| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

A Systematic Review of Studies on Teaching Reading in Arabic to Grades 1–12: Textbooks, Skills, and Learning Outcomes

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| **ABSTRACT**

This study presents a systematic review (SR) of research conducted by the author between 1989 and 2007 on Arabic L1 reading in Saudi Arabia. The corpus comprises 14 studies examining the reading product and process skills embedded in reading textbooks for Grades 1-12, as well as the assessment and remediation of reading weaknesses. The studies were organized into three thematic clusters: high school reading, skills developed or overlooked in reading textbooks, and reading assessment and remediation. Results showed that reading product and process skills are insufficiently taught, or entirely absent. The textbooks provide limited explicit instruction in decoding, cohesion, context analysis, text structure awareness, and study skills. Reading questions and exercises mostly emphasize literal comprehension and details. No questions address critical comprehension, appreciation, character traits, comparison and contrast, sequence of events explicitly or implicitly stated in the text, the setting, plot, conflict and resolution, author's style and mood, and inferring the meaning of difficult words from context. Diagnostic studies reveal early weaknesses in word identification, particularly sound-symbol association and structural analysis. This means that students progress through the grades with fragile decoding skills, and inadequate preparation for the complex reading tasks required in high school and beyond. This SR highlights the need for a coherent, developmentally sequenced approach to reading instruction in Arabic. It provides clear implications for strengthening vertical alignment, improving textbook content and design, enhancing teacher preparation, and expanding assessment practices. Although the studies in this SR were conducted on earlier generations of Saudi reading textbooks before 2007, the operational lists of product and process skills, subskills, and evaluative criteria developed by the author remain a lasting contribution to Arabic reading pedagogy as they were grounded in reading theory, developmental models, instructional methods, and diagnostic principles and therefore extend beyond the specific textbooks analyzed. As textbooks continue to be revised, these conceptual frameworks continue to provide a systematic, theory based reference for developing and evaluating reading instruction. They will also guide future research, curriculum and textbook design, and thesis work, where many researchers, especially young ones, have not received specialized training in reading theory or assessment.

1. Introduction

First language (L1) reading research began in the early 20th century, but it became a recognizable academic field in the 1950's. Early work focused on silent reading, oral reading, and basic comprehension in school children. Much of the reading research in this era came from psychology and education, but it was not yet organized as a coherent field. The 1960s and early 1970s marked the beginning of modern L1 systematic, empirical reading research in the modern sense. Researchers began to study reading

readiness, decoding processes, basal readers, comprehension strategies, and reading assessment. In the 1970s–1980s, a large body of reading research was produced. Thousands of studies were published on basal readers and textbook analysis, reading aloud, decoding and phonics, reading comprehension, reading processes, reading models, stages of reading development, and reading remediation and intervention. Major theoretical models emerged, including bottom-up, top-down, and interactive models. Systematic reviews (SRs) in L1 reading did not appear until the 1990s and 2000s. Even today, the number of SRs of reading in L1 is small compared to the enormous primary research base.

Although the reading literature is full of studies about reading comprehension, decoding, reading aloud, reading remediation, basal readers, reading process, reading product, stages of reading development and reading assessment especially in the 1970, 1980, the SRs found are limited in scope and do not cover many of the areas covered by single reading research studies as in the following SRs on family factors and critical reading skills (Psyridou et al., 2024); children's reading outcomes in digital and print mediums (Hare et al., 2024); low reading literacy skills of elementary pupils in the Philippines (Librea et al., 2023); reading comprehension strategies among English language learners in middle schools (Ruan, 2023); differentiating reading profiles of children with specific comprehension deficits from skilled readers (Guo, Feng & Hodges, 2023); reading aloud and first language development (Batini et al., 2020); how students and teachers use didactic learning materials in L1 (Gissel & Buch, 2020); view of reading in elementary school (Salceda, Alonso & Castilla-Earls, 2014). Few more SRs focused on the factors affecting reading development as the association between reading and emotional development (Batini, 2020); the effects of shared reading on the language and literacy skills of children with autism spectrum disorders (Boyle, McNaughton & Chapin, 2019); preschool predictors of later reading comprehension ability (Hjetland et al., 2017); the quality of systematic reviews of effectiveness in literacy learning in English (Torgerson, 2007). Other SRs examined the integration of reading and writing with STEAM/STEM (Sun & Zhong, 2024); literacy in reading and writing (Nugrahani, Septiari & Widayati, 2025); the reading–writing connection based on independent reading and writing (Jouhar & Rupley, 2021); and reading and writing theories in research (Hodges et al., 2016);

In Arabic, the gap is even larger. The literature review showed very few SRs on fragmented topics, with no developmental synthesis. Existing reviews tend to examine isolated components such as morphological awareness, phonological processing, metalinguistic skills, or dyslexia, without addressing the broader landscape of reading instruction, reading development, or reading difficulties across grade levels. Moreover, Arabic literacy research is dispersed across multiple disciplines, including education, linguistics, psychology, and special education, resulting in a lack of integration and limited visibility in the international literature. The absence of comprehensive SRs that synthesize findings across these domains leaves educators, policymakers, and researchers without a clear understanding of how Arabic reading skills develop, how reading is taught in schools, and what challenges learners face at different stages. The following few SRs on reading in Arabic as L1 were found: Tthe role of short vowels in reading Arabic (Abu-Rabia, 2019); orthographic, phonological, and morphological skills and children's word reading in Arabic (Al Ghanem & Kearns, 2015); morphological awareness among normal and dyslexic native Arabic readers (Wattad & Abu Rabia, 2020); Arabic metalinguistic knowledge predicts reading comprehension (Bin Sawad et al., 2022); the use of modern Arabic literature as an authentic medium in language learning (Azami, 2025); Arabic reading and speaking skills through picture storybooks (Safitriani et al., 2025); screening tests and challenges facing reading disabilities in Arabic-speaking learners (Raji et al., 2025); and a smartphone application for learning Arabic vocabulary (Rahim et al., 2024).

The above literature review shows a significant gap between the global L1 reading SRs that are more diverse compared to Arabic L1 reading SRs. To address this gap, the present study aims to conduct a systematic review (SR) of studies published by the author between 1989 and 2007. These studies examine the reading product and process skills embedded in the reading textbooks for Grades 1-12 in Saudi Arabia, as well as the assessment and remediation of Arabic reading skills. The SR provides a comprehensive synthesis of 18 years of research that illuminates the developmental trajectory of Arabic reading skills developed by the textbooks assigned to Grades 1-12, and the instructional practices used to support them.

This SR is significant because it offers the first integrated synthesis of Arabic L1 reading research across the entire school textbook trajectory. By bringing together findings on early decoding difficulties, textbook-based skill development, and reading assessment, this SR constructs a coherent developmental picture that has not previously been available. The synthesis highlights not only the strengths and weaknesses of Arabic reading textbooks, but also the persistent underemphasis on decoding instruction in the early grades, the limited treatment of key process skills such as cohesion, text structure, text structure, advance organizers, and study skills, key product skills like critical comprehension, appreciation, identifying character traits, comparison and contrast, sequence of events explicitly or implicitly stated in the text, inferring the meaning of difficult words from context, identifying the setting, plot, conflict and resolution, and author's style and mood, in addition to the inadequate preparation that students receive for the more complex reading tasks required at the university level.

As such, this SR establishes a foundational reference point for future research, curriculum development, teacher preparation, and policy reform. It elevates the visibility of Arabic literacy research within the international community and provides a roadmap for addressing the structural gaps that have long hindered progress in the field. In doing so, it makes a timely and essential contribution to both Arabic literacy development and the broader landscape of global L1 reading scholarship.

Furthermore, this SR is significant because it is part of a broader series of SR/MA projects by the author, that has so far included the following SRs/MAs of: translation error studies (Al-Jarf 2026a); An interpretive systematic review of a researcher's contributions to EFL reading instruction with a focus on themes, methods, and pedagogy (Al-Jarf, 2026b); mobile apps for developing multiple language skills in EFL (Al-Jarf 2026c); studies on pronunciation instruction and practice in L2 (Al-Jarf 2026d); Arabic–English transliteration of personal names and public signages (Al-Jarf 2026e); children's language acquisition and development in Saudi Arabia (Al-Jarf 2026f); classroom practices, writing enhancement and creativity among EFL struggling students (Al-Jarf 2026g); collaborative learning and teaching in digital environments (Al-Jarf 2026h); the effectiveness of mind-mapping on multiple English language skills in the Saudi context (Al-Jarf 2026i); an integrative analysis of inadequate staffing and large class sizes in Saudi EFL and translation programs (Al-Jarf 2026j); innovative word formation and pluralization processes in Arabic (Al-Jarf 2026k); 2024–2025 studies on AI Arabic translation, linguistics and pedagogy (Al-Jarf 2026l); and a self-review of ESP research across specialized and underexplored domains (Al-Jarf, 2026m); a review of three decades of ESP innovative research across specialized and underexplored domains (Al-Jarf, 2026n).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 *Study Corpus*

The final corpus consists of 14 studies published between 1989 and 2007 in a range of international journals and conferences, booklets and books published by the College of Education Research Center at King Saud University. The studies were included in the current SR if they met the following criteria: (i) The study must be authored or co-authored by the author. (ii) Participants must be elementary, junior and senior high school students learning to read in Arabic as a native language. (iii) The study must address L1 reading instruction, including L1 reading textbooks, L1 reading skills, L1 reading assessment. (iv) The study must be published between 1989 and 2007, reflecting the full span of the author's research program. (v) the publications include peer-reviewed journal articles, books and booklets published by the Center for Educational Research, conference papers, and empirical or conceptual studies were eligible. (vi) Studies published in English or Arabic were included. The full text must be accessible for analysis.

Cluster 1: High School Reading

This cluster includes studies that examine high-school reading programs, curriculum themes, and lesson design at a broad, structural level as follows:

- *a proposed framework for evaluating the quality of reading instruction in secondary schools (Al-Jarf, 2007a)*
- *Global issues in the Saudi national reading curriculum (Al-Jarf, 2006)*
- *Reading lesson design in junior and senior high school reading textbooks in Arabic Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2003)*

Cluster 2: Skills Taught / Not Taught in Reading Textbooks

This cluster includes studies that analyze specific reading product and process skills in reading textbooks (one skill per study) as follows:

- *Classification of reading comprehension questions in elementary basal readers in Arabic Arabia (*Al-Jarf, 1989b).
- *Developing reading and literacy skills in Saudi Arabia (Al-Jarf,* 2007b*)*
- *Classification of word identification exercises in elementary school reading textbooks in Arabic Arabia (Al-Jarf, 1992)*
- *Context analysis skills instruction in elementary, junior and senior high school reading textbooks in Arabic Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2001c)*
- *Text structure instruction in junior and senior high school reading textbooks (Al-Jarf, 2002)*
- *Cohesion skill instruction in junior and senior high school reading textbooks in Arabic Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2001b)*
- *Advance organizers in elementary, junior and senior high school reading textbooks in Arabic Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2001a)*
- *Study skills instruction in junior and senior high school reading textbooks in Arabic Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2001e)*

Cluster 3: Reading Assessment & Remediation
This cluster includes studies that assess student performance or propose reading remediation as follows:

- *An Arabic word identification diagnostic test for the first three grades (Al-Jarf, 1995)*
- *Analysis of Arabic first, second and third grade students' errors in word identification (Al-Jarf, 1994)*
- *A model for a reading lab for Saudi students (Al-Jarf, 1989a)*

2.2 *Eligibility (Inclusion & Exclusion) Criteria*
Studies were excluded if they met any of the following criteria:

- **Duplicate studies of previously published work** without adding new data or analysis as *enhancing EFL students' reading and appreciation skills with mobile fiction apps (Al-Jarf, 2022d); mobile fiction apps for enhancing EFL college students' reading and appreciation skills (Al-Jarf, 2022e); collaborative mobile ebook reading by translation students (Al-Jarf, 2014a); quality in teaching reading to high school students (Al-Jarf, 2019a); first, second and third grade students' word identification difficulties (Al-Jarf, 2018).*

- **The author's studies on Arab adult reading interests, habits, and practices** as: *digital reading among educated Arabs: a Twitter-based study (Al-Jarf, 2023b); reading habits and motivation among educated Arabs in the age of social media and distractions (Al-Jarf, 2023f); educated Arabs' reading interests and preferences before, during and after the pandemic (Al-Jarf, 2022c); deviant Arabic transliterations of foreign shop names in Arabic Arabia and decoding problems among shoppers (Al-Jarf, 2022a); examples of successful literacy campaigns in the world (Al-Jarf, 2005a); reading promotion programs in South Korea (Al-Jarf, 2005b).*

- **The author's studies on L1 reading by Arab college students including:** *favorite magazines and reading topics among Arabic female college students (Al-Jarf, 2023c); reading interests of university female students in Arabic Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2022f); what college students read in the globalization era (Al-Jarf, 2004b; 2004c); what our youth read in the age of globalization (Al-Jurf, 2004d).*

- **The author's studies on teaching both Arabic and English to Saudi children as:** *differential effects of the iPad on first and second language acquisition by Saudi children during the Covid-19 pandemic (Al-Jarf, 2021b); impact of the iPad on Saudi young children in the home environment as perceived by their mothers (Al-Jarf, 2021f); English language education at the elementary school level in Saudi Arabia: A parents' perspective (Al-Jarf, 2022); how parents promote English and Arabic language proficiency in elementary school children in Saudi Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2022). digital reading among children in Arabic Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2023a); Arabic websites for pre-school children (Al-Jarf, 2004a).*

- **The author's studies on teaching reading in Arabic as a foreign language as:** *Evaluation of Russian Arabic language teaching textbooks in the light of CEFR criteria (Al-Jarf & Mingazova, 2020).*

- **The author's studies on other Arabic skills such as** *Arabic YouTube videos narrated by artificial intelligence suitable for training foreign students in listening skills (Al-Jarf, 2026); and preparing high school students for the university and life after graduation (Al-Jarf, 2023d).*

- **The author's studies where reading in EFL is only a partial component as** text-to-speech software for promoting EFL freshman students' decoding skills and pronunciation accuracy (Al-Jarf, 2022g); the effects of listening comprehension and decoding skills on spelling achievement of EFL freshman students (Al-Jarf, 2005c); the relationship among spelling, listening, and decoding skills in EFL freshman students (Al-Jarf, 2005d); effects of online collaborative activities on second language acquisition (Al-Jarf, 2009a).

- **Unpublished manuscripts (theses and dissertations) on reading in EFL** as *an ethnographic study of reading comprehension instruction in EFL classrooms in secondary schools in Saudi Arabia (Al-Jurf, 1986).*

- **Systematic reviews and meta-analyses not relevant to reading development in Arabic-speaking learners:** *a systematic review and meta-analysis of children's language acquisition and development in EFL in Saudi Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2026).*

- **The author's studies that focus on EFL reading materials** as**:** *developing students' global awareness in EFL reading and speaking (Al-Jarf, 2022b); enhancing EFL students' reading and appreciation skills with mobile fiction apps (Al-Jarf, 2022d; 2022e); enhancing EFL freshman students' reading skills with inspirational quotes (Al-Jarf, 2021d); teaching English with linguistic landscapes to Arabic students studying abroad (Al-Jarf, 2021g); enhancing reading and speaking skills in EFL through multicultural children's short stories (Al-Jarf, 2015); developing and testing reading skills through art texts (Al-Jarf, 2011).*

- **The author's studies that focus on specialized reading texts and skills in EFL, such** as: *can ESL students identify emphatic features of advertisements? (Al-Jarf, 2025); problems of identifying lexical and syntactic features of legal documents by undergraduate EFL students (Al-Jarf, 2023e); EFL students' difficulties with lexical and syntactic features of news headlines and news stories (Al-Jarf, 2021c); processing of advertisements by EFL Arab college students (Al-Jarf, 2007d); processing of cohesive ties by EFL Arab college students (Al-Jarf, 2001d); bridging the gap in reading for specific purposes (Al-Jarf, 2013a).*

- **The author's studies on combining reading with other skills in** EFL as *developing students' global awareness in EFL reading and speaking (Al-Jarf, 2022b); enhancing reading and speaking skills in EFL through multicultural children's short stories (Al-Jarf, 2015); enhancing freshman students' performance with online reading and writing activities (Al-Jarf, 2013b); making connections in reading instruction (Al-Jarf, 2008).*

- **The author's studies on extensive reading in EFL** as *promoting EFL secondary students' extensive reading skills (Al-Jarf, 2009c); teaching extensive reading to EFL secondary students online (Al-Jarf, 2009d).*

- **The author's studies on technology-enhanced reading instruction in EFL** as: *collaborative mobile ebook reading for struggling EFL college readers (Al-Jarf, 2021a); teaching reading to EFL freshman students with mind-mapping software (Al-Jarf, 2021i); teaching reading to EFL Arabic students online (Al-Jarf, 2019b); integrating Elluminate in EFL reading instruction (Al-Jarf, 2014b); enhancing freshman students' performance with online reading and writing activities (Al-Jarf, 2013b); integrating RCampus in college reading and writing for translation students (Al-Jarf, 2010b); reading in the app store (Al-Jarf, 2012); maximizing ESL freshman readers' skill with online instruction (Al-Jarf, 2009b); impact of blended learning on EFL college readers (Al-Jarf, 2007c); enhancing EFL students' reading skills with online videos (Al-Jarf, 2010a).*

- **The author's studies on EFL reading assessment and material coverage** as**:** *How much material do EFL college instructors cover in reading courses? (Al-Jarf, 2021e); testing reading for specific purposes in an art education course for graduate students in Saudi Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2021h); what teachers should know about reading tests (Al-Jarf, 2017).*

2.3 *Corpus Characteristics*

The final corpus consisted of 14 studies authored by Reima Al-Jarf between 1989 and 2007. Because the dataset represents a closed, author-bounded research program published over 18 years, it is both comprehensive and internally coherent, reflecting the author's sustained scholarly trajectory in teaching reading skills to Arabic native-speaking students. Rather than employing diverse methodological approaches, the studies share a consistent analytical framework: in most cases, the author developed operational lists of reading skills, subskills, and evaluative criteria, and analyzed textbook content—particularly exercises and questions following the reading texts, in light of these predefined skill sets. In addition, the author designed a diagnostic word-identification test for the first three grades, which forms the basis of the assessment-focused studies. To facilitate synthesis, the 14 studies were organized into three thematic clusters, each representing a distinct dimension of the research program. Together, these clusters provide an integrated overview of the author's contributions to L1 Arabic reading. Overall, the corpus

reflects a longitudinal, methodologically coherent research program that traces the evolution of reading-skill instruction and development in Saudi reading textbooks.

2.4 *Information Sources*

The information sources for this SR were limited to platforms that index the author's complete scholarly output. No external database search was required, as the aim was not to identify all studies on reading in Arabic by native speaking students, but rather to synthesize all reading-related studies within a single, self-contained research program. All records were retrieved from publicly accessible academic platforms in which the author's publications are fully archived. These sources include Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Semantic Scholar, Academia.edu, SSRN, ERIC, EBSCO, ProQuest, and institutional repositories such as the King Saud University repository. Collectively, these platforms provide full coverage of the author's publications across journals, conference proceedings, and digital repositories. All included and excluded studies were verified manually to ensure accuracy, remove duplicates, and confirm alignment with the eligibility criteria described in Section 2.2.

2.5 *Data Extraction and Synthesis*

Data extraction and synthesis followed an integrated, multi-stage procedure tailored to the descriptive and heterogeneous nature of the included studies. For each study, information was extracted directly from the full text, including: publication year; domain (reading skills, or reading assessment and remediation); participant characteristics (elementary, junior and senior high school students in the Saudi public schools); methodological approach (e.g., content analysis, qualitative analysis, proposed reading comprehension and product skills, reading process skills including word identification, context analysis, advance organizers, text structure, cohesion skill, study skills, lesson design skills and criteria); data sources (test scores, frequency counts and percentages); and key findings related to reading skill development outcomes, assessment patterns, or pedagogical implications. These categories were selected to support thematic synthesis and cluster-level comparison rather than effect-size calculation, as the corpus consists predominantly of qualitative, descriptive Arabic reading studies. All extracted information was entered into a structured matrix to ensure consistency across studies and to enable systematic comparison. Manual coding was employed to preserve conceptual accuracy and to classify each study according to the reading skill targeted and the assessment procedures adopted.

Data synthesis proceeded in three stages. First, all studies were grouped into 3 thematic clusters based on their primary focus: reading skills, and assessment procedures (see Section 2.1). This clustering enabled synthesis within conceptually unified domains while preserving the distinct contributions of each study. Secondly, studies within each cluster were compared according to the reading skill, assessment techniques, data sources, recurring patterns, and pedagogical implications. Thirdly, findings were synthesized across clusters to identify broader patterns in the development of Arabic reading product and process skills and subskills.

Because the corpus represents a single author's research program, the methodological framing and analytical categories were highly consistent across the included studies. This consistency minimized coding discrepancies and enabled a coherent synthesis of findings spanning 18 years of research.

2.6 *PRISMA Flow Description*

Because this SR is based on a closed, predefined corpus of 14 studies published by the author between 1989 and 2007, the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow reflects a streamlined identification and screening process. All publications within this time frame were retrieved from the academic platforms listed in Section 2.4 and manually screened for relevance. Each record was assessed against the eligibility criteria, and studies were excluded if they were duplicates; if Arabic reading constituted only a partial rather than a primary focus; if they examined reading among college students or adults; if they addressed teaching Arabic as a foreign language; or if they focused on reading in both L1 and foreign-language contexts, including EFL.

Following full-text evaluation, only studies directly addressing the teaching of Arabic reading to native-speaking elementary, junior, and senior high school students - specifically those examining reading-skill development in textbooks and reading assessment - ,were retained. The final set of studies was then organized into three thematic clusters for synthesis. Accordingly, the PRISMA flow documents the progression from the initial identification of all publications within the author-bounded corpus, through screening and eligibility assessment, to the final inclusion of studies that directly contribute to the analysis of Arabic reading across diverse textbook generations and skill domains.

3. Results

3.1 Overview
The results of this SR synthesize findings from 14 studies examining reading skills in elementary, junior and senior high school textbooks and reading assessment and remediation used. The analysis is organized around the 3 thematic clusters, allowing the results to highlight both the distinct contributions of the Arabic reading studies and the cross-cluster patterns that characterize the author's research program. Across the corpus, the studies consistently demonstrate which Arabic reading skills are developed and assessed. This overview shows the major trends emerging from the corpus, including the reading skills domains represented in this SR, the reading outcomes reported, and the ways in which reading textbooks facilitated or did not facilitate elementary, junior and senior high school student reading skill improvement.

3.2 Study Characteristics
The corpus consisted of 14 unique studies distributed over 3 thematic clusters. Findings of each cluster are presented below.

Cluster 1: High School Reading
A proposed framework for evaluating the quality of reading instruction in secondary schools (Al-Jarf, 2007a)
Based on an exploratory study, conducted with instructors and students at King Saud University, several shortcomings in the teaching of reading to Saudi high school students were identified. The study set several quality criteria that high school reading program should meet: defining comprehensive reading objectives (skills); designing interesting and attractive reading textbooks; selecting reading texts with contemporary and global diverse themes and forms; designing reading exercises and reading tests; preparing the reading teachers; teaching reading in the content areas such as chemistry, physics, history, geography and others together with the specialized material, fostering reading habits; training students to search for information online and in the library; and developing students' online reading skills.

Global issues in the Saudi national reading curriculum (Al-Jarf, 2006)
This study examined whether the national reading curriculum for Grades 7–12 in Saudi Arabia includes global themes, the grade levels at which these themes appear, and the extent to which specific global themes are emphasized. A checklist consisting of four main global themes - global systems, global issues, human values and global history - was used to analyze the textbooks. A content analysis showed that Quranic verses and Prophet Mohammed's traditions constitute 10%. Islamic history (29%), general topics (13%), classical Arabic literature (11%), history and geography of Saudi Arabia (8%), scientific issues (6%), fauna and flora (6%), Arab and Islamic countries (4%), Arab and international organizations such as UNESCO (1%), and foreign figures (non-Arab) such as doctors and inventors (1%). The study concluded that the Saudi national reading textbooks do not develop global awareness and recommended restructuring the curriculum and re-selecting reading themes.

Reading lesson design in junior and senior high school reading textbooks in Arabic Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2003)
This study evaluated the design of reading lessons in junior and senior high school textbooks using a checklist of lesson-design criteria. Findings indicated that reading lessons lack advanced organizers, interspersed questions, instructions and explanations in the margins. Comprehension questions that follow the reading text within each grade level and across the grade levels did not differ in number or comprehension level measured. Reading lesson design within and across the different grade levels was identical. Reading lessons seemed to be designed independently of previous and following grade levels. Pictorial illustrations were not systematically placed in relation to the text. In some cases, the illustrations were not clear and were not related to the text topic. Pictorial illustrations were not found to be helpful for the students in comprehending and recalling the text. Therefore, this study recommends that reading lessons be re-designed to help the students read and comprehend reading materials more effectively.

Cluster 2: Skills Developed / Not Developed by Reading Textbooks
Classification of reading comprehension questions in elementary basal readers in Arabic Arabia (Al-Jarf, 1989b)
Using Barrett's taxonomy, this study classified 1721 reading comprehension questions in the reading textbooks for Grades 2 to 6. It was found that two thirds of the questions in each grade level focused on literal comprehension, one fourth focused on comprehending the implied meaning, and one tenth focused on inferential comprehension. No questions were allocated to critical comprehension and appreciation. Additionally, between 65.8%-75.5% of the questions focused on details and between 12.6% and 21.4% focused on cause-effect relationships. No questions addressed character traits, comparison and contrast, sequence of events that are explicitly or implicitly stated in the text or those that can be inferred from the text, comprehending the meaning of difficult words in the text, the setting, plot, conflict and resolution, and author's style and mood. The study recommended that teachers

prepare additional questions targeting neglected comprehension skills and support students in understanding vocabulary, grammar, and text organization.

Developing reading and literacy skills in Saudi Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2007b)

The study examines the Saudi national reading curriculum for Grades 1-6; defines the word identification, reading comprehension and teaching approaches; describes the reading lesson design, reading themes, the word identification and reading comprehension skills developed; and reports the strengths and weaknesses of the reading curriculum.

Classification of word identification exercises in elementary school reading textbooks in Arabic Arabia (Al-Jarf, 1992)

The study classified the types of word identification exercises in six elementary reading textbooks using a checklist of four major skills. Results showed that Grades 4–6 contained no word identification exercises. In Grades 1–3, the exercises allocated to phonic analysis in Grade 1, 2 and 3 textbooks were 83%, 51% and 47% respectively. Exercises allocated to contextual analysis in Grade 1, 2 and 3 textbooks constituted 12%, 26% and 51% respectively. Exercises devoted to recognition of sight vocabulary in Grade 1, 2 and 3 textbooks constituted 5%, 9% and 2% respectively. 14% were allocated to structural analysis in Grade 2 textbook only and were absent in Grades 1 and 3 textbooks. The study highlighted gaps in word identification instruction.

Text structure instruction in junior and senior high school reading textbooks (Al-Jarf, 2002)

Using a checklist of narrative and expository text structure skills, this study analyzed all reading questions in junior and senior high school textbooks for girls. Of 1,282 questions, only 18 addressed text structure; 23 questions covered narrative texts and 12 covered expository texts; 6 questions targeted recognizing the protagonist, one question for identifying the story theme, 16 questions for inferring the moral of the story, 2 questions for identifying the organizational pattern of a text, and 10 summarization questions. Recognizing the setting and plot of a story, sentence topic, main idea, place of the main idea in a paragraph, paragraph type, paragraph structure, supporting details, thesis statement, the introductory paragraph, concluding paragraph, the different organizational patterns and text structure signals were not covered by the reading questions in any of the 6 textbooks. In other words, junior and senior high school female students do not receive much instruction in narrative and expository text structures.

Cohesion skill instruction in junior and senior high school reading textbooks in Arabic Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2001b)

This study analyzed reading textbooks for cohesion skills – by reference, substitution; ellipsis; by conjunction; and lexical cohesion. Results showed a complete absence of cohesion-identification exercises across all grade levels. No questions assessed students' understanding of cohesion or its types. The study recommended integrating cohesion instruction into reading textbooks.

Context analysis skills instruction in elementary, junior and senior high school reading textbooks in Arabic Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2001c)

This study examined whether textbooks teach context analysis skills for inferring word meanings in context. A checklist of explicit, implicit, and structural context clues was used. Results showed that textbooks only give definitions or explanations of the new words without teaching students how to infer meanings from context by connecting words with semantic or syntactic clues that precede or follow the difficult words in the text. They do not contain any questions or exercises to assess the students' ability to identify semantic and syntactic clues and how to infer meaning by connecting them with the semantic and syntactic clues. The nine reading textbooks do not differ in how they introduce new words to the students. They all ignore teaching new words in context.

Advance organizers in elementary, junior and senior high school reading textbooks in Arabic Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2001a)

A list of ten types of advance organizers was used to analyze the reading lessons in the reading textbooks for Grades 4 to 12. Advance organizers were not mentioned in the curriculum, the textbooks, nor in the directives and guidelines of the reading supervisors. Only reading lessons for Grades 4 to 6 contain pictures before the text. No differences were found in the reading textbooks for the nine grades, which means that advance organizers such as instructions, presentation of new vocabulary, asking some questions, providing a list of main ideas and supporting details in the text, or providing graphic organizers of the main ideas and supporting details or a quick overview of the main ideas in the text are absent. The study concluded that reading lessons do not prepare students for the text and recommended incorporating advance organizers systematically.

Study skills instruction in junior and senior high school reading textbooks in Arabic Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2001e)

A list of study skills consisting of selection and evaluation, organization, locating information, following instructions, using illustrations, flexibility in reading, applying, retrieving and using the information read was developed and used to analyze and classify questions and exercises in Arabic reading, science, history, geography, physics, chemistry and biology textbooks for Grades 7-12 in Saudi Arabia. Findings showed a complete absence of study skills instruction across all textbooks and grade levels. No lessons or exercises for teaching and practicing study skills are included in any of the textbooks.

Cluster 3: Reading Assessment & Remediation
An Arabic word identification diagnostic test for the first three grades (Al-Jarf, 1995)
This study developed a diagnostic test to identify symbol and word recognition difficulties in Grades 1–3. The test included seven components covering prereading readiness, decoding, and recognition skills (auditory and visual discrimination), while the remaining five assess letter–sound correspondence, word recognition in isolation, word recognition in context, letters-sound associations, and structural analysis). Test content was based on a detailed analysis of the Arabic writing system, spelling rules, and curriculum materials. A pilot with 633 students demonstrated high reliability and strong content validity. The study provides a comprehensive diagnostic tool for early reading assessment. The test package consists of 3 books: text construction, a teacher's guide and the test booklet.

Analysis of Arabic first, second and third grade students' errors in word identification (Al-Jarf, 1994)
A word-identification diagnostic test was used to assess first, second and third grade students' weaknesses in auditory and visual discrimination, letter recognition, sight word recognition, word recognition in context, sound-symbol association, and structural analysis sub-skills. Students' responses showed that the easiest sub-skills for the three grades were: visual and auditory discrimination, sight word recognition or word recognition in context; and to a moderate degree: letter recognition; and the most difficult sub-skills were sound-symbol association and structural analysis respectively. The three grades were significantly different in their mean error in word, identification in general and in the different sub-skills. The first grade mean error was greater than the second and third grade mean error in auditory and visual discrimination, letter recognition and word recognition in context, but there were no significant differences between the second and third grade mean error. The first grade mean error was greater than the second grade which was in turn greater than the third grade errors in sight word recognition, sound-symbol association and structural analysis and the total number of errors. Students' mastery of word identification in general and of each sub-skill gets better as they proceed from one grade to a higher one. The correlation between the total error score and errors in each sub-skill was positive, significant, and greater than the correlation between the errors in the sub-skills.

A model for a reading lab for Saudi students (Al-Jarf, 1989a)
This study described a reading lab model providing remedial services to students with reading difficulties at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The lab also offered training for university students to develop reading and study skills. Services included diagnosis, individualized reading programs, teacher support, curriculum development, instructional material selection, in-service training, and parent outreach. The model emphasized comprehensive support for students, teachers, and families.

4. Discussion

4.1   *Meta-Conclusion*
Across the 14 studies included in this SR, a clear and consistent picture emerges regarding the state of Arabic reading instruction in Saudi elementary, junior, and senior high school textbooks. Taken together, the studies reveal a persistent misalignment between the reading skills that students are expected to master, the skills that textbooks actually teach, and the skills that students ultimately demonstrate. The three thematic clusters—high-school reading, textbook-based skill instruction, and reading assessment and remediation—collectively map the entire reading ecosystem, from curriculum design to instructional materials to student outcomes.

Studies in the first cluster show that high-school reading programs lack many of the structural and pedagogical elements required for effective reading development. In light of the comprehensive reading model that that should be adopted in the high-school reading program, the curriculum and lesson design do not consistently reflect the model. The absence of global themes, limited exposure to contemporary issues, and weak lesson design indicate that high-school reading instruction does not fully prepare students for the cognitive, cultural, and informational demands of modern literacy.

The second cluster demonstrates that these gaps originate in the earlier grades. Textbook analyses across elementary, junior, and senior high school levels reveal systematic omissions in the teaching of essential reading product and process skills. Skills such as cohesion, context analysis, text structure, study skills, and even basic word-identification subskills are either minimally represented or entirely absent from the textbooks. Comprehension questions mainly target literal comprehension, with little emphasis on inferential, critical, or evaluative thinking. This means that students' progress through grade levels is hindered without receiving explicit, structured instruction in the foundational skills required for advanced reading comprehension.

The third cluster confirms the consequences of these instructional gaps. Diagnostic studies of students in Grade 1-3 show persistent difficulties in key word-identification subskills, particularly sound–symbol association and structural analysis. Although students improve with grade level, the overall pattern indicates that early reading instruction does not sufficiently support the development of decoding and recognition skills. The reading lab model further highlights the need for systematic remediation and teacher support, underscoring the broader instructional challenges documented in the first two clusters.

Viewed collectively, the findings point to a systemic issue: the reading curriculum, textbooks, and instructional practices do not form a coherent, cumulative progression of reading skills across grade levels. Instead, students encounter fragmented and incomplete exposure to the reading process and reading product, resulting in predictable weaknesses in reading outcomes. The studies converge on the conclusion that improving reading achievement requires coordinated reform across curriculum design, textbook development, teacher preparation, and diagnostic assessment. Only through an integrated approach can reading instruction support the full continuum of skills, from early decoding to advanced comprehension, that students need for academic success and lifelong literacy.

4.2 Meta-Interpretation

The collective interpretation of the 14 studies reveals a deeply interconnected pattern across the L1 reading curriculum, instructional materials, and student performance in Saudi schools. When the findings of the three clusters are viewed together, they show that the challenges in reading achievement are not isolated or random, but stem from a systemic instructional trajectory in which weaknesses at one level reinforce weaknesses at the next. The studies demonstrate that the reading curriculum does not operate as a coherent developmental sequence, and that the gaps observed in high-school reading are rooted in omissions that begin in the earliest grades.

A central interpretive insight is that the reading process is fragmented across grade levels. Elementary, junior, and senior high school textbooks do not provide a cumulative progression of reading skills. Instead, each grade level introduces a limited set of skills, often without explicit instruction, practice, or reinforcement. Skills such as cohesion, context analysis or text structure, appear sporadically or are entirely absent. This fragmentation means that students do not build the automaticity, strategic awareness, or metacognitive control required for advanced comprehension. The curriculum assumes that students will acquire these skills implicitly, yet the diagnostic studies show that students do not develop them on their own.

Another key interpretation is that textbook content and high-school curriculum expectations are misaligned. The high-school reading model presented in Cluster 1 outlines a comprehensive framework that integrates reading process skills with reading product outcomes, global themes, and critical thinking. However, the textbooks analyzed in Cluster 2 do not prepare students for this model. They do not provide the foundational skills that the high-school curriculum implicitly expects students to have mastered. As a result, high-school reading instruction begins with a deficit: teachers must address gaps that should have been filled years earlier, and students struggle with texts that require skills they were never taught.

The diagnostic studies in Cluster 3 confirm the cumulative effect of these instructional gaps. Students in the first three grades show persistent difficulties in word identification, particularly in phoneme–grapheme correspondence, structural analysis, and recognition of orthographic patterns. These early weaknesses are not remediated in later grades because textbooks do not provide systematic instruction in the skills that support decoding, fluency, and comprehension. The reading lab model proposed in Cluster 3 highlights the need for structured intervention, but it also underscores the broader issue: remediation becomes necessary because the curriculum does not provide adequate initial instruction.

Taken together, the studies suggest that the reading curriculum functions as a series of disconnected components rather than an integrated system. The absence of explicit skill instruction in textbooks, the lack of cumulative progression across grade levels, and the mismatch between curriculum expectations and instructional materials all contribute to a cycle in which students advance through school without developing the full range of reading process and product skills. This systemic pattern explains why reading difficulties persist despite curricular reforms and why high-school students struggle with comprehension, critical thinking, and engagement with global issues.

The overarching interpretation is that improving reading outcomes requires system-level coherence. Curriculum design, textbook development, teacher preparation, and diagnostic assessment must be aligned so that each grade level builds on the previous one and serves as a foundation for the next one. Without this alignment, the reading process remains fragmented, and students continue to face predictable challenges that reflect instructional design rather than individual ability.

4.3 Cross-Cutting Insights

Several insights emerge when the findings of the three clusters are examined together, revealing patterns that cut across grade levels, instructional materials, and student outcomes. These insights highlight systemic issues that cannot be understood by looking at any single cluster in isolation.

A consistent theme across all studies is the absence of a coherent developmental progression in reading instruction. Skills introduced in early grades are not systematically reinforced in later grades, and advanced skills expected in high school are not supported by earlier textbook content. This fragmentation creates a cumulative instructional gap: students move from one grade to the next without mastering the skills required for the next stage of reading development.

Across elementary, junior, and senior high school textbooks, essential reading process skills, such as cohesion, context analysis, text structure, and study skills, are either minimally represented or not taught explicitly. The curriculum appears to assume that students will acquire these skills incidentally, yet diagnostic evidence shows that students do not develop them without direct instruction. This disconnect between curricular assumptions and actual student learning is a cross-cutting weakness that affects all grade levels.

High-school reading programs expect students to engage with global issues, analyze complex texts, and apply higher-order comprehension strategies. However, the textbooks analyzed in Cluster 2 do not prepare students for these demands. The skills required for advanced comprehension are missing from earlier textbooks, and comprehension questions remain predominantly literal. This misalignment means that high-school teachers must compensate for gaps that originate in elementary and middle school materials.

The diagnostic studies in Cluster 3 show that students struggle with foundational word-identification subskills in the first three grades. These early weaknesses are not addressed in later textbooks, which rarely include decoding, structural analysis, or phoneme–grapheme correspondence activities. As a result, students enter upper grades with persistent decoding difficulties that hinder fluency and comprehension. The cross-cutting insight is that early reading weaknesses are not isolated problems—they are symptoms of a curriculum that does not provide sustained, cumulative skill development.

Across all clusters, textbooks emerge as the most influential and most limiting, component of the reading system. They shape what teachers teach, what students practice, and what skills are reinforced. When textbooks omit essential skills, the entire instructional system inherits those omissions. This makes textbook reform a critical leverage point for improving reading outcomes across all grade levels.

The most prominent insight is that the reading curriculum functions as a set of disconnected parts rather than an integrated system. High-school curriculum goals, textbook content, and student performance data do not align. Each component operates independently, resulting in predictable gaps that accumulate over time. Addressing reading challenges, therefore requires system-level coherence, aligning curriculum design, textbook development, teacher preparation, and assessment practices so that each grade level builds on the previous one.

4.4 *Implications*

Findings of studies across the three clusters point to several system-level implications for reading instruction, curriculum development, and educational policy in Saudi Arabia. These implications extend beyond the individual studies and highlight structural issues that must be addressed to improve reading outcomes across all grade levels.

The absence of a coherent progression of reading skills across grade levels indicates that curriculum development must shift from isolated grade-level objectives to a vertically aligned framework. Essential reading process skills—decoding, cohesion, context analysis, text structure, and study skills—should be introduced early, reinforced consistently, and expanded systematically through junior and senior high school. Without such alignment, students will continue to encounter advanced reading demands without the foundational skills needed to meet them.

Since textbooks are the primary instructional tool in Saudi classrooms, and since the studies show that they consistently omit critical reading skills, reforming the textbooks should be essential for improving reading instruction. Textbooks must include explicit instruction, guided practice, and cumulative reinforcement of reading skills. They should also incorporate higher-order

comprehension questions, global themes, and authentic reading tasks that prepare students for the cognitive demands of high-school reading and beyond.

The findings imply that teachers may not be equipped to compensate for the gaps in textbook content. Teacher preparation programs should therefore include training in explicit reading instruction, diagnostic assessment, and skill-based pedagogy. Teachers need to understand how reading skills develop, how to teach them systematically, and how to identify and address student difficulties early. Professional development should also focus on integrating global issues, critical thinking, and text analysis into reading instruction.

The diagnostic studies show that weaknesses in word identification appear as early as first grade and persist through third grade. These early deficits predict later challenges in fluency and comprehension. The implication is that early intervention must become a standard component of reading instruction. Schools need screening tools, diagnostic assessments, and structured remediation programs, such as the reading lab model, to identify and support struggling readers before difficulties become entrenched.

Reading questions in the textbooks focus heavily on literal comprehension and surface-level recall. The studies suggest that reading questions should be redesigned to measure the full spectrum of reading skills, including inferential reasoning, critical analysis, text structure awareness, and strategic reading. Aligning questions and exercises with curriculum goals and textbook content will ensure that students practice the skills they are expected to develop and that teachers receive meaningful feedback on instructional effectiveness.

The study on global themes reveals that students have limited exposure to contemporary, culturally relevant, and globally significant themes through the textbooks. Integrating global themes into reading materials can enhance engagement, broaden students' worldviews, and develop critical literacy. This integration should begin in the upper elementary grades and continue through high school, ensuring that students encounter diverse and real-world content throughout their reading development.

Moreover, improving reading outcomes requires coordinated reform across curriculum design, textbook development, teacher preparation, and assessment. Each component operates in isolation, creating gaps that accumulate over time. A system-level approach, guided by a comprehensive reading model, can ensure that students receive consistent, explicit, and developmentally appropriate reading instruction from the early grades through high school.

Finally, although the studies in this SR were conducted on earlier generations of Saudi reading textbooks, the operational lists of skills, subskills, and evaluative criteria developed by the author remain a lasting contribution to Arabic reading pedagogy. These lists were grounded in reading theory, developmental models, instructional methods, and diagnostic principles, and therefore extend beyond the specific textbooks analyzed. Even as textbooks are revised, this conceptual framework continues to provide a systematic, theory-based reference for evaluating reading instruction. In a field where skill selection is often unsystematic and where many researchers, especially young ones, have not received specialized training in reading theory or assessment, these operationalized skill lists offer a coherent, transferable model that can guide future research, curriculum and textbook design, and thesis work.

4.5   *Positioning This SR Within the Global L1 Reading SR/MA Research*

This SR contributes a perspective that is largely absent from global L1 reading research: a comprehensive, system-level examination of a national reading curriculum through the combined analysis of curriculum models, textbook content, and diagnostic assessments. While international SRs often focus on the effectiveness of instructional approaches, they rarely examine the instructional ecosystem that shapes how reading is taught in real classrooms. This SR fills that gap by integrating three levels of analysis, program design, textbook content, and student performance, within a single national context.

A second distinguishing feature is the focus on Arabic L1 reading, a domain that is underrepresented in global SR/MA literature. Most L1 reading reviews draw from English, European languages, or East Asian languages, with limited attention to Arabic orthography. The studies synthesized here provide insights into the unique linguistic, orthographic, and curricular challenges of Arabic reading instruction, particularly in relation to word identification, phoneme–grapheme correspondence, and the role of diacritics. This positions the SR as a valuable contribution to the diversification of global reading research, offering evidence from a linguistic context that is rarely included in large-scale reviews.

Another contribution lies in the focus on textbooks as the primary instructional tool. International SRs often examine interventions, teacher practices, or student-level predictors, but few systematically analyze the content of national textbooks across grade levels. Because textbooks play a central role in many educational systems, especially in the Arab world, this SR highlights an instructional dimension that global research often overlooks. By documenting which reading skills are included, under-represented, or absent, this SR provides a model for how textbook-based SRs can highlight structural weaknesses in reading curricula.

Finally, this SR offers a longitudinal, 18-year perspective on reading instruction within one national educational system. Global SRs typically synthesize studies conducted within a narrow time frame or focused on a specific intervention. In contrast, the studies included here span 18 years, allowing for the identification of persistent patterns, recurring gaps, and systemic issues that have remained unchanged despite curricular reforms. This temporal depth provides insights into the stability of instructional practices and the long-term consequences of curricular design decisions.

Taken together, these features position this SR as a unique contribution to global L1 reading research. It expands the scope of what SRs can examine, introduces evidence from an underrepresented linguistic context, and demonstrates the value of integrating curriculum analysis, textbook evaluation, and diagnostic assessment within a single review. This broader, system-level perspective complements existing international SRs and offers a model for future research in contexts where textbooks and national curricula play a central role in shaping reading instruction.

4.6   *Limitations of This SR*
The conclusions of this SR must be interpreted in light of several methodological, contextual, and structural limitations. These limitations do not devalue of the synthesis but clarify the boundaries within which its findings can be generalized.

The first limitation is that all included studies were conducted by the same researcher. This ensures conceptual and methodological consistency, but it limits the diversity of theoretical perspectives, analytical approaches, and research traditions typically represented in multi-author SRs. The evidence base reflects one sustained research trajectory rather than a broad national field.

Second, this SR synthesizes descriptive research, curriculum analyses, textbook analyses, and diagnostic assessments, rather than studies that evaluate the effectiveness of instructional practices. No experimental or quasi-experimental studies are included. This limits causal inference and prevents comparison with global SRs that rely heavily on intervention data. Additionally, this SR contains three studies that assess student performance, and all focus on early word-identification skills. No large-scale assessments of comprehension, oral reading fluency, vocabulary in context, or higher-order reading skills across grade levels are included. This restricts the ability to link textbook content or curriculum design to actual reading outcomes beyond the early grades.

Third**,** the studies examine only the official Saudi national textbooks. Because Saudi Arabia uses a centralized curriculum, these findings are highly relevant locally but may not generalize to systems where teachers use diverse materials. The reliance on a single textbook series also means that the findings reflect the strengths and weaknesses of one curricular tradition. Another contextual limitation is that the Saudi Ministry of Education has revised and replaced reading textbooks multiple times since 2007. Many of the studies in this SR analyze earlier textbook generations that are no longer in use. Although the findings reveal long-standing patterns, such as limited explicit skill instruction and dominance of literal comprehension questions, they may not fully represent the content of the most recent textbook editions. This temporal variability limits the direct applicability of some findings to current materials.

Fourth, when the author was conducting the studies, practical constraints and ministry formalities and the author's work commitments limited the ability to assess a broader range of reading skills, particularly reading comprehension. Permissions, access restrictions, and administrative procedures prevented the collection of classroom-based comprehension data or the administration of comprehension assessments. As a result, the diagnostic component of this SR focuses only on word-identification skills, leaving other critical dimensions of reading development underexamined.

Although the studies span 18 years, they do not examine changes in reading outcomes over time. This makes it difficult to determine whether curricular reforms or textbook revisions have produced measurable improvements in reading achievement.

The studies differ substantially in purpose and outcome measures. Most depend on content analyses and only a few assess student performance. This heterogeneity makes it impossible to calculate effect sizes or conduct a meta-analysis. The SR therefore, relies on qualitative synthesis, which limits statistical precision.

Because the included studies come from a single research program, certain topics, particularly reading process skills, are well represented, while others (e.g., motivation, digital reading, home literacy environment) are not. This may create an incomplete picture of the broader reading instruction.

These limitations highlight the need for more diverse research designs, broader participation from multiple researchers, updated analyses of current textbooks, and expanded assessment of reading outcomes across grade levels. They also underscore the

importance of future research that examines the impact of recent curricular reforms and addresses the practical barriers that currently limit access to classrooms and student data.

4.7   *Future Research Directions*

The SR of the 14 studies highlights several gaps in the Saudi L1 reading research landscape and points to clear priorities for future work. The following directions outline a comprehensive agenda for future L1 reading research in Saudi Arabia and comparable centralized educational systems:

- Future research should examine a broader range of reading abilities, including reading comprehension across literal, inferential, critical, and evaluative levels, reading fluency, including rate, accuracy, and prosody, vocabulary development and morphological awareness, metacognitive and strategic reading skills, and digital reading and multimodal literacy Such studies would provide a more complete picture of students' reading development across grade levels.
- Future studies should evaluate the effectiveness of explicit instruction in cohesion, text structure, and context analysis, structured phonics and decoding programs for early grades, reading comprehension strategy instruction, reading labs, remedial programs, and targeted interventions, and technology-enhanced reading tools and digital platforms. Experimental and quasi-experimental designs would allow researchers to determine which instructional practices produce measurable gains.
- Since the Saudi Ministry of Education has revised reading textbooks multiple times over the past 25–30 years, future research must analyze the current textbook editions, compare them with earlier versions to identify improvements or persistent gaps, examine whether new textbooks incorporate global themes, higher-order comprehension tasks, and explicit skill instruction, and evaluate alignment between textbooks and the high-school reading model. This work is essential for determining whether recent reforms have addressed earlier shortcomings.
- Future studies should examine how reading skills progress from Grade 1 through Grade 12 by mapping which skills are introduced, reinforced, or omitted at each grade, identifying gaps in the developmental sequence, and evaluating whether high-school expectations match the skills taught in earlier grades. This research would support the development of a coherent, cumulative reading curriculum.
- Textbooks dominate instruction, but teachers' understanding of reading development also plays a critical role. Future research should explore teachers' knowledge of reading process skills, their ability to teach decoding, comprehension strategies, and text structure, their use of textbooks versus supplementary materials, and professional development needs and barriers. Such studies would help identify where teacher preparation programs require strengthening.
- Textbook content does not always reflect classroom practice. Future research should include classroom observations, analysis of teacher–student interactions during reading lessons, documentation of how teachers adapt or supplement textbook content, and studies of instructional time allocated to different reading skills. This would clarify how reading instruction actually unfolds in real classrooms.
- There is a need for reliable, standardized tools to assess advanced decoding skills and oral fluency, comprehension at multiple levels, morphological and orthographic awareness, and strategic reading and metacognition. Developing validated Arabic reading assessments would support both research and classroom practice.
- Ministry formalities and access restrictions have historically limited data collection, especially for comprehension studies. Future research should develop partnerships with schools and the ministry, establish protocols for ethical and efficient data collection, and advocate for research-friendly policies that support classroom-based studies. Overcoming these barriers is essential for expanding the reading research.
- To understand the long-term effects of curricular reforms, future research should track student cohorts over multiple years, examine how early reading skills predict later outcomes, and evaluate whether textbook revisions lead to measurable improvements. Longitudinal data would provide powerful insights into the effectiveness of the reading curriculum.

5. Recommendations

Based on findings of this SR, several recommendations are offered for curriculum designers, textbook developers, teacher-education programs, policymakers and reading assessment specialists. These recommendations aim to strengthen the coherence of the reading curriculum, improve instructional quality, and support students' reading development across all grade levels.

This SR recommends that reading skills develop cumulatively from Grade 1 through Grade 12. To achieve this, curriculum planners should map essential reading process skills across all grades to ensure continuity; introduce foundational skills early and reinforce them systematically and align high-school expectations with the skills taught in elementary and junior high school. This kind of alignment prevents the fragmentation documented across the three clusters.

Given the central role of textbooks in Saudi classrooms, textbook reform is essential. Textbooks should: provide explicit instruction in cohesion, context analysis, text structure, study skills, and strategic reading; include guided practice, scaffolded activities, and cumulative review; integrate higher-order comprehension questions (inferential, critical, evaluative); and incorporate global themes and contemporary issues to promote critical literacy. These revisions would address the skill gaps identified in Cluster 2.

Teachers need stronger preparation in reading pedagogy to compensate for textbook limitations and to implement best practices. Teacher-education programs should emphasize explicit instruction in decoding, fluency, comprehension strategies, and text analysis; train teachers to diagnose reading difficulties and provide targeted support; develop teachers' ability to integrate global issues and authentic texts into reading lessons; and offer ongoing professional development aligned with updated textbooks and curriculum reforms. Improving teacher knowledge is essential for translating curriculum goals into classroom practice.

To monitor students' progress and guide instruction, reading assessment specialists should create standardized tools for decoding, comprehension, oral fluency, vocabulary in context, and other process skills; include tasks that measure inferential and critical thinking, not just literal recall; validate assessments for different grade levels and linguistic profiles; and use assessment data to inform curriculum revisions and teacher training. Robust assessments would fill the outcome-level gaps identified in Cluster 3.

Because the Ministry has revised textbooks multiple times since 2007, it is essential to analyze the most recent editions to determine whether earlier shortcomings persist; compare new and old textbooks to track improvements in skill coverage and lesson design; evaluate alignment between new textbooks and the high-school reading model; and investigate how teachers implement the new materials in real classrooms. This ensures that reforms are evidence-based and responsive to documented needs.

Early reading difficulties persist without targeted support. Schools should implement early screening for decoding and word-identification skills; establish reading labs or structured intervention programs for struggling readers; provide teachers with training and materials for remediation; and monitor progress to ensure interventions are effective. Early intervention prevents the long-term difficulties documented in Cluster 3.

To broaden the national reading research landscape, academic institutions should encourage multi-researcher and multi-institution studies; support research on underexplored areas such as motivation, digital reading, and home literacy environments; and foster collaboration between reading researchers, curriculum designers, and assessment specialists. A more diverse research ecosystem will strengthen the field and enhance the validity of future SRs.

Collectively, these recommendations collectively aim to build a coherent, skill-rich, and evidence-based reading curriculum that supports students from the earliest grades through high school

6. Conclusion

The synthesis of 14 studies conducted over 18 years provides a rare, system-level view of L1 reading instruction in Saudi Arabia, one that spans curriculum design, textbook content, and student performance. When these studies are examined together, they reveal a coherent and compelling narrative: reading instruction in Saudi schools has long operated as a set of disconnected components rather than an integrated developmental system. The textbooks that drive classroom practice do not consistently teach the skills required to achieve the expected reading goals, and the limited student-level data available show predictable weaknesses that mirror these instructional gaps.

Across all clusters, a consistent pattern emerges. High-school reading instruction expects students to engage with global issues, analyze complex texts, and apply higher-order decoding and comprehension strategies. Yet the textbooks that shape students' learning from Grades 1 through 12 provide limited explicit instruction in the foundational skills, decoding, cohesion, context analysis, text structure, and study skills, that make such advanced reading possible. Diagnostic studies confirm that early weaknesses in word identification persist because they are not systematically addressed in later grades. The result is a cumulative instructional deficit that affects students' ability to read fluently, comprehend deeply, and think critically.

This SR also highlights the unique features of Arabic reading instruction, including the challenges posed by diglossia, the role of diacritics, and the heavy reliance on centralized textbooks. These contextual factors shape the reading environment in ways that differ from many global systems and underscore the importance of developing research, assessments, and instructional approaches tailored to the linguistic structure of Arabic.

At the same time, the review identifies important limitations in the existing evidence base. Frequent Ministry revisions to textbooks mean that some findings reflect earlier curricular generations, and administrative constraints have limited the ability to assess comprehension and other higher-order reading skills. The absence of intervention studies and the scarcity of student-level data further restrict the conclusions that can be drawn about the effectiveness of reading instruction.

Despite these limitations, the SR makes a significant contribution by documenting long-standing patterns that have persisted across multiple curricular cycles. It provides a foundation for future research and policy reform, offering clear directions for improving vertical alignment, strengthening textbook content, enhancing teacher preparation, and expanding assessment practices. Most importantly, it demonstrates that meaningful improvement in reading outcomes requires coordinated action across all levels of the educational system.

To conclude, reading development is cumulative, and every grade level matters. When foundational skills are taught explicitly, reinforced consistently, and aligned with later expectations, students are more likely to become proficient, strategic, and engaged readers. This SR offers a roadmap for achieving that vision and lays the groundwork for a more coherent, skill-rich, and globally relevant reading curriculum for Saudi learners.

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