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Foreign language reading anxiety among advanced students of English : a pilot study

Acta Neophilologica 15/1, 89-102

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE READING ANXIETY AMONG ADVANCED STUDENTS OF ENGLISH – A PILOT STUDY

Key word: reading anxiety, reading apprehension, advanced students

1. Introduction

Analysing language anxiety in the context of developing linguistic skills it may be concluded that reading seems to be the least anxiety susceptible out of four skills. Silent reading is an individual endeavour which allows readers to choose their own rate of reading, to reread selected excerpts and to employ appropriate reading strategies. A reader is not dependent on other learners unlike conversation participants who have the rate of interaction imposed on them, who have a limited time for reaction and who process the discourse “here and now”. As a result language anxiety is intensely explored in the context of developing speaking and reading apprehension both in mother tongue and a foreign language has been rarely chosen as a subject of studies.

2. Review of literature

Unlike foreign language anxiety which was qualified as independent of target language [Aida 1994] Sellers [2000] found out that reading anxiety is a construct that is separate from but still dependable on foreign language anxiety. Students who suffer from high levels of language anxiety also experience intensely reading apprehension. However, unlike foreign language anxiety which is independent of any target language, reading anxiety differs by target language and depends on a particular writing system.

Saito, Horwitz and Garza [1999] identified two potential sources of reading apprehension: (1) unfamiliar scripts and writing systems, (2) unfamiliar cultural material. The researchers hypothesise that learners who cannot rely on sound-symbol correspondences in a foreign language will encounter more difficulties while reading and as a result they will experience greater stress while trying to decode a written message. The lack of cultural knowledge was qualified as a stressor with a delayed effect. It can cause anxiety at higher levels of reading. Once the words have been decoded readers try to construct meaning of a text. At this point they may realise that words do not build into a comprehensible message and that they do not understand the text due to unfamiliar cultural material in a text.

The studies on reading anxiety reveal its debilitating influence on learning a foreign language. Sellers [2000] found that students experiencing high levels of reading anxiety were able to recall less passage content than those who exhibited minimal apprehension. They recalled fewer main ideas from a text which, as Sellers claims, shows that anxiety has a detrimental influence on mental capacity necessary for constructing and identifying the main information in the text which necessitates intensive organization, analysis, interpretation and inferencing. Jalongo and Hirsh [2010] observed that an extensive reduction of cognitive reserves needed to process a text is caused by interactions of physical and cognitive symptoms of anxiety. When learners are aware that their hands are shaking or their voice starts to tremble they become overwhelmed with emotions and have difficulties with decoding a text due to limited mental capacity.

Saito et al. [1999] observed that students who suffer from higher levels of reading anxiety perform poorly and as a result receive lower grades. This complies with Sellers' [2000] research, who explains that highly anxious students experience more cognitive interference than less anxious students. When they read they engage into irrelevant tasks which reduce their mental capacity. Consequently this prevents them from efficient discourse processing and makes access to information stored in the long term memory more difficult. As a result their reading achievements are poor. Moreover, the study by Rai et al. [2001] showed that anxious students needed more time to process the text and to answer questions. They found out that apprehension slows down the process of inferential thinking.

Zhang [2000] investigated gender differences in experiencing reading anxiety. Out of 20 statements of a Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) gender difference appeared in three cases indicating that male students reported higher levels of apprehension due to peer pressure, belief that female classmates are stronger in English, the need to read in English in engineering fields and underdeveloped ability to use language for academic purposes. It should be added, however, that gender studies in the field of anxiety have not given any conclusive results, for example the study prepared and reported by Wu [2011] found no differences between female and male participants both in language anxiety and in reading anxiety.

Millis, Pajares and Herron [2006] found that reading anxiety was negatively associated with reading self-efficacy. Foreign language readers may experience reading apprehension when they doubt in their reading competence, have problems with self-confidence and do not believe that they can succeed in text comprehension. Moreover, Saito et al. [1999] observed that students who perceive difficulty in reading tasks experience greater amount of reading anxiety.

Brantmeier [2005] found that advanced learners do not feel anxious about reading in a foreign language. Reading together with listening were qualified as the least stress provoking skills. The research showed that learners were stressed more by any post-reading tasks, than reading itself which complies with Saito et al. [1999] hypothesis, who state that anxiety may arise while students have finished reading and are to report what they have understood, by carrying out all sorts of comprehension tasks and reporting them in a written or oral form to the teacher. Brantmeier also found that students are more stressed by talking about the text than writing about it.

The review of the studies on reading apprehension allows to identify some factors which are responsible for anxiety arousal. Bektas-Cetinkaya [2011] and Saito et al. [1999] found that the need to understand every word in a text and inability to achieve this aim significantly contribute to reading apprehension. Pessimistic beliefs about one's reading ability and language proficiency also contribute to stress [Millis et al. 2006]. Zhang [2000] directly points to low language proficiency, lack of cultural knowledge, unfamiliarity of the learning context (students were learning English in a foreign country) and teacher diversity.

Finally, it should be added that reading has been found intensely anxiety provoking when it is performed aloud [Saito et al. 2000]. It is presumably due to the fact that it is done publicly which may trigger fear of social negative evaluation and that a reader may feel that he is being assessed which may provoke testing apprehension.

3. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this pilot study was threefold. Its main aim was a detailed investigation of reading apprehension at advanced levels of linguistic proficiency; its cognitive, behavioural and somatic aspects were to be analysed. To this part of the study research questions were formulated. However, as it was a pilot study, the answers to the research questions were to be used to meet the second aim of the research, which was to find out whether reading anxiety can be observed among advanced students of English and consequently whether any further more extensive research in this group of subjects is justified. Finally, the third purpose of the project was to construct an instrument which would enable to measure the selected dimensions of reading apprehension.

4. Research questions

The pilot study was to find the answers to the following research questions:

1. What cognitive aspects of reading anxiety can be observed among advanced students of English?
 - A. How do they feel about their reading?
 - B. Do they experience any test anxiety?
 - C. Do they experience any fear of negative social evaluation?
 - D. What factors provoking reading anxiety seem to prevail among them?
2. Do advanced students of English display any avoidance behaviour facing reading in a foreign language?
3. Can somatic symptoms of reading apprehension be observed in this group?

5. Methodology

5.1. Participants

Forty students of the first year of MA studies at the English department were asked to fill in a questionnaire anonymously. They were all students of teaching English as a foreign language specialisation. There were four male and 36 female participants in the group. Twenty-nine respondents were aged 21–25, seven were aged 26–30, three were aged 31–35, and one was aged 36–40.

5.2. Instrumentation

In order to analyse students' foreign language reading anxiety a questionnaire consisting of 37 questions, each of which is to be answered on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree", was prepared (see Appendix). Prior to that the analysis of various scales measuring anxiety and questionnaires used in the research in this field was performed. As a result questions 1–18 were based on FLRAS constructed by Saito, Garza and Horwitz [1999]; FLRAS consists of 20 elements, however, questions number 10: "By the time you get past the funny letters and symbols in English, it's hard to remember what you're reading about" and 11: "I am worried about all the new symbols you have to learn in order to read English" were excluded as they referred to a foreign writing system. The scale investigates learners apprehension connected with students' attitude to English as a foreign language (e.g. 10: "I enjoy reading in English"), perceived difficulty of reading in English (e.g. 12: "Once you get used to it, reading is not so difficult") and different variables of reading, for example vocabulary (e.g. 8: "When reading English, I get nervous and confused

when I don't understand every word"), grammar (e.g. 6: "I get upset whenever I encounter unknown grammar when reading English") or reading aloud which involves pronunciation issues (e.g. 7: "It bothers me to encounter words I can't pronounce while reading English").

As FLRAS assesses only some of cognitive aspects of apprehension additional questions needed to be invented. Taking into consideration a three dimensional construct of foreign language anxiety by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope [1986] which involves communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative social evaluation it seemed worth investigating whether advanced readers are stressed by testing and assessment of their comprehension and to what extent they are afraid of what other students or teachers will think about their reading. Therefore with reference to the Second Language Writing Inventory (SLWI) constructed by Cheng [2004], questions 19 and 21 (e.g. 19: "If my reading English is to be evaluated I would worry about getting a very poor grade") were formulated to check test anxiety and questions 26, 29 and 33 (e.g. 33: "I don't worry at all about what other people would think of my reading comprehension") to analyse fear of negative social evaluation.

Lang's [1971] tripartite model of apprehension refers to cognitive, behavioural and physiological aspects of anxiety. Therefore more statements needed to be constructed to investigate more than just a cognitive aspect of apprehension. These were adapted from the SLWI constructed by Cheng [2004] to fit into a reading comprehension context. As a result questions number 20, 22, 23, 27, 30 and 32 which were to measure somatic symptoms (e.g. 20: "My mind often goes blank when I start reading something in English" or 23: "I tremble or perspire when I read something in English during classes") and questions number 24, 28 and 31 (e.g. 28: "I would do my best to excuse myself if asked to read something in English aloud") to measure avoidance behaviour were included in the questionnaire.

Finally, the research project of Brantmeier [2005] was analysed in order to supplement the list of stress provoking factors which could fit into a cognitive framework of anxiety. As a result questions number 34–37 were constructed to check whether an apprehension level depends on an activity type which accompanies reading. The students were asked if they become anxious while writing compositions, answering multiple choice questions, answering questions about a text orally and finally whether they get stressed doing reading tasks as homework (e.g. 35: "I become anxious when I have to answer open questions orally during classes about what I have read").

6. Results of the study

6.1. Cognitive aspects of reading anxiety

6.1.1. Students' attitude to reading

It can be assumed that students' general attitude to reading is positive. Thirty-six (90.0%) students believe that reading is not difficult and 33 (82.5%) enjoy reading in English. Twenty-two (55.0%) participants are satisfied with their reading competence and a half feel confident about it. Yet there are 11 (30.0%) participants who would prefer learning speaking exclusively without any reading practice and six (15.0%) believe that reading is the hardest part of learning a foreign language. The same number of respondents, six (15.0%), admit to feeling intimidated when they see a whole page of English in front of them. Finally, it should be added that there are still readers who experience an extreme dimension of anxiety: six students admit to feeling panic while reading.

6.1.2. Test anxiety

The research results show that test anxiety still exists to a significant degree in this group of respondents. Twenty-two (55.0%) participants worry about getting very poor grades from their reading and 18 (45.0%) admit that they feel worried and uneasy if they know they will be evaluated. Only 10 (25.0%) respondents do not feel any stress under these circumstances and 12 (30.0%) do not feel apprehension due to a perspective of getting poor grades.

6.1.3. Fear of negative social evaluation

On the basis of the questionnaire results it can be concluded that approximately 30.0% of respondents are afraid that they may be evaluated by others in a negative way. In detail 15 (37.5%) advanced readers disagreed with the statement "I don't worry that my reading comprehension is a lot worse than others" and 13 (32.5%) still worry that other people think of their reading comprehension. There is also a group of students, five (12.5%), who are afraid that their reading aloud would be mocked by other course participants.

6.1.4. Anxiety generating factors

The most common factor generating tension among 29 (72.5%) students while reading is not being sure whether they understand a text. The next most often pointed reason of fear are comprehension activities accompanying a text. The most stress provoking is answering open questions about a text, a half of respondents feel anxiety in this context. Seventeen (42.5%) participants experience apprehension when asked to write a composition about what they have read in English and 15 (37.6%) become stressed while doing multiple choice tests or answering true/false statements. Advanced students are also anxious about reading aloud: 15 (37.5%) declare to be frightened of this type of reading. The same number are stressed by pronunciation problems as they admit to be bothered when they encounter a word they do not know how to pronounce. The next stressors which can be observed in this group are unfamiliar grammar structures and an unfamiliar topic. Fourteen (35.0%) respondents claim to be worried about them. Another situation which is disturbing for 12 (30.0%) advanced learners is inability to understand every single word in a text. The research results also show that at the advanced level there are still students who have problems with generating meaning of a text. Ten (25.0%) participants agreed with the statement “When I read in English, I often understand words but still can’t quite understand what the author is saying”. The lack of cultural knowledge and culture differences do not seem to be stress provoking for this group of students. Seven (17.5%) and six (15.0%) readers agree with the statements “English/American culture and ideas seem very foreign to me” and “You have to know so much about English history and culture in order to read English”. Finally, the least stressful element of reading tasks seem to be homework as only four respondents become anxious when they have to read something in English at home.

6.2. Avoidance behaviour

Students were also asked to assess their anxiety level in the context of performing avoidance behaviour. The results of the questionnaire show that students do not evade reading in English. Only eight (20.0%) respondents agreed with the statement “I would do my best to excuse myself if asked to read something in English aloud” and five (12.5%) students admitted that they usually do their best to avoid reading in English. Although students do not fleet from reading in English it was also shown that they do not look for reading opportunities very intensely as 19 (47.5%) stated that they do not seek every possible chance to read English outside the class.

6.3. Somatic symptoms

Research shows that somatic symptoms of apprehension can be still observed among advanced readers of English, though to a small degree. The “mind paralysis”, which seems to be the most debilitating for text processing, is experienced by 10 (25.0%) respondents as they admit that their thoughts become jumbled as they read. Seven (17.5%) students get confused to such an extent that they cannot remember what they are reading. The same number freeze up when unexpectedly asked to read English during classes. As far as other physiological aspects of apprehension are concerned it can be concluded that they can be observed in the case of one third of advanced readers. Thirteen (32.5%) respondents feel that their bodies are rigid and tense, 11 (27.0%) feel their heart beat rising and nine (22.0%) experience discomfort of trembling and perspiring while reading tasks performed in the classroom.

7. Discussion and conclusions

The pilot study shows that foreign language reading anxiety can be observed among advanced readers of English with its intensity varying depending on the apprehension dimension under study. Therefore it may be concluded that the pilot study results signal that reading anxiety arises among proficient users of English which gives ground for further and more detailed research in this area. It should be stressed, however, that the sample under study consisted of 40 respondents which gives no ground for generalisation of the obtained results. Percentage values given in section 6. of the article should be also treated with caution as they were to perform a prognostic and not representative function.

The pilot study revealed that the majority students display a positive attitude towards reading which, however, does not imply elimination of their problems with stress. One third of the respondents would like to exclude reading from their language education and 15.0% feel that reading is difficult and the same number of students feel intimidated in this situation. Testing and assessment seem to be strong anxiety provoking factors: 45.0–55.0% of students intensely experience test anxiety in a reading context. The study also revealed that fear of social evaluation can be observed among 30.0–32.5% of readers.

Within a cognitive framework of reading apprehension the research was also to identify stress provoking factors. It was revealed that uncertainty of whether a reader understands a text causes the greatest amount of apprehension (72.5%). The next in line are text related activities. Answering open questions about a text, writing a composition about what has been read, multiple choice questions among true false statements evoke anxiety among 50.0, 42.5 and 37.5% of students respectively. At this point it should be stressed that these factors may

be strictly related with test apprehension as these activities are used as reading comprehension testing techniques. The research also showed that reading aloud is a significant stress provoking element: 37.5% respondents complained about it and the same number feels intimidated by potential pronunciation problems while reading aloud. Finally, unknown grammar structures and problems with reading strategies, which here mean the need to understand every single word in a text, cause apprehension among 35.0 and 30.0% of readers respectively.

As far as avoidance behaviour is concerned it is very rare in this group: 12.5–20.0% of students consciously evade reading situations. Finally the study of a somatic dimension of apprehension shows that it is experienced to a small degree. One third of respondents feel some body tension and rigidity while reading. The other symptoms like heart beat rise, perspiration and trembling or mind paralysis are experienced by 22.0–27.0% of advanced readers.

Referring to instrumentation constructed for the purpose of the research it may be concluded that the questionnaire allows for investigation of reading anxiety from a multidimensional perspective, taking into account cognitive, behavioural and somatic framework of anxiety. As it was prepared in a Likert scale format the data gathered by its means may be easily subjected to various statistical calculations. On the other hand, it can be supplemented by open questions, which would contribute to a qualitative analysis of the problem and allow for identification of more apprehension causing factors at these levels of linguistic proficiency.

To sum up, the described pilot study justified the need for investigation of reading anxiety among advanced readers of English and resulted in a research tool which allows for an extensive analysis in this area. The next step of this study would be to distribute the questionnaire among a representative sample of participants which would allow for generalisation of the study's results.

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Appendix

The questionnaire analysing foreign language anxiety and the results of the pilot study.

Statement	SA n	SA [%]	A n	A [%]	SA + A [%]	N n	N [%]	D n	D [%]	SD n	SD %	D + SD [%]
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. I get upset when I'm not sure whether I understand what I am reading in English.	1	2.5	28	70.0	72.5	9	22.5	2	5.0	0	0.0	5.0
2. When reading English, I often understand the words but still can't quite understand what the author is saying.	1	2.5	9	22.5	25.0	10	25.0	18	45.0	2	5.0	50.0
3. When I'm reading English, I get so confused I can't remember what I'm reading.	0	0.0	7	17.5	17.5	4	10.0	26	65.0	3	7.5	72.5
4. I feel intimidated whenever I see a whole page of English in front of me.	0	0.0	6	15.0	15.0	15	37.5	12	30.0	7	17.5	47.5
5. I am nervous when I am reading a passage in English when I am not familiar with the topic.	0	0.0	14	35.0	35.0	8	20.0	15	37.5	3	7.5	45.0
6. I get upset whenever I encounter unknown grammar when reading English.	3	7.5	11	27.5	35.0	5	12.5	20	50.0	1	2.5	52.5
7. When reading English, I get nervous and confused when I don't understand every word.	1	2.5	11	27.5	30.0	8	20.0	18	45.0	2	5.0	50.0
8. It bothers me to encounter words I can't pronounce while reading English.	2	5.0	13	32.5	37.5	9	22.5	16	40.0	0	0.0	40.0
9. I usually end up translating word by word when I'm reading English.	0	0.0	5	12.5	12.5	7	17.5	20	50.0	8	20.0	70.0
10. I enjoy reading English.	7	17.5	26	65.0	82.5	7	17.5	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
11. I feel confident when I am reading in English.	4	10.0	16	40.0	50.0	17	42.5	3	7.5	0	0.0	7.5
12. Once you get used to it, reading English is not so difficult.	5	12.5	31	77.5	90.0	1	2.5	3	7.5	0	0.0	7.5
13. The hardest part of learning English is learning to read.	1	2.5	5	12.5	15.0	9	22.5	18	45.0	7	17.5	62.5

cont. Appendix

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1												
14. I would be happy just to learn to speak English rather than having to learn to read as well.	1	2.5	11	27.5	30.0	6	15.0	20	50.0	2	5.0	55.0
15. I don't mind reading to myself, but I feel very uncomfortable when I have to read English aloud.	1	2.5	14	35.0	37.5	2	5.0	18	45.0	5	12.5	57.5
16. I am satisfied with the level of reading ability in English that I have achieved so far.	2	5.0	20	50.0	55.0	11	27.5	7	17.5	0	0.0	17.5
17. English/American culture and ideas seem very foreign to me.	0	0.0	6	15.0	15.0	9	22.5	22	55.0	3	7.5	62.5
18. You have to know so much about English history and culture in order to read English.	0	0.0	5	12.5	12.5	4	10.0	26	65.0	5	12.5	77.5
19. While reading English I feel worried and uneasy if I know it will be evaluated.	3	7.5	15	37.5	45.0	12	30.0	10	25.0	0	0.0	25.0
20. My mind often goes blank when I start reading something in English.	0	0.0	5	12.5	12.5	12	30.0	22	55.0	1	2.5	57.5
21. If my reading English is to be evaluated I would worry about getting a very poor grade.	1	2.5	21	52.5	55.0	6	15.0	10	25.0	2	5.0	30.0
22. I usually feel my whole body rigid and tense when I read something in English during classes.	1	2.5	12	30.0	32.5	7	17.5	17	42.5	3	7.5	50.0
23. I tremble or perspire when I read something in English during classes.	0	0.0	9	22.5	22.5	13	32.5	17	42.5	1	2.5	45.0
24. I usually do my best to avoid reading English.	0	0.0	5	12.5	12.5	7	17.5	26	65.0	2	5.0	70.0
25. I often feel panic when I read something in English during classes.	0	0.0	6	15.0	15.0	9	22.5	23	57.5	2	5.0	62.5
26. I'm afraid that the other students would mock my reading aloud in English.	1	2.5	4	10.0	12.5	6	15.0	26	65.0	3	7.5	72.5
27. I feel my heart pounding when I read something in English during classes.	0	0.0	11	27.5	27.5	2	5.0	21	52.5	6	15.0	67.5

cont. Appendix

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
28. I would do my best to excuse myself if asked to read something in English aloud.	1	2.5	7	17.5	20.0	7	17.5	20	50.0	5	12.5	62.5	
29. I don't worry at all about what other people would think of my reading comprehension.	3	7.5	15	37.5	45.0	9	22.5	13	32.5	0	0.0	32.5	
30. My thoughts become jumbled when I read something in English during classes.	1	2.5	9	22.5	25.0	8	20.0	20	50.0	2	5.0	55.0	
31. I usually seek every possible chance to read English outside of class.	0	0.0	6	15.0	15.0	15	37.5	18	45.0	1	2.5	47.5	
32. I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to read something in English.	0	0.0	7	17.5	17.5	7	17.5	22	55.0	4	10.0	65.0	
33. I don't worry that my reading comprehension is a lot worse than others.	1	2.5	13	32.5	35.0	11	27.5	13	32.5	2	5.0	37.5	
34. I become anxious when I have to read something in English as homework.	0	0.0	4	10.0	10.0	4	10.0	27	67.5	5	12.5	80.0	
35. I become anxious when I have to answer open questions orally during classes about what I have read.	2	5.0	18	45.0	50.0	9	22.5	11	27.5	0	0.0	27.5	
36. I become anxious when I have to answer multiple choice questions or true/false statements during classes about what I have read.	1	2.5	14	35.0	37.5	6	15.0	17	42.5	2	5.0	47.5	
37. I become anxious when I have to write a composition during classes about what I have read in English.	1	2.5	16	40.0	42.5	8	20.0	13	32.5	2	5.0	37.5	

SA – strongly agree, A – agree, SA + A – strongly agree and agree with a statement, N – neither agree nor disagree, D – disagree, SD – strongly disagree, D + SD – strongly agree and agree with a statement, n – the number of students who chose a particular answer, % – the percentage value of the number of students who chose a particular answer

Summary

Foreign Language Reading Anxiety among Advanced Students of English – a Pilot Study

The article discusses the problem of foreign language reading anxiety among advanced students of English. It describes a pilot study whose aim was to check whether reading apprehension exists in this group of participants, to investigate cognitive, behavioural and somatic symptoms of anxiety and to create an instrument which would allow for its multidimensional analysis. The study shows that reading anxiety exists at advanced levels of linguistic proficiency. Within cognitive framework of anxiety testing apprehension was found to be prevailing. As far as anxiety generating factors are concerned students are most stressed by inability to understand a text, by activities accompanying reading tasks and by reading aloud. Behavioural and somatic symptoms exist in a small degree in this group of respondents.