

# Extensive Reading to Assuage Primary ESL Learners Reading Difficulties: A Systematic Review

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## Abstract

Extensive reading is acknowledged as one of the approaches to encourage ESL learning and acquisition. With the integration of technology in education, extensive reading is evolving to accommodate the current teaching and learning environments. However, the amount of literature reviews on extensive reading in primary schools is limited, as many studies are focused on learners in secondary schools or tertiary institutions. Hence, this review systematically identifies the implementation of extensive reading to assuage Primary ESL learners reading difficulties. Using three databases, namely; Google Scholar, Scopus, and Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC), 15 articles published between 2018 and 2023 were extracted. Two significant findings are presented in this review. First, poor reading comprehension is the main factor that contributes to primary learners' reading difficulties. Second, extensive reading can assuage reading difficulties when the learners' unique abilities and needs are addressed optimally. These findings suggested that there are gaps in this research area that could be further explored in the future. Substantially, this systematic review is valuable to researchers and educators as it offers more insights into the implementation of extensive reading to assuage ESL learners' reading difficulties specifically in the primary school context while identifying the gaps in this research area.

**Keywords:** Extensive Reading, Reading Skills, English as a Second Language (ESL), Primary School, Reading Difficulties

## Introduction

Fundamentally, ESL is often taught based on the four skills; listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (Kosimov, 2022). While speaking and writing skills are categorised as productive skills, listening and reading skills are receptive skills (Payne, 2020) and are crucial parts of language acquisition (Krashen, 1989). Although all these skills are equally important, in the ESL context, nurturing reading skills would allow learners to develop other language skills and enhance their knowledge. However, UNICEF (2022) has highlighted an alarming rate of illiteracy among young learners around the world. The lack of access to high-quality education

is to blame for this learning crisis (Angrist et al., 2021; Fredriksen, 2022), and this problem was made worse by the extended closure of schools owing to the COVID-19 epidemic (UNICEF, 2022).

The pandemic indeed, reminded the world that many learners relied solely on schools for academic inputs (Reimers, 2022), without which they had to go through the challenging phase of pivoting between different learning mediums (Hurwitz et al., 2022). Underprivileged families especially, relied heavily on school-based services and facilities (Masonbrink, 2020). In language learning however, specifically in the teaching and learning of reading skills, this circumstance had contributed to an increasing interest in the role of extensive reading in ensuring educational continuity, especially in language learning. A study by Al-Jarf (2022) for instance, found that the number of novels and fiction read by his respondents during the pandemic was significantly higher than before the pandemic. Although it is not a new approach to learning ESL, due to the increasing number of research revolving around the topic in recent years, it could be concluded that the pandemic had sparked the interest of many researchers to rediscover extensive reading as a strategy to assuage reading difficulties among ESL learners.

The trend of these researches, however, leans more towards the implementation of extensive reading for older ESL learners such as secondary school and tertiary institution learners. This leaves a gap where a closer look into how extensive reading works for primary school learners who are less proficient and independent is needed. Hence, this systematic review aims to identify the trend in the implementation of extensive reading to assuage Primary ESL learners reading difficulties over the last six years, with the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the common factors that resulted in primary school ESL learners' reading difficulties?

RQ2: To what extent does extensive reading assuage primary school ESL learners' reading difficulties?

Due to the continuous interest in reading strategies, several reviews related to the teaching of ESL reading have been conducted. Baker and Nguyen (2021) reviewed the history of the term 'extensive reading' and the definitions of the term across the years. The results suggested that the concept of extensive reading has been around as far back as 1844. The study then stressed that the idea was broadened in the early 1900s by academics like West (1926) before additional research was suggested on the precise traits and guiding principles of extensive reading, which are still widely used in education today. Liando et al. (2020) on the other hand, reviewed studies on the relation of extensive reading towards vocabulary knowledge. The results summarised that extensive reading works to assist learners in grasping new words.

Although extensive reading has been included in some reviews on reading strategies, due to its relevance and long history, it is hoped that reviews uniquely in primary school context would grow, as at this level, language acquisition through reading is a crucial part of learning a second language. Therefore, this systematic literature review fills this gap and examines the implications of extensive reading on primary ESL learners.

## **Methods**

This systematic literature review models the framework suggested by Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA). This framework comprises four stages, namely; identification, screening, eligibility, and included, as visualised in Figure 1.0.

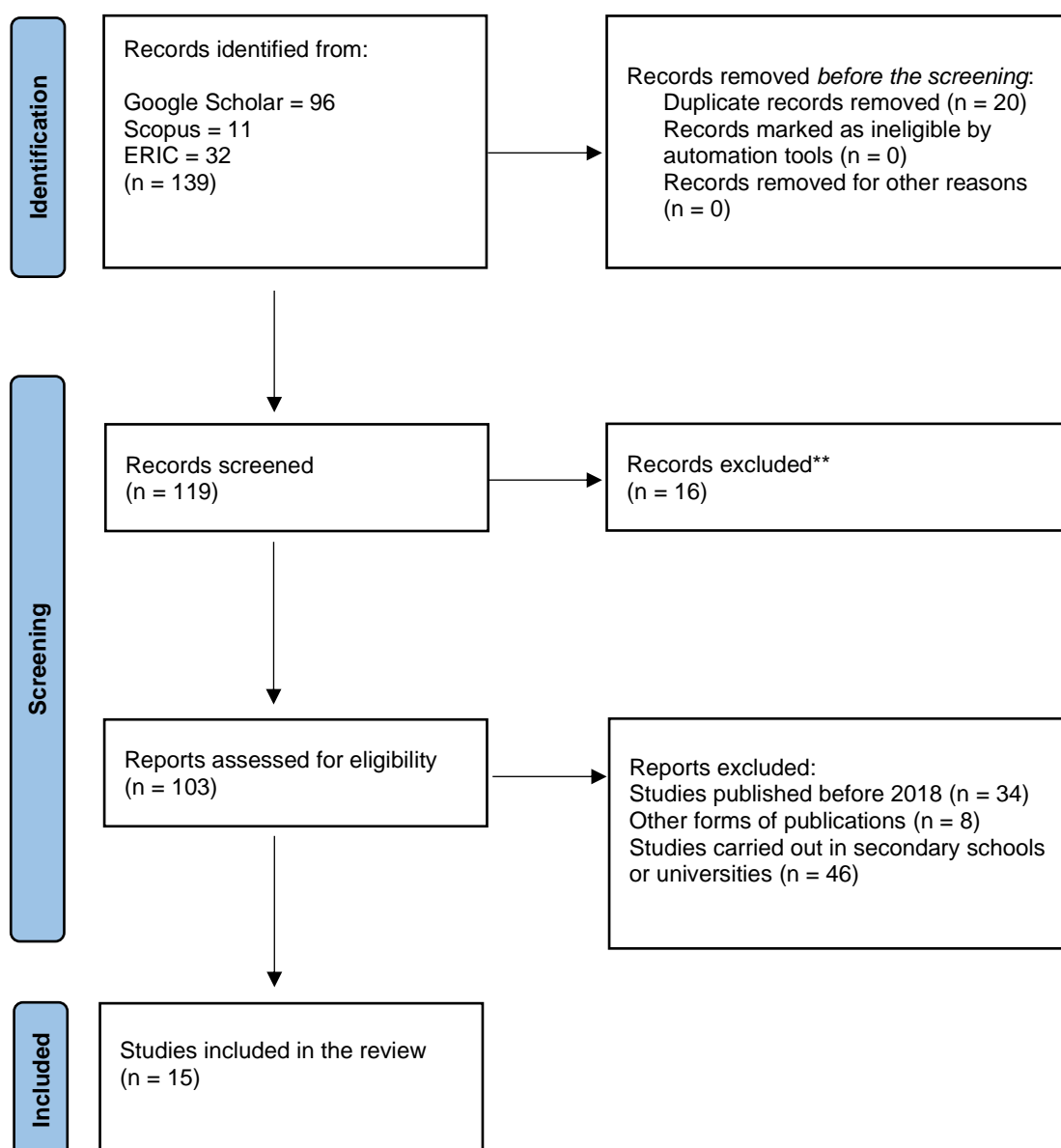


Figure 1.0: PRISMA systematic review adapted from Page et al. (2020)

### Identification

The identification stage is the first stage in PRISMA systematic review. Google Scholar, Scopus, and the Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC) were searched for and used to choose the papers. To ensure that the papers collected are appropriate for this study, the key terms used to search for possible articles were carefully chosen. ESL or EFL learners and extensive reading-related terms were all covered. The search terms used to find the articles in all three databases are shown in Figure 2.1 below.

Database	Key terms
Google Scholar	“Extensive Reading for Primary ESL Learners” OR
Scopus	“Extensive Reading for Primary EFL Learners” OR
ERIC	“Extensive Reading for Elementary ESL Learners” OR "Extensive Reading for Elementary EFL Learners"

Figure 2.1: Key terms used in searching the articles

### Screening

The second stage following the identification is the screening stage. The stage began with the process of eliminating article duplicates found in different databases. Based on the initial screening step, 5 duplicates were detected and 119 items were eligible for further screening. These 119 papers were searched by key terms, with the proviso that they were relevant to the practice of integrated reading in elementary school. 16 papers from this screening process were disregarded because they were irrelevant to the research questions. Following exclusion, the 23 articles that remained were scrutinised using the inclusion and exclusion criteria depicted in Figure 2.2.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Studies published between 2018 and 2023	Studies published before 2018
Articles from journals	Other forms of publications
Studies carried out in primary schools	Studies carried out in secondary schools or universities

Figure 2.2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Due to the scarcity of studies related to extensive reading in primary schools, the number of studies has narrowed down to only 15 articles for the next stages in this systematic literature review.

### Included

Based on Figure 2.2, nine articles were retrieved from Google Scholar, three from Scopus, and three from ERIC as listed in Figure 2.3 below. Since the interest of this study is younger ESL learners, all the selected studies were carried out in primary or elementary schools around the world. These studies mainly discuss the implication of extensive reading on ESL or EFL learners in primary school.

	Study	Database	Aim	Participants	Findings
1	Endris (2018)	Google Scholar	To investigate the effects of extensive reading on reading comprehension and perceptions toward the extensive	90 8 <sup>th</sup> grader EFL learners in an Ethiopian primary school.	The experimental group outperformed the control group on the comprehension post-test without statistically

			reading programme.		significant change.
2	Birketveit et al. (2018)	Google Scholar	To investigate the learners' perceptions of an extensive reading and writing project, as well as their responses to the reading material offered.	83 primary school learners in three schools.	The learners valued the chance to select the reading material themselves highly.
3	Meganathan et al. (2019)	Scopus	To investigate the effectiveness of different instructional techniques on vocabulary acquisition among young ESL learners.	99 learners between 10-11 years old in a Malaysian Tamil primary school.	There are substantial improvements for both experimental groups, with higher means for post-test and delayed post-test scores for the ER+ group. For the control group, there was nevertheless no gain.
4	Pirih (2019)	Scopus	To explore the dynamics of the EFL reading motivation of a group of Slovene primary school learners.	10 learners (8 girls and 2 boys from a semi-urban primary school in Slovenia.	A complicated and dynamic process, reading motivation in EFL is fuelled by a variety of factors, most notably reading resources, familial influences, positive attitudes towards English, and external expectations.
5	Waring and Vu (2020)	Google Scholar	To investigate the Google Scholar development of ER practice in the past two years following the Extensive Reading	112 Vietnamese EFL teachers.	There hasn't been any improvement in ER implementation.

			Foundation (ERF) road shows held in the country.		
6	Nkomo (2020)	Scopus	To explore the effects of implementing a bilingual extensive reading programme in the foundation phase.	Two primary schools in Grahamstown with all the learners who were in grade 3 in 2015	The academic and social abilities of the learners can both benefit from a thoroughly thought-out reading course that is adapted to each participant's needs.
7	Song (2020)	Google Scholar	To explore how participating in an eight-week extensive reading programme helped young EFL learners incidentally acquire vocabulary and develop reading comprehension.	29 primary school EFL learners.	While ER had a small impact on reading comprehension, it significantly aided EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition.
8	Jeon and Kim (2021)	Google Scholar	To find out whether extensive reading (ER) can be an effective teaching approach for teaching English to young learners and to investigate the young EFL learners' perception and motivation for ER.	5 young male EFL learners in South Korea.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The number of books read by the learners and their reading level are connected.</li> <li>2. The learners thought that ER was an excellent tool for enhancing their knowledge of the English language and the wider world.</li> </ol>

9	Maipoka and Soontornwipast (2021)	ERIC	To investigate the effects of integrated intensive and extensive reading instruction on Thai primary school learners' English reading ability.	11 primary school Thai learners.	After getting IERI, learners' English reading skills in terms of their vocabulary knowledge and their reading comprehension considerably improved.
10	Nkomo (2021)	ERIC	To explore the benefits of extensive reading on Foundation Phase EFL learners.	71 Grade 3 learners at two primary schools in the Eastern Cape.	The learners' acquisition of new knowledge (cognitive benefits), change in attitude towards reading (affective benefits), and the emergence of reading responsibility (social benefits) were all seen as benefits of taking part in the ERP.
11	Park and Lee (2021)	ERIC	To study the role of tablets and printed books in improving learners' reading.	97 primary school EFL learners in South Korea.	While digital texts are better for short and shallow learning, print is better for in-depth reading.
12	Bala (2022)	Google Scholar	To examine the attitudes of private primary school learners towards an extensive reading program in the digital library.	10 learners from grades 5 and 6 in a private primary school.	Due to its additional features and incentive methods, a digital library has a positive impact on learners' reading motivation and engagement.
13	Kim and Kim (2022)	Google Scholar	To explore the success factors for English	5 primary school	The integrated language function in the

			extensive reading on elementary learners.	learners in South Korea.	reading process improved for learners who completed online-based self-directed extensive reading effectively.
14	Oaxaca et al. (2022)	Google Scholar	To explore how the reading-aloud project helps learners develop their English reading skills and how much they enjoy reading.	21 primary school EFL learners.	The project on reading aloud revealed a gradual improvement in the understanding of its impact on reading comprehension, enjoyment, and continuing English reading.
15	Conaway and Parsons (2023)	Google Scholar	To explore the common ER practices of EFL teachers and the rationales for those choices.	22 Japanese EFL teachers.	Less explicitly referencing specific study findings, the teachers frequently relied on personal experience and experimentation to establish their justifications for reading targets and grading guidelines.

Figure 2.3: Summary of the selected articles

### Data Analysis Method

After the 15 articles are finalised, the main themes are found using thematic analysis. To do this, the articles are compared and categorised for each research question:

1. What are the common factors that resulted in primary school ESL learners' reading difficulties?
2. To what extent does extensive reading assuage primary school ESL learners' reading difficulties?

To answer the first question, the reading difficulties mentioned in the articles are categorised based on the different aspects of reading skills mentioned in the studies. The second question



is answered by analysing the findings of the selected studies on how extensive reading impacted the different aspects of reading skills.

## Results

### RQ 1

What are the common factors that resulted in primary school ESL learners' reading difficulties?

Reviewing the selected studies has allowed this systematic review to categorise the factors that result in primary learners' reading difficulties. The four factors are (1) limited vocabulary, (2) poor reading comprehension, (3) limited exposure or access to English reading materials, and (4) poor reading motivation. Although these factors are correlated to each other, this section analyses them separately, according to the studies.

Common factors	Studies	Participants
Limited vocabulary	Meganathan et al. (2019) Song (2020) Maipoka and Soontornwipast (2021) Kim and Kim (2022)	99 primary school learners 20 primary school learners 11 primary school learners 5 primary school learners
Poor reading comprehension	Endris (2018) Song (2020) Maipoka and Soontornwipast (2021) Park and Lee (2021) Oaxaca et al. (2022)	90 8 <sup>th</sup> -grade learners 29 primary school learners 11 primary school learners 97 primary school learners 21 primary school learners
Limited access to English reading materials	Nkomo (2020) Nkomo (2021)	2 primary school learners 71 3 <sup>rd</sup> -grade learners
Poor reading motivation	Pirih (2019) Waring and Vu (2020)	10 primary school learners 112 primary school teachers
Not specified	Birketveit et al. (2018) Jeon and Kim (2021) Bala (2022) Conaway and Parsons (2023)	83 primary school learners 5 primary school learners 10 primary school learners 22 primary school teachers

Figure 3.1: Common factors affecting primary school ESL learners' reading skills

As listed in Figure 3.1 above, five articles stated that learners' limited vocabulary is the cause of their reading difficulties. Meganathan et al (2019) conducted Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) adapted by Schmitt et al (2001) and found that the learners have limited vocabulary knowledge and relied on translations to understand unknown words. Song (2020) also evaluated the learners' vocabulary knowledge by conducting Vocabulary Knowledge Test. From the test, it was concluded that the learners are at lower average levels and recognised mainly the common and frequently used words in English. The other two studies (Maipoka & Soontornwipast, 202; Kim & Kim, 2022) also highlighted that ESL learners who have limited or basic vocabulary knowledge face challenges in reading because vocabulary is one of the main aspects of the reading process.

Another factor highlighted as the cause of reading difficulties is poor reading comprehension. Endris (2018) conducted a reading comprehension test on primary EFL learners and found that learners have difficulties answering lower and higher-order skills questions in unfamiliar

contexts. Song (2020) also found that the ESL learners' comprehension level is lower as the comprehension test used for 10 years old learners in the study is normally used for 8 years old learners. In (Maipoka & Soontornwipast, 2021; Park & Lee, 2021), it is explained that with limited exposure to the use of the language, learners' reading comprehension is at beginner level, which would hinder them from reading fluently. Oaxaca et al (2022) added that as learners deal with poor reading comprehension, they would be more reliant on their teacher in language learning.

Limited access to English reading materials is another major factor in reading difficulties. Not only it may lead to the two factors discussed above (Nkomo, 2020; Nkomo, 2021; Maipoka & Soontornwipast, 2021), it makes English a foreign language to them. Nkomo (2020) specifically highlighted that the learners with fewer reading opportunities struggle with the language although some of them are interested in reading. Nkomo (2021) further explained that underprivileged learners with little to no exposure to authentic reading materials have difficulties developing an interest in learning the language.

Several other studies found that poor reading motivation is another factor that leads to reading difficulties. Pirih (2019) summarised various studies which agreed that reading motivation impacts ESL reading proficiency and learners' reading autonomy. Without reading motivation, ESL learners could struggle with written language. Meanwhile, Waring and Vu (2020) found that struggling ESL readers are not motivated to even read in their native language. Hence, they do not understand the importance of ESL reading, nor are motivated to enhance their reading skills. The remaining studies did not specify the factors of reading difficulties among primary school ESL learners. Conaway and Parsons (2023) looked into the perspectives of the teachers in deciding on their extensive reading practices. Jeon and Kim (2021) did not focus on reading difficulties. However, the study found that motivation is a driving factor to encourage extensive reading among learners. Kim and Kim (2022) on the other hand, studied the success factors of an extensive reading programme. Similarly, Bala (2022) looked into the reading practice of motivated learners and how their proficiency levels could be enhanced through extensive reading, while Birketveit et al. (2018) connected reading to the role of genders.

RQ 2: To what extent does extensive reading assuage primary school ESL learners' reading difficulties?

The second research question analyses to what extent extensive reading work assuages primary school ESL learners' reading difficulties based on the reviewed articles. This question is the most crucial part of this systematic review since the number of studies related to extensive reading conducted in primary schools is very limited.

Impacts of extensive reading on reading difficulties	Studies	Participants
Vocabulary	Endris (2018) Meganathan et al. (2019) Song (2020) Maipoka and Soontornwipast (2021) Nkomo (2021)	90 8 <sup>th</sup> -grade learners 99 primary school learners 20 primary school learners 11 primary school learners 71 3 <sup>rd</sup> -grade learners
Reading comprehension	Endris (2018) Birketveit et al. (2018) Song (2020) Maipoka and Soontornwipast (2021) Nkomo (2021) Park and Lee (2021) Oaxaca et al. (2022)	90 8 <sup>th</sup> -grade learners 83 primary school learners 20 primary school learners 11 primary school learners 71 3 <sup>rd</sup> -grade learners 97 primary school learners 21 primary school learners
Reading fluency	Nkomo (2020) Jeon and Kim(2021) Nkomo (2021) Kim and Kim (2022)	2 primary school learners 5 primary school learners 71 3 <sup>rd</sup> -grade learners 5 primary school learners
Not specified	Pirih (2019) Waring and Vu (2020) Bala (2022) Conaway and Parsons (2023)	10 primary school learners 112 primary school teachers 10 primary school learners 22 primary school teachers

Figure 3.2: Impacts of extensive reading to assuage primary school ESL learners' reading difficulties

The results are categorised into three major aspects of reading, namely; vocabulary, reading comprehension, and reading fluency as shown in Figure 3.2 above. Based on the analysis, all except two studies focused on the learners' motivation (Pirih, 2019; Bala, 2022), and another two studies focused on the teacher's perception of extensive reading (Waring & Vu, 2020; Conaway & Parsons, 2023), agreed that extensive reading assuages at least one reading difficulty. Hence, this section will discuss the result based on the reading skills addressed by the studies. Firstly, several studies found that extensive reading improves the learners' vocabulary knowledge to a certain extent. Endris (2018) found that after 12 weeks of the extensive reading programme, learners' vocabulary acquisition has improved only slightly, suggesting that extensive reading needs to be implemented continuously to allow significant improvement in the learners' vocabulary. Meganathan et al (2019) on the other hand, saw vocabulary growth since the extensive programme is supported by post-reading activities. This proves the notion that younger learners do need scaffolding to acquire new knowledge. Two studies (Song, 2020; Maipoka & Soontornwipast, 2021) were carried out over a longer duration; eight and ten weeks respectively. As a result, the vocabulary gain is more evident. Song (2020) stated that the learners were able to gain over three times higher growth rates in vocabulary knowledge through extensive reading. Similarly, Maipoka and Soontomwipast

(2021) also saw considerable vocabulary improvement after carrying out the reading programme.

Several studies also reported that extensive reading can build up reading comprehension. Endris (2018) found that extensive reading impacted learners positively, although not statistically significant due to the short implementation time. Birketveit et al. (2018) agreed, highlighting that with more reading, learners were able to comprehend enough of what they read, resulting in engaging reading experiences. Song (2020) believed that due to insignificant improvement between pre and post-reading tests, extensive reading programmes, and comprehension ability could be developed with more time allocation. Correspondingly, several other studies (Maipoka & Soontornwipast, 2021; Park & Lee, 2021; Oaxaca et. Al, 2022) agreed that in the primary context, the teachers' instructions in carrying out the programme played a big role to ensure the extent of the successful extensive reading programme. Nonetheless, all three studies recorded improvements in the learners' reading comprehension ability.

In terms of reading fluency, Nkomo (2020) stated that learners were able to develop fluency in reading as a result of confidence and engagement gained from extensive reading. This, of course, was not developed within a short amount of time. Jeon and Kim (2021) also agreed that extensive reading was able to develop reading fluency when the materials suit the learners' levels. Although extensive reading suggests giving autonomy to readers to choose their reading materials, in primary schools, it is suggested that reading materials are prepared to address the learners' various levels, to allow them to progress according to their own pace. Kim and Kim (2022) too, found that extensive reading improved the learners' integrated language function, including reading fluency.

All in all, the studies agreed that extensive reading assuages learners' various reading difficulties to the extent and conditions discussed above. As stated by Nkomo (2020), by developing these reading skills, the learners can transfer them to other language skills such as writing. Meanwhile, four studies (Pirih, 2019; Waring & Vu, 2020; Bala, 2022; Conaway & Parsons, 2023) did not directly address the impact of extensive reading on the reading difficulties as the studies focused on the motivation and perception aspects of the learners and teachers.

## **Discussion**

This systematic review sought the answers to two research questions by analysing 15 selected articles related to the implementation of extensive reading in primary schools. The findings shed light on the common factors affecting primary school ESL learners' reading skills. Based on the studies, the factors are limited vocabulary, poor reading comprehension, limited access to English reading materials, and poor reading motivation. It is also important to note that these factors are correlated with each other, mainly focusing on inadequate L2 language exposure or input. Based on the analysis, however, more studies agreed that the factor impacting reading skills in primary schools is poor reading comprehension. Hence, more exposure to English reading materials, words, and reading instructions is vital to overcome this challenge.

Next, this review looked into the impacts of extensive reading to assuage primary school ESL learners' reading difficulties. More studies found that it improved learners' reading comprehension. Nonetheless, as shown in Figure 3.2, the studies agreed that extensive reading helped to assuage various language difficulties such as limited vocabulary and poor reading fluency when it met an ideal condition. For example, Endris (2018) highlighted visible

results from an extensive reading programme can be seen when adequate time is allocated for the implementation. Meganathan et al (2019) stressed that extensive reading programmes for younger learners require supporting instructions to boost the learners' focus on gaining new knowledge through reading. Park and Lee (2021) on the other hand, found that extensive reading done with printed and digital reading materials resulted in different outcomes, although both impacted reading comprehension positively. These findings suggest that although extensive reading works to assuage the learners' reading difficulties, the extent to how successful it is depends on how the implementation fits the learners' various needs and levels. Hence, teachers should play a role to choose the best strategy to amplify the impact of extensive reading on their learners. The major findings discussed are summarised in Figure 4.0 below.

Research Question	Finding	Discussion
RQ 1	Common factors that resulted in primary school ESL learners' reading difficulties: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Poor reading comprehension</li> <li>2. Limited vocabulary</li> <li>3. Limited access to English reading materials</li> <li>4. Poor reading motivation</li> </ol>	The pupils should get more exposure to English reading materials, words, and appropriate reading instructions.
RQ 2	The impacts of extensive reading to assuage primary school ESL learners' reading difficulties: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Improved reading comprehension</li> <li>2. Improved vocabulary</li> <li>3. Improved reading fluency</li> </ol>	The extent to how successful the programme is depends on how the implementation fits the learners' various needs and levels.

Figure 4.0: Summary of major findings Although this systematic review tried to specifically discuss the implementation of extensive reading for ESL learners in primary schools, it is evident that the major limitation of this review is the limited amount of related articles. Although extensive reading is not an emerging topic, research related to this programme is more popular in secondary schools or tertiary education institutions. Hence, this research area could be further explored by educators or researchers who are interested in primary ESL learning.

### Conclusion

This review has filled the gap of not the field having none to a very limited systematic review on the implementation of extensive reading for primary ESL learners in the past six years. Three databases are used to retrieve all the articles, namely; Google Scholar, (Educational Resources Information Centre) ERIC, and Scopus. After selection using the PRISMA model, 15 final articles made it into this systematic review. Based on the result and discussion, reading difficulties are caused by poor reading comprehension and other correlated factors. Hence, extensive reading assuages the learners' reading comprehension problem by exposing them to ESL vocabulary and contents less formally and engagingly. One limitation of this review is the limited number of studies relevant to extensive reading in a primary ESL context. Thus, it is hoped that more researchers would expand their studies on extensive reading to primary schools at various proficiency levels. Furthermore, future research can explore the

implementation of extensive reading through MALL as access to digital reading materials is limitless.

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