

READING ANXIETY AND THE TEACHING OF READING IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION

Aishah Amirah Zainal Abidin¹, Puziah Wahab², Kalthom Husain³ & Haniza Othman⁴

^{1,2}Centre for Core Studies, Selangor International Islamic University College, 43000 Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia

³Faculty of Education, Selangor International Islamic University College, 43000 Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia

⁴Faculty of Science and Information Technology, Selangor International Islamic University College, 43000 Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia *

For correspondence: Tel. + (60) 127227458, E-mail: aishahamirah@kuis.edu.my

ABSTRACT: Reading skills in the higher learning education is without a doubt a vital skill to master. It can make or break the journey of the students in university as it serves as the tool for the students to gain more knowledge and understanding of the content of their study. Reading anxiety among the undergraduate can hinder the understanding of a reading text. This can lead to frustration and later failure in grasping the course attended. The study aims to explore the reading anxiety of the students in the HLIs English reading classes and to identify the teaching and learning process of the reading classes. It seeks to see if the reading anxiety scale of the students, and to identify the teaching practice of the instructors in the classes. It employs a mixed method approach to research. Four-point Likert scale reading anxiety scale questionnaire was administered to 138 students in two higher learning institutions English class. Focus group semi-structured interview were conducted to the English language instructors of these reading classes to gain first-hand data of how the practices were done. The descriptive analysis of the reading anxiety scale questionnaire was done using the SPSS software. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was done to identify recurring trends and practices. Results show the reading anxiety scale corresponds to the teaching and learning of reading in the reading class. To conclude, the reading anxiety of the students can be lowered, if not removed completely with the use of a suitable approach in the teaching of reading. Language instructors should be aware of and play their part in understanding the anxiety faced by the students in the reading classes.

Keywords: Reading anxiety, the teaching of reading, reading approach, higher education, and classroom practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is studied in all level of education, to see how it is acquired and developed at each level. In higher education, ESL reading skills are considered vital to the success of the undergraduates. It is one of the basic skills that students need to master as they need to read extensively the subject matter of their courses. Reading skills is without a doubt an essential skill needed by students to excel in their field of study. It serves as the tool to unlock and understand the subject matter of their study. By having relevant reading strategies, the acquisition and learning of English, specifically, and other courses, generally, will become fairly effective [1] [2]. These reading strategies can also help give an in-depth understanding of the text when the students read them

Reading is complex processing of words, sentences, and texts. The theories in reading were based on the information-processing theories in psychology. This led to the bottom-up and top-down approaches [3]. Bottom-up processing starts from letter recognition to phoneme level, to word recognition, to lastly syntactic and semantic relationships in a linear hierarchy arrangement [3]. Top-down processing starts with the reader forming hypotheses of the meaning of the texts, and proceed to sample the necessary print to confirm or reconfirm the hypotheses made before revising them [4]. The suggested interactive theories proposed by Rumelhart in 1977 as the most suitable to describe reading [4]. It focuses on the text and the reader. From the text perspective, there are three cueing systems; graphophonic, syntactic and semantic, to construct meaning. And from the reader perspective, reading is regarded as an active process of meaning construction. This is achieved through the interaction between the reader and the text from the perspective of the readers' affective state, language competence and prior knowledge [4].

Learners existing knowledge of the world complements the information found in the text. But, the comprehension of the

text can be impaired by ESL readers' language interference, developing of English language competence and limited resource [5].

These approaches in reading will be the building blocks in understanding how the learners process the reading texts and the components that make up the comprehension of a reading text.

Reading Anxiety in Second Language

Second language reading anxiety has been studied extensively due to the prevalent literature it yields. It is still regularly studied together with other effective domain characteristics such as motivation and self-esteem in language learning [6, 7, 8]. Foreign or second language reading anxiety can be regarded as an extension of a larger field of study on anxiety, which was notably proposed by Cattell and Scheier [9]. Anxiety in Cattell and Scheier's perspective was introduced in two-ways; trait anxiety and state anxiety. Where trait anxiety explained as the being in a state of nervousness in wide range of situation, state anxiety is described as the anxiousness that is caused by a certain situation or specific condition [9].

In second language learning, a new term was put forward to highlight the anxiety related to second or foreign language learning. It is called 'foreign language anxiety', or also known as language anxiety. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope [10] first coined the term to be regarded as foreign language classroom anxiety that is related to second language learning. Horwitz et al [10] defined foreign language anxiety 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'. Horwitz later introduced the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to try to measure the level of anxiety in the second or foreign language classroom.

The FLCAS focuses heavily on measuring the oral performance of the learners in the second language classroom [11]. Further research to identify if specific language areas contributed to the anxiety in the second language classroom was conducted by an expert to look into how different language skills anxiety can be distinguished from the general classroom anxiety. This includes a study by Saito et al [12] to look into second language reading anxiety.

Saito et al [12] landmark study first introduced the term 'foreign language reading anxiety' as a distinctive term that focuses on the anxiety faced by learners in the process of reading second language texts. Saito then proposed an instrument called the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) to gauge the anxiety of the learners in second language reading. This instrument is said to measure the level of reading anxiety from the perspective of two text-processing parameters; 1) unfamiliar writing system, and 2) unfamiliar ideas (cultural context). Saito et al work have been used by many (see [13, 14, 15, 16]) in identifying the level of reading anxiety for different background and level of learners.

Masoud Zoghi [11] has attempted to review the instrument proposed by Saito et al [12] by adding variables that were deemed necessary to further strengthen the reliability of the instrument and to also suit the different background and experiences of learners in EFL context who came from non-English major courses. Masoud Zoghi argued that FLRAS is restricted to two parameters mentioned earlier and these parameters may not be appropriate to be applied to certain population and contexts. In his attempt to construct an instrument for EFL reading anxiety, he started with administering an open-ended exploratory questionnaire to the selected participants of the population. The questions included the biographical details as well as information on anxiety experiences when reading in English. The inventory was then piloted to the sample of the population. Masoud Zoghi also included an exploratory interview questionnaire that contained three open-ended questions to be tabulated with the data from the open-ended exploratory questionnaire. The questions were prepared in the student first language, Farsi. The interview questions were constructed to elicit a response on; a) the situation in which reading in English provoke anxiety, (b) the reasons for their anxiety reactions, and (c) the problems they have when attending EFL classes.

The data from the open-ended questionnaire were used by Masoud Zoghi to prepare the framework for the instrument inventory. The interview responses provided the three major categories that will underlie the instrument. The major categories are; 1) Top-down Reading Anxiety (TRA), 2) Bottom-up Reading Anxiety (BRA), and 3) Classroom Reading Anxiety (CRA). The item in the inventory uses a 4-point Likert scale to gauge the level of anxiety of the learners. The final instrument was then validated with the Cronbach Alpha result of 0.89. The t-test reliability the English as a Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Inventory (EFLRAI) score yield the correlation coefficient of 0.97.

Since the EFLRAI is still at its initial stage, the further study still need to be conducted to further validate the reliability and validity if this instrument.

Teaching of Reading

Studies on the teaching of reading skills in Malaysia resulted in the studies conducted at and for secondary school (see [17, 18, 19]). Most of the studies conducted in university covered the aspect of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (see [20], [21]) It is understandable since, the students are assumed to have had reading strategies learned in their earlier level of study, and hence, only needed to tune the skills to meet the different reading purposes in the university. However, this might not always be the case. Universities in Malaysia also serve diploma and foundation courses to the students, apart from the undergraduate and postgraduate courses. This will call for a need to improve the reading skills of these students through the lessons and teaching and learning instructions in the classes.

The teaching of reading in ESL differs from that of the teaching of reading for a native speaker. Some studies on reading skills served two-pronged in explaining the teaching and acquisition of reading skills both by a native speaker and ESL learners. This study intended to focus the teaching of reading in Malaysian ESL context. It should be noted that from this point forward, the term teaching of reading would highlight the perspective of reading for the context of ESL.

Reading skills is essential and vital for ESL learners to learn and master, apart from the other four language skills [2]. In the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 [22] students are aspired to have high proficiency in at least, the native language, *Bahasa Malaysia* and English. It also encourages students to learn one additional global language. This move is relevant with its aim to be competitive in the global market and to prepare the students to thrive and excel in the ever-changing and complex future. To meet this need, all the courses in the HLIs are required to have English subject taught in all level, as part of its university requirement. This course ranges from proficiency, EAP, to ESP. All of which will have in some part the component of reading skills.

The compulsory requirement for all the students in HLIs to have to undertake English subjects mark the need for them to have mastery in reading skills. And this, in turn, will be reflected in how the subjects are being taught and conducted in the classes. Ro, in his study of language instructors' preferences in the teaching of reading, identified the Extensive Reading (ER) as an approach to the teaching of EAP classes [21]. The results indicated that the motivation of the learners increased significantly, especially on intrinsic motivation as well as the amount of reading spent. Grabe & Stoller also mentioned extensive Reading (ER), as a mean to develop vocabulary in the reading instructions and to learn and pick up vocabulary occurred in context [23]. This was viewed as incidental learning and was not part of the explicit instruction in the classroom.

Kung in the study of teaching reading comprehension in the schools in Taiwan focuses on two aspects of reading strategies; cognitive strategies, and metacognitive knowledge [24]. The former looked into how the learner can work and manipulate text to reach completion. The latter is the view of how the learner can think and plan the learning process.

2. THE STUDY

This study was set out to identify the reading anxiety scale from the constructs of Classroom Reading Anxiety (CRA) of

students in two higher learning institutions in Malaysia, namely KUIS and UniSHAMS. A total of 365 participants were chosen to be the respondent of the questionnaire. These respondents came from non-English major courses. They are chosen as the sample as the EFLRAI instruments are said to best suit the anxiety scale of non-English major learners.

Another objective of the study was to explore the classroom practices of the teaching of reading skills by the language instructors. It intended to identify the strategies employed by these language instructors and to discover if it correlates with the reading anxiety of the learners. The participants of the interview were language instructors from Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor (KUIS) and Universiti Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah (UniSHAMS). Thirteen participants participated in two sessions of focus group interview.

Permission and personal information of the participants were collected before the interview sessions began and were signed by the participants. All of the participants have at least a Bachelor in English Studies and TESL. The working experience of the participants varies from three years to 15 years.

Instrument

The questionnaire used was adapted from Masoud Zoghi EFLRAI instrument [11]. Several changes were made to the structure of the sentences in the questionnaire, without changing its original meaning. Biographical questions were added to the first part of the questionnaire, which included the level of study of the students, the course that they majored in, and the years of English learning experiences. The 27 items of EFLRAI questions were put in the second part of the questionnaire.

The 27 items in the EFLRAI can be broken down into three main constructs, and further five sub-constructs. The main constructs and sub-constructs; noted in the parentheses, included the TRA (background and cultural knowledge, and general reading ability), BRA (vocabulary and grammar), and CRA (teaching method). The entire item in the questionnaire used English as its main language, with a translated version to the Malay language provided underneath the English version. The rationale in doing so is to ensure the students understand and comfortable in answering all the questions without the language competence being the hindrance in them providing the best answer to their knowledge.

The questionnaire was administered online within a month. The online medium was chosen, as it was the most suitable with regards to convenience and practicality. The respondents were expected to answer all the questions within five to ten minutes.

Focus group semi-structured interview were used to gather the data from the interview participants. The participants were the language instructors in both universities. The participants have considerable experience in teaching the students of different level, reading skills. Some have taught a specific reading class, and some have taught general proficiency classes with reading skills as part of its syllabus. These participants were selected because of their experience in the reading classrooms.

The semi-structured interview questions were constructed based on Masoud Zoghi's EFLRAI on reading anxiety scale

[11]. This is to tabulate the response to the constructs of the questionnaire given to the students. The semi-structured interview questions adapted the five constructs; background and cultural knowledge, general reading ability, vocabulary, grammar, and teaching methods. These constructs were then expanded to form sets of questions, which include main and follow-up questions. These questions were asked to the participants of the focus group interview in order to gauge the practices of the teaching of reading in their classrooms.

The interview was both video and audio recorded throughout the two sessions. The researchers act as the interviewer in the interview session and taking a turn to ask the questions. All of the questions were included in the interview with follow up questions vary depending on the feedback from the participant.

The interview was transcribed using intelligent verbatim approach. Qualitative data analysis was employed manually to identify recurring sub-constructs in the transcribed interview. The constructs and sub-constructs are then compared with the reading anxiety data from the questionnaire to see how it matches the setting and condition it was used.

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaire

The construct of CRA is arranged in item 22 until 27 of the questionnaire. The data from the questionnaire were analyzed descriptively using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software to identify the mean and standard deviation. The Cronbach Alpha result of CRA yielded .887. The internal consistency of the instrument was similar to the result by Masoud Zoghi. This is also supported by Table 1.0 shows the items in the construct with the results of the mean and standard deviation of both KUIS and UniSHAMS.

Table 1.0: Mean and Standard Deviation of the items in Classroom Reading Anxiety (CRA) from KUIS and UniSHAMS

Item	KUIS		UniSHAMS	
	Mean	Std. D	Mean	Std. D
I feel bothered when the instructor calls on me to read out the text.	2.31	.92	2.35	.86
I worry when the instructor calls on me to translate a piece of English text into my mother tongue.	2.59	.85	2.66	.82
I worry when the instructor asks me to answer reading comprehension questions.	2.59	.82	2.64	.81
I get upset when the instructor chooses uninteresting texts to read in class.	2.50	.91	2.54	.84
I feel uneasy when the instructor corrects my pronunciation or translation.	1.94	.91	1.98	.90
I am nervous when the instructor uses English as a medium of instruction and hardly makes use of our mother tongue.	2.36	.91	2.38	.85

From Table 1.0, it can be seen that the highest mean for both KUIS and UniSHAMS came from the item 'I worry when the instructor calls on me to translate a piece of English text into my mother tongue' with a score of mean = 2.59/2.66 respectively. This apprehension of the learners could be due to their inability to translate the second language to their first language. This practice of the teaching of reading caused the most anxiety among the participants of the study. The lowest mean came from the item 'I feel uneasy when the instructor corrects my pronunciation or translation' with a score of mean = 1.94/1.98 respectively. The correction of translation and pronunciation were deemed lesser anxiety-inducing activity. The correction can be seen as an encouraging way for the instructors to help the learners improve their speech and pronunciation.

Other findings worth noting came from the item 'I worry when the instructor asks me to answer reading comprehension questions'. This question scored a mean of 2.59 and 2.64 from both the institutions. This is the second highest mean score in this construct. The usual practice of a reading class will start with a text, followed by reading comprehension questions. Being asked to answer reading comprehension questions, especially if being called out personally is causing anxiety among the learners. This probably stemmed from their fear of making a mistake, as well as to save face should the mistake made.

Semi-Structured Interview

The transcribed interview was analyzed according to the five constructs it was based upon. The sub-constructs were identified according to its recurring role in the interview sessions. Table 2.0 provides a description of the constructs and sub-constructs.

Table 2.0: Constructs and Sub-Constructs from Focus Group Interview

No	Construct	Sub-Constructs
1	Background and Cultural knowledge	Text selection Context
2	General reading ability	Translation Cognitive Meta-cognitive
3	Vocabulary	Pronunciation Drilling
4	Grammar	-
5	Teaching Method	Reading Aloud Total Physical Response Scaffolding L2 to L1

From the analysis, the sub-construct occurring in the interview can be seen from Table 2.0 In construct number one, the sub-construct includes the text selection of the participants in their classes. The text selections depended on the students undertaking the subject. They stated that a variety of text needed to be used to cater to students from a different background of the study. The appropriate text selection is one of the skills needed by ESL instructors in reading classes [25]. Reynolds suggested a study on the text selection for different proficiency level of the ESL learners. The second sub-construct in the same category is context. The context in which the text takes place will contribute to the motivation factor of the learners [25]. This is supported

by the study by Kung that described students being more engaged in the reading class when given a relaxing and conducive context to learn [24].

In the general reading ability construct, the participants highlighted the use of translation by the learners to help them comprehend the text. The use of translation here showed that the instructors encourage the learners to translate the reading into their mother tongue. This is said to have caused the most anxiety among the learners. There is also the use of cognitive and metacognitive skills by the students when interacting with a text. These findings support the study by Kung on the same issue. [24]

As for vocabulary, the participant reported of use of pronunciation technique and drilling to encourage the learning of new words in the texts selected. The pronunciation is supported by the use of a dictionary (paperback and phone application 'apps') to introduce new vocabulary and the pronunciation of it in the classroom. Macalister described pronunciation as a language-focused learning activity in which it taught the students on how to read, instead of giving them practice at reading [26] This activity focused on the language aspect of reading and is different from the meaning-focused learning activity that was also proposed by Macalister [26]. The drilling method had them asked the students to repeat the new words to learn, and to construct a sentence using the words. The extension of skills from reading to writing is believed to help learners to memorize and understand the context in which the word can be used.

Under the construct of grammar, there were no specific sub-construct occurred. The participants did not mention the specific teaching of grammar in the reading classes. It is presumed that grammar is acquired through the exposure of the reading text.

The teaching method construct showed the most sub-constructs. Four out of the 13 participants have used reading aloud to foster confidence and good pronunciation of the words for the text that they have selected. This concurs with the findings from the questionnaire that the students reported being slightly anxious from the need to read aloud the reading text. The instructors believed students would be more engaged and involved with the lessons when the reading aloud is being conducted in class. Autonomous learning can be fostered through the reading aloud method, it can also help for anxious students to feel more confident to speak [27]. This also encourages peer correction from the part of the learners. Apart from reading aloud, Total Physical Response (TPR) was also used in the reading class. The participants asked the learners to react to the text by using verbal and non-verbal cues. They were encouraged to actively participate in the narrative of the text with the physical response given as per the instructions of the instructors. Despite TPR being as old as the inception of the teaching of reading itself, it still a favorite to be used by some of the instructors. In scaffolding sub-construct, the participants stated that they guide the learners in understanding the text by dividing the text into chunks and go through each chunk to understand it. The instructors act as the facilitator in highlighting the structure of the text, and the skills needed to break down the text into

comprehensible parts. By providing scaffolding, they believe the learners will be able to understand the text better. A few of the participants have reported the use of the translation of the instruction and the sentences in the text from L2 to L1. This was done only in the poor proficiency reading class. Although translating in L2 classroom remains a debatable issue [28], from the first it was introduced from the grammar-translation method to it being a taboo by some proponents of language learning and teaching [29], it still remains as one of tools used by language instructors to help learners pick up the language more quickly.

4. CONCLUSION

The study conducted showed causes of anxiety among the students from the perspective of the teaching method and how it relates to the actual teaching practice of the instructors. Some of the practice of the teaching of reading proved to cause more anxiety than the other. The EFLRAI instrument used has proven to help in identifying the reading anxiety scale of the learners.

In terms of the teaching practices of the language instructors, they have the awareness and knowledge of the techniques and approaches in the teaching of reading. The participants of the interview also reported having consistently used the same techniques and strategy to teach reading throughout their years of teaching. The participants, however, did not report if any of their teaching methods led to more anxiety of the students or if it does not.

The results of the study can help language instructors to be more aware of their teaching practices in the reading classes and to make adjustments to aspects which can cause more anxiety among the learners. When learners are less anxious, they will be more alert and at ease in the lesson, and thus making the teaching and learning process more effective.

The teaching methods and practices of the language instructors can be retained and improved as they still follow the approaches in the teaching of reading.

Further suggestion on how the teaching of reading can be improved can be seen from the study by Macalister [30]. He reiterated the introduction of the four strands; meaning-focused input, language-focused learning, meaning-focused output, and fluency development in the teaching of reading. He further suggested the inclusion of three aspects; extensive reading, reading fluency development, and intensive reading, in the reading classroom to improve the teaching of reading for the students. This is a comprehensive suggestion on the overall practice of the teaching of reading that can be applied in any level of the reading classes.

On a final note, as the language instructors in the reading classroom, it is best to remember that no matter how sophisticated and advanced the reading lesson was prepared, it can only work if it suits the main receiver of the lesson, the students.

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