

The Cycle of Academic Reading Fear Among Undergraduates

Noor Hanim Rahmat¹, Mazlen Arepin², Suraiya Sulaiman³

¹ Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA
patanim@gmail.com

² Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA,
UiTM Puncak Alam Campus, 42300 Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
jasmazlen@salam.uitm.edu.my

³ Suraiya Sulaiman
Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences,
Prince of Songkhla University, Pattani
Ssuraiya1@gmail.com
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Abstract: This study investigates students' fear in academic reading as well as the influence of perceived difficulties in their reading comprehension. The paper aims to study the level of anxiety as experienced by undergraduate students in academic reading. Data from 25 respondents were analyzed quantitatively using Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) developed by Saito, Horwitz, and Garza (1999). The objectives of the study are to examine the influence of students' fear and perceived difficulties in academic reading. The findings of this study reveal that factors such as background and culture, general reading ability, vocabulary, grammar as well as teaching method can make readers fear reading. The results of this study bear interesting implications towards the teaching and learning of academic reading in English as a Second Language.

Keywords: English as a Second Language (ESL); academic reading; perceived difficulties; reading fear; reading anxiety

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Study

Reading is an important skill that students need to acquire to ensure the overall academic success. Reading affects intellectual and emotional growth of an individual (Baba & Affendi, 2020). Many researches in the past have shown the importance of reading skills while learning. To obtain new knowledge, reading skill is essential to assist students in interpreting meaning of words and phrases beyond the surface structures. Students who fail to understand what they read, would not only risk to interpret wrongly but they too would likely bear social and academic failures (Rajab, Zakaria, Rahman, Hosni, & Hassani, 2012).

Reading is important for many reasons. According to some research, reading is key to one's academic success because only through reading one can gain understanding of not only the linguistic aspect but also meaning of the expressions. Academic reading fear is one of the problems that most students would encounter in the process of learning. Reading anxiety is contributed by the sense of uncertainty encountered by students for the fear of not being able to interpret the meaning of texts.

1.2 Statement of Problem

Zhao, Dynia and Guo (2013) carried out a study to examine the foreign language (FL) reading anxiety level of English-speaking university students learning Chinese as a foreign language (n =114) in the United States. Data was taken from a survey, background information survey and also an email interview. Some of them had faced difficulties in reading because of their lack of background knowledge. The study revealed that reading comprehension among students learning English as a foreign language is influenced by how they perceived reading difficulties. Their comprehension was also influenced by their anxiety towards reading. Do students with English as a second language have the same fear for reading comprehension? This study hopes to investigate that.

1.3 Objective and Research Questions

The objective of this study is to investigate how learners' reading comprehension is influenced by their perceptions. Specifically, this study explores how perceived difficulties and reading anxiety influence their reading comprehension. The study is done to answer the following questions;

- 1.3.1 Research Question 1- In what ways do reading anxiety influence reading comprehension?
- 1.3.2 Research Question 2- How do perceived difficulties influence reading comprehension?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 Why Academic Reading is Difficult for Undergraduates

Past studies have reported several reasons why readers find academic reading difficult. The study by Garcia, Ramayan, Sepe & Silor (2014) found that some learners found it difficult to understand the content of the text. This will then reduce their interest in reading and further make them lose interest in academic reading. This is also agreed by Abdul Rahman, Rahmat, and Mohd Yunos (2015) who found similar reasons for difficulty in academic reading. Readers also found that their lack of vocabulary skills further made it more difficult to understand academic tests.

2.1.2 Theories on Reading Fear

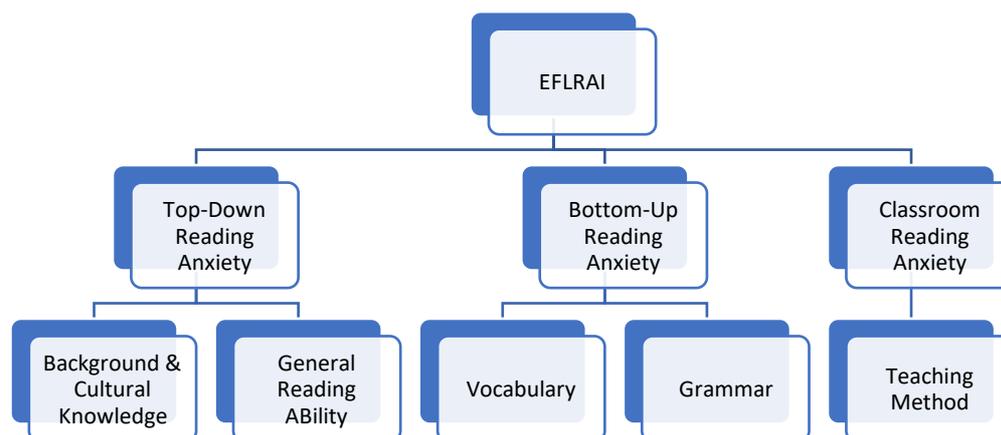


Fig 1- English as a Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Inventory -EFLRAI (adapted from Zoghi; 2012)

Reading anxiety can be caused by several reasons. According to Zoghi (2012), there are three types of reading anxiety for learners of English as a foreign language. The first type of anxiety is top-down reading anxiety (Figure 1). This is when learners fear reading because they have no background

and cultural knowledge of the content of the text they are reading. In addition to that, these learners may also have low general reading ability. The next type of anxiety is bottom-up anxiety. This is caused by the learners' lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge in the target language. The third type of anxiety is classroom anxiety. Sadly, this anxiety is caused by the teaching method in the classroom.

2.1.3 Past Studies

A study by Purnama (2017) looked at the influence of reading strategies and anxiety on 103 students. The instrument used is adapted from Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) developed by Saito, Horwitz, and Garza (1999). The instrument also adapted the measurement for students' reading anxiety, and the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) designed by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002). Findings revealed students had High Anxiety Readers (HAR), Low Anxiety Readers (LAR), and Medium Anxiety Readers (MAR). Based on the data analysis, it was found that $r(102) < r_{table}(.207)$ with significant level 0.842 which was higher than 0.05. This indicated that there was no significant relationship between reading anxiety and overall reading strategies use. This implied that high anxiety did not cause lower reading strategies to be used.

Rajab. Wan Zakaria., Abdul Rahman, Hosni., and Hassani. (2012) conducted a study to identify the level of reading anxiety among 91 final year Science and Non-Science undergraduates in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru Campus. The questionnaire was adapted from Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) [1] using a five point Likert Scale. Findings of this paper were used to revise some of the reading subjects in the university to suit the needs of the second language learners.

The study by Zhou (2017) investigates the foreign language (FL) reading anxiety level of learners of Chinese as a FL ($n = 76$) in the United States. Data was collected from a survey on foreign language anxiety, and background information. A face-to-face interview was also conducted. Findings indicated that there was no significant difference in reading anxiety level among four course levels. Findings revealed that the Chinese L2 learners experienced a medium level of reading anxiety. A regression model with background variables such as years of learning Chinese, heritage learner status, the number of foreign languages learned, and time spent in China significantly predicted learners' reading anxiety levels. Worries relating to comprehension, unfamiliar topics, unknown pronunciation, and feeling uncomfortable reading aloud were identified as major sources of FL reading anxiety.

The study by Jusoh and Abdullah (2016) was done on students in a university in Malaysia. The study was done to investigate the extent of the use of strategies when reading online in an academic setting. It was also done to investigate whether differences in the use of the strategies between students in different fields of studies exist. Findings suggest that students are all users of strategies and the field of studies has no bearing on the type of overall strategies preferred.

The purpose of the study by Somro, Khan and Younus (2019) was to explore EFL reading anxiety of first-year undergraduate engineering students and its effect on their reading performance in a public sector engineering university in Pakistan. The study particularly looked at the top-down, bottom-up and classroom EFL reading anxiety. The study collected data from 200 first-year engineering students. A 20-item questionnaire developed by Zoghi (2012) was used to measure students' EFL reading anxiety, while an IELTS academic reading test was used to measure their reading performance. Findings revealed that bottom-up reading anxiety and the classroom reading anxiety have a significant negative impact on the reading performance of the first-year undergraduate engineering students of a Pakistani university. However, top-down reading anxiety has an insignificant negative impact on the reading performance of university students.

Rahmat, Syed Abdul Rahman, and Hassan (2018) investigated the reading habits of Gen Z in the Engineering and Business Management faculties. Data from 97 respondents explored the learners' perception on reading issues, cognitive skills and critical thinking skills. Findings revealed that when it comes to issues in reading, cognitive skills and critical thinking skills, it does make a difference which faculty the learners came from. Specifically, the study found reports that learners were more focused in classroom reading compared to reading outside classroom contexts. These learners are also easily bored if they do not understand the content of the reading text. Next, as far as cognitive skills are concerned, gen Zers preferred real and authentic content. Finally, gen Zers were not afraid to reveal their personal opinions when it comes to discussing issues from the reading text.

2.1.4 Theoretical Framework of the Study

The theoretical framework of the study is rooted from several studies. Firstly, the framework is based on the characteristic of reading difficulties by Abdul Rahman, et.al (2014). Next, the theory of reading fear by Zoghi (2012) was used to complete the cycle of reading fear. There are two types of reading anxiety; top-down and bottom-up anxiety. Top down reading anxiety refers to readers' fear for the lack of background and cultural knowledge; and even their general reading ability. On the other hand, bottom-up reading anxiety refers to the readers feeling inadequate in terms of their vocabulary and grammar. The readers also may not be fond of classroom reading. This fear may be caused by the choice of teaching method that did not cater to their needs. Furthermore, ESL readers of academic text sometimes fear reading because of their perceived fear. This perceived fear may stem from their reading difficulties. The difficulties may come from top-down or bottom-up anxiety. The anxiety will then hinder them from reading for knowledge. The lack of knowledge may make it difficult for the readers to attempt future reading. This perceived difficulty and reading fear becomes a cycle (Figure 2).

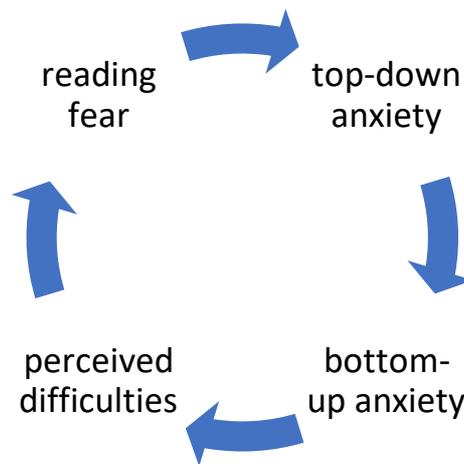


Fig 2-Cycle of ESL Reading Fear.

3. Methodology

This pilot study uses a quantitative design. A total of 25 respondents from social sciences faculty in a public university were randomly chosen for this study. The instrument used is a questionnaire with 3 sections. Section A is about demographic profile; section B is about perceived difficulties in reading comprehension and section C is about reading anxiety. The Cronbach alpha for the instrument was found to be 0.937 thus showing its internal reliability (Table. 1). Data collected is analysed using SPSS version 23 to reveal frequency of mean scores.

Table 1- Cronbach Alpha for Instrument

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.937	35

4. Findings

The findings are presented based on the research questions. The first research question is about reading anxiety; while the second research question is about perceived reading difficulty.

4.1 Reading Anxiety

According to Zoghi (2012), there are two types of reading anxiety; top-down and bottom-up anxiety.

Research Question 1- In what ways do reading anxiety influence reading comprehension?

Background and Cultural Knowledge

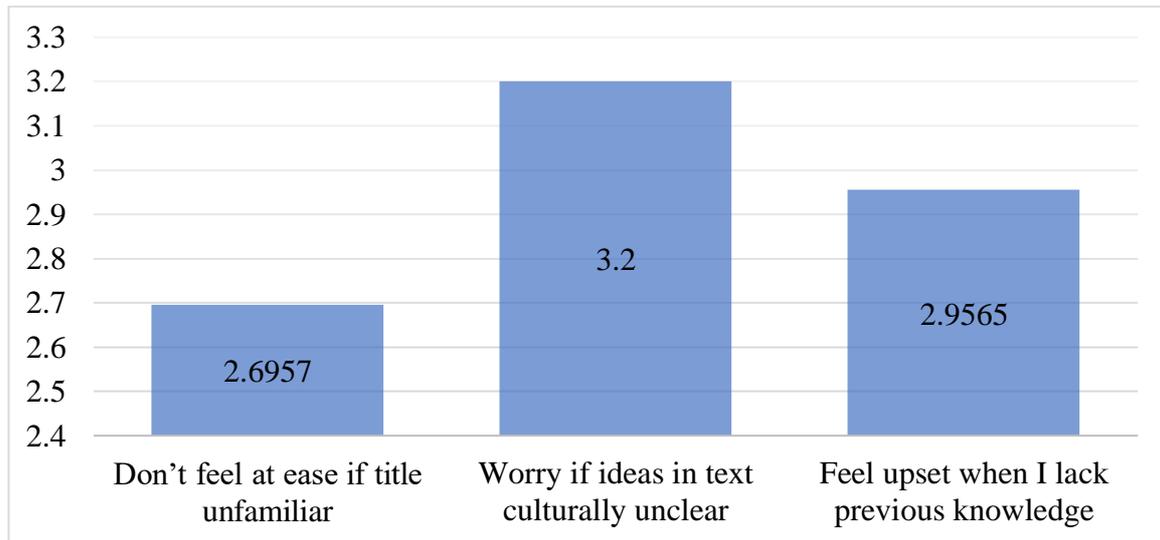


Fig 3- Mean for Top-Down Anxiety

This section reports the findings for top-down anxiety; particularly on background and cultural knowledge. When it comes to background and cultural knowledge (figure 3), readers would get anxious when they do not have knowledge of the cultural background of the text (3.2).

General Reading Ability

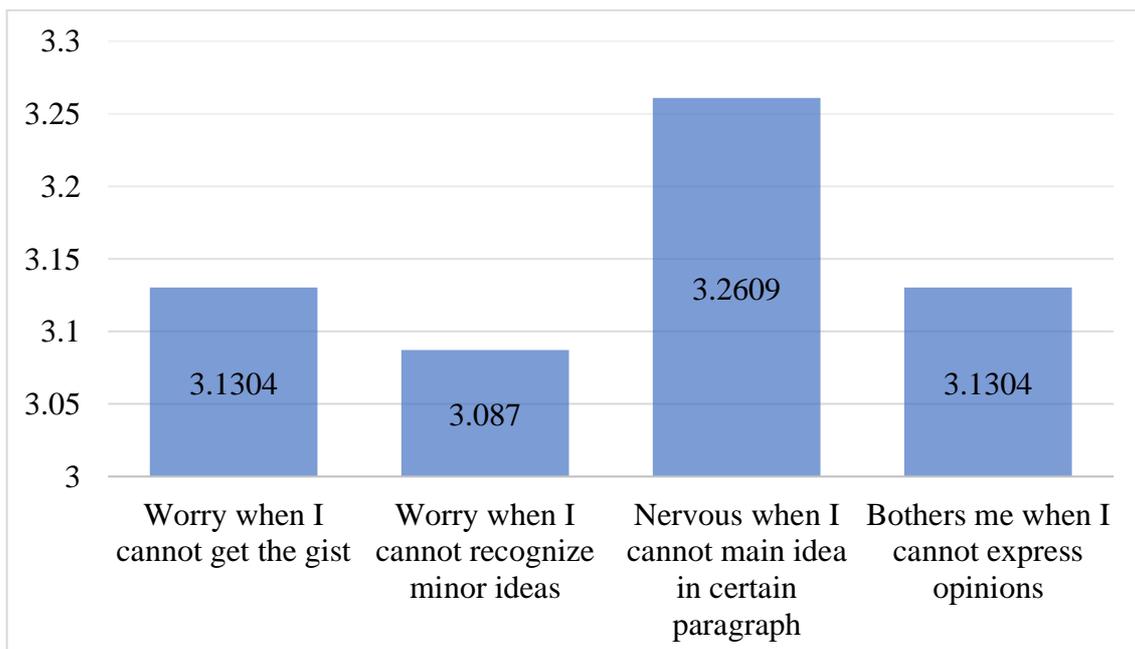


Fig 4- Mean for general reading ability

With reference to Figure 2, the highest mean is when learners are not able to locate the main idea (3.2609) in the paragraphs he/she is reading. Another worry is when the readers “cannot get the gist of the text” (3.1304) and also when they “cannot express their opinions” (3.1304).

Vocabulary

Eight items in the instrument deals with vocabulary (or lack of it). Figure 5 presents the mean for vocabulary in reading. The highest means are when readers “encountered words he/she found unclear” (3.2273) and also when they “could not figure out the meaning of words” (3.2273).

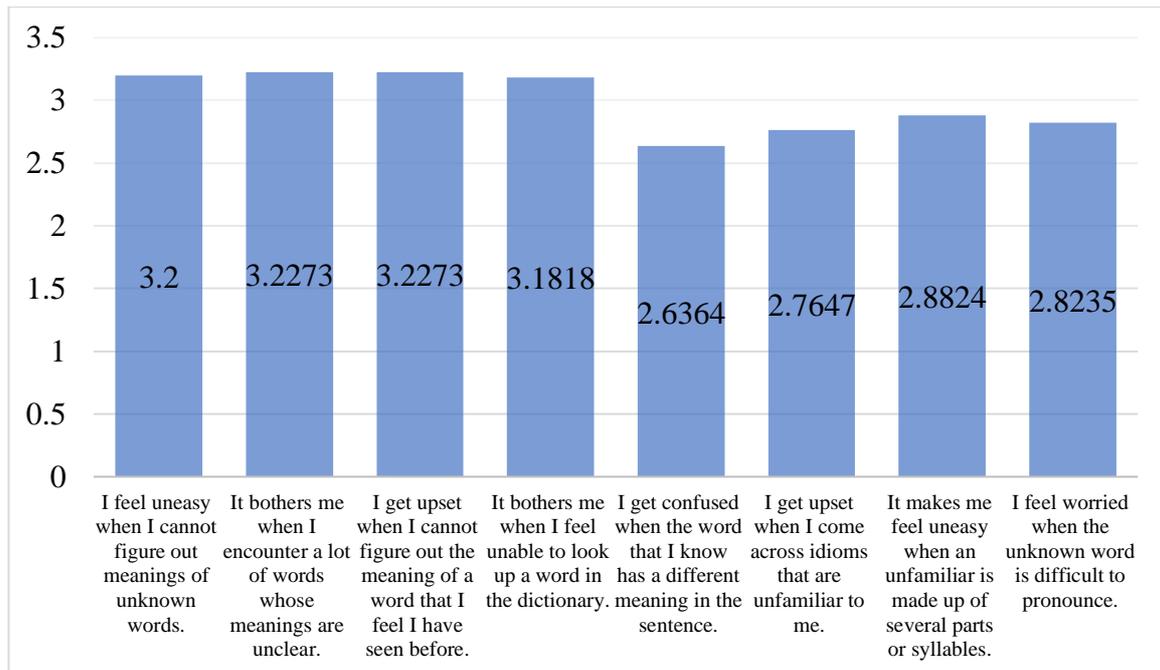


Fig 5- Mean for Vocabulary

Grammar

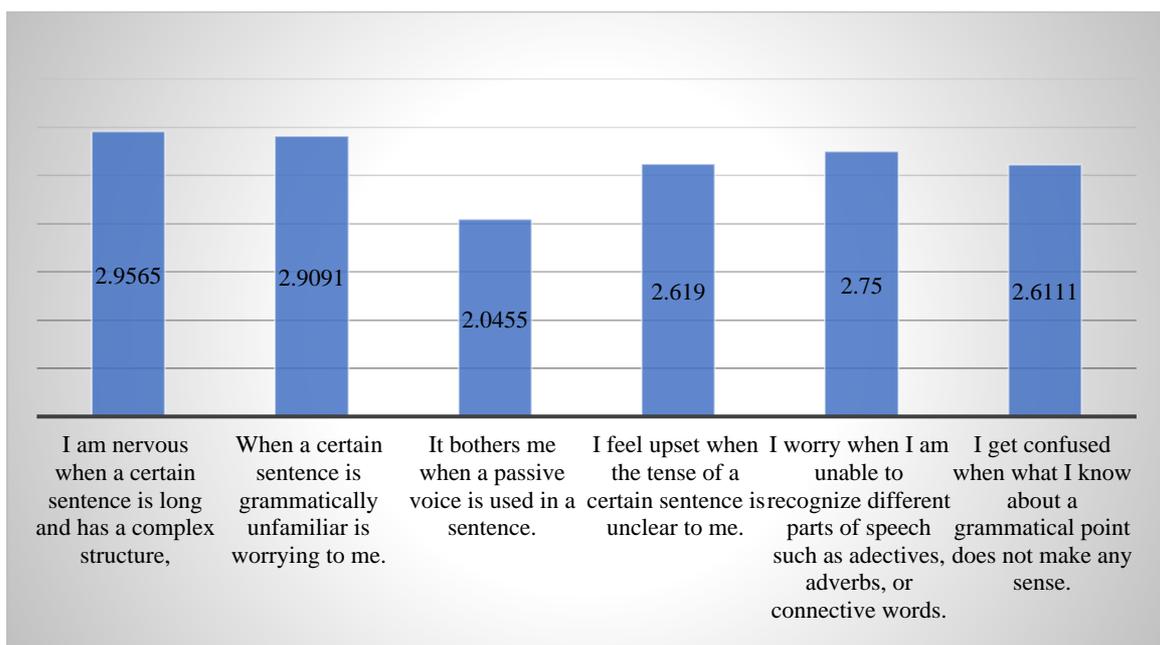


Fig 6- Mean for Grammar

Figure 6 shows the mean for grammar. Readers are most worried when they encounter “sentences that are long and complex” (2.9565) or even when the sentence is “grammatically unfamiliar to them” (2.9091).

Teaching Method

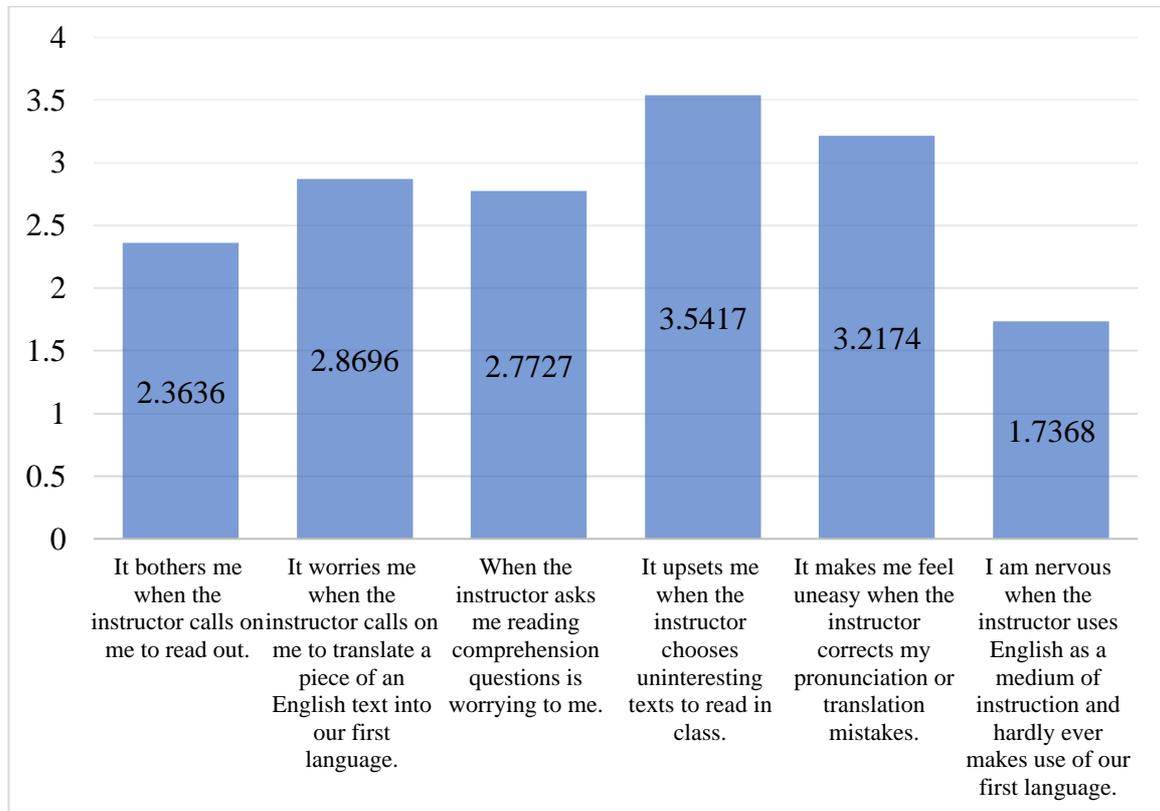


Fig 7- Mean for Classroom Reading-Teaching Method

Figure 7 presents the mean for classroom reading; particularly teaching method. Learners are most anxious when the “instructor chose a text that they were not interested in” (3.5417). Remember the times where teachers ask students to read texts aloud in class? Apparently, students were anxious when “their pronunciation was corrected” (3.2174) during the reading aloud sessions.

The mean for perceived difficulties is shown in Figure 8. A study by Abdul Rahman, et.al (2014) categorized perceived difficulties into (a) difficulties in understanding and (b) lack of focus. Learners are most anxious when they “do not understand the content” (3.96) and they “could not answer the questions about the text” (3.84). In addition, some could not focus because they felt the “topic was boring” (3.84).

4.2 Research Question 2- How do perceived difficulties influence reading comprehension?

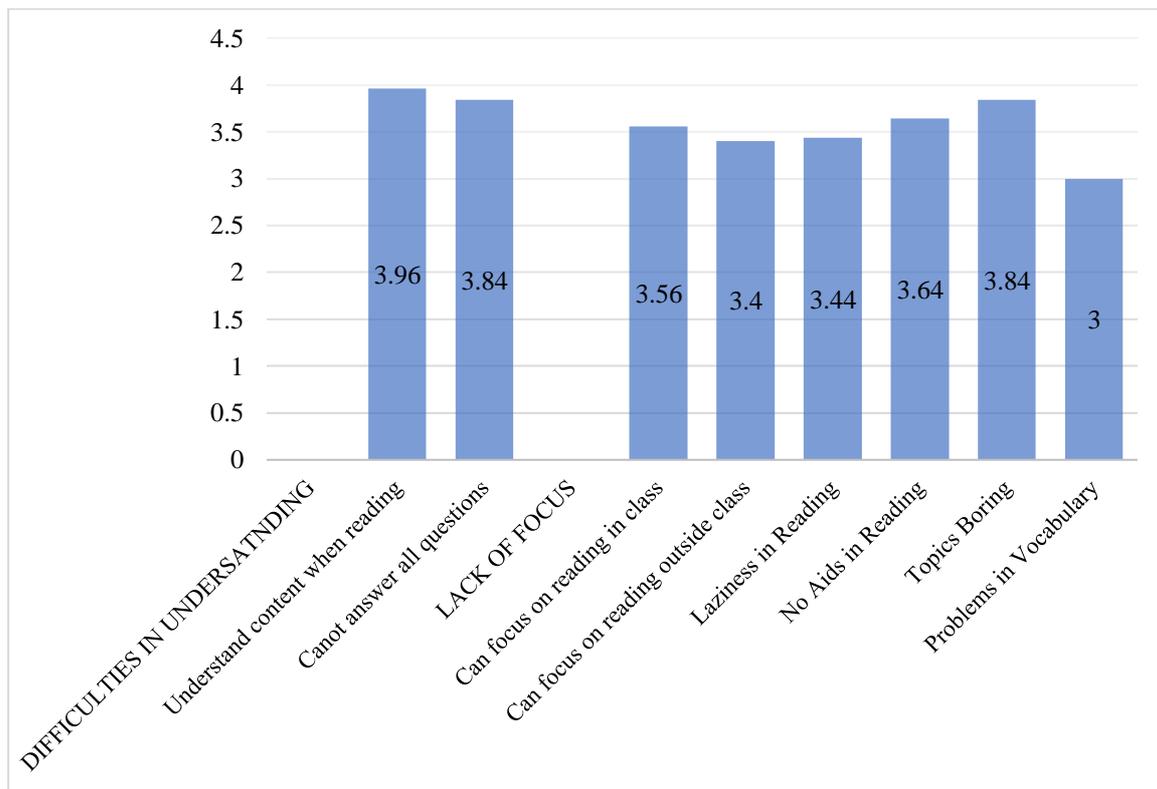


Fig 8- Mean for Perceived Difficulties

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The focus of this study was to look into how academic reading fear could influence learners' comprehension. This study revealed interesting findings in terms of how learners perceive reading difficulty and what learners feel anxious about when they read in academic texts. ESL learners are sometimes given reading texts that they have very little or no knowledge of in terms of background information and the culture in the text. The study by Rahmat, Syed Abdul Rahman, and Hassan (2018) also discovered that when learners could not understand the content of the text, they gave up on reading.

Learners may also be unhappy because they were not able to pronounce some words they read aloud. The study by Zhou (2017) also found similar findings. He found that worries relating to comprehension, unfamiliar topics, unknown pronunciation, and feeling uncomfortable reading aloud can be a source for learners' fear of reading. This study also revealed that ESL readers perceive a text as difficult because they may not have the vocabulary or grammatical level as the writer.

There are different categories of reading fear among learners. This study revealed that students' reading anxiety are categorized into either top-down or bottom-up anxiety. Somro, Khan and Younus (2019) found that bottom-up reading anxiety and the classroom reading anxiety have a significant negative impact on academic reading.

In addition to that, the findings in this study revealed that teaching and learning strategies in the academic reading classroom influence readers' perception of fear for reading. The study by Purnama (2017) discovered that whether or not readers fear reading, they do employ strategies when they read academic texts. It is up to the teachers to guide the learners towards using the appropriate reading strategies suitable for academic texts. However, Jusoh and Abdullah (2016) suggested that academic reading teachers employ different teaching of readings strategies for students of different fields of study.

5.1 Suggestion for Future Study

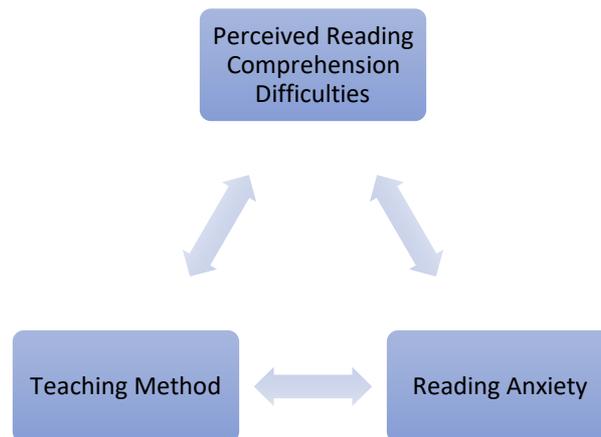


Fig 9-Future Research Connecting Perceived Difficult-Reading Anxiety-Teaching Method

The findings of this study show that perceived reading difficulties and reading anxiety are related. One influences the other in some ways. Perhaps the cycle of reading fear can be ended with good teaching methods of reading strategies. Teaching methods can have an influence on perceived reading comprehension difficulties and in turn influence reading anxiety (Figure 9).

Future researchers could focus on exploring reading strategies used among ESL learners. Qualitative and quantitative data could be analysed to explore the relationship of readings strategies used and reading anxiety.

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About the authors

Noor Hanim Rahmat (PhD) is Associate Professor in Academy of Language Studies in Universiti Teknologi MARA. Teaching English language courses in Akademi Bahasa. Her research interests include language proficiency as well as educational psychology. She has written books, book chapters, journal articles as well as presented in International conferences.

Mazlen Arepin (PhD) is Senior Lecturer in the TESL Department of Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA. She obtained her PhD from International Islamic University Malaysia and her research interests include TESL, College Reading Skills, Asian and Women's Literature and Literary representations of Muslim women.

Suraiya Sulaiman (PhD) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus, Thailand. She obtained her PhD from International Islamic University Malaysia and her research interests are in Postcolonial, Diaspora and Comparative Literature. She has also organised several English training programs and workshops on English Language Teaching.