

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: Reading Anxiety, Foreign Language, Senior High School Students, Reading Anxiety Scale, Reading Comprehension.

INTRODUCTION

Reading proficiency is a foundational skill that learners are expected to develop continuously from junior high school through university, as it functions both as a core academic competency and as a determinant of future educational and career opportunities. In formal education, reading plays a central role in the transmission and construction of knowledge, shaping how students access, interpret, and critically engage with information (Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2015). Students who complete their schooling without adequate reading skills are more likely to face academic challenges and social disadvantages, given that reading underpins performance across disciplines and supports broader cognitive and communicative development.

For learners of a foreign language, reading poses distinctive and often heightened challenges. Limited linguistic proficiency, differences in cultural background, unfamiliar text structures, and varying levels of motivation may impede comprehension and fluency (Sellers & Lee, as cited in Kuru-Gonen, 2009). Among these factors, anxiety has been identified as a particularly influential affective variable. Anxiety has been a central concern in second language acquisition research since the 1970s and is commonly defined as a state of apprehension or diffuse fear that is not directly linked to a specific stimulus (Hilgard, Atkinson, & Atkinson, 1971, as cited in Sabbah & Sabah, 2018). In classroom contexts, such anxiety frequently manifests as fear of making mistakes, which can erode learners' confidence and discourage risk-taking—an essential component of effective reading development.

Foreign language reading anxiety refers more specifically to the feelings of tension, unease, and worry that arise when learners engage with written texts in a second or foreign language. While early research on foreign language anxiety primarily emphasized speaking performance (Horwitz et al., 1986), subsequent studies have demonstrated that reading anxiety constitutes a distinct construct that emerges during the cognitive processing of L2 texts (Saito et al., 1999). This form of anxiety may disrupt lexical access, hinder inferencing processes, and reduce the efficiency of working memory, thereby limiting comprehension and diminishing learners' engagement with reading tasks.

A growing body of empirical research has examined foreign language reading anxiety across different educational contexts. Studies have investigated university learners (e.g., Zhang, 2012; Joo & Damron, 2015) as well as EFL learners more broadly (Saito et al., 1999), consistently demonstrating that anxiety is prevalent and negatively associated with reading performance. However, despite this expanding literature, research focusing on secondary school learners—particularly in the Indonesian context—remains limited. Much of the existing work concentrates on higher education or adult learners, leaving insufficient insight into the levels, sources, and consequences of reading anxiety among senior high school students. This gap is significant, as adolescence represents a critical period for academic identity formation and skill consolidation, during which timely pedagogical interventions may yield long-term benefits for learners' confidence and achievement in reading.

Given the centrality of reading to academic success and lifelong learning, and the potentially debilitating effects of foreign language reading anxiety, there is a clear need to extend research to earlier stages of formal education in Indonesia. A deeper understanding of reading anxiety among senior high school learners can inform the development of targeted instructional 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 contributing to students' anxiety when reading English texts, this research seeks to provide empirical evidence that can assist teachers in designing more effective reading instruction and in fostering a supportive learning environment. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to the limited body of research on foreign language reading anxiety among Indonesian senior high school students and to address a critical gap in the existing literature.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive research design to investigate the level and sources of foreign language reading anxiety among senior high school students in an EFL context. A quantitative approach was adopted to obtain a systematic description of students' anxiety as perceived during English reading activities. The use of a descriptive design was considered appropriate, as the primary aim of the study was not to test causal relationships but to portray existing conditions related to reading anxiety and to identify potential factors contributing to it.

1. Population and Sample

The participants of this study consisted of 40 third-grade students from a senior high school in Pekanbaru, Indonesia. The students were selected using purposive sampling, as

they represented EFL learners at the secondary education level who were actively engaged in English reading instruction. This sampling technique allowed the researcher to focus on participants who were most relevant to the objectives of the study. The respondents included both male and female students, with ages ranging from 16 to 17 years old. All participants had received formal English instruction for several years and were familiar with reading English texts as part of their curriculum, making them suitable subjects for examining foreign language reading anxiety.

2. Research Instrument

The primary instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire adapted from the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale developed by Ahmad et al. (2013). The questionnaire was designed to measure students' perceived anxiety related specifically to reading in a foreign language. It consisted of 26 statements addressing various dimensions of reading anxiety, such as fear of misunderstanding texts, difficulty with vocabulary, concern over pronunciation, and apprehension about classroom reading tasks. Each item was rated using a four-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, to Strongly Disagree. The absence of a neutral option was intended to encourage respondents to express a clear position regarding each statement.

3. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted during regular English class sessions to ensure that students responded in a familiar and authentic learning environment. Prior to distributing the questionnaire, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and provided clear instructions on how to complete the instrument. Students were assured that their responses would remain confidential and would be used solely for research purposes. The questionnaire was then distributed to all participants, and sufficient time was allocated for them to read and respond to each item carefully. During this process, the researcher remained present to clarify any questions related to the instructions, without influencing the students' responses.

4. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive analysis techniques. Students' responses were tabulated and categorized based on the level of agreement for each questionnaire item. Percentages were calculated to illustrate the distribution of responses across the four Likert-scale options. This approach enabled the researcher to identify overall patterns of reading anxiety and to determine the most prominent sources of anxiety perceived by the students. The findings were then interpreted to provide a comprehensive overview of foreign language reading anxiety among senior high school EFL learners in the selected context.

RESULTS

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

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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.

Table 1. Level of foreign language reading anxiety

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	60.7	32.1	7.1		

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the terms, I can understand the text						
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. I enjoy English reading when I understand at least some portion of the text.	7.1	39.3	32.1	17.9	
7		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		
1	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	
1	In reading English, I hardly understand the idea if there is more than one meaning for each word.		21.4	35.7	35.7	
1	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	
1	I usually translate word by word when I am reading English.	10.7	46.4	32.1		
1	It is frustrating in reading English when one word is	14.3	46.4	35.7		
4						

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connected with another to change the meaning.					
1	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	
5					
1	I feel anxious in reading aloud in fear of making errors.	10.7	42.9	25	17.9
6					
1	I feel embarrassed in front of others if I pronounce a simple and easy word wrongly.	10.7	46.4	25	14.3
7					
1	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	
8					
2	I prefer silent reading rather than reading loud.	21.4	32.1	35.7	10.7
0					
2	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
1					
2	In reading aloud in the class, I do not understand the text even though it is easy.	25	42.9	28.6	
2					
2	When reading English aloud in the class, I focus on word accent rather than understanding.	7.1	35.7	35.7	17.9
4					
2	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
5					
2	When reading English, I get disturbed and do not remember what I have read.	14.3	17.9	42.9	25
6					

The findings of this study indicate that senior high school students experience a moderate to high level of foreign language reading anxiety when engaging with English texts. The data reveal that vocabulary-related difficulties constitute one of the most dominant sources

of anxiety. A substantial proportion of students reported feeling worried or upset when encountering unfamiliar or strange vocabulary, particularly when such vocabulary appeared consecutively within a text. This suggests that limited lexical knowledge and heavy reliance on word-level understanding significantly affect students' emotional responses during reading.

The results further show that many students tend to focus excessively on individual words rather than overall meaning. High agreement with statements related to word-by-word translation and difficulty understanding texts despite knowing the meanings of individual words indicates challenges at the level of semantic integration and discourse comprehension. This pattern reflects students' dependence on bottom-up reading strategies, which may hinder their ability to construct global meaning and increase frustration when texts involve polysemy or complex word relationships.

Topic familiarity also emerged as an important factor influencing reading anxiety. A considerable number of students expressed discomfort when reading unfamiliar topics and reported feeling anxious when encountering texts related to subjects they had little prior knowledge about. Conversely, students showed a strong preference for short stories and texts with familiar topics and simple vocabulary, highlighting the role of background knowledge in reducing anxiety and facilitating comprehension. These findings underscore the importance of activating schema and selecting contextually relevant reading materials in EFL classrooms.

In addition, anxiety related to reading aloud was evident among the participants. Many students reported fear of making pronunciation errors, embarrassment when mispronouncing words, and a tendency to focus on accuracy rather than comprehension during oral reading activities. The preference for silent reading over reading aloud further supports the notion that performance pressure exacerbates anxiety and interferes with meaning-making. Students' tendency to prepare excessively or consult phonetic transcriptions prior to reading aloud suggests heightened concern about linguistic accuracy and social evaluation.

Overall, the data demonstrate that foreign language reading anxiety among senior high school students is multifaceted, stemming from linguistic challenges (vocabulary and word meaning), cognitive demands (text comprehension and inferencing), and affective factors (fear of error and negative evaluation). These sources of anxiety can disrupt concentration, reduce retention of information, and negatively affect students' engagement with reading tasks. Therefore, addressing reading anxiety through pedagogical interventions—such as scaffolded reading activities, vocabulary support, topic familiarization, and low-anxiety classroom practices—is essential to fostering more confident and effective English reading development at the secondary school level.

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

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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.

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Volume 13 Number 2 August 2025

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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