

## **Review of Current Developments in Reading Anxiety, First Language Reading and Second Language Proficiency in Association with Second or Foreign Language Reading Comprehension**

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### **Abstract**

*Effects of first language reading and second language proficiency on second or foreign language reading have been studied either separately or together. As most studies have indicated that anxiety as one of the main factors could impede second or foreign language reading process, effect of reading anxiety on SL/FL reading should be explored. Researchers showed that not only L1 reading and L2 proficiency have substantial effects on SL/FL reading, but reading anxiety has been focused as a significant factor in SL/FL reading. Recent studies suggested that besides L1 reading and L2 proficiency in reading comprehension, reading anxiety need to be considered. Since L1 reading, L2 proficiency and reading anxiety influence SL/FL reading significantly, to better understand, this article focuses on the effect of reading anxiety not only with first language reading, but also with English language proficiency to differentiate which factor has the highest effect on SL/FL reading.*

**Keywords:** First Language Reading; Second Language Proficiency; Reading Anxiety

### **1. Introduction**

Most research on SL/FL reading has become popular literally, because comprehension of a text is the main objective of reading instruction. Unfortunately, students' reading performance in society's requirements do not seem to connect well as previous researchers addressed SL/FL reading difficulties of learners due to poor L1 reading or L2 proficiency (Hacquebord, 1989; Benhardt and Kamil, 1995; Bossers, 1991; Brisbois, 1995; Carrell, 1991; Lee; and Schallert, 1997). In this study two important hypothesis of L1 reading and L2 proficiency related to L2 reading are discussed. Other factor shown to cause difficulties in SL/FL reading is reading anxiety. Many researchers have indicated effects of anxiety in oral skills, and little attention has been done in association with reading anxiety (Saito et al., 1999). Hence, to better address SL/FL learners' demands in reading comprehension, it is beneficial to separate the important factors for L2 learners from those which seem to be common to all L2 readers. According to three important hypotheses in SL/FL reading comprehension, review of these three hypotheses (reading anxiety, L1 reading, and L2 proficiency) in SL/FL reading needs to be considered and researched.

## **2. Anxiety**

Horwitz et al. (1986) defined foreign language anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128). As anxiety is defined as a common sign of worry for learners, high attention has been paid to psychology and education. Psychologists have divided anxiety into three categories: i) trait anxiety, ii) state anxiety, and iii) situation-specific anxiety. Overall, trait anxiety is viewed as a permanent personality in each character, state anxiety refers to a particular situation and situation-specific anxiety focuses on complicated nature of some anxieties such as public speaking anxiety (Spielberger, 1983).

### **2.1 Foreign Language Reading Anxiety**

There has been much research on foreign language anxiety and anxiety with oral skills, but few studies have been done to explore reading anxiety. Thus, reading anxiety of foreign language learners is worth investigating. Saito et al. (1999), for example, studied a research related to foreign language reading anxiety. In this study, they constructed foreign language reading anxiety scale (FLRAS) to examine reading anxiety of American students in Russian, French and Japanese. According to this study, unfamiliar writing scripts and unfamiliar cultural background were viewed as the main sources of reading anxiety. Apart from this study, some other researchers have investigated foreign language reading anxiety with other variables such as assessment method (Oh, 1990), reading comprehension ability (Brantmeier, 2005; Sellers, 2000) and gender (Matsuda and Gobel, 2004).

However, studies show that there is a negative correlation between anxiety and L2 reading comprehension (Kopper 1970; Srivastava and Sinha, 1975; Madsen, Brown and Jones 1991; Gardner and MacIntyre 1993; Saito et al., 1999). Likewise, Brahmhatt (1983) found a significant relationship between anxiety and English reading comprehension, while Jafarigohar (2012) found a weak relationship between reading anxiety and English as a foreign language reading comprehension among Iranian learners. Since foreign language reading anxiety does not work in isolation, it is suggested that several factors should be taken into consideration to highlight effect of reading anxiety together with linguistic features and L1 reading on SL/FL reading comprehension.

### **3. Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis**

In linguistic interdependence hypothesis, L1 literacy is premise of second language reading. According to this hypothesis, as there are similarities between reading L1 and L2, they are interdependent (Cummins, 1979). On the other hand, when students are literate in their first language reading, they are assumed to develop their knowledge in second language reading. However, one of the main weaknesses of this hypothesis is that it neglected the great influence of L2 proficiency in L2 reading.

Earlier studies demonstrated that there is a significant relationship between L1 and L2 reading (Bernhardt and Kamil, 1995; Cummins, 1991; Van Gelderen, et al., 2004). Similarly, Verhoeven (1991) stated that “literacy skills being developed in one language strongly predict corresponding skills in another language acquired later in time” (p. 72). Studies of Van Gelderen et al. (2004, 2007) supported linguistic interdependence hypothesis, in which there was a significant relationship between L1 and L2 reading, and L1 reading was showed to be more important than various aspects of L2. Latest study in Iran also shows that L1 reading is a substantial factor in developing English as a foreign language reading (Shahidi, 2011).

### **4. Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis**

Another hypothesis is called linguistic threshold hypothesis. Linguistic threshold hypothesis is addressed as “short-circuit” hypothesis (Clarke, 1980), which means good L1 readers would display poor L2 reading. According to linguistic threshold hypothesis, learners should develop a certain language proficiency level in the second language before transferring L1 reading to L2 reading (Cummins, 1976; Clarke, 1980). On the other hand, learners before reaching essential L2 proficiency, whether or not they have good L1 reading, cannot comprehend reading in second or foreign language.

Recent studies have shown a relationship between L2 proficiency and L2 reading (Carrell, 1991; Clark, 1980; Kern, 1988). It is worth noting that L2 proficiency is defined as a significant element in developing L2 reading comprehension (Kern, 1988). Study of Nassaji (2004) shows that vocabulary in L2 is more important than grammar, while Jahangrad et al. (2011) found role of grammar more important than vocabulary in English language proficiency.

On the other hand, Yamashita (2002) highlighted the importance of vocabulary and grammar as the main elements of L2 proficiency as most of the earlier studies have also focused on these two elements of second language learning (Brisbois, 1995; Bossers, 1991; Lee, J. and Schallert, D. 1997; Nassaji, 2004; Jahangard *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, it is truly to explore the importance of vocabulary and grammar as two components of L2 proficiency in this study as highlighted by Yamashita (2002).

### **5. Alderson's Hypothesis**

Linguistic interdependence hypothesis and linguistic threshold hypothesis are developed by Alderson (1984, 2000) in determining whether L2 reading is a reading problem or a language problem.

In supporting Linguistic threshold hypothesis, further results of Verhoeven, (2000); Droop and Verhoeven, (2003) shouted the importance of proficiency in second language rather than first language reading, as vocabulary was identified more important than grammar in second language proficiency and L1 reading. Similarly, Bossers (1991) investigated L1 reading, L2 proficiency and L2 reading and he found that both L1 reading and L2 proficiency were related to L2 reading comprehension, whereas L2 proficiency had higher effect on L2 reading. Further results showed that as L1 reading and L2 proficiency had significant effects on L2 reading among beginning learners, none of them were substantial for advanced learners (Brisbois, 1995).

### **6. Importance of L2 Proficiency, L1 Reading and Reading Anxiety on SL/FL Reading**

This study has been conducted due to several reasons. Firstly, Bernhardt (2005) mentioned that besides L1 reading and L2 proficiency, affective variables such as anxiety needs to be considered. Secondly, Loghmani and Ghonsooly (2012) concluded that low reading performance is not likely because of low reading ability; it might be due to anxiety in L2 reading. As several studies have focused on the relationship between L1 reading and L2 proficiency with L2 reading comprehension, little study has emphasized on reading anxiety. Thus, this expanded research as a mixed theory (Alderson 1984, 2000; Saito *et al.*, 1999) helps to examine which of these independent variables has the highest effect on SL/FL reading comprehension.

#### **6.1 Current View of Reading Anxiety, L1 Reading, and L2 Proficiency related to Second or Foreign Language Reading Comprehension**

Previous study believed that reading anxiety with L1 reading and L2 proficiency need further research (Bernhardt, 2005). Loghmani and Ghonsooli (2012) pointed out the importance of reading anxiety more than poor reading ability. Several studies discovered that foreign language reading anxiety affects significantly on reading performance (Sellers, 2000; Matsumura, 2001; Miyanaga, 2005). Therefore, foreign language reading anxiety seems to be as a hindrance for developing second or foreign language reading comprehension of learners (Sellers, 2000; Shi and Liu, 2006). In addition to the effect of reading anxiety on reading performance, first language reading and second language proficiency are defined as important factors in developing reading performance. According to different studies, vocabulary and grammar as two important elements of second language proficiency affect more than first language reading on second or foreign language reading comprehension (Bernhardt and Kamil, 1995; Bossers, 1991; 1992; Brisbois, 1995; Yamashita, 2004; and Nassaji 2004).

As most studies related to reading anxiety, L1 reading and L2 proficiency have been investigated separately, and their combination effect on SL/FL reading have not been explored, extensively this study is conducted to explore the link between reading anxiety together with L1 reading and L2 proficiency in association with SL/FL reading comprehension.

### **7. Conclusion**

Current review of this article shows that earlier studies of second or foreign language reading focused on the importance of reading anxiety, first language or second language proficiency of learners separately in developing foreign language reading comprehension. As hypothesis of Saito *et al.* (1999) about foreign language reading anxiety and Alderson's hypothesis (1984, 2000) related to first language reading and second language proficiency are defined as the most popular hypotheses of foreign language reading anxiety and foreign language reading comprehension, the expanded review of these variables are conducted to present the most important effect of foreign language reading comprehension

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