

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ANXIETY AND READING
COMPREHENSION AMONG IRANIAN UTM STUDENTS

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To my beloved parents, thank you for always being there for me, supporting me and encouraging me to be the best that I can be.

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ABSTRACT

This investigation intended to find out the relationship between anxiety and reading comprehension. The subjects included forty-five postgraduate students who took the Intensive English Course (IEC) in UTM. The participants were asked to read texts, one in Persian and the other in English, in order to investigate the relationship between anxiety and reading comprehension while reading L1 and L2 texts. Anxiety questionnaires were used as the research instruments to identify the different levels of anxiety among three groups of learners successful, moderately successful, and less successful. The data were collected and analyzed through Pearson correlation and ANOVA. Results from the data analysis showed that the relation between reading and anxiety scores in L2 and L1 was negative, in which both first and second hypotheses were approved. It means that when the reading score was high the anxiety score was low and vice versa. In addition, the comparing means between groups for both L1 and L2 showed that the anxiety between groups was different. In other words, anxiety significantly differs between the three groups (successful, moderately successful, and less successful) in L1 and L2; therefore the third hypothesis was approved. As a recommendation, the researcher believes that the EFL reading instructors could help students comprehend a reading text better. In order to achieve this, they should have a good relationship with their students, provide a relax atmosphere, and give them some advice to cope with their anxiety.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini dijalankan untuk mengkaji hubungan di antara pembacaan teks pemahaman dengan sifat kebimbangan atau kerisauan. Responden terdiri daripada 40 orang pelajar pasca siswazah yang telah mengambil Intensive English Course (IEC) di UTM. Responden diminta untuk membaca sebuah teks berbahasa Persian manakala beberapa teks berbahasa Inggeris. Ini adalah untuk mengkaji hubungan di antara sifat kebimbangan dengan pembacaan teks dalam bahasa pertama mahupun bahasa kedua. Soal selidik telah digunakan sebagai kaedah kajian dalam menentukan pelbagai jenis dan tahap kebimbangan di antara 3 kumpulan pelajar iaitu kurang berjaya-berjaya-paling berjaya. Setelah itu, data telah dikumpul dan dianalisa. Hasil dari analisis yang telah dijalankan menunjukkan hubungan antara teks pembacaan dengan kebimbangan berada pada tahap negatif. Ini menunjukkan bahawa skor bacaan di tahap tinggi manakala tahap kebimbangan di tahap yang rendah dan begitu juga sebaliknya. Dalam erti kata lain, tahap kebimbangan berbeza di antara 3 kumpulan dalam penggunaan bahasa pertama mahupun bahasa kedua. Sebagai cadangan, penyelidik percaya guru/pensyarah bahasa sangat penting dalam membantu pelajar memahami teks dengan lebih baik. Bagi mencapai tahap tersebut, para guru perlulah mempunyai hubungan yang baik dan rapat dengan para pelajar, menyediakan suasana pembelajaran yang selesa dan menyenangkan serta membimbing mereka dalam menangani kebimbangan dalam diri mereka.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ELPT	English Language Proficiency Test
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
UTM	University Teknologi Malaysia
TEFL	Teaching English as Foreign Language
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
IEC	Intensive English Course
ANOVA	Analysis OF Variance
FLA	Foreign Language Anxiety
TOEFL	Test of English as Foreign Language
SPSS	Statistical Program for Social Sciences
FLRA	Foreign Language Reading Anxiety

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

There is a growing body of research on the anxiety within the area of reading in a second or foreign language. Reading comprehension is perhaps the most important skill that a person will learn. The importance of this skill to language learning and teaching is to the extent that in one specific period in the history of language learning/teaching, a process called “reading comprehension” emerged which focused on reading as an instrument for language learning (Brown, 2000,p.45). Farhady, Jafarpour, and Birjandi (2001, p.247), in stressing the importance of reading for learning EFL, maintain “reading is the most important skill for most language learners in general and for EFL learners in particular”. It is the ability to read that leads to success in academic achievement and to the enrichment of the life of the avid reader.

Alderson and Urquhart (1984) describe different variables, which can affect reading comprehension. These variables include the reader's memory, emotion, attention, feelings, and anxiety, all of which are important for the reader to understand the text. Since human beings are emotional creatures, any theory of language and language learning without considering this aspect would not be valid. Anxiety is part of human emotions. A person whose mind is full of apprehension is not free to use his or her abilities and energy to their full extent. A lot of people who are under high anxiety perform poorly in academic achievement tests (Malik & Bald, 2006). Bandura (1997) believes that human achievement depends on the interaction between one's behaviors, personal factors (e.g., thought, beliefs), and environmental conditions may lead to either high or low anxiety.

1.2 Background of the study

While reading, texts are usually analyzed in different linguistic units (structure, words, and other effective elements), which are the best predictors of difficulty. According to Alderson (2000) reading comprehension consists of two variables: the reader and the text. That is why the reader's memory, emotion, attention, feelings, and concentration are important when understanding the text.

In Iran, as a problem in the context of TEFL, teachers focus their attention on the product of reading. Language research is generally based on data generated by this product-oriented instruction rather than the process of reading comprehension including behaviors, techniques and classroom interactions. Since, product focuses on different readers who may engage in very different reading processes, but the understandings they end up with will be similar. Thus, what matters is not how a reader reaches that understanding, but what understanding a reader reaches. Therefore, based on Dunkin and Biddle's (1974) in the study of classroom teaching reading different variables include aspects such as context, presage, process, and product need to interplay together.

Other reading problems that Iranian EFL students, especially university students, have during reading comprehension are related to misunderstanding of the reading process, insufficient competence in and the use of English, as well as differences between Persian and English, which caused anxiety, and a sense of failure for students who did not have the skills to cope with it.

1.3 Statement of the problem

At the academic level, reading is one of the essential components that students should master because it is the main key to knowledge and

to bridge international resources and references. Foreign language anxiety is a factor, which can affect the reading comprehension, and levels of anxiety can be considerable among college students. Despite the importance of EFL reading, few studies have been conducted on the relationship between anxiety and reading comprehension.

As English is a foreign language in Iran, Persian students face difficulties in reading textbooks and related references in English. There may be two reasons for this issue. First, Persian students have low comprehension in reading texts. Akbari and Mirhashemi (2000, p.49) claim that, “the majority of Iranian students are poor readers in English (and also in Persian). They waste a great deal of time and effort, and their comprehension is not proportionate to the trouble they go through”. Therefore, the Iranian learners feel lost and anxious because they lack the tools necessary to succeed in reading comprehension.

Second, foreign language anxiety affects their reading comprehension. It is believed that college anxiety (MacGeorge, Samter, and Gillihan, 2005; Sasaki and Yamasaki, 2007) and depression are two major problems for college students. Research has shown that the vast majority of college students experience a moderate (77.6%) or serious (10.4%) amount of anxiety (cited by Dixon, Kurpius, and Robinson, 2008).

Following the above, anxiety can play a significant role in reading comprehension. Therefore the purpose of this study is to examine the

relationship between anxiety and reading comprehension among Iranian EFL learners.

1.4 Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate the relationship between anxiety and reading comprehension in L1 & L2.
2. To consider the effect of achievement level.
3. To determine the possible differences in the extent to which learners' anxiety is related to reading comprehension at different levels of achievement.

1.5 Research questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the relationship between Iranian learners' anxiety and their reading comprehension in L1 & L2?
2. Do highly successful, moderately successful, and less successful learners differ in their levels of anxiety when they read?

1.6 Hypotheses

This study hypothesized that:

1. : There is a negative relationship between Iranian learners' anxiety and their reading comprehension in L1.
2. : There is a negative relationship between Iranian learners' anxiety and their reading comprehension in L2.
3. There are differences in the levels of anxiety among successful, moderately successful, and less successful learners in L1 and L2 when they read.

As mentioned, the aim of this study is to find out the relationship between anxiety and reading comprehension as well as whether successful, moderately successful, and less successful learners differ in their levels of anxiety in L1 and L2.

1.7 Significance of the study

Few studies have focused on exploring the relationship between EFL learners' anxiety and their reading comprehension. The significance of this study can be assessed in theoretical terms as well as empirical points of view. This can be applied to the field of language teaching. Moreover, it provides valuable data to those who serve on the front line of education. The research results may make both learners and

teachers aware of the negative effects of anxiety on reading comprehension. It suggests that learners should try to cope with anxiety in order to have better reading comprehension, and also it serves as a guide for foreign language teachers in terms of helping them to decrease EFL learners' anxiety by actively being supportive and also providing them with a comprehensive guide to deal with anxiety and pressures of life in order to increase their achievement, especially in terms of their reading ability.

1.8 Scope of the study

The scope of this study is limited to only Iranian students studying in Malaysia; other local students are not considered. These students came to Malaysia to continue their post-graduate education. Since English is considered a foreign language in Iran the English proficiency level of these students range from low to intermediate. Moreover, these subjects are chosen from IEC classes, including different countries; however this research is conducted on Iranian students.

Moreover, there are several reasons affecting reading comprehension skill such as lack of focus on reading skills, lack of use of English in students' real life, background knowledge, anxiety etc., but this study attempts to relate reading comprehension skills and anxiety level of students. In addition, other variables in language learning such

as the skills of writing, listening and speaking as well as factors such as gender, age, and phonological awareness are not within our interest and thus are not in the scope of this study.

1.9 Definition terms

First Language:

A first language (also native language, mother tongue) is the **language(s)** a person has learned from birth or within the **critical period**, or that a person speaks the best and so is often the basis for **sociolinguistic identity**. For the purpose of this study the first language means Persian.

Second Language:

A second language is a language which is not their native language but which they use at work or at school. For the purpose of this study the second language means English.

English as Foreign Language:

English as a Foreign Language is a situation in countries in which the English language is not considered an official or even second language. In this situation, English is taught only in language classes, or through self-learning, and there is no official usage out of class.

Anxiety:

Language anxiety can be defined as the fear or apprehension which occurs when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language according to Gardner and MacIntyre (1993), or the worry and negative emotional reactions when learning or using a second language (MacIntyre 1999). In some cases, language anxiety has actually been cited as “possibly the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process” (Arnold and Brown, 1999, p.8). Also, anxiety can be defined as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” as asserted by Spielberger and cited in Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p. 125.

Reading comprehension:

Widdowson (1979) defines reading as the process in which the reader tries to get linguistic information through print. It is actually a complex activity and it needs interdisciplinary studies and guidelines. Additionally, reading comprehension refers to the ability to understand

information presented in written form. While this process usually requires understanding textbook, understanding assignments, reading comprehension skills also may affects one's interpretation of directions on exams, labs, and homework assignments and completion of job applications and questionnaires.

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