

# AN INSTITUTIONAL COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE DETERMINANTS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE READING COMPREHENSION ANXIETIES

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**ABSTRACT:** *Reading anxiety is one of the dominant affective factors contributing to the success in language learning. This institutional comparative study aims to investigate the determinants of English reading anxiety among Malay ethnicity undergraduates in a reading comprehension course which run in two of the private state universities in Malaysia: International Islamic University College Selangor (KUIS) and Sultan Abdul Halim Mua'dzam Shah International Islamic University (UniSHAMS). A quantitative method via an online survey was conducted in order to obtain the required data. The instrument that was adopted and adapted in engaging the determinants on reading anxiety was taken from English Foreign Language Anxiety Instrument (EFLRAI) developed by Masoud Zoghi [1]. The data was analyzed using SPSS Version 22. The findings to be discussed are part of a much larger study which addresses the determinants on English as foreign language reading anxiety among the learners. The descriptive statistics showed the most and the least anxiety determinants that are a readers-specific background and cultural knowledge for both institutions. It is hoped that the results can be a useful insight for educators in reducing students' anxiety and developing a low-anxiety English Foreign Language classroom, thus; progressing towards improvement in the students' reading comprehension performance.*

**Keywords:** Determinants, Reading Anxiety, Reading Comprehension, Foreign Language Learning, English Foreign Language Anxiety Instrument (EFLRAI)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reading skills is an essential skill in helping L2 learners in acquiring English as their second language, especially in the context of the university. Researchers pointed out that having the ability to read and write effectively contribute to the success of learning [2-4].

Affective variables are considered as one of the important determinants in the way to understand the true nature of language learning. It has also been proposed that effective differences can account for success or failure in learning [5].

In this study, the researchers are interested to look into reading anxiety as one of the vital effective variables contributing to language learning. Krashen [6] proposed the Affective Filter Hypothesis from his research on Foreign Language anxiety. According to him, a learner who faces anxiety will not able to absorb learning easily as anxiety causes an individual to be less responsive. That is, anxiety acts as a kind of gate, preventing learners from adopting effective learning practices. With this in mind, in relation to reading classroom, anxiety can hinder comprehension.

In several English as Foreign Language (EFL) reading the research, anxiety also has been shown as factors to explain individual differences in reading. Jalongo, M.R and Hirsh, Rae N [7] examined how reading anxiety related to affective domain influences learning. When they studied the relationship of emotions and their role in learning course based on cognitive psychology and neuroscience, they found that the functions of the affective domain are as prominent as the cognitive domain. Therefore, anxiety factors should also be studied and identified in helping the learners, especially problematic weak learners. In the Malaysian context, Mohd. Zin, Z. & Rafik-Galea [10] showed that anxiety can impede comprehension if the readers' cognitive systems interfere. In

other words, learners will have difficulties to process the information during the reading session. The studies showed that anxious readers' performances are to be expected to experience interference with their cognitive aptitude; consequently, this can cause lacking to comprehend the reading text [10]. In brief, anxiety plays an active role contributing to the ESL learners' reading comprehension performance.

This study is a part of a larger study which addresses the first component of the anxiety-provoking determinants on English as foreign language reading anxiety among the learners in KUIS and UniSHAMS. Since the students are exposed to more on Islamic-based learning paradigm with native and Arabic language, the learning of English is not only seen as learning English as Second Language (ESL), but more to learning English as the Foreign Language (EFL). The researchers are the FL/ESL educators who are interested to examine the Reading Anxiety determinants that may affect the EFL/ESL learning in both of these Islamic institutions.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Here, the previous studies have been divided into three divisions to show various related researches on reading anxiety: Anxiety and Language learning, Foreign language anxiety, and determinants of Language anxiety.

### 2.1 Anxiety and Language Learning

Anxiety is an affective domain and it is defined as an uncomfortable feeling, frustrated, nervous, or worried. Anxiety can play two important effective roles in language learning as it resulted either in "facilitative" and "debilitative" anxiety. Previous studies claim that sometimes anxiety can motivate learners as a facilitator to move forward facing and overcoming their anxious feelings. However, the latter feeling can stop the learner from continuing with the learning

tasks or activities. Hence, there have been many attempts to uncover what lies under the manifestations of anxiety and its relationship with language learning. To be able to organize anxiety-free classrooms, why and how learners feel anxious has attracted considerable interest especially in the last two decades [8]. Learning anxiety is largely viewed as the indicator of feelings of incompetence in doing any obligation. Frequent and continuous feeling of nervous may lead the learners to consistently facing difficulties in many situations and hence feel worried even if the task is not that puzzling [9]. Further explanation by Burden [5] is that anxious students can build pessimism or negative self-concepts or even misjudge their own efforts in succeeding others when they carried out tasks. The level of anxiety of the learners increases whenever they are assessed or being evaluated and compared with other students. Thus, this will then result in the different outcomes of behaviours, views, and approaches in the language learning process.

## 2.2 Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)

It is imperative to look into some definitions given to FLA by several researchers. The prevalent researcher on studies related to anxiety, Horwitz et. al. [11], has defined FLA as "perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors derived from uniqueness of classroom language learning". Every classroom lesson has its own distinctiveness; therefore, the FLA attributes to each different set of the process involved in language learning. While MacIntyre & Gardner [12] pointed out that FLA refers to tension and apprehension created in the second language classroom. They posited that certain aspects of the classroom such as the feeling of being continuously observed or scrutinized by the teacher can lead to anxiety. Furthermore, FLA is also connected to a bunch of psychological, psycholinguistic and behavioural symptoms. These symptoms may be realized when the learners are sweating, having dry mouth, feeling tense on muscles, stuttering, avoiding eye contact with the instructors/educators, and finally, hiding in the classroom to avoid any participation or involvement in carrying out tasks. [13].

Zhao, Aiping, Ying Guo, and Jaclyn Dynia [14] suggested that reading anxiety is a pertinent problem for learners of Chinese whose native language is English. Further, Zhou, Jing [15] investigated the reading anxiety level of Chinese as a FL learner in the United States. The findings showed that background variables such as years of learning Chinese, heritage learner status, the number of foreign languages learned, and time spent in China significantly predicted learners' reading anxiety levels and explained 15% of the variance in their reading anxiety. The major bases of FL reading anxiety include worries relating to comprehension, unfamiliar topics, unknown pronunciation, and feeling uncomfortable reading aloud. Thus, this study is aimed to look into the sources of the anxiety of Malay ESL/FL learners.

In a larger view, FL anxiety is claimed to have a potentially negative effect on academic achievement, social context and personality of the language learner [12]. Hence, there have been many efforts to reveal and demonstrate the indicators of anxiety. In the context of anxiety-free classrooms, researchers have considerable interest looking into why and how learners

feel anxious especially in the last two decades [1; 16] and the researcher feels that it is still relevant till now especially when considering the different up-to-date situations and learners' background.

## 2.3 Determinants of Language anxiety

Many kinds of literature postulated foreign language reading anxiety measurements and determinants using different instruments. One of the common instruments used is developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, [11] and known as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). FLCAS contains three categories of scales: Category 1: Communication apprehension (11 items), Category 2: Fear of feedback by peers and teachers (7 items) and Category 3: Fear of language tests (15 items). The categories suggested that the determinants of classroom anxiety derive from nervousness to speak the FL in the classroom, afraid to make mistakes during interaction with friends and language instructors, as well as feeling worried about FL examination.

The first instrument that measures foreign language reading anxiety is called Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS). It was developed by Saito et al., [17] for several purposes that are to produce the students' self-reports of anxiety due to different features of reading, their awareness of reading in FL, and their opinions of the relative difficulty of reading in relation to other language skills. FLRAS contains 20 items, but items 10 and 11 were eliminated on grounds of irrelevance. The items were based on a 5-point Likert-scale which ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

In this research, English as a Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Instrument (EFLRAI) by Masoud Zoghi [1] is used as it indicates the different levels of EFL reading anxiety among non-English major students. This seems to be appropriate as the learners in this study are among Malay ethnicity.

The measurement measures specifically determinants of anxiety according to the university setting, where English is taught as a foreign language and reading anxiety is believed to impact non-English majors reading performance.

One of the determinants of reading anxiety can derive from the learners' schemata. Some research supports the role of content schema in L1 and L2 reading comprehension. When the learners have a content schema, this shows that the learners are familiar with the subject matter of the reading text. For example, the learners able to understand the topic of the text and aware of the cultural-specific elements required to be interpreted. In sum, the content schema is part of the individual's cultural orientation which includes the background of knowledge and general ability in all aspects of life. Therefore, the learners' content schemata undoubtedly have a positive effect on all elements of reading [18].

Therefore, the anxious reader is most likely to fail if his/her cultural schema is different from the one proposed by the reading text. Carrell & Eisterhold p. 80 cited in Ahmad Al-Issa [18] posited that the most apparent explanations on why a certain content schema does not exist for a reader is that the schema is culturally specific and is not part of a particular reader's cultural background. These facts also suggest that to reduce anxiety in a reading classroom, the learners should be exposed to what and how each culture is understood.

### 3. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

In this study, English as a Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Instrument (EFLRAI) by Masoud Zoghi [1] is used as it indicates the different levels of EFL reading anxiety among non-English major students as well as the notion of foreign language reading anxiety. The measurement measures specifically determinants of anxiety related to university settings where English is taught as a foreign language and, reading anxiety is believed to contribute to the reading performance of non-English majors learners. Motivated by this instrument and the specific items, the current researcher was interested to investigate the determinants of FL reading anxiety among the Malay EFL context.

To date, the common instruments used by researchers are the FLCAS and FLRAS. For example, in searching for the sources of FL anxiety among the Turkish students, Ipek Kuru-Gonen [19] did a quantitative and qualitative study used both instruments which have been tailored into the Turkish version. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) were administered to the participants and the results showed that students with higher levels of FL anxiety tend to have higher levels of FL reading anxiety and vice versa. The researcher also interviews and analyses students' diaries which explained their feelings, thought and experience while they are reading in the foreign language. The findings revealed that students experience anxiety caused by the reading text. In summary, three sources of reading anxiety were proposed: anxiety caused by personal factors, reading text and reading course.

### 4. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

The method adopted in this paper includes the descriptions of respondents, instrument, data collection and data analysis are described below:

#### 4.1 Research design

The research design adopted in this study is a quantitative approach and the data was collected via a survey. The instrument was a questionnaire: English as a Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Instrument (EFLRAI) by Masoud Zoghi [1].

#### 4.2 Participants

The participants were recruited from the students who registered English compulsory course with its focus on reading comprehension in both institutions. The participants were females and males in different academic disciplines. Purposive sampling was done to gather required data to accomplish the purpose of the study.

A total of 211 from KUIS and 154 from UniSHAMS first-year low proficiency ESL learners participated in this study and they aged between 17 to 18 years old. The subjects were from a homogenous group of Malay students.

#### 4.3 Data Collection

The Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Instrument (EFLRAI) developed by Masoud Zoghi [1] was applied in this study. This instrument indicates the levels of EFL reading anxiety among non-English major students as well as the factors of anxiety. It also discusses the concept of foreign language reading anxiety and particularly tailored for non-English major students in the context of tertiary education.

The graphic representation in Figure 1 shows the three major categories (i.e. factors) related to EFL reading anxiety labeled as below:

- 1.Top-down Reading Anxiety (TRA)
- 2.Bottom-up Reading Anxiety (BRA)
- 3.Classroom Reading Anxiety (CRA)

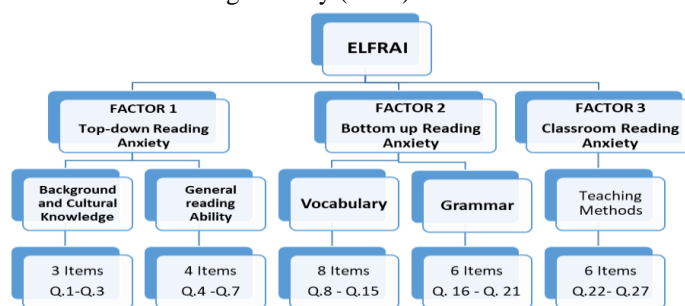


Figure 1: Mosaud Zoghi [1] English Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Instrument (EFLRAI) with itemized questions

### 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results were discussed accordingly to the aim of this paper which address the Top-down Reading Anxiety (TRA) Factor 1- 7 items for both institutions; KUIS and UniSHAMS **Top-down Reading Anxiety (TRA) / Factor 1- 7 items**

The first factor (TRA) depicts the factors of EFL reading anxiety measure particularly related to reader-specific which derives from two subcategories (i) reader's background and cultural knowledge as well as (ii) reader's general reading ability. The descriptive statistics are tabulated as in Table 1 with their subcategories determinants.

Table 1: Descriptive statistic RA determinants related to the reader's background and cultural knowledge and Reader's general reading ability

		KUIS		UniSHAMS	
Item		Mean	Std. D	Mean	Std. D
Factors related to reader's background and cultural knowledge					
Q. 1	I do not feel at ease when the title of the text is unfamiliar to me.	3.00	0.81	2.73	0.69
Q. 2	I worry when the ideas expressed in the text are culturally unclear.	3.06	0.74	2.84	0.66
Q. 3	I get upset when I lack the previous knowledge about the ideas expressed in the text	2.92	0.78	3.22	0.68
Factors related to the reader's general reading ability					
Q. 4	I worry when I cannot get the gist of the text	3.00	0.81	3.00	0.81

	although no new vocabulary items or grammatical points exist in the text.				
Q. 5	I worry when I cannot recognize minor ideas (details) of the text.	3.06	0.74	3.06	0.73
Q. 6	I am nervous when I cannot spot the main idea of a certain paragraph.	2.92	0.78	2.92	0.78
Q. 7	I am bothered when I cannot express my opinions or feelings about the text.	2.93	0.78	2.93	0.77

Table 1 shows the reading anxiety determinants which is related to the reader's background and cultural knowledge and reader's general reading ability. It is showed that the highest mean derives from item "I get upset when I lack the previous knowledge about the ideas expressed in the text" (mean=3.21,SD=0.77), item "I do not feel at ease when the title of the text is unfamiliar to me (mean=2.69, SD=0.77), while the lowest mean derives from item "I worry when the ideas expressed in the text are culturally unclear" (mean=2.76,SD=0.76).

These findings indicate that learners feel easily anxious because of their personal inadequacies in previous knowledge about the ideas, the title of the text and culturally unclear text. If they bring these feelings of upset and worry with themselves while doing reading foreign language activities, this may create barriers to becoming effective readers. This is because each learner will bring in their personal factors and social identities when they engaged in reading activity [20]. This may affect the process in reading especially when their own expectations are not met. Therefore, students may put some obstacles between themselves and what the text may provide them. In this way, students will feel anxious as misunderstanding and misapprehension may occur. As a result, these hinder them from becoming effective readers in the target language.

It can be seen that reading anxiety caused by wariness when the ideas expressed in the text are culturally unclear is more prominent among KUIS students while UniSHAMS learners become most anxious as they get disappointed when they are lack of the previous knowledge about the ideas expressed in the text. In context to the reader's background and knowledge, the schemata of the readers can be the determinants to reading anxiety. This finding is congruent with the schema theory with regards to reading, in which, Brown [21] states that a text does not by itself carry a meaning. He proposes that the reader carries information, knowledge, emotion, and culture that is called schemata, to the printed word or reading text. Clark and Silberstein [22], quoted in Brown [21] argued that reading is only incidentally visual whereby more information is depicted by the reader than by the print on the page. Consequently, the reading

process will be successful depending on how much-related schema readers possess while reading [18].

It is interesting to see that the analyses of the reading anxiety determinants related to reader's general reading ability for both institutions show the same highest mean (3.06): "I worry when I cannot recognize minor ideas (details) of the text" and the same lowest mean (2.92) for "I am nervous when I cannot spot the main idea of a certain paragraph".

The results may occur due to the students' background and exposure from their field of studies. The Quran and Sunnah explicate an accurate, authentically and reliable Islamic paradigm [23]. In addition, the learners are required to read and memorize the details of the information which include a set of rules, values, patterns, and standards. Thus, lacking the ability to recognize details of the reading text could contribute to reading anxiety among these learners.

The findings also suggest that the learners might feel anxious because of not having appropriate reading strategies such as unable to identify the gist or the main ideas of the text and to a certain extent, they feel disturbed when they cannot express their opinions or feelings about the text. Having these fear may contribute to the reading anxiety and consequently lead to an ineffective reading in the target language.

Based on the factors related to reader's general reading ability, it is showed that the highest mean derives from item "I worry when I cannot recognize minor ideas (details) of the text": (mean=3.06,SD=0.74), item "I worry when I cannot get the gist of the text although no new vocabulary items or grammatical points exist in-text":(mean=3.00, SD=0.81) and item "I am bothered when I cannot express my opinions or feelings about the text": (mean=2.94, SD=0.78) " the lowest mean derives from item "I am nervous when I cannot spot the main idea of a certain paragraph": (mean=2.92,SD=0.78).

The analyses of the instrument also showed that learners feel anxious for not adopting the appropriate reading strategies. It is showed that the learners feel most anxious when they are unable to identify minor ideas/details of the text. Besides, lacking the ability to identify the essence of the text even though new vocabulary items or grammatical points were not present in the text, the author's main idea or the important points, which are compulsory strategies for effective reading have caused anxiety among these EFL/ESL learners. The findings posit that anxiety will influence the subjects' reading performance significantly which concurs with Mohd. Zin, Z. & Rafik-Galea, S [10] investigation on the relationship between reading anxiety and comprehension performance of academic texts among ESL Malay students. Thus, when learners fail to comprehend the reading text, they feel bothered for not able to express their opinions or feelings about the text, hence, develop reading anxiety and consequently, create hindrances for them to be effective readers in the target language.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The study sheds the light on the reader's background and cultural knowledge as well as the reader's general reading ability as the specific-reader determinants to reading anxiety. Hence, language educators and researchers in KUIS and UniSHAMS must work strategically to diminish the challenges by understanding the learners' schemata with

their reading ability. Some suggestions toward looking into appropriate materials and imparting reading strategies on learners with the awareness of comfort level of the learners would, therefore, assist the learners from harmful feelings of anxiety. Educators should try to lessen learner's anxiety situation quickly by encouraging various interesting and cooperative activities. Appropriately, educators can also carry out necessary interventions or coping programs to maximize learning, hence, helping learners to become effective readers.

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