A. L. Ong (2022)	Multi-layered analysis	Not mentioned	ERIC	Children's literature that is inclusive can help young learners achieve fair and socially just outcomes.
	Nergiz Kardaş İşler, Hakan Dedeoğlu (2019)	Case Study	Pre-service classroom teachers	ERIC	In order for literary circles to be successful, teachers must select materials that encourage reading fluency. This will increase students' engagement in "real life"

					meaningful discussions about the texts and stories they have read.
	Veena Prachagool (2021)	Mixed-method	25 young children	ERIC	As literary instruction is the foundation for youngsters to receive, learn that reading is enjoyable and can lead to the discovery of many valuable things.
	Jariya Sairattanain, Thiwaporn Thawarom (2022)	Case Study	Not mentioned	ERIC	The length is suitable for students with pre-intermediate language skills to finish reading without encountering any language barriers. The language is simple and the substance is interesting because the authors wanted to use this children's book to let a university student read in one of the required courses.
	Khaled Shuqair, Abdulmuhsin Dashti (2019)	Case Study	66 English teachers	ERIC	Only 6.1% of participants disagreed with the overwhelming majority (91%) who thought children's books may aid in enhancing youngsters' reading abilities.
	Helen Adam, Caroline Barratt-Pugh, Yvonne Haig (2019)	Qualitative research	17 educators	Springer Link	The development of children's conversational language, their early reading abilities, and their future reading proficiency have all been consistently shown to be significantly influenced by frequent exposure to literature through book sharing and reading opportunities.

## 6. Conclusion

As a conclusion, this systematic literature review has reviewed the use of children's literature in improving ESL learners' reading skills. Four databases were used in the literature review namely ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and SpringerLink. 17 final articles were included in this literature review, based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria that had been mentioned in the previous sub-topic. The use of children's literature in improving ESL learners' reading skills has been divided into three aspects; the use of children's literature can improve the ESL learners' reading skills by improving their reading comprehension, reading fluency, and proficiency, as well as promoting enjoyment, engagement, and motivation in reading.

Based on the results, it can be concluded that the use of children's literature which can be varied in terms of materials used such as picture books, big books and fiction storybooks in ESL learning has become a trend and is being widely used all over the education world. Plus, the use of children's literature in learning a second language has brought a lot of positive impacts to teaching and learning. With educators believing and starting to accept that the use of children's literature can be the agent of change in the education system, there is a need for the stakeholders to consider emphasising the use of children's literature again in the education system, especially in the English syllabus. The benefits of children's literature in improving reading skills have been figured out. Thus, the research question for this paper has been answered.

## 7. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This systematic literature review has brought new perspectives and dimensions in the world of education, especially in English Language learning, even though the use of children's literature is not something new among Malaysian teachers and learners. However, the use of children's literature in teaching and learning should have been enlightened again as it brings a lot of positive impacts, especially to ESL learners. However, there is still a big concern in the implementation of children's literature in ESL classrooms. The limitations can be divided into two different perspectives; teachers' perspectives and learners' perspectives. In terms of teachers' perspectives, since there is still a limitation of time allocated for English subjects per week and there are still other topics and syllabus that need to be taught, there will not be enough time to conduct a specific lesson using children's literature in classrooms. However, teachers can always think critically to find the best solution. For example, a grammar lesson can be used to integrate children's literature text in it. So, while having a grammar lesson, at the same time, learners are being exposed to a children's literature text. From one simple children's literature text, teachers can always modify it to suit any language skills to be taught. On the other hand, in terms of learners' perspective, it can be confusing for them to learn a lot of things at a time, and in the end, they will not get anything. What they can do is, they can use their free time to read the children's literature on their own. So when they get in class, they can share their thoughts or ask their teachers about it. Thus, teaching and learning will take place efficiently. The limitation of this paper is there were not many recent past studies and research related to children's literature and ESL which makes it difficult to get the best results. It is quite a challenge to find suitable evidence and references from past studies to be included in this paper because they were very limited. It has become a call for other researchers to publish and conduct studies related to children's literature since it is quite an interesting issue to discuss. As a recommendation for future research, researchers should do other research on the use of children's literature and its impact on other language skills instead of reading skills only.

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