

Exploration of The Whole Language Approach in Comprehensive Literacy Learning in SD/MI (A Systematic Literature Review)

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Abstract : *This study aims to explore the implementation of the whole language approach in comprehensive literacy learning in elementary school through the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) study. A total of 15 articles published in the 2021-2025 range were systematically analyzed using a selection protocol based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. The results of the study show that the whole language approach makes a positive contribution to the four literacy skills simultaneously, including reading, writing, speaking, and listening, through key components such as shared reading, guided writing, group discussions, storytelling, and daily journal writing. This approach has also proven to be relevant to strengthening 21st century competencies that include critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity, as well as being in line with the principles of differentiated learning and strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile in the Independent Curriculum. Further research is recommended to explore the integration of digital and multimodal literacy within the framework of whole language to respond to the demands of the contemporary education ecosystem.*

Keywords : *Whole language, Comprehensive literacy, Systematic literature review, SD/MI*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi implementasi pendekatan whole language dalam pembelajaran literasi komprehensif di sekolah dasar melalui studi Systematic Literature Review (SLR). Sebanyak 15 artikel yang dipublikasikan pada rentang tahun 2021–2025 dianalisis secara sistematis menggunakan protokol seleksi berdasarkan kriteria inklusi dan eksklusi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan whole language memberikan kontribusi positif terhadap empat keterampilan literasi secara simultan, meliputi membaca, menulis, berbicara, dan menyimak, melalui komponen utama seperti shared reading, guided writing, diskusi kelompok, mendongeng, dan penulisan jurnal harian. Pendekatan ini juga terbukti relevan dalam memperkuat kompetensi abad ke-21 yang mencakup berpikir kritis, komunikasi, kolaborasi, dan kreativitas, serta sejalan dengan prinsip pembelajaran berdiferensiasi dan penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila dalam Kurikulum Merdeka. Penelitian selanjutnya direkomendasikan untuk mengeksplorasi integrasi literasi digital dan multimodal dalam kerangka whole language guna menjawab tuntutan ekosistem pendidikan kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: *Whole language, literasi komprehensif, tinjauan literatur sistematis, SD/MI*

INTRODUCTION

Literacy is a fundamental competency that must be possessed by students, especially at the basic education level. This literacy competency plays an important role in determining the success of student learning in the 21st century. This literacy competency is no longer understood as limited to the competence of reading texts, but includes comprehensive language skills consisting of reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Qarshiyeva, 2024). Each of these skills supports the development of the other. By integrating these four language skills, it is possible to improve students' overall language skills and achieve effective communication skills (Lecturer at University of business and science, Uzbekistan & Qilichovna, 2025).

The results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that the literacy ability of Indonesian students is below the OECD average, especially in terms of deep understanding and interpretation of texts (OECD, 2019). This shows that students' literacy mastery is not optimal and has implications for low critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Meliana, 2025). The low literacy ability is inseparable from learning practices that are still oriented to basic skills separately. Language learning in elementary school still tends to separate the four language skills in one meeting. The learning approach used is mechanistic and less contextual, so students are unable to relate students' learning experiences to real life (Saidova, 2024). This shows that there is a gap between the goal of holistic literacy learning and practice in the field which is still partial. Therefore, a learning approach is needed that is able to integrate all language skills comprehensively, simultaneously and meaningfully.

The whole language approach is an approach that emphasizes that language is learned in its entirety in the context of real communication. This approach views that reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills cannot be separated, but must be taught in an integrated manner through authentic learning experiences (Flurkey & Meyer, 1994; K. S. Goodman, 1997). So that the whole language approach is believed to be able to improve the quality of student literacy comprehensively and relevant to the demands of 21st century learning. A number of previous studies have shown that the whole language approach has a positive contribution to improving students' language skills. Research conducted by Nikola Asyari in 2025 found that the whole language approach significantly improves students' initial reading ability and text comprehension (Asyari & Budi Prasetyo, 2025). Then, the findings of research conducted by Wida Utari in 2021 are that the whole language approach can improve students' narrative writing skills and creativity (Utari, 2021). The results of research conducted by ole Maya, et al. in 2025 state that the Merdeka curriculum is effective in supporting students' understanding and literacy skills (Maya et al., 2025).

Although the results of the study show the effectiveness of the whole language approach, there are several limitations that need to be observed. Some of these studies still focus on one aspect of literacy. This creates a methodological gap, where integrative approaches are only partially studied, so that empirical evidence on the effectiveness of whole language as a comprehensive literacy approach is still not fully strong. Furthermore, synthesis-based research such as the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) that can provide a comprehensive picture of the implementation of whole language is still limited, as well as studies that relate the whole language approach to the context of 21st century learning and the Independent Curriculum have not been widely done, so there is a great opportunity to develop this approach.

Based on these conditions, this research is important to be carried out to fill the gaps that existed in the previous study. Through the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, this study seeks to comprehensively analyze various research findings related to the implementation of the whole language approach in Indonesian language learning in elementary / MI. Theoretically, this research can enrich the study of the whole language approach in the context of comprehensive literacy and contribute to the development of integrative language learning theories. Practically, the results of this research are expected to be a reference for teachers, especially in elementary / MI, in designing literacy learning that is more effective, contextual, and in accordance with the demands of the Independent Curriculum. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the

implementation of the whole language approach in comprehensive literacy learning through the Systematic Literature Review study, identify its contribution to the holistic improvement of students' language skills, and identify the implications of this approach in supporting the context of 21st century learning and the Independent Curriculum.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using the *Systematic Literature Review* (SLR) method based on the PRISMA (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis*) guidelines to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesise previous studies related to the implementation of the *whole language* approach in Indonesian language learning at elementary school level (Rehlfesen *et al.*, 2021). Literature searches were conducted through several academic databases, including Scopus, Sinta, Google Scholar, ERIC, and EBSCO, covering publications from 2021–2025. The search process used combinations of keywords such as “*whole language*”, “*literacy*”, “*elementary school*”, and “*MI*” with Boolean operators (AND, OR) to obtain relevant studies. The selection process was carried out through title, abstract, and full-text screening based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria (Page *et al.*, 2021). The selected articles were empirical studies published in Indonesian or English and directly related to the implementation of the *whole language* approach in elementary education. Data extracted from each article included author, year, research focus, and main findings, which were then analysed using a narrative synthesis approach through thematic categorisation, pattern identification, and comparison of findings across studies. The entire selection and analysis process was presented using the PRISMA flow diagram.

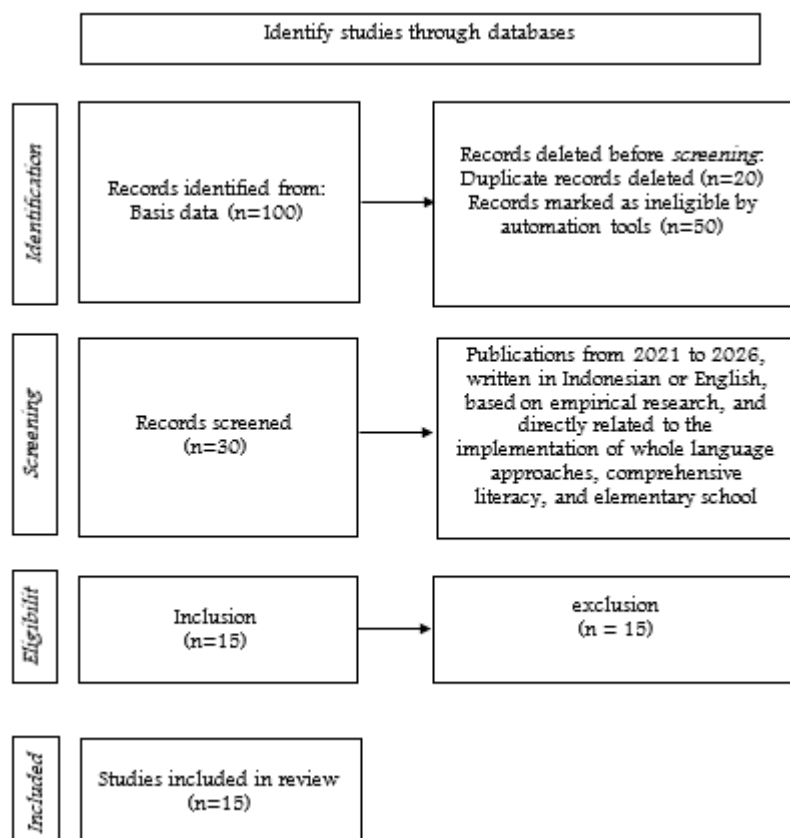


Figure 1: PRISMA diagram

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis of the 15 articles analyzed show that the research trend regarding the whole language approach in literacy learning in elementary school/MI has increased significantly. This can be seen by the increase in publications in Education and Language journals that focus on the integration of literacy skills. Most of the research uses a qualitative, descriptive, and quasi-experimental approach, with a focus on improving reading skills, developing narrative writing, contextual learning, and learning based on the Merdeka curriculum. These findings show a paradigm shift from fragmented language learning to a holistic and meaningful approach.

Table 1. Literature Review

Author (year)	Research Title	Study Focus	Key Findings
(Aisyah et al., 2020)	Early Reading Skills Through Whole language Approach In Elementary School	Reading the Beginning	The results of this study show that there is an influence between whole language on the initial reading ability of elementary school children in South Jakarta
(Aisyah et al., 2024)	Improving Reading Comprehension Skills Through A Whole language Approach In Fifth Grade Elementary School Students	Comprehensive reading	The whole language approach is a one-way approach that teachers can use to improve reading comprehension skills at the interpretive level. The implication of this study is that the application of the All-Language Approach can help students learn.
(Antica Krisnina Maharani et al., 2023)	Application of Whole Language Approach in Indonesian Language Learning Reading Aloud Component with Picture Story Media	Read aloud	Many students have experienced improvements in reading aloud by applying the entire language
(Syahputri & Arianti, 2024)	A Whole language Approach to Improving Reading Skills in Low Class Primary Students	Reading skills	Whole language approach can train students' reading skills in low-grade elementary schools
(Dharma et al., 2023)	Whole Language Approach in Indonesian Language Learning in Elementary School	Komponen pendekatan whole language	In this whole language approach, students will; <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop through stages according to development, 2. Engage in social interaction throughout the day,

Author (year)	Research Title	Study Focus	Key Findings
			3. The Practice of Reading 4. Evaluate progress based on learning experiences.
(Suparya, 2021)	Application of the Whole language Approach in the Development of Indonesian Language Skills of Elementary School Students	Applying a whole language approach	The application of the whole language approach in learning Indonesian has been able to improve student learning outcomes.
(Sukmayasa & Sudiana, 2023)	The Effect of The Whole language Approach on Learning Motivation and Productive Communication Skills of Students	Communication/speaking skills	There is a significant influence of the whole language approach on learning motivation and productive communication skills of third grade students of SD Lab Undiksha
(Hartati - et al., 2019)	Application of Whole Language Approach to Improve the Writing Ability of Grade V Elementary School Students	Writing	Students' writing skills improve after learning by applying the whole language approach.
(Cahyani, n.d., 2021)	The Effect of the Whole language Approach on Student Learning Outcomes in Indonesian Language Subjects in Class III SDN 17 Negri Katon	Learning outcomes	there is an influence of the whole language approach on the learning outcomes of students in the Indonesian language subject dikels III SDN 17 Negri Katon
(Andini et al., 2023)	Analysis of Expressive Language Skills in Literacy Activities with a Whole language Approach in Grade 4 Students of Elementary School N Sendangguwo 02 Semarang Even Semester 2022/2023	Implementation of literacy programs with a whole language approach	The implementation of literacy has been carried out in accordance with the independent curriculum in the elementary school education unit.
(Lestari, 2025)	Pendekatan Whole language in multiliteracy learning to improve oral	Multiliteracy, speaking, and creativity learning	The approach of whole language in multiliteracy learning is able to create a holistic, relevant learning

Author (year)	Research Title	Study Focus	Key Findings
	language skills and creative thinking of elementary school students		experience and encourage the development of students' communication skills and creativity effectively.
(Fitri et al., 2025)	A Improving Reading Literacy Skills of Elementary School Students Through a Whole language Approach	Reading, and critical thinking	WLA is effective in improving reading literacy as a whole, motivating student participation, and developing students' critical thinking skills and character
(Asyari & Prasetyo, 2025)	Strategies to Improve Reading Literacy Through a Whole language Approach for Grade IV Students at Upt Sd Negeri Sinar Mulyo	Reading literacy	The Whole language approach is effective in improving the reading literacy of elementary school students because it emphasizes context, meaning, and active involvement of students in learning.
(Prastyo et al., 2025)	The Effectiveness of the Whole language Learning Approach on Reading Ability in Grade 3 Min 3 Students in Mojokerto	Reading ability	Penerapan The Whole language approach provides positive results in understanding reading texts, especially because students are actively involved in various meaningful reading and text analysis activities.
(Saripah et al., 2025)	Whole Language Approach to Improve Reading Comprehension Ability of Grade V Students at Cinangsi State Elementary School, Cianjur Regency	Ability to read, and think critically	The use of various components of Whole language such as reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading and journal writing helps students develop comprehensive reading comprehension skills.

Characteristics of the Implementation of *the Whole language Approach* in Elementary School/MI

Based on the results of the synthesis, the implementation of *the whole language* approach has several main characteristics that can be seen in table 1. The main characteristics of the *whole language* approach are:

1. Integration of the Four Language Skills

One of the basic principles of the *whole language* approach is to combine the four language skills, namely reading, speaking, writing, and listening in one learning activity. This approach rejects the paradigm that language teaching and learning are separate, where each skill is taught separately without cohesive connectivity (K. S. Goodman, 1997). On the other hand, *the whole language* views language as a unit of communication systems that cannot be separated in its use (Flurkey & Meyer, 1994). According to Goodman, learning using *whole language* includes 10 components, namely reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, journal writing, guided writing, independent writing, shared writing, shared writing, discussion and talk, and authentic assessment (Tafesh, 2005). However, according to the synthesis of the 15 journals above, the dominant components are carried out, namely;

2. Shared reading

This shared reading is a joint reading activity between teachers and students, where everyone has a book that they are reading. There are several ways to do this joint reading, namely the teacher reads and the students follow it, the teacher reads and the students listen while looking at the readings listed on the book, and the students read in turn. This component not only aims to improve decoding, but also builds lexical understanding and appreciation of reading naturally (Lenhart et al., 2022). Shared reading also contributes to the development of phonemes and reading comprehension in early childhood, while creating a positive reading experience (Van Kleeck, 2006).

3. Guided writing

In this component, the teacher does not play the role of the only leader, but rather as a facilitator who *accompanies* students in the process of finding, organizing, and expressing ideas in writing. In this activity, the process of writing in choosing a topic, making drafts, correcting, and editing is done by the students themselves. This activity is in line with Vygotsky's development principle of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where students are able to reach their highest potential by collaborating with more competent parties (Schunk, 2012). Guided writing is also effective in encouraging the development of students' communication with writing, and strengthening students' grammar coherently, as well as increasing students' motivation in writing (Gaffar et al., 2025)

4. Group discussions

This activity is an important component in the *whole language approach* because it can train students' oral language which can strengthen the understanding of the meaning and function of students' language. Through this activity, students not only practice producing spoken language, but also construct common understanding through negotiation of meaning (Brockman, 1994). Group discussions can strengthen students' understanding of the function of language in real communication, as well as develop critical and argumentative thinking skills (Brown, 2007). Group discussions can also encourage active student participation (Suparman, 2024)

5. Storytelling

Strorytelling or storytelling is a representation of speaking skills in *a whole language approach*. This activity not only functions as a means of self-expression, but also builds narrative understanding, discourse structure, and connections between personal experiences and the texts studied (Antica Krisnina Maharani et al., 2023). Antica's research also shows that storytelling, including the reading aloud component of the *whole language approach*, can improve students' information retention and conceptual comprehension skills. In addition, storytelling can develop students' imagination and empathy which plays an important role in the formation of holistic literacy competencies (Rahman et al., 2025)

6. Daily journal

Daily journal writing can provide space for students to express their thoughts. Writing a journal is a safe means for students to express their feelings, tell about events around them, express their learning results, and use language in writing. Research conducted by Cerillia, et al. showed that journaling significantly improved writing fluency, vocabulary, and confidence in language experiments (Ocktaviani et al., 2025).

7. Use of Authentic Text

The *whole language* approach prioritizes the use of authentic teaching materials from real-life contexts such as children's stories, students' personal experiences, and the surrounding environment. The use of authentic texts is based on students' motivation to learn well when students interact with texts that are meaningful and relevant to their daily lives (Patzelt, 1995). Flurkey & Meyer (1994) affirm that authentic texts allow students to establish connections between linguistic experiences in the classroom and communicative realities outside the classroom, so that language learning is not mechanical. This differs fundamentally from phonics approaches that tend to use constructed texts for the exercise of specific structures (K. Goodman & Goodman, 1981)

8. Meaningful Learning

The main focus is not on the structure of language, but on understanding the meaning and use of language in a real context. Goodman explained that comprehension is the primary goal of reading and writing, not mastering phonetics or language structure separately. Feril's research states that students learn to read, write, communicate, and listen through direct experience in everyday life, as well as by reading meaningful and contextual material. Meaningful reading materials such as novels and articles that can be an effective learning resource in teaching languages as a whole (Muzaki, 2023)

9. Student-Centered Learning

Students play an active role in building understanding, while teachers act as facilitators. This is in line with Vygotsky's perspective of social constructivism and Piaget's theory of cognitive constructivism, which emphasizes that knowledge is actively constructed by individuals through interaction with the environment and the people around them (Schunk, 2012). In *the whole language* class, students are given the freedom to choose reading materials, and write writing topics in learning (Asyari & Budi Prasetyo, 2025)

10. Literacy-rich Environment

Classes are designed with various reading resources, written media, and literacy activities that encourage language interaction. Research by Ilham, et al. shows that a rich literacy environment is essential for improving spontaneous reading and writing behaviors in early childhood, as it fosters strong reading skills and is essential for effective language and communication development (Parapat et al., 2023).

The Contribution of the *Whole language Approach* to Literacy Aspects

The results of the analysis that can be seen in table 1 show that *the whole language* approach makes a positive contribution to four aspects of literacy skills. The *whole language* approach conceptually places language as a whole and inseparable system, thus making a significant contribution to the development of simultaneous reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. The findings of SLR show that this integration is a major advantage over traditional approaches that tend to be fragmentative. In this context, students learn not only to read as a process of decoding, but also as a process of constructing meaning that is closely related to their experiences and social contexts. Language integration consists of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In the aspect of reading, *the whole language* approach has been proven to be able to improve reading comprehension more deeply because students interact with authentic texts that are relevant to their lives. Nevertheless, critically it should be noted that some studies still focus on improving short-term outcomes, such as comprehension scores, without exploring higher critical literacy skills, such as textual ideological analysis or information evaluation (Haerunnisa, 2024). Thus, although effective, the contribution to a high level of literacy still requires strengthening in learning design.

The *whole language approach* is also proven to increase students' motivation and interest in reading. When students are given the freedom to choose reading topics according to students' interests (independent reading), curiosity and emotional involvement with the text increase significantly (Safira et al., 2025). Then, a study conducted by Yusuf et al., (2023) showed that the *whole language approach* can have a positive effect in improving the early reading ability of 4th grade elementary school students. In the aspect of writing, this approach encourages the free and creative expression of ideas, which has an impact on improving students' narrative and reflective writing skills. However, some studies show that freedom in writing is often not balanced by

strengthening aspects of language mechanics such as grammar and spelling. This indicates that there is a potential imbalance between creativity and accuracy, so a pedagogical strategy is needed that is able to integrate the two in a balanced manner (Zuhra, 2024). Research by Gaffar *et al.*, (2025) found that students who participated in whole language-based learning showed significant improvements in narrative coherence, elaboration of ideas, and more varied vocabulary use.

Contributions to speaking and listening skills also showed positive outcomes, especially in improving students' confidence and interpersonal communication skills. Activities such as group discussions, *storytelling*, and presentations are effective means of developing communication competence (Antica Krisnina Maharani *et al.*, 2023). In a *whole language* environment, students are not only directed to speak grammatically correctly, but also to communicate effectively and meaningfully in various social contexts. However, it can be critically identified that most studies have not explicitly measured the quality of students' verbal interactions, for example in terms of argumentation, discourse cohesion, or critical thinking ability in speaking. This is a research gap that needs to be overcome through the development of a more comprehensive and performance-based assessment tool. Overall, *the whole language* approach makes a strong contribution to comprehensive literacy, but there is still a research gap in the integration of *higher-order literacy skills*. Therefore, it is necessary to develop an implementation model that not only focuses on the integration of basic skills, but also on strengthening critical literacy, digital literacy, and multimodal literacy to be more relevant to the demands of contemporary education.

The Relevance of the *Whole language Approach* to the 21st Century and the Independent Curriculum

The *whole language* approach also has strong relevance to the demands of 21st century literacy which emphasizes mastery of 4C skills (*critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication*) (Fitri *et al.*, 2025). The results of SLR show that *whole language*-based learning has inherently accommodated these four competencies through contextual and collaborative literacy activities. This shows that this approach is not only pedagogically relevant, but also strategic in preparing students to face the complexities of modern life. Critical thinking within *the framework of whole language* is developed through students' active engagement with authentic texts that are complex, multidimensional, and relevant to their social realities. Students do not only understand the content of the text literally, but are encouraged to question, evaluate, and analyze the perspectives, values, and assumptions contained in the text (Rahayu Kuswardani *et al.*, 2025). Yuliarsih's research shows that students who are involved in whole language-based reading programs with critical text analysis components are significantly better able to identify author biases, distinguish facts from opinions, and evaluate the validity of arguments (Yuliarsih, 2025).

Communication competencies in *the whole language approach* are developed through a variety of authentic language experiences that include oral, written, visual, and multimodal communication. The *whole language* philosophy that emphasizes the use of language in a real context naturally encourages students to communicate with a clear purpose, a real audience, and meaningful content (Muzaki, 2023). Group discussion activities within the framework of *whole language* have been proven to improve students' ability to articulate ideas cohesively, actively listen to other people's perspectives, and respond constructively (Suparman, 2024). In addition, Antica's research also shows that storytelling, including the reading aloud component in the *whole language* approach, can improve students' information retention and conceptual comprehension skills (Antica Krisnina Maharani *et al.*, 2023). Collaboration is one of the fundamental pillars of the *whole language approach* because language is essentially a social practice that is manifested in and through interaction between students and group discussions. Collaboration in *whole language* also builds a *learning community* that supports the literacy development of each member through the *Zone of Proximal Development* mechanism (ZPD) Vygotsky, in which more competent students naturally become *scaffolders* for peers who need support (Schunk, 2012).

Furthermore, the *whole language* approach creates a *safe space* for students to experiment with language, take creative risks, and express students' identities, perspectives, and experiences with daily journal activities. Research conducted by Cerillia, *et al.* showed that journal writing significantly improved writing fluency, vocabulary, and confidence in language experiments

(Ocktaviani et al., 2025). In the context of the Independent Curriculum, *the whole language approach* is in line with the principle of differentiated and student-centered learning. Flexible implementation allows teachers to tailor learning materials and strategies to students' needs, interests, and abilities (Andini et al., 2023). However, critically it can be observed that the success of implementation is highly dependent on the competence of teachers in designing adaptive learning (Rozaan Taqi Junatama et al., 2025). Without an adequate understanding, this approach has the potential to be applied partially and not optimally. Furthermore, the *whole language approach* also has implications for strengthening the profile of Pancasila students, especially in the dimensions of critical, creative, and communicative reasoning. Literacy activities based on real experiences allow students to develop the ability to reflect and interpret their social environment (Patzelt, 1995). However, some studies have not explicitly linked learning outcomes to the Pancasila Student profile indicators, so further studies are needed that systematically integrate these two aspects (Rintaningrum et al., 2023).

From the perspective of digital literacy, *the whole language approach* has great potential to be developed through technological integration, such as the use of digital media, literacy platforms, and multimodal learning resources. However, the SLR findings suggest that most research still focuses on conventional learning without technological support. This is an important criticism, considering that 21st century literacy cannot be separated from the ability to access, evaluate, and produce information in a digital environment. Therefore, it can be seen that the *whole language approach* has a strong foundation to support educational transformation within the framework of the Independent Curriculum and literacy in the 21st century. However, optimizing its implementation requires strengthening aspects of teacher competence, technology integration, and the development of more comprehensive evaluation indicators. Thus, this approach is not only a pedagogical alternative, but also a transformational strategy in improving the quality of student literacy in a sustainable manner.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings of this Systematic Literature Review (SLR) confirm that the *whole language approach* is an integrative and relevant framework for comprehensive literacy learning at the elementary school level. This approach effectively improves students' reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills simultaneously through authentic, meaningful, and student-centred learning activities such as *shared reading*, *guided writing*, storytelling, group discussions, and journal writing. In addition, the *whole language approach* demonstrates strong relevance to the development of 21st-century competencies, particularly critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity, while also aligning with the principles of the Independent Curriculum and the strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile.

However, the reviewed studies still predominantly focus on basic literacy skills and short-term learning outcomes, with limited attention to critical, digital, and multimodal literacy. Therefore, future research is recommended to develop a more adaptive *whole language* model by integrating digital and multimodal literacy to address the demands of contemporary education. Teacher professional development should also be strengthened to support the effective and sustainable implementation of the *whole language approach* in elementary literacy learning.

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