THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN READING ANXIETY AND ACADEMIC READING PERFORMANCE AMONG ESL LEARNERS

ZUHANA MOHD ZIN

FBMK 2007 9
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN READING ANXIETY AND ACADEMIC READING PERFORMANCE AMONG ESL LEARNERS

By

ZUHANA MOHD ZIN

Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts

August 2007
DEDICATION

To my husband Sean, Deena and Irfansyah
and
my parents
The purpose of this study is to examine the possible relationship between reading anxiety among university ESL learners and their performance in comprehending academic texts. This study was conducted based on the assumption that anxiety could be another factor which could explain the differences in comprehension performance among the ESL learners.

The subjects who participated in this study were the low proficiency Malay ESL learners from Kolej Sains dan Teknologi, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur who had just entered the university. This study adopted correlation design which employed quantitative approaches. Two survey questionnaires, namely Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scales (FLRAS) and Cognitive Interference...
Questionnaire (CIQ) were utilized to measure the level of reading anxiety and the interference in the subjects cognitive systems of the subjects. Their comprehension performance were measured by means of a reading comprehension test and a written recall task.

The results gained from this study indicated that the subjects' comprehension performance were inversely related to reading anxiety which suggests reading anxiety plays a role in influencing the low proficiency ESL learners when reading academic texts. In addition, the findings also demonstrated that the interference experienced by the subjects while engaging in the reading tasks was related to the level of anxiety reactions. However, the findings can only be generalized to the samples involved in this study. Further studies to investigate the influence of reading anxiety should include other ESL learners from other local universities to enable the results to be generalized to general population.
Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera

HUBUNG KAIT DI ANTARA PERASAAN CEMAS DAN BIMBANG SEMASA MENBACA DAN KEOBLEHAN KEFAHAMAN DI KALANGAN PELAJAR-PELAJAR ESL

Oleh

ZUHANA MOHD ZIN

April 2007

Pengerusi:  Associate Professor Shameem Rafik-Galea, PhD

Fakulti:  Modern Languages and Communication

Kajian ini dijalankan bertujuan untuk menyelidik tentang hubung kait di antara perasaan cemas dan bimbang ketika membaca dan kebolehan kefahaman teks akademik di kalangan pelajar-pelajar English as a Second language (ESL). Kajian ini di jalankan berdasarkan kepada hipotesis yang mengatakan yang perasaan cemas dan bimbang semasa membaca boleh menjadi salah satu factor kepada perbezaan kebolehan di kalangan pelajar-pelajar ESL di dalam memahami teks akademik.

Para responden yang terlibat di dalam kajian ini adalah terdiri daripada pelajar-pelajar Melayu daripada Kolej Sains dan Teknologi, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur yang baru sahaja memasuki institusi pengajian tinggi bagi meneruskan pengajian
mereka. Kajian ini mengguna pakai prosedur analisis korelasi dengan pendekatan kuantitatif. Dua soal-selidik iaitu Foreign Language reading Anxiety Scales (FLRAS) dan Cognitive Interference Questionnaire (CIQ) yang pertamanya digunakan untuk mengukur tahap kebimbangan dan cemas ketika membaca dan keduanya untuk mengukur tahap gangguan ke atas sistem kognitif pembaca. Kebolehan kefahaman pula diukur melalui ujian kefahaman teks akademik dan written recall task.

Dapatan kajian menunjukkan yang hubung kait di antara parasaan bimbang dan cemas ketika membaca dan kebolehan kefahaman teks akademik adalah negatif. Ini manandakan bahawa perasaan bimbang dan cemas ketika membaca boleh mempengaruhi kebolehan kefahaman. Tambahan lagi, dapatan kajian juga menunjukkan yang gangguan kepada sistem kognitif ketika membaca mempunyai hubung kait dengan tahap cemas dan bimbang yang di alami ketika membaca. Walaubagaimanapun, dapatan kajian ini hanya dapat di generalisasikan kepada kelompok sampel yang terlibat kajian ini sahaja. Oleh itu, kajian yang ingin melihat pengaruh parasaan cemas dan bimbang ketika membaca yang seterusnya perlu mangambil pelajar-pelajar ESL yang terdiri daripada institusi-institusi pengajian
tinggi yang lain untuk menyertai kajian ini supaya dapan kajian dapat digeneralisasikan kepada populasi umum.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My heartfelt gratitude and appreciation go to some individuals who have, in their own special way, helped me to go through the whole process in completing my work

Assoc. Prof. Dr Shameem Rafik-Galea and Dr Wong Bee Eng, my supervisory committee, for their guidance.

My husband Sean and my daughter Deena for their understanding and patience

My friend Mastura for editing my work

My support group Fung, Adilah and Puti for being there

Yusof for making statistical figures comprehensible to me

UTMKL for the sponsorship
I certify that an Examination Committee has met on ...2007 to conduct the final examination of Zuhana Mohd Zin on her Master of Arts thesis entitled “The Relationship between Reading Anxiety and Comprehension Performance of an Academic Texts among ESL Learners” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia 1981. The Committee recommended that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree.

Members for the Examination Committee are as follows:

**Mohd. Faiz Sathivellu Abdullah, PhD**  
Associate Professor  
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Chairman)

**Jayakaran A/L Mukundan, PhD**  
Associate Professor  
Faculty of Educational Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Internal Examiner)

**Rosl Talif, PhD**  
Associate Professor  
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Internal Examiner)

**Nooreiny Maarof, PhD**  
Associate Professor  
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(External Examiner)

______________________________  
HASANAH MHD. GHAZALI, PhD  
Professor/Deputy Dean  
School of Graduate Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
Date:
This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts. The members of the Supervisory Committee are as follows:

**Shameem Rafik-Galea, PhD**  
Associate Professor  
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Chairman)

**Wong Bee Eng, PhD**  
Associate Professor  
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Member)

_________________________  
**AINI IDERIS, PhD**  
Professor and Dean  
School of Graduate Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 22 January 2008
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any degree at UPM or other institutions.

ZUHANA MOHD. ZIN

Date:
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRAK</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPROVAL</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</td>
<td>xviii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

### 1 INTRODUCTION

- Background of the Study 1
- Statement of the Problem 5
- Aims and Objectives 12
- Research Questions 12
- Conceptual Framework 13
- Significance of the Study 17
- Limitations of the Study 19
- Scope of the Study 21
- Definition of Key Terms 22
  - 1.10 Thesis Organization 25

### 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

- Theoretical perspectives 27
  - Information processing theory 28
  - Linguistics and background knowledge in L2 reading 33
- Affective factors in L2 reading 34
- A three-stage model of anxiety 37
  - The influence of anxiety on processing efficiency and cognitive ability 40
- 2.2 Reading comprehension 42
  - 2.2.1 Academic reading texts 48
  - 2.2.2 Attention and reading 50
recall task 149
4.4 Correlation analysis 152
  4.4.1 The relationship between reading anxiety and cognitive interference 153
  4.4.2 The relationship between reading anxiety and reading comprehension measures 154

5 CONCLUSION
Summary and conclusion 163
Reading anxiety level 164
Reading anxiety and interference on cognition 168
Reading anxiety and comprehension performance 170
Implications of the study 175
  5.5.1 Theoretical implications 175
  5.5.2 Pedagogical implications 178
5.6 Suggestion for future research 184

REFERENCES
APPENDICES
BIODATA OF THE AUTHOR
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Conceptual framework</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Information processing reading model</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Affective reading model</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tobias’s three-stage model</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Diagrammatic representation of the theoretical perspectives</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sampling procedures</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The data collection procedures</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Training procedures for the raters</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CIQ  Cognitive Interference Questionnaire

ESL  English as a Second Language

FL  Foreign Language

FLCAS  Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scales

FLRAS  Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scales

HA  High anxiety

LA  Low anxiety

L2  Second language

M  Mean score

Sd  Standard deviation

SPM  Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysia Certificate of Education)

UTMKL  Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This chapter sets out the background of the study, the statement of the problem, the research questions, the purpose of the study and its limitations. It also covers the significance of the study and the definition of key terms.

1.1 Background of the Study

In the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (ESL) or Foreign Language (FL), the acquisition of the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking are considered important. However, reading is by far one of the most important skills for many second language (L2) students (Carrell, 1998; Eskey, 1973) particularly for the university students. This is because reading is highly interrelated with the educational process in that the success of learning at the tertiary level banks upon the students’ ability to read written language with a relatively good comprehension (Dechant and Smith, 1977). In addition, in courses for academic purposes which extensively
use English academic reading texts, the acquisition of literacy skills is highly required. This has undoubtedly put reading as one of the most important skills that L2 university readers need to master.

However, it should be noted that it is not easy to acquire reading skills as they cannot be learned overnight. As Dechant and Smith (1977) point out, reading is “the most complex processes, requiring a very specialized skill on the part of the reader” (p.8). It is complex because it entails several interrelated skills (Curtis, 1980) which pose demanding processes on the readers’ cognitive systems (Sellers, 2000).

Thus, in view of the complex nature of the reading process, it is somewhat not surprising to see most of the low proficiency Malay university ESL learners experience problems in performing in reading comprehension tasks. This is because the reading texts at tertiary level are academic in nature and differ from the typical ESL text that they are exposed to at secondary level. Academic texts at tertiary levels are more complex than the reading texts at the secondary level. In addition, the fact that most of the academic reading texts are in English seems to compound the problem. Malay ESL learners are more likely face problems in comprehending academic texts because it is a well-known
fact among the public and language instructors alike that the level of English proficiency among university students in Malaysia is very poor especially among the Malay students (The Star, 2007). Therefore, based on this situation, it is presumed that the low proficiency Malay university ESL learners are the ones who would face difficulties in comprehending the academic reading texts in ESL classrooms.

However, deficits in comprehension performance among ESL readers are not attributable to language proficiency alone. Numerous studies which have investigated on factors that contribute to individual differences in relation to comprehension performance among L2 readers have shown that one of the factors which could influence their performance in reading is anxiety (Sellers, 2000; Saito et al., 1999; Calvo and Carreiras, 1993; Oh, 1990).

Numerous studies have shown that motivation, interest, attitude and self-esteem are some of the affective variables which play as predictors in L2 performance; the studies have consistently produced significant results (Cohen and Norst, 1989). Similarly, initial findings in anxiety research have found that it consistently influences and affects language learning performance.
More studies that seek to investigate the effects of anxiety on specific language skills ensue and they consistently claim that oral activities are the most anxiety-provoking situation for L2 learners (Kitano, 2001; Young, 1992; Price, 1991). Most correlation studies indicate inverse relationship between the two variables. Currently, most L2/FL researchers are exploring the potential influence of debilitating anxiety on reading performance in the L2 learning contexts (see Horwitz, 2001; Kitano, 2001; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991; 1989; Horwitz et al., 1986), as one of the variables which could explain individual differences in reading. Even though reading is deemed less susceptible to anxiety (Sellers, 2000), its potential influence should not be underestimated particularly among low proficiency ESL university students. This is because anxiety reactions in L2 classrooms are highly associated with learners’ low self-perception of their proficiency in the target language (Kitano, 2001).

Therefore, it is assumed that the Malay ESL learners are the ones who will be critically affected by the feelings of anxiety due to their poor command of English. They are the group of ESL learners who are presumably more susceptible to higher levels of reading anxiety.