

The Effect of Reading Comprehension Strategies Instruction on EFL Learners' Reading Anxiety Level

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Abstract

This experimental study, using pretest-intervention-posttest design, investigated whether or not teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) learners to use comprehension strategies when they read English passages, decreases their English reading anxiety. The participants were 55 EFL learners in Turkey who were at lower-intermediate level based on the results of the Oxford Quick Placement Test. Data were collected via Saito, Garza, and Horwitz's (1999) Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS). The whole treatment/control period lasted for 11 weeks during a reading course. The experimental group (n = 28) received instruction in reading comprehension strategies (i.e., previewing, scanning for details, skimming, identifying the topic and main idea, finding supporting details, making inferences, understanding the author's purpose, making predictions, dealing with unfamiliar words, using context clues, and summarizing). The control group (n = 27) received instruction by traditional teaching methods (i.e., reading, paraphrasing, translating, and answering the exercises). The results of the Mann-Whitney U Test indicated that instruction in English reading comprehension strategies had a positive effect on EFL learners in terms of reducing their English reading anxiety.

Keywords: English as a foreign language (EFL), Reading comprehension strategies, English reading anxiety

Introduction

Reading is a complex psycholinguistic process affected by reader-related, text-based, and context-specific factors including text processing automaticity and fluency, background knowledge, vocabulary, and as well as motivation, positive self-concept, and reading confidence (Ghaith, 2017). The complexity of the reading process is quite clear in English as Foreign Language (EFL) settings and several factors may affect EFL learners' reading comprehension. Anxiety is one of them (Ghaith, 2020).

Foreign language learners, especially at lower levels of proficiency, often express a feeling of anxiety in not only learning a foreign language (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986) but also in reading skill, as one of the specific language skills (Saito et al., 1999). Foreign language learning anxiety (FLA) is defined as a “distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128).

While reading English passages for fun, students' reading anxiety is not experienced, but while reading English passages for tests, which may cause difficulty comprehending them, the learners may experience anxiety (Huang, 2012). It is reported that anxiety is caused by short-term testing during language learning (Aydın et al. 2016, p.145). Neuroscience has found that nervousness pertinent to the reading tasks truly exists (Jalongo & Hirsh, 2010). Literature reports lots of studies that FL learners, in different contexts, encounter foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA) in varying degrees (Saito et al., 1999).

Such anxiety can be because of personal factors, such as being afraid of making errors (Ahmad et al., 2013; Muhlis, 2017; Valizadeh & Alavinia) or it may be due to the text features, such as unknown vocabulary, unfamiliar topic, unfamiliar culture (Ahmad et al., 2013; Muhlis, 2017) and unfamiliar writing system (Saito et al., 1999) although this last factor has not been shown in some studies (S. I. Kuru-Gonen, 2007). Brantmeier (2005) indicated that FLRA is related to the perceived difficulty level of the reading material and following reading tasks.

In Turkey, some researchers already explored the possible sources of FLRA which Turkish EFL learners experienced. For example, Kuru-Gonen (2009) found three main sources of FLRA: “the personal factors, the reading text and the reading course” (p. 50). Genç (2016) found that Turkish EFL learners had low level of second language (L2) ambiguity tolerance and their reading anxiety levels increased by nature of the text and personal factors. It was indicated that gender, L2 ambiguity tolerance, and success in FL reading are important and strong factors that predict FLRA.

FLA has been found as one of the main factors that can hinder effective teaching and learning a foreign language (FL) (Dewaele, Petrides, & Furnham, 2008). Furthermore, it can cause learning a FL an unpleasant experience for learners (Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz et al., 1986). As a result, considering the importance of FLA, researchers have tried to understand the construct and have been searching for ways of decreasing levels of FLA (Kruk, 2018).

Moreover, reading strategies are utilized to overcome problems faced in FL reading (Brantmeier, 2002; Lien, 2011). Literature has shown that the use of reading comprehension strategies can help L2 learners reduce their reading anxiety (Gahungu, 2007; Liao & Wang, 2018; Lien, 2011; Naseri & Zaferanieh, 2012). Lien (2011) indicated that “EFL learners with low anxiety levels tended to use general reading strategies such as guessing, while EFL learners with high anxiety levels employed basic support mechanisms, such as translation, to help themselves understand texts” (p. 199).

Lu and Liu (2015) investigated the interrelations between FLRA and FL reading strategy use. They collected data from university learners in China and

found that more than half of the participants generally were not anxious while reading English, and were confident in and satisfied with their English reading proficiency. Moreover, those students moderately utilized various types of reading strategies such as planning, checking and confirming, predicting and assessing, while reading English.

More recently, Ghaith (2020) explored the direct and indirect roles of ELRA and meta cognitive reading strategies in the reading comprehension of 103 EFL college learners who were Arabic native speakers in Lebanon. Results revealed that global and problem-solving strategies were positively associated with EFL reading comprehension, yet not mediated by ELRA. On the other hand, ELRA negatively affected comprehension and mediated support strategies. Ghaith emphasized the need for integrating instruction in the global and problem-solving strategies to improve comprehension and reduce ELRA. Ghaith recommended further research to investigate the generalis ability of his findings.

In a study already done in the context of Turkey by Çapan and Pekta (2013), intriguingly, it was shown that reading strategy training led to an increase rather than decrease in Turkish EFL learners' levels of FLRA. The participants who received training on some reading strategies involving skimming, scanning, keeping reading journals, and reflective thinking, expressed higher anxiety level. Despite this result, the participants gave positive comments about the received instructions on reading strategies. Based on the comments, the researchers concluded that the way teachers teach the strategies in the classroom may have significant effect on learners' FLRA levels. This conclusion can also support Wu's (2011) similar claim.

In brief, because several studies in literature found that learners with higher language anxiety either in general or in specific language skills may have lower performance in FL learning, the sources of anxiety or the strategies to cope with anxiety have been important subjects of many studies (Genç, 2016). In addition, the issue of possible effect of reading strategy instruction on English reading anxiety level is under-investigated in the context of Turkey. As a result, the researcher of the present study investigated the issue by addressing the

following research question:

Is there any significant difference between the English reading anxiety level of the group that receives reading comprehension strategies instruction (RCSI) and the group that receives traditional instruction of reading skill (TIRS)?

Method

Participants

Eighty-one EFL learners in Turkey, who were studying at lower-intermediate levels, were informed about the research and invited to participate. Sixty-eight of them accepted. They were given the Oxford Placement Test (OPT). The score of 55 learners ranged from 24 to 30 out of 40; they were at the lower-intermediate level, based on Geranpayeh's (2003) guideline. Thus, those 55 learners (43 females and 12 males) were recruited as the participants and were assigned randomly to an experimental group, named, Reading Comprehension Strategies Instruction (RCSI) (24 females and 4 males) and a control one that received the traditional instruction of reading skill, including reading, paraphrasing, translating, and answering the exercises, (TIRS) (19 females and 8 males). The participants' native language was Turkish and their ages ranged from 18 to 26 with an average age of 21.11 years ($SD = 2.123$).

Design

The study was a pretest-treatment-posttest as well as a comparison-group one. There were two independent variables called 'Reading Comprehension Strategies Instruction' and 'Traditional Instruction of Reading Skill'. There was a dependent variable named, 'English Reading Anxiety'.

Instruments

To ensure the homogeneity of the participants in terms of their language proficiency level, the Oxford Quick Placement (OPT) was utilized.

The textbook *Select Readings* (Pre-Intermediate) (Lee & Gundersen, 2011) was mainly utilized for the training in selected English reading comprehension strategies. The experimental group received instruction in the following English reading comprehensive strategies: previewing, scanning for

details, skimming, identifying the topic and main idea, finding supporting details, making inferences, understanding the author's purpose, making predictions, dealing with unfamiliar words, using context clues, and summarizing.

To measure the participants' English reading anxiety, the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) (Saito et al., 1999) was used because the literature has argued that it is a highly valid and reliable instrument (S. I. Kuru-Gonen, 2007; Liao & Wang, 2018; Saito et al., 1999); however, the word 'English' was utilized instead of the three languages mentioned in the original scale, so the scale was adapted to English Language Reading Anxiety Scale (ELRAS). The ELRAS elicits English learners' self-reports of anxiety over several aspects of reading, their attitudes towards the difficulty of reading in comparison with the difficulty of other language skills (Saito et al., 1999). The ELRAS included 20 items on 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 to 5, coded as 1- Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Not agree, not disagree, 4-Agree, 5- Strongly agree. The maximum and minimum possible scores which can be obtained from the scale are 100 and 20, respectively. The lower the ELRA score on ELRAS, the lower the ELRA level. Cronbach's alpha for the ELRAS was .712, rated as an acceptable index in terms of reliability (Pallant, 2013) when 55 participants were tested.

Data Collection Procedure

At the outset, on 1st. session, all the 55 participants were given the ERAS and were required to complete it. Their responses were collected and analyzed to investigate their English reading anxiety level prior to the provision of the intervention. Then, the participants in each group received their selected intervention during 11 sessions (one session in each week, totally during 11 weeks). Each session lasted for one and half hour. On session 13 of the research study, the participants were provided with the same ERAS and were required to complete it based on their perceptions after experiencing the received reading course. Their responses were gathered for further analyses.

Data Analyses and Results

The Normality Tests

The assumption of normality was examined using both the graphic of histogram, and numerical ways as Larson-Hall (2010) recommended. They indicated that the data were normally distributed only for the OPT, but not for the pretest and posttest of reading anxiety. Unlike the OPT, the values of skewness and kurtosis statistics for the pretest and posttest of reading anxiety were not within ± 1 , based on Phakiti (2010); additionally, the outcomes of the ratio of skewedness and kurtosis over their respective standard errors were not within the ranges of ± 1.96 , based on Field (2013) for the pretest and posttest of reading anxiety, unlike the OPT. That's why the parametric t-test was used for the OPT, while the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U Test was utilized to test for the differences between the groups on the pretest and posttest of reading anxiety.

Ensuring the Homogeneity of the Groups

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of the RCSI and TIRS groups in OPT. There was no significant difference in scores for the RCSI group ($M = 26.82$, $SD = 1.744$, $N = 28$) and TIRS group ($M = 27.00$, $SD = 1.641$, $N = 27$); $t(53) = -0.391$, $p = .698$. Therefore, the two groups were homogeneous in terms of their English language proficiency levels.

Then, a Mann-Whitney U Test was conducted to compare the median scores of the RCSI and TIRS groups in the pretest of English reading anxiety prior to the intervention. The test revealed no significant difference in the reading anxiety level of the RCSI group ($Md = 66.00$, $n = 28$) and the TIRS group ($Md = 67.00$, $n = 27$), $U = 276.500$, $z = -1.777$, $p = .076 > .05$, $r = -.238$.

Finding of the Research Question

A Mann-Whitney U Test was conducted to compare the median scores of the RCSI and TIRS groups in the posttest of English reading anxiety immediately after the intervention. The test revealed a significant difference in the reading anxiety level of the RCSI group ($Md = 52.00$, $n = 28$) and the TIRS group ($Md = 68.00$, $n = 27$), $U = 48.500$, $z = -5.645$, $p = .000$, $r = -.761$, indicating a very large effect size

statistic, based on Cohen (1988). The RCSI group indicated lower level of ELRA than the TIRS group.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the present study indicated that instruction in English reading comprehension strategies can have a positive effect on EFL learners in terms of reducing their English reading anxiety. The finding of this study supports some previous studies (Cho & Krashen, 2016; Gahungu, 2007; Krashen & Mason, 2017; Liao & Wang, 2018; Lien, 2011; Naseri & Zaferanieh, 2012) and is not in line with what Çapan and Pekta (2013) indicated in the context of Turkey. Lien (2011) also found that less anxious readers utilized more Global Reading Strategies, such as using background knowledge and using context clues, to monitor or manage their own reading. These two top-down reading strategies were taught and practiced in the present study in addition to nine other strategies. These types of "reading strategies will strengthen learners' confidence and provide them with a more holistic picture of each reading text" (Lien, 2011, p. 206).

Moreover, one of the sources of FLRA revealed in several studies was unknown vocabulary (Ahmad et al., 2013; I. Kuru-Gonen, 2009; Muhlis, 2017). The participants in the present study learned how to deal with unfamiliar words, especially by using context clues. This could have contributed to all eviating their FLRA levels.

Additionally, Genç (2016) found that L2 ambiguity tolerance and success in reading in a FL are significant and strong predictors of FLRA. Ambiguity tolerance is an important learning style because it can hinder or facilitate language learning (Başöz, 2015). The learning strategies taught in the present study (i.e., previewing, scanning for details, skimming, identifying the topic and main idea, finding supporting details, making inferences, understanding the author's purpose, making predictions, dealing with unfamiliar words, using context clues, and summarizing) could have increased the participants' ambiguity tolerance as well as their success in reading and hence reduced their FLRA levels.

Furthermore, instructing EFL Learners in reading comprehension strategies, may have had positive effects on their reading self-efficacy level (i.e., the

beliefs in one's abilities to perform tasks, as defined by Bandura (2010)), and as a result, may have affected the degree of anxiety they experience while doing tasks related to reading English (Bandura, 1986; Usher & Pajares, 2006).

As the concluding remark, the researcher of the present study, like Lien (2011), recommend that EFL teachers pay more attention to training learners in Reading Strategies to enable them to consciously monitor their own learning, with the intention and purpose of decreasing their EFL reading anxiety level.

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