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Mapping global research on children's reading literacy: A bibliometric analysis of emerging trends and multilingual perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Reading literacy is essential for children's cognitive development, academic achievement, and lifelong learning. Despite extensive research, the intellectual structure and emerging directions of children's reading literacy scholarship remain insufficiently mapped. This study employed bibliometric analysis of 403 peer-reviewed articles retrieved from the Dimensions AI database between 2020 and 2025. Performance analysis, bibliographic coupling, and keyword co-occurrence analysis were conducted using VOSviewer. The findings identified four major intellectual domains: cognitive and neuropsychological foundations; digital tools and parental involvement; multilingualism, home literacy, and cultural contexts; and metalinguistic and morphological awareness. Keyword analysis further revealed strong attention to child-centred language development, reading skills, materials, and literacy practices. Geographically, research production is increasingly distributed across both established and emerging research regions. By integrating performance indicators with intellectual and conceptual mapping, this study demonstrates how children's reading literacy research has developed beyond cognitive perspectives towards broader technological, familial, linguistic, and sociocultural dimensions. The findings provide directions for future literacy research and support more context-sensitive approaches to literacy education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Reading literacy is fundamental to children's academic achievement and personal development. Beyond decoding words and comprehending texts, reading literacy enables learners to engage critically with information, supports lifelong learning, and contributes to higher-order thinking skills (Nurhadi et al., 2025). It also influences children's cognitive, social, and emotional development (Altun et al., 2021; Rocha & Mota, 2022). In contemporary multilingual societies, English literacy has become increasingly important because English frequently serves as the language of instruction, assessment, and global communication.

Despite its recognized importance, children's reading literacy remains a global concern. International assessments such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) continue to reveal disparities in reading achievement across countries and learner groups (Doniyarov, 2022). These challenges are particularly evident among learners in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where children must simultaneously acquire reading skills and develop proficiency in English (Zhang et al., 2024). Consequently, many learners experience difficulties in vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and language processing, which may hinder their academic progress.

The consequences of weak reading literacy can be substantial. Early literacy difficulties are often associated with lower academic performance, reduced learning motivation, and diminished self-confidence (Rocha & Mota, 2022). For bilingual and multilingual learners, inadequate English literacy may further restrict participation in English-medium instruction and limit access to future educational and employment opportunities (Ong et al., 2022). As English continues to function as a gatekeeper language in many educational systems, literacy disparities may contribute to broader social and educational inequalities (Lenhart et al., 2021).

Beyond academic achievement, reading literacy also functions as a cultural and linguistic practice through which children engage with identities, values, narratives, and social meanings embedded within texts (Anggraini, 2020). In multilingual societies, literacy development is closely connected to language maintenance, cultural participation, and the negotiation of linguistic identities. Reading practices provide opportunities for children to access cultural knowledge, engage with diverse perspectives, and participate more fully in their linguistic communities (Miller & Khatib, 2023). Consequently, literacy should not be viewed solely as a cognitive skill but also as a sociocultural process that contributes to language equity and cultural inclusion (Gabriel & López, 2024), particularly among multilingual and minority-language populations.

To address these challenges, governments, schools, and educational organizations have implemented various literacy initiatives, including teacher development programs, family literacy interventions, community-based reading campaigns, and technology-supported

learning resources (Alam, 2021; Choiriyah et al., 2023; Lerkkanen et al., 2025; Tubele & Serova, 2020). While these efforts have contributed to literacy development, research in this area remains diverse and fragmented. Existing studies have examined topics such as phonemic awareness, comprehension strategies, language acquisition, cognitive processes, and social influences on reading development (Dawud & Muzaki, 2023; Fiktorius, 2022). However, a comprehensive understanding of the field's intellectual structure, influential contributors, and emerging research directions remains limited.

Thus, the importance of reading literacy extends beyond academic achievement and is increasingly recognized as a key mechanism for promoting educational equity and social inclusion (Altun et al., 2021; Rocha & Mota, 2022). Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) emphasizes the need to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all learners, while Sustainable Development Goal 10 seeks to reduce inequalities across social groups. In many multilingual and developing nations, including those in Southeast Asia, literacy disparities continue to affect children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, rural communities, and minority language groups (Dolean, 2021; Kirsch & Aleksić, 2021; Zhang et al., 2024). Consequently, understanding the evolution of literacy research is essential for identifying evidence-based strategies that can support more equitable educational outcomes.

Although children's reading literacy has been extensively investigated from cognitive, instructional, technological, and sociocultural perspectives, previous studies have predominantly examined specific interventions, reading outcomes, phonological awareness, digital literacy tools, or home literacy environments (Altun et al., 2021; Booton et al., 2021; Rocha & Mota, 2022). Existing reviews, therefore, provide valuable evidence on particular dimensions of literacy but offer less insight into how recent children's reading literacy scholarship is intellectually and conceptually organized across these interconnected domains (Écalle et al., 2023; Zou et al., 2025). In particular, the relationships among cognitive development, multilingualism, home literacy, technology, and sociocultural contexts remain insufficiently mapped at the field level.

This study addresses this gap by combining performance analysis, bibliographic coupling, and keyword co-occurrence to map recent research on children's reading literacy. Rather than treating multilingualism or language equity as predetermined search constructs, the study examines whether linguistic diversity and related sociocultural concerns emerge within the intellectual and conceptual structures identified from the dataset. This distinction enables the analysis to remain grounded in bibliometric evidence while considering its implications for increasingly diverse educational contexts. Accordingly, this study addresses three research questions: (1) Who are the most influential authors, sources, institutions, and countries contributing to children's reading literacy research? (2) What intellectual structures emerge

from bibliographic coupling analysis? and (3) What thematic directions can be identified through keyword co-occurrence analysis?

II. METHOD

This study adopted a quantitative bibliometric research design to systematically map the intellectual landscape of children's reading literacy research published between 2020 and 2025. Bibliometric analysis is widely recognized as a rigorous method for evaluating scientific production, identifying influential contributors, revealing collaboration networks, and examining thematic evolution within a research field through large-scale publication datasets (Donthu et al., 2021; Zou et al., 2025). Unlike traditional narrative reviews, bibliometric techniques enable objective and reproducible analyses using citation relationships and publication metadata. In this study, bibliometric analysis was employed to identify influential authors, journals, institutions, countries, intellectual structures, and emerging research themes related to children's reading literacy, particularly within multilingual educational contexts.

Three complementary bibliometric techniques were employed: performance analysis, bibliographic coupling, and keyword co-occurrence analysis. Performance analysis was used to examine publication productivity and scholarly influence across authors, sources, institutions, and countries. Such analysis provides an overview of the contributions and impact of different research constituents within a field (Donthu et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2020). Bibliographic coupling was subsequently conducted to examine the intellectual structure of children's reading literacy research by connecting publications that share common references. Publications with stronger shared-reference relationships are positioned more closely within the network, allowing related studies to form identifiable research clusters (Li et al., 2021; Van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

Keyword co-occurrence analysis was used to identify the conceptual structure of the literature by examining how frequently terms appeared together across the dataset. This technique facilitates the identification of dominant concepts, relationships, and emerging thematic directions within a research field (Donthu et al., 2021; Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). VOSviewer version 1.6.20 was used to construct and visualize the bibliographic coupling and keyword networks. Bibliographic records were checked for duplicate entries and inconsistent terms before analysis, while synonymous or variant keyword forms were standardized where necessary to minimize fragmentation. Network thresholds were established according to item frequency and connectivity to produce interpretable maps. The resulting clusters were interpreted and labelled by examining the dominant publications, keywords, and conceptual relationships within each VOSviewer-generated cluster rather than relying solely on automated cluster formation.

Search strategy

The literature search was conducted in the Dimensions AI database on 18 July 2025 using ("reading literacy") AND (children). This deliberately focused query was selected to maintain

conceptual precision around children's reading literacy rather than capture the broader literature on reading development or general literacy. Multilingualism and language equity were therefore not predetermined search variables but were examined where they emerged from the bibliometric structures. Records were exported in CSV format and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and VOSviewer version 1.6.20.

The initial search retrieved 10,899 publications. Records were limited to 2020–2025 to capture recent developments and to the Language, Communication, and Culture category to maintain disciplinary relevance to language-oriented literacy research. Only English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles with Open Access availability were retained to ensure consistent accessibility and comparability across documents. These restrictions increased dataset specificity but may underrepresent relevant scholarship from other disciplines, languages, and subscription-based sources. Following filtering, 403 articles were retained for analysis.

Table 1. Inclusion criteria for bibliometric analysis

Dimension AI Database	Criteria
Time period	2020 to 2025
Search keywords	"reading literacy" and "children"
Document Types	47 Language, Communication and Culture
Languages	Article
Open Access	All OA

The article-selection process was documented using a PRISMA-style flow diagram to transparently report identification, filtering, eligibility, and final dataset inclusion. PRISMA was used for reporting the selection process rather than as a systematic-review methodology, as shown in Figure 1. Records were screened sequentially according to publication year, document type, research category, language, and Open Access availability. Duplicate records were automatically removed by the database prior to export, while irrelevant records that did not address children's reading literacy within language-related contexts were excluded during eligibility assessment. The final dataset, therefore, represents a focused collection of peer-reviewed studies suitable for bibliometric mapping. The Dimensions AI database initially found 10,899 records. 7,026 data points were rejected during the screening procedure because they did not fall within the 2020-2025 publication window. This phase ensured the analysis focused on relevant, up-to-date papers that reflected the current state of the field. 3,873 records were then screened for document type. Among these records, 694 were rejected because they were not considered scientific articles.

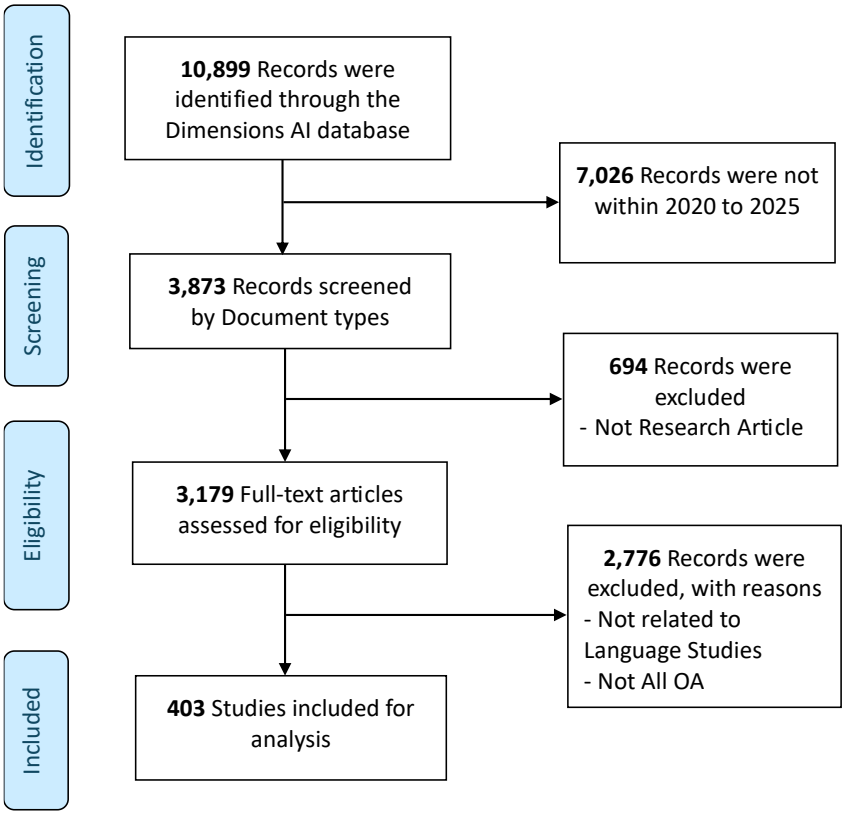


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart

A total of 3,179 full-text papers were then assessed for eligibility. At this time, 2,776 records were removed for failing to meet the inclusion criteria. There were two primary reasons for these exclusions: (1) the publication was not Open Access, which limited access for a comprehensive review, and (2) it had little to do with language studies. Ultimately, 403 papers remained and were included in the final bibliometric study. This rigorous screening and eligibility assessment ensured that a high-quality dataset was used to meet the study's objectives.

Drawing from Dimensions AI's Analytical Overview, the trend analysis illustrates how research citations and publishing dynamics affect children's reading literacy development throughout the selected time frame (2020-2025). In all, we located and reviewed 403 papers. During this period, the overall mean citation per item was 2.25, indicating a slight but noteworthy level of scholarly engagement with the subject. The data revealed steady publication activity over the five years, suggesting that the subject is still current and appealing to the scholarly community. As evidenced by the frequency of citations, reading literacy has emerged as a research topic, and these metrics help identify areas that warrant further study.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Performance analysis

Research results are presented in tables, graphs, or descriptive charts. An analysis of 403 peer-reviewed papers from the Dimensions AI database was conducted to determine the effectiveness and impact of research on the development of children's reading literacy. This research examines the most-cited works, highly productive writers, active journals, top colleges, and contributing nations over the given time frame (2020-2025). This section analyses publication volume, citation metrics, and scholarly contributions to examine the institutional and geographic distribution of academic production, identify key participants in the field, and offer insights into the dynamics of research. The results help clarify the areas of the subject that are flourishing and those that may require additional scholarly attention.

Document by years

The most well-known research on how children develop their reading literacy emphasizes linguistic diversity, parental involvement, and digital resources. The most citations are found in a systematic review by Booton et al. (2021) on how mobile application features affect children's language and literacy skills (62). The importance of this study underscores the increasing incorporation of technology into literacy instruction. With 55 citations, Chavez et al. (2023) highlight the importance of family literacy involvement and the influence of parental assistance techniques on children's English language acquisition. Other publications often referenced for specific literacy challenges include speech abnormalities (Wren et al., 2021) and syntax acquisition in deaf children (Hoffmeister et al., 2021).

The publication trend further suggests that children's reading literacy has become increasingly aligned with contemporary educational priorities, including multilingual education, digital learning, and inclusive pedagogy. The rapid citation growth observed among recently published studies indicates that literacy research is responding to changing educational environments shaped by technological innovation, post-pandemic learning recovery, and increasing recognition of language diversity. Rather than focusing solely on reading achievement, recent studies increasingly conceptualize literacy as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, linguistic, sociocultural, and digital competencies.

Documents by sources

An examination of the source journals shows that most of the research on children's reading literacy is published in a small number of specialist publications. Reading and Writing, with 19 papers and 81 citations, is the most important source, underscoring its influence on the conversation about literacy training. In the Languages journal, nine publications totaling 62 citations were published after this, demonstrating the growing focus on multilingual and second-language reading environments. The fact that journals frequently publish research on

English literacy, including ESL/EFL populations, is noteworthy since it demonstrates the discipline's close ties to English language instruction.

The distribution of source journals also illustrates the interdisciplinary nature of children's reading literacy research. Rather than being confined to literacy education journals, publications increasingly appear in journals specializing in applied linguistics, bilingual education, speech-language pathology, educational psychology, and digital learning. This broad disciplinary representation reflects an evolving understanding of literacy as a complex phenomenon influenced by language acquisition, communication, cognitive development, and educational technology. Such diversity also suggests growing opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing contemporary literacy challenges.

Documents by authors

The author's output and impact study highlight several prominent scholars who have significantly advanced reading literacy research. In this field, Kovelman, Nickerson, and Sun are the most prominent and prolific authors, with five publications and 47 citations apiece. Their seemingly closely related and cooperative work suggests a substantial academic collaboration or project cluster that has impacted current discussions around reading development. Yu and Zhang, two more notable authors, have contributed significantly despite their modest output, with four publications and 39 citations.

The concentration of publications among relatively small groups of collaborating authors suggests that literacy research is increasingly driven by established international research networks. These collaborative relationships facilitate the sharing of theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and multilingual datasets across institutions and countries. At the same time, the relatively limited number of highly productive scholars indicates opportunities for broader participation from researchers representing underexplored linguistic and regional contexts, particularly within developing countries.

Documents by organizations

The institutional landscape of reading literacy research is dominated by prestigious universities in several countries. The University of Michigan-Ann Arbour and the University of Haifa are at the top of the list with five papers each; Haifa has 46 citations, while Michigan has a slightly higher total of 47. This suggests that research is produced and influenced by institutions in North America and the Middle East. Universities such as the University of Reading and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) are also prominently featured, with high citation counts (45 and 59, respectively).

Institutional productivity further demonstrates that universities with established expertise in language education, literacy development, and educational psychology continue to shape the intellectual direction of the field. Nevertheless, the growing participation of institutions

from Asia and other emerging research regions suggests a gradual diversification of global literacy scholarship. This trend is particularly significant because multilingual education and language equity have become increasingly important educational priorities across culturally and linguistically diverse societies.

Documents by countries

The country-level analysis reveals geographically varying interest in children's reading literacy studies. Brazil has 34 documents, whereas Indonesia has 38, making it the nation with the most publications. Even though these countries are contributing significantly, their visibility or influence on a global scale is still growing, as evidenced by their relatively low citation counts (58 and 19, respectively). In contrast, the performance of the United States and the United Kingdom is more equal. Their substantial research effect was demonstrated by the 188 and 170 citations they received, respectively, from 29 and 16 documents. This is due to established literacy research programs, increased international collaboration, and access to higher-impact journals.

Although citation impact remains concentrated in established research systems such as the United States and the United Kingdom, publication output from Indonesia, Brazil, and other emerging research contexts indicates wider geographical participation in children's literacy scholarship. These bibliometric patterns demonstrate diversification in research production but do not, by themselves, establish greater educational or language equity. Instead, they indicate an expanding geographical evidence base from which differences in multilingual and sociocultural literacy contexts can be investigated.

Bibliographic coupling analysis

A bibliographic coupling analysis was conducted to examine topic linkages and the intellectual structure within the field of children's reading literacy development. Researchers can map clusters of connected studies and new research avenues using this method, which finds links between articles based on mutual references. This section shows how various works are thematically aligned and which studies serve as focal points within the scholarly network by examining the overall link strength among papers. The resulting clusters provide insights into the prevailing themes, interdisciplinary connections, and emerging fields of study that have shaped literacy research over the last several years.

Bibliographic coupling analysis by clusters

Nine publications in Cluster 1 focus on the basic linguistic, cognitive, and neurodevelopmental mechanisms underlying reading acquisition. Prosody, morphology, and phonology are investigated in studies such as Enderby et al. (2021) and Silinskas et al. (2023) because they are crucial for spelling and reading fluency, especially in transparent orthographies. Glatz et al. (2023) found that digital game-based training, evaluated in

randomized controlled trials, can integrate technology and psycholinguistics into early literacy instruction.

Various learner demographics are the focus of numerous research studies. For instance, Kertész and Honbolygó (2023) employed sensorimotor tapping to predict third-grade literacy, while Johnels et al. (2021) investigated autistic children. Such tools as grapho-phonological training evaluations (Konerding, 2021) and eye-tracking (Pattemore, 2023) illustrate this cluster's emphasis on quantitative, empirical, and often experimental methods. This cluster highlights the neurocognitive aspect of literacy, which is influenced by internal (e.g., language processing, attention) and external (e.g., intervention programs) factors. It provides a foundation for understanding the causes of certain children's literacy challenges and for developing targeted solutions grounded in scientific evidence.

Collectively, Cluster 1 highlights the continuing importance of cognitive and neurodevelopmental perspectives in explaining reading acquisition. The strong emphasis on experimental methodologies and psycholinguistic constructs indicates that literacy research increasingly seeks to understand not only whether interventions are effective, but also the underlying cognitive mechanisms that explain individual differences in literacy development. This cluster therefore provides the theoretical foundation upon which many subsequent literacy interventions are developed.

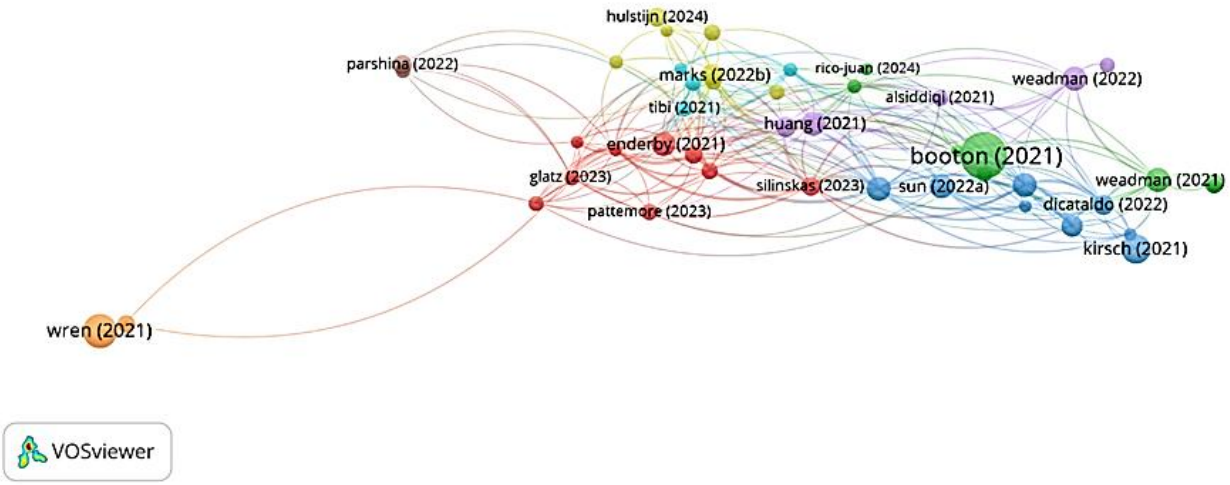


Figure 2. Bibliographic coupling analysis (VOSviewer visualisation)

Eight studies in Cluster 2 focus on interactive literacy assistance mechanisms, mostly through technology integration and family involvement. Under this cluster's leadership, Booton et al. (2021) provide a comprehensive assessment of mobile applications for language acquisition, reinforcing the growing integration of digital media into contemporary literacy and language-use practices. Chi-San Ho et al. (2024) examine children's digital word reading

in a second language at a crucial intersection between multilingualism and digital learning. Numerous studies, such as Asrifan et al. (2022) and Ruan et al. (2023), examine the use of parental coaching, shared reading, and dialogic interactions as strategies to help bilingual or underprivileged students improve their expressive language and literacy.

The inclusion of Weadman et al. (2021) in both performance and coupling studies validates the significance of teacher-family collaboration in literacy development. What ties this cluster together is the actual application. These studies typically employ intervention models, pilot studies, and longitudinal tracking to measure learning results. The diversity of cultural contexts further supports the cross-contextual usefulness of the findings. Cluster 2 concludes by demonstrating the greater importance of digital technology-supported literacy practices that involve the home in early education, particularly in bilingual and socioeconomically challenged populations.

The prominence of parental involvement and technology-assisted learning within this cluster reflects an important shift from school-centered literacy instruction towards more collaborative models involving families and digital environments. This trend suggests that literacy development is increasingly recognized as a shared responsibility extending beyond formal classrooms. It also reflects growing interest in leveraging digital technologies to reduce educational inequalities and enhance literacy opportunities for diverse learner populations.

Cluster 3 comprises 8 studies that examine sociolinguistic and domestic factors influencing children's reading literacy, with a focus on bilingualism, home environments, and family culture. According to Adams et al. (2021) and Dolean (2021), parental reading habits and the availability of print resources at home directly affect early writing and literacy skills. Kirsch and Aleksić (2021) investigate paradigm shift in early multilingual education, particularly in diverse environments such as Luxembourg. Notably, Sun et al. (2022a) examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the literacy development of bilingual children in the United States, reflecting contemporary socio-educational disturbances.

Studies such as Papastefanou et al. (2021) and Karpava (2021) examine how family type, literacy-rich environments, and language exposure affect reading comprehension in bilingual contexts. Cluster 3 highlights the significance of cultural identification, home language usage, and contextual variety for literacy development. Compared to clusters that focus on neurological or technical interventions, this group gives greater weight to naturally occurring activities and environmental affordances. It also highlights the importance of inclusive, culturally responsive literacy frameworks to meet the diverse needs of bilingual and multilingual pupils.

Cluster 3 demonstrates that multilingualism has become a central theme within contemporary literacy scholarship. Rather than treating multilingualism as a challenge to literacy acquisition, recent studies increasingly conceptualize linguistic diversity as an

educational resource capable of enriching children's reading development. These findings reinforce the importance of culturally responsive literacy instruction that acknowledges learners' linguistic identities and home language practices.

Metacognitive skills and higher-order linguistic processes that promote literacy development are the subject of seven articles in Cluster 4. Studies by Marks et al. (2022a, 2022b) and Sun et al. (2022b) provide comparative analyses of morphological awareness across linguistic backgrounds, including English monolinguals as well as Spanish-English and Chinese-English bilinguals, and provide evidence on how English literacy develops across linguistic backgrounds, offering insights into cross-linguistic literacy development among multilingual communities. From a neurological standpoint, this research clarifies the distinctions between morphological and phonological processing in terms of language structure.

Hulstijn (2024) further solidifies theoretical underpinnings by revising the Basic Language Cognition (BLC) Theory and forecasting individual variations in literacy acquisition. Meanwhile, research such as Rendón-Romero et al. (2021) uses phonics-based instruction to help Spanish learners become more literate in English. This cluster serves as an example of literacy as a strategic, rule-based activity that relies on meta-linguistic knowledge such as morphology, grammar, and reading inhibitory control.

The cluster also includes De Rom et al. (2022), who analyze the effects of inhibition in reading complex structures to explain how cognitive control systems affect comprehension. All things considered, Cluster 4 strengthens the theoretical framework of literacy by offering evidence-based assessments of language structure, learning style, and cross-linguistic variance. It strengthens other technical or environmental units by firmly establishing literacy in linguistic theory and cognitive flexibility.

Cluster 4 illustrates the increasing integration of linguistic theory and cognitive science within literacy research. The strong emphasis on morphological awareness, metalinguistic knowledge, and cross-linguistic transfer reflects growing recognition that successful literacy development depends upon children's ability to manipulate language structures across multiple linguistic systems. These findings are particularly relevant for multilingual educational contexts where learners simultaneously develop literacy across more than one language.

Table 2. Bibliographic coupling analysis by clusters

Cluster No. and Colour	Cluster Labels	No. of Articles	Representative Publications
Cluster 1 (Red)	Cognitive and Neuropsychological Foundations of Literacy	9	Enderby et al. (2021); Glatz et al. (2023); Haase & Steinbrink (2022); Johnels et al. (2021); Kertész & Honbolygó (2023); Konerding et al. (2021); Pattemore & Gilabert (2023); Silinskas et al. (2023); Wealer et al. (2022)
Cluster 2 (Green)	Literacy Enrichment through Digital Tools and Parental Involvement	8	Asrifan et al. (2022); Booton et al. (2021); Chi-san Ho et al. (2023); Goodrich et al. (2023); Nasi (2022); Rico-Juan et al. (2024); Ruan et al. (2023); Weadman et al. (2021)
Cluster 3 (Blue)	Multilingualism, Home Literacy Environment, and Cultural Contexts	8	Adams et al. (2021); Choi et al. (2022); Dicataldo & Roch (2022); Dolean (2021); Karpava (2021); Kirsch & Aleksić (2021); Papastefanou et al. (2021); Sun et al. (2022a)
Cluster 4 (Yellow)	Metalinguistics, Morphological Awareness, and Literacy Strategy Research	7	De Rom et al. (2022); Gonçalves et al. (2021); Hulstijn (2024); Marks et al. (2022a); Marks et al. (2022b); Rendón-Romero et al. (2021); Sun et al. (2022b)

Co-occurrence analysis

Co-occurrence (co-word) analysis was used to identify the conceptual framework and theme focus of the study on children's reading literacy development. This approach examines the frequency and co-occurrence of terms in the dataset, providing insights into the most frequently studied subjects and their relationships. This analysis reveals new trends, recurring research issues, and the changing terminology used by academics in the subject by finding keyword clusters. The results show how educational priorities are changing in response to modern learning needs and reflect the main areas of interest, such as language proficiency, reading comprehension, and digital literacy.

Table 3. Top fifteen (15) most used keywords

Rank	Keyword	Occurrences	Relevance
1	child	371	1.1639
2	study	270	0.6521
3	literacy	247	0.5683
4	language	197	0.5413
5	skill	168	0.7215
6	ability	110	0.3729
7	article	95	1.0257
8	activity	91	0.6702
9	process	89	0.5048
10	book	88	1.5772
11	literacy skill	87	0.7858
12	literature	81	1.2926
13	word	76	0.4999
14	group	72	0.9505
15	text	69	1.118

Keywords such as "ability" (110), "activity" (91), and "process" (89) highlight research examining children's cognitive capacities and the processes involved in the development of reading skills, often through organized educational activities. The frequent use of the terms "book" (88) and "literacy skill" (87) points to a close connection between the development of literacy competence and traditional reading materials. Notably, the terms "literature" (81) and "article" (95) denote the field's focus on research, but the terms "word" (76), "group" (72), and "text" (69) refer to smaller units of analysis, such as word recognition and text comprehension. Taken as a whole, these keywords indicate a research environment that strikes a balance among theory, language use, cultural literacy practices, and real-world literacy engagement.

Co-occurrence analysis by clusters

Cluster 1 comprises 17 themes that center on the child as the primary focus of literacy development. Exemplary terms such as “child,” “study,” “language,” “ability,” “skill,” “literacy skill,” “English,” “word,” and “comprehension” suggest that this cluster is mostly concerned with language acquisition, skill development, and reading comprehension. The fundamental components of reading literacy, including vocabulary development, phonological awareness, and decoding abilities, are regularly the focus of this study cluster. Studies in this cluster frequently focus on how children acquire language and reading skills, particularly in contexts where English is used as a second language (ESL) or in multilingual settings.

Their existence suggests a focus on word recognition and text comprehension, two crucial micro-level reading skills in early childhood education. Furthermore, the terms "ability" and "skill" highlight research on individual differences in children, including learning difficulties, developmental issues, and strategies for struggling readers. Cluster 1 represents child-

centered and skill-oriented research that emphasizes the core elements of literacy. It highlights the importance of supportive literacy environments, language-rich interactions, and culturally meaningful reading experiences for children's cognitive and linguistic development in the early school years.

The conceptual dominance of child-centered language development within this cluster suggests that literacy research continues to priorities foundational reading skills as prerequisites for later academic success. However, the simultaneous prominence of English and multilingual-related terms also indicates that researchers increasingly examine literacy development within linguistically diverse educational environments rather than monolingual settings alone.

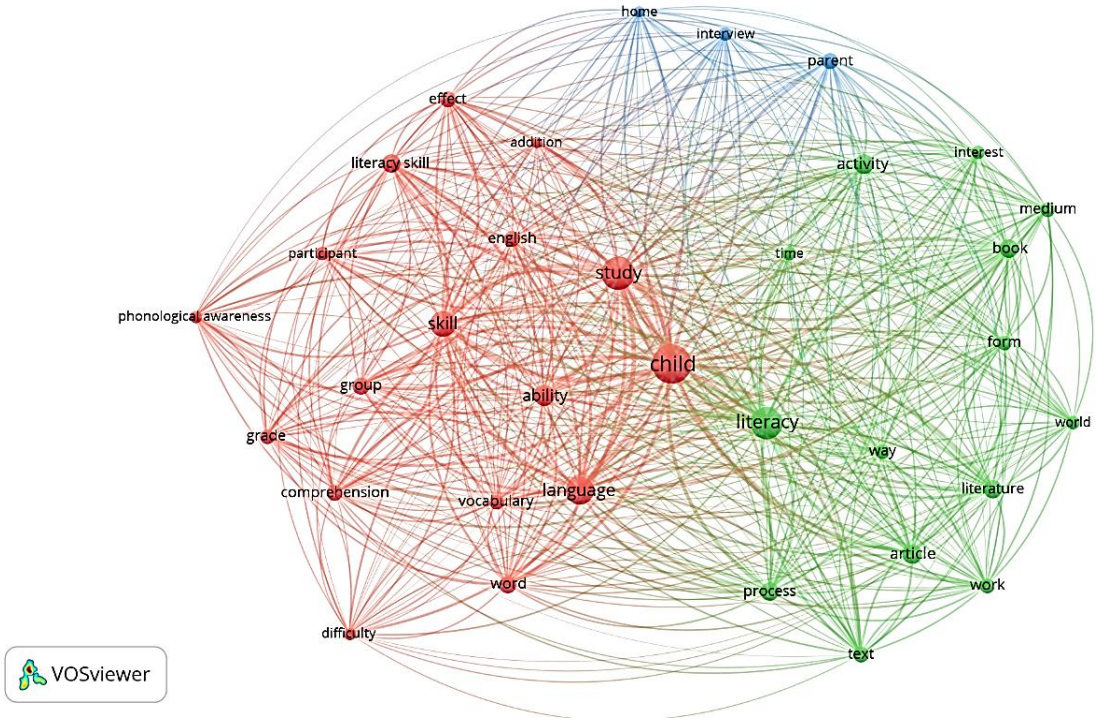


Figure 4. Co-occurrence analysis (VOSviewer visualization)

Cluster 2, comprising 14 terms, emphasizes the tools, activities, and practices that support literacy development. Important terms like "literacy," "activity," "book," "process," "article," "literature," "text," and "medium" imply a focus on teaching strategies, reading habits, and the role of texts in literacy development. This cluster highlights the significance of books and other reading materials as the primary tool for literacy development.

The use of the terms "activity" and "process" suggests that this cluster encompasses studies on instructional techniques such as shared book reading, participatory storytelling, and literacy-related classroom exercises. While "text" refers to the examination of reading

materials and their complexity, the term "literature" also suggests an emphasis on assessing earlier research and theoretical frameworks.

Cluster 2 also includes studies that examine the relationship between reading materials and literacy outcomes, and how different text types – narrative versus factual, print versus digital – affect engagement and understanding. It also draws attention to the growing interest in promoting reading habits by fusing digital media and e-books with traditional books. All things considered, this cluster strengthens Cluster 1 by highlighting not only the children's abilities but also the tools and literacy practices that support children's engagement with language, texts, and cultural meanings.

The findings further suggest that literacy practices are increasingly conceptualized as socially mediated activities supported by both traditional reading materials and digital resources. This reflects contemporary educational priorities that emphasize meaningful engagement with texts, collaborative learning experiences, and multimodal literacy practices capable of supporting diverse learner needs across different educational contexts.

Table 4. Co-occurrence analysis of keywords

Cluster No. and Colour	Cluster Label	Number of Keywords	Representative Keywords
Cluster 1 (Red)	Child-Centric Language and Skill Development	17	"child", "study", "language", "ability", "skill", "literacy skill", "English", "word", "comprehension",
Cluster 2 (Green)	Reading Materials, Literacy Practices, and Pedagogical Processes	14	"literacy", "activity", "book", "process", "article", "literature", "text", "medium"

The performance and network analyses reveal a field organized around complementary rather than isolated perspectives on children's reading literacy. Cognitive and neuropsychological research explains individual reading processes, while digital and family-based studies extend literacy development into technological and home environments. The multilingual and home-literacy cluster further situates reading within linguistic and cultural contexts, whereas metalinguistic research connects these contexts with children's awareness of language structure. These interconnected domains suggest that contemporary literacy scholarship increasingly integrates cognitive, linguistic, technological, familial, and sociocultural explanations rather than approaching reading development through a single perspective (Dawud & Muzaki, 2023; Li et al., 2021).

This pattern extends previous research emphasizing cognitive and instructional dimensions of literacy by demonstrating the increasing visibility of multilingual, home-based, and technology-mediated perspectives within the same intellectual landscape (Booton et al., 2021; Kirsch & Aleksić, 2021; Rocha & Mota, 2022). Importantly, the bibliometric evidence establishes the prominence and relationships of these research domains rather than directly measuring language equity. Nevertheless, the emergence of multilingualism, home-language practices, and culturally situated literacy provides a basis for examining how future literacy research can respond to increasingly linguistically diverse educational environments (Miller & Khatib, 2023; Papastefanou et al., 2021).

Similarly, the co-occurrence analysis demonstrates that children's reading literacy research increasingly emphasizes language development, literacy practices, digital resources, reading comprehension, and learner-centered educational approaches. The prominence of keywords related to language, English, literacy skills, and comprehension indicates continuing attention to foundational literacy competencies, while the growing appearance of digital and multilingual concepts reflects the field's adaptation to rapidly changing educational environments (Booton et al., 2021; Pattemore & Gilabert, 2023; Rico-Juan et al., 2024). These findings suggest that future literacy research will likely continue integrating technology-enhanced learning with culturally responsive and multilingual pedagogies (Gabriel & López, 2024; Quinn & Philippakos, 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, the findings reinforce contemporary literacy theories that conceptualize reading development as an interaction among cognitive processes, language acquisition, sociocultural participation, and technological mediation. The coexistence of neurocognitive, multilingual, and sociocultural research clusters supports an integrated understanding of literacy that extends beyond traditional decoding models and aligns with current perspectives on language learning, multilingual education, and socially situated literacy practices (Altun et al., 2021; Gabriel & López, 2024; Li et al., 2021). Rather than treating literacy as a single cognitive ability, contemporary scholarship increasingly positions it as a socially situated practice shaped by learners' linguistic backgrounds, family environments, and educational experiences (Miller & Khatib, 2023; Rocha & Mota, 2022).

The findings also have important practical implications for educators, language practitioners, curriculum developers, and policymakers. The strong emphasis on home literacy environments and parental involvement highlights the importance of strengthening partnerships between schools and families to support children's literacy development (Alam, 2021; Rocha & Mota, 2022; Ruan et al., 2023). Likewise, the increasing prominence of digital literacy suggests that technology should be thoughtfully integrated into literacy instruction to enhance reading engagement, language development, and equitable access to learning opportunities (Booton et al., 2021; Tubele & Serova, 2020). For multilingual educational contexts, the findings emphasize the need for culturally responsive literacy instruction that

recognizes learners' home languages and linguistic identities as valuable educational assets (Kirsch & Aleksić, 2021; Miller & Khatib, 2023). Policymakers should therefore continue investing in multilingual education, equitable access to literacy resources, and inclusive educational policies capable of reducing literacy disparities across diverse learner populations (Dolean, 2021; Gabriel & López, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024).

Therefore, this bibliometric analysis demonstrates that children's reading literacy has become an increasingly interdisciplinary and globally relevant research field. The convergence of cognitive science, applied linguistics, educational technology, multilingual education, and literacy studies provides a strong foundation for future research seeking to improve children's reading outcomes while simultaneously promoting language equity, educational inclusion, and sustainable literacy development across diverse educational settings (Écalle et al., 2023; Lerkkanen, 2025; Zou et al., 2025).

IV. CONCLUSION

This bibliometric analysis mapped the development of children's reading literacy research between 2020 and 2025 using 403 peer-reviewed publications from Dimensions AI. In response to the first research question, performance analysis identified the principal authors, sources, institutions, and countries shaping recent scholarship, while also revealing growing geographical participation beyond traditionally dominant research systems. For the second research question, bibliographic coupling identified four intellectual domains: cognitive and neuropsychological foundations; technology-supported and family-based literacy; multilingualism and home literacy environments; and metalinguistic awareness. For the third research question, keyword co-occurrence revealed continued emphasis on language development, literacy skills, reading materials, comprehension, and literacy practices.

Collectively, these findings show that children's reading literacy is increasingly studied through interconnected cognitive, linguistic, technological, familial, and sociocultural perspectives. The emergence of multilingualism and home-language contexts within the networks is particularly relevant to linguistically diverse educational settings; however, the analysis does not directly measure language equity. Rather, it identifies intellectual and conceptual developments that may inform future research examining equitable literacy opportunities across linguistic and cultural groups.

The study contributes a structured map of recent children's reading literacy scholarship by integrating performance, intellectual-structure, and conceptual-structure analyses. This mapping helps researchers identify established and emerging areas of inquiry while providing educators and policymakers with an evidence base for understanding how literacy research is responding to changing linguistic, technological, and sociocultural contexts.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis was restricted to Dimensions AI, English-language Open Access journal articles published between 2020 and 2025 within a

selected disciplinary category. These decisions improved dataset focus and accessibility but may underrepresent scholarship published in other languages, disciplines, databases, and subscription-based outlets. Consequently, the geographical and linguistic patterns identified should not be interpreted as representing the entirety of global children's literacy scholarship. Bibliometric analysis also maps publication and citation relationships rather than evaluating the methodological quality or effectiveness of individual studies.

Future research should expand this work by incorporating multiple databases to provide broader disciplinary coverage and enable comparative bibliometric analyses. Integrating bibliometric analysis with systematic literature reviews or meta-analyses would also provide deeper insights into empirical evidence and research quality. Further investigations should explore emerging areas such as artificial intelligence-supported literacy instruction, multilingual pedagogies, digital reading environments, and equitable literacy practices across diverse educational and cultural contexts.

DECLARATION

Author contribution: L.S.P. focuses on conceptualization, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, and project administration. F.S.C.Y. concerns on resources, software, supervision, and writing - review & editing. L.N.M completes data curation, investigation, resources, software, validation, visualization, and writing - review & editing. N.F.A.W. provides investigation, visualization, and writing - original draft. E.E. supports investigation, project administration, and writing - review & editing. P.R. completes data extraction and proofreading.

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