



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT



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ISSN: 2226-6348

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v11-i4/15421>

DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v11-i4/15421

Received: 19 September 2022, **Revised:** 24 October 2022, **Accepted:** 12 November 2022

Published Online: 27 November 2022

In-Text Citation: (Wui & Aziz, 2022)

To Cite this Article: Wui, J. W. J., & Aziz, A. A. (2022). The Effects of Reader's Theatre on Students' Reading Performance: A Systematic Review. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 11(4), 285–300.

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Vol. 11(4) 2022, Pg. 285 - 300

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The Effects of Reader's Theatre on Students' Reading Performance: A Systematic Review

Jordan Wee Jee Wui, Azlina Abdul Aziz

Faculty of Education, National University of Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: p111804@siswa.ukm.edu.my, azlina1@ukm.edu.my

Abstract

Reading skills has always been emphasised in English language classrooms because reading skills is believed to be crucial in helping students become proficient writers and speakers in the process of second language acquisition. However, the "Programme for International Student Assessment" (PISA) 2018 results revealed that most of Malaysian students were still below international benchmark in reading. Therefore, the current systematic review focuses on the effectiveness of Reader's Theatre, a strategy to teach reading, in improving students' reading performance. Employing the "Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses" (PRISMA) review methodology, a total of 15 eligible articles were selected from two databases, which were ERIC and Google Scholar. The identified articles ranged from the year 2013 to 2022. From the articles, it was found out that Reader's Theatre was effective in improving students' oral reading fluency and reading comprehension. Most of the studies in the primary school context focused on the components of oral reading fluency, such as pronunciation, word recognition and prosody; studies in the secondary school context focused more on vocabulary building and reading comprehension. The results also demonstrated the effects of Reader's Theatre in improving motivation among students. It is suggested that future studies focus more on investigating the effectiveness of Reader's Theatre with the integration of technology.

Keywords: Education, Reader's Theatre, Reading Performance, Systematic Literature Review

Introduction

Reading is the most highlighted skill in traditional English language classroom because it is believed that reading is the key to language proficiency (Sloat et al., 2007). As mentioned by Jacob (2016), "reading is a classical and reputed method which helps us become fully accomplished language speakers and writers. Reading has a pivotal role in second language acquisition. Reading is food for mind" (p. 317). Indeed, reading skills has been considered by many linguists, teachers and textbook writers as one of the main four language skills that learners need to master to achieve proficient language ability. Urquhart and Weir (1998) described a reading skill as a cognitive ability used by an individual when interacting with reading texts. It is further elaborated by Lestrud (2013) that reading skills can be divided into several components that an individual must attain to understand the message being conveyed in the written texts, which are phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency,

vocabulary, and comprehension. The development of reading skills is not a stage, but rather a continuum which follows a developmental progression through stages since young age.

In Malaysia, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has been implemented to improve the English language proficiency of Malaysian students. English syllabus and curricula were aligned to CEFR to ensure that the Malaysian English syllabus was commensurate with the international standards. A study by Uri and Aziz (2019) revealed that the reading syllabus specifications in CEFR-aligned English curriculum were relevant to be used against the CEFR global scale. However, the results of the “Programme for International Student Assessment” (PISA) 2018 revealed that only 54% of 15-year-old Malaysian students achieved the minimum proficiency level (OECD average: 77%) in reading (OECD, 2019). Even though there was small improvement compared to PISA 2015 and 2012, Malaysia still achieved below average at the global level (Kok, 2020; Wong, 2019). This implies that further actions need to be taken so that our students are competent enough on the international platform.

Reading is one of the important components of basic language skills that students should acquire since the primary school level because it leads students from word recognition to pragmatic and semantic meanings (Farid, 2020). Over the past few decades, there has been many different theories and opinions on how to teach reading, and a variety of approaches to reading instructions, strategies and techniques to teach different reading sub-skills were developed by teachers and educationists. Reader’s Theatre is one technique that teachers often use to teach reading skills. It is an imaginative and instructional approach for exploiting students’ desire to perform and simultaneously improve their reading skills (Rasinski et al., 2017). Hence, this article aims to provide a review of Reader’s Theatre and its effectiveness in improving students’ reading performance. It is also aimed to provide an insight of the role of Reader’s Theatre in improving students’ reading motivation.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

The main objective of this systematic review is to present a summary and synthesis of evidence in the past studies, and to contribute to the literature of English language learning by presenting results from the review of Reader’s Theatre on students’ reading performance so that further actions and future studies in this area can be conducted. This systematic review is conducted to answer the following two research questions:

- (a) What is the impact of Reader’s Theatre on the reading performance of students?
- (b) What is the impact of Reader’s Theatre on students’ motivation to read?

Literature Review

Reading Skills

Reading is defined as the ability to draw and interpret meanings from printed or electronic page (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Reading skills are important skills that are essential for both academic and communicative purposes. Given the importance of reading skills in academic achievements, career prospects and daily communications, it has been extensively studied across different disciplines. During the reading process, readers comprehend the text by recognising the words, identifying the general idea, and looking for the main idea and supporting details. They may attempt the reading materials in three ways: bottom-up, top-down, or interactive.

Bottom-up Model

The bottom-up model describes reading as the process of constructing meaning from the smallest to the biggest components (Suraprajit, 2019). The process moves from smaller language units, such as phonemes, letters, or words, to larger language units, such as phrases and sentences. In other words, readers decode sounds and words, build inter-sentential associations, and subsequently understand the message conveyed in the reading materials. As cited by Dole et al (1991), bottom-up model is a part-to-whole process in a single direction from recognising letters to comprehending meanings. Meanings are constructed from word identification and, therefore, readers' background knowledge is not an important variable in this model.

Reutzel and Cooter (2005) also claim that learning to read in a bottom-up model begins with learning parts of language to understanding the whole texts. Therefore, bottom-up model opines phonics as an essential piece of knowledge to be acquired so that readers are equipped with the knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondence and decode words into meanings. With the knowledge of phonics, readers develop automaticity, whereby they recognise and decode the words effortlessly (LaBerge and Samuels, 1974). When they become automatic in word decoding, they leave more cognitive attention capacity to higher level processing tasks such as comprehension.

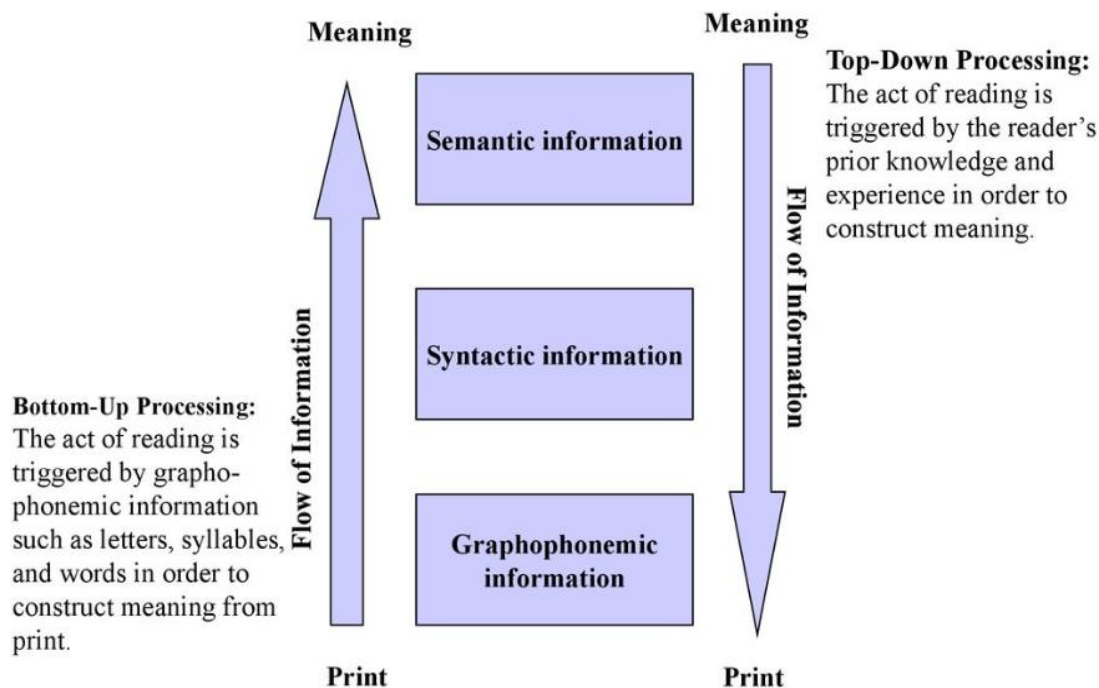
Top-down Model

Top-down model is conceptualised as a "psycholinguistic guessing game," a process of guessing the meaning of the reading materials (Goodman, 1971). To be able to guess meanings easily and successfully, readers need to have prior sense in their mind that can bring to the reading material. In other words, top-down model emphasises schemata, or readers' previous experiences or background knowledge about the language. Readers use semantic cues (meaning) and syntactic cues (grammar and syntax) in addition to grapheme-phoneme cues to identify words and comprehend meanings.

The proponents of top-down model believes that readers are able to comprehend a reading material even when they cannot identify each word. They employ their prior experiences about the subject matter and the background linguistic knowledge to assist them in processing and predicting the meanings. Unlike bottom-up model that produces meaning from low-sensory processes such as decoding, top-down model produces meaning from higher-sensory processes such as activating prior knowledge and predicting. The difference between bottom-up and top-down reading models is depicted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

A Comparison between Bottom-up and Top-down Models of Reading (adapted from Vacca et al., 2016)



Interactive Model

The interactive model describes the act of reading as triggered by the readers' prior knowledge and experiences as well as grapheme-phoneme information to produce meaning (see Figure 2). The interactive model is built based on the notion that a good reader does not use solely grapheme-phoneme correspondence or contextual clues to construct meaning, but a combination of both instead (Liu 2010). It is an integration of the bottom-up and top-down reading models wherein studies have validated its significance in facilitating readers' rapid and effective information processing (Grant et al, 2011; Verhoeven, 2011).

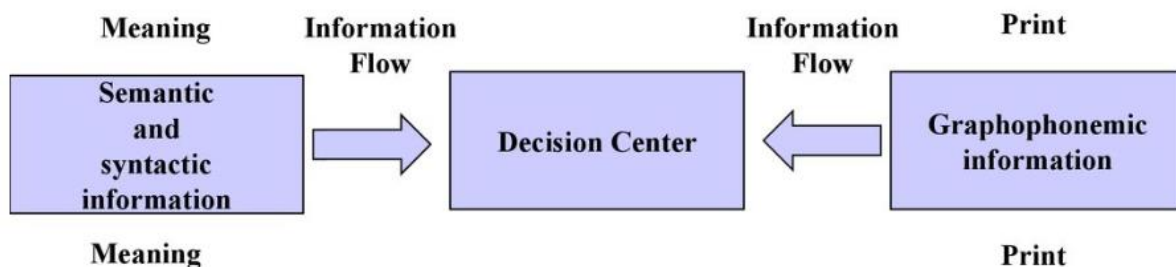


Figure 2 An Interactive Model of Reading (adapted from Vacca et al., 2016)

Interactive model is conceptualised as complementing the shortcomings of both top-down and bottom-up reading models. Alternatively stated, readers make use of top-down model to compensate for the lack of skills on bottom-up models, and vice versa. For example,

a reader who is weak in phonics may use strong semantic or syntactic cues to guess the meaning of unrecognised words. This is supported by Stanovich (1980) who stated:

“Interactive models assume that a pattern is synthesised based on information provided simultaneously from several knowledge sources. The compensatory assumption states that a deficit in any knowledge source results in a heavier reliance on other knowledge sources, regardless of their level in the processing hierarchy.” (p. 63)

Reading Aloud and Performance-Based Reading

According to the National Reading Panel Report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), effective reading instructions should include these five essential components: i) phonemic awareness; ii) phonics; iii) fluency; iv) vocabulary; and v) comprehension. To address these five components, reading aloud is identified as having an important role in helping students learn to read, and develop independent reading (Sajid & Kassim, 2019). Reading-aloud can be done by students themselves, or by teachers or adults through reading the text audibly fluently with expressions, appropriate intonation, tempo and voice modulation (Johnston, 2016). During the process of reading aloud, teacher models fluent reading; students listen and effectively learn how to use graphophonemic, semantic and syntactic cues to recognise words.

Reading aloud can be conducted in many different methods, and one of the methods includes performance reading. In performance reading, students read the text in addition with the element of performance. Performance-based reading aloud activities include storytelling, role play, song singing, Rock and Read, and Reader’s Theatre (Young et al. 2016). During the performance reading, students focus on important words, and change their voice modulation, facial expressions and body language to portray the meanings conveyed in the text. Reader’s Theatre is a reading activity whereby students read a text for the audience without having to memorise the text. Students practise and rehearse for the final performance (Young & Rasinski, 2009). Advocates of Reader’s Theatre claims such activity as being able to improve phonics skills and fluency since students undergo repeated reading in every rehearsal. Also, as students try to use expressions and intonation to convey the meaning of the text, it is an indication that they comprehend the message of the text (Kulo et al., 2021).

Method

A systematic review is a review that organises and synthesises findings of the studies regarding a formulated question in a explicit and systematic manner (Higgins et al., 2019). This systematic literature review was implemented using the “Preferred Reporting Item for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses” (PRISMA) 2020 checklist. PRISMA 2020 is adaptable since it is intended for use in systematic reviews that do or do not include synthesis, and it is relevant for mixed-methods reviews (Page et al., 2021). By examining articles related to the application of Reader’s Theatre, this paper analyses and synthesises the impact of Reader’s Theatre on students’ reading performance and their motivation to read. The review starts with the identification of articles related to the use of Reader’s Theatre to improve reading performance using the ERIC and Google Scholar databases. The following process are categorised into three phases: the identification phase, the screening and eligibility phase, and the inclusion phase.

Phase 1: Identification

This systematic literature review employed articles from two databases: ERIC and Google Scholar. The search range was limited from 2013 to 2022. Table 1 shows the keywords used when searching for the articles in the databases. To further specify the articles that are relevant to the research questions, inclusion and exclusion criteria are employed along with the search for the articles, as shown in Table 2.

Table 1

Keywords used for searching relevant articles

Databases	Keywords
ERIC	Reader's Theatre AND effectiveness, Reader's Theatre AND impact, Reader's Theatre AND effect, Reader's Theatre AND English teaching, Reader's Theatre AND reading skills,
Google Scholar	Reader's Theatre AND reading performance, Reader's Theatre AND learning motivation, Reader's Theatre AND students' motivation, Reader's Theatre AND reading motivation.

Table 2

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Type of articles	Journal articles	Books, book chapters, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, websites, proceedings
Language of the articles	English	Non-English
Year of publication	2013-2022	Any earlier than 2013
Peer review	Peer-reviewed	Without peer-reviewed
Sample	Primary or secondary students	Tertiary students
Perspective	Students or teachers	Parents, school administrators

Phase 2: Screening and Eligibility

After searching for the articles in both ERIC and Google Scholar, the duplicated articles were excluded. The articles were then examined and checked for the eligibility based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria as stated in Table 2. The titles and the abstract of the articles were examined. For some articles which is hard to be included or excluded based on the title and abstract, the introduction and the conclusion sections were also read through.

Phase 3: Inclusion

After checking the articles' eligibility, the remaining articles were read through again to ensure they meet the inclusion criteria. Any articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria, which the researcher might have overlooked in phase 2, were eliminated. This is also to ensure that the researcher obtained relevant, and quality final data needed for the systematic literature review.

Results and Discussion

Fifteen articles from the year 2013 to 2022 are shortlisted based on the two review questions as well as the nature of the respective studies. Ten articles are in the context of primary schools while another four articles are in the context of secondary schools.

RQ 1: What is the impact of Reader's Theatre on the reading performance of students?

The researcher summarises the past studies about Reader's Theatre in the context of primary education (see Table 3) and secondary education (see Table 4). It is found out that studies about Reader's Theatre are more common in the context of primary education (n=10) compared to secondary education (n=4), probably because of the performance-based nature of Reader's Theatre.

Through the articles, it is revealed that Reader's Theatre is used to investigate its effectiveness on different components of reading performance, such as reading fluency, pronunciation, and reading comprehension. In the context of primary education, oral reading fluency is the most investigated component of reading performance (Mraz et al., 2013; Myrset & Drew, 2016; Young et al., 2016; Young & Rasinski, 2017; Mohamed et al., 2020; Jenkins et al., 2020; Devarajoo & Yamat, 2021; Quezada, 2021). Meanwhile, the relationship between Reader's Theatre and reading comprehension is investigated more often in the secondary education context (Kulo et al., 2020; Mohamed et al., 2020).

Oral reading fluency comprises word accuracy, word automaticity and prosody (Young & Ortlieb, 2018). The skills to recognise words in an automatic and effortless manner, and to read with appropriate expressions and intonation are some of the fundamental reading skills necessary to be acquired during early reading stage. Hence, Reader's Theatre in primary education often examines students' oral reading fluency. On the other hand, secondary education emphasises the comprehension component of reading. Therefore, scholars tend to study the effects of Reader's Theatre on reading comprehension in the context of secondary education.

Table 3

Summary of the studies on Reader's Theatre in primary school context

No.	Article/Study	Participants and Contexts	Instruments	Components of Reading Performance
1.	Mraz et al. (2013)	Third-grade African American students (n=19)	Johns Basic Reading Inventory, Multidimensional Fluency Scale (MFS)	Oral reading fluency (word recognition accuracy, word recognition automaticity, prosody) Comprehension
2.	Myrset & Drew (2016)	Sixth-grade students in Norway (n=27)	Lesson observations, video recordings	Pronunciation, word recognition, fluency
3.	Young et al. (2016)	Second-grade students (n=51)	Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills Oral Reading Fluency (DIBELS-ORF), MFS	Word recognition automaticity, reading fluency
4.	Young & Rasinski (2017)	Second-grade students (n=70)	Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI), Oral Reading Fluency Scale	Word recognition accuracy, prosody
5.	Young et al. (2019)	Second-grade students (n=76)	Interviews, video recordings, teachers' journal	Reading comprehension
6.	Mohamed et al. (2020)	Primary 6 students from Benha, Egypt	Pre and post reading prosody test, MFS	Oral reading fluency, Oral reading prosody
7.	Young et al. (2020)	Second-grade male students (n=46)	GMRT-4 pre-test and post-test	Decoding, word knowledge and reading comprehension
8.	Jenkins et al. (2020)	African American male students who with a primary diagnosis of emotional and behavioural disorder	Frequency count	Oral fluency
9.	Devarajoo & Yamat (2021)	Year 2 students in Malaysia (n=3)	Observational checklist, journals	Reading fluency
10.	Quezada (2021)	Dyslexic third and fourth-grade primary students (n=11)	The Adapted Prosody Appreciation Scale	Oral reading prosody

Table 4

Summary of the studies on Reader's Theatre in secondary school context

No.	Article/Study	Participants and Contexts	Instruments	Components of Reading Performance
1.	Mansouri (2016)	Female intermediate EFL students in Iran (n=60)	Oxford Placement Test	L2 vocabulary knowledge
2.	Shanti et al. (2019)	High school students in Malaysia (n=98)	Questionnaire, observation	Reading fluency
3.	Kulo et al. (2020)	Form three secondary students in Kenya (n=426)	Reading skills achievement test, questionnaires	Reading comprehension
4.	Mohamed et al. (2020)	Female first year secondary students (n=50)	Reading skills questionnaire, pre-post reading skills test, motivation scale	Reading comprehension

The effectiveness of Reader's Theatre on students' reading performance is summarised in Table 5. Most studies have demonstrated the positive effects of Reader's Theatre on students' oral reading fluency. The students' word automaticity (recognising words effortlessly), word accuracy (read with correct pronunciation), and prosody (expressions, pace and other non-linguistic features) showed improvement after participating in Reader's Theatre. The improvement of reading fluency has a positive impact on students' reading comprehension. As students read more fluently, they can allocate their cognitive capacity to more complex tasks such as comprehension (Young et al., 2020). Hence, Reader's Theatre is effective in improving students' oral reading fluency as well as reading comprehension.

Table 5

Summary of the studies on Reader's Theatre and its impact on reading performance

No.	Article/Study	Findings
1.	Mraz et al. (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement in word recognition accuracy (increase in the number of words read correctly) • Improvement in word recognition automaticity (increase in the number of words read in one minute) • Improvement in prosody (average score increased from 5 to 11) • Improvement in comprehension (from 46% to 86%)
2.	Myrset & Drew (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement in accuracy (reduce in the number of mispronounced words) • Improvement in word recognition (increase in the reading speed) • Improvement in fluency (reduce in the use of fillers)
3.	Young et al. (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement in students' expression and volume • Students read in meaningful phrases and paused when punctuation dictated. • Increase in reading rate
4.	Mansouri (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students' vocabulary knowledge was positively affected by the exposure to Reader's Theatre.
5.	Young & Rasinski (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement in word recognition accuracy • Improvement in prosody
6.	Shanti et al. (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students claimed that Reader's Theatre helped improve their pronunciation. •
7.	Young et al. (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant gain in word knowledge (vocabulary) • For word decoding, the development of the treatment group was similar with the control group. • Large positive effect on students' reading comprehension

8.	Mohamed et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in scores for prosody • Improvement in overall oral reading fluency
9.	Young et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boys who participated in Reader's Theatre showed better improvement in reading comprehension. • The treatment and comparison groups gained similar results on word knowledge and decoding, and the differences were not statistically significant.
10.	Mohamed et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reader's Theatre was effective in improving students' reading skills.
11.	Kulo et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students improved in word recognition and decoding through repeated readings. • The use of intonation to convey meaning also indicated students' improvement of their reading comprehension.
12.	Jenkins et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequency count of pre- and post-test showed a drastic decrease in fluency errors.
13.	Devarajoo & Yamat (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement in students' ability to pronounce words • Improvement in reading with intonation • Increase in word recognition
14.	Quezada (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvements in reading prosody among students with dyslexia • Reader's Theatre may not be enough to improve reading accuracy for students who have difficulties with certain letters.

RQ 2: What is the impact of Reader's Theatre on students' motivation to read?

Reader's Theatre has an impact on students' motivation level as well (see Table 6). Students showed improvement in their oral reading fluency, indicating an increasing fluency when they read texts. The sense of accomplishment is promising; students become more engaged in the reading-related activities as they are more confident in completing the tasks (Jenkins et al, 2020; Devarajoo & Yamat, 2021). The success of reading performance in intensive it helps students to cultivate the love to reading, and subsequently to make extensive reading a habit (Myrset & Drew, 2016; Mohamed et al., 2020).

Table 6

Summary of the studies on Reader's Theatre and its impact on students' reading motivation

No.	Article/Study	Instruments	Findings
1.	Karabag (2015)	Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most students perceived Reader's Theatre as allowing them to read effectively. • Students showed active participation in the reading process.
2.	Myrset & Drew (2016)	Interviews, pupils' journals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Majority of the students were motivated to read more fairy tales on their own.
3.	Shanti et al. (2019)	Questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most students agreed that Reader's Theatre helped them to read better in English. • Most students were able to use English more confidently through Reader's Theatre.
4.	Jenkins et al. (2020)	Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students were encouraged to become more active and less reluctant to attempt the reading tasks. • Students were willing to assist less fluent readers.
5.	Mohamed et al. (2020)	Motivation scale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students showed an increase in their motivation level in reading-related activities.
6.	Devarajoo & Yamat (2021)	Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The incorporation of technology in Reader's Theatre motivated the students to participate in the activity. • Students were observed to be active and responsible in their own learning.

Conclusion

Reading is an essential skill that needs to be mastered by every student, especially in primary school, because most of the tasks in language learning in higher level require proficiency in reading skills. Keeping in view the significance of reading skills in a student's language acquisition, the present review concludes and informs that the Reader's Theatre can help students of different levels develop their reading abilities. The findings of the review suggest that Reader's Theatre is effective in improving students' oral reading fluency. Through Reader's Theatre, students improve their word recognition and decoding skills, resulting in the improvement of their reading accuracy. When they can recognise words more rapidly, they can read with more fluency. The review also reveals that Reader's Theatre has the potential in improving students' reading comprehension. Compared to the traditional reading activities, Reader's Theatre is found out to have motivating effects on students' interest to read. Hence, teachers can apply Reader's Theatre as a classroom activity or as a part of literacy building blocks in order to help students improve their reading skills.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

The current review is not without its limitations. The current review faces challenges in terms of its relatively limited number of databases involved. The current review relied on only two databases, ERIC and Google Scholar, to identify eligible studies to be included in the review. Same articles may appear in both databases, and this may reduce the number of articles identified and selected. Hence, the researcher could increase the diversity of the articles

reviewed by involving more databases, such as JSTOR, ScienceDirect and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), so that a deeper and broader review of the research topic can be produced.

From the review, it is found out that most of the studies about Reader's Theatre did not incorporate the use of technology. As mentioned by Nicolau et al. (2019), the advancements of technology nowadays have brought about changes in the education sector, whereby information and communications technology (ICT) has become pervasive in all educational levels. Therefore, the review presents a gap, which is the incorporation of technologies in Reader's Theatre. Hence, it is recommended that the element of technology be included in Reader's Theatre in future research so that the compatibility of Reader's Theatre and technology can be determined.

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