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Digital Storytelling and Reading Comprehension in EFL Classrooms: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: *This article presents a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), a method for systematically identifying and synthesizing research, examining the use of digital storytelling (DST) – the creation of narratives using digital tools – to enhance reading comprehension (RC) among learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Adopting the PRISMA 2020 protocol, an evidence-based guideline for reporting systematic reviews, the study analyzes 27 peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC, published between 2013 and 2026. The review is guided by three primary research questions: (1) Which DST platforms are most frequently utilized in EFL reading instruction? (2) To what extent is DST effective in improving reading comprehension across educational levels? and (3) What instructional approaches are employed in integrating DST into EFL reading practices? The findings indicate that DST consistently improves reading comprehension through mechanisms such as multimodal scaffolding, which supports learning across multiple modes like text, images, sound, and video; affective engagement, or learners' emotional involvement; and schema activation, the use of background knowledge to help learners understand texts. Frequently employed platforms include web-based applications, augmented reality tools, and collaborative online environments. Notably, 77.8% of the reviewed studies reported statistically significant improvements in reading comprehension in the experimental groups compared with the control groups. Furthermore, four dominant instructional approaches were identified: scaffolded multimodal reading (combining supportive tools and multiple content formats), collaborative story creation, retelling and response-based activities, and question-and-answer-oriented reading instruction. Despite these promising findings, several gaps remain, particularly in longitudinal research designs, studies situated in Southeast Asian contexts, and the development of explicit instructional design frameworks. The article concludes by outlining pedagogical implications for EFL practitioners and proposing directions for future research.*

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PENDAHULUAN

Reading presents significant challenges for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as it requires not only the recognition of individual words but also the comprehension of sentence meaning. The process involves multiple cognitive operations simultaneously. Learners must infer implicit meanings, integrate new information with prior knowledge, and interpret texts that may contain unfamiliar concepts or cultural references. These complexities are particularly pronounced when reading in a second language.

Given these complexities, EFL learners encounter increasingly diverse challenges in contemporary educational contexts. The current digital environment exposes learners to content that extends beyond traditional print, incorporating visual, auditory, and video elements. Consequently, instructional methods must adapt to support a broader, multimodal approach to literacy.

In response to these educational shifts, digital storytelling (DST) has emerged as a prominent pedagogical strategy. DST involves the integration of text, images, sound, and video through digital tools to create cohesive narratives (Shelby-Caffey, Ubeda, & Jenkins, 2014). Rather than solely delivering content, DST positions students as active participants in meaning-making. Learners engage in reading, interpretation, sequencing, and production of digital narratives, thereby employing essential reading comprehension strategies such as top-down processing, vocabulary development, and narrative organization (Lim, Zakaria, & Aryadoust). The research literature on DST in language learning has expanded substantially since the early 2010s. For example, Lim et al. (2022) conducted a comprehensive systematic review of 71 studies, reporting positive effects of DST across all four language skills, including reading. However, in this review, reading comprehension was considered as one of several outcomes rather than as a primary focus. Furthermore, the review's temporal scope ended in 2021. Since that time, technological advancements, particularly in augmented reality, artificial intelligence-driven scaffolding, and cloud-based collaborative platforms, have introduced new dimensions to DST practices that require systematic re-examination. systematic re-examination.

Despite these advancements, several critical questions remain unresolved in the literature. For example, it is unclear how DST platforms affect learners with varying proficiency levels, how the quality of instructional design may moderate outcomes, and what roles motivation and emotional engagement play. Additionally, the applicability of findings from studies conducted in Europe and North America to Southeast Asian EFL contexts remains uncertain, given differences in class size, technology access, and assessment practices. These gaps present practical challenges for educators seeking to implement DST in contextually appropriate ways.

To address these challenges, this review aims to provide a focused, methodologically transparent synthesis. It is guided by three research questions: (1) What DST platforms and tools are most frequently used in EFL reading instruction? (2) How effective is DST in improving EFL learners' reading comprehension across different educational levels? and (3) What instructional approaches are employed in integrating DST into EFL reading practices? By answering these questions, the study aims to provide researchers, educators, and curriculum designers with a clearer and more practically relevant synthesis of the current evidence base.

METHOD

Research Design

A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design was employed, guided by the PRISMA 2020 protocol (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA, or Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses, provides a structured framework for conducting evidence synthesis in a transparent, reproducible, and defensible manner. The SLR approach was selected to minimize subjective selection bias often present in narrative reviews, where studies supporting prior views may be unconsciously favored. In an SLR,

all inclusion and exclusion decisions are explicit and documented, enabling other researchers to replicate the process and obtain the same corpus.

Research Questions

The following three research questions were established prior to conducting any searches. Pre-registration of research questions is a standard transparency requirement in SLR methodology and helps prevent post hoc modification of research questions based on search results:

RQ1: What DST platforms and tools are most frequently used to support reading comprehension in EFL classrooms?

RQ2: How effective is DST in improving EFL learners' RC outcomes across different educational levels?

RQ3: What instructional approaches are used when integrating DST into EFL reading comprehension activities?

Eligibility Criteria: PICOS Framework

Article selection was guided by a PICOS framework established prior to the initiation of the search process. PICOS refers to Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome, and Study type. The criteria for each component, as well as the corresponding exclusion conditions, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. PICOS Framework for Article Selection

Element	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
P (Population)	EFL learners, all levels from primary to university	Native English speakers or ESL-only contexts
I (Intervention)	Digital storytelling as an instructional tool, including web, AR, and collaborative platforms	Non-digital or traditional storytelling without any technology component
C (Comparison)	With or without a control group, as long as RC is measured before and after the intervention	No pre-post RC measurement reported
O (Outcome)	Reading comprehension in any dimension: literal, inferential, critical, or narrative	Studies reporting only non-RC language outcomes
S (Study type)	Experimental, quasi-experimental, mixed-method, or qualitative studies published 2013 to 2026, in English, indexed in Scopus or WoS	Editorials, book reviews, opinion papers, and grey literature

Beyond the PICOS criteria, articles also needed to meet several supplementary conditions for inclusion: publication between 2013 and 2026, in English, indexed in Scopus or Web of Science, and available in full text. Articles were excluded if they were duplicates, non-peer-reviewed conference abstracts, editorial or opinion pieces lacking empirical data, or if reading comprehension was not treated as an explicit outcome variable.

Search Strategy

Searches were conducted across three databases: Scopus served as the primary source, Web of Science as the secondary source, and ERIC as the supplementary source.

The Boolean string provided below was used in Scopus and adapted for the other two databases:

TITLE-ABS-KEY (("digital storytelling" OR "digital story" OR "digital narrative") AND ("reading comprehension" OR "reading skill" OR "reading ability" OR "reading performance") AND ("EFL" OR "English as a foreign language" OR "EFL learner*"))

Scopus filters included PUBYEAR > 2012, LANGUAGE(English), and DOCTYPE(ar OR re OR cp). All searches were completed in June 2026. Results were exported in RIS format and imported into reference management software for deduplication and subsequent screening.

Article Selection Process

Selection proceeded in four stages as prescribed by the PRISMA framework. In the identification stage, 487 records were retrieved across the three databases. After removing duplicates, 341 records moved to title and abstract screening. Of these, 89 proceeded to full-text eligibility assessment. After carefully applying all PICOS criteria, 27 articles were retained for the final synthesis. Reasons for full-text exclusion were documented throughout. Figure 1 illustrates the complete flow, and Table 2 provides the counts at each stage.

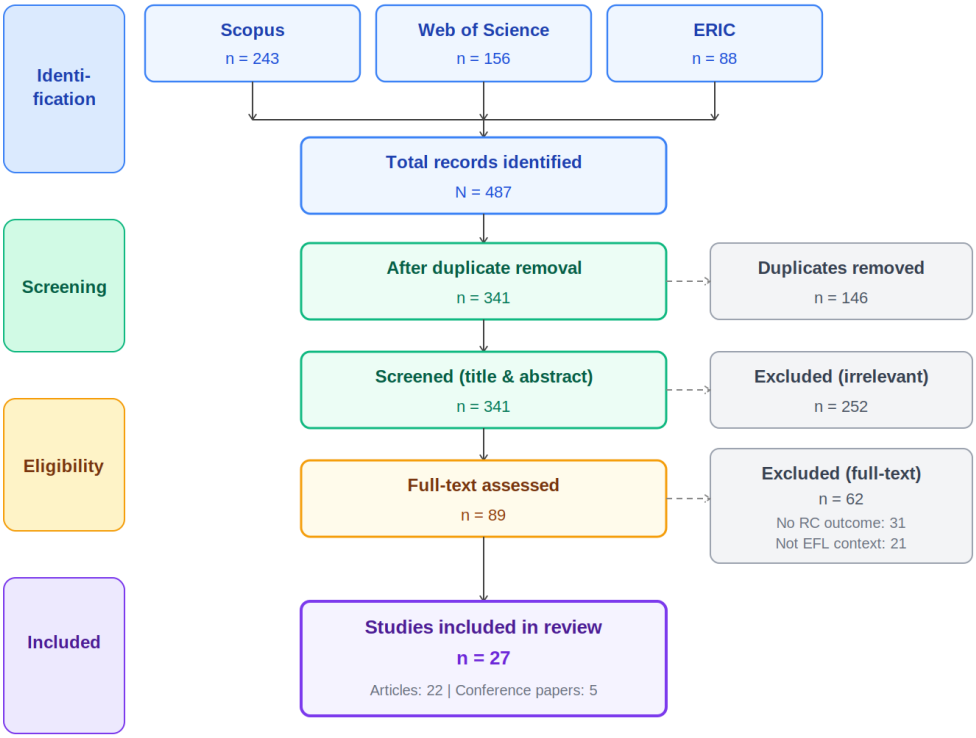


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram. Digital Storytelling and Reading Comprehension in EFL Classrooms

Table 2. PRISMA 2020 Article Selection Summary

PRISMA Stage	Records
Records identified (Scopus, WoS, and ERIC)	N = 487
After duplicate removal	N = 341
Screened (title and abstract)	N = 341
Excluded (title and abstract)	N = 252
Full-text assessed for eligibility	N = 89
Excluded (full-text)	N = 62
Studies included in synthesis	**N = 27**

Quality Assessment

Each included article was evaluated for methodological quality using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018). MMAT was selected for its ability to consistently assess studies across diverse research designs, which is relevant given the mix of quasi-experimental, qualitative, and mixed-method studies in the corpus. Two researchers conducted independent appraisals. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa, and any disagreement below a Kappa of 0.70 was resolved through discussion until consensus was achieved.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data were extracted using a form that was piloted on a small sample prior to application to the full corpus. The form captured the following information for each study: authors and year, country of study, participants' educational level, DST platform or tool used, research design, the reading comprehension dimension measured, and main findings. Due to substantial heterogeneity in study design and sample size, quantitative meta-analysis was not feasible; therefore, synthesis was conducted narratively. Themes from the extracted data were organized according to the three research questions. Table 3 summarizes the ten most representative studies.

Table 3. Summary of Representative Included Studies (n = 10)

Author (Year)	DST Platform or Tool	Level	Design	RC Aspect	Key Finding
Radaideh and Al-Jamal (2020)	Digital story and data show projector	Grade 5 EFL	Quasi-experimental	Applied and analytic RC	Experimental group significantly outperformed control on overall RC
Mohamed El Koshiry	DST-based	Primary, LD students	Quasi-experimental pre-post	Comprehensive RC skills	DST program effectively improves RC

and Hegazy (2024)	electronic program				in students with learning difficulties
Rahimi and Yadollahi (2017)	Online versus offline platform	Intermediate EFL	Quasi-experimental (5 months)	Reading and writing literacy	Online DST significantly improved literacy compared to offline
Chuang et al. (2013)	Storybird platform	Grade 6 EFL	Three-session instruction	Vocabulary and RC	Vocabulary and RC improved significantly
Nurjamin et al. (2025)	AR-based DST video (ADDIE model)	Senior high school	R&D with effectiveness test	Narrative RC	60% improvement in RC, especially in identifying story elements
Hu and Hsu (2023)	DST project tied to SDGs	University EFL, Taiwan	Quasi-experimental with ANCOVA	Reading performance	Treatment group scored significantly higher in reading
Al-Shaye (2021)	Online DST	Pre-service teachers	Quasi-experimental	Critical reading	Critical reading and thinking skills improved significantly ($p < 0.01$)
Ulusoy and Ulusoy (2025)	Digital story with retelling activity	Grade 2 primary	Pre-post control group	Narrative comprehension	All experimental groups improved in narrative comprehension compared to control
Syam (2022)	DST in EFL class	University EFL, Indonesia	Quasi-experimental	Reading and writing	Experimental class improved significantly: mean 82.50 versus 57.05

Al Khateeb (2019)	Social DST platform	University EFL, Saudi Arabia	Qualitative (14 weeks)	Academic literacy	DST improved academic writing and literacy skills

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

RQ1: DST Platforms and Tools Used

The 27 included studies show considerable variation in the DST platforms and tools used for RC instruction. Web-based platforms are the most common category overall. Storybird appeared in two studies (Chuang et al., 2013; Batsila and Tsihouridis, 2016), and digital narratives hosted on Google Classroom were used in both Mayorga et al. (2022) and Jalel et al. (2023). What stands out more clearly in the recent literature, however, is a visible shift toward more immersive technologies, particularly in studies published between 2022 and 2026.

Augmented reality has been the most prominent of these emerging approaches. Nurjamin et al. (2025) developed an AR-based DST video grounded in the Systemic Functional Linguistics Genre-Based Approach (SFL-GBA) to help Indonesian senior high school students understand narrative texts. The study reported a 60 percent improvement in reading comprehension scores, particularly in learners' ability to identify intrinsic story elements. Wang et al. (2025) introduced an application called StoriesAR that combines narrative-based learning with AI-driven scaffolding for primary school children in Pakistan and found significant gains in both reading engagement and comprehension. Ng et al. (2023) took a different angle, asking Malaysian primary school students aged eleven to create augmented storybooks using paper-based circuitry. That study found significant increases in reading interest in the group who made the storybooks, compared to those who only read them.

A third category that recurs across the corpus is collaborative online platforms. Liu et al. (2019) followed 26 Taiwanese elementary students over two years in a DST community mediated by a social networking application. Oral reading proficiency improved steadily as community participation deepened, suggesting that the social dimension of the platform mattered as much as the technology itself. Rahimi and Yadollahi (2017) compared online and offline DST conditions directly and found that the online group made statistically larger literacy gains, which the authors attributed to faster feedback and broader content access in the online environment.

One limitation worth noting is that several studies in the corpus did not specify which platform they used at all, describing only the procedural steps of their DST activity. This makes direct platform comparisons across studies much harder than they should be, and it is something future researchers in this area should make a point of reporting more clearly.

RQ2: Effectiveness of DST on RC

Twenty-one of the 27 included studies, representing 77.8 percent of the corpus, reported statistically significant improvements in RC following a DST intervention. Of the eight studies that used quasi-experimental designs with control groups, all eight found results favoring the DST condition. Reported gains ranged from moderate (around 1 to 2

grade-level equivalents) to quite substantial, with one study reporting a 60 percent improvement in a specific RC dimension.

Radaideh and Al-Jamal (2020) studied 34 fifth-grade Jordanian EFL students and found that the group using digital stories displayed through a data-show projector significantly outperformed the control group on both applied and analytic comprehension subtests. Al-Shaye (2021) examined Kuwaiti pre-service Arabic language teachers and found that an online DST intervention produced significant improvements in critical reading skills compared to conventional instruction ($p < 0.01$). Both studies used validated RC instruments with pre-post control-group designs, which provides their findings with relatively strong internal validity.

At the primary level, Ulusoy and Ulusoy (2025) found that retelling and reading response activities following digital story viewing significantly improved second-grade students' narrative comprehension over a nine-week period. What was particularly interesting in this study was that the combined retelling and response condition produced larger gains than either activity alone, suggesting a synergistic effect when active literacy tasks are paired with digital story exposure rather than used in isolation.

At the university level, Hu and Hsu (2023) engaged 62 Taiwanese EFL college students in a DST project organized around the UN Sustainable Development Goals. A one-way ANCOVA showed the treatment group scored significantly higher on RC than the control group. The study is worth noting because it integrated DST into a cross-curricular theme, suggesting that reading gains can be achieved through DST even when the primary pedagogical goal is not reading instruction per se.

Gutierrez et al. (2019) is the notable exception in this otherwise positive picture. That study compared DST with traditional storytelling in adult night school students in the Philippines and found no statistically significant difference in comprehension scores between the two groups. The researchers attributed this to a short intervention duration and a lack of clear alignment between the digital format and specific RC objectives. This finding is worth taking seriously. It signals that DST will not automatically improve reading comprehension just by being present in the classroom. Thoughtful instructional design is not optional.

RQ3: Instructional Approaches in DST and RC Integration

Across the 27 studies, four distinct instructional approaches emerged as the most common ways in which teachers and researchers integrated DST for RC development.

The first is scaffolded multimodal reading, where DST provides visual and auditory support that holds the comprehension process together. Nurjamin et al. (2025) used the SFL-GBA framework deliberately to sequence AR video content so students encountered genre features in a supported, step-by-step way before being expected to comprehend them independently. This is consistent with Mayer's (2009) Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, which predicts that comprehension deepens when verbal and visual information are presented together in a coherent, non-redundant format.

The second approach is collaborative story creation, where learners are not passive consumers of digital stories but active producers. Chuang et al. (2013) found that collaboration between teachers and students during Storybird-based storybook creation directly stimulated writing development that drew on what students had just read, creating a productive loop between reading and production. Simsek (2017) worked with advanced EFL students at a Turkish university who created alternative endings for literary classics after reading and watching digital versions of the source texts. Both RC and creative

writing developed in parallel. Syam (2022) reported similar findings in an Indonesian university context, where the experimental class producing DST content had a mean RC score of 82.50, compared to 57.05 in the control class.

The third approach is retelling and response activities, in which students are asked to engage with a digital story after watching it. Ulusoy and Ulusoy (2025) showed that retelling alone improved narrative comprehension and that combining retelling with a structured reading response produced even larger gains. Machfudi and Ferdiansyah (2023) used DST as a reflective activity at the end of an online extensive reading course during the COVID-19 period. In their study, creating a digital story served as a metacognitive anchor: students revisited and consolidated comprehension gains made throughout the semester, and the digital story became evidence of that growth.

The fourth approach is question-and-answer-based reading instruction paired with DST exposure. Radaideh and Al-Jamal (2020) structured their intervention so that digital story viewing was followed by alternating rounds of applied and analytic comprehension questions, drawing on Raphael's Question-Answer Relationship (QAR) theory. This approach was particularly effective for higher-order comprehension, which EFL learners in Arabic-language contexts tend to find most difficult.

Discussion

The overall findings from this review indicate that digital storytelling is effective. Most included studies reported significant improvements in reading comprehension, with effects observed across diverse educational levels, countries, and digital storytelling (DST) formats. However, a more valuable insight emerges from examining why digital storytelling is effective and under what conditions it produces optimal results.

A cognitive explanation is most consistently supported in the literature. When learners engage with digital stories that integrate text, images, voice, and movement, they construct a richer mental model of the text's meaning. This occurs because the brain can process multiple sensory channels simultaneously. Mayer (2009) referred to this as the multimedia effect, which is the most prominent theoretical framework identified in this corpus. The substantial gains reported by Nurjamin et al. (2025) and Wang et al. (2025) with augmented reality (AR)-embedded DST further support this explanation, as AR enhances the multimodal experience beyond what standard video or web platforms offer, resulting in greater comprehension gains.

A second explanation, which receives less emphasis in the DST literature, concerns the emotional dimension. Garcia-Pastor (2026) found that EFL student-teachers' emotional engagement with asynchronous DST tasks involved both enthusiasm and anxiety, with both emotions significantly influencing cognitive engagement. This finding complicates a straightforward endorsement of DST. If learners' emotional responses to digital stories can either enhance or hinder comprehension depending on the design and delivery of the material, educators cannot assume that DST will automatically motivate students. Careful consideration of the affective qualities of selected content is therefore essential.

Variation in effectiveness across educational levels warrants careful consideration, as it aligns with developmental patterns. At the primary level, the most effective strategies provided substantial external support, such as visual scaffolding, structured retelling, and guided-response activities. Younger learners depend on concrete representations to develop comprehension, so DST activities that closely support meaning-making yield better outcomes. In contrast, at secondary and university levels, more generative activities,

including collaborative creation and critical response tasks, produced stronger results. These activities offer older learners intellectual challenges that align with their developing abstract thinking abilities. Therefore, DST approaches should be matched to learners' developmental stages rather than applied uniformly across all levels.

The null finding reported by Gutierrez et al. (2019) stands out as an exception to the generally positive results and merits particular attention. When DST was implemented over a short period and without intentional alignment to specific reading comprehension (RC) objectives, it offered no advantage over traditional storytelling. This finding underscores that technology itself is not the intervention; rather, instructional design constitutes the intervention. DST serves as the medium for delivering instructional design, and if the design is inadequate, the medium alone cannot compensate.

Three significant gaps remain following this review. First, Southeast Asian EFL contexts are notably underrepresented, with only four of the 27 studies originating from Indonesia, Malaysia, or the Philippines. EFL instruction in this region faces unique challenges, such as large class sizes, inconsistent digital infrastructure, and high-stakes testing cultures that may conflict with extended project-based DST activities, which are associated with the greatest comprehension gains. Consequently, findings from European or North American studies may not be directly transferable. Second, there is a near absence of longitudinal research. With most interventions lasting only four to twelve weeks, it is not possible to determine whether RC gains persist, diminish, or continue to develop after the treatment period. This limitation is significant for curriculum planning. Third, individual differences—including reading anxiety, prior digital literacy, and learning style preferences—are well-documented factors in RC development in other contexts but have received little systematic attention in the DST and RC literature.

For educators in EFL reading classrooms, this review suggests several practical recommendations. Implementing DST to enhance RC involves more than selecting a platform and assigning a task. It requires intentional focus on the specific dimension of RC targeted for development, incorporation of scaffolding that supports this dimension, and follow-up activities that require students to actively demonstrate comprehension. Additionally, it is important to ensure that the content of digital stories is culturally relevant to students, as affective engagement with content significantly influences comprehension.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review analyzed 27 studies on digital storytelling and reading comprehension in EFL classrooms, encompassing publications from 2013 to 2026. Web-based platforms and augmented reality tools were the most frequently utilized DST environments. Four instructional approaches consistently emerged: scaffolded multimodal reading, collaborative story creation, retelling and response activities, and question-and-answer-based instruction. Most studies reported significant RC gains under these conditions, although the magnitude of these gains varied depending on instructional design quality, learner level, and the extent of engagement with digital content.

This review demonstrates that digital storytelling is not an instructional solution in itself but rather a medium for delivering effective instruction. Such instruction must be intentionally designed to address specific comprehension objectives. Three priorities for future research are evident: expanding studies in Southeast Asian EFL contexts, where the evidence base remains limited; conducting longitudinal research to determine the persistence of comprehension gains; and investigating individual learner differences as

moderating variables. Advancements in these areas would provide a more comprehensive and practical understanding of the potential of digital storytelling for reading comprehension.

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