

Synthesizing Evidence on the Think Pair Share Approach in Strengthening Elementary Pupils Literal and Inferential Levels of Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

This study presents a systematic literature review that synthesizes recent evidence on the role of the Think Pair Share (TPS) instructional strategy in enhancing elementary pupils' literal and inferential reading comprehension. The analysis includes empirical studies published between 2019 and 2025 across mainstream, bilingual, and EFL learning environments. The findings indicate that TPS strengthens literal comprehension by promoting focused individual processing of text, encouraging students to identify explicit information accurately, and enabling clarification of meaning through peer interaction. At the inferential level, TPS facilitates deeper cognitive engagement, allowing learners to justify interpretations, connect ideas, and examine textual cues through structured dialogue. The review also shows that the effectiveness of TPS is closely linked to well-planned scaffolding, purposeful questioning, and opportunities for reflective sharing. Although results vary depending on classroom conditions and learner profiles, the overall evidence affirms that TPS is a practical, adaptable, and low-cost approach for improving essential reading skills in early education. The review further identifies several research gaps and outlines potential directions for future classroom-based investigations aimed at optimizing TPS for literacy development.

Keywords: cooperative learning, inferential comprehension, literacy development

1 INTRODUCTION

The demands placed on learners in the twenty-first century continue to expand as information becomes increasingly abundant and as students are required to analyze and use that information with greater sophistication. Primary school learners are no longer expected merely to decode text or recognize explicit ideas; they must now interpret meaning, evaluate content critically, and communicate their understanding clearly. As a result, early education aims to cultivate cognitive flexibility, collaborative skills, and thoughtful engagement with written materials. Reading comprehension stands at the center of this goal, functioning as a foundational skill that supports learning across academic disciplines. Comprehension involves several layers of processing, with literal comprehension referring to ideas that appear directly in the text, and inferential comprehension requiring readers to extend beyond the surface by drawing conclusions, connecting prior knowledge, and interpreting implied meaning. Recent research emphasizes that inference making is a strong predictor of overall reading achievement and contributes meaningfully to academic success across subject areas (Kim, 2021). However, variations in how inferential comprehension is defined and taught have resulted in

inconsistent classroom practices, often leading to superficial recall rather than meaningful interpretation of text (Rice et al., 2023). In response to these instructional challenges, teachers have increasingly adopted models that encourage student participation, dialogue, and reflective thinking. One strategy frequently used in literacy instruction is think pair share, a structured sequence in which students first reflect individually, then exchange ideas with a partner, and finally share insights with the whole class. When intentionally implemented, think pair share supports students in organizing their thoughts, examining alternative viewpoints, and refining their understanding through collaborative reasoning. Studies report that the strategy enhances engagement, improves reasoning, and contributes to richer comprehension processes (Thanakong, 2022). Additional evidence indicates that think pair share can positively influence comprehension outcomes across various subjects and grade levels, demonstrating its potential as a flexible and powerful instructional tool (Karura et al., 2021). Despite these advantages, research findings on think pair share remain diverse. Many studies address comprehension broadly, without distinguishing between literal and inferential understanding. Others focus on older students, leaving limited evidence about how the strategy supports learners in the early grades. These inconsistencies make it difficult to determine the precise mechanisms through which think pair share contributes to foundational comprehension development. The lack of clarity highlights the importance of a systematic synthesis that brings together existing research, identifies effective patterns of use, and reveals areas where further investigation is needed. Given this context, the present review seeks to synthesize empirical studies that examine the relationship between the think pair share strategy and elementary pupils' literal and inferential comprehension. By integrating findings across diverse educational settings, this review aims to clarify how think pair share may foster deeper reading understanding and provide direction for strengthening instructional practice in early literacy classrooms. Continuing the shift toward dynamic literacy instruction, one important dimension concerns students' ability to collaborate meaningfully in small groups and engage in structured talk about texts. For example, recent studies suggest that when learners articulate their thinking aloud and then refine it with peer input, they engage a deeper processing loop than when they only listen to the teacher or respond privately (Sirbaugh French & Prather, 2020). This social dimension of comprehension is especially relevant because learners must increasingly negotiate meaning with peers, evaluate peer viewpoints, and then present refined understanding to the class—all of which mirror the demands of twenty-first-century literacies. Moreover, this active dialogue often promotes motivation and boosts learner confidence, offering more entry points for diverse learners to participate. Importantly, structured cooperative strategies such as think pair share are not just about social interaction; they embed opportunities for meta-cognitive reflection. As students transition from independent thinking to partner discussion, they frequently monitor their comprehension, question their initial responses, and adjust their reasoning based on peer input. The subsequent sharing phase reinforces this cycle as students compare reasoning across pairs and articulate explanations to the whole class. In this way, think pair share supports both literal processing (by providing time to retrieve and articulate explicit content) and inferential processing (by enabling students to challenge and refine their interpretations). The documented improvement of reading comprehension through think pair share or its modified forms underscores its potential value in early literacy programs (Sutarsyah & Nurweni, 2024).

2 RESEARCH METHODS

This study utilized a systematic literature review as its main research method to bring together and examine empirical studies that explore how the Think Pair Share (TPS) strategy supports elementary learners' literal and inferential reading comprehension. This approach was selected because it provides an organized and traceable procedure for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing research evidence from different educational contexts. Through this method, the researcher was able to construct a balanced and

comprehensive understanding of the scholarly work available on the topic (Gough et al., 2019). The review process was informed by the PRISMA framework, which outlines the phases of identifying relevant studies, screening their suitability, determining their eligibility, and selecting the final set of articles to be analyzed (Page et al., 2021). Although PRISMA served as the foundation, several adjustments were made to align the procedure with the nature of educational research, especially when working with qualitative results and diverse implementations of TPS in various classroom settings (Harden et al., 2020). The design of the review consisted of several stages, beginning with a structured search across major academic databases such as Scopus, ERIC, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and SpringerLink. These databases were deliberately chosen because they index a large collection of peer-reviewed studies connected to literacy instruction (Munn et al., 2020). The search strategy included multiple keyword combinations such as *Think Pair Share*, *reading comprehension*, *literal comprehension*, *inferential comprehension*, and *elementary reading instruction*. To ensure that only recent and relevant publications were included, the review focused exclusively on works published between 2019 and 2025 (Pope et al., 2019). Since this investigation relied solely on published research, the subjects of the study were not children but empirical articles that had examined the application of TPS in elementary reading lessons. All included studies involved participants at the elementary school level, which ensured that the review remained aligned with its purpose. The review was not tied to any single geographical area, as the selected studies represented work conducted in various educational settings worldwide (Harden et al., 2020). The review procedure unfolded in several steps. After initial searching, duplicate records were removed. Next, titles and abstracts were screened to determine whether the articles were related to TPS and reading comprehension at the elementary level. Studies failing to meet these criteria were excluded. Articles that appeared relevant were then read in full to confirm that they reported empirical findings and included data on literal or inferential comprehension. Works that were theoretical, conceptual, or non-empirical such as book chapters or conference summaries were intentionally removed to maintain the methodological consistency of the dataset (Gough et al., 2019). Data from the studies that met the inclusion criteria were extracted through a coding matrix, which documented information about the research setting, characteristics of participants, instructional procedures, methodological approaches, and study outcomes. A qualitative thematic synthesis was then applied to interpret the findings. This process helped identify recurring patterns in how TPS was implemented, the contextual factors that strengthened its effectiveness, and the specific contributions it made to both literal and inferential comprehension. The synthesis also revealed notable methodological differences among the studies, allowing for a deeper and more nuanced interpretation of the role of TPS in reading instruction (Thomas & Harden, 2021).

3 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from the analysis of thirty-two scientific articles investigating the implementation of the Think Pair Share (TPS) strategy in elementary-level reading instruction. The results encompass patterns in research design, participant characteristics, variations in TPS implementation, and its effects on two major components of reading comprehension, namely literal comprehension and inferential comprehension. Overall, the studies analyzed in this review demonstrate that TPS contributes positively to the development of students' comprehension skills. This is evident in the quantitative improvements reported through pretest–posttest scores as well as qualitative indicators such as increased student participation, enhanced ability to justify responses, and improved confidence in expressing ideas. TPS was also shown to address several common challenges in elementary reading instruction, including students' limited ability to identify key information, difficulty connecting explicit details to implied meanings, and the lack of meaningful discussion opportunities in teacher-centered classrooms. These findings

reinforce the principles of social constructivism, which posit that elaboration through structured interaction deepens students' cognitive processing (Clements & Sarama, 2020).

3.1 Findings on the Impact of Think Pair Share on Literal and Inferential Comprehension

The studies included in this review represent a wide geographic and methodological diversity, covering research published between 2019 and 2025. This distribution indicates a growing global concern regarding foundational literacy skills and the search for instructional strategies that can be implemented in diverse classrooms (OECD, 2022).

Research was conducted in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, involving learners aged nine to twelve. This age group is particularly important because students are transitioning from learning basic decoding skills to engaging in more complex comprehension activities. For this developmental stage, strategies that promote structured dialogue such as TPS are especially appropriate. Most studies used quasi-experimental designs due to limitations in manipulating school environments. Even so, the use of pretests, posttests, and control groups helped ensure acceptable levels of internal validity. Some studies employed mixed methods, combining test scores with qualitative observations and interview data to capture nuanced aspects of TPS implementation (Hollingsworth, 2021). These approaches offered deeper insights into how TPS influenced classroom processes, peer interactions, and students' reasoning patterns. A variety of instruments were used including literal-inferential comprehension tests, analytical rubrics, short-answer assessments, and recorded discussions. This diversity indicates that researchers aimed not only to measure outcomes but also to understand how the learning process unfolded. Taken together, these characteristics demonstrate that TPS has been recognized internationally as a flexible and adaptable instructional approach for elementary-level literacy learning.

3.1.1 Characteristics of the Included Studies

This developmental shift requires instructional approaches that not only present content but also facilitate deeper engagement with ideas. TPS fits this need particularly well, as it requires students to analyze text individually, share ideas with a peer, and communicate their interpretations to the whole class. The majority of studies employed quasi-experimental designs, mainly due to practical constraints within school environments. Even with these limitations, the consistent use of pretests and posttests enabled researchers to measure gains in comprehension with reasonable accuracy. Some studies adopted mixed-methods designs, integrating test scores with observations and interviews to capture qualitative aspects of student behavior, such as how learners justify their thinking or respond to differing interpretations. These methodological choices are aligned with contemporary recommendations to combine quantitative evidence with qualitative insights to obtain a more holistic understanding of learning processes (Hollingsworth, 2021). Instruments used across studies varied, ranging from literal-inferential comprehension tests to rubrics assessing oral explanations and recordings of paired discussions, highlighting the multiple dimensions through which TPS affects learning. Taken together, the characteristics of the included studies demonstrate that TPS has been widely investigated within the international literacy research community and is consistently recognized for its adaptability and relevance to primary-level instruction.

3.1.2 Effects of TPS on Literal and Inferential Comprehension

The reviewed studies reveal that TPS exerts strong influence on students' literal comprehension. Across nearly all studies, pupils showed marked improvement in abilities such as identifying key details, locating explicit information, and recognizing main ideas within text passages. This outcome can be attributed to the structure of TPS itself. The

individual thinking phase ensures that every learner engages directly with the text before receiving input from others, which fosters attentiveness to detail. The paired discussion that follows enables students to compare their interpretations, clarify misunderstandings, and refine their responses before presenting their ideas publicly. During the sharing phase, teachers frequently guide students to refer to specific textual evidence, strengthening their capacity to extract information accurately (Rahmani & Ketabi, 2020). These patterns support earlier research showing that collaborative processing of text improves retention of explicit information (Flinn & Mulligan, 2019). In relation to inferential comprehension, TPS also promotes notable progress, though the magnitude of improvement is sometimes smaller than that observed for literal comprehension. Inferential reasoning requires learners to combine textual clues with prior knowledge and evaluate the plausibility of different interpretations. TPS encourages this process by prompting students to justify their ideas to others. When learners encounter differing viewpoints during the pair phase, they are compelled to revisit the text, examine supporting evidence, and articulate their reasoning more clearly.

3.2 Discussion of the Review Findings

The synthesis of findings reveals that the effectiveness of TPS stems from its capacity to coordinate cognitive, social, and metacognitive dimensions of learning within a single activity cycle. By requiring students to think independently before discussing with a partner, TPS strengthens their capacity for individual meaning-making. The peer interaction phase then provides a space for collaborative reasoning, where students negotiate interpretations, justify their ideas, and confront alternative viewpoints. This aligns with research asserting that cooperative dialogue enhances logical explanation and conceptual clarity (Goos, 2019). When students present their conclusions to the class during the sharing stage, they engage in metacognitive reflection, evaluating whether their interpretations are grounded in textual evidence. This process expands awareness of how comprehension is constructed. The pattern of results identified in this review supports earlier findings that dialogue-based learning improves comprehension by making reasoning processes explicit and shared. Clements and Sarama (2020) emphasize that structured elaboration deepens understanding, while Al-Mansoori and Rashid (2023) highlight the role of guided discussion in helping students develop the habit of citing textual evidence. The present synthesis reinforces these ideas, showing that TPS functions not simply as a discussion activity but as a coordinated instructional routine that deepens comprehension at multiple levels. In conclusion, TPS emerges from this review as an instructional strategy with strong empirical support for enhancing both literal and inferential comprehension among elementary learners. Its strength lies in its ability to create an interactive and reflective learning environment where students construct meaning collaboratively while remaining accountable for individual understanding. TPS is therefore a pedagogically sound and adaptable approach that holds significant promise for literacy instruction across varied educational contexts.

3.3 Tabel 1

Tabel 1 Summary of Literal and Inferential Comprehension Improvements Across Studies (2019–2025)

Authors & Year	Country Level		Literal Improvement (%)	Inferential Improvement (%)	Key Findings
Ugwu (2019)	Nigeria	Elementary	16–22	10–15	TPS improved students' recall of explicit facts and enhanced basic idea identification.

Authors & Year	Country	Level	Literal Improvement (%)	Inferential Improvement (%)	Key Findings
Rahmani & Ketabi (2020)	Iran	Elementary EFL	12–18	15–20	TPS strengthened students' ability to draw conclusions, interpret meaning, and link ideas across paragraphs.
Castro et al. (2021)	Chile	Elementary	18–25	8–14	TPS fostered active participation, peer-based explanation, and self-correction during reading tasks.
El-Sayed & Rashid (2023)	UAE	Elementary	14–21	11–17	Paired discussions increased students' accuracy in generating simple inferences and constructing arguments.
Ahmadi et al. (2024)	Iran	High School (Elementary-equivalent EFL)	19–24	12–18	Students showed strong gains on national reading tests
Shakeba & Hussain (2025)	Pakistan	Elementary	17–23	15–22	TPS supported better prediction, inferencing behavior

Tabel 2 Pedagogical Mechanisms Supporting Literal and Inferential Improvements in TPS-Based Reading Instruction (2019–2025)

Authors & Year	Mechanism Supporting Literal Comprehension	Mechanism Supporting Inferential Comprehension	Evidence Provided in Study
Ugwu (2019)	Focused attention during individual Think phase enhanced accuracy in locating explicit details.	Peer verification helped students justify ideas and identify implied meanings.	Classroom observations & comprehension tests
Rahmani & Ketabi (2020)	Text scanning and identification tasks were reinforced through guided pair explanation.	Evidence-tracing prompts improved ability to connect clues and interpret author intention.	Pre/post assessments + interview data
Castro et al. (2021)	Students corrected factual errors during pair discussion, leading to stronger recall.	Disagreement between peers triggered deeper reasoning and inference-building.	Qualitative coding of interaction patterns

Authors & Year	Mechanism Supporting Literal Comprehension	Mechanism Supporting Inferential Comprehension	Evidence Provided in Study
El-Sayed & Rashid (2023)	Structured questioning led to clearer recognition of explicit facts.	Argument construction during Share phase supported inference justification.	Mixed-methods data (tests + audio transcripts)
Ahmadi et al. (2024)	TPS encouraged systematic detail checking, improving literal accuracy on national tests.	Metacognitive questioning (How do you know?) strengthened inferential explanation.	Standardized test analysis
Shakeba & Hussain (2025)	Students used sentence-based evidence to verify answers during pair sessions.	Predictive reasoning emerged from cross-checking cause-effect clues with peers.	Triangulated data (tests + observation)

Table 2 deepens the analysis presented in Table 1 by showing the specific instructional mechanisms that contributed to the gains in literal and inferential comprehension across studies. While Table 1 focuses on the numerical outcomes and percentage improvements, Table 2 explains the pedagogical processes that led to those improvements. Each study identified a consistent set of mechanisms rooted in the structure of TPS itself, particularly the sequence of Think, Pair, and Share. For literal comprehension, the reviewed studies emphasized the importance of the individual Think phase.

4 CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review examined empirical research published between 2019 and 2025 to synthesize evidence on how the Think–Pair–Share (TPS) strategy contributes to the development of literal and inferential reading comprehension among elementary-level learners. The analysis of studies conducted across diverse educational contexts demonstrates that TPS consistently enhances students’ ability to process explicit information and engage in deeper interpretive reasoning. These findings reflect the strength of the TPS cycle, which integrates cognitive activation during the Think phase, collaborative negotiation during the Pair phase, and reflective justification during the Share phase. Across the reviewed studies, TPS was shown to produce notable gains in literal comprehension. Learners became more accurate in identifying factual details, main ideas, and directly stated information, largely because the strategy required them to construct meaning independently before entering dialogue with peers. This step-by-step structure encouraged sustained attention to textual evidence and minimized the tendency of students to rely on others without engaging deeply with the text. The results consistently revealed improvements in literal comprehension ranging from moderate to substantial across regions, languages, and instructional settings. Improvements in inferential comprehension were also evident, although the gains were generally slightly lower than those in literal comprehension. The TPS process encouraged students to articulate the reasoning behind their interpretations, confront differing viewpoints, and revisit textual clues when disagreements arose. These opportunities for justification and reevaluation helped cultivate the metacognitive processes required for drawing inferences, predicting outcomes, and understanding implicit meaning. The reviewed evidence suggests that TPS is most effective for inferential learning when teachers provide additional guidance through questioning, text-analysis prompts, or complementary reading strategies. The synthesis further shows that TPS offers benefits beyond comprehension outcomes. Studies reported

increases in student participation, confidence, and willingness to engage in reading discussions. The strategy also supported inclusive learning environments, enabling learners of varying proficiency levels to contribute meaningfully to classroom activities. The adaptability of TPS across both EFL and non-EFL settings underscores its pedagogical flexibility and relevance for modern literacy instruction. Based on the accumulated evidence, this review concludes that TPS is a robust and pedagogically sound strategy for strengthening elementary pupils' literal and inferential reading comprehension. Its effectiveness lies not in isolated procedures but in its structured integration of individual thinking, collaborative reasoning, and reflective sharing. To maximize its impact, teachers are encouraged to combine TPS with explicit comprehension strategies and metacognitive questioning. Future research should explore longitudinal applications of TPS, its effectiveness in multilingual contexts, and its integration with digital reading environments to further extend the growing body of knowledge on cooperative learning and literacy.

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