

Foreign Language Reading Anxiety and Its Relationship with TEM-4 Scores among English Major Undergraduates in China

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Abstract: With the development of studies on the relationship between foreign language anxiety and specific aspects of foreign language learning, foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA), as a specific language-skill language anxiety, need more attentions and is worth researching in the second language acquisition. The present study's purpose was to identify the level of English major students' foreign language reading anxiety in Chinese context, explore FLRA and its relationship with the Test for English Major Band 4 (TEM-4) scores and identify the potential factors that lead students feel anxious when reading English. To achieving these purposes, 92 English major undergraduates were recruited to respond to a closed-question questionnaire, Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS). Furthermore, 9 interviewees out of 92 participants were chosen by their English proficiency level, decided by their TEM-4 scores, to have 15-minute semi-structured interviews.

Keywords: Foreign Language Reading Anxiety; Test for English Major Band 4; English Major Undergraduates

1. Introduction

Reading is a key language input activity that plays an important role in second language acquisition; however it may be impeded by anxiety. In second language acquisition, researchers have indicated that foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a common issue among second language learners and it also has a negative impact on learners' performance. Anxiety has been found an affective factor that may impede the reading process, therefore reading is inseparable from foreign language anxiety. Horwitz (1999) pointed out that foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA) is related but can be distinguished from FLA. FLRA is a kind of language-skills specific

anxiety in FLA, and research of FLRA and language performance have been undertaken among different learners in different contexts. Numerous empirical studies have indicated that FLRA may negatively affect language performance in different contexts (Li & Lu, 2017). However, the research of Mill, Pajares and Herron (2006) indicated there may be no relationship between reading anxiety and language performance. Due to these inconsistencies, it is necessary to identify the relationship in order to help students and teachers to learn and teach a second language.

2. Methodology

To explore English reading anxiety and its relationship with TEM-4 scores, this study analysed the existence of reading anxiety among English major students, the relationship between reading anxiety and TEM-4 scores and the reasons why students feel anxious during English reading. It drew on two research methods, quantitative method (via questionnaires) and qualitative method (via semi-structured interview).

3. Discussion

3.1 Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Levels of the Participants

Based on the FLRAS, the scores participants got from FLRAS illustrated that English major students experience English reading anxiety to some degree and their FLRA generally was at the medium level. Non-English students have FLRA higher than English major students, which was demonstrated by some mean values of FLRA in empirical research. This may be explained as English major students may need higher scores on the English test in the college entrance examination according to university requirements, which indicates that English major students may have higher English proficiency level. When enrolling in universities, their specialized courses are

related to English language, therefore these courses are taught in English and their textbook and teaching materials are in English. During in-class and out-of-class time, English major students do a lot of English reading as pre-reading or homework tasks. Because of these affecting factors, the FLRA level of English major students is reasonable lower than non-English major students.

According to the descriptive statistics, it is evident that the range of FLRAS scores vary largely and some English major students had quite a high FLRA. The studies of Huang (2013) similarly had a small proportion of students with high FLRA which may not be accidental data, because English major students with higher language proficiency can higher FLRA. Students with higher level FLRA may not meet the standard language proficiency level as they are supposed to, which can lead to English major students with low English proficiency and higher FLRA. Another potential cause was personal factors related to English reading anxiety; therefore, there were some individual differences on English reading anxiety between each English major student. The following detailed discussion will explain the possible reasons why English major students experience anxiety when they are reading in English.

3.2 Relationship between Foreign Language Reading Anxiety and TEM-4 Scores

The results show that there was a significant negative correlation between FLRA and TEM-4 scores, and FLRA was a significant negatively correlated predictor for TEM-4 scores, with no difference in TEM-4 scores between low, intermediate and high English proficiency groups.

The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient found that the total score of overall FLRAS negatively correlated with TEM-4 scores. Therefore, higher English reading anxiety can have a debilitating effect on TEM-4 scores and lead to lower TEM-4 scores among English major students. The result is in line with most previous studies both in the foreign and Chinese context (Matsumura, 2001). In the Japanese context, Matsumura (2001) concluded that English reading anxiety can be a detrimental factor on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) as an English proficiency test.

Research exploring this relationship among non-English major students in the Chinese context showed a negative correlation with FLRA and College English Test, the compulsory English proficiency test for non-English major students. (Qiu & Liao, 2007). Combining these results in different contexts, FLRA generally can have a negative effect on language proficiency test.

Similarly, the results of Linear Regression Coefficient demonstrated that FLRA can be a significant negative predictor of TEM-4 scores, which has not been explored in previous studies among English major students. The present study also found a negative correlation, as English major students with higher FLRA tended to achieve lower TEM-4 scores, as FLRA may impede learners' cognitive and metacognitive reading processes. Cognitive reading processes are affected by cognitive deficits, with students affected by anxiety spending more time on non-reading comprehension activities. Metacognitive reading processes are affected by high anxiety which may disrupt reading comprehension goal setting and solving (Kim, 1998). When doing English reading, students with higher anxiety levels may have problems in recognizing words and sentences' structures in the decoding processes. Due to this anxiety and worry, students may spend more time on decoding processes, and less time on comprehending processes. After decoding, students need to set comprehension goals, activate background knowledge and choose appropriate reading strategies to comprehend reading texts. These negative feelings can result in highly anxious students misusing reading strategies, failing to recall background knowledge and failing to set reading goals. Hence, FLRA has a negative effect on language proficiency tests, which should not be ignored in language learning and teaching.

The One-way ANOVA test did not indicate there was a significant difference in TEM-4 scores between low, medium and high English reading anxiety groups. This limited number of participants may have affected the results of the One-way ANOVA test. Another possible influencing factor is the variance of TEM-4 scores. In 2016, the National Advisory Committee for Foreign Language Teaching increased the overall test difficulty and changed the test contents and types of test

question of the TEM-4. The number of reading comprehension questions increased with a new type of question: short answer questions requiring limited words, which require higher reading comprehension abilities and may be more difficult than multiple choice. All participants in this study took the new TEM-4, which affected participants' scores. Therefore, it is harder to gain higher scores and difficult to have the large range of scores of the previous test. Hence, the limited number of participants and small TEM-4 scores range may lead to the difference in the One-way ANOVA results.

3.3 Sources of the Participants' Foreign Language Reading Anxiety

Although there are some similar results for the anxiety level and the relationship between FLRA and TEM-4 scores, there were still some differences between previous research in terms of the potential factors causing FLRA of English major students. In the present study, these were three common factors analysed from the questionnaire: negative motivation of learning English reading, insufficient confidence in English reading abilities and lack of reading comprehension abilities. In addition, there are different factors causing FLRA between different English proficiency groups. From the semi-structured interviews, unfamiliar vocabulary was introduced as a source that increased FLRA among three English proficiency groups, especially for the low language proficiency group. It is unexpected that intermediate and high English proficiency groups were worried about the reading outcome which increased FLRA. For all three English proficiency students, test-taking is an anxiety-provoking factor.

The lack motivation in learning English reading was one of the factors that caused anxiety in English reading, which had not been analysed in previous studies for English major students. Although this factor has not been explored among English major students, Li and Lu (2017) analysed this factor through the Pearson Product-moment Correlation Coefficient and found that FLRA had a negative correlation with English reading learning motivation. Thus, higher English leaning motivation may contribute to lower English reading anxiety and vice versa, which is consistent with the results of the present

study. Theoretically, foreign language learning motivation, an affective factor in language learning and teaching, is the willingness of energising language learning behaviours which can influence the learning rate and progress of students (Gardner, 1985). Foreign language learning motivation interacts mutually with FLRA, another affective factor in language acquisition. In this study, most of the participants chose this major for their interests, and were expected to have higher English learning motivation. However, the reading classes for English majors are mainly designed for teaching vocabulary, grammar and reading strategies in order to pass examinations, which can largely reduce their willingness in reading. Hence, this unwillingness may lead to negative feelings towards English reading increasing their anxiety when reading English.

Secondly, most English major students experienced insufficient confidence in their English reading abilities which is another reading anxiety-arousing factor. In the present study, insufficient confidence of English major students may be the underestimating of their abilities rather than a feature of personality. Indeed, it is regarded as a dimension of self-esteem. Theoretically, self-esteem is linked to neuroticism that has a tendency to generate anxiety. Many researchers concluded that self-esteem and language anxiety are related and interactive mutually, therefore, a higher level of self-esteem may lead to a lower level of foreign language anxiety (Horwitz, 1999). In the Chinese context, reading passages are combined with comprehension questions and teachers ask students to look up new words and finish questions; therefore, English major students may have misconceptions that reading comprehension means understanding every word and answering every questions correctly (Lee, 1999). Consequently, when they meet some unknown words and some unanswerable questions, they may feel pressure and question their reading comprehension abilities. This low confidence may result in difficulties in deciding on their reading strategies usage and hesitating about reading outcomes, increasing their FLRA.

Thirdly, reading comprehension abilities were a factor that influence English reading anxiety. With regard to the previous empirical research, reading comprehension abilities are the common factor that cause FLRA for both

English and non-English major students in different contexts. Reading comprehension abilities can strongly influence reading comprehension outcomes (Grabe, 2009). However, reading comprehension abilities are slightly different for English major students in the present study as they may have higher English proficiency levels. For non-English major students, the lack of reading comprehension abilities could reflect lack of reading strategies (Wang & Li, 2011). In contrast, English major students generally know reading strategies as they have had reading classes for teaching reading strategies. Therefore, the lack of reading comprehension abilities means they may not have metacognitive awareness (Huang, 2013). Without metacognitive awareness, these highly anxious students may have problems in strategy choice and use, which can lead to dysfluent reading processes and unsuccessful comprehension. Hence, reading comprehension abilities can have a negative relationship with the degree of English reading anxiety, while the effect process may be different between non-English and English major students.

Fourthly, unfamiliar vocabulary was a potential factor increasing English reading anxiety, especially for low English proficiency groups, corresponding with the findings with the previous research. This result was not revealed in the questionnaire as it was not the most influential factors. However, this factor was highlighted in the semi-structured interview especially for students with limited English competence. Vocabulary perhaps is the most important component resource for reading (Grabe, 2009). When meeting unfamiliar words, readers may feel they are blocked by these words and try several ways to comprehend the meaning. This problem means that the limited attentional capacity may need to be reallocated, therefore it can cause reading anxiety (Lee, 1999). By contrast with studies for non-English major students, unfamiliar vocabulary may not be a significant problem for English major students as they have higher language proficiency, however it was a significant problem arousing reading anxiety for non-English major students who had low English proficiency and limited vocabulary. Therefore, as unfamiliar vocabulary can block the reading processes, this blocked feeling may

arouse English reading anxiety for all language proficiency readers. Due to limited vocabulary size, lower English proficiency readers may meet more blocks which can increase the degree of English reading anxiety.

Fifthly, worrying about the reading outcome as a detailed factor of insufficient confidence was the unexpected affecting factor for intermediate and high English proficiency students, which has seldom been covered in previous studies in the Chinese context. Al-Shboul, Ahmad, Nordin & Rahman (2013) applied semi-structured interviews in a Jordanian EFL context. They found from their qualitative data that English major students were more worried about reading outcomes and students with higher English proficiency expressed that they intensively focus on accuracy of reading outcomes which may prevent them from comprehending. In the Chinese examination-orientated education system, students' language proficiency is assessed by different kinds of tests. The teaching gives students the misconception that proficient reading comprehension abilities equal correct comprehension questions answers (Lee, 1999). Therefore, when doing English reading, students focus on worrying about the reading outcomes instead of reading comprehension. Especially for higher language proficiency students, because they are supposed to answer correctly, they are afraid of being questioned by teachers and peers and lost their sense of identity if they make some mistakes. Hence, worrying about the reading outcomes can distract readers' attention from reading comprehension, which leads readers to have a higher FLRA.

Sixthly, the test situation was an increasing reading anxiety factors for low, intermediate and high English proficiency students based on the semi-structured interviews. Based on the previous research of the relationship between test-taking anxiety and language performance, test-taking anxiety generally has a negative relationship with reading performance. In the Chinese context, there are many language tests to assess students' language proficiency. According to the students' responses, they were reluctant to do tests and had negative feelings towards tests. In addition, anxiety is associated with the need of extra time and effort to solve problems (Macintyre, 1994). With enough reading time, students stated that

they can read texts carefully and repeatedly until they find the right answers for the reading comprehension questions. Owing to the resistance and time pressure, students may have nervous feelings when taking tests, which increases their feeling of FLRA. Hence, test-taking is likely to increase the FLRA of English major students.

4. Conclusion

Since the results concluded that English major students have a medium level of FLRA and there are six factors affecting FLRA, it is necessary that both teachers and students take actions to reduce the level of FLRA and create a low-anxious English reading learning environment.

Teachers should make some positive changes to solve the FLRA problems. The first change needed is converting the traditional teacher-centred language teaching into learner-centred language teaching, as the traditional teaching methods fail to motivate learners' learning. Regarding English reading, the task-based language teaching method can be an effective method for university students, which assigns tasks in a given context for learners and encourages learners to finish for the communication purpose. As students are largely involved in student-centred teaching, their motivation for learning English reading can be increased. Reading teaching should also focus on the improvement of reading comprehension abilities rather than vocabulary, grammar and reading strategies teaching. Concentrating on building reading comprehension abilities, effective reading strategies and metacognitive awareness may help readers' comprehension and reduce anxiety. Additionally, teachers should choose the most appropriate reading material according to students' real abilities, allowing students to gain confidence when reading the texts within their reading abilities.

Students should be aware of and actively try and reduce FLRA. During the language learning process, students especially the lower English proficiency students should realise their deficiencies in vocabulary and use their own favourite vocabulary learning method to enlarge their vocabulary size. Intermediate and high English proficiency students should set realistic expectations of their reading abilities rather than the pursuit of accuracy in

answering reading comprehension questions, overcome the misconceptions that successful comprehension equals correctly answering comprehension questions. Additionally, students should adopt a positive attitude toward test-taking and assessment. By practicing tests before the real test, students may adapt to the test situation and become familiar with the test processes, which can reduce learners' fear of taking tests.

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