

STUDENTS' ANXIETY IN READING COMPREHENSION AT SMK NEGERI 15 SAMARINDA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the level and causes of students' anxiety in reading comprehension at SMK Negeri 15 Samarinda. The urgency of this research lies in the increasing challenge students face in understanding English texts, which often hinders their language learning progress. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through questionnaires and interviews to explore students' emotional responses and the factors contributing to reading anxiety. The findings revealed that approximately 67.7% of students experienced anxiety when reading English texts. The main sources of anxiety were unknown vocabulary (71%), unfamiliar cultural contexts (69%), and foreign topics (68%), while personal factors included fear of making mistakes (72%) and concern about reading outcomes (57%). The novelty of this study lies in its in-depth identification of linguistic and personal factors influencing reading anxiety, contributing to the development of more effective reading strategies in English language education.

Keywords: *Anxiety, Reading Comprehension, Descriptive Qualitative*

INTRODUCTION

There are three aspects becoming research concern nowadays about foreign and second language teaching correlate with individual differences in learning. The first is cognitive factors, which include intelligence, language aptitude, language learning strategies and previous language learning and experience. Second, affective factors which includes attitudes, motivation, language anxiety, and self-confidence about the language, personality and learning style. there are miscellaneous factors such as age and socio-cultural experience, which recent research has shown to significantly influence learners' affective states and language performance (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020; C. Li et al., 2021). Recent studies confirm that anxiety is one of the most powerful affective predictors of students' academic performance in foreign language learning (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020). More specifically, recent research examining the relationship between reading anxiety and EFL learners' reading strategies has shown a consistent negative correlation between the two. For example, (Valizadeh, 2021)

found that learners with low levels of reading anxiety tend to employ more effective general strategies such as predicting, inferring, and contextual guessing. In contrast, learners with higher anxiety levels rely more heavily on basic support mechanisms, including word-for-word translation, which often limits deeper comprehension. Similar findings were also reported by (Mokhtarnia & Ghaffarzadeh, 2020) who noted that increased reading anxiety reduces strategic flexibility and leads students to adopt less efficient reading approaches. According to this study, the researcher was fascinated to conduct the same topic about reading anxiety. Whereas the researcher desire about how the situation of the reading anxiety faced by students and factors cause the reading anxiety.

Anxiety is known to trigger cognitive, physiological, and behavioral responses that directly affect learners during language tasks. Recent studies show that when students experience anxiety, they tend to develop negative mental expectations, accompanied by physical symptoms such as increased heart rate, tension, and stomach discomfort (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020). These reactions often lead learners to avoid situations that trigger anxiety, including foreign language activities that feel challenging or threatening. In line with this, foreign language reading anxiety has been identified as a distinct type of anxiety that occurs specifically when learners interact with written texts in the target language. According to (Papi & Khajavy, 2023), public speaking anxiety emerges when learners doubt their own ability to perform in front of others and anticipate that they will not be able to express themselves effectively, which in turn heightens their emotional and physiological stress. Similarly, Recent findings by Chan, Yeung, and Chung (2025) indicate that foreign language anxiety contributes to difficulties in English word reading, largely because anxiety interferes with the cognitive–linguistic skills required for vocabulary recognition and phonological processing. This type of anxiety can lead to significant disadvantages for students: it reduces their willingness to engage with English reading materials, restricts opportunities for language exposure, and interferes with comprehension processes. Consequently, high levels of reading anxiety may hinder students’ ability to understand and analyze reading passages effectively.

Based on the researcher's observation at a SMK NEGERI 15 Samarinda, the students have some problems during learning reading. For instance, during a reading activity, when the teacher asked the students to read a text aloud in front of their friends, some of them refused out of fear that they would make a mistake and their friends would make fun of them, while others lost focus or engaged in conversation with their friends about unrelated topics. Students need to learn importantly of reading especially when it comes to read usually students have their hobbies such as playing video games, or even by watching movies.

Recent studies in SLA show that foreign-language anxiety remains one of the most influential affective variables affecting learners' cognitive processing and overall language performance (L. Li et al., 2024; Ma, 2022). Although a growing number of researchers have examined foreign language anxiety, studies conducted between 2019 and 2024 indicate that reading-specific anxiety, a type of anxiety that occurs during the process of understanding written texts, has not been sufficiently explored within vocational school contexts, particularly in Indonesia (Fitrawati et al., 2023). Most existing research focuses on junior high school, senior high school, or university learners, leaving a research gap regarding how students in vocational education experience reading anxiety, despite their unique academic needs and practical learning orientations. This gap is especially relevant for schools such as SMK Negeri 15 Samarinda, where English reading materials often involve unfamiliar vocabulary, cultural references, and technical topics that may intensify anxiety.

The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive examination of both linguistic factors (unknown vocabulary, unfamiliar cultural contexts, and foreign topics) and personal factors (fear of making mistakes, low confidence, and negative self-evaluation) that contribute to reading anxiety among vocational students. Recent literature emphasizes the importance of understanding these combined influences (Zhou & Li, 2023) yet no study has specifically analyzed how they manifest within an Indonesian vocational school environment. By employing a descriptive qualitative approach supported by questionnaires and interviews, this study provides an in-depth and context-specific understanding of students'

emotional and cognitive responses while reading in English, an approach that is still limited in recent research, which tends to rely heavily on quantitative designs.

The significance of this study is reflected in its potential to support teachers in identifying the root causes of students' difficulties in reading comprehension. As vocational students increasingly engage with digital texts, academic materials, and workplace-related reading tasks, reducing reading anxiety becomes essential for enhancing their learning outcomes and overall language proficiency. Therefore, the findings of this research are expected to serve as a reference for designing more effective, supportive, and anxiety-sensitive reading instruction strategies in vocational schools. Ultimately, the study contributes both theoretically and practically to efforts in improving English literacy among Indonesian learners.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

One of the data collection techniques used in this study was a questionnaire administered to selected individuals as respondents. Questionnaires remain one of the most effective tools for collecting structured information from learners, particularly when examining psychological or affective aspects such as anxiety. This is supported by the 2023 study on students' reading-aloud anxiety at SMK Nurul Yaqin Tlagah, which also employed questionnaires to identify key sources of students' anxiety. (B et al., 2023) In addition, face-to-face interaction was employed to obtain direct and authentic responses through in-depth interviews. Recent methodological studies highlight that semi-structured interviews offer a flexible yet focused method for qualitative research enabling researchers to gather rich, detailed accounts of participants' experiences while preserving structure for consistency across cases. For instance, a recent study described how semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to probe participants' perspectives in depth, uncovering nuanced, context-sensitive information that questionnaire responses would likely miss (Putra Pratama & Vianty, 2024).

The questionnaire used in this study was adapted to assess students' levels of reading-related anxiety and designed according to current recommendations for affective measurement in second language research. A close-ended questionnaire format was applied, allowing respondents to choose predetermined options that best

reflected their experiences. This type of format is considered appropriate for ensuring response consistency, simplifying analysis, and reducing ambiguity in participants' interpretations (Taherdoost, 2019). The questionnaire includes both positive and negative statements. A positive statement is one that is appropriate or illustrates student anxiety in public, whereas a negative statement is one that does not fit or does not describe student fear in public. The questionnaire is mailed to respondents, who are expected to read and comprehend the questions and respond in the area provided on the form. The respondents must respond to the questions on their own.

The researcher will analyze the data using a descriptive qualitative method, as this approach is scientifically appropriate for exploring students' emotional responses, behaviors, and perceptions in depth. Reading anxiety is an affective and context-dependent phenomenon, which cannot be fully captured through numerical data alone. Therefore, a qualitative method allows the researcher to obtain rich, detailed descriptions directly from students' experiences through questionnaires and interviews. This approach is supported by recent methodological literature, which emphasizes that qualitative inquiry is suitable for studies aiming to understand learners' internal states, attitudes, and personal interpretations of learning difficulties ((Liu et al., 2023).

Analysis of the qualitative data followed a cyclical process that included data reduction, data organization, and conclusion drawing or verification, as recommended in recent qualitative research frameworks (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). These stages enable the researcher to systematically interpret patterns, categorize sources of anxiety, and construct meaningful explanations based on participants' authentic responses. The sequence data analysis are as follows:

1. Data Collection

The first stage in analyzing the data that the researcher did was to reduce the data. Data reduction is simplification, classifying, summarizing or removing unnecessary data from the results of data collection, to make it shorter and easier to understand but still clear the results obtained by researcher during the study.

2. Data Enhancement

According to (Miles & Huberman, 1994) after the data is reduced, the next stage is display data. A display can be snippets of expanded text or charts, graphs, or matrices that provide new ways to more textually organize and reflect embedded data. The representation of the data, in the form of words or diagrams, allows the analyst to extrapolate enough of the data to find systematic patterns and interrelationships. At the rendering stage, additional high-level categories or themes may emerge from the data beyond the data that was first discovered during the initial data reduction process. The data display displays activities that are arranged systematically and structured, so as to provide easy-to-understand conclusions.

RESULTS

The researcher will present the results of the questionnaire based on the problem statement mentioned in Chapter 1; “What are the levels of anxiety experienced by the students?”. To answer the research questions, this study used questionnaire. Questionnaire were conducted to investigate Students’ Anxiety in Reading Comprehension. There were 31 students who were selected purposively to participate in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and English. As a result of the research, there are some different answers. Based on the result of questionnaire almost students have reading anxiety when learning English. Some situations indicated students felt anxious such as confused, ashamed, nervous. Students mostly do not understand the whole of the text and are confused with the topic, vocabulary, and content of the text. They were also nervous while reading activities and ashamed of their pronunciation errors. Some students appeared strange with the vocabulary, and regard that reading activities are difficult. They also claimed that reading is a more difficult skill than others. Although almost all students have been studied English in primary school, they were still strange with the English materials. For the questions table below “What factors are causing students' anxiety in reading comprehension in the academic year 2022/2023?”.

The researcher showed data based on the questionnaire. And below, are the results of the student's behaviors and their response's.

Available online:

NO.	STATEMENTS OF THE QUESTIONS	SD (STRONGLY DISAGREE)	D (DISAGREE)	N (NEUTRAL)	A (AGREE)	SA (STRONGLY AGREE)
1	When I read in English, I get really annoyed and worried whenever I come across strange vocabulary.	0 %	12.9%	48.4%	32.3%	12.9%
2	I focus on the words when reading English texts because if I know the vocabulary, I can understand the text.	0%	3.2%	9.7%	67.7%	32.3%
3	I feel anxious in reading English when I encounter a series of strange vocabulary.	3.2%	6.5%	38.7%	41.9%	12.9%
4	I enjoy reading texts in English when I know the translation.	3.2%	3.2%	9.7%	51.6%	38.7%
5	I don't like reading English texts because they have many difficult words.	3.2%	25.8%	45.2%	19.4%	12.9%

6	When I read in English, I feel annoyed and anxious if I find strange vocabulary.	3.2%	19.4%	41.9%	22.6%	16.1%
7	I enjoy reading English when I understand at least some parts of the text.	3.2%	6.5%	12.9%	54.8%	29%
8	I don't like reading foreign topics, especially in English.	9.7%	9.7%	48.4%	32.3%	6.5%
9	The thing I like to read the most in English is short stories because the words are easy, and the topics are common.	3.2%	0%	32.3%	51.6%	25.8%
10	I feel anxious when reading a topic in English that I don't understand.	3.2%	9.7%	19.4%	48.4%	22.6%

First question of percentage bar showing all of the students are mostly neutral about 48.4% and some of them are quite disagree about 12.9%. In addition,

the students expressed that they had a neutral reaction towards it. Second question of percentage bar showing all of the students are mostly agreeing about 67.7% and some of them are disagree about 3.2%. Third question of percentage bar showing mostly students are agreeing about 41.9% and some of them are strongly disagree about 3.2%. Fourth question of percentage bar showing mostly students are agreeing about 51.6% and some of them are strongly disagree and disagree 3.2%. Fifth question of percentage bar is showing mostly students are neutral about 45.2% and some of them are strongly disagree about 3.2%. Sixth question of percentage bar is showing mostly students are neutral about 41.9% and some of them are strongly disagree about 3.2%. Seventh question of percentage bar is showing mostly students are agreeing 54.8% and some of them are strongly disagree about 3.2%. Eighth question of percentage bar is showing mostly students are neutral about 48.4% and some of them are strongly disagree and disagree 9.7%. Ninth question of percentage bar is showing mostly students are agreeing about 51.6% and some of them are strongly disagree about 3.2%. Tenth question of percentage bar is showing mostly students are agreeing about 48.4% and some of them are strongly disagree about 3.2%. According to the charts as presented above, there are negative perceptions revealed and positive perceptions.

Based on the results of the questionnaire and interviews, the study generally revealed that most students at SMK Negeri 15 Samarinda experienced varying degrees of anxiety when engaging with English reading tasks. The collected data indicated that students often felt confused, nervous, and ashamed, particularly when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, difficult topics, or when asked to read aloud in class. A large proportion of students stated that they struggled to understand the overall content of English texts, which intensified their anxiety and led to avoidance behaviors. Additionally, the findings showed that fear of making mistakes especially in pronunciation served as a major trigger for anxiety during reading activities. These results align directly with the research questions, showing that:

1. Students experience moderate to high levels of reading anxiety, and

2. Several linguistic and personal factors contribute to this anxiety, including unknown vocabulary, unfamiliar topics, low confidence, and fear of negative evaluation.

Research Limitations

Despite yielding valuable insights, this study has several limitations. First, the research relied on a small sample size of students from a single vocational school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader educational contexts. Second, the study used a descriptive qualitative approach, meaning that the interpretation of students' responses may contain a degree of subjectivity. Third, the questionnaire items focused largely on observable emotional and cognitive reactions, leaving out deeper psychological constructs such as motivation, self-regulation, or specific reading strategies that may also influence anxiety. Moreover, the data were collected within a limited time frame, preventing the researcher from conducting longitudinal observations that could reveal changes in anxiety over time.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

Given these limitations, future studies are encouraged to adopt a mixed-methods design to combine the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches, enabling more robust measurement of reading anxiety. Expanding the research to include multiple schools, including academic and vocational institutions, would also strengthen the generalizability of the findings. Further research could investigate intervention-based approaches, such as vocabulary enrichment programs, reading strategy training, or mindfulness-based reading instruction, to examine their effectiveness in reducing reading anxiety. Additionally, exploring the relationship between reading anxiety and digital reading environments, which are increasingly used in classrooms, may provide new insights relevant to contemporary learning contexts.

DISCUSSION

The results suggest that foreign language learners are possible faced reading anxiety in their English learning. Based on the data that was gathered by the

interview with the participants and have been analyzed, the researcher revealed that there are some sources of reading anxiety that faced by students of SMK N 15 Samarinda. They were; difficult to comprehend the text, unknown vocabulary, fear making mistake, pronunciation, lack of confident, ashamed, type of reading text, and teacher personality and attitude. The result of this study related to study conducted by who found. Students reading anxiety are varies according to the target language and writing system. The findings also showed that difficulty in comprehending the text especially unknown vocabulary remains a major source of reading anxiety among students. This outcome aligns with more recent empirical studies in EFL settings, such as The EFL Learners' Reading Anxiety Level at English Department UNP (Fitrawati et al., 2023b), which identified "unknown vocabulary" as the most frequent text-feature contributing to foreign language reading anxiety about reading anxiety on elementary CSL' learners. The results suggest that lack of previous knowledge, difficult and complex vocabulary, incorrect guessing, and difficult comprehension are the main sources of elementary CSL learners' reading anxiety. Additionally, a more recent study by Kusumahwati, Perdhani, and Tyas (2022) found that text-based difficulties especially unknown vocabulary, insufficient background knowledge, and complex grammatical structures constituted the most salient sources of reading comprehension problems among Indonesian EFL junior high school students. To address the second research question, the researcher classified the sources of anxiety into three main aspects: text-related factors, learner-internal factors, and contextual/educational factors. The first, factor from the text which are related to the nature of the text. For instance, recent research such as the review by Riana and Yusnita (2025) found that unfamiliar vocabulary and complex sentence structures remain among the most common triggers of reading anxiety, especially when comprehension demands are high. Similarly, in a study by Satria (2021), difficulties in vocabulary mastery and complex phrases were identified through tests and interviews as major barriers to reading comprehension indicating that textual features significantly contribute to reading anxiety. Moreover, a qualitative investigation by Rianawati, Pradana & Pambayun (2024) categorized sources of reading anxiety among Indonesian secondary-level students into three main aspects: text-based difficulties, learner-

internal factors, and contextual/educational factors. The second, factor from students which are related to the personal aspect from foreign language learners. The factors included as ashamed, lack of confidence, fear making mistake. The finding is consistent with a recent study showing that personal factors play a major role in students' reading anxiety, particularly their fear of making mistakes and the worry that their reading performance will lead to negative outcomes (B et al., 2023). The last, factor from teacher which related to the teacher input and attitude that effected the anxiety on students. This study under on the provision's academic which have been adjusted to the scientific procedures. from So, the limitation of the time based on the standard. In this study the researcher used qualitative method, so researcher described the meaning of a phenomenon from the views of participants by make argument that related to the theory. So, probably there are writer's subjectivity on the interpret the meaning of the phenomenon.

Limitation of time

This study under on the provision's academic which have been adjusted to the scientific procedures. So, the limitation of the time based on the standard.

Limitation of methods

The researcher is able to add the methods, such as using questionnaire and interview. As for limitation, the researcher needs to limit and focus the problem of the level of students reading anxiety and the factors influencing students reading anxiety at SMK NEGERI 15 SAMARINDA. It is caused previous researchers in Indonesia were limited discussing about the level of reading anxiety and the factors influencing students reading anxiety.

CONCLUSION

Foreign Language Anxiety is noted as a significant issue when it comes to learning a foreign language. From four skills of language, reading anxiety is one of the most considered in foreign language anxiety. From the interview transcript and data analysis, it can be concluded that: First, almost students at eighth graders of SMK N 15 Samarinda have reading anxiety when learning English. The results of this study resonate with recent research showing that reading anxiety among EFL learners varies depending on a range of personal and contextual factors — such as unfamiliar vocabulary, complex text structure, and learners' self-confidence levels.

For instance, EFL students' anxiety and reading comprehension (Riana & Ningrum Yusnita Sylvia, 2025) identifies "unfamiliar vocabulary" and "complex sentence structures" as common triggers of reading anxiety across studies. Similarly, in Exploring How Language Proficiency And Reading Anxiety Influence Reading Comprehension In EFL Learners (Alqurashi, 2024) vocabulary knowledge was found to be a strong predictor of reading proficiency, while reading anxiety negatively affected comprehension. Some situations indicated students felt anxious such as confused, ashamed, unconfident. Students mostly difficult to comprehend the whole of the text, confused with the topic, strange with the vocabularies. They were also nervous while reading activities and ashamed with their pronunciation errors. Second, the researcher categorized the factors of the anxiety based on the sources that was found. The factors were categorized into three aspects. The outcome of this study echoes recent findings indicating that foreign-language reading anxiety can be strongly affected by linguistic difficulties inherent in the reading material itself. A study on Chinese ESL learners, for instance, foreign-language anxiety was shown to hinder word-reading performance suggesting that readers' negative emotional reaction may stem from challenging text characteristics or linguistic demands (Chan et al., 2025). The second, factor from students which are related to the personal aspect from foreign language learners. The last, factor from teacher which related to the teacher input and attitude that effected the anxiety on students.

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