

Learners' Engagement with Digital Literature in EFL Contexts: A Systematic Literature Review from a Multimodal Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This systematic literature review aims to examine how previous studies have investigated learners' engagement with digital literature in EFL contexts from a multimodal perspective. Existing research has widely discussed digital storytelling, digital multimodal composing, multimodal literacy, and educational technology in English language learning; however, the relationship between digital literature, learner engagement, and multimodal meaning-making remains fragmented. To address this gap, this study reviewed 12 preliminary articles published between 2016 and 2026 from relevant international and Indonesian academic sources, using a systematic review procedure informed by PRISMA 2020 and Zawacki-Richter et al.'s approach to educational systematic reviews. The analysis focused on research demographics, forms of digital literature, dimensions of learner engagement, multimodal elements, benefits, challenges, and research gaps. The findings show that digital storytelling and digital multimodal composing dominate the literature, while other digital literary forms such as interactive fiction, e-poetry, hypertext narratives, fanfiction, and social media-based literature remain underexplored. The review contributes by proposing that EFL learners' engagement with digital literature should be understood as behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and multimodal participation in meaning-making

Informasi Artikel

Kata Kunci:

Sastra Digital; Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Kedua (EFL); Keterlibatan Pembelajar; Multimodalitas; Tinjauan Sistematis

ABSTRAK

Tinjauan pustaka sistematis ini bertujuan untuk meneliti bagaimana studi-studi sebelumnya telah menyelidiki keterlibatan pembelajar dengan literatur digital dalam konteks EFL dari perspektif multimodal. Penelitian yang ada telah banyak membahas tentang penceritaan digital, komposisi multimodal digital, literasi multimodal, dan teknologi pendidikan dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris; namun, hubungan antara literatur digital, keterlibatan pembelajar, dan pembuatan makna multimodal masih terfragmentasi. Untuk mengatasi kesenjangan ini, studi ini meninjau 12 artikel pendahuluan yang diterbitkan antara tahun 2016 dan 2026 dari sumber-sumber akademis internasional dan Indonesia yang relevan, menggunakan prosedur tinjauan sistematis yang didasarkan pada PRISMA 2020 dan pendekatan Zawacki-Richter dkk. terhadap tinjauan sistematis pendidikan. Analisis difokuskan pada demografi penelitian, bentuk-bentuk literatur digital, dimensi keterlibatan pembelajar, elemen multimodal, manfaat, tantangan, dan kesenjangan penelitian. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa penceritaan digital dan komposisi multimodal digital mendominasi literatur, sementara bentuk-bentuk literatur digital lainnya seperti fiksi interaktif, e-puisi, narasi hiperteks, fanfiction, dan literatur berbasis media sosial masih kurang dieksplorasi. Ulasan ini berkontribusi dengan mengusulkan bahwa keterlibatan pembelajar EFL dengan literatur digital harus dipahami sebagai partisipasi perilaku, emosional, kognitif, dan multimodal dalam pembentukan makna.

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1. Introduction

The teaching and learning of literature in English as a Foreign Language, or EFL, contexts have changed significantly in the digital era. Literary texts are no longer limited to printed poems, short stories, novels, or drama scripts. Many learners now encounter literature through digital platforms, such as web-based fiction, digital storytelling, interactive narratives, video poems, fanfiction, electronic picture books, and social media-based literary texts. These forms of literature combine written language with images, sound, animation, hyperlinks, layout, and interactivity. As a result, reading literature has become a multimodal experience in which learners do not only decode written words but also interpret how different modes work together to create meaning [1]. Recent studies on EFL digital storytelling and multimodal literacy also show that digital literary practices can support learner participation, interpretation, and meaning-making in language learning contexts.

In many EFL classrooms, literature is often taught through conventional approaches that emphasize plot summary, vocabulary explanation, moral values, and comprehension questions. Although these practices remain useful, they may not fully reflect how contemporary learners experience texts outside the classroom. A student, for example, may read a short story on Wattpad, respond to a poem posted on Instagram, listen to a spoken-word performance on YouTube, or create a digital story using images, captions, voice-over, and background music. Such experiences show that literary engagement today is increasingly shaped by digital tools and multimodal resources. For EFL learners, this condition opens new possibilities because digital literature can make literary texts more accessible, interactive, and personally meaningful.

Learner engagement is an important issue in EFL literature learning because students often view literary texts as linguistically difficult, culturally distant, or unrelated to their daily lives. Engagement does not simply refer to whether students are present in class or complete assignments. It includes behavioral engagement, such as participation and task completion; emotional engagement, such as interest, enjoyment, and personal connection; and cognitive engagement, such as interpretation, critical thinking, and deeper investment in learning [2]. When learners interact with digital literature, these forms of engagement may appear in different ways. They may actively comment on a digital narrative, emotionally respond to characters through visual and audio cues, or critically analyze how images, sound, typography, and language shape the meaning of a story.

A multimodal perspective is particularly relevant for understanding learners' engagement with digital literature. In multimodal learning, meaning is produced through the interaction of several semiotic modes, including linguistic,

visual, audio, spatial, and gestural elements (Kress, 2010). Digital literature often presents these modes together. For instance, a digital poem may use moving text, background sound, color contrast, and screen movement to create mood. A digital story may combine narration, photographs, subtitles, music, and transition effects to build emotional impact. An interactive fiction text may require learners to choose different narrative paths, making reading more participatory. These examples suggest that engagement with digital literature is not only textual but also sensory, emotional, interpretive, and interactive.

Research on multimodal pedagogy in English language classrooms has grown in recent years. Lim and Tan (2022) reviewed multimodal pedagogies in English language education and highlighted the increasing importance of multimodal meaning-making in contemporary classrooms. Studies on digital storytelling in EFL settings have also reported that learners can become more engaged when they are invited to create or interpret texts using images, sound, and written language [3]. Similarly, research on digital multimodal composing indicates that learners can develop linguistic competence, creativity, digital literacy, and reflective thinking when they produce multimodal texts [4][5]. These studies provide useful insights, yet many of them focus on digital storytelling, multimodal writing, or digital literacy in general rather than digital literature as a specific object of learning.

The concept of digital literature itself deserves closer attention in EFL research. Digital literature is not merely printed literature transferred into a screen format. It includes literary works that depend on digital features, such as hyperlinks, animation, sound, visual design, reader interaction, and non-linear structure [6][7]. This distinction is important because reading a PDF short story is not the same as reading an interactive narrative or a multimedia poem. In digital literature, learners often need to move between verbal text, visual symbols, audio elements, and navigational choices. Such practices require multimodal literacy, not only traditional reading comprehension. For EFL learners, this may create both opportunities and challenges. Digital literature can increase motivation and provide richer meaning-making resources, but it can also demand higher levels of digital skill, interpretive flexibility, and language support.

Despite the growing attention to digital tools and multimodal texts in EFL education, the relationship between digital literature, learner engagement, and multimodal meaning-making remains insufficiently synthesized. Existing studies tend to examine these areas separately. Some focus on literature in EFL classrooms, while others discuss digital literacy, digital storytelling, or multimodal composing. A smaller number of studies connect multimodality with learner engagement, but they do not always examine literary texts as the central learning material. Because of this fragmentation, it is still difficult to understand what kinds of digital literature have been used in

EFL contexts, how learners engage with them, which multimodal features support engagement, and what pedagogical challenges teachers face.

A systematic literature review is needed to organize and evaluate the existing body of research on this topic. Through a systematic review, previous findings can be mapped more clearly according to research trends, methodological designs, theoretical frameworks, types of digital literature, forms of learner engagement, and multimodal elements. This type of review can also identify gaps that may guide future empirical studies. For example, it may reveal whether previous research has focused more on university learners than school learners, more on digital storytelling than interactive fiction, or more on motivation than cognitive engagement. Such synthesis is valuable for EFL teachers, researchers, and curriculum designers who wish to integrate literature, digital media, and multimodal pedagogy in more meaningful ways.

Based on this background, the present study aims to systematically review previous research on learners' engagement with digital literature in EFL contexts from a multimodal perspective. The review is expected to contribute to the field by clarifying how digital literature has been conceptualized, how engagement has been examined, and how multimodal resources have shaped learners' literary experiences. Rather than treating digital media only as a classroom tool, this study positions digital literature as a rich literacy environment where language learning, literary interpretation, affective response, and multimodal meaning-making intersect.

Based on this framework, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- What forms of digital literature are commonly used in EFL learning contexts?
- What dimensions of learner engagement are emphasized in studies on digital literature in EFL contexts?
- How do multimodal elements in digital literature contribute to EFL learners' engagement?
- What benefits and challenges are reported in using digital literature to support learner engagement?
- What research gaps remain in the existing literature on digital literature, multimodality, and learner engagement in EFL contexts?

2. Literature Review

Digital Literature in EFL Learning Contexts

Digital literature refers to literary works that are created, distributed, read, or experienced through digital media. It is different from printed literature that is simply scanned or uploaded as a PDF. Digital literature often uses digital features such as hyperlinks, images, animation, audio, video, layout

design, screen movement, and reader interaction. In EFL classrooms, this may include digital storytelling, interactive fiction, electronic poetry, web-based narratives, fanfiction, digital picture books, video poems, and literary texts shared through online platforms.

The presence of digital literature has changed the way learners experience literary texts. In traditional EFL classrooms, students often read short stories, poems, or drama scripts through printed materials. The learning activities usually focus on vocabulary, plot, characterization, moral values, and comprehension questions. Such activities remain important, but they may not fully represent how learners encounter literary texts in their daily digital lives. Many students today read stories on Wattpad, watch animated literary adaptations on YouTube, follow poetry accounts on Instagram, or participate in online storytelling communities. These practices show that literature has become more visual, interactive, participatory, and multimodal.

In EFL education, digital literature has pedagogical value because it can reduce the distance between literary texts and learners' lived experiences. For example, a narrative presented through voice-over, subtitles, background music, and images may help learners understand the emotional tone of the story more easily than a printed text alone. A digital poem that uses color, movement, and sound may help students interpret mood and symbolism through several modes, not only through written language. Digital storytelling has also been reported as a useful approach in EFL learning because it allows learners to combine language practice with personal expression, creativity, and digital production [3][8]. These studies suggest that digital literary practices can support more active engagement because learners are not only readers but also viewers, listeners, interpreters, and sometimes creators of literary meaning.

However, the concept of digital literature in EFL studies is still not always clearly separated from broader concepts such as digital media, digital texts, digital storytelling, or multimodal composing. Some studies use digital storytelling as a language learning activity, while others treat it as a form of narrative production. Some examine multimodal texts in reading lessons, but they do not explicitly frame them as digital literature. This conceptual overlap creates a strong reason for conducting an SLR. A systematic review can clarify what forms of digital literature have been studied, how they have been used in EFL contexts, and whether previous research treats them as literary texts, literacy tools, language learning media, or multimodal compositions.

Learner Engagement in EFL Digital Literature Learning

Learner engagement is a central concept in this study because digital literature is expected not only to improve language learning but also to make learners more involved in literary interpretation. Engagement is usually understood as a

multidimensional construct that includes **behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement** (Fredricks et al., 2004). Behavioral engagement refers to learners' participation, attention, task completion, discussion, and active involvement in learning activities. Emotional engagement includes interest, enjoyment, curiosity, confidence, and personal connection with the text. Cognitive engagement refers to deeper mental effort, interpretation, reflection, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

In EFL literature learning, these three dimensions are highly relevant. Behavioral engagement can be seen when students participate in group discussion, read digital stories, comment on online narratives, or complete multimodal projects. Emotional engagement appears when learners feel connected to a character, enjoy the story, respond to music or images, or relate the theme to their own lives. Cognitive engagement is visible when learners analyze narrative structure, interpret symbols, compare multiple modes, question the author's intention, or evaluate the cultural values represented in the text.

Digital technology has been widely discussed as a possible support for student engagement. [9] mapped research on student engagement and educational technology and found that digital technology has been associated with behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement, although the strongest attention in the literature often falls on behavioral and affective dimensions. Their mapping also shows that research on engagement and technology remains uneven across regions and disciplines, with limited representation from Global South contexts. This is relevant to EFL digital literature research because many EFL learners are located in Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin American contexts, yet their engagement with digital literary texts may not be sufficiently represented in major indexed databases (Bond et al., 2020).

Studies on EFL digital storytelling also indicate that digital narrative tasks can increase learners' participation, confidence, and motivation. Firdausya et al. (2023), for example, examined EFL students' engagement in multimodal literacy through digital storytelling and highlighted the role of digital storytelling in encouraging student involvement in multimodal meaning-making. Another Indonesian study on digital storytelling in EFL reading reported that digital storytelling can improve reading comprehension when viewed through a multimodal digital literacy lens (Hidayat et al., 2024). These findings are promising, but they also show that the current evidence is still spread across different learning skills, such as reading, writing, speaking, and multimodal literacy.

A key issue for this SLR is that engagement is sometimes used as a general term without clear indicators. Some studies describe students as engaged because they enjoy the activity, while others measure engagement through participation, motivation, performance, or perception. For a systematic review, this variation needs to be carefully mapped. The review should identify whether previous studies define engagement explicitly,

which dimensions are emphasized, what instruments are used, and whether multimodal engagement is treated as a separate dimension or only as part of broader learner engagement.

Multimodal Perspective in Digital Literature

A multimodal perspective is essential for examining digital literature because digital literary texts rarely depend on written language alone. Meaning is often created through the combination of linguistic, visual, audio, spatial, gestural, and interactive modes. Argues that communication in contemporary society must be understood through multiple semiotic resources, not only through language [1]. In language education, this means that learners need to interpret how words, images, sounds, layout, movement, and design choices work together to communicate meaning.

[10] Introduced the idea of multiliteracies to respond to social, cultural, and technological changes in literacy practices. Their framework is still relevant for EFL digital literature learning because learners are expected to move beyond conventional reading and develop the ability to interpret diverse texts across media and cultural contexts. In digital literature, for instance, learners may need to understand how a dark background, slow instrumental music, and fragmented narration create sadness in a digital story. They may also need to interpret how hyperlinks create non-linear reading paths in interactive fiction or how image placement shapes the meaning of a web-based poem.

Recent work in ELT confirms that multimodality has become increasingly important for language teaching. Explains that multimodality concerns the use of different modes or channels of communication, a concept that has gained strong attention in language teaching and research [11]. Conducted a systematic review of multimodality in English language classrooms and noted the need for updated understanding of multimodal pedagogies in English education [12]. Their review is important for the present SLR because it shows that multimodality is already established in English classroom research, but it does not specifically focus on learners' engagement with digital literature in EFL contexts [11][12].

Digital literature offers a rich site for multimodal analysis. A digital story may combine narration, images, music, subtitles, transitions, and voice quality. A video poem may use spoken language, facial expression, rhythm, screen color, and visual metaphor. Interactive fiction may involve written text, choice-based navigation, sound effects, and branching storylines. These examples show that learners' engagement with digital literature is not simply reading engagement. It is also visual engagement, auditory engagement, emotional engagement, interpretive engagement, and interactive engagement.

For EFL learners, multimodal resources can support comprehension and expression. Images may help clarify meaning when vocabulary is difficult. Audio narration can support pronunciation, rhythm, and listening comprehension.

Subtitles can connect spoken and written language. Interactive features can make learners more active in constructing meaning. At the same time, multimodality can create challenges. Learners may focus too much on attractive visuals and ignore literary language. They may struggle to interpret symbolic images or non-linear narratives. Teachers may also lack clear assessment criteria for evaluating learners' multimodal responses to digital literature.

Digital Multimodal Composing and Its Relevance to Digital Literature

Although digital multimodal composing, or DMC, is not identical to digital literature, it is highly relevant to this SLR. DMC refers to the creation of texts using multiple modes through digital tools. Learners may create video essays, digital stories, multimodal posters, podcasts, animated narratives, or digital books. Many digital literature activities in EFL classrooms involve DMC because learners are asked not only to read digital literary texts but also to produce their own multimodal narratives.

[13] Investigated multimodal composing as a learning activity in English classrooms and found that it can support motivation through challenge, curiosity, collaboration, and authentic communication. [5] later examined the affordances of DMC for EFL learning and proposed that DMC provides technological, educational, and social affordances that support students' engagement with English learning. These studies are significant because they connect multimodal production with motivation and engagement in English learning [13][5].

Hafner (2015) also discussed remix culture and English language teaching by examining learners' digital multimodal compositions. His work shows that digital multimodal composing can provide space for learner voice, identity, and creativity. This is relevant to digital literature because many forms of digital literary production, such as digital storytelling and fanfiction, also involve remixing, adaptation, and personal expression. Learners may retell a local folktale through animation, transform a short story into a video narrative, or create a digital poem using music and images. These activities can make literature learning more dialogic and personally meaningful.

More recent studies continue to develop this area. Kang and Kim (2023) examined EFL adolescent learners' perceptions of DMC tasks and task outcomes in a longitudinal study. Their work is useful because it shows that learners' perceptions of multimodal tasks may change over time, suggesting that engagement with multimodal learning is not static. It develops through repeated experience, feedback, and reflection. This point is important for the present SLR because digital literature engagement may also depend on time, familiarity with digital tools, teacher scaffolding, and learners' confidence with multimodal interpretation.

The relationship between DMC and digital literature needs to be handled carefully in the review. Not every DMC activity is literary. For example, a digital poster about environmental pollution may be multimodal but not literary. A video essay about science may support English learning but may not involve literary interpretation. For this reason, the SLR should include DMC studies only when they involve narrative, poetry, storytelling, literary response, creative writing, or literature-based language learning.

Digital Storytelling as a Dominant Form of Digital Literature in EFL Studies

Among the different forms of digital literature, digital storytelling appears to be one of the most frequently studied in EFL contexts. Digital storytelling combines traditional narrative with digital media, usually including images, voice-over, written text, sound, and video editing. It is attractive for EFL learning because it allows students to practice language while creating meaningful personal or fictional narratives.

In realistic classroom practice, students may be asked to create a three-minute digital story about a local legend, a personal experience, a school memory, or a social issue. They write a script, select images, record narration, add subtitles, choose background music, and present the final product to classmates. Through this process, students use English for planning, drafting, revising, speaking, listening, and presenting. They also make multimodal decisions, such as choosing images that match the mood of the story or selecting music that strengthens the emotional message.

Studies from Indonesian EFL contexts show that digital storytelling is often linked with student engagement, reading comprehension, speaking skills, writing development, and multimodal literacy. [3] Specifically focused on EFL students' engagement in multimodal literacy through digital storytelling. [14] examined digital storytelling in relation to EFL reading comprehension through a multimodal digital literacy lens. These studies suggest that digital storytelling can provide a bridge between literature, language learning, and multimodal literacy.

Nevertheless, digital storytelling should not be treated as the only form of digital literature. If an SLR focuses too heavily on digital storytelling, it may ignore other literary forms such as interactive fiction, electronic poetry, digital drama, web-based literary texts, fanfiction, and literary works published through social media platforms. One expected contribution of this SLR is to map whether the current EFL literature is dominated by digital storytelling and whether other digital literary genres remain underexplored.

Benefits and Challenges of Digital Literature for Learner Engagement

The literature suggests several benefits of using digital literature in EFL contexts. First, digital literature can increase

accessibility. Visuals, audio, subtitles, and interactive features can help learners understand literary texts that might otherwise seem linguistically difficult. Second, it can strengthen emotional engagement. Music, images, voice, and animation can make characters, settings, and conflicts feel more vivid. Third, it can encourage active participation. Learners may comment on digital texts, choose narrative paths, create their own digital stories, or collaborate in multimodal projects. Fourth, it can support digital and multimodal literacy, which are increasingly necessary in contemporary communication.

Digital literature also helps connect EFL learning with learners' everyday literacy practices. Many students already use digital platforms to watch stories, read online fiction, listen to spoken-word poetry, and share creative content. When teachers bring carefully selected digital literary texts into the classroom, literature learning can feel less distant and more connected to students' actual media lives. This connection may be especially important in contexts where students perceive English literature as difficult, foreign, or unrelated to their experiences.

At the same time, several challenges appear in the literature. One challenge is unequal digital access. Not all learners have stable internet, suitable devices, or quiet spaces to engage with digital texts. Another challenge is digital distraction. Students may focus on entertainment features rather than literary interpretation. Teachers may also face difficulty in selecting appropriate digital literary texts because online platforms contain materials that vary widely in quality, language level, cultural sensitivity, and copyright status.

Assessment is another important issue. Traditional literature assessment usually evaluates comprehension, vocabulary, plot, theme, and written interpretation. Digital literature requires broader criteria because students may interpret and produce meaning through images, sound, layout, movement, and interaction. Without clear rubrics, teachers may either overvalue technical design or undervalue literary interpretation. This indicates the need for assessment models that integrate literary understanding, language use, multimodal design, creativity, and critical reflection.

Research Gaps in Existing Studies

Several gaps can be identified from the existing literature. First, there is a conceptual gap. Digital literature, digital storytelling, digital multimodal composing, multimodal texts, and digital literacy are often used in overlapping ways. A systematic review is needed to clarify how these concepts are defined and applied in EFL research.

Second, there is an engagement gap. Many studies claim that digital tools increase engagement, but they do not always define engagement using clear dimensions. Behavioral and emotional engagement are often easier to observe, while cognitive engagement and multimodal engagement require deeper analysis. For example, a student may enjoy watching a digital

story, but enjoyment alone does not prove that the student has developed deeper literary interpretation. The SLR needs to examine whether studies provide strong evidence of engagement or only report general positive perceptions.

Third, there is a genre gap. Digital storytelling receives substantial attention, while other forms of digital literature are less visible in EFL research. Interactive fiction, electronic poetry, web-based drama, fanfiction, and social media poetry may offer rich opportunities for multimodal literary engagement, but they appear to be less frequently synthesized in EFL studies.

Fourth, there is a methodological gap. Many studies use small-scale qualitative designs, classroom action research, perception surveys, or case studies. These designs are valuable for understanding classroom experience, but the field also needs stronger methodological variation, including longitudinal studies, mixed-methods research, design-based research, and comparative studies.[15] Kongitudinal study on EFL learners' DMC perceptions is a useful example because it shows how learners' engagement with multimodal tasks can change over time.

Fifth, there is a contextual gap. Much of the indexed literature on educational technology and engagement is concentrated in particular regions, while research from Global South EFL contexts is still less represented in international databases [9]. Indonesian SINTA 1 and 2 journals can help address this gap because they provide evidence from local EFL classrooms, including studies on digital storytelling, multimodal literacy, and digital literacy in English education. However, these studies need to be systematically evaluated for methodological quality, theoretical clarity, and relevance to the SLR questions.

Synthesis of the Literature

The reviewed literature indicates that digital literature has strong potential to support EFL learners' engagement through multimodal meaning-making. Digital literary texts allow learners to experience literature through written language, image, sound, movement, layout, and interaction. These features can support behavioral engagement through active participation, emotional engagement through personal and affective connection, and cognitive engagement through interpretation and critical analysis.

At the same time, the field remains fragmented. Previous studies have examined digital storytelling, digital multimodal composing, multimodal pedagogy, educational technology, and learner engagement, but fewer studies have synthesized these areas under the specific topic of digital literature in EFL contexts. Existing systematic reviews, such as [12] provide valuable insight into multimodality in English classrooms, while [9] Maps educational technology and engagement. However, neither directly focuses on learners' engagement with digital literature from a multimodal perspective. This creates a clear

space for the present SLR.

The present study responds to this gap by reviewing research from Scopus, ERIC, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis, and SINTA 1 and 2 within the period of 2016 to 2026. By using the research problems developed through the PICO framework, the study will examine the forms of digital literature used in EFL contexts, the dimensions of learner engagement emphasized in previous studies, the multimodal elements that shape engagement, the benefits and challenges reported by researchers, and the remaining gaps for future inquiry

3. Method

This study employed a **systematic literature review** design to synthesize previous research on **learners' engagement with digital literature in EFL contexts from a multimodal perspective**. A systematic literature review was selected because it allows researchers to identify, evaluate, classify, and synthesize existing studies in a transparent and replicable way. In educational research, systematic reviews are useful for mapping research trends, identifying conceptual patterns, and locating gaps for future studies (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020). The reporting procedure followed the **PRISMA 2020** guideline, which provides updated standards for identifying, screening, selecting, and reporting studies in systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA 2020 includes a 27-item checklist and revised flow diagrams for reporting the review process transparently.

These databases were selected because they cover international and Indonesian scholarly publications in education, applied linguistics, English language teaching, literacy studies, digital learning, and multimodal pedagogy. Scopus, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, and Taylor & Francis were used to access internationally indexed studies, while ERIC was included because of its strong focus on education research. SINTA 1 and SINTA 2 were added to include high-quality Indonesian publications relevant to EFL learning contexts.

The publication period was limited to **2016–2026** to ensure that the review captured recent developments in digital literature, multimodal literacy, educational technology, and learner engagement. This ten-year range is relevant because digital platforms, online literary practices, and multimodal learning environments have expanded rapidly during this period.

Search Keywords and Search Strings

The search strategy was developed based on the PICO framework used in this study. The population was **EFL learners**, the intervention or area of interest was **digital literature**, the context or comparison involved **conventional or print-based literature learning**, and the outcomes focused on **learner engagement and multimodal meaning-making**.

The search keywords were developed based on four main

concepts: EFL context, digital literature, learner engagement, and multimodality. For the EFL context, the keywords included EFL, English as a Foreign Language, foreign language learning, English language learning, and ELT. For digital literature, the keywords covered digital literature, electronic literature, digital storytelling, interactive fiction, hypertext fiction, e-poetry, digital poetry, web-based literature, fanfiction, and digital narrative. To identify studies related to learner engagement, the keywords included learner engagement, student engagement, behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, motivation, participation, and involvement. Meanwhile, the multimodality-related keywords consisted of multimodal literacy, multimodality, multimodal text, multimodal learning, digital multimodal composing, and multimodal meaning-making. These keywords were combined using Boolean operators such as AND and OR to search relevant studies from Scopus, ERIC, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis, and SINTA 1 and 2.

The search strings were adjusted according to the search system of each database. The main Boolean search strings used in international databases such as Scopus, ERIC, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, and Taylor & Francis included **digital literature AND EFL AND learner engagement, digital storytelling AND EFL AND multimodal literacy, electronic literature AND English as a Foreign Language, interactive fiction AND EFL learners, digital poetry AND EFL learning, multimodal texts AND EFL AND engagement, digital multimodal composing AND EFL AND student engagement, digital narrative AND English language learning AND engagement, fanfiction AND EFL AND learner engagement, and multimodal meaning-making AND digital literature AND EFL**. These combinations were used to identify studies that discussed digital literature, multimodal elements, learner engagement, and EFL learning contexts.

For SINTA 1 and SINTA 2 journals, both Indonesian and English keyword combinations were used to increase the possibility of finding relevant local studies. The Indonesian keywords included **sastra digital AND pembelajaran bahasa Inggris, digital storytelling AND pembelajaran EFL, literasi multimodal AND bahasa Inggris, keterlibatan siswa AND sastra digital, and multimodal literacy AND English education**. These keywords were selected because Indonesian journals may use either Indonesian or English terms when discussing digital literature, multimodal literacy, and learner engagement in English language education.

The inclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria were established to ensure that only studies directly relevant to the research problems were selected. The articles included in this review had to be published between 2016 and 2026, taken from Scopus, ERIC, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis, SINTA 1, or SINTA 2, and

written in English or Indonesian. The selected studies also had to focus on EFL or English language learning contexts and discuss topics related to digital literature, such as digital storytelling, electronic literature, interactive fiction, digital poetry, fanfiction, digital narrative, or literature-based multimodal texts. In addition, the studies had to address learner engagement, including motivation, participation, emotional response, cognitive engagement, involvement, or multimodal engagement. Empirical studies, systematic reviews, literature reviews, conceptual papers, and classroom-based studies were included as long as they had accessible full texts and clear methodological, theoretical, or pedagogical relevance to digital literature and multimodality in EFL contexts.

The exclusion criteria

The exclusion criteria were applied to remove studies that were not relevant to the focus of this review. Studies were excluded if they were published before **2016**, were not related to **EFL, ELT, English language learning, or language education**, or only discussed general educational technology without connection to literature, narrative, storytelling, or multimodal texts. Articles that focused only on printed literature without digital or multimodal elements were also excluded. In addition, studies were not included if they discussed digital literacy without linking it to literary texts or learner engagement,

focused only on teacher engagement rather than learner engagement, or came from non-academic sources such as blogs, opinion articles, commercial reports, and unpublished classroom notes. Duplicated records across databases, inaccessible full-text articles, and studies with unclear research context, unclear participants, or insufficient methodological information were also removed from the review.

Study Selection Procedure

The study selection followed the **identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion** stages recommended in PRISMA 2020. PRISMA 2020 emphasizes transparent reporting of how studies are identified, screened, appraised, and included in the final synthesis [16].

First, records were identified from the seven selected databases using the keywords and Boolean search strings. Second, duplicate records were removed. Third, the titles and abstracts were screened to exclude studies that did not match the focus of digital literature, EFL learning, learner engagement, or multimodality. Fourth, the remaining full-text articles were assessed based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Finally, the selected studies were included in the qualitative synthesis.

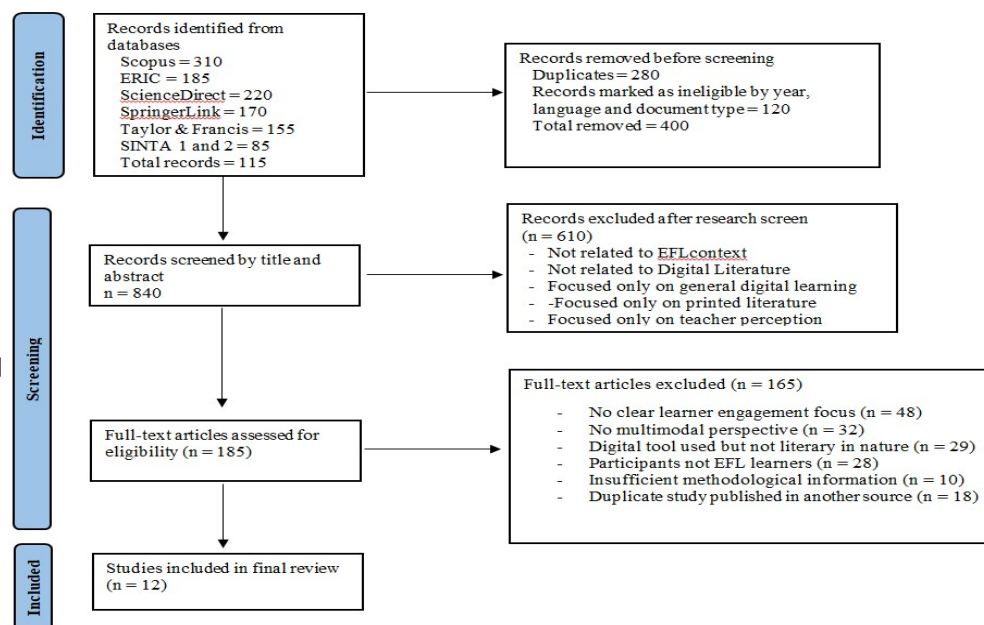


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

Quality Appraisal

To ensure the credibility of the selected studies, each article was appraised based on methodological clarity, relevance, and

contribution to the review questions. Following the logic of systematic reviews in educational research, quality appraisal was not used only to exclude studies but also to understand the strength of evidence across the field [15]. The appraisal focused on five aspects:

- Clarity of research purpose
- Relevance to digital literature and EFL learning
- Clear explanation of participants and context
- Appropriateness of research design and data collection
- Explicit discussion of learner engagement or multimodal meaning-making

Each study was classified as **highly relevant**, **moderately relevant**, or **limited relevance**. Studies with limited relevance were included only when they contributed important conceptual or contextual insight.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

The selected studies were analyzed using **thematic synthesis**. Thematic synthesis was appropriate because the review aimed to identify patterns across diverse studies rather than calculate statistical effect sizes. The analysis followed several stages.

First, the studies were grouped according to the type of digital literature used in EFL contexts, such as digital storytelling, interactive fiction, digital poetry, web-based narrative, fanfiction, and multimodal literary texts. Second, the studies were coded based on the dimension of learner engagement, including behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and multimodal engagement. Third, the multimodal features reported in each study were identified, such as written text, image, sound, animation, layout, hyperlink, and interactivity. Fourth, the reported benefits and challenges were synthesized. Finally, the gaps in previous studies were mapped to identify future research directions.

The synthesis was organized around the five research problems. This allowed the review to move beyond a descriptive summary of previous studies and produce a structured interpretation of how digital literature has been used to support EFL learners' engagement through multimodal resources.

Ethical Consideration

This study used published academic sources and did not involve direct human participants. However, ethical care was maintained by accurately reporting the authors' ideas, avoiding misrepresentation of findings, and following APA 7th edition citation standards. Duplicate publication, unclear sources, and non-peer-reviewed materials were excluded to protect the academic integrity of the review.

4. Result and Discussion

The following results are based **only on the 12 preliminary articles listed earlier**. This corpus should be treated as a **small**

pilot dataset, not as the final SLR corpus. Several sources are methodological, conceptual, or review articles, so they do not all provide direct empirical data on EFL learners' engagement with digital literature.

Research Demographics

Publication Years

The publication trend shows that the selected studies are concentrated between **2020 and 2023**, with the highest number appearing in **2020**. Earlier studies from **2016 and 2017** mainly focus on digital multimodal composing and its role in English learning, such as Jiang and Luk's work on multimodal composing and motivation and Jiang's study on the affordances of digital multimodal composing for EFL learning [5][13]. The increase after 2020 suggests that multimodality, digital learning, and learner engagement became more visible in English language education research, especially after digital learning practices expanded during and after the COVID-19 period. However, within this 12-article pilot corpus, there are no included studies from 2024 to 2026.

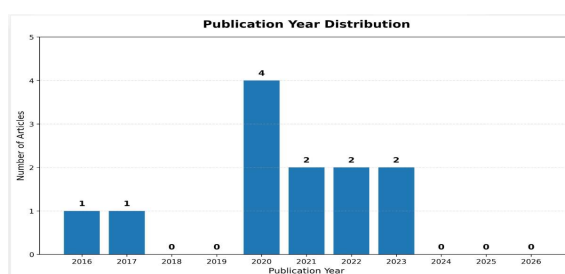


Figure 2. Publication Years of Included Articles

Countries or Research Contexts

The country distribution shows that many sources are **international, review-based, or not tied to one specific national context**, including PRISMA 2020, Zawacki-Richter et al.'s methodological book, Bond et al.'s evidence map, Lim et al.'s systematic review, and Kessler's conceptual article on multimodality [9][11]. The empirical studies are mostly located in **Asian EFL or L2 English contexts**, especially China, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Indonesia. This pattern is relevant because the topic of digital literature and multimodal engagement is especially important in Asian EFL contexts, where learners often engage with English through classroom instruction, digital platforms, and multimodal media rather than through everyday English-speaking environments.

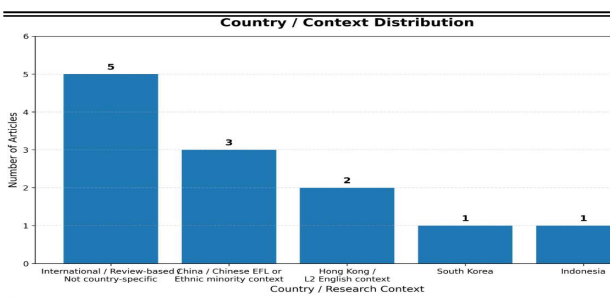


Figure 3. Countries of Included Articles

Research Method

The methodological distribution shows that the pilot corpus is dominated by **review, methodological, and conceptual sources**, followed by qualitative studies. This is understandable because the current study is an SLR and requires methodological references such as PRISMA 2020 and [17], as well as conceptual grounding in multimodality and student engagement [1]. The empirical studies mainly use qualitative or mixed-method designs to explore learners' experiences, perceptions, motivation, identity, and engagement in digital multimodal composing or digital storytelling[3]. The limited number of quantitative studies suggests that future research may need more measurement-based work on engagement, especially studies that examine behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and multimodal engagement using validated instruments.

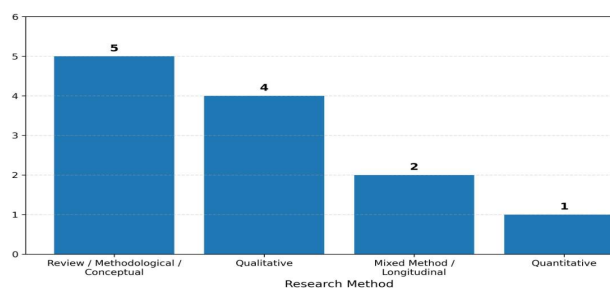


Figure 4. Research Methods of Included Articles

Key Themes Based on the Five Research Questions

RQ1. What forms of digital literature are commonly used in EFL learning contexts?

The 12-article pilot corpus shows that **digital storytelling** and **digital multimodal composing** are the most visible forms related to digital literature in EFL contexts. Digital storytelling appears as a narrative-based activity where learners combine written scripts, images, voice-over, music, and video editing to produce meaningful stories in English [3]. Digital multimodal composing is also strongly represented, especially in studies that examine how learners create digital texts using linguistic, visual, audio, and spatial resources [4].

However, other forms of digital literature, such as **interactive fiction, hypertext fiction, electronic poetry, web-based**

drama, fanfiction, and social media poetry, are not strongly represented in the 12 selected sources. This means that the current pilot corpus is still more focused on **learner-produced digital narratives and multimodal compositions** than on diverse genres of born-digital literary texts. For the final SLR, this is an important gap because the title refers to digital literature broadly, not only digital storytelling or multimodal composing.

RQ2. What dimensions of learner engagement are emphasized in studies on digital literature in EFL contexts?

The reviewed articles suggest that learner engagement is mostly discussed through **behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and motivational dimensions**. Behavioral engagement appears when learners participate in digital composing tasks, collaborate with peers, complete multimodal projects, and present their work to others. Emotional engagement is shown through learners' enjoyment, confidence, curiosity, and personal connection with the digital texts they create or interpret. Cognitive engagement appears when learners make decisions about language, images, sound, narrative structure, and meaning-making.

Several studies emphasize that digital multimodal composing can support learners' motivation because it gives them space to express identity, creativity, and personal voice [4]. [18] also connect digital multimodal composing with learner investment, showing that multimodal tasks can empower learners who may otherwise feel marginalized in English learning contexts. Kang and Kim's longitudinal study adds another important point: learners' perceptions of digital multimodal composing may develop over time, meaning that engagement is not fixed but shaped by repeated practice, teacher support, task design, and learner confidence [8].

RQ3. How do multimodal elements in digital literature contribute to EFL learners' engagement?

The 12 articles show that multimodal elements contribute to engagement by making language learning more interactive, expressive, and meaningful. In digital storytelling and digital multimodal composing, learners do not depend only on written English. They use **images, sound, voice, video, layout, subtitles, movement, and visual design** to communicate meaning. These elements can help learners understand and produce English more confidently because difficult vocabulary or abstract ideas can be supported by visual and audio cues.

From a multimodal perspective, meaning is produced through the relationship among different modes, not through language alone. For example, a learner creating a digital story about a local legend may use narration to tell the story, images to show the setting, music to build emotion, and subtitles to support comprehension. Such a task can strengthen engagement because

learners are involved as writers, speakers, designers, editors, and interpreters at the same time. Studies on multimodality in English classrooms support this view by showing that multimodal pedagogy expands how learners read, write, interpret, and communicate in English [11].

RQ4. What benefits and challenges are reported in using digital literature to support learner engagement?

The main benefit reported across the pilot corpus is that digital and multimodal literary practices can make EFL learning more **creative, participatory, and learner-centered**. Digital storytelling and multimodal composing allow learners to connect English with personal experience, cultural background, visual imagination, and digital media practices. This can increase motivation and reduce the distance between English literature and learners' everyday lives [5].

Another benefit is the development of multiple literacies. Learners practice English language skills while also developing digital literacy, visual literacy, narrative competence, and multimodal design awareness. Instead of only answering comprehension questions about a printed story, learners can create a digital narrative, explain design choices, interpret visual symbols, and reflect on how language and media work together.

The challenges are also clear. Digital multimodal tasks require access to devices, internet connection, editing applications, and technical support. Some learners may focus too much on visual effects and not enough on language quality or literary interpretation. Teachers may also struggle to assess multimodal work fairly because traditional rubrics often focus on grammar, vocabulary, and content, while digital literature requires attention to voice, image, sound, design, creativity, and meaning-making. Hafner and Ho's work on assessing digital multimodal composing is relevant here because assessment needs to consider both the process and the product of multimodal work [4].

RQ5. What research gaps remain in the existing literature on digital literature, multimodality, and learner engagement in EFL contexts?

The first gap is a **genre gap**. The 12-article pilot corpus is dominated by digital storytelling and digital multimodal composing. Other forms of digital literature, such as interactive fiction, digital poetry, fanfiction, web-based literary texts, and social media literature, are still underrepresented. A stronger final SLR should search more deeply for these genres.

The second gap is an **engagement measurement gap**. Many studies describe learners as motivated or engaged, but not all studies clearly separate behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and multimodal engagement. Future studies need clearer engagement indicators, stronger instruments, and more explicit theoretical framing.

The third gap is a **methodological gap**. The corpus contains

many qualitative, review-based, or conceptual works. These are useful for understanding learners' experiences and theoretical issues, but more quantitative and mixed-method studies are needed to measure engagement more systematically.

The fourth gap is a **contextual gap**. The empirical studies in this pilot corpus are mostly from Asian EFL or L2 contexts, with limited representation from wider EFL regions. Indonesian research is represented only by [3] in the 12-article set, even though Indonesian EFL classrooms are highly relevant for digital literature, local stories, multimodal learning, and learner engagement.

The fifth gap is an **assessment gap**. Digital literature tasks require assessment models that can evaluate both literary understanding and multimodal design. Existing assessment practices may not fully capture how learners create meaning through text, image, voice, sound, layout, and interaction. This suggests the need for future studies that develop and validate rubrics for multimodal digital literature learning in EFL classrooms.

Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the 12-article pilot corpus indicates that research on learners' engagement with digital literature in EFL contexts is still emerging and conceptually connected to broader work on digital storytelling, digital multimodal composing, multimodality, and educational technology. The strongest evidence currently comes from studies on digital storytelling and multimodal composing rather than from studies on digital literature in its wider sense. Learner engagement is mostly discussed through motivation, participation, learner voice, identity, creativity, and multimodal meaning-making. The findings support the relevance of the proposed SLR, but they also show that the final review must expand the search more systematically across the selected databases to locate more studies on interactive fiction, digital poetry, fanfiction, web-based literature, and other forms of born-digital literary texts.

Discussion

The findings from the 12-article pilot corpus indicate that research on **learners' engagement with digital literature in EFL contexts** is still developing and remains closely connected to broader studies on **digital storytelling, digital multimodal composing, multimodal literacy, and educational technology**. Although the selected sources do not yet represent a complete systematic literature review, they provide an important initial picture of how digital literary practices are currently discussed in English language education. The results suggest that learners' engagement with digital literature is not only a matter of reading literary texts on digital screens. It involves a more complex process in which learners interpret, respond to, and sometimes produce meaning through written language, images, sound, voice, layout, movement, and digital interaction.

One significant finding is that **digital storytelling and digital multimodal composing dominate the existing discussion**. These two forms appear more frequently than other genres of digital literature, such as interactive fiction, electronic poetry, digital drama, fanfiction, or social media poetry. This pattern shows that EFL research has paid more attention to learner-produced digital narratives than to the reading and interpretation of born-digital literary texts. Digital storytelling is attractive in EFL classrooms because it allows students to combine language learning with personal experience, creativity, and digital media production. For example, learners may write a script, record narration, choose images, add subtitles, and include background music to tell a story in English. Through this process, they are not only practicing English but also making design choices that shape literary meaning. This supports Jiang's (2017) argument that digital multimodal composing provides important affordances for EFL learning because it combines linguistic, technological, social, and creative dimensions.

The dominance of digital storytelling also reveals a limitation in the current literature. If digital literature is understood broadly as literature that depends on digital features, then the field should not be limited to digital storytelling alone. Interactive fiction, hypertext narratives, electronic poetry, web-based literature, and fanfiction also offer rich possibilities for EFL learners. These genres can encourage non-linear reading, reader choice, collaborative interpretation, and participatory literary culture. However, they are still underrepresented in the 12-article pilot corpus. This suggests that future studies need to expand the scope of digital literature beyond classroom-based storytelling projects and examine how learners engage with more diverse digital literary genres.

Another important discussion point concerns the concept of **learner engagement**. The reviewed studies show that engagement is often discussed through motivation, participation, enjoyment, learner voice, creativity, and investment. These findings are consistent with [2] view that engagement includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. In digital literature activities, behavioral engagement can be seen when learners participate in group work, complete digital projects, comment on stories, or present multimodal products. Emotional engagement appears when students feel interested, confident, curious, or personally connected to the digital text. Cognitive engagement is reflected in learners' efforts to interpret symbols, organize narratives, revise language, and connect different modes into meaningful communication.

However, the findings also show that **engagement is not always clearly defined or measured**. Some studies describe students as engaged because they enjoy the activity or participate actively, but they do not always distinguish between behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. This is a methodological issue because enjoyment does not automatically mean deep interpretation, and participation does not always indicate

meaningful literary understanding. A student may enjoy editing a video but pay little attention to the literary theme, character development, or symbolic meaning of the story. For this reason, future research on digital literature in EFL contexts needs more precise indicators of engagement. Researchers should explain whether they are examining participation, emotional response, cognitive investment, multimodal interpretation, or all of these dimensions together.

The multimodal perspective provides a strong theoretical lens for understanding why digital literature may support learner engagement. Digital literary texts and digital storytelling projects often combine written words, images, voice, music, animation, layout, and interaction. These modes can help learners understand and express meaning in ways that printed texts alone may not support. For instance, a learner who struggles with difficult vocabulary may understand the mood of a story through images and background music. Another learner may use voice tone, subtitles, and visual transitions to communicate emotion in a digital narrative. Such practices show that multimodal elements do not merely decorate the text. They participate in meaning-making. This is in line with [1] view that communication is shaped through multiple semiotic resources, not language alone.

In EFL contexts, multimodality is especially relevant because learners often face linguistic challenges when reading literary texts in English. Digital literature can provide scaffolding through visual, auditory, and interactive resources. Images may support comprehension, audio narration may help pronunciation and rhythm, subtitles may connect spoken and written language, and interactive features may encourage active reading. These affordances can make literary learning more accessible and engaging. [12] also emphasize that multimodality has become increasingly important in English language classrooms because students now encounter and produce meaning across various media forms.

Even so, multimodality also creates pedagogical challenges. Teachers need to help students understand that images, music, colors, layout, and sound are not merely aesthetic additions. They are part of the meaning-making system. Without proper guidance, learners may focus more on technical effects than on literary interpretation or language quality. For example, students may spend much time choosing music and transitions but provide weak narration, unclear characterization, or limited reflection on the story's meaning. This challenge indicates the need for teacher scaffolding, clear learning objectives, and assessment rubrics that balance language accuracy, literary understanding, creativity, and multimodal design.

The findings also highlight the importance of **assessment** in digital literature-based EFL learning. Traditional literature assessment usually focuses on comprehension, vocabulary, plot, theme, and written response. Digital literature requires broader criteria because students may demonstrate understanding

through spoken narration, visual symbolism, sound design, digital layout, and interactive choices. Hafner and Ho (2020) argue that assessment of digital multimodal composing needs to consider both process and product. This idea is relevant for digital literature because learners' engagement may appear not only in the final digital story but also in planning, drafting, peer discussion, revision, and reflection. A fair assessment model should not reward visual attractiveness alone. It should also assess how effectively different modes work together to communicate literary meaning.

The demographic findings show that the pilot corpus is concentrated between **2020 and 2023**, with fewer studies from the earlier years and no studies from 2024 to 2026 in the selected list. This pattern suggests that interest in digital multimodal learning increased in recent years, possibly influenced by the wider use of digital learning environments during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The country distribution also shows that empirical studies are mostly situated in Asian EFL or L2 English contexts, including China, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Indonesia. This is important because EFL learners in these contexts often engage with English through formal education and digital media rather than through everyday immersion in English-speaking environments. Digital literature may therefore provide an alternative space where learners can experience English as meaningful, expressive, and socially connected.

The limited number of Indonesian studies in the pilot corpus is also worth noting. Indonesia has strong potential for digital literature-based EFL learning because students are highly familiar with digital platforms, online stories, social media poetry, and video-based narratives. Indonesian classrooms also have rich local literary and cultural resources, such as folktales, legends, oral traditions, and regional narratives that can be transformed into digital stories or multimodal literary projects. However, the current pilot corpus only includes one Indonesian study. This shows a contextual gap that future SLR work should address by searching more deeply in **SINTA 1 and SINTA 2** journals.

Overall, the discussion confirms the relevance of conducting a full systematic literature review on this topic. Existing studies provide useful insights into digital storytelling, multimodal composing, learner motivation, and multimodal pedagogy. Yet the field remains fragmented. Digital literature is often discussed indirectly through digital storytelling or multimodal composing, while learner engagement is sometimes treated as a general positive response rather than a clearly defined multidimensional construct. A full SLR can help clarify these conceptual boundaries, map research trends, identify dominant methods and contexts, and propose a stronger framework for understanding learners' engagement with digital literature in EFL contexts.

5. Conclusion

This pilot review of 12 selected articles shows that **learners' engagement with digital literature in EFL contexts** is an emerging area of research that is strongly connected to digital storytelling, digital multimodal composing, multimodal literacy, and educational technology. The findings indicate that digital literature can support EFL learners' engagement by creating more interactive, creative, emotional, and multimodal learning experiences. Through digital literary practices, learners are not only readers of English texts but also interpreters, designers, narrators, collaborators, and meaning-makers.

The review found that **digital storytelling and digital multimodal composing** are the most commonly discussed forms of digital literature-related practice in the selected corpus. These activities allow learners to combine written language with images, voice, sound, video, layout, and digital tools. Such practices can support behavioral engagement through active participation, emotional engagement through enjoyment and personal connection, and cognitive engagement through interpretation, reflection, and multimodal decision-making.

At the same time, the findings reveal several important gaps. First, the existing discussion is still dominated by digital storytelling and multimodal composing, while other forms of digital literature, such as interactive fiction, electronic poetry, hypertext narratives, fanfiction, and social media-based literature, remain underexplored. Second, learner engagement is often described broadly without clear separation between behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and multimodal dimensions. Third, many studies use qualitative or conceptual approaches, while more quantitative, mixed-method, longitudinal, and classroom-based intervention studies are needed. Fourth, Indonesian EFL contexts are still underrepresented, although they offer rich possibilities for digital literature learning through local stories, digital platforms, and multimodal classroom practices.

Based on these findings, a full systematic literature review is necessary to provide a more comprehensive synthesis of studies from **Scopus, ERIC, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis, and SINTA 1 and 2** during the period **2016–2026**. Future research should define digital literature more clearly, use stronger engagement frameworks, include diverse digital literary genres, and develop assessment models that integrate language learning, literary interpretation, and multimodal meaning-making. In this way, digital literature can be positioned not merely as a technological tool, but as a meaningful pedagogical space where EFL learners engage with language, literature, culture, identity, and digital creativity.

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