

## READING APPREHENSION AMONG HIGHER LEARNING LEARNERS

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### ABSTRACT

**W**hile many of the educational stakeholders are concerned with the more communicative usage of the second language, educators as well as learners themselves are very much aware of their capabilities of understanding second language texts that will directly affect their ability to master reading materials. This study investigates the reading apprehension level of thirty-four respondents from a private higher learning institution. The Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) questionnaire was used as the instrument where mean and standard deviation were used as descriptive analysis. Results indicated that Linguistic Factors are the main factors that elicit reading apprehension among the second language learners.

*Keywords: reading, apprehension, second language, linguistic factor, learner*

## 1. Introduction

Even though the four main skills of learning a language are considered the central areas for communicating with people from all around the globe, the impact of reading and understanding reading materials must not be neglected especially when examinations are mostly reflected through written text. In recent years, two surveys were conducted to investigate the reading habits among Malaysians. In 1996, the results showed that Malaysians read an average of only two books a year and this number did not increase when another survey was done in 2005 (Sunday Star, 2006). In 2008, the Malaysian literacy rate was only 93.2% as compared to other developed countries such as Japan, Britain and the United States, which achieved literacy rate at 99% (Peng & Chapman, 2009). According to Pandian (1997), Malaysian learners did not read for pleasure. They only read materials that were important to their daily lives especially for examinations or subject-related-matter and there was not enough cultivation of reading habits among Malaysians, which could lead to the low level of proficiency in many areas of language learning especially when it comes to the English language. Pandian (1993; 1996; 1997) believed that reading habits must be cultivated among Malaysian learners in their early years as it is essential for lifelong learning.

However, performing reading task in second language can trigger emotional situations such as apprehension, nervousness, and fear which eventually lead to mental blocks. The feelings of apprehension could be one of the reasons why learning a language is distinct from learning any other subjects or skills (Campbell & Shaw, 1994; MacIntyre, 1995). Equally, its affective constructs might impede language learning and thus contribute to the declining state of reading habits among Second Language Malaysian learners. Zbornic (1991) supported this notion, highlighting that language learners who experience reading apprehension portray signs, which source from the blockage of their mental inquisitiveness. This reaction can seriously hinder learners from succeeding in their language learning as reading apprehension is idiosyncratically distinctive from other types of language learning apprehension. Arikunto (2008) for example, claimed that students dislike reading because reading requires them to sit at one place for a long time in order to complete the reading tasks, thus the learners need to use their cognitive faculties in the process of reading (Sellers, 2000). This indicates reading requires the readers to submit to different kinds of mental processes including giving attention, perception, or understanding of the reading materials. They not only need to give extra attention to the knowledge of the foreign language, but also to the cultural background of the target language community. Hence, it becomes a complex process because it entails several overlapping and interrelated skills, which is demanding on the learners' cognitive systems (Curtis, 1980). Saito, Horwitz and Garza (1999) corroborated that reading is an anxiety-provoking activity as agreed by many other studies (Aida, 1994; Matsudaa & Gobel, 2004; Young, 1992) which are in agreement that language anxiety plays a pivotal role for foreign language or second language learners' quest for successful language learning. According to Sellers (2000), since reading is a cognitively demanding process, learners are required to have sufficient language capacity, cultural experience as well as motivation. The fact that some readers do not possess adequate language ability or knowledge of the target language may trigger the feeling of apprehension. Lee (1999) asserted that misguided reading practices can also result in reading apprehension especially when the process of reading is perceived as only a one-way or linear process between the reader and the text. Saito, Horwitz and Garza (1999) posited that reading apprehension does occur especially when readers are able to decode the foreign words but are unable to interpret its true or intended meaning due to their lack of conceptual knowledge of the foreign culture. This may result in frustration and eventually the increase in apprehension level. Although several studies on foreign or second language apprehension claimed that

speaking is the most anxiety-provoking situation, Saito et al. (1999) maintained that reading contributes to language learning apprehension and heightens apprehension especially when performing reading tasks. Therefore, it is the aim of this study to investigate the reading apprehension level of English as Second Language (ESL) learners and to determine which of the three domains (linguistics factors, personal factors and cultural items factors) contributed most towards the learners' apprehension level.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Instrument, Respondents and Analysis

The instrument of this study is the Foreign language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) developed by Saito et al., (1999). The questionnaire included twenty items related to the reading apprehension. FLRAS consisted of questions, which elicit self-report of apprehension over various aspects of readings, their perceptions of reading difficulties in the target language, and their perceptions of the relative difficulty of reading which is segregated into three categories namely the Linguistics factors, the Personal factors and the Cultural Items. FLRAS uses a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree on a scale of 1- 5. The instrument has a coefficient of  $r=0.64$  ( $p<0.01$ ) with a Cronbach alpha of 0.86. There are 34 respondents of this study representing 30% of the total population of students from Diploma in Information Technology (DIT) in Kolej Poly-Tech MARA, Batu Pahat, Malaysia. To investigate the reading apprehension level, Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 19.0 was used for mean, standard deviation and Pearson Product Moment Correlation to generate the results of ESL learners and to determine which of the three domains (linguistics factors, personal factors and cultural items factors) contributed most towards the learners' apprehension level. The range of mean between 1.00 – 2.50 is considered as experiencing high apprehension level, 2.51 – 3.50 as medium apprehension level and 3.51 – 5.00 is considered as experiencing low apprehension level. The apprehension level and its mean value is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Range for Apprehension Level**

	Apprehension Level	Mean Value (Range)
1	High	From 1.00 to 2.50
2	Medium	From 2.51 – 3.50
3	Low	From 3.51 to 5.00

## 3. Results and Discussions

**Table 2: Reading Apprehension Level**

Program	Levels of Apprehension	Mean	SD	Percentage
DIT (N = 34 )	High 11 respondents	2.37	0.22	32%
	Medium 22 respondents	2.78	0.19	65%
	Low 1 respondent	3.72	-	3%

The results in Table 2 shows that 65 percent or 22 respondents experienced medium reading apprehension, 32 percent or 11 experienced high reading apprehension and only 3 percent or 1 respondent experienced low reading apprehension. This finding supports the research findings of Kitano (2001) and Saito and Samimy (1996). Both studies yielded the same result which are that learners at higher learning institutions experience a state of nervousness when dealing with second language learning. Even though learners at this level is considered as more matured and are assumed capable of handling any psychological condition such as apprehension, the results show that more than half of the respondents are in the categories of medium and high apprehension level. Evidently, the results indicate that they do experience apprehension when performing reading tasks at the higher learning institutions. It could be due to task difficulties and the inability to handle high-level task difficulty that requires them to have linguistic background as well as discourse, strategic and sociolinguistic competencies. According to Spielberger (1966), the impact of apprehension could be seen through the integration of learning stage, difficulty of task and the integrated intelligence. Results indicated that high apprehension level facilitated learning when the task is relatively easy but impeded learning when the tasks become difficult. This is applicable in examining reading activities as well, where the learners encounter diction that is more difficult for them whether in terms of pronunciation or meaning, they tend to feel uneasy with the reading tasks. On the other hand, it increases their motivation to handle the situation by discovering more about the target language. However, too much difficulty in the reading tasks may de-motivate them and eventually make them feel less interested to complete the activity. This situation could also lead to feelings of uneasiness, which ultimately leads to feelings of frustration and depression and indirectly towards high apprehension level.

**Table 3: Domain of Reading Apprehension**

**Descriptive Statistics**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Linguistics Factors	2.5824	.59973	34
Personal Factors	2.6667	.36185	34
Cultural Items Factors	2.6912	.50022	34

**Table 4: Pearson Correlation between the category of factors and Reading Apprehension**

Factors	Reading Apprehension Level	
	Pearson Correlation	
Linguistics Factors		<b>.827**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<b>.000</b>
	N	34
Personal Factors	Pearson Correlation	<b>.715**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<b>.000</b>
	N	34
Cultural Items Factors	Pearson Correlation	<b>.653**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<b>.000</b>
	N	34

From Table 4, the Pearson Correlation shows a strong positive correlation between three factors which are ( $r = 0.827$ ,  $r = 0.715$ ,  $r = .653$ ). Results indicated that all three factors have strong relationship with reading apprehension. Hence, it can be concluded that reading apprehension in this study depends on Linguistic Features, Personal Factor, and Cultural Items. It also confirms the earlier study on reading apprehension by Saito, Horwitz, & Garza (1999) which stated that reading apprehension does indeed consist of all three factors.

Of the three categories of factors that elicit reading apprehension among the ESL learners in this study, Linguistic Factors with a mean value near to high apprehension level (refer to Table 3), can be considered as the lead factor that causes reading apprehension. This proves that not understanding the reading texts or the grammar of the reading materials could trigger reading apprehension among second language learners while performing reading tasks as indicated by the results of this study. Learners' attitude towards the language itself are also pertinent as apprehension may interfere with learning. As mentioned by Vygotsky (1978), the rigid beliefs that a learner upholds is the main reason in determining the learners' success in language learning. In fact, this belief is the key concept that will ultimately influence the learners' self-esteem, confidence and motivation towards mastering the target language. Therefore, the results of this study show that second language learners' do experience apprehension while reading English materials and at some point in time, they also experience some detrimental personal factors such as losing interest, depression and frustration especially when confronted with difficult passages in the texts which eventually lead to higher apprehension.

Additionally, it supports the classic humanistic approach that claims that humans are naturally inclined towards self-actualization (Rogers, 1969). Humanistic theory believes in peoples' needs, self-concept and values that are essential to humans (Huitt, 2006). Maslow (1954) and Rogers (1969) believed that humans possess unique intrinsic ability of self-actualizing tendency, which assists them to pursue personal development towards achieving personal objectives and development of their own selves. This humanistic theory is centred on the development of self-esteem in which humans are endowed with innate potential of learning. As Rogers (1969) stated, significant learning takes place when the subject matter (in this case English language) has relevance for the learners' own purposes.

Practically, the most socially useful learning is the learning of the learning process, which is a progressive action to experience and blend oneself towards the course of transformation. In other words, Rogers believed that learning is actually a continuous process, which leads to self-actualization only if the learners are aware of the purpose of the knowledge for their self-development. The results of this study show that the learners perceive English language as playing crucial roles in their future development. Therefore, the external factor of achieving better academic performance, has in fact, in a way triggered the students' intrinsic motivation to achieve their self-actualizations.

The results also indicated that the respondents of this study felt extremely anxious when they have to perform public reading. It means that, even though they do not have any problems when reading silently, they still feel uneasy when they have to read aloud in front of others. In such situations, teachers need to instill a sense of confidence to the extent that it will help to reduce their feelings of apprehension while reading in public. One way of doing it is by instilling what Miller, DeBacker and Greene (1999), specified as the instrumental beliefs relating to language learning which not only amplify extrinsic motivation but also boost learners' intrinsic motivations. According to Ryan et al. (1996), instrumentality belief is defined as the belief that accomplishment in a present condition will offer positive achievements to some upcoming outcome. In other words, instrumentality beliefs entail that a person has exterior motives for indulging in the current tasks. Even though the earliest theorists of self-determination theory believed that instrumentality could actually discourage intrinsic motivation, they still acknowledged that older learners' external factors could enhance their intrinsic motivations (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Eccles, Wigfield & Schiefele, 1998)

The findings of this study demonstrated that teachers could enhance learners' external motivations in acquiring English language by making them aware of the importance of the language in their future endeavors. This can be the main principle in persuading the learners to be more confident and to inculcate more self-esteem towards learning the second language. Hence, in brief, considering learners' beliefs in language learning are in fact very important as it can serve as one of the prominent elements or ways to motivate learners' autonomy towards mastering the target language.

It is most important to view apprehension in general, as the barrier to language learning. As such, it is pertinent to understand apprehension through Krashen's (1981) model of affective filter. Krashen's (1981) theory of affective filter claimed that psychological factors such as depression and apprehension that might hinder language learning are proven to occur in the present study. The affective filter plays the role of obstruction between the input that the learners try to acquire towards mastering the second or target language. Hence, apprehension has in fact served as a mental block prohibiting learners from acquiring extensive input of the target language. The results of this study are consistent with a study conducted by Miyanaga (2002) who discovered negative correlation between the learners' reading apprehension levels and their reading scores. The study on reading apprehension of 245 Japanese university learners support Saito et al.(1999) in that reading in a foreign language is indeed an anxiety-provoking activity. Based on her observation, it was concluded that "affective variables exerted a greater influence on the participants' reading performance than their metacognitive awareness of various reading strategies" (Miyanaga, 2002:12).

In contrast, the findings from a study by Sellers (2000), showed that there is a significant negative relationship between apprehension and reading comprehension. First, heightened level of apprehension may result in directing intentional capacity away from the reading process. Second, apprehension slows down the application of reading process such as word and letter recognition and finally, apprehension influences a reader's decision-making process such as decisions about the meaning and strategy used that can be misleading. Breznitz (1991) discovered that apprehension affects comprehension more negatively when reading orally than reading silently. This is because when the learners' are asked to read aloud in front of the whole class, their ability to decode the material are being evaluated by the teachers and their colleagues, and this triggers the feeling of nervousness. The reasons why researchers are so interested in looking into factors that lead to reading apprehension are that, directly and indirectly, reading apprehension can affect learners learning processes of a second language. Another study by Calvo and Carreiras (1993) indicated that reading anxiety leads to learners spending more time on detail information from at beginning of the sentences rather than waiting for the end of the clauses to look for clues in their reading test. This is especially unhelpful since it wastes the learners' examination time. In addition, learners' apprehension level will increase as they realize that they have little time left to complete their test/examination. This study concludes on a positive note that reading apprehension can increase learners' motivation and pressure them to be more attentive and directed in their second language learning.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The conflicting results when dealing with the correlation between apprehension and reading has yet to be proven further since Scovel (1991) posited the issue over a decade ago. While some studies discovered positive correlation, others found negative or no relationship at all between them (Aida, 1994; Brantmeier, 2005; Chan & Wu, 2004). In this study, the reading apprehension level of the second language learners are at medium level and between the three domains of reading apprehension, Linguistic factors, Personal factors and Cultural Items, Linguistics Factors emerged as the factor most closely related to Malaysian ESL feelings of apprehension while reading English texts.

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