
The impact of foreign language reading anxiety and text feature awareness on university students' reading comprehension ESP texts

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Abstract: In the present study, I sought to measure the impact of foreign language reading and text feature awareness on university students' reading comprehension ESP texts. This study looked to answer three research questions: 1) Does reading anxiety have any effect on reading comprehension of ESP students?; 2) Does text feature awareness have any effect on reading comprehension of ESP students?; 3) Is the effect of interaction between reading anxiety and text feature awareness on reading comprehension of ESP students significant?. Participants were 120 students enrolled in ESP classes in four majors including 30 persons in electronic engineering, 30 chemistry engineering, 30 civil engineering and finally 30 persons in management course of Fars Science and Research University. Of all respondents only 93 students answered the questionnaires and gave back them who 46 were male and 47 were female. The students were asked to complete reading comprehension texts from ESP books consisting English for the students of Power, Electronics, Control & Communications and English for the students of Civil Engineering and English for the students of Chemistry and English for the Student of Management, as well as the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) developed by Saito, Garza and Horwitz in 1999 and Text Feature Awareness Questionnaire (TFAQ) developed by Mehrpoor in 2004. The results of the study reveal that there is significant relationship between reading anxiety and reading comprehension, correlation is negative. It means that the reading comprehension is increased with decreasing the FLRAS, but there is a positive significant relationship between reading comprehension and TFA, based on the results of the study it can be inferred that the higher the learners' awareness of the text features, and the higher their L2 technical proficiency, the better performance on L2 reading comprehension task will be and vice versa. Finally, from the regression analysis, we infer that there was a significant relationship between the reading comprehension and the interaction of FLRAS and TFAQ. Moreover, the analysis revealed that the FLRAS had stronger effect on the reading comprehension than the TFAQ.

Keywords: Foreign Language Reading Anxiety, Reading Comprehension, Text Feature Awareness, ESP Students

1. Introduction

As language skills become crucial to the professional success in many areas, ESP course also should be well suited to the needs of professionals who need to acquire specific language knowledge and skills. Regarding the primary significance of acquiring the reading ability by ESP students for academic purposes, steps have been taken to identify the problematic factors underlying reading process. The reading

process is further complicated in the second language, where there are additional factors to consider such as language ability, cultural backgrounds, and learner motivations, among others. Many students learning a foreign language experience some degree of frustration when they attempt to comprehend any but the simplest foreign language texts. This is not surprising when one considers all of the factors mentioned (Sellers, 2000). In particular, anxiety is described to be consciously perceived disorder, i.e., tension, apprehension, inadequacy, nervousness, insecurity and self-doubt

(Spielberger and Gorsuch, 1983). It is considered a factor influencing second language (L2) learning (Pawanchik *et al.*, 2010) and predictor of L2 performance (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991; Saito and Samimy, 1996). Anxiety is a part of human emotion which includes fear and uncertainty, uneasiness and frustration or tension (Brown, 2000; Sarason, 1988; Scovel, 1978; Spielberger, 1972). Language anxiety takes up processing capacity and thereby diminishes the amount of attention that the learner has to dedicate to the learning task itself (Eysenck 1992; Sarason 1988). On the other hand, many foreign language learners experience foreign language (FL) anxiety which is "a situation-specific and unique type of anxiety closely related to the acquisition of a foreign language" (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986, p. 125).

Although language anxiety can sometimes work as helpful "energizer" for L2 learning, the harmful effects of anxiety which is considered "debilitating anxiety" (Brown, 1994), cannot be easily ignored in the context of L2 teaching. Reading in a foreign language ends in anxiety and finally poor language achievement "in conjunction of students' levels of reading anxiety and general foreign language anxiety" (Saito, Thomas, & Horwitz, 1998, p. 202). Saito, Horwitz, and Garza (1999) and Sellers (2000) found that reading anxiety is distinct from foreign language anxiety. Furthermore, Zhang (2000) believes that low language proficiency and teacher diversity may cause reading comprehension test anxiety.

For example, highly anxious readers may expend part of their mental energy thinking about things that are completely unrelated to the reading activity, such as the difficulty of the vocabulary in the text, how poorly they are doing, how their classmates are faring, or how much time they have to complete the reading. As a result, the reading process cannot take place automatically or efficiently. In contrast, a less-anxious reader does not expend energy on these task-irrelevant thoughts, and thereby has more mental energy to contribute to the reading process itself. Using the cognitivist approach to study Anxiety affects the curiosity of students which in turn reduces the functioning of cognitive abilities & capacities like logical thinking, keen observation, questioning etc., and because of these the comprehension as such is affected. It may be either facilitating; in a sense that it affects learning and performance positively or debilitating which hinders learning and performance (Alpert & Haber, 1960).

While learners may read a text either in public or privacy, for those who are worried about reciting in front of their peers there exists an important psychological phenomenon in this regard. Reading in public is one of the factors creating anxiety in dealing with the foreign language. Furthermore, reading privately in the foreign language for test may even give the learner a new sense of anxiety. Hence, a text with unfamiliar features may enhance anxiety and so affect the process and product of reading significantly. Obviously, reticence and anxiety are closely related to each other. Nevertheless, they have rarely been explored in content-based ESP courses where learning may be more challenging and the students may thus feel more anxious and less willing

to participate in classroom activities (Jackson, 2002, 2003; Flowerdew *et al.*, 2000) With these assumptions in mind, one can easily feel the strong need for further research in this area. The current article focuses on reading anxiety and text feature awareness and their effects on reading comprehension among ESP students.

1.1. Literature Review

Chastain (1975) conducted a study to investigate the effect to three affective variables on course grade of which anxiety was one. The selected students were in elementary language course. It was reported that a positive correlation existed between anxiety and course grade in this study.

Swain and Burnaby (1976), however, in their study of English-speaking French immersion children found a negative correlation between anxiety and one measure of children's proficiency in French, but found on other significant correlations, either negative or positive, with any other proficiency measures.

In another investigation by Chapelle and Roberts (1986), it was found that there existed no significant relationship between English class anxiety and beginning of semester proficiency. However a negative relationship was found between class anxiety and end of semester proficiency.

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, (1986) sought to define the construct of FLCAS. The finding of the study showed that a majority of the students experienced anxiety with respect to at least some aspects in their FL learning. It was also found that most of statements of the FLCAS were supported by at least a third of the students surveyed.

In order study, Young (1990) examined the effect of anxiety on the oral proficiency ratings of prospective language teachers. The concern underlying this study was that anxiety would reduce scores on oral proficiency interviews. The result showed that anxiety scales correlate significant with oral proficiency. Young also reported no significant partial correlation between anxiety scales and the oral proficiency interview scores after statistically removing the effects of other proficiency measures.

Aida (1994) designed another study to determine the effects of anxiety in the classroom and indicated that anxiety is common among students. Furthermore, Foreign language performance, with final grades, with teachers ratings of achievement and with students self rating of second language proficiency. In this study, the adapted Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale was found to be a highly reliable instrument to measure the anxiety level of students learning Japanese in college setting.

Saito and Samimy (1996) also conducted a study to test the role of language learner anxiety in relation to students' language performance. Their findings indicated that as instructional level increase, anxiety plays a more important role.

Onwuegbuzie *et al.* (1999b) undertook a research which suggested how students perceived themselves as language learners can affect both their level of anxiety in FL courses

and their achievement. This study of 146 university students attempted to identify a combination of learning modality that might be correlated with FL anxiety. Students who are not responsible in attempting assignments and who preferred not to learn in cooperative groups tended to have higher level of FL anxiety.

Kitano (2001) set out another research and investigated 2 potential sources of the anxiety of college learners of Japanese in oral practice: an individual student's fear of negative evaluation and his or her self perceived speaking ability. The survey was administered to 212 students in Japanese courses at 2 major universities. The results showed that an individual student's anxiety was higher as his or her fear of negative evaluation was stronger.

Levine (2003) in his study explored the relationship between target language (TL) use and student anxiety about target language use. He hypothesized that the amount of overall TL use would correlate positively with students' anxiety about it but the results of the study did not support this hypotheses. Analysis of data showed a negative relationship between reported amount of TL use and reported TL use anxiety.

Sellers (2000) in his study explored the relationship between language anxiety and reading in Spanish. The results indicated that the more highly anxious students tended to recall less passage content than did those participants who claimed to experience minimal anxiety. Furthermore, students with higher levels of overall foreign language learning anxiety reported higher levels of reading anxiety.

Hsu (2004) examined the effect of FLRA on reading comprehension and the causes of FLRA of 114 first-grade cadets of a military junior college. Interestingly, FLRA did not affect students on comprehending difficult texts. When the reading material was easy to read, high-anxiety readers recalled less passage content whereas low-anxiety readers recalled minor idea units. The FLRA was found to be associated with limited English competence, not texts.

Liu (2006) reported another study on anxiety in Chinese undergraduate non-English majors at three different proficiency level. By way of survey, observation, reflective journals and interviews, the study revealed that a considerable number of students at each level felt anxious when speaking English in class, the more proficient students tended to be less anxious, the students felt the most anxious when they responded to the teacher or were singled out to speak English in class. They felt the least anxious during pair work.

Also, Martinez (2008) investigated the metacognitive awareness of reading strategies among 157 Spanish nonnative ESP students from the faculties of chemistry at the University of Oviedo. In this study participants completed MARS (Mokhtari, 1998-2000). The results indicated a higher reported use of problem solving and global reading strategies among Spanish ESP learners. Moreover, females reported significantly higher frequency of strategy use and tended to use support reading strategies more than men.

Elsewhere, Tabatabaei and Assari (2011) investigated the strategic processes of L2 reading comprehension among

collegiate Iranian ESP learners across three academic fields of study: medicine, computer, engineering and law. . The findings of the study would help ESP teachers to gain a more profound understanding of ESP learners' strategic processes of L2 reading. It can be concluded that all of the ESP learners were intermediate reading strategy users who demonstrated a clear preference for problem solving strategies regardless their academic field of study. However, ESP learners indicated variations in their individual reading strategy preferences and weaknesses across the three academic fields of study. Also, it was concluded that the major was influential in the awareness of specific individual reading strategies.

Jafari and Shokrpour (2012) designed another study to determine the reading strategies used by Iranian ESP students to comprehend authentic expository texts in English. . Based on the findings of the study, pedagogical implications can be made. L2 teachers may include the role of all metacognitive reading strategies (e.g. global, support and problem solving strategies) in the instruction of reading sections when they teach Iranian ESP students. As the moderate overall mean of metacognitive reading strategies in this study showed that Iranian ESP students were not using the full range of suitable reading strategies and were not aware of all them, it sounds apt that ESP instructors raise students' awareness of the wide range of reading strategies available to them.

Dalili and Tavakoli (2013) also, investigated a comparative analysis of reading strategies across ESP students of humanities and engineering. The results revealed that despite the fact that the two student groups were studying different fields, they reported similar patterns of strategy awareness and confirmed having used almost all of the strategies when reading ESP materials. Where differences were found, students of engineering reported using certain types of strategies more often than did the students of humanities. The findings of the study not only help to explain some of the differences and similarities between engineering and humanities students but also help to remove the misconceptions regarding the deficiencies in strategy –based ESP reading comprehension of humanities students.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

This study addressed the issue of how FL reading anxiety and text feature awareness are related and how, in turn, they affect on reading comprehension of ESP students. This is, it sought to determine how these three constructs correlate with each other. Also, the effect of interaction between reading anxiety and text feature awareness on reading comprehension of ESP students.

The purpose of this study, as such, was to examine Iranian ESP students' FL reading anxiety and its relation to their reading proficiency and text feature awareness and their impact on reading comprehension of them who are native speakers of Persian and read academic texts written in English. Therefore, the following research questions were explored in this study:

1.3. Research Questions

1. Does reading anxiety have any effect on reading comprehension of ESP students?
2. Does text feature awareness have any effect on reading comprehension of ESP students?
3. Is the effect of interaction between reading anxiety and text feature awareness on reading comprehension of ESP students significant?

1.4. Significance of the Study

This research makes a worthwhile contribution to the present state of knowledge about foreign language reading anxiety and awareness of text features in learning a foreign specific language, in that, it reports on an inquiry undertaken to assess the influence of FLRA experienced by undergraduate English for specific purpose students in their awareness of text features and overall reading comprehension.

The results of this study could have implications for teaching, testing and material development for ESP student. Teachers will be more aware of those aspects of reading comprehension processes which are more important to Persian learners of English for specific purpose as a foreign specific language. Such being the case, they will focus their attention on the reader and text variables factors while teaching reading comprehension and make their students aware of such features. It is also hoped that through the findings of this study, teachers pay more attention to the psychological needs of students during the process of specific language learning and provide appropriate pedagogical and curricular programs to create stress-free learning environment.

Material developers can also be informed by the results of this study in that they will have a better picture of factors affecting reading comprehension of Persian learners of specific language English, and will try to develop appropriate specific instructional materials to meet the needs of this domain of ESP learners.. The results of the study might be use in selecting reading technical materials

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The sample comprised 120 students enrolled in ESP classes in four majors including 30 persons in electronic engineering, 30 chemistry engineering, 30 civil engineering and finally 30 persons in management course of Fars Science and Research University. This number of participants represented approximately 95% of spring 2013, ESP students' enrolled ESP classes related to their courses at Science and Research University of Shiraz. Of all respondents only 93 students answered the questionnaires and gave back them. Distribution of gender were almost equal between male (46 persons corresponded to 49.5%) and female (47 persons corresponded to 50.5%). The reason why this type of students were chosen as participants is they had passed on general English, and at the time of data collection, they were enrolled in ESP course. So they had faced with a number of special reading comprehension texts in their ESP books suitable with their

specific courses and so had a better understanding of this skill and the factor which might affect their reading comprehension performance. Their age ranged between 20 and 28 years old. The most of participants were under 24 (70 persons out of 93, corresponded to 75.3%).. The participants all spoke Persian as their mother tongue language.

2.2. Instruments

Three different instruments will be used in this study. The first is Reading texts take from ESP books of each special course the second one is foreign language reading anxiety scale (FLRAS) developed by Saito Garza and Horwitz in (1999) and the third one is Text Features Awareness Questionnaire (TFAQ) developed by Mehrpoor in 2004. In the following subsections the three instruments used in this study are described in detail. FLRAS and TFAQ have been shown to be reliable and valid, through a statistic study, with alpha coefficient of 0.88 and 0.86, respectively.

2.3. Data Collection

FLRAS was translated into participants' mother tongue, Persian. This measure was taken in order to eliminate the possible effect of difficulty with reading comprehension on the responses made by subjects, and to make sure that all the subjects in different levels of proficiency in ESP course would clearly understand every question and give answers that truly indicate their feelings and attitudes. The FLRASE is a scale that specifically assesses learners' reading anxiety by measuring their degree of anxiety over various facets of reading and asking questions that are subjective in nature. Reading texts take from ESP books of each special course was administered to the participants of the study. FLRAS was attached to the TFAQ. The subjects were instructed to do the reading test within the time limit and to fill the questionnaires next. The time set for ESP reading texts was 40 minutes and the administration of 2 questionnaires took approximately 25 minutes. The participants' score on this test were used as an indicator of their level of reading comprehension.

2.4. Data Analysis

After collecting the data, the data matrix was prepared. As a result, the EFL learners reading anxiety and text feature awareness could be measured. Correlational analysis was used to measure the degree of relationship between TFA and FLRAS and Reading Comprehension, applying simple Pearson product moment correlation. This was to determine the relationship between the three variables irrespective of gender. The reliability based on Cronbach's Alpha was found to be 0.716 and 0.786 for FLRAS and TFAQ, respectively, which were high and convenient (above 0.7). This indicates that the questionnaires were reliable. The analyses that were employed for each research question were descriptive statistics and Pearson product moment correlation .The analytical procedures employed to explore the research questions were computed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

3. Results

The data of the present study were subjected to a number of statistical analyses including (1) descriptive statistics (2) Pearson product moment correlation. The results of these analyses are presented under appropriate headings in the following subsections.

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 Distribution of Major

Statistics Major	Frequency	Percent
Civil	24	25.8
Chemistry	23	24.7
Management	21	22.6
Electronic	25	26.9
Total	93	100.0

Table 1 shows the participants subjects of study. The distribution is almost uniform in different majors. 24 students corresponded to 25.8% were in Civil Engineering, 23 students corresponded to 24.7% were in Chemistry, 21 students corresponded to 22.6% were in Management and 25 students corresponded to 26.9% were in Electronic Engineering.

3.2. FLRAS, TFAQ and Reading Comprehension Scores

The FLRAS was scored by assigning a value of one to five points to the chosen response. Responses indicating low-anxiety received one point, and those indicating high anxiety received five points.

As pointed out previously, the FLRAS included 20 items, all of which can fit into different categories representing different dimensions of L2 reading and anxiety. Results indicated that the FLRAS mean was 52.17 with standard deviation 9.371, ranged between 33 and 70. Most of participants obtained 62 *mode* (score that occurs more frequently) for FLRAS. Half of them were above 52 *median* (midpoint in the score distribution). The Skewness and Kurtosis were 0.073 and -0.950, respectively, in the accepted range (between -1 and 1). Skweness refers to asymmetry of a distribution, whereas kurtosis indicates peakedness of distribution although there are no absolute criteria for skweness and kurtosis, "values for skweness and kurtosis that do not exceed +2 and -2 are often used to suggest that the data are normally distributed" (In'nami, 2006, p.325).

The TFAQ mean was 45.04 with standard deviation 7.017, ranged between 27 and 61. Most of participants obtained 46 (mode) for TFAQ. Half of them were above 45 (median). The Skewness and Kurtosis were -0.040 and 0.200, respectively, in the accepted range (between -1 and 1).

The Reading Comprehension mean was 13.14 with standard deviation 4.365, ranged between 2 and 20. Most of participants obtained 18 (mode) for TFAQ. Half of them were above 14 (median). The Skewness and Kurtosis were -0.368 and -0.687, respectively, in the accepted range (between -1 and 1).

Since in this research two questionnaires are compared

with each other and the number of questions in these 2 scales is not equal so the real mean here is converted into *weighted mean* which range from 1 to 5 and the mean is 3.

3.3. Inferential Statistics

In this section we study research hypotheses by Pearson and regression statistical tests. These tests require the normal distribution for variables. Thus firstly, we investigate the normality of the variables distribution by Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test.

Table 2 Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of normality for variables

Statistics Variables	N	Z	Sig.
Reading Comprehension	93	1.021	0.248
FLRAS	93	0.932	0.351
TFAQ	93	0.726	0.667

The above table shows results for Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test. Since p-values were greater than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$) for all variables, the statistics were not significant which means that the distributions were normal.

4. Discussion and Interpretation

Q1: Reading anxiety affects university students reading comprehension of SP texts.

To identify the relationship between Reading Comprehension and FLRAS the Pearson correlation test was done.

Table 3 Pearson correlation between FLRAS and Reading Comprehension

Statistics Variables	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	N
FLRAS & Reading Comprehension	-0.333	0.001	93

As presented in the above table, the correlation between FLRAS and Reading Comprehension was significant at the level of 0.01 ($p = 0.001 < 0.01$). Thus there was a significant relationship between FLRAS and Reading Comprehension. The Pearson correlation was 0.333 which is a moderate correlation ($r = 0.333$). Two variables are inversely correlated, since the correlation is negative. It means that the Reading Comprehension is increased with decreasing the FLRAS. This approves hypothesis 1.

Q 2: Text feature awareness affects university students reading comprehension. To identify the relationship between Reading Comprehension and TFAQ the Pearson correlation test was done.

Table 4 Pearson correlation between TFAQ and Reading Comprehension

Statistics Variables	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	N
TFAQ & Reading Comprehension	0.242	0.020	93

As presented in the above table, the correlation between TFAQ and Reading Comprehension was significant ($p = 0.020 < 0.05$). Thus there was a significant relationship between TFAQ and Reading Comprehension. The Pearson

correlation was 0.242 which is a weak relationship ($r=0.242$). Two variables are directly correlated, since the correlation is positive. It means that the Reading Comprehension is increased with increasing the TFAQ. This approves hypothesis 2.

Q 3: The interaction of reading anxiety and text feature awareness affect university students reading comprehension of ESP texts.

Here we use the regression analysis to verify relationship between reading comprehension and the interaction of FLRAS and TFAQ. The regression analysis also determines whether reading comprehension can be predicted from FLRAS and TFAQ.

Regression:

Dependent Variable: Reading Comprehension

Independent Variables: FLRAS and TFAQ

Regression equation: Reading Comprehension = $B_0 + B_1 \times \text{FLRAS} + B_2 \times \text{TFAQ}$

Table 5 Regression analysis for relation between Reading Comprehension and FLAS and TFAQ

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	330.245	2	165.122	10.446	0.001
Residual	1422.688	90	15.808		
Total	1752.933	92			

It indicates that there was a significant linear relationship between the dependent variable reading comprehension and independent variables FLRAS and TFAQ. Therefore the regression was valid and significant. ($F=10.446$, $df=2, 90$, $p=0.001 < 0.01$).

Table 6 Regression estimation for relationship between Reading Comprehension and FLAS and TFAQ

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
0.434	0.188	0.170	3.976

In the above table adjusted R square shows how much the regression can predict the reading comprehension in terms of independent variables. In other words, only 17 percent of the variance of reading comprehension can be estimated by the variance of FLRAS and TFAQ.

Table 7 Regression coefficients for dependent variable Reading Comprehension

Independent variables	B	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	14.117		4.178	0.001
FLRAS	-0.169	-0.362	-3.796	0.001
TFAQ	0.174	0.280	2.927	0.004

Table 4.9 shows that the p –value was significant for both FLRAS ($p=0.001 < 0.01$) and TFAQ ($p=0.004 < 0.01$). This means that FLRAS and TFAQ were significantly correlated with Reading Comprehension, and contributed to predict it.

Notice that the B coefficient was negative for FLRAS which means that increasing the FLRAS leads to decreasing reading comprehension. For TFAQ, the B coefficient was negative and indicates that TFAQ and reading comprehension were negatively correlated. Beta coefficients indicate the

strength of relationship between reading comprehension and each of the independent variables. It shows that the FLRAS (beta= 0.362) had stronger relation with the reading comprehension than the TFAQ (beta= 0.280).

In summary, from the regression analysis, we infer that there was a significant relationship between the reading comprehension and the interaction of FLRAS and TFAQ. This approves hypothesis 3. Moreover, the analysis revealed that the FLRAS had stronger effect on the reading Comprehension than the TFAQ.

5. Conclusion

In this research, Pearson correlation results showed that overall reading comprehension, as measured by reading comprehension texts from ESP books, was positively and significantly linked to text features awareness of participants of this study. This would suggest that awareness of text features played a considerable role in reading comprehension..

Also, the correlation between foreign language reading anxiety and reading comprehension scores of students which was negative and statistically indicated that the lower the level of reading anxiety the higher scores they tended to attain in reading comprehension test and vice versa. It lends support to the premise that reading anxiety influences the low proficiency L2 readers' comprehension performance.

The persistence of negative statistical significance in correlation between foreign language reading anxiety and awareness of text features also seems to support the notion that high level of foreign language reading anxiety was indeed connected to the poor text feature awareness.

Also this study find significant relationship between reading anxiety and reading comprehension, the fact that different ESP learners at different level of knowledge of special courses view the reading skill differently should not be overlooked and some of them couldn't compensate for their shortcomings with regard to anxiety.

The results of present study suggest that anxious and unaware learners have a weaker command of English. These individuals should be helped to decrease their anxiety and increase their awareness, but at the same time should work extra hard to become more efficient processors of the text. They may achieve less comprehension because they are not patient and aware enough. It is possible that these individuals need more conscious instruction and specific knowledge about ESP text features, and how they should be employed. While non-anxious students automatically acquire these skills, anxious readers must be guided and frequently checked to keep track of their gradual progress. The problem can at times be handled indirectly as well.

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