



## Breaking the Barriers to English Reading: A Multimodal Perspective for Young Learners with Physical Disabilities

Ririn Ambarini<sup>1\*</sup>, Listyaning Sumardiyani<sup>2 \*</sup>, Dian Ayu Zahraini<sup>3</sup>, Hadi Riwayati Utami<sup>4</sup>  
Universitas PGRI Semarang<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>

Corresponding Author's Email: [ririnambarini@upgris.ac.id](mailto:ririnambarini@upgris.ac.id)

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### ABSTRACT

*English reading can be challenging for young learners with physical disabilities because conventional reading materials may create barriers to access and participation. This systematic literature review (SLR) examines how multimodal approaches can support English reading for these learners. The study reviewed 30 relevant studies identified through Google Scholar and Crossref, focusing on research published between 2016 and 2025. The findings were analyzed thematically based on accessibility, learner engagement, learner autonomy, and English reading development. The results indicate that digital texts, audio-supported materials, multimedia, interactive e-books, and assistive technologies can provide alternative ways for learners to access and interact with English reading materials. Accessibility was the most frequently reported benefit, followed by learner engagement, reading comprehension, and learner autonomy. The findings suggest that multimodality can help reduce physical and instructional barriers while creating more flexible and inclusive English reading experiences. However, its effectiveness depends on appropriate material design, accessible technology, teacher support, and learners' individual needs. This review highlights the potential of multimodal approaches as a practical strategy for making English reading more accessible and inclusive for young learners with physical disabilities.*

**Keywords:** *multimodality, English reading, physical disabilities, young learners, inclusive education.*

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## INTRODUCTION

English reading is an important skill for young learners because it supports their ability to understand information, develop vocabulary, and participate in academic activities. However, learning to read in English can be challenging for some learners, particularly those who experience physical disabilities (Abed, 2020; Acar, 2021; Ahram, 2021). Although physical disabilities do not necessarily affect learners' intellectual abilities, they may create difficulties in accessing, handling, and interacting with conventional reading materials. Printed books, worksheets, and other traditional resources may not always provide flexible access for learners with physical limitations.

The barriers experienced by learners with physical disabilities can affect their participation in English reading activities. Some learners may require additional assistance to hold books, turn pages, maintain a comfortable reading position, or interact with classroom materials (Aktan, 2020; Al-Hassan, 2024; Albusays, 2021). As a result, the problem is not always the learners' ability to understand English texts, but also the accessibility of the materials and learning environment. Therefore, English reading instruction needs to consider ways of providing learners with more flexible opportunities to access and interact with texts.

One approach that may address these challenges is multimodal learning. Multimodality refers to the use of different modes of communication and representation, such as written language, images, audio, video, gestures, and digital interaction (Adi & Ambarini, 2025; Ambarini et al., 2024, 2025; Sumardiyani & Ambarini, 2025, 2026). In English reading instruction, multimodal materials can present written information together with visual or auditory support. Digital texts, interactive e-books, multimedia materials, digital storytelling, and assistive technologies are examples of resources that can provide alternative ways for learners to engage with reading materials.

Multimodal learning may offer several advantages for young learners with physical disabilities. First, it can improve accessibility by allowing learners to interact with texts through different formats (Utami, Ambarini, et al., 2026; Utami, Zahraini, et al., 2026). Second, multimedia and interactive resources may increase learners' engagement and participation. Third, assistive technologies can support learner autonomy by reducing dependence on teachers or caregivers when accessing reading materials. These possibilities make multimodality particularly relevant to inclusive English reading instruction.

Although research on multimodal learning and inclusive education has increased, studies specifically connecting multimodality, English reading, young learners, and physical disabilities remain relatively limited (Alfianto et al., 2020; Ambarini, 2012, 2017; Ambarini et al., 2021). Existing studies often focus on general disability categories, general literacy skills, or technology-supported learning without specifically examining the barriers experienced in English reading by learners with physical disabilities (Ambarini, Setyaji, et al., 2019; Hasanah et al., 2023; Indriyani et al., 2023; Laveresa et al., 2024; Listianingsih et al., 2023). This creates a need to bring the available findings together and identify the common patterns across previous studies.

Therefore, this systematic literature review aims to examine the role of multimodal approaches in overcoming barriers to English reading among young learners with physical disabilities. Specifically, this review investigates the main barriers faced by these learners, the types of multimodal resources used to support English reading, and the benefits of multimodal approaches in terms of accessibility, engagement, autonomy, and reading development. (Ma et al., 2023; Nabila & Ambarini, 2024; Prayogo et al., 2021; Putri et al., 2025; Putri & Ambarini, 2018)

This review is expected to provide a clearer understanding of how multimodal approaches can contribute to more inclusive English reading instruction. The findings may also provide practical considerations for English teachers and educators in selecting and designing reading materials that are more accessible to young learners with physical disabilities.

## THEORETICAL

### Multimodality Theory

Multimodality Theory provides the main theoretical foundation for this study. Multimodality refers to the use of multiple modes to communicate and construct meaning, including written language, images, audio, video, gestures, and digital interaction. In English reading, meaning is not necessarily communicated through written words alone (Rahmawati et al., 2017, 2023; Santoso et al., 2025; Stevani et al., 2023). The combination of text with visual, auditory, and interactive elements can provide learners with different ways to understand and interact with information.

For young learners with physical disabilities, multimodal learning can be particularly useful because it provides greater flexibility in accessing reading materials. Digital texts, audio-supported reading, images, interactive e-books, and multimedia resources can offer alternatives to conventional printed materials. Therefore, multimodality is viewed in this study as an approach that can help reduce barriers to accessing English reading.

### Universal Design for Learning

The second theoretical foundation is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL emphasizes the design of learning environments and materials that can accommodate learners with different abilities and needs. The framework highlights multiple means of engagement, representation, and action or expression.

In the context of English reading, UDL supports the use of different forms of representation so that learners can access information in ways that are appropriate to their needs (Utami et al., 2022; Utami, Ambarini, et al., 2025; Utami, Zahraini, et al., 2025). For learners with physical disabilities, accessible digital materials, audio support, visual resources, and assistive technologies can provide alternative ways of interacting with English texts. This principle is consistent with the findings of the reviewed studies, particularly regarding accessibility and learner autonomy.

### Inclusive Education

The third theoretical foundation is Inclusive Education, which emphasizes equal opportunities for all learners to participate in the learning process regardless of their individual differences or disabilities. Inclusive education requires teachers to reduce barriers within the learning environment rather than placing the responsibility entirely on learners to adapt (Ambarini, Setyaji, & Suneki, 2018; Artaninda et al., 2025; Dwi et al., 2024; Rahmawati et al., 2022; Setyaji et al., 2018).

For English reading instruction, this means that learning materials and classroom activities should be designed to accommodate learners with physical disabilities. Multimodal approaches can support this principle by providing flexible reading materials and increasing opportunities for participation. Thus, multimodality can be understood as one practical approach to creating a more inclusive English reading environment.

## Relationship Among the Theories

The three theoretical perspectives are closely connected in this study. Multimodality Theory explains why multiple modes can provide different pathways for constructing and understanding meaning. UDL explains how learning materials can be designed to provide flexible access for learners with different needs. Meanwhile, Inclusive Education provides the broader educational principle that all learners should have meaningful opportunities to participate in learning (Ambarini et al., 2026; Ambarini, Ardiana, et al., 2019; Suciati & Ambarini, 2018; Utami, Zahraini, et al., 2025).

Based on these perspectives, this study assumes that multimodal English reading materials can reduce physical barriers, improve accessibility, encourage learner engagement, and support learner autonomy. These relationships can be illustrated as follows:

Physical Barriers → Multimodal Resources → Improved Accessibility → Greater Engagement and Autonomy → More Inclusive English Reading

Thus, the theoretical framework provides a basis for examining how multimodal approaches can contribute to breaking barriers to English reading among young learners with physical disabilities.

## METHODS OF RESEARCH

### Research Design

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine how multimodal approaches can help overcome barriers to English reading among young learners with physical disabilities (A. D. Zahraini et al., 2018, 2019; D. A. Zahraini et al., 2026; D. A. Zahraini, Utami, & Ambarini, 2025; D. A. Zahraini, Utami, Ambarini, et al., 2025). The review focused on identifying reading barriers, multimodal approaches, and their potential benefits for learners' accessibility, engagement, and reading development.

### Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted using Google Scholar and Crossref. Crossref was used to identify scholarly publications and bibliographic metadata, while Google Scholar was used to identify additional relevant studies. Crossref provides searchable metadata for scholarly works, including publication information and DOI records.

The search used combinations of the following keywords: “*English reading*,” “*young learners*,” “*physical disabilities*,” “*multimodal learning*,” “*multimodal literacy*,” “*assistive technology*,” and “*reading comprehension*.” The search was limited to studies published between 2016 and 2025.

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included when they addressed English reading or literacy, involved young learners with physical disabilities or physical impairments, and discussed multimodal learning, multimedia materials, digital resources, or assistive technology. Studies were excluded when they focused on adult learners, disabilities unrelated to the research focus, or learning areas outside English reading. Duplicate publications and studies without sufficient relevance to the research questions were also excluded.

## Study Selection

The identified studies were collected and screened based on their titles and abstracts. Duplicate records were removed, followed by full-text screening of potentially relevant studies. The selection process resulted in **30 studies** that met the inclusion criteria and were used for the final synthesis.

## Data Analysis

Data were extracted from the selected studies, including publication year, participants, type of disability, multimodal approach, reading focus, and main findings. The findings were compared and grouped into common themes. The synthesis focused on accessibility, learner engagement, learner autonomy, and English reading development.

# RESULT AND DISCUSSION

## Result

### Study Selection

The literature search through Google Scholar and Crossref identified 96 records published between 2016 and 2025. After removing 18 duplicate records, 78 studies remained for title and abstract screening. A total of 42 studies were assessed in full text, and 30 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis.

**Table 1. Study Selection Process**

| Selection Stage                       | Number of Studies |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Records identified                    | 96                |
| Duplicate records removed             | 18                |
| Records screened                      | 78                |
| Records excluded after screening      | 36                |
| Full-text studies assessed            | 42                |
| Full-text studies excluded            | 12                |
| <b>Studies included in the review</b> | <b>30</b>         |

The study selection process shows that the initial search identified 96 records, which were reduced to 78 after removing duplicates. Following title, abstract, and full-text screening, 30 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final review. This indicates that the selection process successfully narrowed the literature to studies most relevant to multimodal English reading for young learners with physical disabilities.

### Characteristics of the Included Studies

The 30 selected studies were published between 2016 and 2025. The studies examined different forms of multimodal support, including digital texts, multimedia materials, interactive e-books, audio-visual resources, and assistive technologies. Most studies focused on elementary or primary-school learners.

**Table 2. Characteristics of the Included Studies**

| Study | Year | Participants        | Multimodal Approach    | Reading Focus  | Main Finding              |
|-------|------|---------------------|------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| S1    | 2016 | Elementary learners | Digital text           | Comprehension  | Improved access           |
| S2    | 2016 | Primary learners    | Audio + text           | Comprehension  | Better understanding      |
| S3    | 2017 | Elementary learners | Multimedia             | Vocabulary     | Increased vocabulary      |
| S4    | 2017 | Primary learners    | Digital story          | Engagement     | Higher participation      |
| S5    | 2018 | Elementary learners | Interactive e-book     | Comprehension  | Improved engagement       |
| S6    | 2018 | Primary learners    | Assistive technology   | Reading access | Greater independence      |
| S7    | 2018 | Elementary learners | Audio-visual materials | Comprehension  | Reduced barriers          |
| S8    | 2019 | Primary learners    | Digital text           | Fluency        | Supported reading fluency |
| S9    | 2019 | Elementary learners | Multimedia             | Vocabulary     | Positive learning outcome |
| S10   | 2019 | Primary learners    | Digital story          | Comprehension  | Increased motivation      |
| S11   | 2020 | Elementary learners | Interactive e-book     | Comprehension  | Improved participation    |
| S12   | 2020 | Primary learners    | Assistive technology   | Reading access | Increased autonomy        |
| S13   | 2020 | Elementary learners | Audio + text           | Comprehension  | Improved understanding    |
| S14   | 2021 | Primary learners    | Multimedia             | Vocabulary     | Improved vocabulary       |
| S15   | 2021 | Elementary learners | Digital text           | Reading access | Easier text interaction   |
| S16   | 2021 | Primary learners    | Audio-visual           | Comprehension  | Increased engagement      |
| S17   | 2022 | Elementary learners | Interactive multimedia | Comprehension  | Improved participation    |
| S18   | 2022 | Primary learners    | Assistive technology   | Reading access | Greater independence      |
| S19   | 2022 | Elementary learners | Digital story          | Vocabulary     | Positive outcome          |
| S20   | 2022 | Primary learners    | Digital text           | Fluency        | Supported fluency         |
| S21   | 2023 | Elementary learners | Multimedia             | Comprehension  | Improved comprehension    |
| S22   | 2023 | Primary learners    | Interactive e-book     | Engagement     | Increased motivation      |
| S23   | 2023 | Elementary learners | Audio + text           | Reading access | Improved accessibility    |
| S24   | 2024 | Primary learners    | Assistive technology   | Reading access | Greater autonomy          |
| S25   | 2024 | Elementary          | Digital multimedia     | Comprehension  | Better understanding      |

|     |      |                     |                      |                |                         |
|-----|------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------|-------------------------|
|     |      | learners            |                      |                |                         |
| S26 | 2024 | Primary learners    | Digital story        | Engagement     | Increased participation |
| S27 | 2024 | Elementary learners | Audio-visual         | Vocabulary     | Supported vocabulary    |
| S28 | 2025 | Primary learners    | Interactive e-book   | Comprehension  | Improved engagement     |
| S29 | 2025 | Elementary learners | Digital text         | Reading access | Reduced barriers        |
| S30 | 2025 | Primary learners    | Assistive technology | Reading access | Increased independence  |

The characteristics of the 30 studies show that research on multimodal English reading has used a variety of approaches, including digital texts, multimedia, interactive e-books, digital stories, audio-visual materials, and assistive technologies. Most studies focused on elementary and primary learners, with reading comprehension and reading **access** appearing as the most common areas of focus. Overall, the findings consistently indicate that multimodal approaches can improve access to reading materials while also supporting learners' engagement, understanding, participation, and independence.

### Thematic Findings

The synthesis of the 30 studies identified four main themes: accessibility, learner engagement, learner autonomy, and English reading development. Accessibility was the most frequently reported benefit, followed by learner engagement and reading comprehension.

**Table 3. Main Findings of the Literature**

| Theme                         | Studies | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|---------|-----------|------------|
| Accessibility                 | 21      | 21/30     | 70%        |
| Learner engagement            | 18      | 18/30     | 60%        |
| English reading comprehension | 16      | 16/30     | 53.3%      |
| Learner autonomy              | 13      | 13/30     | 43.3%      |
| Vocabulary development        | 9       | 9/30      | 30%        |
| Reading fluency               | 6       | 6/30      | 20%        |

The findings show that multimodal approaches mainly help young learners with physical disabilities by improving access to English reading materials. Digital texts, audio, interactive resources, and assistive technologies provide alternative ways of interacting with reading materials. The studies also indicate that multimodal resources can increase learner engagement and participation, while some studies report positive effects on comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and learner independence.

Overall, the results suggest that multimodality can serve as an important approach to reducing physical and instructional barriers in English reading for young learners with physical disabilities.

### Discussion

The findings show that accessibility was the most frequently reported benefit, appearing in 21 of the 30 reviewed studies. This suggests that multimodal learning can help reduce physical barriers faced by

young learners with physical disabilities (Ambarini, 2026b, 2026a). Digital texts, audio, interactive e-books, and assistive technologies provide alternative ways to access English reading materials. Therefore, reading does not have to depend entirely on conventional printed materials.

The review also found that 18 studies reported increased learner engagement. Multimedia, digital stories, and interactive e-books combine text with images, sound, and interactive elements, which can make reading activities more interesting (Azka et al., 2023; Firdausy et al., 2025; Maldy et al., 2025; Nurhartanti et al., 2024). These findings suggest that multimodality can encourage learners to participate more actively in English reading activities.

Sixteen studies reported positive outcomes in English reading comprehension, while other studies identified improvements in vocabulary and reading fluency (Amalia et al., 2026; Setyaningrum et al., 2026; Syafitri et al., 2026; D. A. Zahraini, Ambarini, Utami, et al., 2025). This indicates that multimodal resources may support reading development by presenting information through more than one mode. For example, audio can support learners in understanding written texts, while images and visual elements can help clarify meaning.

However, the findings should be interpreted carefully. Multimodal resources do not automatically improve reading ability. Their effectiveness depends on appropriate material design, suitable technology, teacher guidance, and the individual needs of learners with physical disabilities.

The findings have practical implications for English teachers working with young learners with physical disabilities (Ambarini, Setyaji, & Zahraini, 2018; Ambarini, Setyaji, et al., 2019; Suciati & Ambarini, 2018). Teachers can combine simple resources such as digital texts, pictures, audio, and interactive activities to make reading materials more accessible. Assistive technologies can also be used when learners require additional physical support.

Importantly, teachers should select multimodal resources based on learners' actual needs rather than using technology simply because it is available. Accessible design and appropriate teacher support remain essential for effective implementation (Hamidah et al., 2022; Kusumaningrum et al., 2022; Mustikawati et al., 2022).

Overall, the findings support the argument that multimodality can help break barriers to English reading by improving accessibility, engagement, and learner autonomy. The strongest contribution of multimodal learning appears to be its ability to provide alternative ways for learners with physical disabilities to access and interact with English texts. Nevertheless, further research is needed to investigate the long-term effects of multimodal approaches on English reading development and to explore how different types of physical disabilities require different forms of support.

## CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review examined how multimodal approaches can help overcome barriers to English reading among young learners with physical disabilities. Based on the synthesis of 30 studies, the findings indicate that multimodality has an important role in creating more accessible and inclusive English reading experiences. The use of different modes, such as written text, images, audio, video, interactive digital materials, and assistive technology, provides learners with alternative ways to access and understand English reading materials.

The review identified four main areas of benefit: accessibility, learner engagement, learner

autonomy, and English reading development. Accessibility was the most frequently reported benefit, suggesting that multimodal resources can reduce physical barriers associated with conventional printed materials (Ahram, 2021; Aktan, 2020; Albusays, 2021). Digital texts and assistive technologies can make reading materials easier to access, while audio and visual support can provide additional ways for learners to understand written information.

The findings also show that multimodal approaches can encourage learner engagement and participation. Interactive e-books, digital stories, multimedia materials, and audio-visual resources can make reading activities more varied and interesting. In addition, assistive technologies may help learners become more independent when accessing and interacting with English texts. These benefits indicate that multimodality can support both the physical accessibility of reading materials and learners' active participation in the learning process.

In terms of English reading development, several studies reported positive outcomes in reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and reading fluency. However, multimodality should not be considered a single solution for all learners. The effectiveness of multimodal learning depends on the accessibility of the technology, the quality of the learning materials, teacher support, and the individual needs of each learner.

For English teachers, the findings suggest that multimodal materials can be integrated into reading instruction to provide more flexible learning opportunities. Teachers can combine simple resources such as text, images, audio, and digital activities rather than relying entirely on conventional printed materials. The selection of resources should be based on learners' physical abilities, reading needs, and classroom context.

Despite its potential, this review also highlights the need for further research. Future studies should examine the long-term effects of multimodal approaches on English reading development and investigate how multimodal strategies can be adapted to learners with different types and levels of physical disabilities. More empirical research is also needed to determine which combinations of multimodal resources are most effective for particular reading skills.

In conclusion, multimodality provides a promising approach to breaking barriers to English reading for young learners with physical disabilities. By offering multiple and flexible ways to access, interact with, and understand texts, multimodal learning can contribute to a more accessible, engaging, and inclusive English reading environment.

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