Effectiveness of Literature Circles in Developing English Language Reading Ability: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

English reading ability is essential to overall language proficiency because our learning depends heavily on written materials. As a highly evolved form of collaborative learning originating in the L1 context, literature circles can provide a perfect scaffolding for reading, discussion and sharing. Thus, this reading strategy has also been widely used in L2 learning. This systematic review examines the effectiveness of literature circles in improving English language reading ability. An analysis is conducted in reference to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) methodology. Based on the search keywords, a total of 19 articles related to the benefits of literature circles for English reading comprehension ability are identified from Scopus, Google Scholar, Dimensions and Education Resources Information Center databases. The findings from the synthesis show a trend among literature circles to integrate more modern technology and to adopt more diversified reading materials. The identified themes related to reading ability consist of six areas: self-regulation, reading skills, positive attitude, cultural awareness, critical-thinking skills and reading engagement. It is hoped this systematic review will inspire language instructors to implement literature circles to improve training students' English reading ability.

Keywords: literature circles, PRISMA, reading ability, systematic literature review

1. Introduction

In the globalization era, the English language has increasingly enhanced its status as an international language in both linguistic and cultural boundaries. In every corner of the world, school systems require students to learn English from an early age to gain access to information and gain economic and professional competitiveness (Grabe, 2009). Among basic language abilities such as reading, speaking, writing and listening, the reading ability is considered crucial in the acquisition of other necessary skills (Kirsch et al., 2003). According to Grabe (2014), reading is a complex cognitive ability to extract and build meaning from a text and involves lower-level processes (e.g., word recognition skills, lexico-syntactic processing, and semantic processing) and higher-level processes (e.g., forming main ideas and recognizing thematic and personal interpretation).

McElvain (2010) argued that reading is a transactional process between the student, the text, peers and the teacher, during which messages and knowledge move among members. In this process, learners need to be actively involved in their learning, be able to interact with teachers, and be able to evaluate and synthesize the material (Rodriguez-Valls & Ponce, 2013). Therefore, it is vital for teachers to be able to guide students to engage and participate in reading activities to develop their reading ability. Daniels (2002) suggested that in an educational setting, students working in literature circles—considered a perfect vehicle to integrate curricula through the authentic reading of books supported by students' rich discussion—can achieve this collaborative learning. Bedel (2016) agreed that literature circles can help students to practice and develop the skills of good readers and to enhance the quality of their English through collaboration and cooperation. According to Dalie (2001), it is the features of authenticity, empowerment and collaboration that make the activity meaningful and effective.

Daniels (2002) started literature circles, which are rooted in sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1978) and transactional (Rosenblatt, 1969) theories, in Chicago in the early 1990s as a sophisticated part of the popular collaborative learning movement. Furr (2004) defined literature circles as small, peer-led reading groups that provide a framework for members to read the same story, poem, article or book and have meaningful discussions.

According to Dalie (2001), the most peculiar feature of literature circles is the distribution of pre-assigned roles, which can provide students with boundaries, clear expectations and a safe and supportive structure to interact with each other. The most basic roles Daniels (2002) designed are connector, questioner, literary luminary and illustrator. Furr (2004) developed six adapted roles to better suit advanced adult readers: discussion leader, summarizer, connector, word master, passage person and culture collector.

Since their conception in Chicago, literature circles have been applied widely at the K-12 stage and college above level. Researchers have recognized the benefits of literature circles as a platform to engage learners to improve their various abilities, such as their reading motivation, reading comprehension ability, speaking skills, and critical-thinking ability (e.g., Avci, 2018; Ragland & Palace, 2017; Irawati & Samarinda, 2016; Day & Ainley, 2008).

However, despite the popularity and wide application of literature circles in both quantitative and qualitative studies, there has been a lack of systematic literature reviews on the effectiveness of literature circles in helping English learners improve their reading ability. The purpose of the current systematic review is to examine the impact of literature circles on learners' reading ability. Experimental and quasi-experimental studies published since the initial practice of this activity are reviewed to create a synthesis of the state of knowledge in this field. The systematic review is conducted to answer one specific question: To what extent are literature circles effective in improving learners' reading ability?

2. Methodology

This part discusses the method used to search for studies on the benefits of adopting literature circles. The systematic literature review used the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement to identify, select, appraise, and synthesize studies. The statement consists of a 27-item checklist and a four-phase flow diagram for identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion processes (Page et al., 2021).

2.1 Information Sources

Because the aim was to synthesize studies related to the application of literature circles to improve the reading comprehension ability or skills of EFLs or ESLs, this systematic review retrieved studies about only this specific topic. Thus, studies related to other benefits of literature circles on English learning such as motivation, critical-thinking skills, and learner autonomy were excluded. The review retrieved related studies from four databases: Scopus, Google Scholar, Dimensions and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). Scopus is a comprehensive abstract and citation database covering a wide range of disciplines, with over 81 million reliable documents provided by more than 7,000 publishers. As a freely accessible web search engine, Google Scholar provides full-text data or metadata from scholarly literature across a variety of disciplines and sources. Dimensions is the world's largest linked research information dataset and the most comprehensive research grants database linked to over 133 million journal, server and book publications. ERIC is an online digital library of education research and information, containing a variety of publication types that are searchable and easy to use.

2.2 Search Strategies

There are four main stages in the search strategies: identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion. Identification is the process of finding related records using the main keywords, synonyms and variations from the research question. The author used Boolean operators, phrase searching and truncation to search Scopus, Dimensions, ERIC and Google Scholar databases to cover all the terms related to the topic and produce the query string. The aim was to examine the effect of literature circles on the reading ability of English learners. Literature circles were used interchangeably with reading circles and reading clubs, and reading ability was used synonymously with reading skills and reading comprehension skills. Table 1 lists the search keywords from the four databases.

Table 1. Keywords used in search strategies

Database	Keywords
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Reading circles" OR "literature circles" OR "reading clubs") AND ("reading skills" OR "reading ability" OR "reading comprehension")
Google Scholar	reading circles OR literature circles OR book clubs OR reading skills OR reading ability-L1
Dimensions	(Reading circles OR literature circles OR reading clubs) AND (reading skills OR reading ability OR reading comprehension)
ERIC	Reading circles OR literature circles OR reading clubs AND reading skills OR reading ability OR reading comprehension

Because Daniels popularized literature circles from 1994 onward, and there has been a lack of review papers on the benefits of this reading activity, the time range covered related studies from 1994 to January 2023, when the review was conducted. A total of 595 related records were identified from the four databases, including books, book chapters, journals, reviews, conference proceedings, theses and editorials.

The next stage after identification was screening the records. A total of 45 duplicate records were first detected and excluded. Then, the remaining 550 records were screened based on the requirements of the research question by reviewing the title and abstract. Because this systematic review aimed to synthesize research related to the effect of literature circles on reading skills or reading ability of English learners, studies with other variables in English language learning, such as motivation, affective factors, speaking skills and writing ability, were excluded after reviewing the titles and abstracts. Literature circles were first implemented in the L1 reading classroom and then expanded quickly to L2 learning. However, this study only examines the effect of this reading activity in the EFL or ESL context. Therefore, any studies not focused on L2 learning or not published in the English language were also deleted as irrelevant. Altogether, 231 full-text publications were scrutinized in detail based on the exclusion criteria. Table 2 provides the inclusion and exclusion criteria used for the systematic review process.

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Timeline	1994–2023	< 1994
Language	English	Non-English
Scope	Reading ability/reading skills/reading comprehension	Not related to reading ability of EFL or ESL learners
Type	Empirical studies in the form of journals	Reviews, books, chapters, conference proceedings, editorials, theses

Based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, a total of 19 full-text studies were selected for systematic review. Figure 1 shows the complete search process.
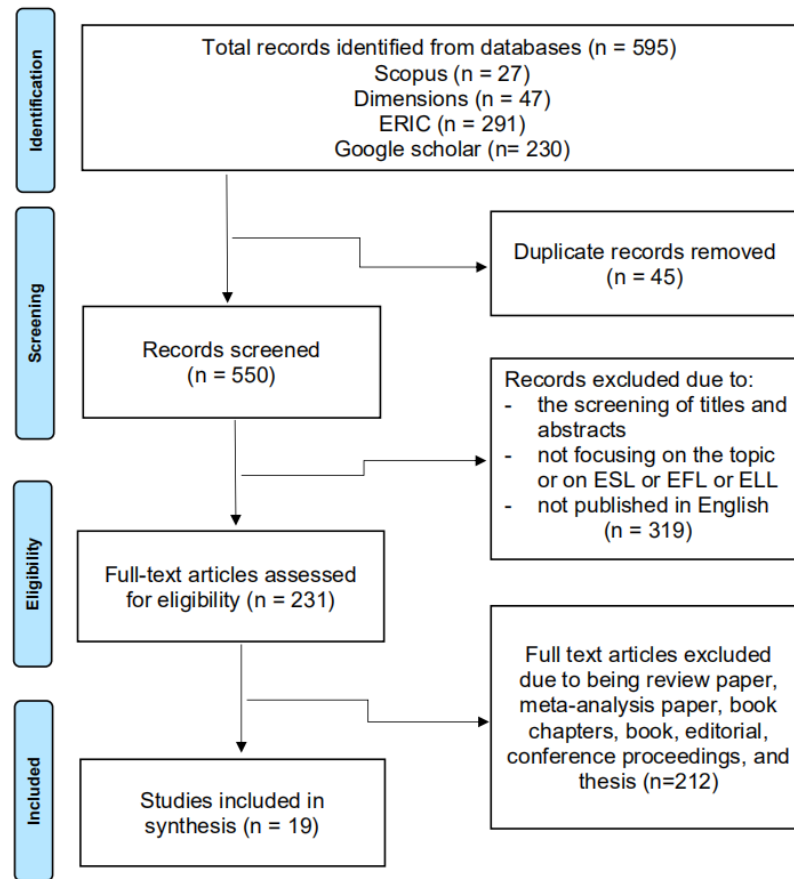
Figure 1. Flowchart of the systematic review process

Of the 19 studies reviewed, 11 were conducted using quantitative methods, 4 were conducted using qualitative methods, and the remaining 4 were conducted using mixed methods. Figure 2 clearly shows the frequency of the three methods previous researchers adopted to investigate the influence of literature circles on the reading ability of English learners from the 1990s to the present day.
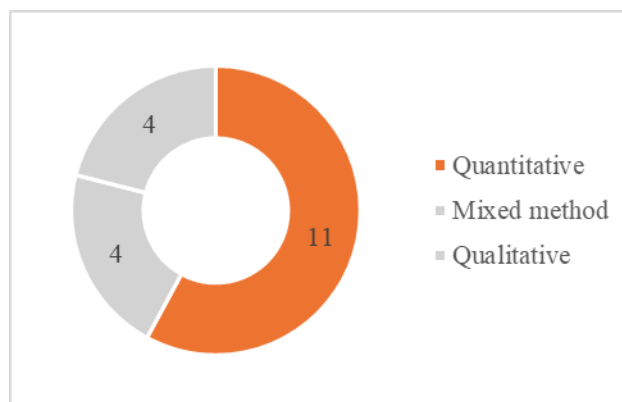

Figure 2. Frequency of the research design

3. Results

A total of 595 records were retrieved from the four databases, and 19 full-text journal articles were identified as eligible after screening based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. This part analyzes the 19 related studies based on their general background and main findings after an in-depth examination.

3.1 General Background of the Studies

Table 3 provides an overview of the 19 selected studies in terms of the subjects involved, the country, the research method and the research duration.

Table 3. Background information of the studies

No.	Author and Year	Subjects	Country	Method	Period
1	Kassem, 2022	60 (university)	Saudi Arabia	QN	1 semester
2	Chou, 2022	60 (university)	Taiwan	QN	1 semester
3	Wati & Yanto, 2022	15 (vocational)	Indonesia	QN	1 month
4	Rokhayati & Alvionita, 2022	34 (grade 11)	Indonesia	QN	1/2 month
5	Xu, 2021	26 (university)	China	MM	1 semester
6	Musdalifah, 2021	15 (vocational)	Indonesia	QL	8 meetings
7	Chen, 2020	38 (university)	Taiwan	MM	10 weeks
8	Ali, 2020	80 (secondary)	Egypt	QN	9 weeks
9	Ahmed et al., 2019	80 (secondary)	Egypt	QN	3 months
10	Julianti et al., 2018	36 (senior high school)	Indonesia	QN	2 cycles
11	Nurhadi, 2017	Grade 11	Indonesia	QN	2 cycles
12	Varita, 2017	40 (senior high school)	Indonesia	QN	5 meetings
13	Irawati, 2016	24 (university)	Indonesia	QN	1 semester
14	Widodo, 2016	6 (teachers) 57 (vocational)	Indonesia	QL	13 months
15	Shen, 2013	160 (college)	Taiwan	QN	1 semester
16	McElvain, 2010	75 (grades 4–6)	United States	MM	7 months
17	Day & Ainley, 2008	22 (grade 6)	United States	QL	3 months
18	Chiang, 2007	32 (University)	Taiwan	MM	1 year
19	Carrison & Ernst-Slavit, 2005	24 (Grade 4)	United States	QL	2 months

Note: QN = Quantitative, QL = Qualitative, MM = Mixed Method.

As the table shows, the amount of research concerning the effects of literature circles on reading ability has increased year by year. Four studies were conducted in 2022, showing that more researchers and practitioners have recognized the benefits of literature circles in improving the reading ability of English learners and have implemented this strategy in their practice. Regarding the level of participants, seven articles focused on undergraduate students, nine articles focused on vocational high school students or secondary school students, and only three articles focused on grade 4 to grade 6 students. The distribution of participants showed that though literature circles were initially adopted among primary school students, their influence has gone beyond the K-12 stage. They are now more frequently implemented in university to improve the reading skills of English learners. Meanwhile, based on the distribution of studies by country in Figure 3, eight studies were conducted in Indonesia, four were conducted in Taiwan and one was conducted in mainland China, three were conducted in the United States, two were conducted in Egypt, and one was conducted in Saudi Arabia. The chart shows that the benefits of literature circles are widely recognized and practiced in Indonesia, followed by Taiwan and the United States.
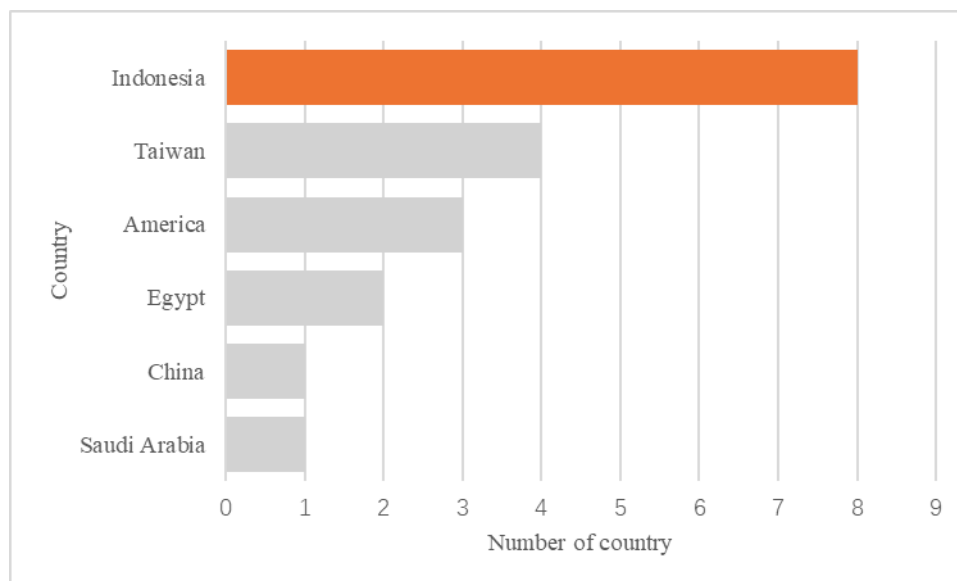
Figure 3. Distribution of the research studies

As Table 4 shows, in terms of the research design, among the 11 quantitative studies, eight were quasi-experimental studies with intervention periods ranging from half a month to one semester. Three studies were conducted as classroom action research lasting for one month or two cycles.

Table 4. Duration and frequency of the quantitative studies

Duration	Quasi-experimental design	Action research	Total
1 semester	4		4
2 cycles		2	2
5 meetings	1		1
1/2 month	1		1
9 weeks	1		1
1 month		1	1
3 months	1		1
Total	8	3	11

To sum up the backgrounds of the selected 19 studies, more research has been conducted using the quantitative approach, and the effects of literature circles have been better achieved in quasi-experimental or action research implemented for one semester to improve learners' ability or skills. Regarding the popularity of this reading activity by country, Indonesia appears to embrace literature circles the most, followed by Taiwan and the United States. Meanwhile, research on the influence of literature circles on English reading has been increasing in recent years. A basic analysis of the background information showed that even though literature circles started in North America, they have gained momentum in Asia and researchers and language teachers have increasingly accepted them lately. The following section lists the main findings of the 19 studies after an in-depth examination.

3.2 Main Findings

After examining the benefits of literature circles for the reading comprehension ability of English learners in the 19 selected studies, the researchers identified several features connected with the studies: diversified types of reading materials, a tendency to integrate modern technology and a series of benefits gained from implementing literature circles.

3.2.1 Varied Reading Materials

As Daniels (2002) proposed, the members of a literature circle can choose to read "the same story, poem, article, or book" (p. 2). Therefore, both fiction and non-fiction texts are suitable as reading materials. The reading texts in the 19 studies in the synthesis indicated that English learners or instructors can select any genre for reading.
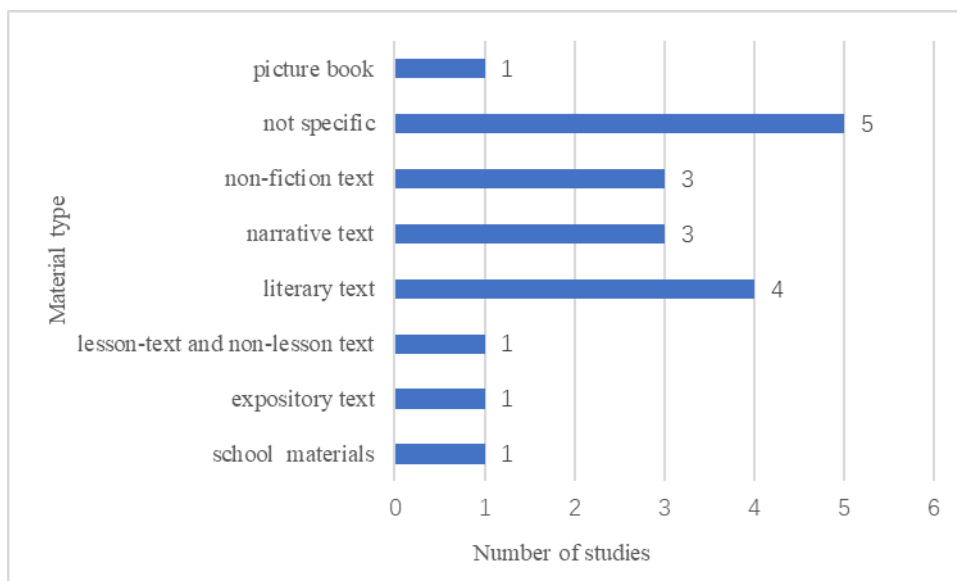
Figure 4. Characteristics of reading materials

As Figure 4 shows, out of the 19 studies, only four (1, 2, 7, 12) chose literary texts and three (10, 11, 19) focused on narrative texts. The other 12 studies improved students' reading skills with non-fiction texts or other genres and types. Furr (2004) stressed that the materials instructors select should be "appropriate for their student population" and "manageable" (p, 2). In study 1 (Kassem, 2022), the participants were all English major students, and literary texts were considered an integral component and a source of authentic texts in English language learning (Ashrafuzzaman et al., 2021; Bloemert et al., 2019). For article 2 (Chou, 2022), graded readers adapted from literature were used for their simple words and uncomplicated grammar. They could also be upgraded from the basic to the advanced level (Hill, 2008). However, in the case of Xu (2021), non-fiction texts in the field of business, finance, science and technology were used for intensive reading because the participants were business English majors and needed to obtain business-related knowledge and language input. In Day and Ainley (2008), to stimulate discussion with compelling themes and to build confidence and ability in reading and speaking, the researcher chose a list of high-quality picture books suitable for sixth graders.

To sum up, a brief review of the reading materials in the 19 selected studies showed that literature circles are a very flexible reading strategy that integrates different types of appropriate materials to provide opportunities for successful social interaction and scaffolded collaboration among students in a small, safe and low-risk setting (Su & Wu, 2016).

3.2.2 Integration of Technology

Technology and related skills are essential in today's learning environment. According to Herrera and Kidwell (2018), technological development can make the exchange of information instantaneous to facilitate collaboration, critical thinking and intercultural communication. As Table 5 shows, in the 19 selected studies, there was a trend toward integrating modern technology in literature circles. Since 2020, there have been 5 studies (1, 4, 5, 6, 7) that were conducted online or that have integrated modern social media, indicating that virtual literature circles or literature circles 2.0 have become the primary reading strategy to replace traditional face-to-face reading activities.

Table 5. Use of technology in research studies

Author	Integration of technology
Kassem, 2022	Online and Blackboard
Rokhayati & Alvionita, 2022	Online and Zoom, Google Forms
Xu, 2021	Online and MosoTeach
Musdalifah, 2021	Online and Google Classroom, WhatsApp group, Zoom
Chen, 2020	Online and Facebook

In Kassem's (2022) study, literature circles were implemented online and virtually with a learning management system called Blackboard. Through the system, students can respond to or comment about learning content in written or oral formats both synchronously and asynchronously. Moreover, discussions by participants can break the barriers of space and time and be recorded for deep analysis. Similarly, Xu (2021) used a classroom management platform called MosoTeach to aid in the completion and evaluation of tasks, making it easier for teachers to assess students; performance and for students to experience collaborative learning. Besides using learning management systems, Rokhayati and Alvionita (2022), Musdalifah (2021) and Chen (2020) integrated modern social media or online class platforms such as Zoom, Facebook, Google Forms, and WhatsApp groups to conduct literature circles. This tendency to integrate technology indicates that the era of digital literature circles has already begun, providing a more convenient avenue for language acquisition.

3.2.3 Benefits of Literature Circles

As a student-centered reading activity, literature circles have been proven effective at improving L1 learners' reading comprehension skills (e. g., Avci et al., 2013; Thomas, 2013). In terms of EFL or ESL learning, the effectiveness of this reading strategy is obvious. In the 19 selected studies focusing on the benefits of literature circles for improving the reading ability of English learners, themes related to reading comprehension were discovered, namely, self-regulation, reading comprehension skills, positive attitude, cultural awareness, critical-thinking skills and reading engagement (Figures 5 and 6).
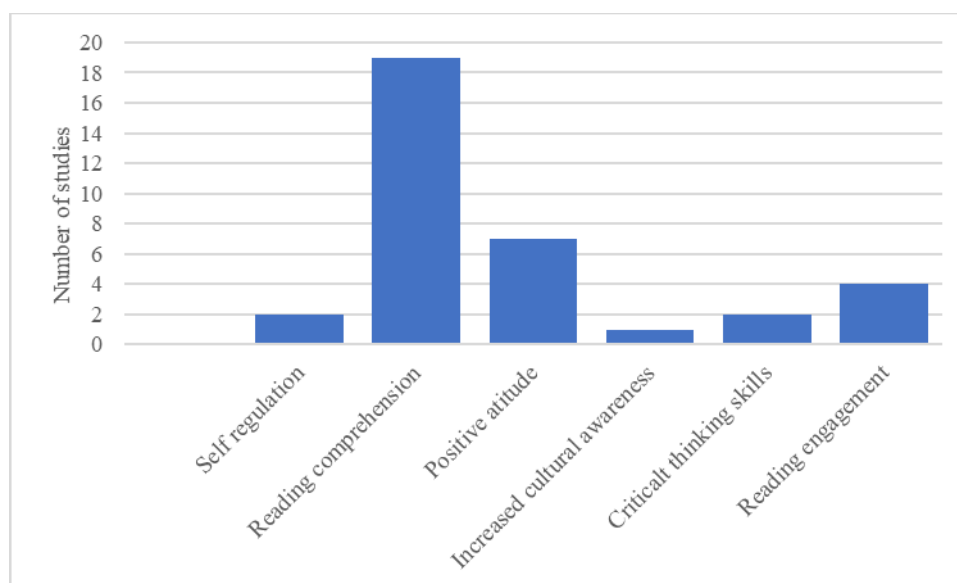

Figure 5. Frequencies of studies based on themes

All the 19 studies showed that literature circles, whether conducted online or traditionally, are very effective to develop participants' reading comprehension skills for both literary and non-literary texts. Based on Wati and Yanto (2022), Chen (2020), Julianti et al. (2018) and Irawati (2016), the sub-skills of reading ability, such as stating the main ideas, drawing inferences, looking for specific information and recognizing words, all improved significantly. Additionally, seven studies (1, 5, 6, 7, 16, 18, 19) showed that students' attitude toward reading became more positive after they had meaningful experiences and dynamic discussions in literature circles.

Reading engagement is another benefit researchers identified (Chen, 2020; Widodo, 2016; McElvain, 2010; Day & Ainley, 2008). According to Day and Ainley (2008), when students are given the freedom to talk and get involved in discussion, their motivation for and interest in learning will increase significantly. Besides reading comprehension skills, reading attitude and reading engagement improved significantly. Self-regulation (1, 2), critical-thinking skills (5, 10) and cultural awareness (2) were three other themes of literature circles that researchers identified. Kassem (2022) highlighted the obvious development of self-regulation in literature circles 2.0, which may be attributed to various skills and strategies such as goal setting, time management, self-monitoring and self-evaluation that students employ in learning. Chou (2022) also proposed that experimental group members more frequently use monitoring strategies in comprehending literary texts. Xu (2021) and Julianti et al. (2018) both emphasized that students' critical-thinking skills can be developed in literature circles when they participate in the collaborative learning process. Out of the 19 studies, only Chou

(2022) identified cultural awareness after using two books (Great Expectations and The Great Gatsby) from Oxford Bookworms.

This part reviewed the background features and main findings of the 19 selected studies on the benefits of literature circles in developing the reading comprehension ability of English learners. All the studies showed the effectiveness of this reading strategy in promoting English learners' reading ability. Researchers also identified other themes, such as an improved reading attitude, enhanced reading engagement, better critical-thinking skills, more self-regulation strategies and cultural awareness. The following part will continue with a discussion about the effects of literature circles on developing English language learners' reading comprehension ability.

4. Discussion

The results of this systematic review showed the overall effects of literature circles in improving the reading ability of English language learners. The background information indicated the popularity of this reading strategy in Asia. A reading program started in North America that has been used exclusively in K-12 classrooms (Thomas & Kim, 2019), literature circles have already been extended to the L2 setting and started to exert their influence beyond their birthplace. The review showed that, in the L2 context, literature circles have been widely used in Indonesia and are attracting attention gradually in Taiwan. An examination of the multiple levels of participants further demonstrated the suitability of this reading activity among university students. Of the 19 studies, seven were conducted in university or college settings. This supports Levy's (2011) argument that literature circles can offer college and university students an "inventory of reading strategies for entering and navigating a text, initiating textual discussions, deepening comprehension of and connecting to reading" (p, 53).

The next prominent finding is related the different research designs for implementing literature circles. Eleven studies were conducted using quantitative methods, and four studies were conducted using qualitative methods such as phenomenological and ethnographical designs. This shows the versatility and compatibility of literature circles as a pedagogical approach to stimulate students for language acquisition (Shelton-strong, 2012).

Regarding the mode of conducting the reading activity, the review showed a trend toward employing literature circles 2.0, namely, digital literature circles or virtual literature circles, in which various modern technological skills work together to create a learning platform for collaboration and interaction. Chen (2020) stressed that this online learning context can provide EFL learners with opportunities to share their ideas in a more egalitarian context and can offer teachers a tool to observe, monitor and evaluate students' reading comprehension process. In this safe and free learning setting, students have more time to respond to teachers and peers and become more engaged readers.

Literature circles have already moved beyond reading-only literature-related materials. Of the 19 studies, only four chose literary texts as reading materials. As an important part of collaborative learning underpinned explicitly by reader response theory (Daniels, 2002), literature circles mainly aim to promote students' appreciation of literature and improve their language skills in reading literature (Kim, 2017). However, a review of the reading materials of the 19 studies showed that diversified types of texts can be incorporated into literature circles. All of them have been proven to be effective in enhancing reading abilities. According to Shelton-strong (2012), if reading materials are within readers' "range of easy comprehension" (p, 221), literature circles with various levels of language learning groups become possible.

As a systematic review conducted to examine the benefits of literature circles in improving the reading ability of English language learners, all the 19 studies in synthesis proved the effectiveness of this reading activity among different learning groups from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. Karatay (2017) has summarized six areas in reading comprehension that can be developed from literature circles, namely, (1) the students' text analysis skills, (2) providing a social learning atmosphere, (3) critical reading skills, (4) strong reading desires, (5) speaking abilities and self-confidence, (6) tolerance towards cultural and socio-economic differences. In the L2 setting, the 19 studies have also demonstrated similar benefits of literature circles in reading comprehension. The six themes identified from the 19 studies indicated the important areas that can be improved through participating in literature circles in L2 learning classrooms.

As can be seen from the review, literature circles have entered the digital era. They can flexibly incorporate a series of technology skills and social media to maximize their function of providing language learners with a scaffolding to learn and discuss collaboratively and freely. On this platform, diversified reading materials can be appropriately adopted to develop the reading comprehension ability of English learners in both EFL and ESL settings.

5. Conclusion

This review synthesized 19 studies related to the effectiveness of literature circles in developing and promoting the reading abilities of English language learners. An initial examination of the background information showed that literature circles, a reading program started in Chicago to enhance the literary in the K-12 stage, have extended their usefulness to more L2 classrooms and improved reading instruction in other countries and areas. Moreover, they have expanded their reading materials to incorporate diversified types of texts and make appropriate materials accessible to different levels of readers. The main findings of the review showed that literature circles can effectively improve reading comprehension in six areas: self-regulation, reading comprehension skills, positive attitude, cultural awareness, critical-thinking skills and reading engagement. Thus, this review confirms the results of previous studies on the benefits of literature circles in the development of English language learners' reading ability. Further, this review can provide knowledge and inspiration to stakeholders such as L2 educators and instructors to solve problems related to poor reading skills and low reading motivation.

However, even though the findings of this review have proved the effectiveness of literature circles in developing the reading ability of EFL or ESL learners, there are some other areas that researchers need to explore more to expand the research scope. For example, other variables such as learner autonomy and learning motivation in language acquisition were not taken into consideration in this research, and specific reading comprehension skills were not explored in detail. More qualitative-based inquiry needs to be conducted to probe into the efferent and aesthetic stances of readers. Therefore, researchers should conduct more empirical studies on the overall benefits of literature circles.

Regarding the limitations of this systematic review, there are several aspects that must be acknowledged. First, only 19 studies were obtained for examination from four databases. Thus, more search engines such as Web of Science and JSTOR should be explored to conduct a comprehensive exploration of the review topic. Second, out of the 19 selected studies, five studies (4, 8, 9, 16, 18) did not specify the material type and 2 (3,4) had a short period for intervention. Therefore, the research outcomes may have been affected. Third, of the six themes identified concerning the benefits of literature circles for reading ability development, only comprehension skills such as gaining the main idea and drawing inferences were fully developed, followed by positive attitude and reading engagement. Other areas such as cultural awareness, critical-thinking skills and self-regulation still need more empirical research to strengthen the effectiveness of literature circles.

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