



A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY ON JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' ANXIETY FACTORS IN READING

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Abstract

This study aimed to analyze the factors that cause anxiety in reading based on the FLRAS by Saito, Garza, and Horwitz (1999) and the students' ways to overcome anxiety. The subjects of this study were 33 ninth-grade students of SMP Negeri 4 Sungai Raya. This study used a descriptive study and data collected from the provision of questionnaires, namely a close-ended questionnaire and an open-ended questionnaire. The results explained the factors of anxiety in reading and how to overcome the anxiety in reading. The factors included worrying about reading effects, afraid of making errors, unfamiliar culture, unfamiliar topics, and unknown vocabulary. The efforts that the students used to overcome their anxiety in reading were preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer-seeking, and resignation.

Keywords: anxiety, FLRA, reading



Abstrak

Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis faktor-faktor yang menyebabkan kecemasan dalam membaca berdasarkan FLRAS oleh Saito, Garza, dan Horwitz (1999) dan juga cara siswa menghadapi kecemasan tersebut. Subjek pada penelitian ini adalah 33 siswa kelas sembilan SMP Negeri 4 Sungai Raya. Studi ini menggunakan penelitian deskriptif dan data dikumpulkan dari kuesioner, yakni berupa pertanyaan tertutup dan pertanyaan terbuka. Hasil penelitian menjelaskan faktor-faktor kecemasan dalam membaca dan bagaimana mengatasi kecemasan tersebut. Faktor-faktor itu meliputi kecemasan terhadap efek membaca, takut membuat kesalahan, budaya yang tidak familiar, topik yang tidak familiar, dan pembendaharaan kata yang tidak diketahui. Usaha yang diterapkan oleh siswa dalam mengatasi kecemasan dalam membaca adalah persiapan, relaksasi, pemikiran positif, mencari rekan, dan penyerahan diri.

Kata kunci: kecemasan, FLRA, membaca

Introduction

Students learned to read in English since elementary school, as early as possible. They start with simple words that they find in their everyday life activities. In junior high school, they start to read more complex writing forms, such as descriptive text. The writing and its topic get more complex as the students proceed to a higher education level. In addition, reading is specifically important because reading is assumed to be a central means of learning new information (Grabe & Stoller, 2001). Rani and Jayachandran (2015) also state that mastering reading will enhance and enrich the language learning process. Therefore, it is safe to say that teaching students to read early and well offers benefits and is the key to a student's academic in the future.

Although crucial, learning to read is extremely difficult. According to Liu (2011), it is difficult to develop the needed reading ability and skills in the target language because foreign language reading is affected by multiple factors, such as unfamiliar scripts and writing systems, and unfamiliar cultural material. Reading itself involves complex cognitive processes of encoding and decoding word meanings. For foreign language learners, they have to deal with complicated

development between their first language and their second language acquisition, which makes reading an even more complicated skill.

Those factors could become significant factors of anxiety among students, especially foreign learners. The anxiety that they experience also varies from student to student, such as feeling worried, afraid, anxious, mind blank, and unable to think well, and some students even experience trembling in body parts such as hands or feet.

Anxiety is a prominent topic in second language learning. This is because the students are less optimistic about their second language skills. A substantial amount of research has been conducted in this era. It suggests that anxiety is an essential factor in learning English or a second language. According to Balta (2018), anxiety is a dynamic, multi-faceted condition, a feeling that floods humans' entire self, which affects several multiple perspectives of the human being. That is why learning other languages could be challenging for students. The students' perspective regarding English being difficult to be learned might be the result of several conceptions. For example, the students have to learn to make sentences, have to become accustomed to the sounds of the language, have to remember a lot of vocabulary, and have to learn the pronunciation of words as well. Some students who find it difficult to learn English will most likely experience anxiety. The students will always have doubts about learning. In addition, anxiety could hinder the students from understanding the content of the reading passages. It can be seen when students expressed their anxiety by feeling frozen, nervous, intimidated, confused, worried, and tense during the reading process (Song, 2010).

According to Mohammadpur and Ghafournia (2015), by knowing the factors of English as Foreign Language (EFL) reading anxiety, language teachers could provide their students with better assistance to overcome probable reading anxiety reactions. It is the job of the teachers to provide support for their students in any difficulties. Therefore, anxiety is a topic that needs teachers' attention. In order to help the students, the teachers ought to analyze.

Saito, Garza, and Horwitz (1999) mention that there are five sources of reading anxiety in English as a foreign language or FLRA (Foreign Language Reading Anxiety). They include worrying about reading effects, being afraid of making errors, unfamiliar culture, unfamiliar topics, and unknown vocabulary. Having a certain worry about reading effects make students unable to focus on their own performance since they worry too much about the effects of their reading on others. Afraid of making errors also contributed to anxiety. Students perceived errors as unacceptable and shameful. These judgments prevented the students

from freely exploring their abilities. As for unfamiliar cultures and unfamiliar topics, they have a similar core problem. Students are mostly afraid to delve into something they have no clear idea of. Lastly, it is unknown vocabulary. It is only natural for students to be anxious when they read vocabulary that they are not familiar with.

During a teaching practice program as pre-observation in SMP N 4 Sungai Raya, the researchers herself found that the students were afraid of delivering their ideas based on the teacher's information about anxiety in reading. The observation showed some limitations that the students experienced during English lesson. Most students considered reading as a difficult skill to learn. They did not have the willingness to read English during the class. These conditions were influenced by the lack of vocabulary, and excessive feelings of tension, worry, and nervousness. Based on the observation, it was obvious that these conditions were in need of attention.

The researcher found that several researchers had conducted research that discussed reading anxiety in English. Nirmala (2017) conducted a study on anxiety in learning reading. The researcher wanted to see how students find difficulties reading text in English. To determine the level of reading anxiety, FLRAS (Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale) was employed in a form of a questionnaire. This study's participants were 8th-grade Taman Adult Jetis Junior High School students in Yogyakarta, Java, Indonesia. The data were collected using the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale by Saito et al. (1999) as the measurement to determine reading anxiety.

Compare to other studies, this study focused on the factors that caused student anxiety in reading in English class. Based on the description above, the researcher conducted a descriptive study that focused on students' anxiety factors in learning to read English based on the FLRAS by Saito et al. (1999). Thus, the aims of this study were to identify the factors of students' anxiety in reading and the ways that the students used to overcome their anxiety.

Research Method

According to Creswell (2012), the qualitative study explores a problem and develops a detailed understanding of a certain phenomenon. Therefore, considering the aims of this study, it was decided that a descriptive qualitative study was used. A descriptive study determines and reports the way things are. It is scientific research that describes events, phenomena, or facts systematically dealing with a certain area or population. The participants of the study were 33 ninth-grade junior high school students of SMP Negeri 4 Sungai Raya. The

questionnaire was used as the technique of data collection. The research instruments were two sets of questionnaires. One questionnaire consisted of 25 close-ended questions related to the FLRA by Saito et al. (1999). Meanwhile, the other questionnaire consisted of two open-ended questions about the students' anxiety factors in general and their ways to overcome anxiety. The data gathered from the close-ended questionnaire, containing the variables of language learning anxiety such as worry about reading effects, afraid of making errors, unfamiliar culture, unfamiliar topic, and unknown vocabulary, were analyzed using FLRA Scales proposed by Saito et al. (1999). After the students' scores were calculated, each student was then labeled based on their level of anxiety, ranging from very anxious, anxious, mildly anxious, and relaxed. Meanwhile, data from open-ended questionnaires were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results and Discussion

Results

Concerning the two formulated research questions, the results of both questions are obtained in terms of the factors causing anxiety in reading and students' ways of overcoming the anxiety. The data from the close-ended questionnaire indicated that most students were anxious about reading English text, specifically 20 students. 5 students were very anxious. Moreover, 8 students were mildly anxious. In general, the mean of the range or scores of the close-ended questionnaire was 67.60. This laid on the level of 'anxious'. The students explained various causes of their anxiety which, in this research, grouped into five types of learning anxiety. The followings are the details.

Factors Causing Anxiety in Reading

The factors were gained from the distributed close-ended questionnaire. By the use of FLRAS proposed by Horwitz (1986), it was known that of 33 students, 5 of them were labeled as very anxious, 20 of them were anxious, and 8 of them were mildly anxious. Based on these data, it can be concluded that none of them felt relaxed. In regard to the questions used in the questionnaire, they assisted the researcher in knowing the factors of students' anxiety which were five.

The first factor is the so-called worry about reading effects or actions that happened during reading created tensions among the students. Several questions were to disclose this matter. They were questions number 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 of the close-ended questionnaires. The statements of questions sounded like *"Do you feel anxious (nervous, panic, jittery, etc.) when you have to read a text in English in front of the class?"*, *"I feel anxious during a reading process"*, and *"I am worried*

more with my performance in reading rather than my understanding in reading.” From 33 students, the data answered the questions with respectively 28, 27, and 28 chose strongly agree to agree. These showed that they were lack of confidence, always worried about making mistakes when asked to read in English, and worried more about their reading performance rather than their understanding.

Afterward, another factor refers to the fact that students were afraid of making errors. In an obvious way, errors created fears and negative feelings within the students. They were scared that they would receive negative outcomes from both the teacher and the other students. Several questions were to disclose this matter such as numbers 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. In essence, the questions that sounded like *“I am afraid and embarrassed when I mispronounce words in reading”* and *“My friends will mock me if I misread in English”* were mostly answered as strongly agree to agree by respectively 30 and 26 students out of 33 students. This implied that they were afraid to do errors which led them to feel embarrassed and anxious.

In addition to this, unfamiliar culture appeared to be the third factor of anxiety in reading. The idea of a culture not so known by the students caused anxiety within them. Several questions were to disclose this matter, namely numbers 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15. In sum, the questions sounded like *“I get discouraged to read text from a culture I am not familiar with”* and *“Strange words from different culture frightens me.”* Based on the data, out of 33 students, 17 students strongly agreed and/or agreed with the first question type. Not quite different, the second question type gained 14 students who chose to strongly agree and another 14 students chose to agree. It can be said that the reasons for students’ anxiety when encountering unfamiliar culture were discouragement, restlessness, frights of words related to the culture, failure to comprehend the content of the text, and the uncomfortable feeling they felt.

Besides, unfamiliar topics also served as a factor in students’ anxiety in reading. Almost similar to the previous aspect, this aspect focuses on unfamiliar topics within the students’ culture. Several questions were to disclose this matter, such as numbers 16, 17, 18, 19, and 20 in the close-ended questionnaire. They were under the matter of *“I prefer reading text that is related to my major”* and *“Texts with unfamiliar topics frighten me because it most likely is difficult to understand.”* The firstly mentioned resulted in 5 students choosing to strongly agree and 12 students choosing to agree. Whereas, the ultimate mentioned showed that 6 students chose to strongly agree and 8 students chose to agree. These implied that half of the students strongly agreed and/or agreed while the other half disagreed and/or strongly disagreed with this factor.

Last but not least, the fifth factor of anxiety in reading was related to unknown vocabulary. This aspect was almost similar to the two previous aspects. The difference was that anxiety may be created by the unknown vocabulary that built the text rather than its original culture or topic. Several questions were to disclose the matter, namely questions numbers 21, 22, 23, 24, and 25. These were more into the scope of *“I feel anxious with unfamiliar words because I don’t know what they probably mean.”* The data showed that 6 out of 33 students chose to strongly agree with the statement, 15 students chose to agree, 9 students chose to disagree, and other 3 students chose to strongly disagree. These implied that most students agreed they got anxious regarding their ability in recognizing the meaning of an unknown vocabulary.

How Students Overcoming Anxiety in Reading

According to the previous findings, it was fair to conclude that 33 students in class IX A, on average, experienced anxiety in reading. The biggest insight on how the students overcome their anxiety was then being questioned. Students’ way of overcoming the anxiety was then led to the second research question. In finding out the ways or strategies used by the students to decrease their anxiety, the open-ended questionnaire hold an important role to disclose this matter.

Based on the answers given by the students, it can be concluded that students overcome anxiety in reading English texts in straightforward ways, such as by increasing self-confidence, praying before starting the lesson, and trying to feel relaxed, excited, focused, and motivated to learn. Moreover, the students tried to view that reading was not difficult by trying to think positively, continue to practice reading, read the text slowly so that it could be easy to understand, believe on oneself that they can read the text correctly, and not focus on others things while reading. Some students imagined that their friends or people around the students in the class did not exist.

Discussion

Factors Causing Anxiety in Reading

This study follows the 5 themes that cause reading anxiety in foreign languages or FLRAS mentioned by Horwitz (1986). The results of the research showed that the factors of these 5 components did cause anxiety in students when learning to read. The study also showed that most of the ninth-grade A students of SMP Negeri 4 Sungai Raya experienced high anxiety when reading in English. Specifically, as many as 5 students in the class were in the highest “very anxious” level, namely 20 students at the “anxious” level, then 8 students at the

“mildly anxious” level, and 0 students at the “relaxed” level. These factors indicate that it is true that students experience anxiety when learning to read English.

The first factor, worrying about reading effects, occurred due to the negative outcomes that the students expected even before and during the process of reading. This could reduce students' courage to discuss the target language effectively. The cause of worries might occur because the teachers failed to observe the students' past experiences of negative outcomes. The data also showed that the condition or the atmosphere during the reading process might contribute to this factor as well. For example, the students would feel anxious when the other students and the teacher watched them too long, or they would be nervous when reading English texts in front of the class and becoming the center of attention in a classroom.

The second factor is the fear of making errors. This factor arose from the need for students to better impression of reading performance on others. This cause tends to occur in students learning English as a foreign language and perceived this as learning that is difficult to practice. Students who faced this might reduce their learning process in reading and learning in a correct way. Hence, the teachers hold a really important role in preparing the students to learn. It is important for the teacher to explain that making mistakes is normal. Therefore, the chance of the fear of making errors occurs may be decreased.

The third factor is the unfamiliar culture. It is natural for students to feel uneasy about something they rarely almost never encounter. This condition can cause anxiety in students at certain times. Usually, it will often happen when students think that they may not be able to extract the content of the writing.

The fourth factor is the unfamiliar topic. This factor is almost similar to the factor of unfamiliar culture in a sense. The students are anxious when they have to encounter something they have little to no experience with, which in this case is topics. However, the results showed prominent differences with the results in the factor of an unfamiliar culture. With the topic of reading, the students had a rather confident feeling that they may understand or comprehend the reading. Meanwhile, with the culture, they were not so sure of it. Hence, it is safe to say that while unfamiliar topics are rather agitating, the students' chance of not experiencing anxiety is high.

The last factor is the unknown vocabulary. Rather different from the third and the fourth factors, the unknown vocabulary is related to the word that builds the writing. Vocabulary can create a huge impact on students' anxiety. The data even showed that unknown vocabulary mostly frightens students. This may be caused by their fear of not knowing how the word sounds or what the meaning is.

It is also relevant to point out that students are afraid of making mistakes, as related to the second factor. They are afraid that they may mispronounce and give the wrong understanding of the word which leaves them to experience anxiety.

The researcher collected data to find out what factors cause anxiety in students when reading in English still has many shortcomings. For example, the answers from students written in the questionnaire given by the researcher may not be purely from the students' responses. In other words, the student is not interested in answering the question (cheating) or does not understand the question.

How Students Overcoming Anxiety in Reading

This study showed that most students experience anxiety when reading in English. Students also have their way of dealing with anxiety in reading. Kondo and Ling (2004) wrote about coping with language anxiety in an academic journal. They wrote that students could use 5 strategies to overcome the anxiety they experience in reading.

The first strategy is preparation. Students attempt to control themselves by improving learning and study strategies, such as focusing on reading texts and continuing to practice reading in English. The second is relaxation, which attempts to overcome anxiety symptoms and relax the body by doing something like taking a deep breath, praying before starting to read, and trying to calm down. The third strategy is positive thinking, which is intended to divert attention from the stressful situation to positive and pleasant cues and bring relief to anxious students by imagining that they can read adequately, be confident, and focus on the text. Fourth is peer seeking, which is distinguished by students' willingness to look for other students who seem to have trouble understanding the class and controlling their anxiety. However, this strategy was not found in this study because most students think other students are better than these students. Finally, the fifth strategy is resignation, which is characterized by students' unwillingness to do anything to decrease their language anxiety. Resignation seems intent on minimizing the impact of anxiety by refusing to face the problem, such as giving up. This is because students feel unprepared, lack confidence, fear failure, and worry about wrong grammar and pronunciation.

Conclusion

Based on the results, ninth-grade of A-Class students experienced anxiety when reading texts in English. The main factor causing this anxiety from the available questions, namely worrying about reading effects, afraid of making errors, unfamiliar culture, unfamiliar topics, and unknown vocabulary.

Furthermore, other factors that were very supportive can be seen in the open-ended questionnaire in question one, which is the lack of good command of English, the lack of student motivation in learning English, and most students writing that they are afraid of being the center of attention when asked to read the text in English in front of the class. The anxiety factor significantly affects their achievement in English text-reading skills.

In addition, students have simple ways to overcome anxiety when learning to read texts in English. The way to overcome anxiety was that students must increase their self-confidence, pray before starting to study, calm themselves to feel more relaxed, have a sense of confidence that they can read the English text properly and correctly, think that learning English is not difficult, as well as do not feel embarrassed when being asked to read English texts in front of the class. Kondo and Ling (2004) share the writing strategies that students can use to overcome anxiety in reading. Students may do preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking, and resignation. This method may be effective for every student because they have ways of dealing with their anxiety when reading English texts.

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