

An Investigation of Reading Anxiety among Vietnamese English Major Students

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ABSTRACT

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Understanding EFL students' anxiety when performing a reading task has gained much attention in recent research. In Vietnam, not much research focuses on the anxiety level of English-major students. This study aims at measuring linguistics students' reading anxiety levels using the English as a Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Inventory (EFLRAI) (Zoghi & Alivandivafa, 2014). A total of 72 linguistics students from two Reading classes at the International University, VNU-HCMC, took part in this study. A follow-up interview was carried out with the students to further investigate the factors, including top-down reading anxiety, bottom-up reading anxiety, and classroom reading anxiety. Quantitatively, the findings revealed that the majority of students experienced low to moderate levels of reading anxiety. Most students reported that their reading background knowledge and reading ability, namely the top-down factors, accounted the most for their negative emotions while performing the task. Importantly, some solutions related to teaching strategies were recommended by students for a better learning environment.

Introduction

Emotions play an important role in the language classroom. Students may go through different levels of feeling while learning a second language. Among different shades of emotions, anxiety is the most commonly studied by second language learning researchers (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). In 1994, MacIntyre and Gardner introduced the concept of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). In their description, FLA is a negative emotion and tension that learners face while learning the four skills. Among these, reading skills play a vital role in learning English. A study of 184 Chinese students in Hong Kong who study English as a second language found that reading comprehension boosts vocabulary acquisition (Xie & Yeung, 2022). For many university students in Vietnam, especially those who study in schools that have English as the medium of instruction, the need for reading grows due to the number of course books in English. However, students face many challenges reading English textbooks. Ha Le's study (2021) revealed that students find it hard to read when they lack the necessary vocabulary and background knowledge.

In the context of Vietnam, the number of English-major students is growing fast. In 2008, the Minister of Education and Training (MOET) signed the approval for the big plan to boost foreign language teaching and training for the period of 2008-2020. This brings about a high demand for English teachers and university students majoring in English and linguistics (Pham, 2021).

Still, while this is a growing research field in the world (Chen et al., 2022; Hamada & Takaki, 2021), anxiety about reading has not gained much attention in Vietnam. Furthermore, while most research focuses on non-English major students, very little research has investigated such issues in university students who major in English. Therefore, this study aims to explore the feeling of reading anxiety among English-major students. An in-depth study was also conducted to determine what factors contribute the most to their reading anxiety.

Literature review

Foreign Language Anxiety

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) was first introduced by Horwitz et al. (1986, p. 128) 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.” Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014, p. 3) later clarified FLA as “the worry and negative emotional reaction when learning and using a second language,” which is mostly found in instructional settings where learners are supposed to self-express, such as in listening and speaking tasks or in examinations. The concept of FLA then received much interest from researchers, and a number of factors were found to be the culprits of FLA (Bailey, 1983; MacIntyre et al., 1997; Luo, 2012; and Kruk, 2018). Whether external or internal factors can cause FLA, FLA adversely influences language learning and reducing it is a necessary step toward a better learning experience among language learners. (Horwitz et al., 1986; Young, 1990; and von Wörde, 2004)

Foreign Language Reading Anxiety

After the concept of FLA was introduced and well investigated, researchers started to shift their attention to skill-specific foreign language anxieties and separate the concept of skill-related FLA from general FLA. Among the four skills, FLA emerging from oral and written performance received the most discussions (Horwitz et al., 1986; Young, 1990; Price, 1991; Phillips, 1992; Cheng et al., 1999; Leki, 1999; Cheng, 2004; Kuru-Gonen, 2007) due to the fact that learners tend to be aware of their own limitations of communicating in a foreign language when they have to produce the language. In her recent study, Pabro-Maquidato (2021) was concerned about the anxious feelings in speaking among second language learners and found that learners often suffer from emotional tensions, physiological symptoms, and mental difficulties when they orally express ideas in English. However, it is evident that learners also experience unpleasant emotions and inherent threats in the literacy skill - of reading. Hence Saito (1999) coined the term Foreign Language Reading Anxiety (FLRA) which refers to the anxious feelings when reading a foreign language, especially with a different writing system. In other words, FLRA is viewed as “perceptions of uneasiness, apprehension or stress from which an individual might suffer when reading a foreign language text” (Capan & Pektas, 2013, p. 182). Since then, FLRA has attracted numerous empirical research on FLRA and anxiety-provoking factors.

FLRA Instruments and Recent Studies

Various types of questionnaires have been developed in FLA research to measure this effect. Gardner designed the French Class Anxiety Scale in 1985 (mentioned in Gardner & McIntyre, 1993), and one year later, Horwitz et al. introduced the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. In 1999, Saito et al. introduced an instrument called to specifically gauge the FLRA of learners with different target languages (French, Japanese, and Russian) and from different cultural backgrounds, which is called the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS). However, multiple aspects of FLRA have not been examined in the aforementioned methods, and to investigate "exactly why students feel anxious about reading" (Saito et al., 1999, p.217), especially those who use English as a foreign language in the context of tertiary education, a context-specific instrument has been introduced by Zoghi in 2012 and tested in 2014. It is the English as a Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Inventory (EFLRAI).

When designing such a questionnaire, Zoghi viewed FLRA from a multi-dimensional perspective and labeled FLRA's three main groups of factors as (a) Top-down Reading Anxiety, (b) Bottom-up Reading Anxiety; and (c) Classroom Reading Anxiety. Top-down Reading Anxiety (TRA) consists of readers' background and cultural knowledge, Bottom-up Reading Anxiety (BRA) involves the levels and complexity of vocabulary and grammar of the texts, and Classroom Reading Anxiety (CRA) concerns mostly the teaching methods employed by the teachers in the reading classes. The findings are consistent with those of Kuru-Gonen (2007), who contended that the three sources that may produce Turkish students' FLRA are: personal factors, the reading text, and the reading course.

EFLRAI and FLRAS were later employed by a number of researchers to measure this affective filter and to draw the correlation between FLRA and learners' reading performance in different contexts. Many researchers explored the medium level of anxiety among their Asian students (Filipino, Indonesian, Thai, and Chinese) when involved in English reading activities both inside and outside the classrooms (Aisyah, 2017; Muhlis, 2017; Faruq, 2019; and Miao & Vibulphol, 2021). Researchers also found a significant negative relationship between FLRA and learners' reading comprehension scores. Students who self-report being anxious about reading in a foreign language receive lower scores on their reading tests (Jafarigohar & Behrooznia, 2012; Guimba & Alico, 2015; and Wijayati et al., 2021).

Despite the great interest from researchers in FLRA in many Asian countries, few studies have been conducted in the Vietnamese context. Given the dearth of research on FLRA in Vietnam, this study intends to fill in the gap in the literature related to the level and causing factors of FRLA among English-major students in a Vietnamese university that uses English as a medium of instruction.

Research Questions

The study was conducted in order to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do English-major students experience reading anxiety?
2. What factors may make the most contribution to English-major students' reading anxiety?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The English Linguistics program started to recruit English-major students in 2017. The research was conducted at International University (IU), Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The study included 72 sophomore students from two Reading 2 classes. Their proficiency level was at the C1 level as a result of the requirement of the training curriculum. Further information on the level can be found in the Reading 2-course information posted on the website of the School of Languages, IU.

Design of the Study

The research employed both quantitative and qualitative studies. For the quantitative side, the researchers employed the English Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Inventory (EFLRAI) (Zoghi, 2012). This framework was chosen for this study as its validity was tested and supported with 939 non-English major students (Zoghi & Alivandivafa, 2014). The survey includes 27 questions that explore students' reading anxiety with a Likert scale of 1-4. Twenty-seven questions are divided into three main groups of factors, including the TRA, BRA, and CRA (Zoghi, 2012). Five main factors are under investigation, including the "background and cultural knowledge" (questions 1-3), "the general reading ability" (questions 4-7), "the vocabulary" (questions 8-15), "the grammar" (questions 16-21) and "the teaching method" (questions 22-27). The mean and standard deviation for each factor were calculated to determine students' reading anxiety level. Qualitatively, the follow-up interview with the participants was analyzed to have a deeper insight into students' negative emotions and possible solutions.

Data collection & analysis

Procedure

The study was conducted from week 4 to week 7 of the 15-week course. After the first two weeks of course orientation, the lecturers had the chance to understand the students better. After listening to the researchers explain the study's purposes, the students signed in the consent forms. In week 4, the survey was conducted with 72 students from two Reading 2 classes. In week 5, the follow-up interview was conducted with 20 students. The students volunteered to participate in the interview.

The researchers then input the data of the survey on an excel sheet and used Minitab 19 to treat the data. The interview sessions were also transcribed for accurate report and analysis.

Tools

The survey used was the EFLRAI (Zoghi & Alivandivafa, 2014). For measuring reading anxiety, Saito et al. (1999) used to design the foreign language reading anxiety scale (FLRAS). Yet, it was too general for all language learners. The researchers chose the EFLRAI because it was designed to measure the students at the tertiary level. Also, the detailed five factors in the EFLRAI, as mentioned in the previous section, matched the researchers' goal for the study. The interview questions consist of 4 questions, which are based on the EFLRAI (see Appendix A)

Data analysis

Students' responses to the 27 Likert scale questions will be calculated to means and standard deviations, with a higher mean score meaning a higher level of reading anxiety (Zoghi, 2012). For further analysis, the researchers decide on the level of a low, moderate, and high levels of anxiety as in table 1, with little adaptation from the study of Miao & Vibulphol (2021)

Table 1*Mean range and the according level of reading anxiety*

Mean range	Reading anxiety level
1.00-1.99	Low level
2.00-2.99	Moderate level
3.00-4.00	High level

Results and discussion

The results of the questionnaires are shown in table 2 below.

Table 2*Summary of the Vietnamese English-major students reading anxiety*

No.	Item	Mean	SD	Reading anxiety level
1	"I do not feel at ease when the title of the text is unfamiliar to me."	2.58	0.83	Moderate
2	"It is worrying to me when the ideas expressed in the text are culturally unclear."	3.07	0.78	High
3	"I get upset when I lack the previous knowledge about the ideas expressed in the text."	2.75	0.95	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."	2.93	0.97	Moderate
5	"When I cannot recognize minor ideas (details) of the text is worrying to me."	2.87	0.80	Moderate
6	"I am nervous when I cannot spot the main idea of a certain paragraph."	3.14	0.79	High
7	"It bothers me when I cannot express my opinions or feelings about the text."	2.66	0.93	Moderate
8	"I feel uneasy when I cannot figure out meanings of unknown words."	2.92	0.88	Moderate
9	"It bothers me when I encounter a lot of words whose meanings are unclear."	3.37	0.66	High
10	"I get upset when I cannot figure out the meaning of a	3.25	0.75	High

	word that I feel I have seen before."			
11	"It bothers me when I feel unable to look up a word in the dictionary."	2.39	0.85	Moderate
12	"I get confused when the word that I know has a different meaning in the sentence."	2.83	0.86	Moderate
13.	"I get upset when I come across idioms that are unfamiliar to me."	2.89	0.97	Moderate
14	"It makes me feel uneasy when an unfamiliar is made up of several parts or syllables."	2.82	0.70	Moderate
15	"I feel worried when the unknown word is difficult to pronounce."	1.84	0.83	Low
16	"I am nervous when a certain sentence is long and has a complex structure."	2.5	0.95	Moderate
17	"When a certain sentence is grammatically unfamiliar is worrying to me."	2.69	0.76	Moderate
18	"It bothers me when a passive voice is used in a sentence."	1.46	0.73	Low
19	"I feel upset when the tense of a certain sentence is unclear to me."	2.26	0.83	Moderate
20	"I worry when I am unable to recognize different parts of speech such as adjectives, adverbs, or connective words."	2.16	0.87	Moderate
21	"I get confused when what I know about a grammatical point does not make any sense."	2.85	0.79	Moderate
22	"It bothers me when the instructor calls on me to read out."	1.88	0.98	Low
23	"It worries me when the instructor calls on me to translate a piece of an English text into our first language."	2.18	0.97	Moderate
24	"When the instructor asks me reading comprehension questions, it is worrying to me."	2.13	0.90	Moderate
25	"It upsets me when the instructor chooses uninteresting texts to read in class."	2.26	0.99	Moderate
26	"It makes me feel uneasy when the instructor corrects my pronunciation or translation mistakes."	1.56	0.85	Low
27	"I am nervous when the instructor uses English as a medium of instruction and hardly ever makes use of our first language."	1.81	0.79	Low

The means show a moderate to a high level of anxiety in all items from 1-27. This is consistent with most other reading anxiety research. Among them, the students express the highest anxiety when it comes to vocabulary, as seen in items 9 and 10, $M=3.37$, $SD=0.06$ and $M=3.25$, $SD=0.75$, respectively. The lowest anxiety levels arise for items 26 and 27, which are about the role of instructors in the classroom.

A closer look at each of the five main factors gives the following result.

Table 3

5 main factors that contribute to the Vietnamese English-major students reading anxiety

No.	Factors	Mean	SD	Reading anxiety level
1	TRA			
a	The background and cultural knowledge	2.80	0.25	Moderate
b	The general reading ability	2.90	0.09	Moderate
2	BRA			
a	Vocabulary	2.78	0.10	Moderate
b	Grammar	2.32	0.49	Moderate
3	CRA			
a	Teaching method	1.97	0.26	Low

Table 3 shows that the students have the highest level of anxiety for the TRA, with the student's general reading ability ($M=2.90$, $SD = 0.09$), followed by the student's background and cultural knowledge ($M=2.80$, $SD = 0.25$). CRA with the teaching method from instructors has the lowest level ($M=1.97$, $SD = 0.26$). This is consistent with the finding for Chinese students who learn English as L2. These students also encounter problems with a lack of necessary cultural background knowledge for the reading. (Gan, 2021)

Qualitatively, the interview transcript reveals quite thought-provoking results. Though most students choose TRA as their main source of anxiety, they believe that the solutions could come from the teachers' side. For the first question, most students admit feeling nervous while doing the reading task. Interestingly, one student contrasts the relaxed feeling while reading at home with the tension that he encounters when performing the task in class. The second and third questions confirm the result of the interview since most students choose their reading ability and vocabulary to be the things that make them worried the most. Question 4 digs deeper into students' belief in overcoming this negative feeling. Interestingly, though the CRA receives low points, students believe the teachers can change the scenario. They trust the role of teachers in giving them the right method to read, as one affirms that teachers can "provide students with more methods of better reading". To be specific, one student expresses the need to learn "the skimming and scanning techniques" in classes.

Conducted in a limited amount of time, the study inevitably has some limitations which may

be improved in further studies. First, the number of participants involved in the survey is quite small, with 72 students coming from the two Reading 2 classes in a university. The findings, therefore, cannot be generalized to all English-major students in Vietnam. Second, the EFLRAI was adopted to measure the students' reading anxiety due to its fitness to the goal of this study and the fact that its validity has been tested (Zoghi & Alivandivafa, 2014); nevertheless, the researchers fully recognize that the 27 Likert scale questions of the EFLRAI with only 4 response items and no midpoint might lead the students with neutral responses to overestimating their choices.

In spite of these mentioned limitations in the research, the findings in this study still have a significant contribution to the understanding of FLRA among English major students in Vietnam in general and in IU in particular. It can be seen from the survey results that TRA is mostly chosen as the main source of anxiety among students interviewed; however, the interview transcript discloses that the anxiety can be reduced thanks to the support from teachers. Dealing with FLA in general and FLRA in particular, language teachers are suggested (1) to prepare and equip students with appropriate strategies to overcome anxiety-provoking situations in FL learning and (2) to create a less stressful learning atmosphere and contexts (Horwitz et al., 1986 and Saito et al., 1999).

Implications

Despite the fact that English-major students are quite familiar with and well-equipped with different strategies for reading texts, teachers are still considered the key factors in lessening their reading anxiety. Before reading assignments or reading texts are introduced, students must be well provided with needed strategies to minimize their reading anxiety as well as techniques to foresee problems that they may face within the reading texts. Also, students' reading will become clear if suitable reading strategies are introduced and employed beforehand.

With the help of the EFLRAI, language teachers have more understanding of what circumstances EFL reading anxiety occurs in and, therefore, have appropriate actions. It is beyond dispute that the earlier the EFL readers' anxiety is identified, the better and sooner actions the teachers need to take.

Conclusion

Reading anxiety has gained much attention from language researchers around the world, and it is certainly on the rise (Chen et al., 2022; Hamada & Takaki, 2021). However, in Vietnam, little attention is paid to this field of study. The study is expected to provide insight into the situation of EFL reading anxiety among English-major students in Vietnam. Although the findings reveal that all students surveyed have moderate levels of reading anxiety, which mostly stems from their general reading ability and a lack of general and cultural background (TRA), students still think that teachers have an important role in guiding and assisting them in reducing anxiety in reading. In fact, many students appreciate reading major books suggested by their lecturers. (Nguyen, 2022)

Based on limited samples in two Reading 2 classes at the C1 level of IU, the result of the findings may not be generalized for all English-major students in all Vietnamese universities. However, in order to make the findings more accurate and applicable among the larger population of English-major students in Vietnam, a larger sampling size should be employed.

This study has significantly contributed to understanding the level of reading anxiety among English-major students in Vietnam in general and in IU in particular, who are thought to be quite confident in reading in comparison with non-English major students. Besides, the study is significant to language teachers as it informs them about the student's level of reading anxiety and the most influential factors on students' anxiety; therefore, teachers can select and employ appropriate strategies to minimize their students' reading anxiety.

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Biodata

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Appendix A

EFLRAI, ©M. Zoghi, 2012

This questionnaire does not intend to gauge your EFL reading ability. Nor is it a test that you can score high or low. In fact, this questionnaire helps us help you i.e. by knowing about your true responses, we will be able to find out when you undergo anxiety while reading in English. This may enable us to be well-prepared for your future English classes. Thus, your cooperation can certainly make a big difference.

Thanks for your time in advance.

Name:

Gender: Male Female

Current Proficiency in English: Poor Fair Good Excellent

Directions: Statements 1–27 refer to how you feel about reading in English. Please read all of the statements and tick the option that describes you by indicating whether you (1) totally disagree, (2) somewhat disagree, (3) somewhat agree, or (4) totally agree.

1. I do not feel at ease when the title of the text is unfamiliar to me.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

2. It is worrying to me when the ideas expressed in the text are culturally unclear.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

3. I get upset when I lack the previous knowledge about the ideas expressed in the text.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

4. I worry when I cannot get the gist of the text although no new vocabulary items or grammatical points exist in the text.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

5. When I cannot recognize minor ideas (details) of the text is worrying to me.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

6. I am nervous when I cannot spot the main idea of a certain paragraph.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

7. It bothers me when I cannot express my opinions or feelings about the text.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

8. I feel uneasy when I cannot figure out the meanings of unknown words.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

9. It bothers me when I encounter a lot of words whose meanings are unclear.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

10. I get upset when I cannot figure out the meaning of a word that I feel I have seen before.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

11. It bothers me when I feel unable to look up a word in the dictionary.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

12. I get confused when the word that I know has a different meaning in the sentence.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

13. I get upset when I come across idioms that are unfamiliar to me.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

14. It makes me feel uneasy when an unfamiliar is made up of several parts or syllables.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

15. I feel worried when the unknown word is difficult to pronounce.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

16. I am nervous when a certain sentence is long and has a complex structure.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

17. When a certain sentence is grammatically unfamiliar is worrying to me.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

18. It bothers me when a passive voice is used in a sentence.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

19. I feel upset when the tense of a certain sentence is unclear to me.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

20. I worry when I am unable to recognize different parts of speech such as adjectives, adverbs, or connective words.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

21. I get confused when what I know about a grammatical point does not make any sense.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

22. It bothers me when the instructor calls on me to read out.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

23. It worries me when the instructor calls on me to translate a piece of an English text into our first language.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

24. When the instructor asks me reading comprehension questions, it is worrying to me.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

25. It upsets me when the instructor chooses uninteresting texts to read in class.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

26. It makes me feel uneasy when the instructor corrects my pronunciation or translation mistakes.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

27. I am nervous when the instructor uses English as a medium of instruction and hardly ever makes use of our first language.

(1) totally disagree (2) somewhat disagree (3) somewhat agree (4) totally agree

Thank you for taking time to complete this questionnaire.

We appreciate your comments.