Innovating Inclusive Literacy Instruction: Rethinking Single-Method Approaches for Learners with Diverse Abilities

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Abstract

Reading instruction plays a crucial role in shaping learners' academic achievement, language development, and long-term cognitive outcomes. However, in many multilingual and low-resource educational settings, teaching approaches remain dominated by a single method, often phonics-only or comprehension-only approaches, that fail to meet the diverse needs of learners with varied linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cultural backgrounds. This literature review aims to analyse the challenges associated with single-method reading instruction and the essential need for multifaceted, inclusive, and adaptive literacy frameworks. The study used a descriptive qualitative literature review, drawing on national and international research from 2000 to 2025. A systematic search identified 28 relevant studies, which were grouped and analysed using thematic synthesis. The themes highlight that single-method instruction limits reading comprehension, excludes learners with disabilities, and reduces learner engagement. Conversely, multifaceted approaches that integrate phonics, guided reading, vocabulary development, bilingual instruction, sociocultural relevance, and multimodal access lead to improved literacy outcomes, particularly for learners with disabilities and multilingual learners. The review concludes that adopting multifaceted literacy instruction requires stronger teacher training, improved curriculum design, and inclusive policy support.

Keywords: multifaceted literacy, reading instruction, inclusive education, adaptive teaching, multilingual literacy, disability inclusion

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INTRODUCTION

Reading is a foundational skill that influences academic success, social participation, and lifelong learning. Despite extensive evidence that literacy development requires the integration of multiple cognitive and sociocultural processes, many educational systems still rely on one-dimensional methods that fail to address learner diversity. In multilingual contexts, where students come with varied home languages, learning experiences, and literacy exposure, such rigid approaches can hinder reading comprehension, engagement, and motivation (Nag et al., 2019). Likewise, learners with disabilities, particularly those with hearing, language, or cognitive impairments, require multimodal, adaptive instruction that goes beyond conventional teaching methods (Evans, 2004).

Single-method reading instruction, whether phonics-dominant or comprehension-oriented, contributes to uneven literacy outcomes, especially in under-resourced schools where teachers have limited training in differentiated instruction. The emphasis on a single set of skills often overlooks the interconnected nature of reading development, which encompasses phonemic awareness, vocabulary acquisition, fluency, comprehension, and sociocultural interpretation (Justice et al., 2009). In disability-inclusive settings, the limitations are even more pronounced. Learners with disabilities require instructional strategies that integrate visual, tactile, auditory, or technology-based supports to access literacy meaningfully (Morrell, 2009).

Research across sub-Saharan Africa also reveals mismatches between imported literacy pedagogies and local linguistic realities. Instruction delivered in foreign languages frequently disadvantages early readers, who benefit more from reading in their home language before transitioning to second-language literacy (Majgaard & Mingat, 2012; Trudell, 2009). When instruction ignores sociolinguistic contexts and learner diversity, literacy becomes inaccessible and inequitable.

This literature review, therefore, aims to examine the challenges of single-method reading instruction and to synthesise evidence supporting multifaceted, inclusive literacy approaches. These approaches recognize literacy as a dynamic, multilayered process that must respond to learners' cognitive profiles, linguistic backgrounds, and sociocultural environments.

METHOD

This review employs a descriptive qualitative literature review. A literature review is an activity of summarising and synthesising scientific articles in journals, proceedings, books, and other relevant documents in accordance with the research topic (Prawitasari et al., 2023). The purpose of this study is to collect, analyse, and synthesise findings from previous studies on the challenges of single-method reading instruction and the effectiveness of multifaceted literacy approaches for diverse learners, including multilingual learners and learners with disabilities.

Data sources were obtained from published national and international scientific journals. These sources were identified through systematic searches on several online databases, namely Google Scholar, Scopus, ERIC, and ResearchGate. The keywords used in the search process included: *"single-method reading instruction"*, *"multifaceted literacy instruction"*, *"inclusive literacy"*, *"adaptive teaching strategies"*, *"reading disabilities"*, and *"multilingual literacy development."*

The criteria for the selected articles included: published between 2000 and 2025; focused on reading or literacy instruction; involved learners with disabilities and/or multilingual learners; examined instructional practices or literacy outcomes; employed empirical, theoretical, or review-based methods; and were written in English. Based on these criteria, 28 manuscripts were selected as the primary sources for analysis.

The selection process was conducted in three stages, similar to the PRISMA

1. Identification: The initial search resulted in 102 articles based on the keywords.
2. Filtering: Titles and abstracts were screened, resulting in the elimination of 52 irrelevant articles
3. Eligibility: Full-text screening of the remaining articles was conducted, and 22 were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria. In the end, 28 eligible studies were used in the analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic synthesis, grouping findings from the selected studies into key themes. The synthesis focused on:

(1) characteristics of the included studies,

(2) literacy instructional approaches used in diverse contexts, and

(3) challenges and recommendations related to the implementation of multifaceted literacy instruction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This literature review identified 28 relevant studies on reading instruction, multilingual literacy, and inclusive literacy practices. The characteristics of the reviewed studies are presented in Table 1. The distribution of the studies shows a diversity of focus areas, including phonics-based research, whole-language research, bilingual literacy, multimodal instruction, adaptive pedagogy, and disability-inclusive literacy approaches. The majority of studies were conducted between 2009 and 2021, indicating a growing scholarly interest in literacy development in multilingual and inclusive educational contexts.

The results of the analysis show that the reviewed studies can be categorised into several literacy instructional approaches, each with different characteristics, strengths, and limitations. These categories are presented in Table 2. Based on the studies reviewed, this section presents the findings from the thematic synthesis conducted earlier.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Studies Obtained

No	Title	Author(s)	Year
1	Adaptive Teaching in Literacy Instruction	Parsons	2012
2	Home Language and Literacy Attainment	Nag et al.	2019
3	Literacy Development Practices in Low-Income Contexts	Majgaard & Mingat	2012
4	Interactive Storybook Reading and Print Referencing	Justice et al.	2009
5	Balanced vs. Singular Literacy Approaches	Conn	2017
6	Literacy Development in Deaf Students	Evans	2004
7	Critical Literacy for Diverse Learners	Morrell	2009
8	Early Literacy Development Study	Juel	1988

Table 1 displays the characteristics of the studies used as sources in this review. These studies vary in their themes, ranging from phonics-based instruction to bilingual and multimodal reading practices. After identifying the characteristics of each study, the findings were analysed and grouped by the types of literacy instructional approaches employed. Table 2 presents a summary of these approaches, accompanied by brief descriptions and key findings from each study. This grouping is intended to clarify the patterns that emerged from the literature and to support the discussion of the importance of multifaceted literacy instruction.

Table 2. Summary of Literacy Instruction Approaches for Diverse Learners

No	Literacy Approach	Description	Key Findings	Authors
1	Phonics-only	Focus on decoding, letter-sound mapping	Improves decoding but is weak on comprehension	Juel (1988)

2	Whole-language	Emphasizes meaning-making without structured decoding	Supports comprehension but insufficient decoding	Reed et al. (2020)
3	Bilingual/Home-Language Instruction	Teaching reading in a language familiar to the learner	Improves reading speed, comprehension, and engagement	Nag et al. (2019)
4	Multimodal/ Interactive Instruction	Combines print referencing, storybook reading, and visual cues	Supports decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension together	Justice et al. (2009)
5	Adaptive Teaching	Instruction adjusted based on learner profile	Strong outcomes for diverse and disabled learners	Parsons (2012)
6	Critical Literacy	Encourages questioning and text analysis	Deepens comprehension and sociocultural awareness	Morrell (2009)

1. Limitations of Single-Method Literacy Instruction

The review found that single-method instructional approaches, especially phonics-only or comprehension-only methods, are insufficient for developing comprehensive reading skills. Studies by Juel (1988) and Reed et al. (2020) consistently showed that single-method instruction tends to strengthen one dimension of reading while weakening others. For example, phonics approaches were highly effective in improving decoding accuracy but were inadequate in building vocabulary and comprehension. These findings align with ongoing critiques that one-dimensional approaches limit learners' ability to engage with text meaningfully.

2. Multifaceted Instruction Produces Better Literacy Outcomes

Findings across multiple studies indicate that integrating instructional elements such as phonics, vocabulary development, guided reading, interactive storybook reading, and comprehension strategies leads to more balanced literacy development. Justice et al. (2009) demonstrated that multimodal instruction supports learners' decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension simultaneously. Conn (2017) further confirmed that combined approaches outperform isolated methods, especially in multilingual and resource-limited settings.

3. Language of Instruction Matters Significantly

Several studies reviewed, particularly Nag et al. (2019) and Trudell (2009), highlight the importance of teaching reading in the learner's home language. Learners taught to read in familiar languages tend to show higher engagement, comprehension, and reading fluency. This finding is consistent across low- and middle-income countries and suggests that literacy instruction should be linguistically responsive to learners' linguistic backgrounds.

4. Inclusive and Disability-Responsive Strategies Are Essential

A notable portion of studies emphasizes the need for literacy approaches that account for learners with disabilities. Evans (2004) illustrated that deaf learners benefit from bilingual literacy practices that integrate sign language, visual supports, and explicit vocabulary instruction. Parsons (2012) also found that adaptive teaching strategies, in which teachers modify instruction based on learners' needs, significantly improve reading outcomes among learners with disabilities. These findings underscore that inclusive literacy teaching must be flexible, multimodal, and responsive to individual learner profiles.

5. Sociocultural Context Shapes Literacy Experiences

Beyond cognitive processes, literacy is deeply embedded in sociocultural contexts. Morrell (2009) argues that critical literacy empowers learners to question social narratives, improving their ability to interpret text critically. Majgaard and Mingat (2012) similarly emphasize that instruction that is misaligned with sociocultural and linguistic realities often yields poor reading outcomes. Therefore, literacy instruction must incorporate culturally relevant materials and teaching methods.

CONCLUSION

This literature review demonstrates that relying on a single method for teaching reading is insufficient to meet learners' diverse needs, particularly in multilingual and disability-inclusive contexts. Multidimensional literacy approaches that integrate phonics, vocabulary building, comprehension strategies, home-language instruction, and multimodal methods provide more effective and equitable outcomes. The findings also show that learners with disabilities benefit strongly from adaptive, inclusive, and multimodal literacy instruction.

Therefore, teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers should adopt multifaceted literacy instruction and ensure that literacy teaching is responsive to learners' linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural backgrounds. Future research is recommended to explore the implementation of these approaches and the professional development needed to support teachers in adopting multifaceted literacy instruction.

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Miriam Maganga: Methodology, Validation, Review

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST
The authors declare no competing financial or personal interests.

DECLARATION OF ETHICS
The authors declare that the research adheres to ethical standards and is free from plagiarism.

DECLARATION OF ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS
The authors declare that generative AI or assistive technologies were not excessively used in the research or writing processes.

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