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PERCEIVED CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY IN READING

Abstract. This study explores the difficulties and coping strategies of students who have anxiety when reading in a foreign language. Through a qualitative thematic analysis of interviews with 8 master's students, three main themes emerged: the challenges in foreign language reading include vocabulary difficulties, text complexity, and speed constraints; emotional responses such as anxiety, self-doubt, and external pressures; strategies to overcome reading anxiety include vocabulary building techniques, digital tools, and peer support. The findings are significant in highlighting the importance of motivation, self-regulation and structured pedagogical interventions in reducing reading anxiety. Learners can be supported by educators by introducing pre reading strategies, encouraging collaborative learning and incorporating technology into teaching to help in improving comprehension and confidence. Limitations of the study include small sample size and reliance on self-reported data.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety, reading, reading anxiety, second language acquisition, language learning, vocabulary difficulties, self-doubt, coping strategies.

Introduction

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a well-known entity with an adverse effect on learning and comprehension of a second language. Foreign language anxiety is defined as the feeling of stress and anxiety encountered in foreign language learning situations (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986), while speaking, listening, writing and reading are but a few of the areas in which it might appear. Among these, reading anxiety poses particular difficulties because it is a direct predictor of comprehension, fluency, and, therefore, academic achievement. Learners who have reading anxiety in a foreign language will have problems with decoding unfamiliar vocabulary, understanding complex sentence structures and maintaining motivation. These challenges could be lack of confidence, little contact with the target language, and adverse experiences with language learning.

Reading foreign languages presents learners with multiple challenges. Students face difficulties with words that they know and understand, difficult sentence structures, and readings that contain elements related to the culture which students do not comprehend. Students face particular challenges in academic settings because they regularly encounter complex technical content. Students experience increased anxiety levels because academic journals and textbooks present dense formal writing which leads to avoidance behaviors that result in reduced engagement.

As Saito, Garza, and Horwitz (1999) pointed out, it is also attributed to fear of misunderstanding or misinterpreting information which makes them lose confidence and then they start to disengage. It is worrying for students in higher education who are expected to engage critically with advanced texts in order to improve their academic and professional development. However, students are reported to experience significant anxiety during reading activities which in turn limits their freedom to process and retain information as critical as foreign language reading proficiency. This anxiety however not only affects their learning in class but also affects their performance in academic activities like exams, assignments, and papers. This anxiety, in turn, limits their confidence and willingness to participate in reading tasks, which becomes a barrier to their language development.

As reading skills are central to academic success and personal development, it is crucial to understand the causes of foreign language reading anxiety to help teachers design appropriate pedagogical interventions. Previous research has investigated FLA from different angles, but the particular issues of reading in a foreign language have been paid relatively little attention, especially from the point of view of advanced learners.

The aim of this research is to explore the difficulties students experience in foreign language reading and investigate how to help students overcome foreign language anxiety. Through experiences of students, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of the emotional, cognitive, and psychological factors that underpin FLA and offer suggestions for establishing more effective and supportive learning environments.

Research questions:

1. What are the reading challenges caused by the foreign language anxiety?
2. What strategies and support can be used to help students overcome foreign language anxiety and enhance their reading effectiveness?

Literature review

Foreign language anxiety has been explored since Horwitz et al. (1986) made foreign language anxiety a concept in research through their pioneering study. It has been understood to be a particular disorder that does not overlap with general anxiety to comprehend it as a specific condition. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) has been widely used to measure learners' anxiety and to relate it to language performance. Studies have found that FLA has an adverse effect on language learning and performance particularly in productive skills like speaking and writing (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Nevertheless, the reading skill has attracted relatively less attention than its receptive counterpart even though reading plays a vital academic and professional role.

Several studies have examined reading anxiety as a type of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). Garza, Horwitz and Saito (1999) were some of the first to pinpoint the specific factors that cause reading anxiety: unfamiliar vocabulary, complex grammatical structures, cultural differences, and the fear of misreading. Students experience cognitive overload when confronted with these elements which then impairs their comprehension and increases their anxiety. The expectations in advanced academic settings become a real issue because students are supposed to analyze and interpret specialized texts. Research by Zhao et al. (2013), as well as Sellers (2000), has shown that metacognitive awareness helps to decrease reading anxiety, because those learners who are aware of their reading processes and are able to control them are less likely to feel anxious.

A further factor which has been found to play a crucial role in the reduction of reading anxiety is self-efficacy, the belief in one's effectiveness. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy theory posits that students with more confidence in reading are likely to have a more favorable disposition towards reading and will not be deterred by difficulties. Zbornik and Wallbrown (1991) expanded on this by stating that self-efficacy is not only a determinant of performance but also of the emotional experience of the learner in the reading process. As such, for students who are likely to come across texts that require both linguistic and critical thinking skills, self-efficacy is particularly significant.

The literature identifies multiple approaches to help students with reading anxiety. The literature recommends prior reading strategies including vocabulary preview and background knowledge activation together with visual aids to ease learners' anxiety about both content and context before reading (Zhao et al., 2013). Research has also showed that students who engage in group discussions and peer support in collaborative learning strategies also enhance their learning and foster a safe environment that helps in the reduction of anxiety and improving comprehension (Su & Chu, 2023). Moreover, the application of digital technologies such as e-readers that come with a dictionary and annotation capabilities have been identified as improving the self-empowerment of the learners and decreasing their stress when it comes to reading difficult or even new texts (Lai & Zheng, 2017).

The experience of reading anxiety is also influenced by cultural factors. Mamat and Muhammad (2024) pointed out that students from collectivist cultures may have higher levels of anxiety because of the societal expectations of academic excellence, and the fear of face loss. It also has been found that some cultures may stigmatize students who cannot read in a language. These cultural pressures may add to the challenges that students face in trying to get help or even asking for help. On the other hand, students from individualistic cultures may display more proactive ways of dealing with reading difficulties, which means that teachers should be aware of cultural diversity in the classroom.

There is no overemphasizing on the role of teacher support and the classroom environment in overcoming reading anxiety. When teachers develop a positive and non-threatening learning environment, offer positive feedback, and ensure that students can express their feelings freely, then the level of anxiety will decrease (Young, 1991). In addition, scaffolding techniques have been shown to increase students' confidence and comprehension: For example, teaching them to break down complex texts into manageable segments, and guiding their practice. These strategies also highlight the importance of pedagogical practices that focus on the emotional well-being of students as much as their academic achievement.

Reducing reading anxiety through the application of mindfulness practices in language education provides an opportunity that shows much promise. The potential benefits of practices such, as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and meditation in alleviating anxiety could be applied effectively in language learning environments (Gregersen & MacIntyre 2014). These methods promote learners to concentrate on the moment and cultivate an understanding of their feelings to enable them to approach reading activities, with enhanced tranquility and lucidity.

In addition, the problem of the role of parental involvement in helping children with reading anxiety, especially in younger children is also significant. According to Pomerantz et al. (2007), parents play an important role in supporting their children by engaging in reading and fostering a positive mindset, towards challenges while providing necessary resources. When teachers and parents collaborate harmoniously they can create an environment that helps students handle anxiety and cultivate resilience.

Method

A qualitative research design is employed in this study to explore the difficulties and solutions perceived by learners when dealing with foreign language anxiety (FLA). Qualitative research is a well-suited to delve into how learners view and experience things such as reading anxiety in language learning settings. It can offer valuable insights into the struggles people face and ways to overcome them effectively.

This study sampled participants from 8 master's degree students who are currently using foreign language learning and reading tasks. Master's students were chosen because they are regularly tasked with responding to demanding academic texts that contain difficult vocabulary, complex syntax and cultural references. Through purposive sampling, participants who meet the inclusion criteria of being currently enrolled in a master's program and having prior experience with foreign language reading tasks were selected. It is intended that, with diverse academic backgrounds and linguistic proficiency, students will provide some rich insights into the phenomenon of reading anxiety.

Through the use of semi-structured interviews, data was collected, with this method providing flexibility and the ability to explore in depth the experiences of participants. First, some initial questions were developed to explore general attitudes of participants toward reading in a foreign language. Then some more specific questions were asked about the challenges they have encountered during reading tasks (such as vocabulary, cultural references, or text complexity). Next, questions were asked about their emotional and psychological responses to reading anxiety (including avoidance behaviours, stress, and self-perception), then questions about coping strategies and solutions they have identified to help manage reading anxiety. Finally, some recommendations for educators and institutions on how to minimize reading anxiety.

Face to face or online platforms were used to conduct interviews based on the convenience of participants. Every interview were 30-45 minutes long and were conducted with the consent of participants, and the interview was audio-recorded to ensure that the transcription and analysis are accurate.

Interview data was analysed with thematic analysis. This method entails categorizing, comparing and interpreting the data to identify patterns and themes. Several steps are involved in the analysis process. The first step involved finding out the data through the interview transcripts and reading them to establish an initial understanding. After that, some initial codes were developed to label systemically important features of the data. The themes were developed from the codes which represented the overarching ideas and recurring patterns. After that, themes were reviewed to make sure they represent the data accurately and are not similar to one another. After finalizing them, themes were defined and named to ensure clarity. With the findings presented through the use of data examples, the research was concluded by reporting the results in relation to the research questions and existing body of knowledge. Through this structured process, experiences of participants of reading anxiety and the problems and solutions encountered are analysed in depth.

Results

Thematic Analysis

The interviews were analyzed thematically to provide useful information on the perceived challenges and solutions to foreign language anxiety in reading. The analysis revealed three main themes which can help to understand how students feel and how they cope with anxiety in reading. The main themes include (1) challenges in foreign language reading, (2) emotional responses to reading in a foreign language, and (3) strategies for overcoming reading anxiety.

The theme “challenges in foreign language reading” included three subthemes: (a) vocabulary and comprehension difficulties, (b) text type and contextual knowledge, and (c) speed and processing constraints. “Emotional responses to reading in a foreign language” theme has subthemes (d) anxiety and self-doubt, (e) motivation and interest in the topic, and (f) influence of external pressures. The third main theme “strategies for overcoming reading anxiety” is subdivided into (g) developing personal coping mechanisms, (h) utilizing external resources and support systems, and (i) maintaining motivation and concentration.

Theme 1: Challenges in Foreign Language Reading

Subtheme 1: Vocabulary and Comprehension Difficulties

A challenge noted to be most frequent in reading in a foreign language was vocabulary and comprehension. Participants expressed that unfamiliar words disrupted understanding, which was frustrating and discouraging. Participant 3 mentioned, "One and only problem that I have regarding reading texts is vocabulary. When you read advanced or upper intermediate level passages, I always have a couple of words that I don't know."

Participant 4 also mentioned that despite having reading abilities sometimes unfamiliar words can still cause a bit of disruption in understanding.

"Even if you understand 90% of it, some unfamiliar words can distract your comprehension."

Subtheme 2: Text Type and Contextual Knowledge

The challenges of reading in a language depended on the kind of text and how well the reader knew its subject matter as some participants found specialized texts particularly tough to understand. Participant 1 stated, "If I work with literary texts, I prefer to work with Russian texts because I think that all the beauty of language provides feelings which I would like to see."

However, they mentioned that scientific texts or documents related to work were more manageable regardless of the language used. Participant 2 also mentioned, "The topics that I do not have enough knowledge about are the hardest topics."

Subtheme 3: Speed and Processing Constraints

Speed reading posed a challenge for participant as they felt compelled to read quickly in academic environments which caused them to experience heightened levels of anxiety. Participant 1 shared, "I need much time in order to process the text because it's how my brain works personally. In this case, what they [professors] do is make me increase the speed of reading." This pressure to read faster produced participants as feeling lost or overwhelmed especially in group settings where peers were waiting for them to finish.

Theme 2: Emotional Responses to Reading in a Foreign Language

Subtheme 1: Anxiety and Self-Doubt

Some participants felt anxious and doubtful about their ability when reading in a foreign language. They got nervous over unknown words and lack of comprehension. Participant 5 said, "When I saw unknown words all the time, it kinda made me feel unconfident and not smart enough, so I avoided reading on purpose." In a similar manner, participant 1 shared, "If I don't understand the meaning in English or Russian, then I feel that perhaps I do not know either language well."

Subtheme 2: Motivation and Interest in the Topic

Motivation played a key factor in determining the willingness of participants to engage in reading in a foreign language. Comprehension was higher and anxiety was lower when they were interested in the topic. A lack of interest led to frustration. Participant 2 shared their experience, "If it's about obligation, then I have to make myself do it. But if I find it interesting, I can read without any problem." Participant 1 also mentioned, "If I am interested in the context, then I will understand the meaning of the sentences I have. If I do not understand the context, for example, medical or political texts, I think I will meet some issues."

Subtheme 3: Influence of External Pressures

Some participants pointed out that social pressures like group discussions or academic expectations contributed to their anxiety. Time pressure was another issue that created stress. Participant 1 noted, "Sometimes, of course, I feel lost while reading the text when I know that I have my time limit and need to follow these frames. I start losing myself, so I just read, read, read... and maybe it's even useless." Similarly, participant 6 mentioned, "Every time I felt that I was struggling, it made me feel as if I was not smart or intelligent enough."

Theme 3: Strategies for Overcoming Reading Anxiety

Subtheme 1: Developing Personal Coping Mechanisms

Many participants had their own ways of dealing with anxiety. For instance, some participants followed a systematic way of translating and memorizing the unknown words. Participant 3 stated, "If I don't understand something, I try to underline new words, then translate and memorize." Some of them used mental strategies. Participant 8 mentioned, "I just realized that it is okay not to know all the words and phrases in English as it is not my mother tongue. There is no one who knows a foreign language 100 percent fluently."

Subtheme 2: Utilizing External Resources and Support Systems

Some participants talked about the role of instructors, peers, or digital tools in helping them with reading challenges. However, while some of the participants felt that their professors did not provide much support, others found alternative resources. Participant 2 noted, "These days, I get instructions from AI-generated apps that give me a chance to understand texts in an easier way."

Peer discussions were also found to be helpful as well. Participant 4 mentioned, "After you read individually, you can discuss it with your peers in order to see if you understand the information correctly."

Subtheme 3: Maintaining Motivation and Concentration

Several participants, however, highlighted the issue of maintaining motivation and concentration. Participant 1 described a unique strategy, "Sometimes, I take a photo of one moment from the text, let's say one paragraph that I find the most interesting, and if I have problems with another page, I can come back to this photo, reread it, and it raises my motivation."

Others suggested taking breaks or just reading in shorter intervals to avoid exhaustion. Participant 7 suggested, "If I come across any unknown words, first I try to find the meaning through the context itself. If it is too complicated, I just translate it and try to memorize so the next time I will not struggle."

Discussion

The findings of this study offer useful information about the difficulties, the emotional reactions, and the ways of coping with foreign language reading anxiety. The findings are in line with the recent studies in second language acquisition which stress the role of vocabulary problems, speed of processing, motivation and external pressures.

Research highlights that lexical knowledge is the single most important predictor of reading fluency and vocabulary and comprehension difficulties were the most common challenges in this participant group (Shi & Lee, 2025). A limited vocabulary causes interference and stress because learners fail to understand the information they are required to process (Zhao et al., 2025). Furthermore, according to the schema theory, prior knowledge also dramatically affected comprehension with text type and contextual knowledge being the significant factors (Paul & Kendeou, 2024).

Students experienced additional stress because of text complexity and insufficient background knowledge when reading academic or culturally unfamiliar materials. The findings support Bernhardt's (2011) compensatory model of L2 reading because learners depend on their prior knowledge when their linguistic proficiency is not enough. Grabe (2009) found that pre-reading discussions activate schema which substantially enhances comprehension as demonstrated by Participant 1's preference for texts related to their interests. The research supports educational scaffolding methods like Koda's (2005) metacognitive strategy training to assist students with complex text navigation.

Speed and processing constraints were also frequently mentioned, which are also characteristic of academic environments, where reading is often expected to be fast. A recent study has found that making learners read at a faster rate increases their anxiety levels and reduces their comprehension (Kosaka, 2024). However, when learners are given more time to process information, they tend to retain and understand more.

Anxiety and doubt were the main factors that influenced reading experiences. Research also shows that students with higher levels of reading anxiety perform worse in reading than their peers (Alshehri, 2025). Those who got unknown words frequently and avoided reading altogether, confirmed the previous findings that perceived self-competence is a determinant of motivation and persistence in language learning (Zhang et al., 2024).

Motivation was also found to play an important role in reducing reading anxiety. Those participants who were interested in the reading topic got higher comprehension and less stress, which is supported by self-determination theory that states that intrinsic motivation enhances learning achievements (Ryan and Deci, 2020). However, in addition to the internal factors, external pressures like peer comparisons and academic demands increased anxiety, as has been found in research on social influences in second language learning (Cao et al., 2024).

The findings about participants' coping strategies receive empirical evidence. The study by Chun (2011) on technology-enhanced reading supports the use of digital tools such as dictionary apps and the peer discussions follow Vygotskian (1978) social learning principles. The annotation strategies described by Kern (1994) support Participant 7's method of word translation and memorization.

The findings have several implications for educators and learners. Teachers should incorporate flexible reading speeds, vocabulary-building exercises, and contextual learning to reduce student anxiety. Encouraging students to personalize their reading strategies, such as focusing on key vocabulary, using digital aids, and peer discussions could help increase confidence.

This study also has some limitations. The sample size was small, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should include a bigger and more diverse participant group to include

other experiences. Also, the study was qualitative in approach, but use of quantitative data on reading anxiety levels at different times could have been helpful in enhancing the findings.

Conclusion

This study reveals significant challenges to foreign language anxiety in reading, such as vocabulary issues, text difficulty, the rate of processing information, and other pressures, all of which affect comprehension and confidence. However, learners use coping strategies, like vocabulary building, digital tools, and peer support to help reduce anxiety. The results highlight the importance of teachers to design supportive learning contexts, incorporate pre-reading approaches, and advise students to regulate their reading efforts for better fluency and interest. However, future work should go further to investigate larger, more representative samples with quantitative indicators of anxiety levels across time. While the study offers important findings, the limited sample size prevents generalization, and larger, more diverse groups with quantitative assessments of anxiety levels over time should be examined in future work.

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ШЕТ ТІЛІНДЕГІ ОҚУҒА БАЙЛАНЫСТЫ ШЕТ ТІЛІ МАЗАСЫЗДЫҒЫНЫҢ ҚАБЫЛДАНҒАН ҚИЫНДЫҚТАРЫ МЕН ШЕШУ ЖОЛДАРЫ

Аңдатпа. Бұл зерттеу шетел тілінде оқығанда мазасыздық сезінетін студенттердің қиындықтары мен оларды жеңу стратегияларын зерттейді. 8 магистрантпен жүргізілген сұхбаттар негізінде сапалы тақырыптық талдау арқылы үш негізгі тақырып анықталды: шетел тілінде оқудағы қиындықтар — сөздік қорының тапшылығы, мәтіндердің күрделілігі және уақыт шектеулері; эмоциялық жауаптар — мазасыздық, өз-өзіне сенімсіздік және сыртқы қысым; ал мазасыздықты жеңу стратегиялары — сөздік қорын дамыту әдістері, цифрлық құралдарды пайдалану және құрдастардың қолдауы. Бұл зерттеу нәтижелері мотивация, өзін-өзі реттеу және құрылымдалған педагогикалық тәсілдердің оқудағы мазасыздықты азайтудағы

маңыздылығын көрсетеді. Мұғалімдер білім алушыларды алдын ала оқу стратегияларын енгізу, бірлесіп оқуды ынталандыру және оқытуда технологияны қолдану арқылы қолдай алады, бұл түсіну мен сенімділікті арттыруға көмектеседі. Зерттеудің шектеулері — таңдаманың аз болуы және өзіндік есеп беру деректеріне сүйенуі.

Түйін сөздер: шет тіліндегі мазасыздық, оқу, екінші тілді меңгеру, шет тілдерін үйрену, сөздік қорындағы қиындықтар, өзіне деген сенімсіздік, күресу стратегиялары.

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ВОСПРИНЯТЫЕ ТРУДНОСТИ И РЕШЕНИЯ СВЯЗАННЫЕ С ИНОЯЗЫЧНОЙ ТРЕВОЖНОСТЬЮ ПРИ ЧТЕНИИ НА ИНОСТРАННОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

Аннотация. Это исследование посвящено изучению трудностей и стратегий преодоления, с которыми сталкиваются студенты, испытывающие иноязычную тревожность при чтении. На основе качественного тематического анализа интервью с восемью магистрантами были выделены три основные темы: во-первых, трудности при чтении на иностранном языке связаны с ограниченным словарным запасом, высокой сложностью текстов и нехваткой времени; во-вторых, эмоциональные реакции проявляются в виде тревожности, неуверенности в себе и давления со стороны окружающих; в-третьих, стратегии преодоления тревожности включают развитие словарного запаса, использование цифровых инструментов и получение поддержки от сверстников. Полученные данные подчеркивают значимость мотивации, навыков саморегуляции и целенаправленных педагогических вмешательств для снижения уровня тревожности при чтении. Преподаватели могут эффективно поддерживать учащихся, внедряя стратегии предварительного чтения, поощряя совместную работу и интегрируя технологии в учебный процесс для повышения понимания текста и уверенности в своих силах. Ограничениями исследования являются небольшой объем выборки и опора на самоотчетные данные.

Ключевые слова: иноязычная тревожность, чтение, овладение вторым языком, изучение иностранных языков, трудности со словарным запасом, неуверенность в себе, стратегии преодоления

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