

Foreign Language Reading Anxiety of Indonesian EFL Senior High School Students

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Abstract

This research was conducted to investigate students' reading anxiety in the EFL classroom in a Senior High School. The respondents of this study were 40 students of a Senior High School in Pekanbaru. This study used a qualitative descriptive method which investigated the levels of students' anxiety and the causes of students' anxiety in English reading class. The data were collected using the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS), a set of questionnaires adopted from Ahmad et al. (2013), and interviews to clarify the responses from the questionnaires. The study revealed that most of the students perceived moderate to high levels of anxiety while reading English texts. It is found that the causes of students' reading anxiety were mainly related to limited vocabulary knowledge, over-reliance on translation, difficulty in pronouncing words when reading aloud, and encountering unfamiliar or difficult topics. These findings indicate the importance of providing appropriate strategies and learning materials to reduce students' anxiety and improve their reading comprehension in English.

Keywords: anxiety, reading, reading anxiety.

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Introduction

Reading proficiency is a foundational skill that students are expected to develop from junior high school through university. It functions as a core academic competency and a key driver of future career opportunities. In educational settings, reading plays an important role in the transmission and construction of knowledge, shaping how learners' access, interpret, and engage with information (Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2015). Students who leave school without solid reading abilities are at greater risk of encountering difficulties both academically and socially, as reading underpins performance across subjects and supports broader cognitive and communicative development.

For learners of a foreign language, reading presents distinctive challenges. Factors such as limited linguistic proficiency, differences in cultural background, and varying levels of motivation can impede comprehension and fluency (Sellers & Lee, as cited in

Kuru-Gonen, 2009). Among these, anxiety stands out as a particularly influential affective variable. Long recognized in second language acquisition research since the 1970s, anxiety is commonly described as a state of apprehension or diffuse fear not directly tied to a specific stimulus (Hilgard, Atkinson, & Atkinson, 1971, as cited in Sabbah & Sabah, 2018). In classrooms, this apprehension often manifests as fear of making mistakes, which can erode learners' confidence and discourage risk-taking—both essential for growth in reading.

Foreign language reading anxiety refers specifically to the unease and worry that arise when students read in a second language (L2). While general foreign language anxiety has frequently been linked to speaking performance (Horwitz et al., 1986), reading anxiety represents a more targeted construct, emerging during the act of processing written texts in the L2 (Saito et al., 1999). This anxiety can interfere with lexical access, inhibit inferencing, and reduce working memory efficiency, thereby hampering comprehension and diminishing overall engagement with texts.

A growing body of research has examined reading anxiety among university learners in various contexts (e.g., Zhang, 2012; Joo & Damron, 2015) and among EFL students more broadly (Saito et al., 1999). However, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning secondary school learners, particularly in the Indonesian context. Much of the existing work concentrates on higher education, leaving limited insight into the levels, sources, and consequences of foreign language reading anxiety among senior high school students. Addressing this gap is important: adolescence is a formative period for academic identity and skill consolidation, and interventions at this stage may have lasting effects on learners' confidence and achievement in reading.

In sum, reading is indispensable to academic success and lifelong learning, yet foreign language reading anxiety can significantly undermine students' progress. Expanding research to include Indonesian senior high school learners would deepen our understanding of the factors that shape reading anxiety at earlier stages and inform targeted pedagogical strategies—such as scaffolded texts, culturally responsive materials, and anxiety-reducing classroom practices—to support more equitable and effective L2 reading development.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to explore the levels and causes of students' reading anxiety in an EFL classroom at a Senior High School in Pekanbaru. By

identifying the dominant factors that contribute to students' anxiety, this research is expected to provide valuable insights for teachers in designing effective reading instruction and creating a supportive learning environment.

Although research on foreign language reading anxiety has been conducted in various educational contexts, there remains a lack of studies focusing on Senior High School students in Indonesia. Most prior studies have investigated university students or adult learners, while high school students, who are at a critical stage in developing academic English skills, have not been widely examined. This study attempts to fill this gap by providing empirical evidence of reading anxiety among Senior High School students and highlighting the factors that contribute to their anxiety in reading English texts.

Literature Review

A growing body of research has documented the presence and consequences of foreign language (FL) reading anxiety across diverse learner populations and educational levels. In the Indonesian context, Muhlis (2017) investigated the existence of FL reading anxiety among EFL senior high school students in Bandung and found clear evidence of its presence. Complementing these findings, interviews with two fourth-semester students from the English Education Department at the State Islamic University revealed hallmark symptoms of reading anxiety: feeling threatened by reading tasks, avoiding reading activities, and experiencing diminished confidence in their reading ability. These self-reported experiences underscore how anxiety can suppress motivation and engagement, ultimately hindering reading development.

Beyond documenting prevalence, several studies have examined how FL reading anxiety relates to other forms of anxiety and to reading performance. Kuru Gonen (2009) explored the correlation between reading anxiety and general classroom anxiety, while also eliciting students' perspectives on the sources of their reading-related apprehension. This dual focus is noteworthy, as it situates reading anxiety within a broader affective landscape and foregrounds learners' own interpretations of what triggers their discomfort. Similarly, Rajab et al. (2012) investigated both the level of reading anxiety and its relationship to reading comprehension among 91 final-year Science and Non-Science undergraduates at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru. Using the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) on a five-point Likert scale, their study provided

quantifiable insight into how anxiety correlates with comprehension outcomes in higher education settings.

Findings from other contexts reinforce and refine this picture. Zhou (2017), examining learners of Chinese as a foreign language, identified salient sources of reading anxiety that frequently impede comprehension: worries about understanding the text, unfamiliarity with topics, uncertainty about pronunciation, and discomfort when reading aloud. These factors map onto common cognitive and affective hurdles in FL reading, highlighting how both linguistic demands (e.g., unknown vocabulary, orthographic differences) and performance pressures (e.g., oral reading) can heighten anxiety and disrupt processing. In Indonesia's secondary education sector, Nirmala (2017) adopted a quantitative approach to analyze the connection between reading anxiety and reading comprehension at the junior high school level. The study reported a negative relationship: as reading anxiety increases, reading comprehension tends to decrease. This pattern is consistent with theoretical accounts that posit anxiety as a drain on attentional resources and working memory, thereby compromising meaning-making during reading.

Taken together, these studies converge on three implications for research and practice. First, FL reading anxiety is not confined to a single educational tier; it affects learners from junior high school through university, with observable behavioral and motivational consequences. Second, anxiety is multidimensional—overlapping with broader classroom anxiety while also stemming from specific sources tied to text difficulty, topic familiarity, pronunciation concerns, and performance contexts. Third, the consistent negative association between anxiety and comprehension underscores the need for targeted pedagogical interventions. Such interventions might include scaffolded texts, pre-reading activation of background knowledge, explicit strategy instruction (e.g., inferencing, self-monitoring), low-stakes reading practice to reduce performance pressure, and supportive classroom climates that normalize difficulty and encourage risk-taking.

In conclusion, the literature establishes FL reading anxiety as a significant barrier to effective reading development and comprehension. By systematically identifying its prevalence, correlates, and sources across learner populations and contexts, these studies offer a roadmap for educators and researchers to design evidence-based

supports. Prioritizing anxiety-reducing practices and strategic reading instruction, particularly in secondary education where habits and identities as readers are still forming, can help mitigate the adverse effects of anxiety and foster more confident, competent readers in the foreign language.

METHODS

The questionnaire used in this study was adapted from Foreign Language Anxiety Scale developed by Ahmad et al. (2013). It consists of 26 items with answers response option ranged from Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. The questionnaire was distributed to 40 Students in third grade Senior High Students. A descriptive analysis was used to reveal the data about the anxiety level perceived by the students in reading English, and their potential sources of anxiety in reading English.

3.1 Population and Sample

The participants of this study were 40 students from a Senior High School in Pekanbaru. The students were selected purposively as they represented EFL learners at the secondary level who were actively involved in English reading classes. The respondents consisted of both male and female students, aged between 16 to 17 years old.

3.2 Data Collection Procedure

The research was conducted in several stages. First, the researcher distributed the FLRAS and the questionnaire to the participants during their English class session. The students were given sufficient time to read and respond to each statement.

3.3 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed qualitatively. The questionnaire responses were tabulated to determine the percentage of students' agreement levels on each statement.

Results

No	Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	When I am reading in English, I get very upset and worried whenever I encounter strange vocabulary.	7.1	50	25		7.1

2	I focus on words in reading English texts because if I know the terms, I can understand the text	60.7	32.1	7.1		
3	I feel anxious in reading English when I encounter series of three strange words.	10.7	50	21.4	17.9	
4	I enjoy reading a text in English when I know its translation.	57.1	25	17.9		
5	I do not like to read an English text that has lots of difficult words.	10.7	46.4	21.4	17.9	
6	When I am reading in English, I feel upset and anxious if I encounter strange vocabulary.	7.1	39.3	32.1	17.9	
7	I enjoy English reading when I understand at least some portion of the text.	21.4	53.6	25		
8	I do not prefer reading unfamiliar topics, particularly in the English language.		35.7	35.7	17.9	10.7
9	The most things I like to read in English are short stories because they have easy words, and their topics are common.	21.4	60.7	17.9		
10	I feel anxious when I am reading a topic in the English language which I have no idea about		46.4	35.7	14.3	

11	In reading English, I hardly understand the idea if there is more than one meaning for each word.		21.4	35.7	35.7	
12	When I read English, I often understand the words, but I still cannot quite understand what the writer says.	7.1	46.4	25	21.4	
13	I usually translate word by word when I am reading English.	10.7	46.4	32.1		
14	It is frustrating in reading English when one word is connected with another to change the meaning.		14.3	46.4	35.7	
15	I most often feel that I cannot understand an English text even though I know every word's meaning.		46.4	14.3	35.7	
16	I feel anxious in reading aloud in fear of making errors.	10.7	42.9	25	17.9	
17	I feel embarrassed in front of others if I pronounce a simple and easy word wrongly.	10.7	46.4	25	14.3	
18	I prefer to prepare too much and search for the phonetic transcript prior to the class if I was expected to read in the class.	17.9	28.6	50		

20	I prefer silent reading rather than reading loud.	21.4	32.1	35.7	10.7	
21	When I am reading aloud, I focus on reading correctly rather than focusing on understanding the text.	14.3	64.3	10.7	10.7	
22	In reading aloud in the class, I do not understand the text even though it is easy.		25	42.9	28.6	
23	I enjoy silent reading because I can easily understand the text.	10.7	39.3	42.9	7.1	
24	When reading English aloud in the class, I focus on word accent rather than understanding.	7.1	35.7	35.7	17.9	
25	I get upset when I am not sure whether I understand what I am reading in English or not.	10.7	35.7	42.9	10.7	
26	When reading English, I get disturbed and do not remember what I have read.	14.3	17.9	42.9	25	

The results reveal a clear, word-centered approach to reading that both shapes students' preferences and fuels their anxiety. The most dominant factor identified was an overreliance on individual word recognition: 60.7% of students strongly agreed with statement no. 2, indicating that they tend to focus on words in English texts because knowing the terms is seen as the key to understanding the passage. Closely related, 57.1% strongly agreed that they enjoy reading in English when they know the translation,

underscoring a dependence on direct lexical access rather than broader comprehension strategies.

Performance pressure further amplifies this anxiety, particularly during oral reading. A majority of students (64.3%) agreed that when reading aloud, they prioritize correct pronunciation over meaning, suggesting that fear of errors eclipses the goal of comprehension. This aligns with additional indicators of performance-related apprehension: 46.4% agreed they feel embarrassed if they mispronounce even simple words, highlighting how social evaluation can heighten linguistic insecurity.

Students' text preferences also reflect attempts to manage cognitive load and mitigate anxiety. Notably, 60.7% agreed that they most enjoy reading short stories in English, citing easier vocabulary and familiar topics as appealing features. More than half (53.6%) reported that they enjoy reading when they can understand at least some portion of the text, implying that partial comprehension can sustain motivation. Conversely, students expressed aversion to texts dense with difficult words and to topics entirely unfamiliar to them, both of which were reported to trigger anxiety.

Vocabulary-related challenges emerged as a persistent source of distress. Half of the students (50%) agreed that encountering a series of unfamiliar words makes them anxious and worried about strange vocabulary; a similar pattern was reported by 46.4%, reinforcing the salience of lexical difficulty as an anxiety trigger. This lexical focus often manifests as a bottom-up reading habit: many students reported usually translating word by word while reading English. Paradoxically, an equal proportion (46.4%) also agreed that they often cannot understand a text even when they know the meaning of every word, illustrating the well-documented "comprehension gap" that arises when translation and isolated word recognition substitute for integrative reading strategies such as inferencing, monitoring, and synthesizing.

Overall, the findings paint a consistent picture: students' reliance on word-by-word processing and translation, combined with performance pressures during oral reading and sensitivity to unfamiliar vocabulary and topics, contributes substantially to reading anxiety. At the same time, their preferences for short, familiar, and lexically accessible texts suggest adaptive strategies to preserve confidence and engagement. Addressing these patterns will likely require instruction that shifts emphasis from isolated word recognition to meaning-making at the sentence and discourse levels; builds

tolerance for ambiguity; scaffolds topic knowledge; and reduces evaluative pressure during oral tasks. Through such supports, students can gradually move from anxiety-driven, bottom-up reading toward more flexible, strategic, and confident comprehension.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal several important aspects related to students' anxiety in reading English texts. The most dominant factor identified was students' tendency to focus heavily on vocabulary. More than half of the respondents (60.7%) strongly agreed that their understanding of a text depends largely on knowing the meaning of individual words. This suggests that students perceive vocabulary mastery as the primary gateway to text comprehension. Such a result aligns with previous studies indicating that vocabulary knowledge strongly influences learners' reading comprehension and their confidence in reading foreign texts (Horwitz, 2001; Zhang, 2012). When students lack sufficient vocabulary, they are likely to experience higher levels of anxiety because they feel unable to grasp the meaning of the passage as a whole.

Another noteworthy factor is students' reliance on translation. A large proportion (57.1%) reported enjoying reading when they knew the translation of the text. Similarly, many admitted that they often translate word by word while reading. This pattern reflects a common strategy among second language learners who are still developing their reading fluency. However, it also demonstrates a dependency that can hinder their ability to process meaning globally, thereby creating anxiety when translation is not readily available. As supported by Kern (1994), over-reliance on translation often limits learners' ability to infer meaning from context and may increase frustration when they face unfamiliar structures.

The results also highlight that reading aloud contributes to students' anxiety. About 64.3% stated that they tend to prioritize correct pronunciation over comprehension when reading aloud. This finding indicates that performance pressure plays a role in reading anxiety, as students may feel embarrassed or fearful of making mistakes in front of others. This echoes Young's (2000) findings that fear of negative evaluation is a significant source of language anxiety. The embarrassment of mispronouncing even simple words, as reported by 46.4% of students, further illustrates the social dimension of reading anxiety.

In addition, the type of reading material plays a role in shaping students' comfort and anxiety. The preference for short stories with familiar topics and simpler vocabulary (60.7%) suggests that learners are more motivated and confident when the texts are accessible. On the other hand, encountering texts with numerous unfamiliar words or topics they do not understand triggers anxiety, as reflected by more than half of the students. This supports Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), which emphasizes that comprehensible input is essential for lowering affective filters and facilitating language acquisition.

Interestingly, even when students reported knowing the meaning of individual words, 46.4% still felt that they could not fully understand the text. This highlights a deeper issue related not only to vocabulary but also to reading strategies, such as identifying main ideas, making inferences, and understanding cohesion in the text. It suggests that students' difficulties extend beyond word-level processing, pointing to the need for explicit instruction in higher-order reading skills.

Overall, the results indicate that students' reading anxiety is multifaceted, rooted in limited vocabulary, over-reliance on translation, performance pressure during oral reading, and challenges in comprehending unfamiliar or complex texts. These findings underline the importance of designing reading instruction that not only expands students' vocabulary but also fosters confidence, encourages inferencing skills, and provides exposure to varied yet comprehensible reading materials.

Conclusion

This study concludes that students' anxiety in reading English is mainly influenced by their strong focus on vocabulary mastery, their reliance on translation, and their fear of making mistakes while reading aloud. The findings indicate that when students encounter unfamiliar words or difficult topics, they are more likely to experience frustration and anxiety. Moreover, the tendency to translate word by word and the pressure of correct pronunciation often interfere with their comprehension. On the other hand, students feel more comfortable and motivated when reading short stories or texts with familiar topics and simpler vocabulary. These results suggest that teachers should provide more supportive reading instruction by integrating strategies that promote

vocabulary growth, develop global comprehension skills, and gradually reduce students' dependency on translation.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the data were obtained from a limited number of participants, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to wider contexts. Second, the study relied on self-reported questionnaires, which might not fully capture students' actual experiences and behaviours in real reading situations. Lastly, the study focused only on reading anxiety without examining its relationship with other language skills, such as speaking or writing, which may also affect students' overall language performance. Future research should therefore involve larger and more diverse samples, adopt multiple data collection methods such as interviews or classroom observations, and explore the interconnection between reading anxiety and other aspects of language learning.

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