



Sheikhbahaee University

School of Foreign Languages

Department of English

**A STUDY OF READING ANXIETY IN RELATION TO
GENDER, READING PROFICIENCY, AND READING
STRATEGY USE AMONG IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS**

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN
TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

By

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THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE CONTENT, FORMAT AND QUALITY OF
PRESENTATION OF THE THESIS SUBMITTED BY

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DEGREE OF M.A. IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IS
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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis was composed by me, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text. This work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

To my mother, father and Yashar

For all their love and tolerance

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List of Abbreviations

FLRAS: Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale

FL: Foreign Language

MAQ: Metacognitive Awareness Questionnaire

TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language

Abstract

This study investigates the effect of foreign language reading anxiety on Iranian EFL learners' reading strategy use, and reading comprehension. Also it was examined if reading strategy use and reading anxiety level differ across the gender divide. To this end, data were collected from sixty Iranian students (thirty males and thirty females) who were enrolled in English learning classes in a language learning center. Participants took the foreign language reading anxiety scale (FLRAS) followed by a background questionnaire, Metacognitive Awareness Reading Strategy Questionnaire (MAQ) and TOEFL reading section. Based on their TOEFL scores, participants were divided into two groups, namely High proficient group and Low proficient group. After calculating the level of foreign language reading anxiety for each student, the level of foreign language reading anxiety was compared with students' language proficiency levels, reading strategy use and gender. The results revealed that examinees experiencing lower foreign language reading anxiety have performed better in foreign language reading. The findings suggest that the more students experienced high foreign language reading anxiety, the less they were able to deal with reading context. This is because they could not use as many strategies as they normally can. That is, learners would tackle the context much better if they experience low level of foreign language reading anxiety. Considering gender, it was observed that the level of foreign language reading anxiety experienced by male and female participants did not differ in terms of their language proficiency, and reading strategy use. However, female participants performed better than male participants in applying bottom-up strategies.

Key Words: Affective Variable, Anxiety, Foreign Language Anxiety, Foreign Language Reading Anxiety, Gender, Reading Strategy.

Chapter One

Introduction

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Overview

Being the lingua franca in nearly all international communications and the realm of science, English has been known in virtually every country in the world, and has involved a lot of people in. Also, there has been growing demand for English all around the world. This trend, as a result, has led to a series of misconceptions about learning this language. For instance, a lot of people hold that learning another language is akin to acquiring one's mother tongue. However, this has been proved wrong. Among people who are against this notion, Grabe and Stoller (2002) mentioned that when learning and reading a second language, the processes that occur differ in at least three general areas, as opposed to when doing the same in the first language. These areas are "*linguistic and process, individual and experiential, and socio-cultural and institutional*" (p. 42).

Another crucial factor worthy of heeding in FLA/SLA is learners' psychological conditions. A researcher in this field is Krashen, who in his Affective Filter Hypotheses (1982), argued that learners' emotional state functions as a filter which can impede the input data or even completely block it. He (1982) also claimed that this feeling of uneasiness could even interrupt the process of second language acquisition. Affective filter includes all sorts of discomforting feelings which are caused by a threatening environment. When the affective filters are high, learners cannot transform input data to intake due to the mental burden they bear as a result of their emotional uneasiness; conversely, the process of learning accelerates with the affective filters being low, and learning becomes feasible. Anxiety is a feeling that can raise the affective filter, for it provokes the feeling of threat. So, it is very difficult, if not impossible to neglect its impact on the acquisition of either first or second language. This point of view has been assessed by a lot of scholars, and they have found similar results in their investigations. For example, King (2002) believes that emotional status, and more

noticeably anxiety, worsens performance and may even influence learners' self-esteem, or according to Cheng (2008), "no Chinese" policy followed by some Chinese teachers of English is a misconception that makes students feel uneasy and anxious, and consequently, lowers their performance.

There is not yet a consensus about a thorough going definition for the construct of language anxiety since it is a complex psychological concept made up of numerous variables. The first attempts to define language anxiety viewed it as the tension one feels when having to use a language in which one is not competent enough. This regards language anxiety as an invariable personality trait, for it is a reaction, such as increased heart beat rate, shown by some people when exposed to a not-completely familiar situation (Endler & Okada, 1975; Eysenck, 1979; Schwarzer, 1986). Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) defined foreign language anxiety 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). This construct was defined earlier in the same article as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (p. 125). Since then, different studies have revealed that learning situations are specifically sensitive to anxiety arousal (Price, 1991, Horwitz and Young, 1991). Another definition was put forward by Sellers (2000), whose simplified definition of anxiety suggests that "anxiety can be associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, insecurity, or apprehension and is intricately intertwined with self-esteem issues and natural ego-preserving fears" (p. 512).

Horwitz et al. (1986) believe that foreign language anxiety consists of three components, namely *communication apprehension*, *fear of negative social evaluation*, and *test anxiety*. The first component is the tension which is felt when one cannot express his/her

mature thoughts and ideas, or when one fails to comprehend the others through his/her immature second-language vocabulary. The second element is the pressure experienced because of the fear of negative social evaluation. Again, students may feel their language is not appropriate enough to make a proper social impression. The third component concerns the apprehension over academic evaluation and is especially effective and prominent when formal instruction is involved.

1.2. Statement of Problem

Language anxiety has long been considered as an important factor. Certainly neglecting this emotional variable can result in unfavorable consequences. Anxiety's devastating impacts on students' performance, achievement in learning and self-esteem have been substantiated. This could be the reason why reducing affective barriers is the primary concern of various methodologies. Anxiety, among other emotional variables, has been a notorious variable from which a lot of learners suffer. Therefore, it seems absolutely necessary to pay specific attention to this issue in order to gain a better understanding of its nature and functions.

Another major issue to keep in mind is that, contrary to the common belief which suggests anxiety arises or is significant only in the case of speaking and listening, it could irritate the learner even while reading or writing. The studies scrutinizing this issue, however, are considerably fewer than the studies conducted to find the relationship between anxiety and speaking/listening. As a result, the attempt has been made, in this study, to investigate the relationship and possible interactions between reading anxiety and the variables of reading proficiency, reading strategy use and gender.

1.3. Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study, firstly, is to unearth the possible correlation that FL reading anxiety could have with reading proficiency. Secondly, it tries to uncover whether reading strategies used by learners while reading a text, are possibly related to the reading anxiety experienced by subjects. Then, it is explored if FL reading anxiety and FL reading strategy use might differ across the gender divide.

1.4. Research Questions

The literature on the foreign language reading anxiety is not quite rich. In this regard, by reading up the studies on this affair, the research questions were based on two assumptions. Firstly, foreign language anxiety is a construct which is related to but distinct from general foreign language learning anxiety. Secondly, the level of foreign language reading anxiety changes when learning different languages (Saito et al., 1999).

The purpose of this study is to further our understanding of foreign language reading anxiety by assessing foreign language reading anxiety among learners. To this end, the study focused on the following research questions:

1. Is there any relation between the students' reading proficiency and the amount of language anxiety they experience?
2. Is there any relation between the learners' preferred reading strategies and their anxiety level?
3. Is there any difference in the anxiety level among male and female learners?
4. Is there any significant difference in reading strategy use among male and female learners?

1.5. Research Hypotheses

All four items below were formulated as Null Hypotheses:

1. There is no significant relation between reading anxiety and reading ability.
2. Reading anxiety does not affect learners' reading styles and preferences for certain types of strategies.
3. There is no significant difference in the anxiety level among male and female learners.
4. Learners' gender is not significantly related to the reading strategy use.

1.6. Significance of the study

Anxiety is arguably believed to play a crucial role in foreign language learning (Hussein, 2005; Saito & Samimy, 1996; Samimy & Tabuse, 1992). Although, skill-specific anxiety is an issue which has not yet been studied thoroughly, several researches have been conducted on this area in which participants reported different levels of anxiety when tackling different skills (Kim, 2000; Sellers, 2000; Saito et al., 1999; Vogely, 1998). When students are struggling with reading and do not show the least bit in getting better at it, their achievement suffers across the board. That is just because of what we call **reading anxiety**. Just like the fear of heights, reading anxiety is a phobia. It is associated with a strong negative emotional reaction toward reading. When the student's intellectual curiosity and attempts to read become linked to the disapproval of a significant affective filter, anxiety sets in (Sellers, 2000)

To apprehend how affective factors, particularly anxiety, would affect the foreign language learning specially reading performance, this study has highlighted foreign language reading anxiety and it provides a context for the possible relation between foreign language