



Reconceptualizing the Simple View of Reading for Korean Secondary-Level EFL Learners: A Research Synthesis*

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ABSTRACT

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This study systematically synthesizes 31 empirical studies to examine how the foundational components of the Simple View of Reading (SVR) framework are reconceptualized and contextually adapted for Korean secondary-level EFL learners. Through a qualitative research synthesis, this study reveals that the application of the SVR model exhibits unique characteristics that reflect a print-heavy environment driven by limited exposure to authentic oral input. First, regarding word recognition and its development, reading fluency operates as a crucial bridging process; advanced learners transition effectively from decoding to reading fluency, whereas basic decoding remains a persistent bottleneck for lower-proficiency students. Second, regarding linguistic comprehension, the literature indicates a predominant reliance on written linguistic knowledge (WLK), specifically vocabulary depth, grammatical knowledge, and morphological awareness. WLK functions as a major analytical resource that systematically compensates for the highly limited authentic oral language input. Finally, substantial learner heterogeneity within the same grade suggests that the predictive weights of these SVR components are dynamically moderated by cumulative L2 proficiency rather than chronological age. Ultimately, this study advocates for the incorporation of formative diagnostic assessments targeting basic decoding and reading fluency to resolve foundational bottlenecks. Concurrently, it calls for a pedagogical shift toward cultivating WLK as an active, meaning-making analytical resource, thereby providing a comprehensive framework for tailored interventions.

KEYWORDS

Simple View of Reading (SVR), reading comprehension, Korean secondary-level EFL learners, research synthesis, written linguistic knowledge (WLK), reconceptualization

1. Introduction

Successful second language (L2) reading comprehension is a highly complex cognitive process requiring the integration of multiple linguistic and cognitive skills (Jeon and Yamashita 2014, H. Lee and Lee 2024). Among the various theoretical frameworks aiming to elucidate this process, the Simple View of Reading (SVR) is widely acknowledged as a robust baseline model. Originally proposed by Gough and Tunmer (1986), the SVR postulates that reading comprehension is the product of two independent yet equally essential components: decoding (efficient word recognition) and linguistic comprehension (general oral language understanding). Although the predictive power of this model is widely accepted in both first language (L1) contexts (Quinn and Wagner 2018) and general English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts (Lee et al. 2022), applying it directly to Korean secondary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners necessitates a contextualized understanding of how its core components uniquely operate within this specific educational environment.

The motivation for this study stems from the unique educational and environmental realities facing these learners. Korean secondary students often experience significant academic disparity, frequently termed the ‘English Divide’ (Shin and Lee 2019). Exacerbated by a high-stakes, test-oriented educational system (e.g., the College Scholastic Ability Test, CSAT), this divide drives a heavy instructional reliance on written texts and grammar-translation methods rather than authentic oral input (Kang 2013, 2020, Lee 2008). In this print-heavy environment, learners accumulate language knowledge primarily through explicit instruction, forming what is often addressed as Written Linguistic Knowledge (WLK) rather than naturally acquired oral language skills (Kim 2022, Kim 2025). Consequently, while the foundational validity of the SVR framework remains widely supported, emerging literature suggests that its application follows a distinct, print-heavy trajectory among Korean secondary-level EFL learners. This stands in notable contrast to naturalistic L1 or ESL environments, where naturally acquired oral language skills drive reading once decoding is mastered. Over the past decade, a substantial body of empirical research has applied the SVR framework to this specific demographic; however, the accumulated findings remain highly diverse and occasionally yield mixed results.

In the broader field of L2 reading research, meta-analyses and systematic reviews have played a pivotal role in establishing robust theoretical models (e.g., Jeon and Yamashita 2014, Lee et al. 2022, H. Lee and Lee 2024). While these quantitative syntheses are invaluable, their broad demographic scope may obscure context-specific reading mechanisms, particularly those predominantly observed in the Korean secondary-level EFL environment. Furthermore, recent advanced analytical studies highlight considerable learner heterogeneity, indicating that the structural relationships among SVR variables shift dynamically across different proficiency profiles within the same grade (Kim and Lee 2021, G. Lee and Lee 2024). In light of this methodological diversity and the complex, profile-specific nature of recent findings, a qualitative research synthesis would offer a valuable complementary approach to statistical meta-analyses. Such an approach allows a deeper exploration of nuanced, context-specific patterns and dynamic cognitive shifts. Therefore, conducting a qualitative research synthesis is methodologically valuable for systematically uncovering the meta-level themes, contextual operationalizations, and structural dynamics embedded within the diverse body of accumulated literature.

The purpose of this study is to conduct a qualitative research synthesis of 31 empirical SVR studies targeting Korean secondary EFL learners. Specifically, this research aims to: (1) systematically review how the foundational architecture of the SVR is contextually adapted within a print-heavy environment; (2) explore how the WLK compensates for limited oral input in L2 reading comprehension; and (3) provide evidence-based pedagogical implications for tailored reading interventions that accommodate the profound learner heterogeneity in this specific educational setting.

To systematically address these gaps, this study is guided by the following overarching research questions:

1. How are the core SVR components operationalized, and what are their relative predictive contributions in the Korean secondary-level EFL context?
2. To what extent does the literature explain WLK as a major analytical resource, and how does this WLK compensate for the limited exposure to authentic oral input in this EFL context?
3. How does learner heterogeneity (e.g., L2 proficiency and grade level) moderate the structural relationships among the SVR components as they operate within this specific context?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations: The SVR Framework and its Theoretical Expansions

The SVR framework (Gough and Tunmer 1986) posits that reading comprehension is the product of two essential components: decoding and linguistic comprehension (Hoover and Gough 1990). The validity of this model has been primarily supported in L1 contexts through empirical studies (e.g., Kendeou et al. 2009) and reaffirmed in subsequent theoretical assessments of its adequacy (Hoover and Tunmer 2018), which demonstrated that decoding and listening comprehension operate as distinct, separable components even in early reading learners. As the SVR model has been widely applied, various approaches have been attempted to operationalize and measure its two core components. In the case of decoding, traditional measurements primarily focused on the accuracy of isolated word recognition; however, discussions have emerged suggesting that reading fluency should be included as an alternative sub-skill or a bridging process, depending on the learner's developmental stage or orthographic characteristics (Duke and Cartwright 2021, Kang 2020). Furthermore, diverse attempts have been made regarding the measurement of the linguistic comprehension construct. As Ripoll et al. (2014) noted, researchers have utilized highly diverse measures to assess linguistic comprehension, and terms such as linguistic comprehension and listening comprehension have been used interchangeably without clear distinctions in the literature. This ambiguity has led to various attempts to redefine or expand the concept from multiple perspectives (Duke and Cartwright 2021).

Amidst these diverse attempts and theoretical expansions, recent studies have sought to elucidate the structure of linguistic comprehension more specifically. Notably, Kim's (2017) model (DIER) hierarchically classified the sub-components comprising linguistic comprehension. This model explicitly defined vocabulary and grammatical knowledge as foundational language skills that support discourse-level listening comprehension, explaining that these foundational skills indirectly affect reading comprehension via listening comprehension and word reading.

In parallel with such structural specification, discussions reconsidering the fundamental nature of the specific assessment tasks used to measure linguistic comprehension have also emerged. Originally, linguistic comprehension in the SVR referred to natural spoken language comprehension abilities. However, Apel (2022) pointed out the limitations of the diverse written vocabulary and syntax tasks used in previous SVR studies in capturing unconscious and natural spoken language processing. According to Apel, typical assessment tasks require readers to consciously analyze text rules and meanings, and these cognitive processes inevitably rely on meta-linguistic skills.

These diverse approaches and efforts to expand the SVR framework have also led to attempts to apply the model beyond L1 to L2 reading research. Following Jeon and Yamashita's (2014) meta-analysis, which confirmed the

powerful predictive role of vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, and L2 listening comprehension, recent large-scale studies utilizing meta-analytic structural equation modeling (MASEM) have been conducted (Lee et al. 2022, H. Lee and Lee 2024). By synthesizing data from tens of thousands of learners, these studies reaffirmed that the core structure of the SVR—decoding and linguistic comprehension—remains a valid framework for explaining reading comprehension even in second and foreign language (SFL) learning contexts, thereby demonstrating the universal validity of the framework.

In the course of this continuous expansion, researchers have highlighted that the relative predictive weights of the two SVR components are not static; rather, they change dynamically depending on the learner's linguistic environment and developmental stage. For example, Florit and Cain (2011) emphasized that the mastery speed of decoding varies according to the environmental characteristics of orthographic transparency (transparent vs. deep orthographies), which consequently shifts the relative weights of each component during reading development. This dynamism of the components carries decisive implications for L2 and EFL learning contexts, where language exposure environments and instructional methods are significantly different. Even a universally valid SVR framework may operate in different ways depending on the specific environment in which the learner is situated. This naturally leads to a discussion of how the SVR model is being contextually adapted and reconceptualized for the print-heavy, specific secondary-level EFL environment in Korea.

2.2 Scholarly Evidence on the Unique Korean Secondary-Level EFL Context

The secondary-level EFL environment in Korea possesses a language exposure and learning ecosystem that is largely different from Western L1 or ESL environments. Due to the washback effect of high-stakes testing, such as the CSAT and school-level exams (Naeshin), classroom instruction primarily relies on print-heavy input, such as explicit grammar translation and vocabulary memorization, rather than abundant authentic oral input (Kang 2013, 2020, Lee 2008). Consequently, many SVR studies addressing the Korean secondary EFL context attribute the primary source of input for improving reading comprehension not to natural oral exposure, but to explicit WLK (Kim 2022, Kim 2025).

As previously discussed, in the existing SVR theory (e.g., Kim 2017), vocabulary and grammatical knowledge are treated as foundational language skills that naturally support discourse-level listening comprehension. In a natural language environment with rich oral exposure, such foundational language skills are primarily acquired through spoken language and indirectly affect reading comprehension, mediated by listening comprehension (Kim 2017). However, even though they represent essentially the same vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, the WLK accumulated by Korean secondary EFL learners is formed through print-heavy explicit learning rather than authentic oral interactions, clearly distinguishing its acquisition pathway and mode of utilization (Kang 2013, 2020, Lee 2008).

Even in an environment with limited oral exposure, Korean secondary school learners exhibit a pattern of continuously developing their reading comprehension abilities through texts (Kang 2020). This developmental process does not imply that the role of listening comprehension (LC) within the SVR model is diminished due to the lack of oral input (Kang 2020, Kim 2022). Rather, to decode complex English texts, Korean learners, who lack sufficient oral input, are intensively trained in and exposed to cognitive processes that require them to consciously analyze the rules and meanings of texts using explicitly learned vocabulary and syntactic knowledge (Lee et al. 2015). In other words, for Korean EFL learners, WLK can be seen as a major analytical resource actively mobilized to grasp the structure and meaning of texts, serving as one of the core variables that contribute to reading comprehension (Huh 2014, Kim and Cho 2015, Kim and Kang 2014).

Considering the specificities of the Korean educational environment and these differences in input, it is highly likely that the core components of the universally validated SVR model interact in a distinct manner during the reading development of Korean secondary EFL learners. Therefore, by synthesizing relevant empirical studies targeting this population, the current study aims to systematically explore the patterns and structural dynamics of how the SVR model is being reconceptualized and utilized within this specific context.

3. Methodology

To achieve the study's primary objective, a qualitative research synthesis approach, specifically, a narrative synthesis, was adopted. Although quantitative meta-analyses have significantly contributed to the broader L2 reading field, this inductive approach is particularly well-suited for systematically unpacking the dynamic cognitive shifts and context-specific operationalizations unique to these learners.

3.1 Literature Search and Selection Process

To systematically identify relevant empirical studies (published up to December 2025), a comprehensive literature search was conducted in January 2026. The search encompassed major international databases (Web of Science, Scopus, and ProQuest Dissertations & Theses) alongside prominent domestic Korean databases (RISS and KISS). The search strategy employed specific combinations of Boolean operators and keywords adapted for both English and Korean databases. The English search string applied to the international databases was: ("reading comprehension" OR "reading ability") AND ("simple view of reading" OR "decoding" OR "reading fluency" OR "listening comprehension" OR "vocabulary" OR "grammar") AND ("middle school" OR "high school" OR "secondary" OR "adolescent") AND ("Korean" OR "Korea"). Simultaneously, the Korean search string applied to the domestic databases was: ("읽기 이해" OR "독해력" OR "읽기 능력") AND ("단순 관점" OR "해독" OR "유창성" OR "듣기 이해" OR "어휘" OR "문법") AND ("중학" OR "고등" OR "중등" OR "청소년") AND ("영어").

Guided by the PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al. 2009), the study selection process was designed to ensure transparency and reproducibility, as illustrated in Figure 1. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were established based on a modified PICOS framework (Population, Interest, Context, Outcome, and Study design):

1. Population: Korean secondary-level EFL learners (middle and high school students).
2. Interest: Traditional and contextually operationalized SVR components (e.g., decoding, reading fluency, listening comprehension, and written linguistic knowledge).
3. Context: The Korean public education system and its unique EFL environment.
4. Outcome: Receptive L2 reading comprehension.
5. Study design: Empirical studies providing qualitative and quantitative data.

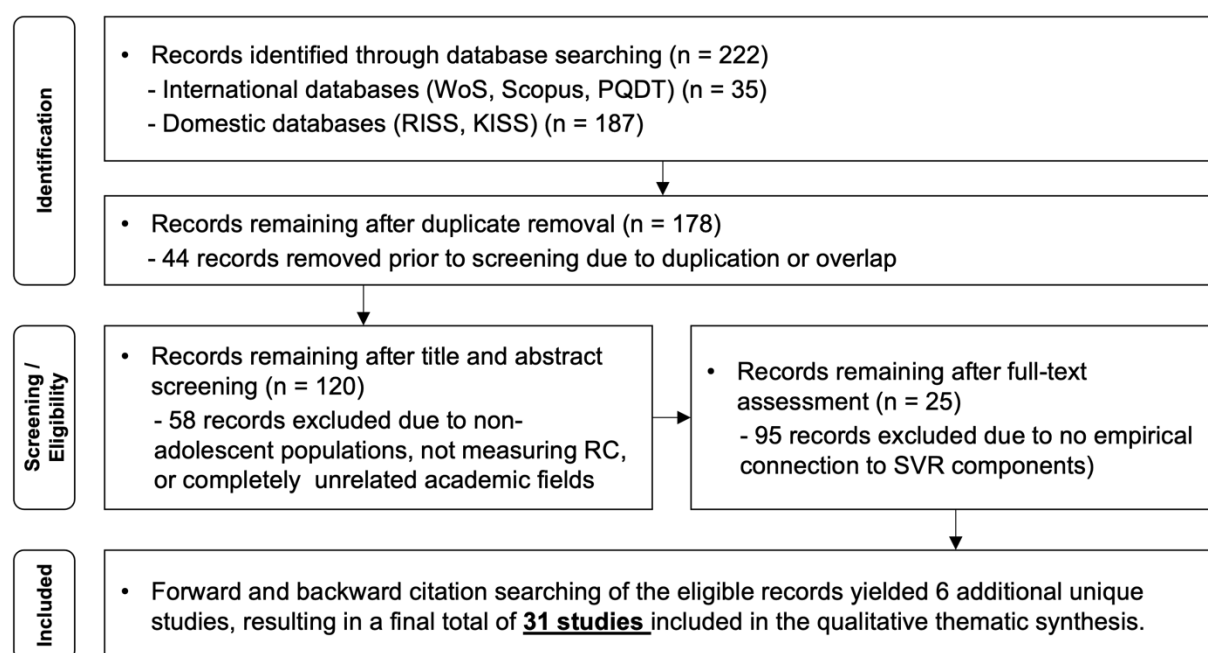


Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart for Literature Search

An initial search across international and domestic databases yielded 222 articles. Following the removal of 44 duplicates, the titles and abstracts of the remaining 178 articles were screened, leading to the exclusion of 58 studies targeting non-adolescent populations or unrelated fields. A subsequent full-text review of 120 articles led to the exclusion of 95 studies lacking an empirical connection to the SVR components. Finally, forward and backward citation searches identified 6 additional studies, culminating in a final pool of 31 empirical studies for the qualitative thematic synthesis.

3.2 Data Coding

To facilitate this research synthesis, a standardized data coding framework was developed. Each of the 31 selected empirical studies underwent a thorough review, and relevant information was extracted and categorized into four domains to directly address the study's research aims, as summarized in Table 1:

1. Domain 1 (Study characteristics): author(s), publication year, and publication type (e.g., peer-reviewed journal article, master's thesis, or doctoral dissertation).
2. Domain 2 (Participant demographics): sample size, specific grade levels (middle school vs. high school), and general English proficiency levels (e.g., skilled vs. less-skilled readers), which are crucial for investigating the developmental shifts in the reading process.
3. Domain 3 (Operationalization of SVR constructs): how the traditional and contextually operationalized SVR variables were defined and measured. This included categorizing foundational word recognition skills (e.g., isolated word decoding), the bridging process of reading fluency (Duke and Cartwright 2021), and discourse-level listening comprehension alongside WLK (such as vocabulary breadth/depth, grammatical knowledge, and morphological awareness).
4. Domain 4 (Key empirical findings): the major qualitative conclusions drawn from the statistical outcomes

(e.g., hierarchical multiple regression, structural equation modeling [SEM], or latent profile analysis [LPA]). Instead of merely extracting raw statistical values, the coding focused on the relative contributions and predictive dominance among the variables as interpreted by the original authors, essentially transforming quantitative outcomes into qualitative narratives suitable for thematic synthesis.

Table 1. Data Extraction and Coding Framework

Domain 1: Study Characteristics	Domain 2: Participant Demographics	Domain 3: SVR Constructs & Measurements	Domain 4: Key Empirical Findings
• Author(s) & Year • Publication type	• Sample size (N) • Grade level (Middle/High) • L2 Proficiency groups	• Word recognition & the bridging process of fluency • Discourse-level listening comprehension & WLK	• Relative contributions of SVR components (R^2, β) • Dominant predictors • Authors' main conclusions

To ensure methodological rigor and mitigate subjectivity during the data coding, an independent peer researcher with expertise in L2 reading education was recruited to cross-check the process. The primary researcher and the peer coder independently extracted data from a random sample of 6 studies (accounting for approximately 20% of the selected literature) to establish and rigorously verify the coding framework. The initial inter-coder reliability was high (exceeding 95%), and any minor discrepancies were resolved through in-depth discussion to reach full consensus before the primary researcher completed the remaining coding. The complete data coding results are provided in the Appendix.

3.3 Data Analysis Process

Building upon the extracted data, this study employed an inductive thematic synthesis (Thomas and Harden 2008) to establish a transparent analytical audit trail. During the inductive phase, the qualitative conclusions extracted across the four domains were treated as raw text data. Following Thomas and Harden's (2008) structured approach, the qualitative inductive synthesis was conducted in three rigorous steps:

(1) Line-by-line coding: Initial descriptive codes capturing diverse patterns and variable relationships were extracted from the raw textual conclusions (e.g., 'low decoding scores hindering reading' [Bae 2017, Kang et al. 2014], 'WCPM outperforming accuracy in advanced learners' [Ahn and Kang 2016, Jeon 2012], or 'vocab depth overriding listening scores' [Huh 2014, Kim and Kang 2014]).

(2) Descriptive themes: By employing a constant comparative method, these initial codes were repeatedly compared across different learner profiles and study designs, gradually merging into broader conceptual categories (e.g., 'shifting operationalization from oral to written skills' [Kim 2022, Kim 2025] or 'resolving decoding bottlenecks' [G. Lee and Lee 2024, Park 2018]).

(3) Analytical themes: Ultimately, three overarching analytic themes emerged from the consolidation of these descriptive categories: (a) the shift from basic decoding to the bridging process of reading fluency, (b) the compensatory role of WLK as a major analytical resource, and (c) the moderating effects of learner variables.

Rather than fitting the findings into static, L1-based developmental assumptions, this inductive process allowed context-specific patterns and unique developmental dynamics within the SVR framework for Korean secondary EFL learners to emerge naturally from the coded data.

4. Results

4.1 Overview of the Included Studies and Thematic Synthesis

To provide an overview of the findings before presenting the detailed analysis, Table 2 summarizes the thematic categorization of the selected literature. Specifically, the descriptive data extracted from Domain 3 (SVR constructs) and Domain 4 (Empirical findings), contextualized by the study characteristics and participant profiles in Domains 1 and 2, were inductively synthesized into three core themes. These three themes provide a comprehensive framework that addresses the study's central inquiries. In detail, Theme 1 captures the shift from basic decoding to the bridging process of fluency, Theme 2 explores the compensatory role of WLK as a major analytical resource, and Theme 3 examines the moderating effects of learner variables. This table systematically maps the 31 individual studies onto the three core themes and their specific sub-themes, demonstrating how the synthesized literature collectively sheds light on the broader research aims.

Table 2. Thematic Categorization of the Selected Studies

Core Themes	Sub-themes & Key Findings	Relevant Studies
Theme 1: The Shift from Basic Decoding to the Bridging Process of Reading Fluency	1a. Ceiling effect of decoding and strong predictive power of fluency. 1b. Persistent importance of decoding for lower-proficiency learners. 1c. Importance of simultaneous comprehension over mere prosody/speed.	Ahn and Kang (2016), Jeon (2012), Kang (2011), Kim (2012), Woo and Lee (2017) Bae (2017), Kang et al. (2014), Park (2018) Ahn (2024), Hwang and Lee (2023), Ryu (2023), Ryu and Lee (2021)
Theme 2: The Compensatory Role of WLK as a Major Analytical Resource	2a. Strong contributions of vocabulary breadth and depth. 2b. Predictive dominance among written operationalizations. 2c. Debate over listening comprehension mediating WLK and reading. 2d. Unique contribution of morphological awareness.	Kang et al. (2012), Kang (2020), Kim and Kang (2014), Kim (2019) Huh (2014), Kim and Cho (2013) Kim (2022), Kim (2025) J. W. Lee and Kim (2024, 2025)
Theme 3: The Moderating Effects of Learner Variables	3a. Influence of SVR components moderated by L2 proficiency. 3b. Developmental changes in skills across grade levels.	Kim and Lee (2021), Kim and Cho (2015), Lee (2024), B. Lee and Kim (2024), G. Lee and Lee (2024), Moon (2020) Kang (2013), Kim (2016), Kim (2015)

4.2 Theme 1: The Shift from Basic Decoding to the Bridging Process of Reading Fluency

The synthesized studies demonstrate a dynamic developmental shift from basic word decoding to reading fluency. Specifically, this shift can be delineated into three key aspects. First, as learners advance, basic word decoding reaches a ceiling effect. For these learners, oral reading fluency emerges as a robust predictor of L2 reading comprehension. For instance, Jeon (2012) reported that oral passage reading fluency alone accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in reading comprehension ($R^2 = .209$), serving as a much more potent predictor ($\beta = .515, p < .01$) compared to isolated word reading ($\beta = .002, p > .05$) or pseudoword decoding ($\beta = -.085, p > .05$). Although Jeon's participants, reading at an average rate of 62.5 WCPM, may not yet be considered fully proficient readers, this finding is developmentally significant and theoretically consistent. It indicates that as

learners transition beyond the initial stage of isolated decoding, the bridging process of fluency emerges as a prominent predictor because it actively connects decoding efficiency with meaning construction (Duke and Cartwright 2021). Similarly, Ahn and Kang (2016) demonstrated that for the “Capable Students” (CS) group, this bridging process of reading fluency showed strong predictive power, explaining an additional 9% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = .090, p < .01$).

Second, conversely, for lower-proficiency learners, basic decoding remains a persistent bottleneck. Kang et al. (2014) revealed that even for 11th graders, basic decoding skills made a unique, statistically significant contribution to reading comprehension ($\Delta R^2 = .017, p < .05$) after controlling for general proficiency, whereas reading fluency failed to explain any significant additional variance ($\Delta R^2 = .004, p > .05$). This finding echoes other profile-specific analyses indicating that for lower-level learners, insufficient decoding automation continues to hinder the transition to fluent text processing (Bae 2017, Park 2018).

Third, focusing on the specific nature of fluency, the synthesized studies address the complex relationship between fluency components and comprehension. Specifically, among the included studies, those focusing on fluency demonstrate that learners’ reading automaticity, measured by Words Correct Per Minute (WCPM), acts as a key indicator of their reading comprehension (Ahn 2024, Hwang and Lee 2023, Lee 2024, Ryu 2023, Ryu and Lee 2021). These studies consistently demonstrate that achieving a sufficient WCPM rate and appropriate prosody do not by themselves guarantee reading comprehension. Rather, proper fluency in the Korean EFL context emerges as an observable reflection of the successful interaction between decoding automaticity and meaning construction, representing the critical threshold where learners can efficiently allocate their cognitive resources. Thus, the literature indicates that fluency acts as a critical intermediate bridge distinguishing developing fluent readers from those still struggling with foundational bottlenecks.

Taken together, the synthesized quantitative metrics reveal a distinct developmental divergence between foundational decoding and the bridging process. Rather than remaining static, the primary cognitive bottleneck dynamically shifts. That is, basic phonological and orthographic decoding acts as a significant barrier for lower-proficiency learners (Bae 2017, Kang et al. 2014, Park 2018), whereas the speed and efficiency of simultaneous meaning construction (fluency) becomes the dominant predictor for advanced learners (Ahn and Kang 2016, Jeon 2012, Kang 2011). This synthesis clearly demonstrates that the SVR’s decoding component cannot be treated uniformly across different L2 proficiency profiles.

4.3 Theme 2: The Compensatory Role of WLK as a Major Analytical Resource

Due to print-heavy instruction and limited authentic oral input, Korean secondary EFL learners largely rely on explicitly learned WLK, specifically vocabulary depth, grammar, and morphological awareness, to drive reading comprehension. While SVR models classify these elements as naturally acquired oral resources (Kim 2017), these learners mobilize WLK as a major analytical tool to consciously decode texts, systematically compensating for their environmental deficit. Specifically, this compensatory role manifests in four key aspects.

First, regarding the predictive dominance among written operationalizations, empirical results present a dynamic debate between vocabulary and explicit grammatical knowledge. When vocabulary is measured simply as breadth, some studies assert that grammatical knowledge plays a relatively superior role. For instance, Kim and Cho (2013) reported that while vocabulary and grammar shared a substantial 55.0% of the variance ($R^2_{shared} = .550$) in reading comprehension, explicit grammar knowledge demonstrated a slightly stronger predictive power ($\beta = .450, p < .001$) compared to general vocabulary breadth ($\beta = .443, p < .001$).

Second, emphasizing the strong contributions of deep lexical knowledge, studies show that when the

multidimensionality of vocabulary, particularly vocabulary depth (e.g., synonyms, analogies, and paradigmatic knowledge), is captured, it appears to subsume syntactic processing and oral comprehension. Huh (2014) demonstrated that paradigmatic vocabulary (depth) contributed an additional 33.6% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = .336$, $p < .001$) beyond the combined effects of listening and grammar, proving to be a much more powerful unique predictor than grammar itself. Similarly, Kang et al. (2012) found that general vocabulary knowledge explained a significant 18.0% of additional variance ($\Delta R^2 = .180$, $p < .001$) even after rigorously controlling for traditional oral listening comprehension.

Third, regarding the structural relationship between WLK and oral skills, SEM studies present a debate over whether listening comprehension effectively mediates WLK and reading. For example, Kim and Kang (2014) revealed that when vocabulary depth was entered into the SVR model as a discrete latent variable, it exhibited a robust direct effect on reading comprehension ($\beta = .89$). Consequently, the traditional predictors of listening comprehension ($\beta = -.03$, $p > .05$) and basic decoding ($\beta = -.16$, $p > .05$) lost their statistical significance, indicating that WLK operates as a more dominant predictor than oral linguistic comprehension in this specific EFL context.

Fourth, expanding the scope of WLK, recent studies highlight the independent contribution of morphological awareness. For instance, J. W. Lee and Kim (2024, 2025) utilized structural equation modeling to demonstrate the unique role of this morphological knowledge. Specifically, their findings revealed that morphological awareness directly and robustly predicts reading comprehension in both L1 ($\beta = .59$, $p < .001$) and L2 ($\beta = .52$ to $.62$, $p < .01$) over and above general vocabulary and word reading. Crucially, in their models, once morphological awareness is accounted for, the independent predictive power of general vocabulary drops to non-significance (e.g., $\beta = .07$, $p > .05$). This statistically corroborates that morphological knowledge accounts for the variance previously attributed to general vocabulary breadth to drive reading comprehension.

Taken together, the dynamic competition among vocabulary, grammar, and morphological awareness observed across these Korean EFL studies should not be interpreted as reflecting the relative influence of discourse-level listening comprehension itself. Rather, these findings accurately demonstrate the relative importance among the sub-components that constitute WLK. In essence, the literature demonstrates that WLK serves as more than just an auxiliary reading skill; instead, it functions as the primary analytical tool that systematically compensates for the environmental deficit of authentic oral input.

4.4 Theme 3: The Moderating Effects of Learner Variables

Furthermore, the synthesized literature highlights that the structural relationships among SVR components are not static. Rather, they are moderated by individual learner variables. Specifically, these moderating effects are manifested through two key aspects. First, regarding the influence of L2 proficiency, while traditional variable-centered approaches often obscure these nuanced dynamics, profile-specific analyses reveal that the predictive dominance of linguistic comprehension sub-skills shifts dramatically across different proficiency groups within the same classroom. For instance, Kim and Cho (2015) demonstrated this dynamic shift among 11th graders: for the high-level reading group, explicit grammar was the only statistically significant predictor ($\beta = .479$, $p < .05$), whereas for the intermediate group, vocabulary breadth served as the sole significant predictor ($\beta = .226$, $p < .05$). Notably, for the low-level group, neither component was significant, suggesting a critical lack of foundational skills.

Second, while some studies address developmental changes across grade levels (Kang 2013, Kim 2016, Kim 2015), recent person-centered approaches utilizing Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) and Latent Transition Analysis (LTA) expose the substantial learner heterogeneity hidden within these uniform grade levels (e.g., Lee et al. 2019,

2026). Kim and Lee (2021) identified three distinct reading profiles (Good 44.49%, Average 35.83%, Poor 19.69%) among 10th graders. Their analysis revealed that vocabulary knowledge recorded the largest group difference ($\eta^2 = .804$), and the “Poor readers” had mastered only about 40% of the most basic 1,000-level English words. The severity of this disparity is further captured by Ryu and Lee (2021), who found that when diagnosed via an Informal Reading Inventory (IRI), a mere 2.94% of 11th graders could actually read grade-appropriate textbooks at an independent level. However, this heterogeneity also implies plasticity. G. Lee and Lee (2024) demonstrated through LTA that with targeted interventions, learners rapidly transition across profiles: an impressive 80.3% of “Delayed” students successfully moved to the “Average” profile, and 100% of “Average” students transitioned to “Proficient”.

Taken together, these findings strongly suggest that relying solely on chronological age or grade level as a developmental metric may be insufficient in the Korean secondary-level EFL context. Instead, a learner’s specific cognitive profile and cumulative L2 proficiency act as crucial moderating variables that shape how decoding, fluency, and linguistic knowledge interact to yield reading comprehension.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion of the Main Findings: Contextual Application and Operationalization of the SVR

This narrative synthesis of 31 empirical studies aims to explain how the foundational SVR framework manifests among Korean secondary EFL learners. Over the past decades, the SVR (Gough and Tunmer 1986, Hoover and Gough 1990) has been extensively validated and expanded across diverse learner profiles, including bilinguals, struggling readers, and language minority students (Lesaux et al. 2010, Nakamoto et al. 2008, Proctor et al. 2005). Furthermore, recent meta-analyses and meta-analytic structural equation modeling (MASEM) studies in L2 reading (Jeon and Yamashita 2014, Lee et al. 2022, H. Lee and Lee 2024) have consistently demonstrated that while the fundamental architecture of decoding and linguistic comprehension remains valid, the relative contributions of sub-components, such as reading fluency, vocabulary, and syntactic knowledge, vary significantly depending on learners’ linguistic environments and proficiency levels. The synthesized findings strongly support the core premise of the SVR; however, the findings extend the model by explicitly demonstrating how the ‘linguistic comprehension’ component is uniquely operationalized through explicitly learned WLK to fulfill the comprehension requirements within the specific cognitive and social realities of the Korean secondary EFL context.

To address why Korean secondary-level EFL learners exhibit these distinct reading mechanisms compared to their L1 or ESL counterparts, it is essential to examine the profound impact of the local educational system. In typical L1/ESL development, learners automate decoding through abundant oral input and sound-to-letter mapping. However, Korean secondary-level EFL students receive limited authentic oral input (Lee 2008), as instruction is largely skewed toward explicit grammar translation and rote vocabulary memorization (An 2007, Lee et al. 2015), driven by the washback effect of high-stakes, test-oriented evaluations, most notably the CSAT and highly competitive school-level exams (Naeshin). Consequently, the cognitive mechanism of L2 reading skips the natural phonological bootstrapping phase; instead, learners tend to develop extensive ‘visual-lexical networks’. Because achieving true automaticity in word recognition without adequate oral exposure takes significantly longer, basic decoding remains a persistent bottleneck for lower-proficiency learners, while advanced learners rely heavily on visual-orthographic efficiency rather than expressive prosody (Ahn and Kang 2016, Hwang and Lee 2023).

Furthermore, this test-driven social mechanism elucidates why the linguistic comprehension construct is

predominantly operationalized through WLK rather than traditional listening comprehension. While major meta-analyses highlight the robust role of listening comprehension in ESL contexts (Jeon and Yamashita 2014, Lee et al. 2022), the CSAT primarily demands the rapid processing of complex, decontextualized written texts. Crucially, the prominent predictive power of WLK in these findings does not imply that authentic listening comprehension is theoretically unimportant in L2 reading. Rather, it demonstrates that WLK operates as a critical, compensatory vehicle for text comprehension within the unique ecological constraints of this environment, which is characterized by a scarcity of oral input and high-stakes evaluations. In this high-pressure environment, WLK, encompassing explicit grammatical knowledge, vocabulary, and morphological awareness (Kim and Cho 2015, Lee and Kim 2025, Shiotsu and Weir 2007, Zhang 2012), is not merely an artifact of reading; it becomes the primary, contextualized cognitive vehicle through which learners navigate texts, compensating for their lack of oral language skills (Kim 2022, Kim 2025).

In this regard, while the sub-components of WLK, such as morphological awareness, are frequently conceptualized as naturally acquired oral resources or bridging skills in L1 literacy models (e.g., Levesque et al. 2021, Perfetti and Stafura 2014), the synthesized findings suggest a distinct operationalization in the Korean EFL context. As these learners lack the vast, intuitively acquired oral vocabulary networks of naturalistic environments (Lee 2008), they primarily rely on the explicit analysis of linguistic rules, encompassing vocabulary, grammar, and morphology, to deliberately decipher complex, decontextualized academic texts. Consequently, WLK functions less as a natural bottom-up language tool and more as a conscious, analytical system, effectively serving as a top-down semantic vehicle for reading comprehension. Ultimately, this finding does not discard the SVR; rather, it illustrates that within this specific EFL environment, the SVR's linguistic comprehension pillar is practically realized and fulfilled via explicitly taught WLK.

5.2 Pedagogical Implications: Integrating with Current Assessment Systems

The empirical evidence synthesized in this study poses a critical question for policy and practice: How can these findings be integrated into the current Korean educational evaluation system? The traditional 'one-size-fits-all' instructional approach may not be ideal for accommodating the substantial learner heterogeneity in this context (Lee 2014, Shin and Lee 2019).

First, regarding foundational reading components, instruction should differentiate between decoding and fluency based on student proficiency. For lower-level students who still struggle with decoding bottlenecks, explicit phonological and orthographic training is strongly needed (Bae 2017, Kang et al. 2014, Park 2018). For intermediate and advanced students, interventions should shift toward building reading fluency through repeated reading or reading-while-listening tasks to enhance their WCPM efficiency (Ahn and Kang 2016, Jeon 2012). Furthermore, given that the CSAT and school-level exams predominantly assess silent reading comprehension and written grammar (An 2007, Lee et al. 2015), the critical decoding and fluency bottlenecks of lower-level students often remain obscured within the formal evaluation system. Therefore, from a pedagogical perspective, formative diagnostic assessments targeting these foundational reading skills should be institutionalized as a supplementary tier within public education (see Lee et al. 2020 for a systematic review of the effectiveness of formative assessment). Specifically, utilizing WCPM as a practical, low-stakes diagnostic tool can provide educators with objective data to systematically monitor students' developmental transitions from basic decoding to reading fluency (Hwang and Lee 2023, Ryu 2023). Identifying these hidden deficits early will allow educators to provide explicit phonological and orthographic training to struggling readers before they experience significant disengagement from the English curriculum, thereby actively mitigating the socially entrenched 'English Divide'

(Shin and Lee 2019).

Second, regarding linguistic comprehension, the findings necessitate a pedagogical shift in how WLK is taught. Since WLK functions as the primary cognitive vehicle for text processing in this context (Kim 2022, Kim 2025), vocabulary and grammar should not be taught as decontextualized, rote-memorization items. Instead, educators are encouraged to guide students to build robust semantic networks (e.g., paradigmatic knowledge) that can actively drive reading comprehension (Huh 2014, Kim and Kang 2014, Kang et al. 2012). Furthermore, long-term curriculum designs should explore pedagogical interventions that can gradually bridge this uniquely print-heavy WLK system with authentic listening comprehension, ultimately guiding Korean secondary-level EFL learners toward a more balanced, naturalistic L2 reading development.

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

Despite providing a comprehensive theoretical map of L2 reading development, this study has several limitations. First, while this study adopted a qualitative narrative synthesis to effectively address the vast methodological diversity and explore nuanced, context-specific patterns across the 31 reviewed studies, the absence of a concurrent quantitative meta-analysis remains a limitation. Second, a critical reflection on the representativeness of the synthesized studies reveals potential sampling biases. A significant portion of the primary studies sampled learners from specific urban metropolitan areas or particular school types (e.g., vocational high schools or elite foreign language high schools). Consequently, the synthesized findings may not fully capture the broader demographic spectrum, particularly students in rural areas suffering from more pronounced educational disparities.

However, considering the substantial pool of literature now systematically categorized, future research should build upon these qualitative findings by conducting rigorous quantitative syntheses as independent empirical studies. Specifically, as highlighted in recent methodological discussions, employing Meta-Analytic Structural Equation Modeling (MASEM) on this accumulated literature (e.g., following Lee et al. 2022, H. Lee and Lee 2024) is highly recommended. Such quantitative integration will be crucial to statistically validate the contextualized pathways and the specific operationalizations of SVR components identified in this synthesis. Moreover, to validate how these SVR components uniquely manifest across different environments, future researchers are expected to expand their empirical focus to ensure broader demographic representation, alongside the development and validation of practical, low-stakes L2 oral reading fluency diagnostic tools tailored for Korean secondary classrooms.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Secondary

Appendix. Summary of the 31 Studies Included in the Research Synthesis

No.	Study	Domain 1: Study Characteristics	Domain 2: Participant Demographics (Moderators)	Domain 3: Operationalization of SVR Constructs	Domain 4: Key Empirical Findings
1	Ahn (2024)	Comparative correlational study in a Korean EFL high school.	N = 76 (12th grade). Two proficiency groups based on MCSAT.	Oral Reading Fluency (ORF): WCPM with/without comprehension checks. RC: 5 open-ended questions and MCSAT scores.	No significant WCPM differences existed between groups. Both types moderately correlated with RC. Higher-proficiency students balanced speed and comprehension, while lower-proficiency students acted as “word callers”.
2	Ahn and Kang (2016)	Hierarchical regression analysis comparing two groups from a foreign language vs. regular high school.	N = 116 (11th grade). 55 Most Highly Capable Students (MHCS) vs. 61 Capable Students (CS).	RC: WRMT-R Passage. Fluency: WJ III Reading. Listening: WJ III Oral. WLK: Vocabulary depth.	Modified SVR was supported. Listening comprehension was the stronger predictor for MHCS. Reading fluency explained more variance for CS.
3	Bae (2017)	Master’s thesis on the Verbal Efficiency Model and L2 RC.	N = 213 (10th grade). High (n=101) vs. low proficiency (n=112).	Phonological/orthographic processing, semantic access, syntactic processing, and L2 RC.	Basic decoding predicted reading more strongly for lower-proficiency students. Syntactic processing accuracy was the most influential predictor for the low group.
4	Huh (2014)	Hierarchical regression on grammar and vocabulary depth.	N = 54 (7th grade). Broad proficiency distribution.	WLK: Vocabulary depth and grammar. RC/Listening: TOEFL Junior.	Vocabulary depth was a more powerful predictor than grammar. Paradigmatic knowledge contributed 33.6% of the unique variance.
5	Hwang and Lee (2023)	Assessment of L2 ORF using textbook materials.	N = 61 (8th grade). Lower-proficiency English readers.	ORF: Accuracy (WRA), automaticity (WCPM), and prosody. RC: Textbook-based multiple-choice.	Only 30% read independently. WCPM and WRA significantly explained RC, while prosody overlapped heavily with WCPM.
6	Jeon (2012)	Exploratory Factor Analysis and sequential regression. Cross-sectional study on a modified SVR	N = 255 (10th grade). 7.6 years of English study.	Decoding, listening, WLK, RC (G-TELP), and passage reading fluency.	Oral passage reading fluency explained 20.9% of reading variance, proving to be a potent predictor.
7	Kang (2011)	replacing word recognition with reading fluency.	N = 101 (10th grade). Diverse proficiencies.	Decoding: Reading fluency. Listening: WJ-III. WLK: Receptive vocabulary. RC: WRMT-R.	Modified SVR was supported. Oral comprehension had a stronger influence on RC than reading fluency.
8	Kang (2013)	SEM assessing SVR adequacy, including phonological awareness (PA).	N = 96 (10th grade). Wide PKSAT score range.	Decoding, listening, WLK (breadth/depth), PA, and RC.	SEM explained 90% of variance. Oral comprehension was the primary contributor, while decoding and PA were insignificant for this advanced group.
9	Kang (2020)	SEM investigating an augmented SVR for advanced decoders.	N = 148 (7th/8th grade). 100% decoding mastery.	WLK, reading fluency, RC, and listening.	Only listening and vocabulary depth had direct effects on RC.
10	Kang et al. (2014)	Regression comparing decoding vs. reading fluency.	N = 222 (11th grade). Wide PKSAT score range.	Decoding, reading fluency, listening, proficiency, and RC.	Decoding skills outperformed reading fluency in explaining RC.
11	Kang et al. (2012)	Hierarchical regression analysis in a high school setting.	N = 98 (10th/11th grade). Advanced, intermediate, and beginning levels.	RC, listening, WLK (breadth and depth).	Vocabulary explained 18% additional variance beyond listening. Depth was a stronger predictor than breadth.
12	Kim (2012)	Tested SVR applicability via productive vs. additive models.	N = 30 (10th grade, female). 8.5 years of English education.	Decoding, listening, ORF (DIBELS), and RC.	Decoding was not a significant predictor. Additive model (LC + Fluency) outperformed the productive model, explaining 53.3% of variance.
13	Kim (2015)	Path Analysis (SEM) in a middle school.	N = 318 (8th grade). Varied proficiency levels.	WLK, listening (ELPT), and RC.	L2 vocabulary was the strongest direct predictor of RC, followed by L2 listening.
14	Kim (2022)	SEM clarifying the role of WLK and LC in predicting RC.	N = 250 (10th grade). Average proficiency from mid/low-income areas.	Decoding, L2 LC, WLK (vocabulary/morphology/syntax), and RC.	Decoding and listening significantly predicted RC. Listening fully mediated the effect of WLK on RC.
15	Kim (2025)	SEM examining WLK in L2 RC (Master’s thesis).	N = 170 (9th grade).	L2 decoding, listening, WLK, and RC.	WLK significantly influenced RC both directly and indirectly through listening. Decoding was statistically insignificant.

No.	Study	Domain 1: Study Characteristics	Domain 2: Participant Demographics (Moderators)	Domain 3: Operationalization of SVR Constructs	Domain 4: Key Empirical Findings
16	Kim and Cho (2013)	Commonality analysis partitioning unique and shared variance of vocabulary and grammar.	N = 96 (11th grade, male). Lower average proficiency.	WLK (vocabulary/grammar) and RC.	Grammar showed slight superiority over vocabulary as a predictor. Shared variance accounted for 55% of the model.
17	Kim and Cho (2015)	Multiple regression and commonality analysis.	N = 200 (11th grade). High, intermediate, and low proficiency groups.	RC and WLK (vocabulary/grammar).	Syntactic knowledge uniquely predicted RC for the high group, whereas vocabulary breadth predicted RC for the intermediate group. Neither was significant for the low group.
18	Kim and Lee (2021)	Latent Profile Analysis (LPA).	N = 254 (10th grade). Good, average, and poor readers.	Decoding, WLK, and RC.	Vocabulary knowledge drove the largest group differences. Poor readers mastered only ~40% of basic words.
19	Kim and Kang (2014)	Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).	N = 207 (11th grade). Varied proficiencies.	RC, decoding, listening, and WLK (breadth/depth).	Vocabulary depth was the only significant unique predictor of RC, overriding decoding and oral comprehension.
20	Kim (2016)	SEM focusing on linguistic abilities and individual differences.	High school students.	WLK, L2/L1 reading, and metacognitive strategies.	L2 linguistic ability strongly predicted L2 reading.
21	Kim (2019)	Hierarchical multiple regression and paired t-tests.	N = 33 (9th grade). Beginner to pre-intermediate.	RC, listening, and WLK (orthographic vs. phonological vocabulary).	Students possessed larger orthographic than phonological vocabulary. Orthographic vocabulary was the strongest predictor of both RC and LC.
22	Lee (2024)	Longitudinal study (2 years) using LGM and ARCL models.	N = 201 (Vocational high school). Lower proficiency.	Decoding/Fluency (ORF), WLK (vocabulary), and RC.	ORF and RC grew linearly. Reciprocal relationships were found among vocabulary, ORF, and RC.
23	B. Lee and Kim (2024)	Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) and multinomial logistic regression.	N = 234 (11th/12th grade, female). Mid- to low-level proficiency.	Decoding, WLK, and RC.	Identified four distinct profiles. Motivation and positive middle school experiences predicted higher profile membership.
24	Lee and Kim (2025)	CFA and SEM in middle schools.	N = 121 (7th grade).	Decoding, WLK (morphological awareness/vocabulary), and RC.	Morphological awareness directly predicted RC in both L1 and L2. The independent contribution of vocabulary became non-significant.
25	G. Lee and Lee (2024)	Latent Transition Analysis following an online tutoring intervention.	N = 63 (Vocational high school, female). Profiled proficiencies.	RC and WLK (vocabulary/syntactic knowledge).	Intervention caused significant upward transitions, with 80.3% of “Delayed” students moving to “Average”.
26	J. W. Lee and Kim (2024)	Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).	N = 121 (7th grade). General population.	RC, word reading, and WLK (vocabulary/morphological awareness).	Morphological awareness robustly predicted RC and subsumed general vocabulary.
27	Moon (2020)	Correlation and hierarchical regression (Master’s thesis).	N = 124 (10th/11th grade). Skilled vs. less-skilled readers.	ORF, listening, WLK, and RC.	Higher-order cognitive skills accounted for the greatest variance in RC. ORF was highly correlated but not a unique predictor.
28	Park (2018)	Examined relations of real/pseudoword and ORF to comprehension types.	N = 46 (9th grade). Low-intermediate.	Word reading fluency, ORF, and RC (literal/inferential).	Pseudoword fluency and ORF predicted general RC. Only pseudoword fluency predicted inferential comprehension.
29	Ryu (2023)	Spectrographic analysis and hierarchical linear regression.	N = 90 (12th grade). Higher, intermediate, and lower proficiencies.	Decoding, reading efficiency, prosody, and RC.	Prosody explained unique variance beyond decoding. Pause features significantly differed across fluency levels.
30	Ryu and Lee (2021)	Informal Reading Inventory (IRI) diagnosis.	N = 68 (11th grade). Wide distribution.	RC and ORF.	Only 2.94% read independently at grade level. Lower fluency readers committed high mispronunciation errors.
31	Woo and Lee (2017)	Descriptive and correlational research synthesis.	N = 139 (6th grade). Low confidence EFL environment.	Decoding/Fluency (DIBELS) and RC (Daze).	Reading speed correlated positively with accuracy and comprehension. Comprehension levels were below US 3rd-grade benchmarks.