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Research Article

Trends in Reading Programs among ASEAN countries: A Meta-synthesis (2020–2026)

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ABSTRACT

Reading programs across the ASEAN region function as vital tools for developing a culture of reading. This meta-synthesis investigated the trends, challenges, and recommendations from ASEAN reading programs from 2020 to 2026. A rigorous screening process using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Checklist was employed to select the final 26 articles. Using a hybrid inductive-deductive approach, this meta-synthesis consolidated Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis and Ritchie and Spencer's Framework Analysis to evaluate the eligible studies, which were geographically weighted primarily in Indonesia (11 studies) and the Philippines (11 studies), along with studies from Laos (1), Malaysia (1), Vietnam (1), and Myanmar (1). Trends in reading programs are helping to promote a love for reading through extensive reading (15-minute reading before class), setting up reading corners in classrooms, and reading programs like the Catch-Up Fridays Program that help address learning gaps caused by the pandemic. Shared reading was also recommended for refugees who struggle with language barriers. Cross-regional challenges include a lack of learning resources ("book poverty"), inadequate teacher capacity building, limited support from stakeholders, and low student engagement. Recommendations focus on expanding extensive reading, equipping schools with reading corners and digital tools, applying formal assessments, and training teachers for integrative and differentiated instruction. These findings were deductively mapped onto SEAMEO's 7 Educational Priorities to form an Integrated Framework that demonstrates how regional reading interventions align with broader Southeast Asian educational targets.

Keywords: *ASEAN, Reading programs, Seameo educational priorities, Trends*

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Introduction

Effective reading programs employing research-based practices aim at vocabulary expansion, better writing skills, and improvement in reading comprehension, resulting in students' academic success and lifelong learning. The literature indicates that, in the context of regional identity and global initiatives, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) fully commits to promoting inclusive and quality education (ASEAN, 2021). Despite these initiatives, ASEAN member states continue to face substantial learning difficulties according to the latest findings from the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) 2024 regional report (UNICEF, 2025). Recent comparative studies analyzed literacy levels across ASEAN countries (Ahmed et al., 2025; Kusumastuti & Nuryani, 2020; Nietschke et al., 2024; Rusydiyah et al., 2023).

However, a significant literature gap persists regarding how post-pandemic learning recovery strategies (2020–2026) have been operationalized across diverse reading programs in the region. While individual country policies exist—such as Indonesia's School Literacy Movement and the Philippines' Catch-Up Fridays and ARAL program—a cross-national comparative meta-synthesis systematically evaluating these post-COVID interventions and mapping them against SEAMEO's regional educational priorities has been lacking.

This study employed a meta-synthesis focused on emerging trends in reading programs across ASEAN, drawn from published articles in reputable journals. A successful reading program aims beyond students' recognition of symbols or letters. These programs are built on foundational reading skills: phonemic segmentation, grapheme-phoneme knowledge, decoding, and spelling skills (Ehri, 2022). These reading programs also incorporate evidence-based instructional strategies like picture mnemonics, articulation for phonemic segmentation and sound streaming for decoding, purposeful fluency-building activities, setting of comprehension-building practices, predicting, analyzing, summarizing, and providing students with opportunities to practice making sense of text. (Ali & Razali, 2019; Ehri, 2022; Vaughn et al., 2024). Reading literacy drives world leaders to design and implement policies geared towards acquiring and improving literacy skills (UNESCO, 2025). The right to education depends on the importance of improving literacy skills. In fact, ensuring "inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong opportunities for all" is United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) by 2030. Addressing structural obstacles such as "book poverty"—defined academically as the critical scarcity of accessible, age-appropriate, and culturally relevant reading materials—remains central to achieving these developmental targets. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, more than 86% of the world's population knows how to read and write. But this statistic translates to 739 million adults who can't read and write, of whom two-thirds are women, and 250 million children who have not acquired basic literacy skills.

The ten members representing ASEAN: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, together with Timor-Leste, prioritize future-ready education at higher and basic education as well as technical and vocational education and training (TVET). Their priorities also include unwavering support for students' transition to the workforce, for teachers on state-of-the-art teaching methods and strategies, for out-of-school youth and children, and for protected and resilient schools. With an outstanding partnership with Google, ASEAN has launched the ASEAN Digital Literacy Programme (ASEAN DLP) to educate teachers and youth leaders in combating misinformation (ASEAN, 2025). ASEAN's Media and Information Literacy Division, in partnership with the US Department of State under the Alumni Engagement Innovation Fund (AEIF) 2022, launched the ASEAN Teachers' Virtual Boot Camp on February 8-10, 2023, with the goal of "building resilience for the futures of learning" (ASEAN, 2023). The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) is another intergovernmental organization that collaborates closely with the ASEAN member states to achieve its goal of promoting cooperation in education, science, and culture in the region (SEAMEO, n.d.). Its Education Agenda 2021- 2030 Priority Areas, Targets & Indicators are as follows: Achieving Universal Early Childhood Care and Education, Addressing

Barriers to Inclusion, Promoting Resilience in Emergencies, Promoting Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), Revitalising Teacher Education, Harmonising Higher Education and Research, Adopting a 21st-Century Curriculum (SEAMEO, 2021). Famous reading programs from this region include Indonesia's School Literacy Movement (Kartikasari & Nuryasana, 2022), Singapore's Reading and English Acquisition Programme (Ng & Sullivan, 2001), and the Philippines' ARAL Reading Program ("DepEd's ARAL Program," 2026). However, one in every two Grade 5 students has not reached the expected level of reading in six countries from Southeast Asia. It was pointed out that without foundational literacy, too many students are unable to read and count in areas where they are believed to thrive. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 results revealed that students from the Philippines "love learning new things in school," but they consistently have low scores in math, reading and science (OECD, 2024). While students from Indonesia also performed below the OECD average scores, students from Thailand showed declining performance. On the other hand, students from Singapore ranked second globally in the same assessment, while Vietnam also achieved exceptionally high scores. These disparities in scores alone emphasize the differences in educational thrusts among ASEAN countries.

This study employed a meta-synthesis to determine the different reading programs implemented in the ASEAN countries. This qualitative study focused on articles on reading programs published between 2020 and 2026 from these 11 countries. A screening process was employed using inclusion and exclusion criteria and the CASP checklist. The eligible studies were analyzed through thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis.

Problem Statement

This meta-synthesis aimed to provide a comprehensive, systematic review of research articles on trends in reading programs across ASEAN countries from 2020 to 2026. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the emerging trends in the design and implementation of the reading programs?
2. What are the challenges encountered in the implementation of these reading programs?
3. What recommendations have been proposed to address these challenges?
4. What curricular framework or policy recommendation can be developed based on the findings of this meta-synthesis?

Significance of the Study

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations' educational goals include future-ready education, lifelong learning, emphasis on technical and vocational education, and inclusive education. This synthesis of the reading programs in these member states from 2020 to 2026 provided an overview of their design and implementation in each country. The examination of the differences and similarities among these reading programs could offer insights into the disparities in literacy outcomes or the literacy divide among these countries. This study can be a basis for future language policies among countries with high educational disparity and improvement of educational reforms for countries with high literacy rates.

Review of Related Literature

This meta-synthesis on trends in reading programs across ASEAN countries was guided by the extensive literature on the topic. The following selected literature provided an overview of the available resources on the reading programs from these member states. To concretely lay out the trends of the reading programs, this review is organized according to the major themes addressed in this meta-synthesis.

Reading Programs Implemented Across ASEAN Countries

Brunei

Brunei has implemented various initiatives to improve its educational system, starting from 1986 when the Bilingual System in education was implemented (Salbrina et al., 2024). The Literacy and Numeracy Coaching Programme (LNCP) launched its first phase from 2016 to 2019 (McAleavy & Pagden, 2024). With

the technical assistance of the Education Department Trust, the Ministry of Education implemented a progressive approach to improving literacy through coaching. With the support of international and local coaches, teachers modified their teaching methods following evidence-based practices in lesson planning and assessment methods.

Modeled after Singapore's Reading and English Acquisition Programme (REAP), Brunei launched its Reading and Language Acquisition Project (RELA) in 1989 (Ng, 2001). From the initial 20 pilot schools, the program has been continually extended to upper primary school through the implementation of Sustained Silent Reading for reading improvement.

Cambodia

One of Cambodia's major literacy initiatives is Room to Read's Literacy Program, launched in 2002 with the support of the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS). Room to Read is a non-profit organization whose aim is to uphold children's literacy and girls' education across Asia and Africa. The organization has integrated an improved Grade 3 curriculum and learning materials in over 80 schools in Cambodia (Room to Read, 2025).

Indonesia

In Indonesia, prominent reading programs include The *Yayasan Literasi Anak Indonesia* and Let's Read Indonesia, which are initiatives by non-government organizations supported by the local government. The *Yayasan Literasi Anak Indonesia* aims to develop a reading culture and love for reading in Indonesia among elementary students through the Balanced Reading Program (Yayasan Literasi Anak Indonesia, n.d.). The program provides storybooks, develops teacher manuals, student exercise books, and video tutorials.

Let's Read Indonesia is the Asia Foundation's key initiative to fulfill its goal of expanding opportunities and improving lives in the Asia-Pacific Region. The program's approach to improving literacy is through providing engaging books that broaden children's horizons while embracing local languages like Javanese, Sundanese, Minang, Batak Toba, and Balinese (The Asia Foundation, 2024).

The country is also recognized for its initiatives for non-profit publishing and open access for research. In 2019, the government passed its Law on National System of Science and Technology, promoting accessibility, transparency, and dissemination of scientific information and open access practices (The Conversation, 2020).

Laos

In partnership with the Global Partnership for Education and the World Bank, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) launched the Reading Readiness Program to improve early grade literacy in 127 communities (Global Partnership to Education, 2026). Since its implementation, 142 classrooms received specialized kits of instructional materials, and coaches and master coaches have trained 183 teachers in preparation for the implementation of the reading readiness program. The program's successful design and implementation of the program resulted in significant improvement in learning outcomes of the students.

Malaysia

The Malaysian Ministry of Education implemented NILAM (Nadi Ilmu Amalan Membaca), a nationwide reading program aimed at fostering reading culture among students (Ponnudorai & Zamin, 2022). The program promotes a lifelong passion for reading using different materials in multiple languages. The reading program now has its own technology, i-NILAM, used to record NILAM activities in school (Mansor & Mailok, 2013).

Myanmar

Following the 2021 coup, Myanmar's education problems have deepened, following a massive enrollment drop and violence against schools and teachers (San, 2021). However, the Mingala Trust, a registered international charity, funded the Myanmar Extensive Reading Programme to help Myanmar learners increase English fluency through enjoyable reading materials and provide opportunities for students to learn on their own when teachers lack proficiency and experience. (Myanmar Extensive Reading Programme, n.d.). The Trust has started the program with the printing of 76,000 books.

Philippines

World Vision, a non-government organization, in partnership with the Department of Education, launched the Brigada Pagbasa Programme (National Reading Brigade) with an aim to bring together education supporters to teach Filipino kids to read and be educated for life (Aquino, 2022). The Department of Education has its own long-running reading program, Every Child a Reader Program (ECARP). This reading initiative is aimed at solving literacy challenges faced by Filipino elementary students, particularly Kinder to Grade 3 students (Capate et al., 2025). The emphasis is on providing continued support for struggling readers through a more balanced approach to teaching reading. The Department of Education launched the National Reading Program in 2024 through the introduction of the Catch-up Fridays Program to address students' learning losses from the pandemic. (Rominimbang et al., 2024; Requillo et al., 2024).

Singapore

As the country with one of the highest literacy rates in Southeast Asia, Singapore has national and school-based reading initiatives. Foremost among them is the Reading and English Acquisition Program (REAP) introduced in 1986 to Year 1 classes at 30 primary schools (Ng & Sullivan, 2001). The principles of these early programs were now integrated into the national primary English syllabus by 1992. A known reading program directed toward addressing challenges students faced with reading difficulty is the School-based Dyslexia Remediation (SDR), a special remediation program for children with dyslexia in Primary 3 and Primary 4 (Edgefield Primary School, n.d.). The students are selected through diagnostic tests conducted at the end of Primary 2.

Thailand

Some reading initiatives implemented in Thailand are part of UNICEF-supported strategies like the Bilingual Education Program, which prioritizes language and reading instruction for adults in marginalized groups such as the Pwo Karen community (UNESCO, n.d.). This ongoing program aims for better access to quality and relevant education among students from the Pwo Karen's community.

Laudara, a global non-profit organization, partnered with a local agency, Tai Wisdom Association to establish reading programs across Thailand to ensure the academic success of Thai kids in rural areas (Laudara, n.d.). Reading programs include the Read-Aloud Program for Preschool and Primary 1 & 2, the Together We Read Program for Primary 3 to 6, and Independent Reading for Primary 1 to 6. The ultimate goal of these programs is to alleviate poverty in the rural areas through coordinating with local organizations or clubs.

Vietnam

Similar to Cambodia, the Ministry of Education and Training partnered with a non-profit agency, Room to Read, to establish the Literacy and Girls' Education Programs to improve Vietnamese children's learning outcomes. This partnership aimed to build up local libraries, train teachers, and provide books especially to primary schools (Room to Read, n.d.).

A noticeable depth disparity exists between country sections in published qualitative literature. While Indonesia and the Philippines possess rich, contemporary documentation featuring specific program titles (2020–2026), sections on countries like Brunei, Cambodia, Singapore, and Thailand draw on historical or broader institutional reports. This reflects the availability of published qualitative literature within the target temporal window rather than an omission of policy initiatives.

Challenges and Solutions

Inevitably, the implementation of reading programs is accompanied by several challenges. Each reading program should be tailored according to various factors, such as the needs of the students, the available resources, the readiness of the teachers, and parental support. The succeeding discussion will focus on the identified challenges encountered in the reading programs and how these challenges are addressed.

The Ministry of Education of Brunei Darussalam evaluated the implementation of the Reading and Language Acquisition Project. Statistics show a significant improvement in students from primary schools. However, the study recommended further collaboration

among educational sectors for a more sustainable change (Ng, 2001). In Indonesia, a study reported that secondary school teachers lack ready-to-use materials and activities for the extensive reading program. They also voiced the lack of support from the government and the school administration, as the reading programs add an overwhelming workload to the teachers (Wulyani, 2022).

One identified challenge is the alignment between technology-based program design and the readiness of the teachers, as tablets were used to assist struggling students in Cambodia (Oakley et al., 2022). Staff members were positive about the intervention program, but ample training was needed in applying mobile learning elements in the study. In Laos, despite government initiatives, reading programs lack accessible reading materials, inadequate infrastructure, and most of all, poverty, which causes socioeconomic barriers. It was recommended that mobile library services and multilingual resources should be expanded and the sense of local ownership of the literacy programs should be encouraged through further teacher training and more parental involvement (Phomma & Chanthavong, 2023).

A study from Malaysia on academic reading in the master's program revealed that the students themselves were not engaged in overcoming academic challenges. Relevant administrative policies and reading-related programs were recommended to ensure the students' academic success (Singh, 2014).

In the Philippines, a study on reading programs revealed that students faced difficulties in decoding, fluency, comprehension, and motivation. It was identified that there is a need for implementing effective reading programs that will encourage more frequent reading habits and supply engaging reading materials so learners can overcome challenges they encounter (Binay-an, 2022;Obispo et al., 2026). In Vietnam, the Extensive Reading program was implemented for two years. Unfortunately, the program seems to have limited impact on the students, as the teachers themselves were still unclear of the role and purpose of the reading program (Waring & Vu, 2020).

Methodology

This meta-synthesis on the reading programs across ASEAN countries delved into the analysis of the emerging trends in the design and implementation of the program, the ultimate goals of these reading programs, and the challenges encountered in the implementation. To ensure a thorough research methodology, a meticulous design and strategy were employed to maintain the rigor of this research study.

Research Design

This meta-synthesis followed a qualitative research design. The focus was on the search for eligible studies through a series of screenings according to predetermined inclusion-exclusion criteria. The list of included studies was further appraised using the CASP checklist. Three independent validators from the field of education evaluated the articles using the CASP checklist. The inter-rater reliability and quality of the studies were established by consolidating their individual ratings; only articles that met the required standards across all core CASP quality indicators were retained for the final synthesis. The eligible articles were analyzed and coded through thematic analysis.

Search Strategy and PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

This meta-synthesis followed an exploratory and rigorous undertaking. Articles related to the recent ASEAN reading programs were extracted from electronic databases like Google Scholar and Semantic Scholar. Scopus-indexed journals were also accessed through the following databases: Sage Journals, SpringerLink, Wiley Online Library, and ScienceDirect. To refine the search strategy, Harzing's Publish or Perish software was used to extract relevant articles from Google Scholar and Semantic Scholar. In the software, the preferred publication year was set for the intended articles. Keywords were considered as filters, such as "ASEAN", "Reading Programs", "reading", "trends", "Brunei", "Cambodia", "Indonesia", "Laos", "Malaysia", "Myanmar", "Philippines", "Singapore", "Thailand", and "Vietnam" to screenthe articles. Timor-Leste was not

included in the study because it was admitted as a full member only from October 26, 2025. This meta-synthesis covered the reading programs implemented from 2020 to 2026. The software produced a downloadable CSV file complete with the bibliographic information of the articles, such as URL, name of the journal, name of the authors, title of the article, etc. In the screening process, predetermined inclusion-exclusion criteria were set. The included articles are published qualitative studies, studies related to reading programs, ASEAN- related studies that addressed the first three questions of the statement of the problem of this meta-synthesis, and mixed-method studies with strong qualitative findings. Excluded articles were purely quantitative studies, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, conference proceedings, books, citations, non-ASEAN studies, non-English publications, studies with dead links, comparative studies, theses/dissertations, studies published outside 2020–2026, and studies lacking clear qualitative methodology. Quantitative studies were explicitly excluded because qualitative meta-syntheses require deep interpretive context to evaluate pedagogical nuances, stakeholder experiences, and implementation dynamics that numerical metrics cannot capture.

The final list of articles met the quality standards of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist. The CASP Checklist includes these questions: *Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research? Is a qualitative methodology appropriate? Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research? Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research? Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue? Has the relationship between the researcher and participants been adequately considered? Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous? Is there a clear statement of findings? How valuable is the research?* The questions provided evidence on the validity, trustworthiness, and relevance of the chosen articles to the research questions. Figure 1 below reflects the PRISMA flow of the selection process.

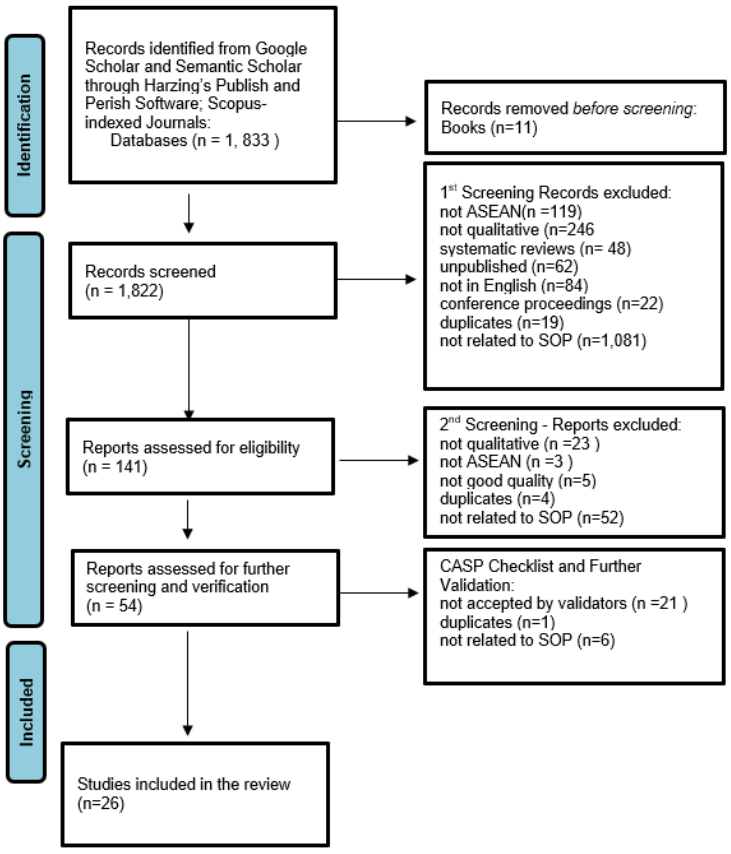


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

Data Gathering Procedure

After the rigorous process of screening and appraising the articles, only 26 studies out of 1,833 articles were considered eligible for this meta-synthesis. The initial codes were generated and uploaded to Taguette, an open-source qualitative data analysis tool. The website allows importing of the documents and highlighting the texts for tagging codes. It also allows the search and filtering of codes, the exporting of results in various formats, and collaboration for multiple researchers.

Data Analysis

This meta-synthesis followed a Thematic Analysis with a Framework Approach. This kind of data analysis followed a rigorous hybrid inductive-deductive approach. The eligible articles were first analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis procedure includes familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Since this is a hybrid inductive–deductive approach, another type of data analysis was subsequently employed for the application of a framework. Framework Analysis procedure consists of six phases: familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping, and interpretation (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). Following the inductive generation of themes for trends, challenges, and recommendations, Ritchie and Spencer's Framework Analysis was applied deductively. The inductively derived recommendation themes were indexed and mapped onto a matrix framework corresponding directly to SEAMEO's 7 Educational Priorities. This matrix charting allowed the qualitative findings to be interpreted through an established regional policy lens. The inductive approach allowed themes to emerge organically from the data, while the deductive approach helped organize these themes within an existing framework relevant to ASEAN.

Ethical Considerations

As a systematic review, this meta-synthesis involved systematic retrieval and synthesis of eligible published studies. This study did not involve any human participants or respondents. As with all review studies, there were minimal concerns about ethical issues like voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, the potential for harm, and results communication. The researcher is committed to integrity through minimizing bias and upholding academic honesty and trustworthiness.

Findings/Results

The data-gathering procedure resulted in 26 articles meeting the eligibility criteria for this study. Codes, themes, and sub-themes were generated after a meticulous data analysis. The following discussion will focus on answering these questions: What are the emerging trends in the design and implementation of the reading programs? What are the challenges faced in these reading programs? What recommendations have been proposed to address these challenges? What curricular framework or policy recommendation can be generated from the findings?

Sources of the articles

The selection of the articles covered all 10 member states of the ASEAN, namely, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam. Timor-Leste, the 11th member of ASEAN, was not included in the study as it only became an official member on October 26, 2025. This meta-synthesis covered the reading programs implemented from 2020 to 2026. The studies that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria of this study are from Indonesia (11 studies), the Philippines (11 studies), and one from each of these countries: Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar/Burma, and Vietnam. No study from Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, or Thailand met the criteria. Surprisingly, no qualitative study on a reading program met the inclusion criteria from Singapore despite the country's top-ranked performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests. However, there are no recent studies on the current reading programs the government implements in Singapore. The last published studies on reading programs in Singapore focused on the Reading and English Acquisition Programme, which was implemented in 1988 (Ng

& Sullivan, 2001). The lone included article from Myanmar focused on the experience of the Burmese refugees who now live in the United States (Boit et al., 2025). The disproportionate concentration of qualitative studies in Indonesia (n = 11) and the Philippines (n = 11) stems from two primary drivers. First, both nations executed massive, aggressive national reading policy mandates during the post-pandemic recovery period, such as the Philippines' Catch-Up Fridays, ARAL Program, and ECARP, and Indonesia's School Literacy Movement (Gerakan Literasi Sekolah). Second, both countries possess highly active, open-access research publishing ecosystems supported by national legislation, such as Indonesia's 2019 Law on National Knowledge System and Technology, which significantly increases the volume of indexable qualitative literature available for retrieval. The Department of Education, the Philippines' executive educational department, also actively implements literacy laws on foundational reading through programs like the ARAL Program (RA 12028 - Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning Act), the Alternative Learning System (ALS) Act (RA 11510), and the Every Child a Reader Program (ECARP - DO 18, s. 2017).

Thematic Analysis

The first step towards the analysis of this meta-synthesis was familiarization with the materials. The articles were meticulously scrutinized to generate the initial codes. The initial codes were grouped according to the main questions stated above. The initial codes corresponded to the three main questions of this meta-synthesis.

A. Trends

The eleven Indonesian studies focused mainly on the School Literacy Program implemented by the Indonesian government through the Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 23 of 2015. This movement primarily aimed to develop a culture of reading through habituation, that is, reading for pleasure. The students are allowed to read for 15 minutes before the lesson starts. The program promoted extensive reading, as students can choose the reading material they are most interested in. The mandate recommended the provision of a reading corner in every classroom where various books can be easily accessed. This literacy program was also used to introduce Islamic education to students (Fuad, 2026; Siregar, 2025; Oktaviana et.al, 2025; Fitriyaningsih, 2021; Rubiyad & Fajriyah, 2025; Khoiriyah & Ilmi 2023; Sari et al., 2026; Al Munziroh et al., 2025; Madeten et al., 2024; Wulyani et al., 2022; Qoyyimah et al., 2025).

The eleven articles from the reading programs in the Philippines focused on the implementation of the Department of Education's initiatives to address learning losses exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. To improve reading proficiency, remedial intervention programs were introduced, like the Catch-Up Fridays Program (Drop Everything and Read), remedial reading in content areas, and "*Basa Pilipinas"* (Read Philippines). Volunteerism was also recommended in programs like *"Bayan Ko, Titser Ko*" and peer tutoring for Project Empowering Learners' Eagerness and Confidence through Intensive Reading and Active Engagement (ELECTRA). The Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) was adopted as a diagnostic and assessment tool for the implementation of these intervention programs. To measure the literacy skills of primary school students, some schools used formal assessments like the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA). The emphasis on teaching reading through a phono-syllabic method like the Marungko Approach was also noted in the Philippine studies (Obispo et al., 2026; Bullos et al., 2025; Sancada, 2022; Buante et al., 2026; Casilac et al., 2023; Binay-an, 2022; Villon et al., 2025; Golo & Belen, 2024; Rosano et al., 2025; Rominimbang et al., 2024; Requillo et al., 2024).

The reading program from Laos centered on community reading centers and mobile libraries for easy access to culturally responsive materials (Phomma & Chanthavong, 2023). The articles from Malaysia and Vietnam also emphasized the importance of extensive reading in encouraging the students to love reading (Khairani et al., 2022; Pham, 2025). The article published in the United States on the refugees from Burma portrayed the importance of the use of dual-language books in Shared Book Reading, as Burmese mothers struggle to teach their kids the new language (Boit et al., 2025).

B. Challenges

One of the main focuses of this meta-synthesis is to present the challenges the implementers encountered during the implementation. The challenges identified are grouped into themes following Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis.

Evaluation, Monitoring, and Assessment

Regardless of the locale, there is a commonality in the challenges and problems faced by the implementers of the programs. Foremost among the problems pertains to the design, implementation, evaluation, monitoring, and assessment of the reading programs. The formal assessments like the Phil-IRI were deemed too complex and demanding due to inconsistent procedures, inadequate reading instructions, absence of a structured curriculum, assessment and formal curriculum integration, inconsistent implementation, etc (Buante et al., 2026; Casilac et al., 2023; Requillo et al., 2024; Pham, 2025).

Lack of Learning Resources

The lack of books and proper learning materials, or as one study pointed out, "book poverty", was consistently emphasized in most studies. The need for the provision of more books, scarcity of age-appropriate materials, low-quality collections, and lack of fiction storybooks are just among the problems explicitly stated in the challenges of implementing a reading program (Oktaviana et.al, 2025; Fuad, 2026; Siregar, 2025).

Capacity-Building for Teachers

As the reading programs progressed, it became apparent that teachers need to be trained to properly assist the students. The findings accentuated the need for teacher capacity building, tutor training, continuous professional development, sufficient training, orientation, and training to teach reading and insufficient pedagogical knowledge of reading instruction. The teachers also struggled in implementing differentiation of instruction, managing the burden of added workload, and accessing professional learning communities that could support them teach reading. (Requillo et al., 2024; Oktaviana et.al, 2025; Obispo et al., 2026; Casilac et al., 2023).

Support from Stakeholders

The teachers acknowledged that they need support from all stakeholders. Policymakers, parents, school heads, and community leaders can all actively support and participate in the endeavor. Some of the reported challenges are insufficient literacy support from home, limited parental participation, parents who disliked buying books for their children, low parental motivation, lack of support from the government, school's lack of support for the remediation reading program (Fuad, 2026; Siregar, 2025; Fitriyaningsih, 2021; Sari et al., 2026; Wulyani et al., 2022; Phomma & Chanthavong, 2023; Sancada, 2022).

Learners' motivation and literacy skills

Another pressing problem is the learners' lack of literacy skills and engagement with the reading program. Teachers recounted various challenges, such as students' low motivation to read, students who are passive in class, low enthusiasm from students, the influence of gadgets on the motivation to read, and students who outright don't like to read. Some young learners do not have the capacity or the language abilities to read. Teachers relay that students still do not have the capacity to read (Qoyyimah et al., 2025; Fitriyaningsih, 2021; Khoiriyah & Ilmi, 2023; Sari et al., 2026; Wulyani et al., 2022; Golo & Belen, 2024).

Aside from the above-mentioned discussion, more themes in the challenges were identified, such as unstructured program design, lack of reading corners/libraries, unavailability of digital tools, lack of volunteers, unforeseen calamities and natural disasters, and geographical limitations.

C. Recommendations

Data from the twenty-six articles revealed multiple recommendations to address the challenges at hand.

Support, Partnership and Training

At times, teachers are overwhelmed with the burden of providing reading remediation to students. Teacher capacity building can only be possible if they receive all the support they need. Success can only come when there is established collaboration and partnership with

the parents, school managers, community decision makers, policy makers, and program specialists. There should be a good collection of books at hand, a reading corner or clinic, digital tools for strategic implementation, mobile libraries, and collaboration with other libraries. Teachers should also be supported through teacher training, professional development in reading instruction, reduced workloads, provision of systematic monitoring and feedback mechanisms (Villon et al., 2025; Siregar, 2025; Fitriyaningsih, 2021; Al Munziroh et al., 2025; Wulyani et al., 2022).

Literacy based on Integrative and Differentiated Learning

As teachers deal with learners at risk, learners with reading difficulty, learners with special needs, and students with no reading ability, the focus should be on more integrative and differentiated learning. In Indonesian studies, mentoring and habituation were recommended to cater to the needs of these children. Extensive reading in Malaysia and Vietnam gives the students the freedom to choose the reading materials they prefer. Scaffolding stems from providing materials that learners are interested in, providing more individualized instruction, and providing targeted phonics and comprehension strategies for young learners, thus tailoring the reading instruction to the individual learner. (Rubiyad & Fajriyah, 2025, Bullos et al., 2025; Casilac et al., 2023, Fitriyaningsih, 2021).

Competency-based Implementation

Reading programs must promote a competency-based curriculum as students adapt to a rapidly evolving educational landscape. The students' mastery of specific reading skills is taken into account in promoting the MARUNGKO approach. Students go through a step-by-step progression of competencies as they advance their reading ability. Phil-IRI, a formal assessment that determines the reading skill mastery level of the students also promotes competency-based reading instruction. (Villon et al., 2025; Buante et al., 2026; Binayan, 2022; Obispo et al., 2026).

Promoting Reading Beyond Challenges

Ideally, reading programs should address the needs of students in tough times and situations. Through these numerous challenges, it is highly recommended that schools and policymakers create programs that can provide for such instances. Philippines' Catch Up Fridays Reading program exemplifies the type of intervention that addresses the learning gaps students experienced during the pandemic. (Requillo et al., 2024). In Laos, mobile libraries are recommended to address the geographical isolation of learners in rural areas. The mothers among Burmese refugees enjoy shared reading with their children using dual-language books despite language barriers. (Phomma & Chanthavong, 2023; Boit et al., 2025).

D. Alignment of the Findings with the SEAMEO Seven Educational Priorities

The fourth question of this meta-synthesis is: What curricular framework or policy recommendation can be developed from the findings? To answer this, a more thorough analysis was applied using a hybrid approach (inductive-deductive).

The initial codes on the reading programs and the themes for the challenges were generated inductively following Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis. For further data analysis, Ritchie and Spencer's Framework was applied in the recommendations part of the reading programs. A thorough review of ASEAN-related frameworks, SEAMEO's 7 Educational Priorities, came out as the one that best complements the data from this meta-synthesis (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization [SEAMEO], 2021).

The priorities are:

1. *Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)*
   The focus is on the education of young chi dren before primary school
2. *Addressing Barriers to Inclusion*
   Make education accessible to all, including disadvantaged groups.
3. *Resiliency in Emergencies*
   Ensuring children continue to learn despite disasters like typhoons and pandemics
4. *Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)*
   Developing skills for future employment

5. *Revitalising Teacher Education*
   Providing support to teachers through teacher training
6. *Higher Education and Research*
   Promoting research and higher education in universities
7. *21st Century Curriculum*
   Updating modern skills through technology, critical thinking, etc.

Trends in Reading Programs – SEAMEO 7 Educational Priorities Synthesis.

Figure 2 below illustrates an integrated framework of how these ASEAN reading programs facilitate the attainment of SEAMEO's Priority Areas.

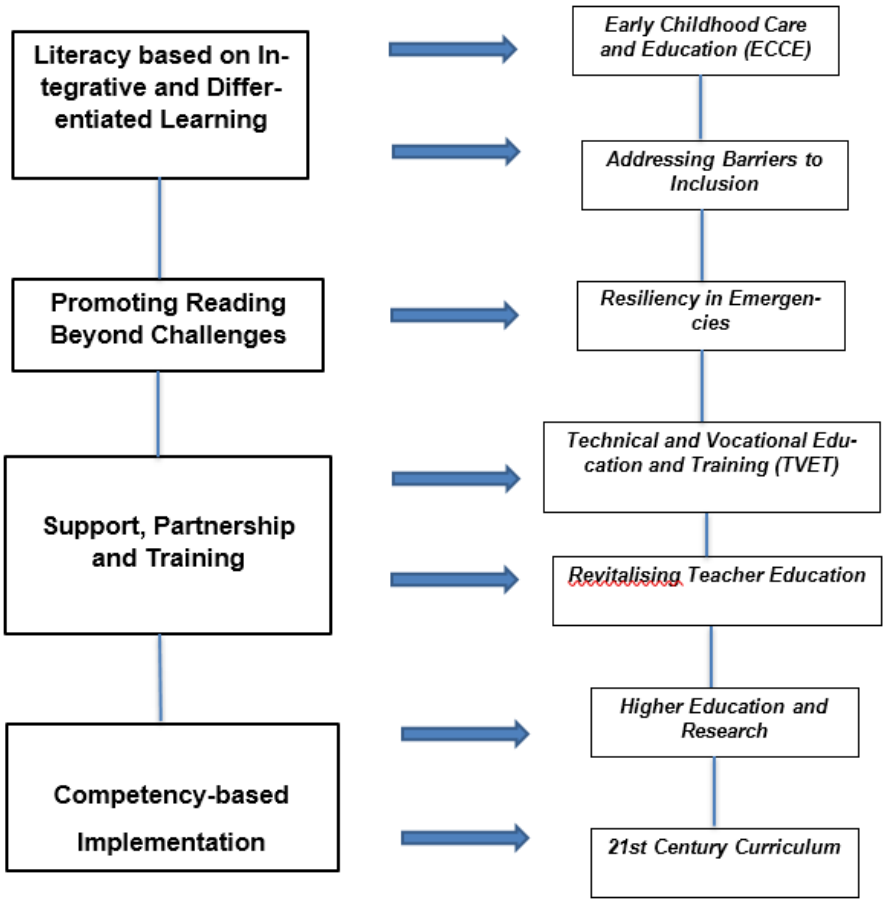


Figure 2. Integrated Framework for ASEAN Reading Programs and SEAMEO's Educational Priorities

For the area of *Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)* and *Addressing Barriers to Inclusion,* the theme **Literacy based on Integrative and Differentiated Learning** most closely aligns with these areas. Teachers deal with young learners with no reading ability, learners with special needs, learners with reading difficulty, and learners at risk through mentoring, habituation, extensive reading, more individualized instruction, targeted phonics, and comprehension strategies. Tailoring the reading instruction to the individual learner addresses ASEAN's priority to educate young learners and those with special needs. Students from ASEAN countries (Villon et al., 2025; Buante et al., 2026; Binay-an, 2022; Obispo et al., 2026).

The theme **Promoting Reading Beyond Challenges** from this meta-synthesis supports SEAMEO's priority of *Resiliency in Emergencies.* Students from countries in the ASEAN region face frequent natural disasters, civil wars, geographical isolation, and economic collapse while carrying the burden of the compounding

crisis of the pandemic. Policymakers have recognized the need to address the learning gaps by implementing remedial reading programs. Identifying their literacy levels and providing them with appropriate reading instruction lightens the burden of students affected by educational disparity. In various circumstances, teachers manifest resiliency through promoting reading beyond challenges (Requillo et al.,2024; Phomma & Chanthavong, 2023; Boit et al., 2025).

Reading programs will never be successful without the active participation of teachers who truly care for students with reading difficulties. Teachers need substantial support in promoting the culture of reading. The theme **Support, Partnership and Training** sums up all the learning resources, collaborations and training the students and teachers need in making any reading program successful. This particular theme promotes the SEAMEO Priority areas: *Revitalising Teacher Education* and *Higher Education and Research.* The comprehensive research stems from addressing the resources and, trainings that the teachers revitalize teacher education. At times, not only professional teachers are involved in the reading programs; volunteers and university students act as mentors for these reading programs. SEMEO recognized the need to equip future teachers through quality teacher education. The body of knowledge that concerns the need for the reading program should impact teacher education (Villon et al., 2025; Siregar, 2025; Fitriyaningsih, 2021; Al Munziroh et al., 2025; Wulyani et al.,2022).

The twenty-first-century curriculum focuses on several pillars: core skills, literacy in the digital age, and life and career skills. The **Competency-based Implementation** of the reading programs supports the development of the skills of students, reflecting SEAMEO's priority of promoting a *21st-century curriculum*. Some reading programs adapt digital tools in their design and implementation. Others use formal assessments that measure the competencies of students. Creativity is fostered through the use of varied learning resources like fiction books as well as course-related reading. Students should adapt, be more aware of what is happening around them, and acquire the social skills they need to face the future. (Villon et al., 2025; Buante et al.,2026; Binayan, 2022; Obispo et al., 2026).

As this study focused on reading programs, there is no direct relation between the trends, challenges, and recommendations to SEAMEO's priority area of *Technical and Vocational Education.* However, as students acquire the love for reading and adapt to a culture of reading while honing necessary skills, they will eventually be equipped enough to contribute to the workforce in the future.

This meta-synthesis showed that the reading programs implemented across the ASEAN region support SEAMEO's goals as evident in the alignment of this study's generated themes to SEAMEO's educational priorities. The themes - Literacy based on Integrative and Differentiated Learning, Promoting Reading Beyond Challenges, Support, Partnership and Training, and Competency-based Implementation – illustrated how reading programs endeavored to address diverse learners' needs, strengthen teacher capacity, encourage resilience in the midst of educational disruptions, and promote the skills and competencies required for the twenty-first century. The emergence of these themes from the reading programs demonstrated the need for strong literacy skills as a prerequisite to SEAMO's goals for lifelong learning, employability, and workforce readiness. The findings affirmed that successful reading programs contribute to advancing regional educational priorities, in this case, ASEAN, by promoting resilience, inclusion, teacher development and learner competencies.

Conclusion

This meta-synthesis centered on the trends in the design and implementation of reading programs in the ASEAN region from 2020 to 2026. The rigorous process of selecting 26 eligible articles from the initial 1,833 articles, analyzing the data gathered through a hybrid inductive-deductive approach through the consolidation of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis procedure and Ritchie and Spencer's Framework Analysis, produced themes that mostly answered SEAMEO's Educational Priorities. This study identified trends in reading programs such as the implementation of extensive reading (15-minute reading of non-course

materials) to foster a love for reading, using formal assessments in reading instruction, implementation of reading programs that address the learning gaps of students, and shared reading to combat language barriers. This meta-synthesis features the priority of Indonesia, Myanmar, and Vietnam to promote reading for pleasure, while the Philippines' focus is on reading remediation. Challenges encountered include a lack of reading resources, or aptly called "book poverty", training for tutors and teachers; proper assessment and monitoring; support from parents, school heads, and the community; demotivated students; students who lack reading capability; and geographical isolation. The recommendations gathered from the 26 articles include providing a rich literacy environment through the supply of learning resources, establishing reading corners/clinics in the classroom, training for tutors and mentors, adapting an integrative and differentiated instruction, and the use of formal assessments in building students' literacy skills. The themes from the initial analysis were further indexed for a better interpretation, associating the data with SEAMEO's 7 Educational Priorities. Thus, it can be concluded that despite all the challenges encountered in the design and implementation of the reading programs, these programs contribute to the realization of the goals of ASEAN and the priorities of SEAMEO as shown in the **Integrated Framework for ASEAN Reading Programs and SEAMEO's Educational Priorities.**

The reading programs that passed the selection criteria of this meta-synthesis were from Indonesia, the Philippines, Myanmar, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Laos. Unfortunately, none came from Singapore, which consistently garners high scores in PISA assessments and maintains one of the highest literacy rates in the world. The available data on the Singapore Reading and English Acquisition program (REAP) reaches as far back as 2001 (Ng & Sullivan, 2001). Recent studies from Singapore focus more on predictors of student reading achievement, reading habits, and reading culture (Wong et al.,2025; Garces-Bacsal & Yeo, 2017; Loh et al., 2017). A consolidated study on the recent reading programs in Singapore could contribute to the body of knowledge on the improvement of ASEAN literacy. Also, this study revealed that Indonesian reading programs promote extensive reading but lack the application of formal assessments, while the Philippines' national reading programs rely on formal assessments but lack the type of reading programs that promote the culture of reading like that of Indonesia's. An integrated reading program design that incorporates the strengths of such reading programs would be very beneficial. Also, a detailed curricular framework or policy recommendation for the new framework - **Integrated Framework for ASEAN Reading Programs and SEAMEO's Educational Priorities** would be of great value for students in the ASEAN region.

Recommendations and Future Research Directions

Based on the synthesis of the 26 eligible articles and the derived alignment with SEAMEO's 7 Educational Priorities, the following recommendations and future research directions are proposed:

1. **Integrated Reading Program Design:** Educational leaders and curriculum developers across ASEAN member states should design hybrid reading programs that merge Indonesia's extensive reading for pleasure (*Gerakan Literasi Sekolah*) with the Philippines' diagnostic, assessment-driven remedial instruction (Phil-IRI and Catch-Up Fridays). Combining habituation and extensive choice with structured skill progression will nurture both reading enjoyment and measurable literacy competencies.
2. **Resource Provision and Stakeholder Support:** Policymakers and school heads must take decisive measures to eliminate "book poverty" by equipping classrooms with dedicated reading corners stocked with diverse fiction, non-fiction, digital tools, and culturally responsive, localized materials. Furthermore, active partnerships among parents, teachers, and community volunteers (such as university student tutors) should be structured to support teachers and prevent workload burnout.
3. **Teacher Capacity Building:** Continuous professional development should be prioritized to equip educators with integrative and differentiated instructional strategies.

Teachers need sustained training on phonics, decoding, and managing reading remediation alongside standard subject-area demands.

4. **Empirical Cross-Border Comparative Research:** Future empirical research should test whether integrating Indonesia's extensive reading/reading-for-pleasure model with the Philippines' diagnostic/remedial assessment model yields superior literacy outcomes in primary and secondary classrooms.
5. **Bridging the Regional Research Gap:** Primary qualitative and mixed-methods research on contemporary, state-funded reading interventions should be conducted in countries with limited published qualitative data within the 2020–2026 window—such as Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, and Cambodia—to build a more balanced, comprehensive picture of literacy developments across the entire ASEAN region.

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Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest that could have influenced the analysis and interpretation of the findings of this meta-synthesis.

Generative AI Statement

As the authors of this meta-synthesis, we used Grammarly as an AI-assisted tool to help check grammar and spelling. After using this AI tool, we reviewed and verified the final version of our work to ensure accuracy and quality. We take full responsibility for the content of our published work.

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