

English as a Foreign Language Reading Anxiety of Chinese University Students

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Abstract

Given the impact of anxiety on foreign language reading, understanding how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading anxiety is evoked would help teachers facilitate their students in the reading process effectively. This study aimed at investigating the sources of EFL reading anxiety of Chinese university students. The data were collected from 459 non-English major students from four different universities in China, using an adapted version of English as a Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Inventory (EFLRAI) developed by Zoghi (2012). The findings showed that the participants experienced the moderate level of EFL reading anxiety overall and also categorically. The main source of anxiety was from the lack of general reading ability. Of the three key factors that seemed to arouse higher levels of anxiety than the others, one related to the general reading ability and the other two were vocabulary-related factors. Chinese university students tended to read for details and seemed to get highly anxious when they did not understand 'everything'. These findings lend suggestions to some interventions that English teachers may use to reduce Chinese university students' anxiety when reading.

Keywords: reading anxiety, reading ability, anxiety, Chinese EFL students

1. Introduction

1.1 Significance of the Problem

Anxiety is one of the important affective factors that impacts language learning (Arnold, 1999; Du, 2009; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a). Previous studies have shown the negative effect that foreign language anxiety may have on language learning (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Von Worde, 2003; Young, 2000). However, early studies on language anxiety focused mainly on speaking skills, which was considered the most anxiety-provoking skills among the four language skills. It was later found that different language skills may be affected by different types of anxiety (Aida, 1994). As a result, studies of reading-related anxiety began to appear (e.g. Saito, Horwitz, & Garza, 1999; Shi & Liu, 2006).

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading anxiety seems to yield both facilitative and debilitating effects on reading (Horwitz, 2010), similarly to general reading anxiety. Previous studies have reported inconsistent findings about the relationship between EFL reading anxiety and reading performance (e.g. Brantmeier, 2005; Deng, 2003; Lu & Liu, 2015; Shi & Liu, 2006; Wu, 2011; Young, 2000). To reduce debilitating effects of reading anxiety, an understanding of the potential factors that may heighten EFL reading anxiety is needed (e.g. Kulsum, 2018; Kuru-Gonen, 2009; Soomro, Khan & Younus, 2019; Zoghi, 2012).

A number of studies on factors affecting EFL reading anxiety have been conducted in various countries, such as Filipino (Guimba & Alico, 2015), Indonesian (Kulsum, 2018), and Pakistan (Soomro et al., 2019). The anxiety of readers with different cultural and language backgrounds was found to be affected by different factors (Kulsum, 2018; Kuru-Gonen, 2009; Saito et al., 1999; Soomro et al., 2019; Zoghi, 2012). For example, the EFL Pakistani students were anxious when reading due to insufficient grammar knowledge, unknown words, and inappropriate teaching methods (Soomro et al., 2019), while lacking of top-down reading strategies was the most prominent source causing anxiety in EFL reading of Indonesian students (Kulsum, 2018) and Turkish students (Kuru-Gonen, 2009).

Considering how important reading in English is for university study and lifelong learning in this information age

(Lu & Liu, 2015), Chinese university students, as well as others, are expected to develop a certain level of reading skills in English (Sun & Henrichsen, 2011). However, English reading anxiety is considered as a prominent issue for them (Lu & Liu, 2015; Wu, 2011; Zhao, Guo, & Dynia, 2013). To date, little is known about how Chinese EFL learners' anxiety is raised (Deng, 2003; Huang, 2003; Liu, 2006). Studies about reading anxiety in Chinese EFL classrooms have been mainly about the relationship between anxiety and other variables, such as gender (Shi & Liu, 2006; Shi, 2008), English proficiency (Zhou, 2017), nature of English courses (Liao, 2008), and teaching methods (Wang, 1999). Therefore, the present study attempted to find insights into the factors that give rise to EFL reading anxiety of Chinese university students. Insights into this will help Chinese EFL teachers to design their reading instruction to help reduce reading anxiety of the students effectively.

1.2 Review of the Literature

1.2.1 Foreign Language Reading Anxiety

Krashen (1982) claimed that learners with a high level of anxiety might be prevented from fully utilizing the comprehensible input they receive for language acquisition. In the foreign language learning context, the reading process may pose different challenges since there are additional factors to consider such as language ability, cultural background, and learner motivation (Sellers, 2000; Wang, 1999). To properly address the anxiety that readers experience when they are reading in a foreign language, Saito et al. (1999) proposed the notion of foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA).

Apart from Saito et al. (1999), a growing number of researchers have studied the relationship between foreign language reading anxiety and other variables, such as reading comprehension ability (Brantmeier, 2005; Sellers, 2000), gender (Chen, 2005), the use of reading strategies (Kulsum, 2018), and so forth. So far, the findings from different studies are inconsistent. Some researchers found that reading anxiety has a harmful effect on foreign language reading (Sellers, 2000; Wu, 2011; Young, 2000). However, Brantmeier's (2005) research displayed different findings. Language learners with different levels of ability were affected by foreign language reading anxiety differently (Brantmeier, 2005). Nevertheless, reducing the potential negative effects of foreign language reading anxiety is recommended (Kim, 2012).

To measure foreign language reading anxiety, Saito et al. (1999) designed the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS), which has been widely used (e.g. Sellers, 2000; Young, 2000; Zhou, 2017). FLRAS is typically used to measure foreign language reading anxiety in terms of an unfamiliar writing system and unfamiliar cultural texts (Saito et al., 1999). Later on, Zoghi (2012) further developed the FLRAS for EFL contexts in particular and added two more factors—students' reading skills and teachers' teaching methods. The questionnaire was renamed 'English as a Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Inventory' (EFLRAI). The sources of reading anxiety described in the EFLRAI were comprehensive and specific as readers, texts, and instructors (Zoghi, 2012). The present study thus employed EFLRAI to investigate the factors affecting Chinese university students' EFL reading anxiety.

1.2.2 Factors Affecting English as a Foreign Language Reading Anxiety

An increasing number of researchers have attempted to study which factors arouse foreign language reading anxiety, including learners' foreign language proficiency (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a), text-related factors (Oh, 1992; Young, 2000), and personal factors such as reading ability (Sellers, 2000) and gender (Shi & Liu, 2006; Shi, 2008). The following section reviews three potential factors that have been found to affect EFL reading anxiety.

1.2.2.1 Personal Factors

With respect to personal factors, three factors have been under investigation, including readers' foreign language proficiency, reading skills, and background knowledge of the texts. Foreign language proficiency has been found to have negative correlation with foreign language reading anxiety (Brantmeier, 2005; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a; Saito & Samimy, 1996). For example, Saito and Samimy (1996) have studied learner' anxiety in beginner, intermediate, and advanced learners of Japanese and found that foreign language reading anxiety was lower in learners with higher experiences and proficiency. Similarly, reader's skills in using reading strategies are the most anxiety-provoking factor of foreign language reading (Baker, 2008; Kulsum, 2018; Sellers, 2000). Furthermore, a lack of required background knowledge was found to raise EFL reading anxiety (Liao, 2008). These findings support that personal factors are one source of foreign language reading anxiety.

1.2.2.2 Text-Related Factors

Another important factor that has been found to provoke readers' anxiety is teacher-related. Horwitz et al. (1986) and Brantmeier (2005) both reported that readers' anxiety was induced by the teacher's correction behaviors and unsupportive help. Wang (1999) also found that when the teacher asked the students to translate or answer reading comprehension questions, the students were often afraid of making mistakes, resulting in increased foreign

language reading anxiety.

1.3 Studies on EFL Reading Anxiety in Chinese EFL Context

Chinese learners of English face two tremendously different writing systems as well as distinct syntax systems (Huang, 2003; Liu, 2006; Liu, 2011). When reading in English, Chinese learners were found to spend most of their time on word recognition and little time on reading comprehension (Huang, 2003). Liu (2006) explained that they may feel anxious about their inefficient reading skills (Liu, 2006). However, the findings from previous studies do not show the same trend. Some have found that EFL reading anxiety affected Chinese students' reading performance negatively (Deng, 2003; Shi & Liu, 2006; Shi, 2008; Wu, 2011; Zhao, Guo, & Dynia, 2013), others did not (Chen, 2005). Apart from the relationships between EFL reading anxiety and Chinese students' reading performance, some Chinese researchers have investigated the relationship between EFL reading anxiety and other variables, such as gender (Shi & Liu, 2006; Shi, 2008), learners' EFL proficiency (Zhou, 2017), introversion-extroversion personality (Deng, 2003), English courses (Liao, 2008), and teaching methods (Wang, 1999). These variables can play a significant role in studying Chinese students' EFL reading anxiety (Shi, 2008). Considering that there is a limited amount of research conducted in China to examine the sources of EFL reading anxiety, the present study aimed to investigate the factors affecting Chinese university students' EFL reading anxiety.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study was a survey study, which employed an online questionnaire to investigate the factors that may give rise to Chinese university students' EFL reading anxiety.

2.2 Population and Participants

The population in this study was Chinese university students numbering approximately 30.32 million (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). A total of 459 students from four different Chinese universities participated in this study (according to Yamane (1973), a minimum number of participants should be 400). One public university in each of the four regions in China (North, Central, East and South) that agreed to help distribute the questionnaire was selected as the participating university. One English instructor in each university who taught an English foundation course was asked to help share the questionnaire link through the online medium "wjx.cn" to his or her students. The four instructors chose the target participants from the students in their English foundation course in the winter semester of 2019. The students were informed about their rights to agree or disagree to participate without any penalty to the course they were taking and that their identity would be kept confidential before signing the consent form and completing the questionnaire. Altogether, 463 questionnaires were sent. Any returned questionnaires that were not completely filled were excluded from the study, leaving 459 valid questionnaires to be analyzed. The questionnaires were completed by 330 female and 129 male students studying in non-English majors in four universities. The number of participants in each university was varied, ranging from 100 to 130.

2.3 Instrument

The data were collected using a Chinese translation version of the English as a Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Inventory (EFLRAI), which was developed by Zoghi (2012). The EFLRAI was used in this study because it is accepted as a reliable and valid instrument to measure EFL reading anxiety, particularly for non-English majored students (e.g. Guimba & Alico, 2015; Kulsum, 2018; Soomro et al., 2019). The original English version of the questionnaire was translated, with permission, into Chinese and validated using the back-translation process. A pilot study of the Chinese version was then tried out with 30 participants with similar characteristics to the participants. The Cronbach Alpha result of 0.935 was obtained, showing that the questionnaire had high reliability (Santos, 1999).

The EFLRAI consisted of twenty-seven four-point Likert-scale items, which can be grouped under three types of anxiety and five subcategories that address the sources of anxiety.

1) Top-down Reading Anxiety

Seven items in the questionnaire are used to measure top-down reading anxiety or the anxiety caused by the factors related to the reader when interacting with the text, namely background and cultural knowledge (Items 1-3) and general reading ability (Items 4-7).

2) Bottom-up Reading Anxiety

Fourteen items are used to measure bottom-up reading anxiety or the anxiety caused by the factors related to the text including vocabulary (Items 8-15) and grammar (Items 16-21).

3) Classroom Reading Anxiety

Six items are used to measure the third type of reading anxiety, called classroom reading anxiety or the anxiety caused by the teaching method, which creates the context in which the reader, text and teacher interact (Items 22-27).

When completing the questionnaire, the participants were asked to read each statement and indicate their agreement with the statement using a scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 4 (totally agree).

2.4 Data Collection Procedures

The EFLRAI was formatted into an online questionnaire using a Chinese professional questionnaire data collection platform called “Questionnaire Star” (<https://www.wjx.cn>), which is the most suitable for Chinese students with regards to convenience and practicality, and shared to the participants on WeChat by their English instructor.

2.5 Data Analysis

The participants’ responses to the EFLRAI were analyzed using descriptive statistics including mean (M) and standard deviation (S.D.). Three levels of anxiety: high (M=3.00-4.00), moderate (M=2.00-2.99), and low (M=1.00-1.99), were used to identify the extent to which the reader might experience anxiety in each situation (cf. Casado & Derशिwsky, 2004; Rajab et al., 2012). The factors that obtained the highest mean score were interpreted as the main source of Chinese university students’ EFL reading anxiety.

3. Findings and Discussion

Three main findings are presented and discussed in the following section. Detailed results from the questionnaire are presented in the Appendix.

First, as shown in Table 1, the overall results indicated that the Chinese non-English majored university students participating in this study possessed a moderate level of English reading anxiety (M=2.78, SD=0.90). This finding is consistent with the findings in Liao (2008) and Wu (2011), which also studied English reading anxiety of Chinese university students. The moderate level of English reading anxiety found in this present study and the two mentioned previously tend to suggest that Chinese university students are able to cope with English reading tasks to a certain level even though the writing and syntax of Chinese and English are greatly different, contrasting to what Liu (2011) discussed. In fact, possessing a certain level of anxiety may help more than hurt. Research has shown that reading anxiety can help the students maintain their efforts in learning (Kulsum, 2018; Kuru-Gonen, 2009; Rezaabadi, 2017).

Table 1. Sources and levels of EFL reading anxiety of Chinese university students (n = 459)

Sources of anxiety	Mean	SD	Level of anxiety
Background and Cultural Knowledge	2.86	0.91	Moderate
General Reading Ability	2.95	0.93	Moderate
Vocabulary	2.81	0.96	Moderate
Grammar	2.82	0.94	Moderate
Teaching Methods	2.59	1.05	Moderate
Overall	2.79	0.97	Moderate

Second, regarding the factors that may affect EFL reading anxiety, the results showed that all the five sources focused in this study could provoke EFL reading anxiety of Chinese university students similarly at the ‘moderate’ level (see Table 1). From the results, the students’ anxiety was raised by their own general reading ability the highest (M=2.95, SD=0.93) and by the teaching methods the lowest (M=2.59, SD=1.05). From the questionnaire, it can be seen that the lack of reading abilities such as not being able to find out the main ideas and details of the text, or to express their own views or feelings, caused the highest EFL reading anxiety among Chinese university students. These findings lend support to Kulsum (2018), which found that Indonesian students tended to be anxious when they lacked reading ability. Differently, Soomro et al. (2019) found grammar and unknown vocabulary and teaching methods to be the most anxiety provoking factors for Pakistani students. These inconsistent findings among the studies seem to support that English learners from different language backgrounds may face different challenges when reading (Saito et al., 1999; Zoghi, 2012).

Last but not least, another finding worth noting is about the three specific conditions (in Items 5, 9 and 10). As

shown in Table 2, these three conditions were reported to cause ‘high’ level of EFL reading anxiety. Item 5 is related to general reading ability while Items 9 and 10 are related to vocabulary knowledge. The conditions described in these items suggest that the Chinese university students may be used to reading for details and thus could get highly anxious when they could not figure out everything when reading. Considering the nature of university English examinations which require reading for factual details (Sun & Henrichsen, 2011) and the teaching approaches used in China which require the mastery of the meaning of most words in a text (Liao, 2008), these findings can be explained.

Table 2. Conditions caused ‘high’ level of EFL reading anxiety (n = 459)

Item	Conditions	Mean	SD	Level of anxiety
5	When I cannot recognize minor ideas (details) of the text, it is worrying to me.	3.04	0.90	High
9	It bothers me when I encounter a lot of words whose meanings are unclear.	3.11	0.90	High
10	I get upset when I cannot figure out the meaning of a word that I feel I have seen before.	3.00	0.92	High

4. Suggestions for Further Studies and Implementation

Despite the limitation of a survey study, the findings in this study provide insights into the situation of Chinese university students’ EFL reading anxiety. Since reading anxiety can affect the long-term development of students’ English reading skills and their reading experiences (Krashen, 1982; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Price, 1991), it is of great significance to regulate the students’ reading anxiety in English reading classes. Identifying why students are unable to read well is as significant as teaching them how to read well (Zoghi, 2012). Since the levels and sources of EFL reading anxiety may vary in different contexts as suggested in this study and others (e.g. Kulsum, 2018; Kuru-Gonen, 2009; Saito et al., 1999; Soomro et al., 2019; Zoghi, 2012), studies on reading anxiety in other learning contexts are worth considering. Furthermore, research on how different levels of EFL reading anxiety may affect the reading performance is also recommended.

Based on the three major findings, here are some implications for English reading teachers in China.

Firstly, in view of the prevalence of reading anxiety in Chinese English classrooms, teachers should pay attention to how to help their students regulate the level of reading anxiety. Na (2007) suggested that teachers can explicitly tell students the inevitability of anxiety in English reading and let them know that anxiety can be reduced through self-regulation.

Secondly, since the lack of general reading ability was found to be the major source of EFL reading anxiety in this study. English teachers in China need to design effective pre-reading activities that equip the students with adequate skills before assigning them to read.

Third, in order to reduce the high reading anxiety caused by vocabulary, English teachers should consider choosing the reading materials that correspond to their students’ vocabulary level (Deng, 2003) and providing strategy training on how to deal with unknown words in texts (Wang, 1999).

Lastly, teachers, together with schools, should take some measures to reduce students’ attention on understanding the meaning of all words in texts (Liao, 2008).

5. Conclusion

The present study addressed issues concerning Chinese university students’ EFL reading anxiety. The moderate level of anxiety possessed by the students in this study added new insights into the reading experiences of Chinese learners of English. The factors that were found to potentially raise high level of reading anxiety reflect the situations in English classrooms and examinations in China that tend to expect students to understand ‘everything’ when reading. Given the influence of reading anxiety on reading, understanding how anxiety is provoked will help teachers to regulate the level of students’ reading in order to maintain the ‘facilitative’ effects of the anxiety. Since inconsistent findings have been found, which reflect the nature of reading anxiety, further research in this field should continue.

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Appendix

Descriptive statistics for EFL reading anxiety of Chinese university students by items (n = 459)

Item	Statement	Mean	SD	Level of anxiety
Background and Cultural Knowledge		2.86	0.91	Moderate
1	I do not feel at ease when the title of the text is unfamiliar to me.	2.77	0.93	Moderate
2	It is worrying to me when the ideas expressed in the text are culturally unclear.	2.94	0.91	Moderate
3	I get upset when I lack the previous knowledge about the ideas expressed in the text.	2.86	0.89	Moderate
General Reading Ability		2.95	0.93	Moderate
4	I worry when I cannot get the gist of the text although no new vocabulary items or grammatical points exist in the text.	2.99	0.92	Moderate
5	When I cannot recognize minor ideas (details) of the text, it is worrying to me.	3.04	0.90	High
6	I am nervous when I cannot spot the main idea of a paragraph.	2.86	0.94	Moderate
7	It bothers me when I cannot express my opinions or feelings about the text.	2.91	0.93	Moderate
Vocabulary		2.81	0.96	Moderate
8	I feel uneasy when I cannot figure out the meanings of unknown words.	2.89	0.92	Moderate
9	It bothers me when I encounter a lot of words whose meanings are unclear.	3.11	0.90	High
10	I get upset when I cannot figure out the meaning of a word that I feel I have seen before.	3.00	0.92	High
11	It bothers me when I feel unable to look up a word in the dictionary.	2.52	1.01	Moderate
12	I get confused when the word that I know has a different meaning in the sentence.	2.86	0.90	Moderate
13	I get upset when I come across idioms that are unfamiliar to me.	2.76	0.93	Moderate
14	It makes me feel uneasy when an unfamiliar word is made up of several parts or syllables.	2.75	0.94	Moderate
15	I feel worried when the unknown word is difficult to pronounce.	2.60	0.99	Moderate
Grammar		2.82	0.94	Moderate
16	I am nervous when a certain sentence is long and has a complex structure.	2.88	0.96	Moderate
17	When a certain sentence is grammatically unfamiliar is worrying to me.	2.85	0.89	Moderate
18	It bothers me when a passive voice is used in a sentence.	2.62	0.99	Moderate
19	I feel upset when the tense of a certain sentence is unclear to me.	2.78	0.92	Moderate
20	I worry when I am unable to recognize different parts of speech such as adjectives, adverbs, or connective words.	2.86	0.91	Moderate
21	I get confused when what I know about a grammatical point does not make any sense.	2.92	0.91	Moderate
Teaching Methods		2.59	1.05	Moderate
22	It bothers me when the instructor calls on me to read out.	2.39	1.06	Moderate
23	It worries me when the instructor calls on me to translate a piece of an English text into our first language.	2.78	1.00	Moderate
24	When the instructor asks me reading comprehension questions, it is worrying to me.	2.72	0.98	Moderate
25	It upsets me when the instructor chooses uninteresting texts to read in class.	2.64	1.01	Moderate
26	It makes me feel uneasy when the instructor corrects my pronunciation or translation mistakes.	2.27	1.06	Moderate
27	I am nervous when the instructor uses English as a medium of instruction and hardly ever makes use of our first language.	2.76	1.04	Moderate
Overall		2.79	0.97	Moderate

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