

# THE DIFFERENCES IN EFL STUDENTS' READING ANXIETY IN ACADEMIC READING

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## Abstract

This study aims to determine the anxiety level and investigate the differences between female and male reading anxiety in the academic reading of EFL students, especially reading English in TOEFL material. This research used a mixed-method design. The data of this study were collected by using a questionnaire that adopted the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) and using semi-structured interviews with questions that an expert has validated. The findings showed that most students identified anxiety at a medium level. Moreover, the researcher found that female students were nervous, anxious, and panicked when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, topics, and grammar in TOEFL reading. Male students did not feel anxious even though they had difficulty encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, topics, and long texts.

**Keywords:** Reading anxiety, EFL, academic reading

## INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of four skills in English, and one of the language skills students should master to get new information. When students read, there is a linguistic process where the reader looks for information or written messages. Reading for academic purposes gives a more significant challenge for students in higher education. Academic reading is more challenging since it requires learners to do various skills such as questioning, interpreting, synthesizing, and reflecting on the material (Sengupta, 2002). Reading academic texts is difficult because they are longer than general reading, the paragraphs are lengthier, and they contain complex sentences and difficult vocabulary (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022).

In foreign languages, the reading process is further complicated by factors such as language ability, cultural backgrounds, learner motivation, unfamiliar scripts, and writing systems (Saito et al., 1999). Heriyawati and Aprianto (2018) said that several factors, including the unfamiliar vocabulary employed by the author and the unfamiliar context of the passages, contribute to the student's difficulties in comprehending the text. Many students studying a foreign language experience frustration when attempting to comprehend foreign language text. In a way, these students experience anxiety. Zhou (2017) stated that foreign language reading anxiety is the specific anxiety that "learners experience while they are reading a passage in the target language".

Male and female students may experience reading anxiety when learning a foreign language. Gender influences foreign language anxiety significantly. According to Wardhaugh (2014), in language study, gender is one of the major 'growth areas'. Concerning gender and reading anxiety, several studies (Capan & Karaca, 2013; Jafarigohar & Behrooznia, 2012; Lien, 2011; Lu & Liu, 2015) revealed mixed results. Jafarigohar & Behrooznia (2012) found that female participants felt more anxious and worried than male participants. Lien's (2011) and Capan & Karaca's (2013) study showed no significant difference in reading anxiety among female and male subjects. Nevertheless, female participants seemed more anxious overall than male participants (Lien, 2011).

Several studies about students' reading anxiety levels and sources (Ahmad et al., 2013; Aisyah, 2017; Faruq, 2019) found that most students identified anxiety at a medium level, and three main sources of foreign language reading anxiety are unknown vocabulary, unfamiliar topic, and unfamiliar culture. Sabti et al. (2016), in their research about gender differences and foreign language reading anxiety in EFL, stated that female students were slightly more anxious about reading comprehension than their male counterparts. Following that, this study aimed to determine the anxiety level and investigate the differences between female and male reading anxiety in academic reading.

## **METHOD**

The current study employed a mixed-methods design. Mixed-methods research is an approach to investigation that involves gathering both quantitative and qualitative data, combining the two types of data, and employing distinct designs that may include philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks (Creswell, 2014). This research involved 70 students who took an Interpretative Reading course in the third-semester academic year 2022/2023 students in an English Education Department at a private university in Malang, East Java, Indonesia.

The researcher used the questionnaire sheets adapted and translated from FLRAS (Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale) developed by Saito et al. (1999). FLRAS consists of 20 items with a total score of 100. The higher the number, the lower the level of FLRA experienced by EFL students. The answer response options ranged from Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neutral (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). The FLRAS results will be used as a score to determine the level of anxiety. After obtaining each student's scores, descriptive statistics containing means, standard deviations, and percentages will be calculated using SPSS. The second instrument is the interview. A semi-structured interview was designed to investigate the differences between female and male reading anxiety in academic reading. Five questions in this interview have been translated into Indonesian and validated by an expert. Researchers selected six participants, one male and one female from each level of anxiety. They were interviewed individually in Bahasa via Zoom meeting.

The students' average total anxiety scores were calculated to measure their reading anxiety levels. The researchers used descriptive statistics in SPSS to

calculate means and standard deviation. The descriptive statistic numbers are used to categorize the reading anxiety levels, which are divided into three categories: low, medium, and high anxiety. For the second research question, interview data were analysed following Miles et al. (2014), data analysis consists of three steps: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification.

Table 1. List of Interviewed Students

| Student Initial Name | Gender | Score | Anxiety level |
|----------------------|--------|-------|---------------|
| Participant 1        | Male   | 76    | Low           |
| Participant 2        | Female | 76    |               |
| Participant 3        | Male   | 45    | High          |
| Participant 4        | Female | 39    |               |
| Participant 5        | Male   | 55    | Medium        |
| Participant 6        | Female | 54    |               |

## FINDING

### The Levels of Reading Anxiety Experienced by EFL Students

The research findings were gathered from the data collection using a questionnaire and interview to determine the levels of reading anxiety experienced by EFL students and the differences between female and male reading anxiety in academic reading of the EFL students in an English Education Department at a private university in Malang, East Java, Indonesia

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for FLRAS

|         | N  | Mean  | Std. Deviation |
|---------|----|-------|----------------|
| Valid N | 70 | 61.44 | 10.894         |

For the FLRAS, the mean and standard deviation were calculated as  $M = 61.44$  and  $SD = 10.894$ . The final scores from the FLRAS questionnaire were calculated manually for each student.

Table 3. Distribution of the Anxiety Level on the FLRAS

| The level of reading anxiety      | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Low<br>( $M > 72.33$ )            | 12        | 17.1%      |
| High<br>( $M < 50.55$ )           | 9         | 12.8%      |
| Medium<br>( $50.55 < M < 72.33$ ) | 49        | 70%        |
| Total                             | 70        |            |

According to the distribution of anxiety levels of 70 participants in FLRAS, they are mostly in the medium level which contains more than half of the participants which is 70%. Another finding was that 17.1% of students showed low levels, and 12.8% showed high levels.

### The Differences between Female and Male Reading Anxiety in Academic Reading

The researcher has selected six students to be interviewed. There are two low-level anxiety students, two high-level anxiety students, and two medium-level anxiety students.

*Question 1: What was your most stressful experience while reading the TOEFL material?*

All male participants did not feel anxious in TOEFL reading. Then participants 3 and 5 stated that they were confused when they encountered unfamiliar vocabulary and unfamiliar topics.

*“What I experienced when I did TOEFL reading was that when I read, sometimes there was some unfamiliar vocabulary and topic. When I read the entire text, words that I do not understand make me less understanding of the text.” (P5)*

Meanwhile, two out of three female participants felt anxious and panicked when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, unfamiliar topics, and unknown grammar.

*"I am usually confused, anxious, and nervous, too. I think reading is difficult, especially with a lack of vocabulary and grammar. I am more worried if I find unfamiliar vocabulary, unfamiliar topics, and grammar." (P4)*

*"I am just panicking because I am afraid, I will make a mistake, which makes me hesitate to answer questions. The obstacles or things that I am worried about, I am more worried about the vocabulary." (P6)*

*Question 2: How does academic reading anxiety affect your academic performance?*

According to participant 3, the difficulties they faced influenced their academic performance. He believes the key to success in reading is related to vocabulary mastery. Participant 5 stated that reading long texts can take time.

*"Concerning vocabulary issues, I think it is very influential because the key to success in reading is related to how many words we have remembered or how many we have is one of the keys." (P3)*

*"I think it is influential because if you find a long text, it chases time, too." (P5)*

All three female participants felt anxiety affected their academic performance. Participant 2 felt that it was quite disturbing her focus. Participants 4 and 6 stated the same thing that they were afraid of making mistakes and afraid of getting bad scores.

*"It may have a slight effect on disrupting focus when working on questions." (P2)*

*"This anxiety has an effect. I am afraid of making mistakes and afraid of bad results." (P4)*

*Question 3: In your opinion, what factors can cause anxiety when reading the TOEFL material?*

Male participant 1 did not have factors that cause anxiety. While participant 3 and participant 5 have different factors that cause anxiety. Participant 3 has internal and external factors. Participant 5 said that apart from the difficulties he faced, the noise around him could interfere with his focus in doing TOEFL reading.

*"... ..Student failure or failure to maximize the student's ability in terms of reading because external factors are not given room or not given the opportunity to practice in the use of the language. Those 30% are only internal errors because people with low IQ cannot remember when they get new vocabulary written and then remember and use it later. Most of us cannot be like that." (P3)*

*"Besides the difficulties I encountered. When I answer questions, I lose focus if there are distracting sounds around me. So, it is not optimal." (P5)*

Two out of three female participants stated that lack of vocabulary, lack of reading, lack of preparation, and practice were factors that could cause reading anxiety. Whereas, Participant 2 did not have factors that cause anxiety.

*"For me, it's an internal factor because I don't know vocabulary or grammar. So, lack of knowledge is a factor. I did not have any preparation before the exam." (P4)*

*"For myself, perhaps I do not read enough, I do not have enough preparation and practice, and my understanding of vocabulary is also lacking." (P6)*

**Question 4: What strategies do you use to alleviate anxiety while reading on the TOEFL?**

Male participants have the same strategy to alleviate reading anxiety. They use English daily, reread to understand words or sentences, guess the meaning of vocabulary, and read articles and news in English.

*"The fundamental skill where we speak every day, interact, or communicate with others means we use that language every day. Which would support our reading in the academic." (P3)*

*"I read repeatedly understood sentences, sometimes even guessing the meaning of the word by linking the word before or after. Outside of working on questions, sometimes I just read random articles and news in English to improve my vocabulary." (P5)*

The strategy used by female students is that female participants guess the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary or sentences, reread to improve understanding mark unknown words or sentences, translate word by word into Indonesian, and learn TOEFL reading material from YouTube and TikTok videos.

*"I guess the meaning of unknown vocabulary, read sentences repeatedly to understand, circle or mark unknown vocabulary, translate word for word, read aloud, and repeat to understand. Apart from that, I never do exercises or do questions, I usually study TOEFL material from videos on TikTok." (P4)*

*"Another strategy is to practice and watch videos on YouTube because there are explanations of the questions there, so it is easier." (P2)*

## DISCUSSION

In this research, there are three levels of anxiety, which are low, high, and medium level. The levels of anxiety perceived by students were gained from the FLRAS questionnaire. From seventy respondents, it was found that twelve participants (17.1%) fell in the low level of reading anxiety, forty-nine participants (70%) fell in the medium level of reading anxiety, and nine participants (12.8) fell in the high level of reading anxiety. The research shows that most students were in the medium level of reading anxiety, with 70% of the students at this level. This finding is in line with Mawardah et al. (2019) found that most of the EFL students (66%) are at medium level. Faruq (2019) also found that most of the students reported medium levels of anxiety.

The researcher also conducted interviews to answer the second research question. The results show that two out of three female students stated they were nervous, anxious, and panicked when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, topics, and grammar in TOEFL reading. They feel that anxiety affects their academic performance. In line with Abubakar & Hairuddin (2020) found that one of the symptoms recognized by students when experiencing reading anxiety is that students feeling nervous when they read texts with unfamiliar topics. Meanwhile, male students stated they did not feel anxious even though they had difficulty encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, unfamiliar topics, and long texts.

Factors experienced by male students are the lack of space to practice English, low memory to remember new vocabulary, and disturbed focus due to noise around them. Apart from that, unfamiliar vocabulary, unfamiliar topics, and long texts are also factors experienced by male students. Meanwhile, the factors experienced by female students are lack of vocabulary, afraid of making error, lack of grammar, lack of reading, lack of preparation and practice. In line with (Ahmad et al., 2013; Aisyah, 2017; Faruq, 2019; Muhlis, 2017) that found that factors that cause reading anxiety are worry about reading effect, afraid of making error, unfamiliar culture, unfamiliar topic, and unfamiliar vocabulary.

In conclusion, female students are slightly more anxious than male students in TOEFL reading. The reason is that female students feel anxious, nervous, and panicked when they encounter unfamiliar vocabulary, unfamiliar topics, and unknown grammar in TOEFL reading. Meanwhile, male students did not feel anxious despite encountering the same difficulties as female students. The result aligns with Sabti et al. (2016) discovered that female learners were marginally more anxious than their male counterparts about reading comprehension. The research done by Lien (2011) also discovered that in reading, female participants exhibited a somewhat higher level of anxiety compared to male participants in general. This finding was inconsistent with Capan & Karaca (2013), that there was no discernible gender difference in reading anxiety.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings discussed in the previous chapter, it can be summed up that third-semester students in the Interpretative Reading class have a level of anxiety in TOEFL reading material that is categorized as medium. From the total participants, there were 12 (17.1%) were at a low level, 9 students (12.8%) were classified as high level, and 49 students (70%) showed a medium level.

According to the interview results data, female students have slightly higher anxiety levels than male students. Two out of three female students felt anxious in TOEFL reading. The first female student stated she was anxious when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary and topics. The other female students felt panicked because she was afraid of making mistakes and afraid of the results. The factors that cause them anxiety are lack of vocabulary, lack of grammar, lack of reading, and lack of practice and preparation. The strategies female students use are guessing the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary or sentences and rereading to improve understanding, marking unknown words or sentences, translating word by word into Indonesian, and learning TOEFL reading material from YouTube and TikTok videos.

Meanwhile, male students did not feel anxious. However, they have difficulty encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, topics, and long texts. Factors experienced by male students are the lack of space to practice English, low memory to remember new vocabulary, and disturbed focus due to noise around them. They use strategies to alleviate reading anxiety by guessing the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary and rereading words or sentences to improve understanding. They also read books, articles, and news and use English daily to enhance their vocabulary in academic reading.

In research findings, it was found that most third-semester students in the Interpretative Reading course experience a medium level of anxiety when reading TOEFL reading material and female students were slightly more anxious than male students. The lecturers are suggested to pay more attention to each student, female students who have higher levels of anxiety, and students with low scores of TOEFL reading. Additionally, lecturers can apply teaching methods that can improve students' reading skills and vocabulary. It is suggested that students should often practice TOEFL reading and increase their vocabulary by reading books, articles, and news. So, the anxiety in TOEFL reading can be reduced. The researcher hopes that future researchers can examine students who have taken the TOEFL test and expects that other studies will find additional strategies, methods, and media that can be employed to alleviate reading anxiety.

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