

## **READING ANXIETY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

There has been a longstanding debate over the role of affective variables in language learning process. As a multi-faceted nature of concept, anxiety is one of the intriguing phenomena that has great impacts in foreign language learning (FLL). Until recent decades, whilst a great deal of research has been conducted in the field of foreign language anxiety (FLA) induced by speaking in a foreign language classroom setting, Foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA) had been neglected and had seldom been investigated. As speaking is considered to be the most anxiety provoking skill among the four language skills, FLRA has not received great interest from researchers in EFL contexts,. For that reason, the overarching purpose of this research is to provide valuable insights about reading anxiety to language students, EFL teachers and also researchers. Accordingly, the current study aims to broaden the understanding new perspectives about reading anxiety in FLL. To this end, the reasons for reading anxiety are elucidated and the effects of reading anxiety on language learning will be elaborated. In the lights of the diffuse body of related research, it is investigated why reading in a FL is anxiety provoking to some students. Under the framework drawn in this study, certain major suggestions will be presented to reduce reading anxiety in EFL classroom settings.

Key Words: Anxiety, Reading Anxiety, Foreign Language Learning

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is notable that over the last decade most of the researchers have recognized that learning a foreign language depends on a host of affective constructs such as language anxiety. Language anxiety is an influential factor that is assumed to be the possible predictor of achievement in language learning. The extensive body of research has been carried out to investigate FLA in a particular context but few have dealt with reading in EFL context. Therefore, a considerable amount of research hypothesized that reading anxiety is closely related to but distinguished from general FLA. In that respect, FLRA may also viewed as a distinct construct which a plethora of specific traits associated with. Researchers are in fairly strong agreement that reading is an active and complex mental process to make sense what you read. Clearly, it is also argued that language learners may experience ever-increasing numbers of difficulties to get meaning from the text during reading comprehension process. As a result, high anxiety caused by reading may lead to low academic achievement in reading skill. Anxiety in the last few decades has been considered as one of the key affective variables particularly in language learning. There has been a longstanding debate over the role of affective variables in language learning process.

#### **Foreign Language Anxiety**

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope defined FLA as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (1986, p. 128). In that sense, FLA is mostly associated with listening and speaking. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994, p. 283) assert that FLA refers to “the feelings of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language context including speaking, listening and learning”. Horwitz et.al., (1986) stated three components of FLA as follows: the fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension and test anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation refers to the feelings of apprehension related to other people’s evaluations, refraining from the situations that need evaluation and false perception that they will always be evaluated in a negative way. Foreign language learners often experience this fear as they are evaluated both by their teachers and by their peers. Communication apprehension is a type of shyness characterized by fear or anxiety about communicating with people. It derives from the personal knowledge that one will almost

certainly have difficulty understanding others. Communication apprehension occurs when learners have immature communication skills although they have mature ideas and thoughts. Test anxiety is an apprehension over academic evaluation. It is a fear of failing in test situation and an unpleasant experience held consciously or unconsciously by learners. It is a type of anxiety concerning apprehension over academic evaluation arising from a fear of failure (Horwitz et. al., 1986). Because communication apprehension is part of language anxiety, language anxiety is mostly connected with the oral and aural aspects of language use (i.e. listening and speaking). Therefore, these skills are highly by numerous research. From this perspective, FL reading anxiety differ from general FLA that have been linked to oral performance (Saito, Horwitz and Garza, 1999). Brantemier (2005) stated that of all language skills, speaking provokes the highest anxiety, followed by writing, listening and reading respectively.

### **Foreign Language Reading Anxiety**

Obviously, a plethora of research has been focused on FL anxiety induced by speaking and listening in a classroom setting. Since reading does not entail interpersonal interaction, the effect of reading on FL anxiety has been ignored so far. Foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA) is not readily detected although its effects may be just as detrimental as anxiety induced by speaking and listening. Reading is a substantial skill to be developed in foreign language settings requiring complex mental process. As Nunan (1999, p. 249) states that “reading involves highly complex cognitive processing operations”. The notions such as rapid, purposeful, interactive, comprehending, flexible, and gradually developing are key terms to explain reading ability (Grabe, 1991, p. 378). It is undeniable fact that foreign language (FL) learners need to read to improve their other language abilities and skills (Richards and Renandya, 2002). In that sense, reading in a FL is probably anxiety provoking activity to some students. Foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA) refers to the feelings of frustration and apprehension one experiences when he fails comprehending a text in FL. As a receptive skill, reading is perceived as a less anxiety-provoking activity in that it is basically an individual task and allows for reconsideration (Saito et. al., 1999, p. 202), there is still a sense of threat, which triggers anxiety in a foreign language. Reading anxiety is provoked in FL contexts as it entails readers to employ and activate certain cognitive processes including attention, perception, memory and comprehension (Sellers, 2000). Additionally, Saito et. al. (1999, p. 203) claim that learners’ familiarity with FL writing and script system and the target culture determine their levels of FLRA. Although, foreign language learners experience foreign language (FL) anxiety which is “a situation-specific and unique type of anxiety closely related to the acquisition of a foreign language” (Horwitz et. al., 1986, p. 125), reading anxiety is a distinct phenomenon but related to from foreign language anxiety in general (Saito et.al., 1999).

### **The Underlying Factors of FLRA**

MacIntyre emphasizes that “when learners feel anxious during reading task completion, cognitive performance is diminished, performance suffers, leading to negative self-evaluations and more selfdeprecating cognition which further impairs performance and so on” (1995, p. 92). The reading process holds further challenges since there are additional factors to consider such as language ability, cultural background, and learner motivations (Sellers, 2000). According to Saito et. al. (1999) foreign language reading anxiety varies according to the target language culture and writing system. It is emphasized that two aspects of FL reading would seem to have great potential for eliciting anxiety: (a) unfamiliar scripts and writing systems and (b) unfamiliar cultural material. If the reader depends on the reliability of a specific system of sound-symbol, he or she experiences high anxiety in the act of reading. The reader would firstly encounter the symbols, decode them into sounds, and associate the sounds with words, and then attempt to process the meaning of a text. When the reader is aware that the words he or she has decoded do not comprise a comprehensible or logical message entity that one would expect anxiety to set in. In other words, anxiety is also anticipated when a reader can decipher the words of a FL text, but

not its sense, because of incomplete knowledge of the cultural material underlying the text (Saito et. al., 1999). Foreign language reading anxiety seems to be related to the perceived difficulty level of reading materials (Brantemeier, 2005).

Additionally, the underlying factors of English language reading anxiety were categorized into two aspects; the text features (unknown vocabulary, unfamiliar topic, unfamiliar culture), and the personal factors (afraid of making errors, worry about reading effects). FL learners may experience anxiety in reading as a result of two aspects: personal factors and text features. The reason of high level of FLRA was the increase level of difficulty of reading materials in term of both the aspects of personal factor and text feature. These two aspects are represented by the five constructs of unknown vocabulary, unfamiliar topic, unfamiliar culture, worry about reading effects, and afraid of making errors (Al-Shboul, Ahmad, Nordin and Rahman, 2013). According to Rajaba, Zakariab, Rahmanc, Hosnid and Hassanie (2012), there are certain factors eliciting reading anxiety among learners which are unfamiliar linguistic component, cultural materials and curricular content. English writing systems might completely differ from the learners' first language in terms of its pronunciation and language structure. Some learners might find reading English texts quite difficult as the writing systems do not exactly symbolize the real pronunciation. Also, the different language structure, unfamiliar and lack of vocabulary knowledge could cause them to feel more anxious as they do not comprehend. Besides that, the representations of different cultural elements in reading texts might be anxiety-provoking factor for learners. In other words, being familiar with English or other cultures might inhibit their reading comprehension process and cause anxiety as the culture represented in the texts is unfamiliar to them. Because, culture prepares people with the means to survive by providing mental constructs for people to categorize the world (Gunderson, 2009). Another possible factor that is related to reading anxiety is lack of background knowledge in curricular content. In the context of FLL, the reading texts are more academic and more complex in nature. When they are not familiar with the content, they might feel anxious if the text is not addressed, it might impede learners' learning process.

Young (1992) asserts that reading is the anxiety-provoking factor for the students who do not employ appropriate strategies efficiently. Also, learners may not be interrupted by certain task-irrelevant thoughts during reading act. As another concept, self-efficacy in reading may have an impact on EFL learners' reading anxiety and reading achievement (Ghonsooly and Elahi, 2011). Personal and text features factors may impact learners' reading anxiety. Three kinds of text feature factors were indicated as follows: Unfamiliar culture, unfamiliar topic and unfamiliar vocabulary. Clearly, EFL learners' of high level of reading anxiety may be attributed to the increasing difficulty of the reading text (Ahmad, Al Ashboul, Nordin, Rahman, Burhan and Madarsha, 2013). Zhang and Kim (2014) propose that there are four constructs of reading anxiety for (a) fear of unfamiliar topics and language forms, (b) fear of reading comprehension, (c) fear of negative attitude toward reading a foreign language, and (d) fear of unfamiliar culture. Kuru-Gönen (2005) contended that some personal factors were the sources of anxiety while reading. A total of six sub-categories were as followings: inappropriate strategy use, fear of comprehension, lack of motivation, lack of self-confidence, negative background experience, high expectations. Shao (2014) remarks that lack of English linguistic knowledge triggers reading anxiety. The "linguistic knowledge" refers to the knowledge of English words, structures, texts and so on. It is well known that a language is a transmitter of information, so if one lacks sufficient and relevant linguistic knowledge, he will be anxious when he meets complex reading materials. Unfamiliar cultural topic and the reader's use of reading techniques and strategies improperly are considered as remarkable anxiety-provoking factors. Reading strategies are "the comprehension processes that readers use in order to make sense of what they read" (Brantmeier, 2002, p. 1). In other words, reading strategies are conscious actions used to improve understanding and solve difficulties encountered in reading. Reading strategies consist of reading aloud, paraphrasing, guessing, re-reading the text, visualizing the information, asking

oneself questions, translating, and using a dictionary (Lien, 2011, p. 200). Oh (1990) points out that EFL readers use diverse reading strategies when they are anxious. In a similar vein, Sellers (2000) posits that FL readers with a high anxiety level use translation strategies directly while low-anxiety learners read the text more holistically and use more reading strategies. In addition, the reading strategies employed by EFL learners at a high anxiety level were different from those at a low anxiety level. Undoubtedly, the learners with more reading anxiety used fewer reading strategies (Lien, 2011). On the other hand, Wu (2005) noted that learners with higher reading proficiency levels employed reading strategies more frequently than those with lower proficiency levels. All in all, it is clearly evident that there may be diverse source of reading anxiety. Still, many researchers investigate the causes of reading anxiety and the other variables related with the act of reading.

### CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Language teachers assumed that reading is probably the least anxiety-provoking part of the curriculum. As Horwitz et. al. (1986) suggest, there are two basic tenets for the language teacher to cope with FL anxiety: (a) help students cope with the anxiety-producing situation, and (b) make the learning context less stressful. Indeed, these premises are also followed during reading course. Accordingly, EFL teachers may help their students by (a) giving information about distinctive features of the target language; (b) carefully choosing authentic materials to show how students can use the vocabulary and structures they have been studying; (c) strengthen learners' confidence; (d) pacing the course so that students are challenged but not faced with a cognitive overload; (e) train them regarding reading strategies and how to employ them properly and efficiently; (f) devoting more class time to prereading activities (Saito, et. al.) ; (g) clearly conveying the objectives in each activity in order to ensure that everyone has understood what they are doing and why (Çapan and Karaca, 2013) ; (h) select the interesting topics that appeals to the learners' culture, needs, expectations, and background; paying careful attention to the selection of texts to ensure the suitability of material selection with the appropriate difficulty; (i) creating stress free classroom environment to alleviate the learners' anxiety caused by reading itself as an act, course, text feature, etc.(j) building a good rapport with the students may lessen the the level of anxiety experienced during reading process; (k) selecting reading text or materials suitable for the level of students, not too difficult and not challenging, as well; (l) helping learners to cope with problems caused by their personalities such as motivation, their inadequacies, prejudices, negative attitudes and beliefs towards reading in foreign language.

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