



## Factors of Foreign Language Reading Anxiety in a Taiwan EFL Higher Education Context

Ching-Yi Tien\*

Assistant Professor, I-Shou University, Taiwan

### Abstract

Although there is increased attention on investigating foreign language reading anxiety around the world, factors causing EFL reading anxiety have rarely been investigated, especially in the researched setting. Therefore, this study aimed to explore and understand the underlying problems and factors that lead to foreign language reading anxiety in a Taiwanese university context. The study employed two survey instruments (i.e., the background questionnaire and FLRAS) and one English reading test to answer the research questions. A total of 98 undergraduate English-major students participated in this study. The results reveal that gender has an important impact on foreign language reading anxiety. While time spent each week reading in English and learners' English proficiency levels did not have significant results, they still have an influence on individual differences.

**Keywords:** foreign language reading anxiety, higher education, gender, English proficiency

### INTRODUCTION

Owing to the rapid advancements in technology used in all domains, people benefit from it in significant ways, and education is no exception, especially for university learners. Take foreign language reading for example; instead of reading textbooks or learning to read from websites, a trend of learning by watching YouTube videos has become increasingly popular at the researcher's institution. A more concerning change is that an increasing number of English language learners at the researched site have raised doubts about the importance of reading; they even suggest just watching films in reading classes, and claim that they may learn better by doing so, not to mention that they are quite reluctant to purchase books. This triggered the researcher to wonder what the causes are for these negative attitudes towards reading. It is strongly suggested that reading plays a vital role in language learning (Anderson, 1994; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; Day & Bamford, 1998); however, in recent years, numerous language learners have begun to favor speaking and listening over reading (Huang, 2012). Anjali Hans (2013) pointed out that "reading is a complex cognitive process of decoding symbols in order to construct or derive meaning (reading comprehension)" (p.

15). Due to the multifaceted issues involved in reading, researchers have extended the research focus from reading comprehension to reading anxiety.

Horwitz et al. (1986) defined foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA) as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language-learning process” (p. 128). To achieve better teaching and learning in EFL reading classes, many advocates have begun to conduct research on foreign language reading anxiety in order to mitigate the learners’ apprehension concerning foreign language learning (e.g., Aida, 1994; Brantmeier, 2005; Horwitz et al., 1986; Huang, 2001; Saito et al., 1999).

Although there are some studies which have focused on foreign language reading anxiety in Taiwanese contexts (Chen, 2007a; Chen, 2007b; Chen et al., 2016; Hou, 2009; Huang, 2001; Kao & Craigie, 2010; Lien, 2011; Lien, 2016; Tasi & Li, 2012; Wu, 2011), there is still room to explore such issues. Hence, this study aimed to investigate factors concerning university level EFL learners’ English learning anxiety in Taiwan.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to explore issues concerning university level EFL learners’ English learning anxiety in Taiwan, the following questions were addressed:

1. What are the differences in reading anxiety levels between genders among Taiwanese university students?
2. What are the differences in reading anxiety levels with regard to the amount of time spent each week reading English materials among Taiwanese university students?
3. What is the relationship between EFL learners’ Foreign Language Reading Anxiety levels and their English reading proficiency?

## RESEARCH ON FLRA IN DIFFERENT REGIONS

A growing number of studies concerning foreign language anxiety (e.g., Chan & Wu, 2004; Alsowat, 2016) and foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA) have been reported in major journals. Sellers (2000) explored the relationship between language anxiety and reading in Spanish as a foreign language in a large research university in the United States. The study suggested that “reading anxiety is a separate and distinct phenomenon in language learning” (p. 517). More empirical research is needed in this area. Zhao et al. (2013) conducted a study examining the foreign language reading anxiety level of English-speaking university students learning Chinese as a foreign language in the United States. Their findings suggested that reading anxiety was a salient problem for learners of Chinese whose native language was English. In a similar vein, Zhou (2017) also investigated the FLRA level of learners of Chinese as a foreign language in the United States. The research identified major sources of FLRA as the worries about unfamiliar topics, unknown pronunciation, and feeling uncomfortable reading aloud in class. Joo and Damron (2015) looked at foreign language reading anxiety among college students who were studying Korean as a foreign language in the United States. One of

the findings indicated that students who were in higher-level Korean classes felt less anxious about reading than those in the lower levels, and there was no significant difference between the genders in terms of reading anxiety.

Some research was conducted in Turkey regarding foreign language reading anxiety. Kuru-Gonen (2009) sought the sources of foreign language reading anxiety among first year university students and found that personal factors, the reading text, and the reading course were the three main sources of FLRA. Gübendir (2014) used think-aloud protocols to identify factors that cause foreign language reading anxiety. The study found 12 factors stimulating FL reading anxiety, and the researcher proposed that teachers should help students to build up their self-confidence in order to reduce their FLRA. Subaşı (2014) questioned the existence of foreign language reading anxiety in a study which proved that FLRA was a phenomenon related to, but distinct from general foreign language anxiety. Elaldı (2016) investigated the foreign language anxiety levels of students studying English language and literature by adopting gender as the causing factor. The findings showed that male students had higher FLA than female students. Kilinc and Yenen (2016) scrutinized students' reading anxiety with regards to variables of gender, grade levels of students, and socio-economic level of schools. Although there was no significant difference in connection with the gender variable in the study, it was found that female students were more anxious than male students in some sub-dimensions.

Advocates of foreign language reading anxiety have also provided substantial studies in Iranian contexts. Zoghi (2012) constructed an English as Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Inventory (EFLRAI) for non-English major students and found that EFLRAI is a new, valid, and reliable instrument for examining EFL learners' reading anxiety. Ghonsooly and Loghmani (2012) recruited 196 senior university EFL learners to answer the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) inventory, and a final 46 contributors to additionally respond to the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS). The results indicated no significant relationship between FLRAS scores and SORS scores; no noteworthy relationships between the genders were found either. Nazarinasab et al. (2014) sought to measure the impact of foreign language reading and text feature awareness on university students' reading comprehension ESP texts. The results showed that students who had higher scores in reading comprehension tests tended to have lower levels of reading anxiety, and vice versa. Mohammadpur and Ghafournia (2015) asked 100 BA students to take a TOEFL reading proficiency test and then to answer a reading anxiety questionnaire. The study revealed that highly proficient learners felt less anxious and stressed while they were engaged in comprehending reading tasks than low proficiency learners.

Although there are more studies regarding foreign language reading anxiety around the world, due to the limited space, only three are reported here. Rajab et al. (2012) examined the reading anxiety level among 91 final year Malaysian undergraduates and found that the participants experienced little or minimal anxiety in second language reading performance. Al-Shboul et al. (2013) sought factors of FLRA in a Jordanian EFL

context with different levels of English language proficiency student participants. Their study found that unknown vocabulary, unfamiliar topics, and unfamiliar culture were three main sources of foreign language reading anxiety. Lastly, Sabti et al. (2016) looked at gender differences and the FLRA of high school EFL Iraqi learners in Malaysia. The results of their study showed that both male and female students had a high level of reading anxiety, and that gender played a minor role in the study, with female participants revealing a higher level of reading anxiety than their male counterparts.

## METHOD

### Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in a private university in southern Taiwan. A total of 98 student participants were recruited in this study (29 males and 69 females), of whom 58 (59%) were sophomores and 40 (41%) were juniors. Participants were from the Department of Applied English and were taking the courses listed as Practical Reading (for sophomores) and Reading and Writing for TEFL (for juniors), and each class lasted three hours per week for 18 weeks. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and consent letters were signed and collected from the voluntary participants. The questionnaire was then distributed near the end of the semester (week 17).

### Instrument

In order to investigate the Taiwanese university students' English reading anxiety, two survey instruments (i.e., the background questionnaire and FLRAS) and one English reading test were used. The background questionnaire survey was designed to obtain some basic data about the participants, such as gender, the year of study, whether the participants liked or disliked reading English articles, the types of article they usually read, time spent reading per week, and some questions regarding reading strategies and reading tests.

The original Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) developed by Saito, Horwitz, and Garza (1999) was modified to some extent by Liu (2011) for her PhD dissertation. The FLRAS adopted for the present study is that of Liu because it best meets the needs of the Taiwanese context. The modified FLRAS is a 20-item questionnaire based on a 5-point summated Likert-type scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The difference between the original FLRAS and the modified FLRAS is the wording, such as the words "French, Russian, Japanese" were completely replaced by the word "English". Saito, Horwitz, and Garza (1999) reported that the FLRAS had an internal consistency coefficient of .86 (Cronbach's alpha,  $n= 383$ ). The internal consistency coefficient of the modified FLRAS for the present study was .742 (Cronbach's alpha,  $n= 98$ ).

The reading test conducted for the present study was to identify the participants' English reading proficiency. The sample reading test of *Cambridge English: Preliminary*,

also known as the *Preliminary English Test (PET)*, was utilized. The students' scores were converted and calculated to fit the purpose of this study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Background Information

Descriptive statistical analysis was used to analyze the data. Some of the participants' background information regarding the research questions is presented in the following.

When asked whether they liked or disliked reading English articles, 77 (78.6%) of the participants chose "like" and 21 (21.4%) "dislike." The majority of the students who chose "like" wrote down the reasons why they like to read English articles as: reading English articles can enhance their English ability, can broaden their views about other countries, can let them know more English vocabulary, and can improve their writing skills. As for their reasons for disliking reading English articles, most of them expressed that it takes a lot of time to find out the meaning of unknown words, and it is very annoying to do so. In response to questions regarding what types of reading they usually do, most of them indicated that they read the textbook ( $M=.58$ ,  $SD=.496$ ) more often than outside reading materials ( $M=.30$ ,  $SD=.459$ ) and Internet articles ( $M=.40$ ,  $SD=.492$ ). In terms of how much time they spend on English reading, half of them chose between 5 and 10 hours. Table 1 shows the statistics.

**Table 1.** Time spent reading English per week

Total hours	N	Percentage (%)
Less than 5 hrs	33	33.7
5 to 10 hrs	54	55.1
10 to 15 hrs	9	9.2
More than 15 hrs	2	2.0
Total	98	100.0

A question concerning English reading tests can reveal test takers' English reading proficiency. The answer was highly positive ( $M=3.98$ ,  $SD=.835$ ). When asked if they seriously answer the questions in English reading tests, the result was significant ( $M=4.23$ ,  $SD=.606$ ).

### The Reading Test

A sample reading test of *Cambridge English: Preliminary (PET)*, was employed to assess the students' English reading proficiency. The mean score of the test was 52.31 (lowest: 18; highest: 95). To be specific, students who scored between 18 and 40 are considered as less-proficient readers ( $N=31$ ,  $M=30.33$ ), those who scored between 42 and 70 are considered as average readers ( $N=50$ ,  $M=55.09$ ), and those who scored between 71 and 95 are considered as more-proficient readers ( $N=17$ ,  $M=82.6$ ).

## FLRAS

Liu's 2011 Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) was utilized to measure the students' English reading anxiety and to answer the three research questions of this present study. The mean score of average anxiety level is 3.23, which suggests that the students tend to have a high level of English reading anxiety. This result supports all the aforementioned research in this paper. Among 20 statements regarding English reading anxiety, the top five statements (S13, S7, S12, S1, and S14) and the bottom five statements (S17, S8, S3, S18, and S15) identified by the participants are listed in Tables 2 and 3, respectively, along with the statistical details.

**Table 2.** The highest 5 mean score statements reported by the participants

Statements	N	M	SD
13. I feel confident when I am reading in English.	98	3.47	.922
7. When reading English, I get nervous when I don't understand every word.	98	3.50	1.229
12. I enjoy reading English.	98	3.77	.797
I get upset when I'm not sure whether I understand what I am reading in English.	98	3.79	.922
14. Once you get used to it, reading English is not so difficult.	98	4.09	.705

Table 2 shows that students' worries of foreign language reading anxiety are unknown vocabulary and uncertainty of reading comprehension. The results are consistent with the findings of previous studies (Al-Shboul et al., 2013; Güvendir, 2014; Zhou, 2017). However, the table also indicates that the apprehension diminishes once students get used to reading in English.

**Table 3.** The lowest 5 mean score statements reported by the participants

Statements	N	M	SD
17. I don't mind reading to myself, but I feel very uncomfortable when I have to read English aloud.	98	2.77	1.147
8. It bothers me to encounter words I can't pronounce while reading English.	98	2.81	1.155
3. When I'm reading English, I get so confused that I can't remember what I'm reading.	98	2.82	1.097
18. I am satisfied with the level of reading ability in English that I have achieved so far.	98	2.92	1.109
15. The hardest part of learning English is learning to read.	98	2.92	1.190

Although Table 3 presents the 5 statements with the lowest mean scores, it still reveals that the mean scores are higher than the average mean score, which may suggest that the students feel uncomfortable when they have to read English aloud, and feel it is troublesome when they are unable to pronounce certain English words. This finding partially corroborates Zhou's (2017) research finding.

**Research Question 1:** What are the differences in reading anxiety levels between genders among Taiwanese university students?

To find out the differences in reading anxiety levels between genders among these participants, an independent samples *t* test was used. The result is presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Reading anxiety level difference between genders

Statements	G	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
11. I am worried about all the new symbols I have to learn in order to read English.	M	3.00	.886	-0.063	0.042*
	F	3.01	1.091		
13. I feel confident when I am reading in English.	M	3.69	.761	1.545	0.007**
	F	3.38	.972		
15. The hardest part of learning English is learning to read.	M	2.90	1.081	-0.117	0.05*
	F	2.93	1.240		
16. I would be happy just to learn to speak English rather than having to learn to read as well.	M	3.66	1.010	1.739	0.038*
	F	3.22	1.187		

Note: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .0001$

Gender= G, male= M (N=29), female= F (N=69)

Table 4 shows that there were statistically significant differences between male and female students for statements 11, 13, 15, and 16. Statement 11 indicates that female students ( $M=3.01$ ) are slightly more worried about all the new English symbols they have to learn than male students ( $M=3.00$ ). Also, female students ( $M=2.93$ ) agree more that the hardest part of leaning English is learning to read than the male students ( $M=2.90$ ). In contrast, male students ( $M=3.69$ ) feel more confident when reading in English than female students ( $M=3.38$ ). Also, male students ( $M=3.66$ ) would be happier just to learn to speak English rather than having to learn to read as well compared with female students ( $M=3.22$ ).

Research regarding the role that gender plays in foreign language reading anxiety has yielded inconsistent results. Most of the studies have claimed that gender does not play a significant role in foreign language reading anxiety (Aida, 1994; Alsowat, 2016; Joo & Damron, 2015; Kao & Craigie, 2010; Wu, 2011; Zhao, 2013). Yet, in other research, male learners have been found to have higher FLRA than females (e.g., Elaldi, 2016); comparatively, others have pointed out that female students experienced higher FLRA than male students (e.g., Kilinc et al., 2016; Lien, 2011; Sabti et al., 2016)

**Research Question 2:** What are the differences in reading anxiety levels with regard to the amount of time spent each week reading English materials among Taiwanese university students?

To address research question 2, the differences in reading anxiety levels with regard to the amount of time spent each week, the data were computed by one-way ANOVA. Analysis of variance revealed no significant difference except for statement 20 [F(3.925,

1.320)=2.974,  $p=.036$ ]. Table 5 shows the mean score and the standard deviation of the difference by duration of the time students spent each week reading in English for statement 20 (see Table 5). It is interesting to see that students who spent 10 to 15 hours reading English articles/ materials believed that knowing more American history and culture will help them to be able to read English. There is no previous study examining time spent reading in English as a factor of FLRA; hence it is difficult to make comparisons between other studies and the current one. However, the results of Lien's (2016) research showed that academic level (years of academic level) was not associated with FLRA.

**Table 5.** Statement 20: You have to know so much about American history and culture in order to read English.

Time spent weekly	N	M	SD
Less than 5 hrs	33	2.97	1.159
5 to 10 hrs	54	2.93	1.211
10 to 15 hrs	9	4.11	.601
More than 15 hrs	2	2.50	.707
total	98	3.04	1.183

**Research Question 3:** What is the relationship between EFL learners' Foreign Language Reading Anxiety levels and their English reading proficiency?

To find out the answers to research question 3, the data were computed by one-way ANOVA. The analysis of variance revealed no significant difference except for statement 1: I get upset when I'm not sure whether I understand what I am reading in English [ $F(1.084, .640)=1.694, p=.034$ ] ( $M=3.79, SD=.922$ ). Additionally, the data were further analyzed to examine the three different groups of readers (less-proficient readers, average readers, and more-proficient readers) and their English reading anxiety level, the independent  $t$  test and one-way ANOVA were applied. No significant difference was shown by either analysis. The results of the current research for this category are different from those of Mohammadpur and Ghafournia (2015) who adopted TOEFL to place students into three proficiency levels and reported that students with high and intermediate reading levels differed significantly from those with a low reading level in terms of their foreign language reading anxiety. Although there are studies using course grade as a factor to investigate the relationships between FLRA and course achievements (e.g., Alsowat, 2016; Kao & Craigie, 2010), more studies are needed in order to find out whether learners' English proficiency provokes their foreign language anxiety or not.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study shed light on previous suppositions related to foreign language reading anxiety. Reading involves complex cognitive processes of encoding and decoding word meanings, not to mention that foreign language learners have to



deal with complicated development between first language and second language acquisitions. Perhaps this could explain why some students prefer speaking and listening to reading. Hence, knowing the factors of EFL reading anxiety, language teachers can provide their students with better assistance in order to overcome probable reading anxiety reactions (e.g, Mohammadpur, B. & Ghafournia, N., 2015; Sellers, 2000). Although this study does not identify significant differences for the factors of time spent reading English and English proficiency, the researcher still suggests that it is important to look into individual differences in both sources.

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