



A Case Study on Foreign Language Reading Anxiety of Undergraduate Students at the Faculty of Education

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دراسة حالة لقلق القراءة في اللغة الأجنبية لدى طلاب المرحلة الجامعية في كلية التربية

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Abstract

Reading in English can be challenging for foreign-language learners despite its importance in language learning. Given the fact that English is a foreign language in Libya, reading struggles are inevitable, which may result in anxiety that can trigger mental and emotional apprehensions. Thus, this case study sought to explore the reading anxiety of English-specialized undergraduate students at the Faculty of Education. Furthermore, it is envisioned to determine students' coping strategies for managing anxiety to improve their reading comprehension. Four (4) undergraduate students were identified as participants using the maximum variation sampling technique. The unstructured interview was conducted three times, with a one-week interval between sessions until data saturation was achieved. Using Litchman's (2013) three Cs for data analysis, the findings revealed significant factors about students' reading anxiety in their advanced reading class, captured in four major themes: perceptions, coping strategies, text preferences, and challenges. Despite participants' positive views and adaptive reading strategies, factors such as verbose texts, inadequate vocabulary, fear of reading aloud, large class size, and comprehension difficulties remain concerns that heighten their anxiety. Essential considerations for resolving these problems can help foreign language students reduce their reading anxiety, thereby facilitating comprehension.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, reading anxiety, case study, Libya.

المخلص

تُعدّ القراءة باللغة الإنجليزية تحدياً كبيراً لمتعلمي اللغات الأجنبية على الرغم من أهميتها في تعلم اللغة. وبما أن اللغة الإنجليزية تُعدّ لغة أجنبية في ليبيا، فإن صعوبات القراءة أمر لا مفر منه، مما قد يؤدي إلى القلق الذي يمكن أن يثير مخاوف نفسية وعاطفية. لذلك، هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف قلق القراءة لدى طلاب المرحلة الجامعية المتخصصين في اللغة الإنجليزية في كلية التربية. كما تهدف الدراسة إلى تحديد الاستراتيجيات التي يستخدمها الطلاب للتكيف مع القلق وإدارته من أجل تحسين فهمهم القرائي. تم اختيار أربعة (4) طلاب جامعيين كمشاركين باستخدام أسلوب أخذ العينات بالتباين الأقصى. وقد أجريت مقابلات غير منظمة ثلاث مرات، مع وجود فاصل زمني مدته أسبوع واحد بين كل جلسة وأخرى، وذلك إلى أن تم الوصول إلى تشبع البيانات. وباستخدام منهجية ليتشمان (2013) المعروفة بالثلاثة Cs لتحليل البيانات، كشفت النتائج عن عوامل مهمة تتعلق بقلق القراءة لدى الطلاب في مادة القراءة المتقدمة، وتجلت في أربعة محاور رئيسية: التصورات، واستراتيجيات التكيف، وتفضيلات النصوص، والتحديات. وعلى الرغم من الآراء الإيجابية للمشاركين واستراتيجياتهم التكميلية تجاه القراءة، إلا أن عوامل مثل النصوص المطولة، وضعف المفردات، والخوف من القراءة بصوت عالٍ، وكبر حجم الصف، وصعوبة الفهم ما زالت تمثل مشكلات تزيد من مستوى القلق لديهم. إن أخذ هذه الجوانب بعين الاعتبار والعمل على معالجتها يمكن أن يساعد طلاب اللغة الأجنبية على تقليل قلق القراءة لديهم، مما يسهل في تسهيل عملية الفهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، قلق القراءة، دراسة حالة، ليبيا.

Introduction

Reading plays a crucial role in helping students express themselves orally and in writing. It is regarded as a fundamental skill for building and enhancing other language skills (Albiladi, 2019; Balqis, 2022), given that reading fluency is strongly linked to mental development and overall academic success (Kondra, 2023). Reading is introduced in the early stages of education, specifically in primary and secondary school, to establish linguistic and thinking skills. Undeniably, it helps students acquire more knowledge that may broaden their perspectives. To succeed at the tertiary level, they are expected to be more cohesive when articulating their ideas or providing information (Rafi et al., 2021). On that account, developing students' reading skills should be a priority for those wanting to improve their linguistic skills.

Nonetheless, some foreign language learners may struggle when reading English texts and often associate it with anxiety. Foreign language anxiety, as described by Xiong et al. (2024), is an emotional response to acquiring and using a foreign language that may detrimentally affect a person's feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and self-perceptions. Generally, it is believed that foreign language students' comprehension and academic achievement may be affected by poor reading skills (Zemni & Alrefaee, 2020), which can increase their anxiety (Edwards et al., 2023). For instance, Miao and Vibulphol (2021) noted that Chinese university students tend to appear very concerned whenever they do not understand every detail in the reading text.

Reading anxiety, likewise, represents a significant issue for Arab students as foreign language learners. Arab EFL learners' reading anxiety stems from different factors, including cultural content, vocabulary, grammar, and lack of self-confidence (Batiha et al., 2021). In addition, research involving Arabic-speaking university students suggested that reading anxiety is more closely linked to social pressure while reading aloud in front of peers than comprehension difficulties (Tibi et al., 2024), along with difficulty understanding new words, pronunciation issues, fear of mistakes, and unfamiliar scripts (Khaled Alsaleh, 2017).

In the Libyan context, reading ability and anxiety are particularly perennial. Libyan students frequently experience stress-related factors in reading. For instance, issues with grammar and vocabulary, level of proficiency, speaking in front of the class, exam preparation, and teacher factor were the primary causes of stress for Libyan students (Ghwela, 2024). Additionally, a lack of reading skills and culture, traditional teaching methods, insufficient learning environment (Mohamed, 2016), and spelling (Alowalid et al., 2018), contribute to their concerns. Despite the vital role of reading in academic success, the psychological impact of reading-induced anxiety remains under-addressed in the Libyan context.

Thus, the primary objective of this case study is to describe potential reasons for reading anxiety among undergraduate EFL students when reading English texts. It equally addresses their insights on how to cope with this anxiety.

Research Question

This case study aims to explore the undergraduate students' reading anxiety and coping strategies in the English Department of the Faculty of Education at Misurata University. Since this study is qualitative, the researcher presents an overarching question: How do you describe your personal experience when reading English texts in your Advanced Reading class? As Kalu (2019) noted, qualitative research questions are developed and revised through an iterative reflective process.

Related Literature

Emotions play a foundational role in language acquisition (Dewaele, 2021; Plonsky et al., 2022; Richards, 2020), as Lüdtke et al. (2021) stressed their key functions in readers' processing and understanding of texts. Building on this, Oxford (2015) characterizes emotion as an intensifier for learning that enhances language acquisition by energizing behavior and interweaving with cognition. Consequently, emotions experienced during reading could influence the quality of readers' processing, which may either facilitate or impede their capacity to grasp and learn from literature on complex subjects (Bohn-Gettler & Kaakinen, 2022). This indicates that emotions are not detached from intellect, but actively interact with it. However, emotions experienced during reading can either enhance or impede learners' capacity to process difficult ideas.

While positive emotions can amplify learning, negative feelings, often referred to as reading anxiety, may become a comprehension barrier. Reading anxiety, as described by Liu (2025) and Piccolo et al. (2017), involves the unpleasant feelings of worry or distress that learners experience when reading, especially in a language they are still learning. Foreign language learners are more likely to feel reading anxiety due to a lack of confidence or motivation, learning difficulties, and language-related challenges (Daskan, 2023). Furthermore, this reading anxiety is heightened by factors such as cultural and socioeconomic background, general reading ability, vocabulary and grammar skills, and the teaching methods used by instructors (Rahmat et al., 2020; Al Faruq, 2019). Reading anxiety develops from various situations that create unpleasant experiences during reading. It may act as a psychological hurdle for foreign language learners.

According to Arab studies, foreign language students may struggle to understand English texts. Students at a Jordanian institution face challenges with reading comprehension, including unclear words, new terminology, and insufficient time to understand the material (Qarqez & Ab Rashid, 2017). Similarly, Saudi Arabian EFL students' reading difficulties are attributed to comprehension, dissatisfaction with reading skills, and complex phonics rules (Bensalem, 2020). Equally, limited vocabulary and poor word identification are concerns of students at the University of Bisha in Saudi Arabia (Hezam et al., 2022). According to Arab educational environments, these studies indicated that reading anxiety is also associated with linguistic impairments, such as vocabulary and phonics, rather than solely a result of text difficulty.

The issue has also been explored in the Asian context. For instance, second-semester Indonesian students at Batanghari University encountered difficulties comprehending long texts, insufficient background knowledge, using working memory, and reading strategies (Putra & Munawwaroh, 2021). Furthermore, a study at an Indonesian university found that students fail to understand the meanings of difficult terms and how to interpret and comprehend complex and formal language (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022). Although Nguyen et al. (2023) reported that Vietnamese linguistics students at the International University have low to moderate levels of reading anxiety, and most of them reported that most of their negative emotions are accounted for by top-down factors while performing a reading task.

Nonetheless, coping with reading anxiety is an important step to help undergraduate students overcome it. Studies suggest ways to lessen this concern. For instance, Cao et al. (2024) proposed that creating enjoyable reading materials and using effective coping strategies could help students reduce their anxiety about reading English. This, in turn, would improve their reading skills and increase their interest. Al Faruq (2019) correspondingly suggests that increasing self-confidence is essential for easing anxiety. Personalized teaching strategies can reduce anxiety and improve overall comprehension (Mardianti et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2023). For Yang (2023), selecting reading materials based on students' personal interests can help them maintain focus, overcome fear, and establish a consistent reading habit. Thus, students can manage more effectively by setting objectives and dividing reading responsibilities into smaller sections.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a case study that explored foreign language students' reading anxiety. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), case studies are comprehensive analyses of a specific case observed in many domains, usually an individual, a community, a method, or an activity. A case study is advantageous in achieving a thorough understanding of the influence of anxiety on undergraduate students studying English as a foreign language, since anxiety is complex to perceive in a single context. Besides, this study design can elucidate how undergraduate students manage anxiety associated with reading English texts.

Participants and Setting

The participants of this study were fourth-semester English-specialized undergraduate students taking Advanced Reading for the first time. Case studies can include a single case or multiple bounded cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using a maximum variation sample, four (4) participants were selected from regular fourth-semester undergraduate students specializing in English, and registered in an Advanced Reading class in the English department of the Faculty of Education at Misurata University. Maximum variation sampling is a technique for identifying participants who exhibit differences in particular attributes (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005), in this case, their level of anxiety, using Saito et al.'s (1999) Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS). This sampling technique facilitated information-rich interviews with the participants.

Data Gathering Instrument

In this research, an unstructured interview was used as the instrument. This type of instrument contained several open-ended, unstructured questions. An overarching question is presented, followed by subsidiary questions that address specific components of the original research question. Kross and Giust (2019) explained that this simplifies the original answer and helps eradicate misinterpretation of the respondent's answers. The researcher implemented a flexible question order that permitted the participants to express themselves freely. At the same time, the interviewer acted freely to reformulate questions as needed. The interview was conducted to obtain perspectives and opinions relevant to the reading anxiety of fourth-semester English specialized undergraduate students in their advanced reading class.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher sought permission from the head of the English department of the Faculty of Education to conduct the interviews. The purpose of the study was explained explicitly to the students, and their participation was voluntary. Upon approval, participants were asked to participate voluntarily and assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous. Participants' profiles were initially requested,

and they signed a consent form allowing the researcher to audio-tape the interview. It was followed by an unstructured face-to-face interview focused on their narratives. The researcher implemented a flexible question order that permitted the participants to express themselves freely.

Throughout the interview process, member checking was conducted. It means that the participants served as a check throughout the analysis process. During the interview, topics were rephrased and probed to ensure a thorough understanding and establish trustworthiness. The turnaround time for the interview phase was one month. For validation purposes, the initial face-to-face interview was followed up twice for two weeks, lasting 30-40 minutes. The interview process concluded when data saturation was achieved, as no additional data were obtained that could spark new insights. After consolidation, the interview data were sent back to the participants for correction, addition, and approval.

Data Analysis

After conducting the interview, the interview recordings were thoroughly transcribed verbatim. Once transcribed, repeatedly read, and examined, they were subjected to qualitative analysis. This investigation followed Litchman's (2013) three C's: coding, categorizing, and identifying concepts. It is used to generate categories, concepts, or themes of the study.

Initially, the researcher read the transcripts by sentence or paragraph and labeled codes accordingly. The initial codes from the transcripts were recorded in a table. The transcripts were reread to check, revise, remove, or add codes when needed. Finally, they were narrowed down, and vital codes were selected to include in the list of categories. When organizing the data, initial ideas were based on the research questions and the interview guide. During the categorizing stage, the researcher continued the iterative process by identifying essential topics, subtopics, and subset topics of modified codes.

Then a preliminary list of categories and central ideas was made to include as the central idea or sub-idea. Rereading helped identify the less significant categories that merged. Consequently, the categories and subcategories were checked to remove redundancies and determine essential elements. Eventually, themes from categories and subcategories were identified. Lastly, these concepts helped to synthesize the findings using participants' direct quotes to understand the influence of anxiety on foreign language students' reading comprehension.

Data Trustworthiness

This study adhered to the following steps to establish data trustworthiness.

Credibility pertains to the validity of the inferences derived from the evidence and how these findings correspond to what is being reported (Mabuza et al., 2014). The researcher warranted prolonged, rigorous interaction with participants during the interview to evaluate specific sources of misrepresentation and, at the same time, to recognize prominent information throughout the process. The participants' interviews were followed up twice to ensure honesty during the preliminary interview. Subsequently, the encoded transcript was sent to the participants to assess the accuracy of the statements. Credibility includes member checks to validate the transcriptions and emerging themes with the participants. This was done by continuously soliciting participants' reactions.

The study's findings can be applied to other comparable contexts, which is known as transferability. A thorough explanation of the study's environment, participant selection, and results is necessary for others to assess whether the findings are transferable (Mabuza et al., 2014). When qualitative research provides detailed descriptions of the setting or offers many perspectives about a theme, the results become more realistic and richer. Thick description measures the extent to which the study is applicable within other contexts and settings. To ascertain this, the researcher provided a rich account of the participants and the methods and procedures used in the study. In this study, maximum variation sampling was used to gather robust information about participants' anxiety. The maximum variation sample is best for identifying the extreme differences in perceptions about the influence of reading anxiety on students' comprehension of English texts.

Dependability is the consistency of data across comparable situations (Hanson et al., 2019). Research dependability is about ensuring that methods are described in sufficient detail for other researchers to replicate them. A transparent and chronological description of the steps taken from the beginning of a research study to the development and reporting of findings. All the data gathered, such as recordings and transcripts, were kept until they were no longer needed for further checking.

Confirmability is the impartiality in gathering and reporting data. Mabuza et al. (2014) emphasized that the findings should be based on the data obtained rather than the researchers' speculations or inclinations. It describes how impartial the researcher was when gathering and reporting the data. Checking and rechecking the data confirmed the study's objectivity. This verifies that the interpretations were based on the gathered data rather than the researcher's opinion. Hence, an audit trail was conducted to validate the data.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher addressed the principles of respect for persons and impartiality to ensure ethical soundness. The participants were requested to sign a consent form stating that they were participating willingly. At the same time, they were guaranteed the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. They were assured that their responses would not affect their academic rating.

Findings and Discussion

Several themes emerged from the participants' interviews. Four noteworthy aspects were captured: perceptions, coping strategies, text preferences, and challenges. In the theme perceptions, the subthemes were motivation and language development. Under the coping strategy, the subthemes were translation, note-taking, and pre-teaching vocabulary. The subthemes under preferences were short reading texts and long reading texts. For the last theme, challenges, the subthemes include class size, oral reading, comprehension, and vocabulary.

Perceptions. When asked about their perspectives toward reading, the participants revealed common responses, including eagerness to read and the benefits of developing other language skills.

Motivation can have a powerful impact on cognitive and affective aspects of students' lives. These statements demonstrated students' personal gains in reading. Participant 1 quoted, "When I'm reading texts or articles, I feel more confident when I'm reading only in English." Additionally, Participant 2 enthusiastically mentioned, "It [reading] is not boring; it's an interesting subject." In a similar vein, participant 1 added, "Reading, in general, helps us when we speak and communicate with others because we receive [information] from learning vocabulary [which] helps us to improve our language. So, it's helpful."

Language Development can be enhanced by reading, which increases students' exposure to other English language skills. Reading fosters verbal abilities, augments vocabulary, and promotes learning. Specifically, participant 1 expressed, "When I read articles or essays, it helps me when I want to speak, or when I read a lot of essays and articles, I can learn many words. It helps me to communicate with others, and it helps me in writing." Whereas participant 2 agreed, "Yes, we all know that when we start to learn a new language, we need to read a lot or listen. So, reading opens up different skills, such as when I write or when I speak..." Moreover, participant 3 echoed in her response, "Yes, I enjoy when I read [sic] English text[s] to learn because when I read, I learn new vocabulary."

Coping Strategies. Foreign language learners frequently encounter reading problems, prompting them to use strategies to resolve them. Based on the following statements, participants collectively chose options to overcome reading difficulties.

Translation is considered one of the strategies students use to manage anxiety. For language learners, reading with minimal understanding of the English text could overwhelm them. Although some educators find this approach ineffective, participants of this study used it continuously to reduce their apprehensions. Using available resources, students constantly resort to translation as part of their learning process. Some of them shared in this way: "[I] translate if there is a word in the sentence I can't understand, ... I read the whole sentence and tried to understand... [if] I can't understand, I translate it with my phone," as participant 1 articulated. Participant 4 added, "I read the vocabulary I know, then I try to translate the difficult words..." This is supported by participant 3, who stated, "They [words] are difficult, actually. Yes, they're difficult, but when we translate them, we find it easy." For Participant 2, she used translation when needed, "I prefer taking notes or translating the words because I can understand most of them in a paragraph when I read. So, I translate some of the words..."

Note-taking skills help foreign language learners capture ideas and concepts in their own words, reducing their anxiety. According to the participants' statements, this technique helped them grasp the gist of the reading text. Participant 1 shared, "Taking notes ... helps me when the teacher asks about what the topic is about; I can read these notes to tell me what the article talks about." Meanwhile, participant 2 replied, "Yes, when I read step by step, I take notes. It makes me understand more while I'm reading." Similarly, participant 1 cited, "It's a new skill [take notes] when I study this semester. When I finish reading, it's important to write what I understood from the article." Participant 2 elaborated the idea in the succeeding interview as, "Yes, this semester we learn a new style in reading, like when you are reading, you start to see your goals in the article you read, and while you are reading, you are taking notes, [using] your own words, your ideas in the margin of the paper. [It] makes a long article clearer by taking notes in the margin."

Pre-teaching Vocabulary is a technique used by foreign language learners, especially in dealing with high-frequency words, which are usually challenging for them. Based on the participants' narratives, their reading teacher assigned them high-frequency words to prepare and study at home. This made them feel optimistic because it helped them understand the reading in class. Participant 1 stated, "Yes, we translate the words at home to know their meaning because they are difficult and new for us. These words are related to the article in the class." Participant 3 explained, "The teacher gives us activities on the sheet. She provides us with vocabulary, then we

translate it into Arabic and find the meaning in English.” She added, “At home, we find English and Arabic translations. It’s a good thing because we have to learn to translate it and know its meaning. We have to.”

The idea is also elaborated by participant 2, stating, “The teacher assigned us words to translate and find the definition in English. It’s really helpful this way. She provided us with ten words to translate at home and define in English. At the next meeting, she gave us articles related to these words. So, when I read the passage or article, I find the words, [so] I can comprehend more.” Participant 1 shared, “It’s different from what we studied in Reading 1; the words are difficult to understand. But the teacher gives us the new academic words, and tells us to prepare the meaning in Arabic and English at home.”

Text Preferences. Foreign language learners’ preferences in choosing reading materials vary. Long and short texts were provided in the class; however, participants’ preferences were distinctly different, showing the level of anxiety they felt towards them.

Short Reading Text is preferred by many English language learners, especially when it is shorter and simpler. This may be because short texts are easy to process and encourage students to read, which minimizes anxiety. This was mirrored by participant 3, who expressed, “When I see a short paragraph, I don’t feel nervous.” Participant 4 readily answered, “I like to read easy, short paragraphs. I don’t feel tired when I read them.” As for participant 1, she explained, “First of all, if there’s a lot of paper, I’m stressed and nervous. When I start reading the text, it depends on the first three lines or three sentences. If I understand them, I feel relaxed, but if I can’t, I won’t understand the text.”

Long Reading Text is disdained by the participants who struggle to read complex texts. For them, long texts often present an array of information and new vocabulary words, which can reduce their enthusiasm. This can be reflected in their following statements. Participant 1 reiterated that, “... as I’ve said, I don’t like to read long texts. Maybe one page with four or five paragraphs, but not six or seven...” For participant 4, she did not enjoy it, saying, “I feel nervous and bored. I hate long texts.” As for participant 1, she expressed that, “It [advanced reading] is different, completely different. The articles are longer and more complex, and there’s a lot of academic words.”

Challenges. Participants cited some challenges in their advanced reading class. These weakened their comprehension and interest in reading English texts, which resulted in a high level of anxiety. These concerns were captured in the following subthemes, as mentioned by participants in these specific situations.

Class Size matters for students’ engagement and instruction. The nature of the tasks set in class and the quality of instruction vary depending on the number of students. The large number of students in the classroom had a detrimental effect on the anxiety of this study’s participants. Based on the view of participant 1, she described, “If there is a huge number [of students], it makes me feel shy to read in front of the students, and I think if I misunderstand or mispronounce any word, they will laugh.” As for participant 2, her concern was the number of students, as she highlighted “There are forty-eight [students in the class] ... a challenge for the teacher and us.” Whereas participant 3 mentioned what she felt when reading in a large class, “Nervous, so I can’t focus on the text paper in my mind... when the class is loud.”

Oral Reading measures reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension that cannot be directly observed in silent reading. It helps language learners grasp the nuances of English. Nonetheless, participants were discouraged from reading aloud due to pronunciation mistakes that embarrassed them in front of their classmates. Some of their reservations were reflected in these statements. Participant 1 explained, “I feel stressed when I mispronounce any word or if I can’t read this word, [I’m afraid] other students or other people will laugh if I mispronounce [it]. I lack confidence, so I don’t like to read in front of an audience.” She added, “I don’t like it [oral reading] because I’m very shy to speak English or read in English in front of students.” As for participant 3, she expressed her anxiety as, “Yes, I feel nervous sometimes. I’m afraid to say something wrong, so that’s why I don’t like to read in class.” In addition, participant 4 replied, “I feel nervous, I don’t like to read in class, but I’ll try.”

Comprehension or understanding the reading text is another challenge for the current participants, which contributed to their high level of anxiety. Being unable to comprehend the reading material led to their frustration and uneasiness. Most of the participants voiced their personal views; for instance, participant 1 said, “... it stressed me if I can’t complete the article, or I can’t understand all the paragraphs.” Additionally, she explained in the succeeding interviews how she dealt with complex text, saying, “In the exam, she [teacher] gave us two articles, the first one talks about the sounds of animals, it’s simple. But [the second is] about the strike. It’s really difficult to understand. I read it three times, [but] I don’t understand.” Participant 2 expressed, “I feel more nervous if I don’t understand the question [like] what’s the purpose of the question.” Moreover, she admitted, “So, I failed in the second article of the midterm exam; it was difficult. Most of my marks, I lost them in the second article.”

Vocabulary is one of the participants’ concerns because it is unfamiliar to them. They emphasized that reading became complicated when they could not understand the words in the text. It contributed to their high level of anxiety as reflected in their responses. “It [advanced reading] is completely different from Reading Three.”

As we said, the vocabulary is difficult, and the paragraphs are longer,” stated participant 1. She added, “The words are more complex and difficult. I can't understand when I read it [for the] first time; I can't understand the word. It's really difficult.” Meanwhile, participant 2 explained, “But it happened to me when I couldn't understand some vocabulary and connected words or sentences. They don't have the same meaning sometimes. When you don't know the word in the sentence and know exactly what the sentence is, it doesn't have the same meaning sometimes.” As for participant 4, she mentioned, “Because she [the teacher] gives a short text, I like it. But you know, the vocabulary in the text is difficult. Yes, it's difficult, but when we translate, we find it easy.”

Discussion

Perception. Most participants underscore that reading is necessary for developing their other language skills, aligning with the concept of other researchers (Albiladi, 2019; Balqis, 2022) that reading serves as a foundation for linguistic skills. It enhances vocabulary acquisition, grammar skills, and critical thinking (Parhadjanovna, 2023). Likewise, the participants in this study consider their advanced reading class motivating as they learn new vocabulary words and reading strategies. Their enthusiasm regulates their anxiety, which positively increases their learning. This is consistent with Kondra's (2023) idea that reading enhances vocabulary, grammar, and overall language comprehension. Similarly, reading enhances cultural knowledge, fosters the development of cognitive abilities, including memory and creativity, and aids language acquisition (Rustamovna, 2021). This posits that participants' positive attitude is associated with a lower level of anxiety toward reading.

Coping Strategies. The participants of this study accentuate several strategies to help them understand the reading texts, such as translation and note-taking. They recount that some vocabulary words in their advanced reading class are difficult to comprehend, which affects their comprehension. That being the case, they resort to translating the words in their first language (L1) to grasp the idea better. This aligns with Al Faruq's (2019) findings that when participants are aware of the translation of vocabulary words, they become less worried while reading.

However, Bensalem (2020) found that participants were dissatisfied with their reading abilities, as reflected in their tendency to translate texts verbatim to improve their reading performance. Likewise, Jordanian third-year EFL students are upset when they do not understand what they read in English, so they resort to translating every word (Abu Abeeleh et al., 2021). This is echoed by Miao and Vibulphol's (2021) research, showing that Chinese university students are inclined to read for details and become quite anxious when they do not comprehend every aspect of the text.

Additionally, the current participants highlight note-taking as an effective way of understanding the text. Research findings (Do Amaral & Tomitch, 2022; Rusdiansyah, 2019) align with this conclusion, perceiving that taking notes increases comprehension and recall. In short, these aforementioned strategies minimize the students' apprehension when reading complex texts. It is crucial to highlight that the participants of this study emphasize their teacher's teaching strategy, which focuses on pre-teaching new vocabulary before reading, and that this strategy positively impacts their comprehension. They agree that this strategy minimizes their anxiety during class reading activities. Introducing new vocabulary before reading activities leads to better text understanding and improved test scores (Mousavian & Siahpoosh, 2018; Rasouli et al., 2019). These strategies not only help current participants overcome difficulties related to limited vocabulary but also boost their confidence in tackling complex texts.

Preferences. The length of texts affects how students learning a foreign language approach reading. Generally, the participants prefer shorter texts and dislike longer ones. They mention that they are more comfortable when reading shorter texts rather than longer texts, which increases their level of anxiety. As studies by Forrin et al. (2021) and Forrin et al. (2017) have shown, FL students are much more likely to lose focus inadvertently when reading longer passages. However, Mizrachi et al. (2018) differed, emphasizing that university students, irrespective of country, typically prefer reading academic materials in print, mainly longer texts. These findings may suggest that teachers should consider the text length alongside other factors when selecting materials for reading instructions and assessment for foreign language students. This gradual introduction of shorter texts to longer ones on various topics may help increase students' interest and motivation in reading.

Challenges. There are several causes of anxiety that the participants encounter in their advanced reading class. Initially, the large class size affects their concentration in class, which increases their level of anxiety. It has been proven that class size can significantly impact student anxiety and learning experiences. According to Blatchford and Russell (2020), large classes can heighten off-task behavior and increase peer interactions. Nonetheless, smaller classes and collaborative learning techniques seem to mitigate students' apprehensions regarding negative evaluations from peers and teachers (Harfitt, 2012). Nevertheless, Toro et al. (2019) noted that small class sizes facilitate increased interaction, participation, and individualized feedback, although some students may experience anxiety due to heightened teacher scrutiny. Consequently, these findings highlight the

complex relationship between class size and student anxiety, suggesting that optimal class sizes may vary according to educational context and goals.

Another challenge is reading aloud in a large class, which aggravates the participants' anxiety when they are asked to do so in front of other students. This finding aligns with other studies showing similar results. For instance, students dreaded cold calling and random calls because they feared negative assessments, particularly when they did not volunteer (Cooper et al., 2018). In addition, a study involving Arabic-speaking university students revealed that reading anxiety is more strongly associated with social pressure when reading aloud to classmates than with comprehension problems (Tibi et al., 2024). Zemni and Alrefaee (2020) likewise mentioned that reading aloud resulted in more anxiety than silent reading because their teachers and classmates evaluated them. However, they maintained that anxious participants tend to encourage themselves to do better in reading, which is worth noting.

Further concerns the current participants encounter are reading comprehension and vocabulary. They elucidate that their anxiety level is heightened when they struggle to comprehend the text with complicated words. Moreover, barriers to understanding reading texts include unfamiliar vocabulary and complex reading texts, which affect the participants of this study. The study by Bensalem (2020) supports these findings, stating that uneasiness about comprehension, dissatisfaction with reading ability, and unfamiliar phonics rules are reading challenges among EFL students. Consistent with the present study's results, Putra and Munawwaroh (2021) concluded that understanding vocabulary and long sentences, insufficient background knowledge, and limited knowledge of reading strategies are among the most challenging issues for Indonesian students. Additionally, these findings align with other research (Fitrawati et al., 2023; Al Faruq, 2019; Seliana et al., 2024; Mokoginta et al., 2023; Zemni & Alrefaee, 2020), such as fear of committing errors, unfamiliar topics, fear of negative feedback, and limited vocabulary. The participants' inclination in this study to translate the meaning of every word may suggest teaching pedagogy that emphasizes less efficacious reading strategies.

In essence, the findings yield both facilitative and debilitating consequences. Although the participants show interest in reading and recognize its importance for language learning, which lowers their reading anxiety, they identify several aspects that trigger it. Most of the participants' responses show that their reading anxiety is heightened due to longer texts, and inadequacy of vocabulary and comprehension, coupled with oral reading in a large class. These factors of reading anxiety among Libyan undergraduate students have several implications.

Implications

The findings imply that reading syllabi should be reviewed thoroughly to integrate effective reading strategies that address the reading difficulties of Libyan undergraduate students and to select suitable texts that incorporate vocabulary-building activities. Equally, teachers should explore alternative reading approaches to reduce students' fear of making mistakes and form small groups to minimize loud reading in large classes, thus promoting students' self-confidence. In addition, it is essential to identify students who are struggling with reading comprehension through diagnostic tests to tailor interventions, such as decoding exercises, vocabulary enrichment, and effective reading strategies. A gradual introduction from short, manageable texts to longer texts is necessary to build students' confidence and reduce anxiety, too. By addressing these factors, students may learn to manage their reading anxiety as they become more competent and less apprehensive.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the verbal accounts of the participants are clustered in several themes, such as perceptions, coping strategies, preferences, and challenges that prompted their low and high levels of reading anxiety. On the one hand, the participants identified factors that reduce their reading anxiety, leading to their positive views about reading. Likewise, they appreciate the constructive experiences they gain in their advanced reading class. On the other hand, several aspects contribute to their high levels of anxiety, such as oral reading, large class size, long texts, comprehension problems, and unknown vocabulary. As anxiety negatively interferes with students' learning, reading teachers need to provide an encouraging, anxiety-free atmosphere for effective learning.

Limitations of the Study

The study has various limitations that must be considered when interpreting the findings. The participants, all females, were limited to one faculty in Misurata. Since this study targeted regular fourth-semester students, the number of participants was limited because most enrolled in the Advanced Reading class were irregular students. Therefore, the findings may differ when a similar study is conducted on multiple students in other universities. Besides, findings may differ when this study is followed by a quantitative research design.

Directions for Future Research

Aside from the research design employed in this study, other researchers may conduct comparable investigations in various colleges in Libya using a mixed-method design to obtain in-depth, generalizable

conclusions. Future research may look into several factors aside from the ones mentioned in the study to delve deeper into the understanding of the effects of anxiety concerning other variables. Additional research is needed to explore effective teaching strategies in reducing anxiety and enhancing reading as a lifelong skill for foreign language students.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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