THE SOURCES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE READING ANXIETY OF STUDENTS IN A TURKISH EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract: In the recent years, why and how anxiety influences the acquisition of certain skills like speaking, listening, writing and reading have attracted the attention of many researchers. Among these skills, one area which little research exists is the relationship between reading in a foreign language (FL) and anxiety. This study aimed at finding the sources of FL reading anxiety from the students’ perspectives. For this purpose, 50 first year students were taken as the subjects. Quantitative findings indicated that FL reading anxiety was a phenomenon related to, but distinct from general FL anxiety. Moreover, three main sources of FL reading anxiety were identified through qualitative analyses: the personal factors, the reading text and the reading course. As a result of the study some suggestions for dealing with the FL reading anxiety were proposed.

Key Words: Anxiety in FL, FL Reading Anxiety, Sources of FL Reading Anxiety

1 Introduction
Why do some students learn a foreign language easily whereas others have difficulties and cannot achieve the desired level of proficiency? To be able to give a sound answer, FL educators examine various factors that may affect a student’s foreign language learning. Affective variables are considered as one of the important factors in the way to understand the true nature of language learning. It has been proposed that affective differences can account for success or failure in FL learning [1],[2].

As being one of the affective variables, anxiety plays a very important role in language learning Krashen [3] was one of the first to conduct research on FL anxiety. According to his Affective Filter Hypothesis, anxiety contributes negatively to an affective filter, which makes an individual less responsive to input. That is, anxiety acts as a kind of gate, preventing students from adopting effective learning practices. In order to better understand the role and importance of FL learning anxiety, first of all the term FL learning anxiety should be made clear.

1.1 What is FL Learning Anxiety?
FL learning anxiety is a type of anxiety unique to second/foreign language learning [4],[5]. For many students, language class can be more anxiety-provoking than any other course they take [6],[7]. FL 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” [8].

FL anxiety is claimed to have a potential negative effect on academic achievement, social context and personality of the language learner [9]. Hence, there have been many attempts to uncover what lies under the manifestations of anxiety. To be able to organize anxiety free classrooms, why and how learners feel anxious has attracted considerable interest especially in the last two decades. Recent years have also witnessed the increasing emphasis on the relationship between FL anxiety and four skills-speaking, listening, writing and reading [5],[7]. Among four language skills, Saito, Horwitz and Garza [10]claim that reading is a potential source for provoking anxiety in a language classroom and is open to investigation since little research has been carried on the relationship between FL learning and FL reading anxiety [11],[12],[13].

1.2 FL Reading Anxiety
Sellers [11] claims that reading in any language is a cognitively demanding process which includes the coordination of attention, memory, perception, and comprehension processes at
least at minimum levels. When we come to the second or foreign language context, the reading process proposes further challenges since there are additional factors to consider such as language ability, cultural background, and learner motivations [12],[11]. 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 [10],[11],[12].

When foreign language reading anxiety is examined from a cognitivist view, it becomes obvious that language anxiety takes up processing capacity, and therefore diminishes the amount of attention that the learner has to give to the reading task [12]. From a pedagogical perspective, Lee [12] highlights the ineffective reading practices in reading that are rooted in the misconceptions about reading can lead to reading anxiety. These misconceptions are: ‘reading is just answering the comprehension questions’, ‘reading is a private act’ and ‘reading is a linear process’.

Bamford and Day [14] emphasize the affective power of reading and state that successful reading experiences promote positive attitudes toward reading which in turn motivate further reading. Yamashita [15] also claims that the affective domain of reading has received much less attention than the cognitive domain despite the great amount of research in the field of foreign/second language reading. According to Yamashita [15], the affective factors such as anxiety should be examined to understand the nature of L2 reading difficulties the learners experience.

2 Problem Formulation
In the ELT Department at Anadolu University, Faculty of Education, some manifestations of reading anxiety among some learners were observed. Some learners also informally mentioned that they became stressful while reading in a foreign language and they were not enthusiastic about reading. Anxiety those students experience while reading cannot be reduced without knowing what happens and makes them anxious while reading in a foreign language. In other words, there is a need for exploring and identifying the sources of FL reading anxiety to be able to find solutions to the problems that students experience while reading in the target language.

In the way to identify the sources of FL reading anxiety in a Turkish EFL context, first of all determining whether anxiety students experience in reading is a specific one in our context or part of the general language anxiety is important. As a result, there emerged two research questions for the purpose of this study:
1. Does foreign language reading anxiety exist as a phenomenon distinguishable from general foreign language anxiety?
2. What are the sources of foreign language reading anxiety of students in a Turkish EFL context?

2.1. Methodology

2.1.1 Subjects:
50 first-year students in two classes of Anadolu University ELT Department participated in this study. The participants were chosen randomly from all the first year students in the ELT Department. The participants took three hours of compulsory reading course in a week and they were required to do the assignments and attend the course regularly.

2.1.2 Instruments:
This study includes both quantitative and qualitative research elements. The quantitative data collection instruments used were:
a) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)
b) Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS).

For the qualitative part of the study which aimed at finding the sources of reading anxiety, the instruments used were:
a) Learner diaries
b) Guided interviews

2.1.2.1. Quantitative Instruments
The first quantitative instrument, FLCAS developed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope [8] contains 33 Likert scale type items scored on a five point scale (ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree). This instrument aims at measuring the amount and type of anxiety experienced by the foreign language students in a classroom context. In this study, the Turkish version of FLCAS was used. The reliability and validity of the Turkish version of FLCAS was examined by Aydin [16] and this scale was
found reliable and valid. The Turkish version of FLCAS was used to help the students feel more comfortable, and eliminate any possible problems caused by language difficulties while filling in the scale.

The other quantitative instrument FLRAS, developed by Saito et al. [10] is a Likert scale type instrument that specifically focuses on FL reading anxiety. The FLRAS contains 20 items, each of which is answered on a five point Likert scale (ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree). A pilot study was conducted to test the reliability and validity of the Turkish version of FLRAS. Results of the principle component analysis with varimax rotation and Cronbach’s $\alpha$ coefficient suggested that this scale was highly valid and reliable to be used in this study.

### 2.1.2.3. Qualitative Instruments

In order to find out the possible sources of foreign language reading anxiety, diaries were collected from each of the participants in the study. Students’ learning diaries were followed by the guided interviews with 25 randomly selected students, which constitute the 50% of total students, to allow fuller exploration of FL reading anxiety and support the sources that were found with the help of the diaries. Open-ended questions which guided them to uncover their feelings and thoughts about FL reading anxiety were asked to each student. All the interviews were held in students’ native language to let them feel comfortable while expressing their thoughts.

### 2.1.3. Data Collection and Analysis

In the first step of data collection, FLCAS and FLRAS were administered to the participants. In the second step, the participants were asked to write diaries each week for seven weeks about what they feel, think and experience while they are reading in the foreign language. Since the participants were not familiar to diary writing, sample diary entries were given to the participants. Following the collection of diaries, 25 randomly selected students were interviewed to support the data collected through diaries.

As for analysis, to find out whether foreign language reading anxiety exists as a phenomenon distinguishable from general foreign language anxiety or not, the relationship between the FLCAS and the FLRAS was computed using a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient ($r = .45$, $n = 50$, $p < .01$). This finding indicates a positive correlation between two scales. That is, when the amount of one variable goes up, the other variable also goes up; hence, the relationship of the variables moves in the same direction. As a result, in this study, students with higher levels of FL anxiety also tended to have higher levels of FL reading anxiety and vice versa. A correlation coefficient of .45 means that the two measures share approximately 20% ($r^2 = .45 \times .45 = 0.20$) of the variance. Thus, approximately 80% of the variance is not shared between the two measures, a finding that supports the
differentiation of the two constructs. As a conclusion, this finding indicates that there is at least preliminary support for the existence of FL reading anxiety as a phenomenon related to, but distinct from, general FL anxiety. The findings of this study conform to Saito et al.’s [10],[11] and studies owing to the fact that both studies revealed FL reading anxiety as a phenomenon separate and distinguishable from general FL anxiety.

3.2. Research Question 2

In order to find out the sources of FL anxiety from the learners’ diaries, the Constant Comparison Method was used. As a result, there emerged a total of 1821 communication units, 16 sub-categories and three main categories. The three main categories of FL reading anxiety sources are: anxieties caused by the personal factors, anxieties caused by the reading text, and anxieties caused by the reading course.

3.2.1. Anxieties Caused by the Personal Factors

Learners expressed that some personal factors were the sources of anxiety while reading. A total of six sub-categories were revealed and the distribution of these sub-categories is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Sub-categories Related to the Personal Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Categories</th>
<th>N*</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate Strategy Use</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Comprehension</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Motivation</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Self-Confidence</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Background Exp.</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Expectations</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>674</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N*: Number of communication units

The analyses of the diaries and interviews showed that students might feel anxious because of not using appropriate strategies or using certain strategies incorrectly such as depending too much on dictionary instead of getting meaning from context, focusing on details and not being able to identify the author’s main idea or the important points, which are necessary for effective reading. Moreover, some students stated that fear of not comprehending the reading material leads to anxiety and this constitutes a big problem for them while reading in the target language. Lack of motivation is another source of reading anxiety related to the personal factors.

As another personal factor feeling that they cannot read effectively and believing that they are not able to master the skill of reading in the target language might lead to anxiety among learners. Negative background experiences students had can also cause anxiety. These negative experiences include expressions such as not having the right habits of reading or experiencing some negative incidents related to reading that cause to hold some prejudices against reading in the target language. As the last source of anxiety related to the personal factors some students expressed that they have to achieve everything related to reading in the target language. These high expectations might also cause anxiety.

This finding indicates that students may feel anxious because of some personal inadequacies, prejudices or negative experiences they bring with themselves while reading in FL. Wallace [19] asserts that learners bring some personal factors and social identities which affect what and how they will read before they are engaged in reading activity, and if the needs and expectations of these identities are not met, students may put some barriers between themselves and what the text may provide them; hence, they cannot become effective readers in the target language. Thus, the findings of this study shed a considerable light on why some students feel anxious and have problems in becoming effective readers while reading in FL by putting forward that this anxiety may stem from some personal factors.

3.2.2. Anxieties Caused by the Reading Text

The analyses of diaries and interviews revealed that students experience anxiety caused by the reading text. Total of five sub-categories were formed under the main category of the reading text as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Sub-categories Related to the Reading Text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Categories</th>
<th>N*</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topics</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown Vocabulary</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex Linguistic Structures</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown Cultural Content</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format of the Text</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>644</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N*: Number of communication units

Table 3 shows that while reading in the target language, the topics which are not
interesting or difficult for students may lead to anxiety. Unknown vocabulary in a reading text appeared to be another source of anxiety from the students’ diaries and interviews. Results also indicate certain amount of anxiety students feel when they come across with complex linguistic structures in a reading text. Another source of anxiety related to the reading text is the unknown cultural content. According to the students’ expressions, the cultural concepts that are not familiar to them block their understanding, and therefore cause anxiety. For the last sub-category, students expressed that the format of a text such as the length, the writing type and the font of writing might cause anxiety.

As a result, it is revealed that some features of the text are likely to cause anxiety and prevent effective reading. Wallace [19] points out that if the topic of a text is not interesting to a learner it is almost impossible for this learner to read for pleasure and consequently to become an effective reader. On the other hand, topics which are of high interest to a reader help him to have a flexible and appropriate response to a reading text. Moreover, if a text includes so many unknown words or complex structures students feel anxious of not understanding. Hence, the findings of this study explain why some students cannot become effective readers revealing that some features of the text are likely to cause anxiety.

### 3.2.3. Anxieties Caused by the Reading Course

The reading course appeared as the last main category of FL reading anxiety from students’ diaries and interviews. Students expressed that the reading course has an anxiety provoking nature. A total of five sub-categories were emerged under the main category of the reading course. Distribution of these sub-categories is shown in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Categories</th>
<th>N*</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course Book</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Environment</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory Reading</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>503</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N*: Number of communication units

As shown in Table 4, the course book emerged as the most anxiety provoking part of the reading course. The sub-category of the classroom environment included expressions such as the negative atmosphere in the classroom and the relations between the friends that cause anxiety. What is more, students expressed that having reading as a compulsory course causes them to get away from the pleasure of reading, and therefore causes anxiety. Students also think that their reading is negatively affected by the reading teacher and his/her enthusiasm. Finally, having exams and the concern of passing the class is revealed to cause anxiety among the students.

This finding indicates that the reading course has an anxiety provoking nature for some students and an attempt to decrease anxiety related to FL reading should include certain preventions to lower the anxiety students feel. Wallace [19] claims that success of classroom reading is affected by classroom learning processes’ being social as much as individual, involving complex interactions between learners and teachers. Findings also indicate that classroom reading might influence the readers in a negative way and cause anxiety if they do not have any chance to select the materials.

As a consequence, creating a low- anxiety reading atmosphere for learners may be helpful for them in becoming effective readers. This study would be a first step to identify why some learners feel anxious when they are reading in FL. By paying attention to the FL reading anxiety sources revealed in this study, students may be encouraged to overcome their anxieties related to reading in FL.

### 4 Conclusion

In the context of reading, foreign language reading anxiety is claimed to intervene in the reading process and turns reading into an unpleasant experience for students. Thus, this study tried to find out the sources of FL reading anxiety that lead learners feel frustrated and anxious while they are reading in the target language.

The results yielded a concern for dealing with personal factors that students bring with themselves in the way to lower down the FL reading anxiety. Since our duty as language teachers is to help students say “I can” rather than “I can’t” as Tsui [20] emphasizes, it becomes clear that turning towards the learner and the factors affecting him/her is a good starting point.

Student reports have also shown that they have some expectations from the text like including some pictures or photographs, and
having the font big enough. Furthermore, students feel anxious because of the unknown cultural content the text has. Because of these kinds of features of the text, they become closer to say “I can’t” while they are reading in the target language. It is apparent in this study that the text selection should be done by giving importance to what students feel and expect from the text they are to read.

As the last source of anxiety revealed in this study, students reported that they feel anxious because of some features of the reading course they are taking. Therefore; some arrangements should be made in the reading course to lower the anxiety levels of the students and encourage them to say “I can” while reading in the target language.

All in all, this study sheds a considerable light on the issue of reading anxiety, as Tsui [20] states “recognizing and addressing anxiety not only help students to be more responsive, but also make language learning a much more enjoyable experience”.

References: