
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Exploration of Foreign Language Reading Anxiety of Young EFL Students

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| ABSTRACT

Despite the extensive research attention foreign language anxiety has received, most studies have focused on foreign language classroom anxiety or foreign language speaking anxiety of EFL learners at the university level. Foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA), particularly that of young EFL learners under the age of 12, has been understudied. The present study examined the foreign language reading anxiety level of 137 young EFL learners in a primary school in China. A questionnaire adapted from Saito et al.'s (1999) Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale was adopted to determine the level of students' FLRA. The potential sources of their FLRA were identified with an adapted version of the questionnaire devised by Ahmad et al. (2013). Results of the present study indicate that young EFL learners generally have medium-level FLRA. In addition, textual features, including unknown words and unfamiliar words, have been identified as the main source of FLRA of young EFL learners, whereas personal factors are not as prominent as shown in previous studies conducted on adult EFL learners.

| KEYWORDS

Language anxiety, foreign language reading anxiety, young EFL learner

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1. Introduction

Anxiety generally refers to people's "apprehension, a vague fear that is indirectly associated with an object" (Scovel, 1978, p.34). MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) defined language anxiety (LA) as "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning, or the worry and negative emotional reaction arousal when learning or using a second or foreign language" (p.301). Horwitz (1986) applied the term of anxiety to the specific domain of second/foreign language learning and defined foreign language anxiety (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" (p.128). Saito et al. (1999) were the first scholars who reveal that foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA) is a distinct phenomenon from, though it is also related to, foreign language anxiety in general. They defined foreign language reading anxiety as "a specific anxiety type distinguishable from the more general types of FL anxiety" (p.215).

EFL students' foreign language anxiety has received extensive academic attention (e.g., Ahmad et al, 2013; Akkakoson, 2016; Al-Shboul et al., 2013; Kuru-Gonen, 2009 ; Marwan, 2007; Liu & Huang, 2011; Saito et al., 1999). Even since FLA was recognized as an effective factor that plays an important role in the learning of a foreign language, a considerable number of studies have been carried out to examine its impacts on students' learning process (e.g., Demirdaş & Bozdoğan, 2013; Herwanto, 2013), learning outcomes (e.g., Baran-Łucarz & Słowik-Krogulec 2023; Horwitz, 2001) language performances (e.g., Demirdaş & Bozdoğan, 2013; Subekti, 2018, Zhang, 2019) and other affective factors related to language learning (e.g., Alamer & Almulhim, 2021; Eysenck, 1979; Philips, 1992; Sarason, 1980; Tobias, 1979;) within various educational contexts. Empirical studies have also been conducted to explore how FLA can be reduced or alleviated (e.g., Alsowat, 2016). Despite the considerable number of studies on EFL students' foreign language anxiety, their foreign language reading anxiety, as a distinct but related phenomenon, has been understudied. Extant studies on foreign language reading anxiety have mostly been conducted in college education settings and

very few studies have attempted to explore foreign language reading anxiety of young EFL learners. To compensate the research gap, the present study examined the following two research questions:

1. What is the level of foreign language reading anxiety of young EFL learners in China?
2. What are the main sources of foreign language reading anxiety of young EFL learners in China?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualization of Reading

Reading has long been recognized as one of the most complex activities humans can perform (Kendeou, McMaster, & Christ, 2016). Scholars' understanding of reading has evolved with time. A considerable number of theoretical models of reading have been put forth and they tend to focus on several rather than all components and processes of reading as the recognized complexity of reading has almost precluded the possibility of one single theoretical model that can be applied to all types of readers, texts, and discourse contexts (Kendeou & O'Brien, 2014; Perfetti & Stafura, 2014). In the 1960s, Goodman (1967) conceptualized reading as a selective process that involves partial use of available minimal language cues selected from perceptual input on the basis of the reader's expectation. He pointed out that as this partial information is processed, tentative decisions are made to be confirmed, rejected, or refined as reading progress. In the 1970s, researchers started to shift the focus of their attention from decoding to comprehension and started to highlight the bidirectional nature of reading. For example, Widdowson (1979) indicated that the actual aim of reading is not merely partaking in an interaction with others but to derive something which enlarges and holds conceptual world from the interaction. Reading therefore should be considered as an interaction between the writer and the reader that is mediated through the text, rather than merely as a reaction to text. Reading is not only a process that readers acquire contents on the pages but a process that brings meanings into text. He also suggested that reading be viewed as a psycholinguistic process in which the reader begins with a set of linguistic symbols that are assigned to illustrate the ideas they wish to express and the process ends when the reader parses as much of the author's meaning as possible. Bernhardt (1991) proposed the combination of cognitive and social perspectives in the exploration of the nature of reading. From the perspective of cognition, the process of extracting meaning in reading is an inner behavior of readers that happens only in their brain. From the social perspective of society, reading should be regarded as a process of meaning construction and reading materials are not fixed and can be analyzed by different readers in different contexts. Reading texts include both language factors such as vocabulary, syntax and sentence structure and social attributes such as theme, content and style. Readers are supposed to combine the language and social factors during the reading process.

2.2 Studies on foreign language anxiety

Horwitz et al. (1986) suggested that foreign language anxiety was responsible for students' negative emotional reactions to language learning since they had to deal with a totally foreign language and culture. They identified three components of foreign language classroom anxiety: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. To measure foreign language classroom anxiety, they designed the 33-item Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). Level of foreign language anxiety of students in different educational settings and the potential sources and impacts of foreign language anxiety have been two consistently popular topics in the broad field of language teaching and learning over the past four decades (e.g., Aida, 1994; Horwitz, 1986, 2001; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Liu & Huang, 2011; MacLntyre & Charos, 1996; MacLntyre & Gardner, 1989, 1994; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999; Phillips, 1992; Proulx, 1991; Saito & Samimy, 1996; Saito, Garza, & Horwitz, 1999; Shao, Yu, & Ji, 2013; Tran, Moni, & Baldauf, 2013; Yan & Horwitz, 2008; Young, 1991). In most of the studies, foreign language learners' final scores or scores of standardized proficiency tests were used as the measure of language learning outcome. Most studies have identified a negative correlation between foreign language anxiety and language learning outcomes.

One thing that is worth noting is that in the early phases of foreign language anxiety, empirical studies have focused on foreign language anxiety in general and anxiety related to the four specific skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing was usually not distinguished (e.g., Aida, 1994; Bailey, Onwuegbuzie, & Daley, 2000; Burden, 2004; Casdado & Dereshiwsky, 2001; Cheng, 2004; Horwitz, 1986, 2001; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Sanchez-Herrero & Sanchez, 1992). Empirical studies have subsequently suggested that each of the four skill has its own pertinent anxiety and research was carried out on skill-related anxiety such as foreign language listening anxiety (e.g., Chang, 2010; Chang & Read, 2008; Gönen, 2009; Kim, 2000; Kimura, 2008; Ko, 2010), foreign language reading anxiety (e.g., Bektas-Cetinkaya, 2011; Kuru-Gonen, 2005, 2009; Muhlis, 2017; Zhao, 2009), foreign language writing anxiety (e.g., Chen & Lin, 2009; Cheng, 2002, 2004; Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999), and foreign language speaking anxiety (e.g., Abdullah & Rahman, 2010; Cheng, 2017; Osboe, Fujimura, & Hirschel, 2007).

2.3 Relationship between foreign language reading anxiety and foreign language anxiety

Saito et al. (1999) explored the possibility of anxiety in response to foreign language reading in 30 intact first-semester classes of Spanish, Russian, and Japanese, with a total number of 383 students in an English university. Their study provided the earliest empirical evidence for the existence of foreign language reading anxiety and confirmed that reading in a foreign language can be anxiety-provoking for some students. They further suggested two aspects of foreign language reading that can potentially elicit anxiety: unfamiliar scripts and writing systems, and unfamiliar culture. Unfamiliar culture is not likely to cause immediate foreign language reading anxiety as unfamiliar scripts and writing systems do. Saito et al. (1999) designed the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale, a five-point likert scale consisting of 20 items ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” as a specific scale to measure foreign language reading anxiety.

Saito et al.' (1999) view that the level of foreign language reading anxiety is dependent on the specific target language and would vary with the target language is echoed by Sellers (2000) whose study explored the relationship between language anxiety and reading in Spanish as a foreign language. She applied both FLCAS and FLRAS to 89 English university students and revealed that the two scales shared less than 50% of the variance, indicating that foreign language reading anxiety was distinct from the more general term of foreign language anxiety. Kuru-Gonen (2005, 2007, 2009) conducted a series of three consecutive studies to investigate whether foreign language reading anxiety should be distinguished from general foreign language anxiety. She also administered FLCAS and FLRAS to first year Turkish students who were learning English as a foreign language. A significant correlation of .45 was established between the results of the scales and the two measures shared approximately 20% of the variance. In a more recent attempt to investigate the relationship between foreign language anxiety as a general phenomenon and foreign language reading anxiety as a specific skill-related anxiety, Wu (2011) administered both FLCAS and FLRAS to 91 Taiwanese university students who were learning English as a foreign language. Pearson Product-Moment correlation coefficient again revealed a significant positive correlation between the two scales ($r = .68$, $p = .000$, $n = 91$). The study provided additional evidence for foreign language reading anxiety as a distinct phenomenon.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

137 participants consisting of 77 (56.2%) male and 60 (43.8%) female EFL learners from a primary school in China were recruited. The participants were all primary school students of Year Five and were all enrolled in compulsory English courses offered by their school. All participants aged between 11 and 12 and the majority of the participated (91.2%) aged 11.

3.2 Instrument

Two questionnaires were adopted in the present study. First, a Chinese version of Saito et al.'s (1999) Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale was administered to the participants during a self-study session. Minor modifications were made to the original version of the scale to avoid possible confusion or misunderstanding before it was administered. The second questionnaire consisted of 26 questions that aimed to collect information about the possible sources of students' foreign language reading anxiety. All items on the two questionnaires were placed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The second questionnaire was adapted from the questionnaire devised by Ahmad et al (2013) to explore the potential sources of foreign language reading anxiety in a Jordanian EFL context.

3.3 Procedures

The participants were debriefed on the purpose of the present study before the two scales were administered. The second questionnaire was administered one week after the first was administered. After the administered of the first questionnaire was administered, the students were classified by their levels of foreign language reading anxiety.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Levels of foreign language reading anxiety

In the present study, students' level of foreign language reading anxiety was measured by a Chinese version of Saito et al.'s (1999) Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale. Kuru-Gonen's (2007) criteria was subsequently adopted to label students' levels of foreign language reading anxiety as low, medium and high. Only 11 (8.02%) students were labeled as “high foreign language reading anxiety” and 15 (10.95%) as “low foreign language anxiety”. The dominant majority of the participants (111, approximately 81%) fell into the category of medium foreign language reading anxiety. One possible explanation for the medium level of foreign language reading anxiety reported in the present study could be that they were not totally unfamiliar with English reading texts and Chinese students in the urban areas in generally are exposed to the English language no later than 6 years old. Reading activities do not seem to provoke too much anxiety for young EFL learners in China. This could be partially explained by the fact that Chinese EFL teachers usually attach much more importance to the development of students' reading skills and reading usually constitutes the largest proportion of students' English exercises and carries the heaviest weight in large-scale language proficiency tests in China. Educational policies in China that encourage young students to read extensively both in their own native language and in English might have also contributed to the medium level of foreign

language reading anxiety reported in the present study. The potential benefits of reading were reiterated throughout Chinese EFL learners' K12 education process.

An interesting finding that has emerged from the present study is that 104 students (75.9%) indicated that they would be happy to learn to speak rather than to read English. This is consistently with the findings of Liu's (2011) investigation into the foreign language reading anxiety of university students that EFL learners prefer speaking English over reading written texts in English. In a vast contrast to previous studies, a very small proportion of the participants (9.48%) in the present study agreed that they would get upset if they were not sure whether they understood what they were reading. 123 participants (89.7%) agreed that reading English would no longer be difficulty once they get used to it.

4.2 Sources of foreign language reading anxiety

In the present study, the possible sources of foreign language reading anxiety of young EFL learners in China were analyzed via an adapted Chinese version of the questionnaire designed by Ahmad et al (2013). According to Ahmad et al. (2013), potential sources of foreign language reading anxiety can be classified into two broad categories: personal factors which include worrying about reading effects and fear of making errors, and text features including unfamiliar culture, unfamiliar topic and unfamiliar vocabulary. Saito et al. (1999) also suggested that unfamiliar culture could be a potential source of foreign language reading anxiety. Their view resonated with Kuru-Gonen (2009) who highlighted the possibility that unknown cultural content might oppose the learners from comprehending foreign language text and topics that are not interesting or complicated might elicit reading anxiety. In a similar manner, Kuru-Gonen (2009) categorized uninteresting topics and unknown vocabulary as sources of foreign language reading anxiety caused by reading text. Descriptive analysis of the information collected by the second questionnaire adopted in the present study showed that for young EFL learners in China, the most possible sources of foreign language reading anxiety were, in descending order, unfamiliar vocabulary, unfamiliar culture and unfamiliar topic. In the present study, worrying about reading effects and being afraid of making errors were not shown as prominent factors that could largely account for the medium level of foreign language reading anxiety observed.

Vocabulary emerged as the most salient factor in the present study. Almost all the participants (135, 98.5%) admitted that they enjoyed reading the text in English when they knew its translation. A similarly high proportion of participants (129, 94.1%) agreed that they would focus on words when reading English texts because if they know the words, they can understand the text. Approximately half of the participants (62, 45.2%) strongly agreed that they did not like reading texts with a lot of difficult words. There were 93 students (67.88%) who considered words with more than one meaning as a great difficulty for them when they were reading an English text. More than half of the participants (87, 63.5%) admitted that they could not understand the idea when they encountered words with more than one meaning in their reading. Approximately two thirds of the participants (92, 67.2%) believed that when one English word was connected with another to change the meaning, it would cause frustration for them. Interestingly, very few students (6, 4.37%) considered that words they could not pronounce in English would bother them when they were reading a text in English. Berkemeyer (1989) and Liu (2011) suggested that while students usually focus on the recognition of phonemic words when they are speaking English, they tend to focus on the relationship between words while reading a text.

The present study also revealed that unfamiliar cultures posed great challenges for young EFL learners in China when they were reading English texts. 100 participants (73%) considered it necessary to know more about the English culture in order to fully understand the texts they read. More than three-quarters of the participants (146, 76%) admitted that for them, English culture was something very foreign and unfamiliar. This finding pointed out the need for EFL teachers to provide students with more cultural background information before they assign reading tasks to students. Yet cautions must be taken when generalizing this finding to other EFL learning contexts as the meaning of word of "culture" itself might be ambiguous or vague for the young participants in the study and failing to understand the word culture correctly, as used in the questionnaire, might hinder the participants from reporting their sources of reading anxiety in an accurate way. Given the young age of the participants in the present study, it might be necessary to check their understanding or perception of culture before asking them to indicate their opinions concerning the relationship between English culture and reading English.

Neither of the two personal factors, worrying about reading effects and being afraid of making errors, was identified in the present study as a major source of foreign language reading anxiety for young EFL learners in China. While 68 participants (49.6%) admitted that they would get nervous when they read a passage in English with an unfamiliar topic, a very similar proportion of participants (72, 52.5%) reported very strong confidence and a slightly lower percentage of participants (62, 45%) reported moderate confidence in reading in English.

5. Conclusions

The present study identified medium-level foreign language reading anxiety in young EFL learners in China. While most of the previous studies have identified both personal factors and text features as potential sources of foreign language reading anxiety,

results of the present study indicated that for EFL learners at a young age, foreign language reading anxiety was caused mostly by text features including unfamiliar culture, unfamiliar topic and unfamiliar vocabulary. Vocabulary was found to be a salient factor that would affect young EFL students' foreign language reading anxiety.

The present study has theoretical implications as it provides empirical evidence for the need to take age and the distinctive characteristics of young learners into consideration when examining foreign language reading anxiety in specific contexts. It also has practical implications for the improvement of reading class design and selection of English reading materials for young EFL learners. One of the major limitations of the present study lies in that participants in the present study were all students of the same primary school and, therefore constituted a highly homogeneous sample of EFL learners. Besides, the study was positioned in merely one specific EFL context in China, findings and implications should be generalized to other contexts with cautions. In addition, given the young age of the participants of the present study and the possibility that they might find some of the linguistic terms in the two questionnaires beyond their current knowledge scope, further research should check the degree to which young students understand each item of the questionnaires and provide extra explanation when necessary.

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