



L2 reading anxiety: Exploring the phenomenon

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Anxiety has a crucial role in language learning. Research shows that high levels of anxiety have tremendous effects on achievement and motivation. When we take skill-specific anxieties into consideration, it is apparent that most of the studies are done on the speaking anxieties of the learners. Recent literature on anxiety revealed that skills other than speaking are likely to cause anxiety reactions among learners. One of the skills on which little research has been done is reading. In order to overcome the affective nature of second or foreign language L2 reading difficulties, there is a need to explore language learning reading anxiety in detail. In this respect, this study sheds considerable light on the L2 reading anxiety phenomenon by investigating the L2 reading anxieties of students of different proficiency levels. A total of 225 students enrolled in the English Preparatory School Program in Anadolu University, Turkey are the subjects of this study. Participants were chosen from three different proficiency levels (elementary, intermediate, and advanced) to reveal whether reading anxiety changes with proficiency level. Participants were given the FLCAS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986) and the FLRAS (Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale, developed by Saito, Garza, and Horwitz, 1999) at different times to reveal whether anxiety students experience is related to general language learning anxiety or reading in L2. Correlation analyses were applied and the results ($r = .52$, $n = 225$, $p < .01$) indicated that the anxiety students felt is specific to L2 reading and there are differences among students from different proficiency levels in terms of reading anxiety. Thus, further investigation needs to cover the possible reasons of this difference in order to shed more light on the issue of L2 reading anxiety.

Recent years have witnessed a tremendous interest in affective factors while learning a foreign language. According to Brown (2000), the affective domain is the emotional side of human behavior and it involves a variety of personality factors, feelings about ourselves and about others with whom we come into contact. Hence, affective variables have taken the attention of many researchers especially in the last two decades. Among these, anxiety plays a pivotal role for learners who are learning

English as a foreign or second language (Deutsch, 2004; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Foss & Reitzel, 1991; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Kitano, 2001; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Powell, 2000; Rodriguez & Abreu, 2003; Young, 1992).

In its basic terms, anxiety is assumed to be related to fear, frustration, apprehension, uneasiness, insecurity, self-doubt, or worry (Brown, 2000). When we take the action of learning a foreign language into consideration, foreign language (FL) anxiety experienced by many learners may be collapsed into a complex psychological phenomenon including both cognitive and affective factors due to the unique nature of language learning (Horwitz, 2001). Therefore, foreign language anxiety is defined 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” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128).

MacIntyre (1995) asserts that FL anxiety has negative effects on the cognitive processing and behavior; in fact, the relations among anxiety, cognition, and behavior are cyclical in the language class, each influencing the other. For example, a demand to answer a question in a foreign language class may cause a student to become anxious, then anxiety leads to worry and frustration. Cognitive performance is diminished because of the divided attention, and therefore performance suffers leading to negative self-evaluations and impaired cognition which further negatively influences performance. According to MacIntyre (1999), besides the cognition and behavior, FL anxiety has a potential negative effect on academic achievement, social context, and personality of the language learner. Moreover,

Elkhafaifi (2005) states that FL anxiety can deter students from pursuing academic or professional careers in which knowing a foreign language is essential for success. Hence, there have been many attempts to uncover what lies under the manifestations of anxiety.

Price (1991) pinpoints that the greatest source of anxiety is having to speak in the target language and other skills such as reading can also be anxiety provoking. Furthermore, frustration of not being able to communicate effectively and negative beliefs about target language would likely to cause anxiety. According to Oxford (1999), the sources of foreign language anxiety may also include concepts such as low self-esteem, low tolerance of ambiguity, problems with identity, competitiveness, fear of risk-taking, shyness, and classroom activities and methods. In addition to these, Horwitz (2001) points out that the sources of foreign language anxiety may vary according to culture. Aydin (2001) identified three main sources of FL anxiety experienced by Turkish students. These are; personal reasons, teachers' manner, and the teaching procedures. According to Aydin (2001), personal reasons include negative self assessment of ability, high personal expectations, and irrational beliefs about language learning. Moreover, teachers' manner towards learners and their error as well as the teaching procedures can create anxiety.

Although there has been fruitful research on the sources of FL anxiety, most of the studies focused on oral aspects of language learning and discussions centered around difficulties of oral performance caused by anxiety. However, recent attempts emphasize the negative effects of anxiety associated with other skills such as listening, writing, and reading.

According to Christenberry (2001), listening is a problematic skill and consists of difficulties for teaching; therefore, it is likely to cause anxiety. Other than listening, Leki (1999) puts forward that although learners have time to think about the message, to find words and syntactic structures to communicate the message and to change the content and language after the first attempt is written down, writing may become a potential source to cause anxiety.

Among the four skills, reading includes many difficulties and complexities for a learner; thus, is a potential source for provoking anxiety in a language classroom. This area of language learning is open to investigation since little research has been carried on the relationship between foreign language learning and foreign language reading anxiety (Saito, Horwitz, & Garza, 1999; Sellers, 2000).

Research on foreign language reading anxiety

In the second or foreign language context, the reading process is complicated because there are additional factors to consider such as language ability, cultural background, and learner motivations (Lee, 1999; Sellers, 2000). Although language teachers have generally assumed that reading is the least anxiety-provoking part of the curriculum, recent attempts dealing with skill-specific anxieties revealed that foreign language reading anxiety does exist and it has negative effects on the cognitive abilities of the learners (Lee, 1999; Saito et al., 1999; Sellers, 2000).

Saito et al.'s (1999) study was first to reveal reading anxiety as a phenomenon distinguishable from the general foreign language anxiety. Moreover, this study introduced

the construct of FL reading anxiety and offered a scale for the measurement of FL reading anxiety (Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale—FLRAS). Participants of the study were 383 students attending French, Japanese, and Russian courses. The results of this study showed that FL reading anxiety was distinguishable from general FL anxiety and also it indicated that students with higher levels of FL anxiety also tended to have higher levels of reading anxiety and vice versa. It was also clear that although general FL anxiety was independent of target language, levels of reading anxiety were found to vary by target language and seem to be related to the specific writing systems and unfamiliar cultural materials.

In another study conducted by Seller (2000), the principal goal was to confirm empirically that reading anxiety exists as a separate and distinct phenomenon in language learning as well as to assess its relationship to reading comprehension. Furthermore, this study explored the effect of language anxiety on the reading comprehension and recall of university level language students and the effect of language anxiety on the reading process itself. Seller's (2000) study supports the findings of Saito et al.'s (1999) study and suggests that reading anxiety is a separate and distinct phenomenon in language learning. Findings also indicate that more highly anxious students tended to recall less passage content than did those participants who claimed to experience minimal anxiety.

In a recent study, Matsuda and Gobel (2004) investigated the possible relationship between general foreign language classroom anxiety and foreign language reading anxiety along with gender, extended overseas experience, and

classroom performance. In addition to this, their study aimed to determine variables and anxiety factors which would be significant predictors of performance among first-year students participating in the study. The results of this study indicate that Foreign Language Reading Anxiety is a specific type of anxiety independent from general classroom anxiety. In addition to this, the findings of this study suggest that the students with overseas experience demonstrated lower anxiety in speaking English and gender was not found to have a significant effect on overall general reading anxieties. However, it was demonstrated that gender, proficiency, and self-confidence in speaking English played an important role in classroom performance of first-year students.

Despite the current interest on FL reading anxiety, there has not been much research on the sources of FL reading anxiety. Kuru Gonen (2005) conducted a study in a Turkish EFL context to reveal the reasons of students' anxiety while they were reading in the target language. In order to find out the sources of FL reading anxiety, students in her study were asked to keep diaries for two months on a weekly basis. Moreover, students were interviewed to support the findings derived from the analyses of the diaries and explore whether there was anything left that they wanted to express. As a result of the analyses, it was found that there are three main sources of FL reading anxiety in a Turkish EFL context. These sources are: anxieties caused by the personal factors, the reading text, and the reading course. The results of this study indicated that FL reading anxiety sources were different than general FL sources as the specific nature of reading including the text and the reading environment had influences on students' experiences of anxiety.

As can be seen from the previous studies mentioned above, the reduction of FL anxiety has an indispensable role on foreign and second language learning, and in order to create anxiety-free classrooms and help learners get the pleasure of reading in the target language, FL anxiety needs to be investigated. In this attempt, there is a gap in literature about the change in FL reading anxiety according to the proficiency levels of the learners. Hence, the purpose of this study is to fill in this gap by examining the possible relationship between FL reading anxiety and general classroom anxiety and find out whether FL reading anxiety changes according to the proficiency levels of FL learners.

Based on the purposes of this study, the following research questions emerged:

1. Does foreign language reading anxiety exist as a phenomenon distinguishable from general foreign language anxiety?
2. Does the foreign language reading anxiety of students change according to their proficiency levels?

Methodology

This study is conducted in 2005-2006 Academic year at Anadolu University School of Foreign Languages in Turkey.

Subjects

A total of 225 students from three different proficiency levels (elementary, intermediate, and advanced) participated in the study. Seventy five students were from elementary level, seventy five students were from intermediate level,

and seventy five students were from advanced level. The participants' proficiency levels were determined according to a proficiency test focusing on assessing language proficiency in skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. They were all enrolled in the School of Foreign Languages in a preparatory program which is designed for teaching students English as a FL prior to their academic study.

Data collection procedures

In order to determine whether anxiety students experience stemmed from general classroom anxiety or it is specific to reading in the target language, two scales were administered to the students. These were: Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS, developed by Horwitz, et al., 1986) and Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS, developed by Saito, et al., 1999). Both scales were administered to students in their native language, Turkish, to avoid any limitation caused by lack of proficiency in English since the participants were coming from three proficiency levels.

The FLCAS and the FLRAS

FLCAS was scored on a five point Likert scale, requiring students to respond to each item with a single answer; strongly agree (5 points), agree (4 points), neither agree nor disagree (3 points), disagree (2 points), and strongly disagree (1 point). This instrument aims at measuring the amount and type of anxiety experienced by the foreign language students in a classroom context and it integrates three related anxieties- communication apprehension, test anxiety, and

fear of negative evaluation (Oxford, 1999). Furthermore, levels of general FL anxiety that FLCAS measure did not depend on the specific target language. That is, FLCAS has stability regardless of the target language (Rodriguez & Abreu, 2003). The other quantitative instrument FLRAS contains 20 items, each of which is answered on a five point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5 points), agree (4 points), neither agree nor disagree (3 points), disagree (2 points) to strongly disagree (1 point).

Reliability and validity of both scales were computed in previous studies (Aydin, 2001; Kuru Gonen, 2005) to ensure that these scales could be used in a Turkish FL context. FLCAS consisted of 32 items (one item was deleted from the original scale as a result of reliability and validity studies) whereas FLRAS consisted of 18 items (two items deleted from the original scale as a result of reliability and validity studies). The scales were administered to the participants in different times to avoid the effect of retention. Participants were informed about the confidentiality of their data and only the students who volunteered took part in the study.

Data analysis procedures

In order to answer the first research question, Pearson Product moment correlation coefficient was computed. This analysis was appropriate since the aim was to determine whether there is a relationship between two constructs: general FL anxiety and FL reading anxiety.

For the second research question, the following formula was applied to FLCAS scores to determine the students from high, medium, and low anxiety levels:

High Anxiety: Mean + Standard Deviation = The score higher than this

Low Anxiety: Mean - Standard Deviation = The score lower than this

Medium Anxiety: The score between Mean - Standard deviation and Mean + Standard deviation

After determining students according to their FL reading anxiety levels, simple mean, and standard deviations were used to identify students' FL anxiety levels according to their proficiency levels.

Results and discussion

Determining whether FL reading anxiety is a phenomenon different from general classroom anxiety is of utmost importance since anxiety or uneasiness students experience may be caused by general FL anxiety. Thus, identification of FL reading anxiety as a skill specific one that is different from general FL anxiety was a necessary step for the purposes of the study. According to the results of the Pearson Product moment correlation coefficient, there is a positive correlation between two constructs of anxiety ($r = .52$, $n = 225$, $p < .01$). $.52$ means that the two measures share approximately 27% of the variance. Thus, approximately 73% of the variance is not shared between the two measures (general FL anxiety and FL reading anxiety). Thus, the results indicate that FL reading anxiety exists as a phenomenon related to, but distinct from, general FL anxiety.

The findings of this study conform to Saito et al.'s (1999) and Sellers's (2000) study owing to the fact that both studies

revealed FL reading anxiety as a phenomenon separate and distinguishable from general FL anxiety. In Saito et al.'s (1999) study, a correlation coefficient of $.64$ was found to explain the relationship between general FL anxiety and FL reading anxiety which indicated that 59% ($r = .64$, $r^2 = 0.41$ that is two constructs share 41% of the total variance) of the total variance related to anxiety students feel is specific to FL reading. Similarly in Sellers's (2000) study, correlation coefficient of $.70$ indicated that approximately 51% ($r = .70$, $r^2 = 0.49$ that is two constructs share 49% of the total variance) of the total variance related to anxiety students feel is specific to FL reading anxiety. Deriving from these results, both studies claimed that FL reading anxiety is related to, but distinct from general FL anxiety. The findings of this study support the findings of Saito et al.'s (1999) and Sellers's (2000) study; however, with the finding of 73% of the total variance related to anxiety students feel is specific to FL reading anxiety, the results of this study clearly emphasize FL reading anxiety as a distinguishable phenomenon. That is, in the context of the study a skill specific anxiety towards reading was experienced which was quite different from the general classroom language anxiety. For these students, reading in the foreign language brought forward some problems and they were frustrated while reading in the target language. Although this study did not focus on the sources of FL reading anxiety, by looking at Kuru Gonen's (2005) study conducted in a similar context, it may be assumed this skill specific anxiety may stem from some personal factors such as lack of motivation, self-confidence, and negative background experiences; the features of the reading texts such as unknown cultural content, complex linguistic structures, and uninteresting topics; and the nature of the

reading course such as the classroom environment, fear of evaluation, and the teacher.

As for the second research question which examines the levels of FL reading anxiety according to proficiency levels, the mean score was 50.02 and standard deviation was 7.4. When the formula for identifying low, medium, and high anxiety levels was applied to the total scores gained from FLRAS, scores between 1-42 indicated low level, scores between 43-57 indicated medium level, and scores higher than 58 indicated high level of FL reading anxiety. When the FL reading anxiety levels were categorized according to the proficiency of the learners', elementary level students (50%) appeared to suffer from FL reading anxiety more than the other proficiency level students. On the other hand, advanced level students (13%) experienced lowest FL reading anxiety among the three proficiency level students. Table 1 shows the results of the levels of FL anxiety according to three proficiency levels.

Table 1. Distribution of fl reading anxiety levels according to proficiency levels

	Low Anxiety		Medium Anxiety		High Anxiety		Total	
	N*	%	N*	%	N*	%	N*	%
Elementary	4	5	34	45	37	50	75	100
Intermediate	10	13	42	56	23	31	75	100
Advanced	17	23	48	64	10	13	75	100

N* Number of the Students

Total Number of the Students: 225

As can be clearly seen from Table 1, FL reading anxiety is experienced by the participants from all three proficiency

levels. Advanced students appear to have the lowest FL reading anxiety level accounting for 23 percent of the three proficiency levels. They are followed by the intermediate level students accounting for 13 percent. Elementary level students have the least low level accounting for only 5 percent of FL reading anxiety.

It is displayed in Table 1 that elementary level students have the highest level of 50% of FL reading anxiety whereas advanced level students have the least high level of 13% of FL anxiety. Fifty six percent of the intermediate level students experience medium level of FL anxiety whereas 64% of the advanced level students have the medium level of FL anxiety.

The results of this study indicate that the participants, who are students in a Turkish EFL context, experienced a substantial amount of FL reading anxiety while reading in the target language. The findings related to the second research question pinpointed that there is a negative relationship between proficiency level and level of FL reading anxiety. That is, FL reading anxiety level tends to decrease when the students become more proficient in the foreign language. However, results also showed that even the advanced level students experience FL reading anxiety although they are considered to be proficient in the target language. Furthermore, findings underlined the negative relationship between FL reading anxiety and proficiency levels as more proficient learners appeared to experience lower anxiety when compared to less proficient learners. This finding may be due to the increase in confidence and comprehension when the learner progresses in the language study.

According to Wallace (2001), effective readers use all levels of ability to make sense of the text at the same time they see reading as a process by which meanings are not simply extracted from the text, but mediated by the linguistic and schematic knowledge which they bring to it. Moreover, Miller and Meece (1997) assert that motivation plays an important role in the way to become an effective reader. That is, if students are highly and intrinsically motivated to read something, they are able to make sense of the text more successfully. Hence, by determining the level of anxiety students experience and by focusing on decreasing this anxiety, language teachers can help their students to enjoy reading in the target language. Thus, creating a low-anxiety reading atmosphere for learners may be helpful for them in becoming effective readers.

Teachers should keep in mind that the frustration their students feel may be related to a skill specific anxiety like FL reading anxiety. Identifying to what extent students experience FL anxiety or FL reading anxiety may help instructors to take certain precautions to lower the level of anxiety in the foreign language classroom. Moreover, by recognizing and dealing with FL reading anxieties of students, teachers may organize anxiety-free classroom environments in which learners can become effective readers. In order to help our students overcome FL reading anxiety, reading teachers can include some activities, which are prepared to decrease anxiety, for especially less proficient learners. Furthermore, they can bring reading materials which students like and are interested in, to turn reading into an enjoyable activity. As stated in Tsui (1996, p.165) “recognizing and addressing anxiety not only help students

to be more responsive, but also make language learning a much more enjoyable experience.”

Conclusion

FL reading anxiety is an important phenomenon that should be investigated since anxiety may interfere in learning and can serve as a strong indicator of success while reading in the target language. However, anxiety students feel may be related to general language learning anxiety or it may be due to skill specific anxiety. Therefore, it is important to determine whether the anxiety language students experience is a general FL anxiety or a skill specific type. This study has concluded that anxiety, as one of the affective variables, is an important factor that influences students in a negative way while they are reading in the target language and FL reading anxiety is a specific type of anxiety that is different from the general FL classroom learning anxiety. As creating a low-anxiety learning environment is important to reduce anxiety and tension that inhibit language performance, the implications of this study might be helpful for teachers and language educators in recognizing and dealing with the anxiety manifestations of learners in order to encourage them to be more effective readers.

Since there were differences among students from different proficiency levels in terms of reading anxiety, a further research may focus on identifying the possible reasons of this difference. Moreover, a new study can be designed to train students in order to lower their anxiety levels and at the end of the training, whether the anxiety levels of the students while they are reading in the target language is diminished can be investigated. In such a study, students can be made

aware of their reading anxieties and some strategies can be taught to students to decrease their anxieties. Then, the effect of these strategies on diminishing their anxiety levels can be investigated. Finally, another research looking at the correlation between FL reading anxiety and other affective variables, such as motivation and self-esteem that can affect reading can be suggested since anxiety is not the only factor influencing FL reading.

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