



# Exposing EFL Students' FLRA in Reading Section: The Case of TOEFL Course

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## ABSTRACT

Foreign Language Reading Anxiety (FLRA) becomes increasingly crucial for EFL students since it prevents the learners' reading grasp. This study reports on college students' reflections on reading. The study's main objective was to determine students' reading anxiety levels and discover the most potential factors contributing to students' Foreign Language Reading Anxiety (FLRA) in TOEFL Test. It was administered to 22 students of the English Department in Universitas Pembinaan Masyarakat Indonesia using purposive sampling in the academic year 2022/2023. To achieve this purpose, this study utilized both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The data were collected using a Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) questionnaire with five-point Likert scale participants and an interview sheet to examine the levels of their reading anxiety and its factors. The results demonstrate that the student's reading anxiety levels were 18% in the low category, 64% in the medium category, and 18% in the high category. It indicates that they experienced a medium level of anxiety while reading with unfamiliar vocabulary and unknown topics, and the fear of making mistakes was identified as the significant factor of FL reading anxiety.

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## 1. Introduction

As a foreign language, learning English raises challenges in non-English-speaking countries. Most academic texts are written in English, and most foreign language (FL) learners must read many English texts. In order to find out the learners' level in mastering English skills requires the standard test of a foreign language known as TOEFL. Despite the significance of TOEFL, many students still need to meet the standard minimum score.

Studies on TOEFL are still blooming, particularly in Indonesia, since getting a particular score on the TOEFL is a requirement for non-native English speakers to pursue studies. Such as in the US and Indonesia, TOEFL is also required in the academic atmosphere. Some universities require students to acquire TOEFL scores for graduate admission (Samad & Fitriani, 2017). In consequence, to achieve TOEFL score goals, some difficulties during completing tests needed to be known to solve. Several aspects in the current format of PBT TOEFL consist of three sections – listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension.

Among those three sections, reading comprehension is focused due to most students' low interest in the reading section. Most previous studies found that reading comprehension is the most crucial section among the three language skills tested in the TOEFL (Anjomshoa & Zamanian, 2014). One of the challenges is anxiety that some FL learners might suffer from. The anxiety in reading is often referred to as Foreign Language Reading Anxiety (FLRA).

FL reading anxiety is distinguished from FL anxiety since it is a more specific anxiety learners experience while reading a passage in the target language. FL anxiety was commonly 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. It has been recognized that Foreign Language Anxiety symptoms stress the learners' negative feelings, such as extreme fear, insecurity, and forgetfulness in the learning process, which further influence their cognitive output (Oyeleye & Odunayo, 2020). Forth, FL reading anxiety affects FL reading performance. Students with high anxiety levels cannot concentrate on learning and fail to perform a task in the classroom. Anxiety studies in reading contexts were conducted after the FLRA release by Saito et al. (1999). Many Indonesian students perform at different reading comprehension levels, including low, middle, and high.

The students should have obtained an advanced level of English proficiency at the tertiary level. Nevertheless, this number still needs to be satisfactory. Several studies conducted by the experts also discuss the students' reading anxiety. Based on the previous studies, many students felt low self-confidence, lack of peer support, low self-perceived language competence, and low motivation in reading (Limeranto & Subekti, 2021). Moreover, Nurul, Ismail, and Madi (2022) also assert that they feel anxious about reading with certain reading troubles, such as avoiding reading activities in the classroom, being unmotivated, and being uninterested in reading materials.

Some factors play a significant role in affecting learners' FLRA levels. A lack of self-confidence makes learners afraid of making mistakes if they are unfamiliar with the topics (Estrada-Madronero, 2019). In addition, self-efficacy also influences learners' reading (Tarigan et al., 2022). Previous research investigated students' problems in reading sections related to finding inference meaning (Tarigan, 2021). At the same time, Septiana (2021) found out that the student's problems in the reading section tend to limit vocabulary mastery, grammatical knowledge, reading skills and unfamiliarity with the passage's topic. Joo and Damrons (2015) reveal the significant sources of foreign language reading anxiety among students learning Korean, such as learning new symbols, remembering the meaning of words once the symbols are learned, and feeling uncomfortable reading in Korean. Many students of the English Department at Universitas Pembinaan Masyarakat Indonesia still need to perform the TOEFL reading section. It occurs because the students identify its meaning in long, complex sentences. Supported by Oakhill, Cain & Elbro (2019) state that determining the appropriate meaning of words is one of the expected reading difficulties experienced by EFLs. Hence, it is essential to determine the levels and the factors of Foreign Language Reading Anxiety's students in cases of TOEFL Courses. It is crucial since it is the key to helping English lecturers successfully teach reading TOEFL and obtain a higher English proficiency level in TOEFL, especially in reading tests.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 TOEFL test*

Since students must have a high level of English proficiency, some language institutions worldwide offer international English tests for students who want to know their English proficiency. These tests are the International English Language Test System (IELTS), the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). However, the TOEFL test is the most common test for advanced students at universities in Indonesia as one of the requirements to take the final thesis examination, get a scholarship and get a job. In the TOEFL test, reading comprehension is one of the aspects that has the main questions.

### *2.2 Reading Comprehension*

Reading poses challenges for foreign language learners since it is a complex and cultural skill. However, it is a complex and perceptive skill which depends on readers' thinking. It involves physical activities (e.g., movements of eyeballs, head, hands, and other body parts) and thinking activities (e.g., understanding between letters, words, and sentences) so the reader can capture the gist of information in a text. Reading is challenging because readers must attempt many interpretations of the author's intentions.

Reading has a very close relationship with comprehension. The word comprehension is defined as the ability to understand something. In an academic context, reading comprehension is a complex, active process of constructing meaning from text. It involves knowing how to read words accurately and automatically, accessing previous knowledge, understanding vocabulary and concepts, making inferences, and linking key ideas (Thompson & Vaugh, 2007). The level of understanding for reading can be measured through several standardized tests; among them is the widely used TOEFL. Reading TOEFL consists of 50 questions, which should be completed in 55 minutes.

### 2.3 Foreign Language Reading Anxiety

It is common for someone to deal with a serious problem and become anxious. It also occurs in doing tests, including reading. Difficulties in reading affect reading anxiety. Anxiety has two components: worry and emotion (Booth & Tekes, 2019). Worry or cognitive anxiety refers to negative perception and cognitive worries about oneself, the situation at the side, and possible consequences, whereas emotional or physical anxiety is concerned with one's understanding of the physiological-affective elements of anxiety experience, unpleasant feelings like nervousness, stomach upset, heartaches, tension, and sweating.

FL anxiety was commonly 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. It has been recognized that Foreign Language Anxiety symptoms stress the learners' negative feelings, such as extreme fear, insecurity, and forgetfulness in the learning process, which further influence their cognitive output (Oyeleye & Odunayo, 2020). Specifically, foreign language reading anxiety refers to feelings of worry and apprehension when students try to read and comprehend foreign language text (Muhlis, 2017). Anxious learners are likely to feel uncomfortable with the unfamiliar (e.g., words, grammar and cultural background) and expect that they should understand all the materials presented (Saito et al., 1999). Meanwhile, Zhornik (2001 in Jalongo & Hirsh, 2010) defines reading anxiety as a specific, situational phobia toward reading that has physical and cognitive reactions. Hence, it can be stated that FL anxiety is a feeling of worry related to reading and comprehending.

Foreign language anxiety has adverse effects on cognitive processing and behaviour. Hence, the anxieties precipitated by reading tasks are a significant challenge for reading progress. Based on Subasi (2014), reading anxiety is classified into three levels: low, medium, and high. To determine the level, the students must answer the FLRA questionnaire.

### 2.4 Factors of Foreign Language Reading Anxiety

Saito et al. (1999) have developed two indicators of reading anxiety: unfamiliar writing scripts and unfamiliar cultural background. However, based on Ahmad et al. (2013), these are the indicators of reading anxiety.

#### 2.4.1 Unfamiliar culture

The reading task is an interaction between the reader and the author's thoughts and an incidental interaction between the reader and the shared knowledge of cultural history in printed materials (Ahmad et al., 2013). Unfamiliar foreign language cultures would hamper students' reading comprehension process and cause anxiety as the culture represented in the text is foreign to them (Rajab et al., 2012). In addition, Saito et al. (1999) also reveal that unfamiliar culture was considered a significant aspect that elicits foreign language reading anxiety. Unknown cultural content made students challenging to understand foreign language scripts. In this sense, being familiar with the culture represented in the text is required to help the learners to make sense of the text or to misunderstand the text.

#### 2.4.2 Unfamiliar topic

Topics of high interest to a reader help him have a flexible and appropriate response to a reading text. If the topic of a text is not attractive to a learner, it is almost impossible for this learner to read for pleasure and become an effective reader. In other words, Gonen (2007) stated that uninteresting topics in reading texts are considered sources of foreign language reading anxiety.

#### 2.4.3 Unfamiliar vocabulary

It is easier for foreign language learners to understand and understand foreign languages if they know the vocabulary. Rajab et al. (2012) said that unfamiliar vocabulary might impede learners' comprehension and cause difficulty, leading to anxiety. In Gonen's study (2007), unknown vocabulary in reading a foreign language text appeared to be another source of anxiety. 20% of the communication units related to the text category fit the student's statement of anxiety about new words through reading English language text.

#### 2.4.4 Worry about the reading effect

Worrying about the reading effect is the manifestation of anxiety toward reading aloud. According to Jalongo & Hirsh (2010), reading aloud is paired with an anxious unconditioned stimulus, which brings an adverse reaction. The case is when the students are asked to perform reading aloud in front of their classmates; they will feel worried and disrupt their concentration in comprehending a text. If they fail to control their anxiety, it is difficult for them to demonstrate their idea about a text. Moreover, they will need to remember what has been read. The anxious feeling will happen during and after the reading task. Consequently, it will disturb reading comprehension and performance (Ahmad et al., 2013).

#### 2.4.5 fear of making an error

Fear is substantially related to a matter of self-confidence. It is supported by several studies which stated that language anxiety is complexly intertwined with self-confidence though the latter is characterized as a positive component (Brown, 2007). In some cases, those who lack self-confidence will be afraid to make errors in learning. Hence, the feeling of being afraid to make errors will lead students to be anxious in the act of reading.

### 3. Method

This study adopted a quantitative and qualitative method that aims to analyze and determine the level of students' reading anxiety and discover the most potential factors contributing to students' Foreign Language Reading Anxiety (FLRA) in the TOEFL Test. This study was conducted at Universitas Pembinaan Masyarakat Indonesia, Medan, Indonesia. The respondents were 22 EFL learners of students of the English Education Department using purposive sampling. The reading comprehension questionnaire and interview sheet were used to collect the data to find the significant anxiety factors in answering the reading test. The test was based on the TOEFL test in reading comprehension, which consists of 50 questions. Data were then analyzed by using SPSS.

FLRAS (Foreign Language Reading Scale) questionnaire was used to analyze the level and factors of Reading anxiety among the learners. In analyzing the data, the options for each question in the questionnaire were arranged with Likert Scale from Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree., as proposed by Nemoto and Beglar (2013), is a psychometric scale which has multiple categories in which the participants choose to represent their feelings, opinions, ideas, and attitudes about a particular issue. In addition, an interview was conducted as a supplement research instrument for data gathering.

### 4. Results and Discussion

To determine the level of EFL students' reading anxiety, the FLRAS questionnaire was adopted. The following table displays the descriptive statistics of students' reading anxiety levels. The level of reading anxiety for each participant with 18 items. In this present study, the score range was between 45 and 71, based on the table below.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for Reading Anxiety

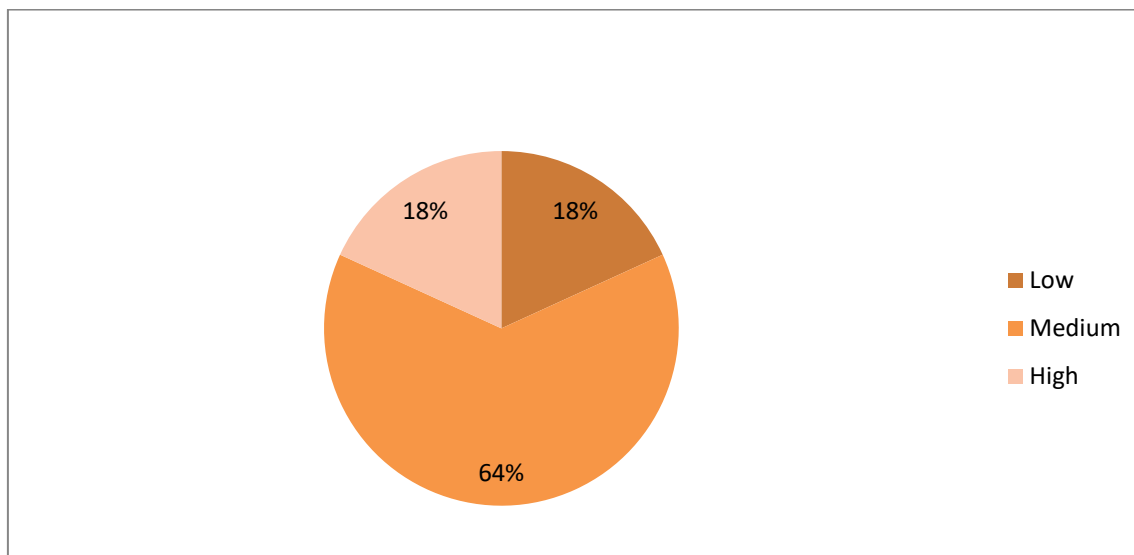
	<b>N</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Total</b>	22	45	71	58	8.3

In analyzing the data, the first step was collecting the data from students' responses to the foreign language reading anxiety questionnaire, then was identified using a positive scoring rate from 1 to 5 (1 strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neither agree nor disagree, 4 agree, 5 strongly agree).<sup>60</sup> In contrast, negative wording was identified using negative scoring, which rated from 5 - 1 (5 for strongly disagree, 4 for disagree, 3 for neither agree nor disagree, 2 for agree, and 1 for strongly agree). Then, the score was analyzed to find descriptive statistics, which contain mean, standard deviation and percentage, that were used to determine the student's level of reading anxiety.

**Table 2.** The categorization of the Score of the Reading Anxiety Level

<b>Level</b>	<b>Formula</b>	<b>Score</b>
Low	$58+8$	$> 66$
Medium	$58-8$	$< 50$
High	$50 > M > 66$	

Table 2 calculated the mean and standard deviation as  $M = 58$  and  $SD = 8$ . The students with scores higher than 66 were categorized as having low anxiety, those with scores lower than 50 were categorized as high anxiety, and those between 51 and 65 were categorized as medium anxiety. The percentage can be seen as follows.



**Figure 1.** The frequency of students reading anxiety level

Based on the result seen in the table above, it was found there were four students (18%) were categorized as low level of reading anxiety, 14 students were categorized as medium level (64%) and four students (18%) were categorized as high level. The last step was calculating the percentage of the result FLRA based on the frequency counted. The percentage of students reading anxiety-based level can be seen in Figure 1.

**Table 3.** The Factors of Foreign Language Reading Anxiety

No	Domain	SD	D	N	A	SA	
1	Unknown vocabulary	7%	11%	25%	33%	24%	Text Feature
2	Unfamiliar topic	3%	12%	32%	38%	15%	
3	Unknown culture	4%	12%	34%	34%	16%	
4	Fear of making mistakes	5%	11%	33%	36%	15%	Personal Factors
5	Worry about the reading effect	7%	11%	36%	36%	10%	

Table 3 indicates the students' responses to the questionnaire on potential factors in reading anxiety. Each item has some items to support the indicator of the domain. There are 26 items in the questionnaire of potential factors in reading anxiety. The students' responses were used to find the total responses in each answer. There are 5-point Likert scales with positive scoring. The point is started with Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neither Agree nor Disagree (N), Agree (A), and Strongly Agree (SA).

The responses to the questionnaire have been quantified in tabular form. From Table 4.2, it can conclude that the first potential factor was personal in the domain of unknown vocabulary, with 57% of students agreeing (33% strongly agree and 24% agree) with the statement that said fear of making mistakes could enhance their anxiety in reading English text.

The second domain that students have agreed upon is the unfamiliar topic. There were 53% of students agreed (15% strongly agree and 38% agree) that an unknown topic influences their reading anxiety. From these responses, it can be concluded that most students still agreed that unfamiliarity with the topic in English text causes their reading anxiety.

The third domain that caused students reading anxiety, based on students' responses, is fear of making mistakes, with an agreed to answer of 51% (36% agree and 15% strongly agree). It means that most students agreed that fear of making mistakes is a domain that students frequently experience as a potential factor of their reading anxiety.

The fourth domain that 50% of students agree on is unknown culture. 16% strongly agree, and 34% agree that they are unknown cultures. It means that unknown culture also triggers reading anxiety.

The last domain that 46% of students agree on is the worry about the reading effect. 10% strongly agree, and 36% agree they are worried about the reading effect. It means worry about the reading effect also triggers reading anxiety.

In brief, the most significant factor that students have chosen to cause English reading anxiety is unknown vocabulary, which scored 57%. The second factor influencing students' English reading anxiety is an unfamiliar topic with 53% of voters. Then the third factors are fear of making mistakes which 51% of students agreed. Next, the fourth factors are unknown culture. The last domain chosen by students worries about the reading effect is the fifth factor that many choose in factors that cause English reading anxiety in students.

The result of this study is related to the study conducted by Saito et al. (1999), who found that the dominant factor in students' English reading anxiety is unknown vocabulary. Unknown vocabulary has been a central problem among foreign language learners in different contexts. Moreover, the unknown vocabulary might impede learners' comprehension and causes difficulty, which turns into anxiousness (Rajab et al., 2009). The second factor of students' reading anxiety in TOEFL tests is unfamiliar topics. From twenty-two students, it was found that the level of most students reading anxiety in the TOEFL test is 64% in the category of medium level.

Based on interviewing the respondents about reading anxiety, not all symptoms are generally experienced by EFL students in an Indonesian context. There are some features that students experience when they are anxious, especially when they are reading English texts, such as they need to translate word for word, which makes them less interested in reading English. Anxiety felt by students when reading is also much influenced by the lack of strategies and the monotonous strategies in learning reading English, making them less interested in reading exercises. Hence, it is better for the lecturers to apply more relevant and attractive strategies to teach students.

## 5. Conclusion

This study aimed to determine the level of students' reading anxiety and discover the most potential factors contributing to students' Foreign Language Reading Anxiety (FLRA) in TOEFL Test. Based on the result and the discussion about foreign language reading anxiety among EFL students in the TOEFL course, it can conclude as follows.

1. The students English reading anxiety based on their level was 18% (4 students) in the low category, 64% (14 students) in the medium category, and 18% (4 students) in the high category. From the result, it can be stated that most students experienced a medium level of English reading anxiety with symptoms of reading anxiety such as worry, nervousness, and apprehension. After finding the level of reading anxiety among students, it can be stated that their reading anxiety is categorized as state anxiety, which means that students feel anxiety in certain situations, such as asked to read English text.
2. Depending on the frequency of English reading anxiety factors, it can be stated that the most common factor faced by students is an unknown vocabulary, with 57%, followed by the second factor, experienced by them is an unfamiliar topic, with 53%. The third factor that causes reading anxiety is fear of making mistakes, and the fourth is unknown culture. The last factor is worry about the reading effect.

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