Correlation between anxiety and critical reading ability of Indonesian English as a Foreign Language students

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the possible relationship between reading anxiety and the critical reading ability of tertiary EFL students majoring in English education at a state university in West Sumatra, Indonesia. Thirty-two students were selected utilizing convenience sampling as the research sample. By employing a correlational approach, the instrument used for this analysis was a TOEFL test consisting of 30 questions to measure students' ability to read critically. In addition, a questionnaire was also developed based on the theory of experts composed of 20 statements used to measure students' reading anxiety. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to investigate the relationship between reading anxiety and students' critical reading ability. The study found that 1) most students experience anxiety at the intermediate level, 2) the level of students' critical reading ability is at the average level, and 3) there is a significant relationship between students' reading anxiety and critical reading ability. The results imply that the reading anxiety students experience correlates to their scores in critical reading, leading to a significant effect of reading anxiety on students' critical reading skills.

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Introduction

English has become mandatory in Indonesia from junior high school to university. Students need English because learning such a significantly important foreign language may help them widen their perspectives, develop emotional abilities, and enhance their quality of life by giving them career prospects (Suryanto, 2014). Of the four macro skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), reading is often considered an essential skill at the tertiary level (Saud & Abduh, 2017). Unlike speaking, reading is done privately with unlimited opportunities for reflection and reconsideration. Reading is also an individual act that does not need the validation of others to determine its success (Liu & Dong, 2022). Students who desire to learn English will have to read into their knowledge unless they can move into an English-speaking environment (Celce-Murcia et al., 2014). Therefore, the key to success in learning a language lies in how proficient students read the target language (Chow et al., 2021). The more skilled students read the more comprehensive is their knowledge (Ghaith, 2020).

Reading at the university level is divided into literal, interpretive, and critical reading comprehension (Par, 2018). Critical reading is assumed to be the highest reading level (Rohmah, 2018). Albeckay (2014) alluded to critical reading as a high-level understanding of written material that requires evaluation and interpretation skills that enable the reader to sort out unimportant information, distinguish between fact and opinion, and determine

the author's purpose and direction. Critical reading in English subjects requires a high ability to evaluate and analyze complex texts such as news texts, essays, and theses (Bolton et al., 2023). Critical reading is more complex and requires the reader to read more carefully, using different skills several times to approach the text. Nevertheless, in practice, students may experience some difficulties in critical reading.

Anuar et al. (2020) found difficulties in mastering critical reading, such as lack of motivation, low English proficiency, mental fatigue, fear of negative feedback, and fear of being wrong. From this list, it can be seen that most of the difficulties lead to anxiety (Perrodin et al., 2022). Complex reading texts and high reading demands in critical reading can increase students' possibility of feeling anxious in reading. Several critical reading activities, such as looking for specific information in passages or encountering unfamiliar words, provoke students to fear and anxiety when reading a foreign language. Anxiety in reading affects students' thinking skills and causes students to read carelessly without understanding the meaning of the text. Anxiety weakens the connections in some parts of the brain, leading to irrational thoughts and erratic behavior (Limeranto & Subekti, 2021). Students may also experience blank outs while reading due to anxiety. High anxiety levels negatively correlate with academic achievement in reading English and students' grades (Al Faruq, 2019). This kind of anxiety is called Foreign Language Reading Anxiety.

Foreign Language Reading Anxiety is any discomfort or fear of reading foreign texts during the reading process (Alsowat, 2016). As such, FLRA causes physical reactions and cognitive reactions due to response anxiety while reading (Aisyah, 2017; Chang & Huang, 2022). Reading anxiety, considered less experienced by students, has long been neglected in research on anxiety. Until the late 1990s that research on foreign language reading anxiety emerged. Saito et al. (1999) conducted a seminal pilot study on reading anxiety in first-semester Spanish, Russian, and Japanese classes. Saito et al. introduced foreign language reading anxiety components to navigate the anxiety dilemma. They developed the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) as a measurement instrument. Zhao et al. (2013) and Zhou (2017) likewise investigated the level of foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA) of learners of Chinese as a foreign language in the United States. They found that foreign language reading anxiety is natural and that students' reading anxiety levels rise in tandem with their perceptions of how challenging the foreign language is to read. In essence, the authors found that the lower the achievement scores, the higher the foreign language reading anxiety level.

As explained above, although several studies examined for anxiety of foreign language students when reading a foreign language, few studies have reviewed the relationship between reading anxiety and the ability to read English of students majoring in English. Thus far, two earlier studies have investigated this topic, Jafarigohar and Behrooznia (2012), who investigated the correlation between Foreign Language Reading Anxiety (FLRA) and reading comprehension skills among Iranian EFL learners studying English as a foreign language, and Ghonsooly and Elahi (2010), who investigated the relationship between EFL learners' self-efficacy in reading comprehension and reading anxiety among sophomores majoring in English at three universities. These researchers postulated that students majoring in English would be less likely to experience anxiety when reading in English, as English should be a focal point of an EFL learner. Furthermore, Muhlis (2017) measured the foreign language reading anxiety level and the potential factors of foreign language reading anxiety among Indonesian EFL senior high school students. They found that over half of the students experienced reading anxiety; most fell in the medium level and much fewer in the high level. Unknown vocabulary was considered the most frequent factor that contributed to reading anxiety.

To explore the results of previous studies, this study focuses more on the relationship between reading anxiety and critical reading, especially for students majoring in English. English students are chosen due to the assumption that students majoring in English are unlikely to experience problems when reading in English since English is something that the students should master. Based on the abovementioned problems, by employing quantitative correlational research in the form of a questionnaire to determine students' anxiety levels and a test to measure students' critical reading ability, this study intends to equally identify the correlation between reading anxiety and students' critical reading ability with tertiary EFL students majoring in English education at a state university in West Sumatra, Indonesia.

Method

Research Design
The correlational research design applied in this study, according to Creswell (2014), is a statistical test to consistently determine the likelihood or pattern of two (or more) independent and dependent variables. The independent variable in this study was reading anxiety, and the dependent variable was critical reading ability.

A questionnaire was utilized to determine students' reading anxiety levels, and reading tests were used to assess students' critical reading ability. First, students' reading anxiety levels were identified using a

questionnaire. Second, students' critical reading ability was obtained by using a reading test. Third, Pearson product-moment correlation based on questionnaires and students' reading tests discovered the correlation between variables. The next step is to analyze the effect of reading anxiety on the student's critical reading ability.

Population and Sample

The accessible population is third-year English Education students at a state university in West Sumatra, Indonesia. Of the 157 third-year students, convenience sampling was used to solicit participation in this study (Stratton, 2021). For this study, 32 students chose to take part in the study.

Data Collecting and Analysis Technique

Google Forms was used for data collection due to its efficiency and effectiveness of time and place in collecting the data during this pandemic. The instrument used in this research were 1) a questionnaire, 2) a critical reading test, and 3) an interview.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was designed based on the theory of Anuar et al. (2020), Saito et al. (1999), and Sheikh Ahmad et al. (2013). The questionnaire consisted of 20 statements regarding reading anxiety and critical reading. The indicators contained in the questionnaire were as follows: 1) students' reading anxiety source (cognitive), 2) difficulties in critical reading, 3) reading anxiety symptoms; physical, cognitive, and 3) students' reading anxiety source (text). This study calculated data using a 1–5 Likert scale. Afterward, scoring adapted from Kuru Gonen (2007) was used to determine the anxiety level of the students (Table 1). A score of > 76 denoted a reading anxiety level, a score of 50–75 indicated a medium reading anxiety level, and a score of < 49 conveyed a low reading anxiety level.

Reading Test

The TOEFL Reading test adopted and adapted from Cambridge Preparation for the TOEFL Test (4th ed.) was the second instrument utilized in this study. The TOEFL Reading test consisted of three reading passages, each followed by several reading comprehension and vocabulary questions. Moreover, the topics were varied but were often informational subjects. The students' TOEFL scores were divided into three levels: 70%–100% (20–30) questions answered correctly, students were said to have advanced critical reading abilities; 30–60% (8–19) questions answered correctly, students were perceived to have an average critical reading ability; < 20% (1–7) questions answered correctly, students were said to have poor critical reading ability.

Interview

In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data. The interviews were a combination of open and guided interviews. Interviews were conducted to find deeper information about reading anxiety experienced by students in critical reading. The main advantage of the semi-structured interview method is that it allows reciprocity between the interviewer and the participants (Galletta & Cross, 2013), allows the interviewer to improvise follow-up questions based on participant responses, and provides space for participants' verbal expressions.

Validity

Content validity and construct validity were observed for the instruments (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Experts were solicited to test the validity of the instrument to be used. Furthermore, the research instrument was tested on 24 fourth-year students for construct validity. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to test the validity. Items that had a value below $r = .404$ were considered invalid. The questionnaire results included six invalid and 12 invalid items for the test. It was then decided only to use valid items, namely 20 items for the questionnaire and 30 for the test.

Reliability

The Cronbach Alpha technique was used to determine the instrument's reliability (Sudina, 2021). A frequently cited acceptable range of Cronbach's alpha is a value of 0.70 or above. The reliability results for the questionnaire produced a value of 0.906 > 0.70 which meant that the reliability of the questionnaire could be categorized as good. Also, the reliability results for the reading test produced a value of 0.924 > 0.70, which meant that the reliability of the critical reading test was categorized as good.

Results and Discussions

Data Descriptions and Analysis

The findings in this research were from the questionnaire and the writing test. The study first grouped the results from the questionnaire level and the critical reading test to find the relation between reading anxiety and critical reading ability.

Students' Reading Anxiety Level

Table 1. Reading Anxiety Level Statistics

N	Level	Freq.	Percentage (%)	Min	Max	Mean	SD
32	Low (20–49)	6	18.75%	43	91	63.03	13.074
	Medium (50–75)	20	62.50%				
	High (> 76)	6	18.75%				

As shown in Table 1, the descriptive statistics of reading anxiety statistics shows that the maximum score was 91, and the lowest score was 43 with the 32 participants. The participants' average foreign language reading anxiety was 63.03, with a standard deviation of 13.074. The questionnaire revealed that the three levels of anxiety in reading foreign languages were all felt by students with different indicators. Based on the results of the questionnaire, the analysis showed that there were 6 (18.75%) students who scored 20–49 demonstrating low anxiety levels; 20 (62.50%) students scored between 50–75 showing moderate anxiety levels; and six students scored > 76 (18.75%), therefore displaying high anxiety levels. Most of the student's anxiety is categorized as medium and high level related to their reading comprehension achievement, which is poor or very good, or their reading comprehension achievement is too high or too low. The majority (62.5%) of students in Indonesia must deal with many unfamiliar sentence patterns, syntax, lexicon, and semantic relations of English as a foreign language. Culture, topics, and foreign words also trigger anxiety. Anxiety in reading could arise because readers are unfamiliar with English or other cultures represented in the texts they read (Petrus & Shah, 2020). Those factors determine students' anxiety in reading the selected reading critically. The qualitative data also shows that students struggled with their self-belief, which made them doubt themselves to do the reading. The results of the qualitative data are as follows:

"...There are sometimes I feel like "oh, I can't do this," I'm not used to reading a bunch of text like that; it makes me overwhelmed..." (Respondent 6)

The excerpt indicates that the student feels anxious because he is not used to much reading selection. Reading a lot in English makes the student afraid to read and perform high achievement.

Students' Critical Reading Ability

Table 2. Critical Reading Ability Statistics

N	Level	Freq.	Percentage	Min	Max	Mean	SD
32	Poor (< 29)	8	25%	17	67	39.69	15.059
	Average (30–69)	24	75%				
	Advanced (> 70)	0	0%				

The descriptive statistics of the Critical Reading Ability test are shown in Table 2. The maximum score was 67, and the minimum score was 17. The mean for the participants was 39.69, and the standard deviation was 15.059. From the test, it was revealed that students with different indicators perceived all three levels of Critical Reading Ability. Based on the results of the test analysis showed that there were eight students (25%) who scored < 29, demonstrating a poor critical reading ability level, and the rest of the sample students (75%) scored between 30–69, therefore, exhibiting an average critical reading ability level. Moreover, no students performed at an advanced level.

It can be concluded that student's ability to read critically was at the average level, meaning they still have problems reading critically. They feel insecure and not confident when reading in English. The qualitative data also shows that students struggled with their self-belief, which made them doubt themselves to do the reading. For poor achievers (25% of students), there are three difficulties experienced by students in carrying out critical reading; mental fatigue, fear of negative feedback, and fear of being wrong. Mental fatigue was also found in qualitative data as follows:

"..The second one, I feel overwhelmed when I see the long text. I'm tired of just looking at it..." (Respondent 19)

Furthermore, based on the results of interviews with respondents, most students also struggle to understand vocabulary and word meaning. The qualitative data obtained as follows:

"...While reading, I find a lot of words that I don't even know the meanings, so it was a bit difficult..." (Respondent 16)

"...Mostly because of the difficult vocabulary that we never encountered before..." (Respondent 23)

"...I found it difficult when I don't know the meaning of the text..." (Respondent 18)

Respondents 16, 23, and 18 admitted that the most significant struggle in reading was understanding challenging words. It means that the main factor of student anxiety is the fear of finding difficult vocabulary in the text. Unknown vocabulary has been a dominant problem causing anxiety among foreign language learners in different contexts (Fitrawati & Syarif, 2021). It can be shown that the difficulties found in critical reading significantly provoke students' anxiety in reading.

Correlation between Reading Anxiety and Students' Critical Reading Ability

Table 3. Correlation Test Result

Correlations					
		Critical Reading Anxiety		Critical Reading Ability	
Critical Reading Anxiety	Pearson correlation	1		**-.375**[*]	
	Sig. (2-tailed)			**.035**	
	N	32		32	
Critical Reading Ability	Pearson correlation	**-.375**[*]		1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	**.035**			
	N	32		32	
Note: *. Correlation is significant at the .05 level ($p < .05$).					

From the result analysis, as shown in Table 3, the correlation coefficient or the r-obtained (-0.375) was higher than the r-table (-0.349) and showed a weak correlation between the two variables. The findings reveal a significant correlation between the students' reading anxiety and critical reading ability ($p = .035$), demonstrating that the less anxious a student feels, the higher their critical reading test scores will be. Hereafter, the probability (p) significance (sig.2-tailed) was 0.035. The p (0.035) was lower than .05, indicating a significant correlation between the students' reading anxiety and critical reading ability. It means that the higher anxious students are, the lower their critical reading test scores will be. It can be stated that the null hypothesis (H0) was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis (Ha) was accepted.

The results show a weak correlation between reading anxiety and students' critical reading ability ($r = .375$) and a negative correlation between reading anxiety and students' critical reading ability. Like other studies, Marhaeni et al. (2020) found a weak correlation between reading anxiety and students' reading comprehension. There is a negative relationship between students' anxiety and reading competence, and students are anxious to understand the meaning of words or phrases and find textual references in texts. Farihah (2017) also found a significant negative correlation between students reading anxiety and their reading comprehension achievement.

Most of the student's anxiety is categorized as medium and high level related to their reading comprehension achievement, which is poor or very good, or their reading comprehension achievement is too high or too low. Wijayati et al. (2021) also found a negative moderate-strong relationship between reading anxiety and comprehension of ESP students. This finding correlates with the concept that the higher anxiety the students perceive, the lower the comprehension score they obtain.

From the results, it can be seen that the participants experience anxiety at the medium level. From the analysis results, students had problems with self-belief in reading, making them feel insecure that they are fine merely reading for themselves but get nervous and uncomfortable if they have to read for some specific purposes. Secondly, the students experience mental fatigue and are overwhelmed when reading demanding and complex texts. The two indicators above focus on students' cognitive activity.

In line with Nazarinasab et al. (2014), who found that anxious readers may spend some of their mental energy thinking about things unrelated to the reading activity, such as how badly they are doing or how much time they spend to finish reading. For the following indicator, the student responded neutrally on the part of the physical symptoms experienced when anxious, which indicated that the student did not feel the physical symptoms. Furthermore, students said they felt embarrassed by cognitive symptoms if they did not understand anything while reading. Moreover, the last indicator that caused reading anxiety was that students felt worried if they encountered unknown vocabulary. The findings align with Wijayati et al. (2021), who found that students

felt annoyed when they found many words with unclear meanings and became upset when they could not find definitions of words they had seen before.

Finally, based on the results obtained from the questionnaire about reading anxiety, the current study showed that the level of students' reading anxiety is at the medium level. This finding means that the group of students experienced reading anxiety at a moderate level. Similarly, Muhlis (2017) clarified that students' reading anxiety level is medium. It means the students feel anxious when reading activities in class. Recently, the study done by Al Faruq (2019) was consistent with the current results that students feel nervous when involved in reading activities. Linking reading anxiety to critical reading might be interpreted as a negative relationship, which means the more students feel anxious when they are involved in reading activity, the lower the reading comprehension score they will get.

Conclusions

This study illustrates that most English department students perceived anxiety at a moderate level. Based on the data and elaboration in findings and discussion, it can be seen that students' anxiety levels are varied. There are three groups of reading anxiety levels: high, moderate, and low. Most students are grouped into a moderate level. The students' reading anxiety sources were from three high-ranked statements representing each aspect causing reading anxiety. Most students agreed that vocabulary with unclear meaning is the most significant factor that raised their reading activity anxiety. Then, it was followed by mental fatigue, fear of negative feedback, and fear of being wrong.

Regarding students' critical reading ability, the students belong to a moderate reading comprehension level. It means most students failed to answer more than half of the questions correctly. Besides, the result of the study revealed that there was a negative relationship between reading anxiety and critical reading comprehension. In other words, the higher the students' anxiety, the lower the comprehension score they obtained. The existence of students reading anxiety can disturb them in comprehending, evaluating, and interpreting English texts.

This result showed that a psychological factor, such as reading anxiety, contributes to the student's reading ability; therefore, this study may have several pedagogical implications for future researchers and students. This finding could imply that students should be more aware of reading anxiety in learning because reading anxiety is one of the factors that affect reading skills. Most importantly, the students must greatly desire to learn to read in English to help them understand the material and improve their knowledge. Along with the times, critical reading is a demand that everyone, especially teachers, must master. Teachers must be more aware of and find solutions to the difficulties students face in reading so as not to cause anxiety. The teachers should encourage the students to learn to get rid of reading anxiety for a better future. Then, the teachers must make reading fun, not scary, for the students.

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