

Foreign Language Reading Anxiety in the Saudi Tertiary EFL Context

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Abstract

Foreign language (FL) reading is a persistent problem among many learners. This preliminary study investigates FL reading anxiety among students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) at the tertiary level, employing Saito et al.'s (1999) Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) and a background information questionnaire. A total of 225 students enrolled in general English courses at two Saudi universities participated in the study. Results indicated that female participants exhibited higher levels of anxiety than their male counterparts. An exploratory factor analysis revealed three domains of student concern in Saudi university contexts: worry about comprehension, lack of satisfaction with one's reading ability, and unfamiliarity with certain phonics rules. Results also showed that background variables (i.e., experience abroad, knowledge of a third language) and self-perceived proficiency in English reading played a significant role in predicting FL levels of reading anxiety. Implications for foreign language teaching strategies are discussed.

Keywords: language anxiety, English as a foreign language, gender, reading, tertiary education

College students are expected to exhibit excellent reading comprehension skills because the ability to read, comprehend, and interpret texts is a prerequisite for academic success (Grabe & Stoller, 2001; Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2005). The vital function that reading plays in language learning has been well-documented (e.g., Anderson, 1994; Day & Bamford, 1998). Formative research on L2 reading development has identified that knowledge of the target language (vocabulary and grammar) and metacognitive skills are key proficiencies that contribute to competent performance in reading (e.g., Lee & Schallert, 1997; Schoonen et al., 1998; Van Gelderen et al., 2004). Dörnyei (2005) has further highlighted that earlier studies had established that the variables associated with Individual Difference (ID) play a major role in the success of learning a foreign language. Such studies, for example, underscored the importance of those non-linguistic ID variables such as motivation (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2017), global personality traits (Brown et al., 2001; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002), and tolerance to ambiguity (Dewaele & Shan Ip, 2013). Perhaps the one ID variable that has received the most attention is anxiety (e.g., Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz, 2010; Horwitz et al., 1986; Horwitz & Young, 1991; Shao et al., 2013). Of greater significance, and as Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) have conceded, anxiety by now has become a concern at the very heart of research that focuses on second language acquisition.

Despite the lengthy research history, however, foreign language (FL) reading anxiety as an independent construct has not been examined closely until recently (Zhou, 2017). In fact, as several studies have acknowledged, this area of research remains understudied (Ismail, 2015; Sabti et al., 2016; Tien, 2017) with inadequate attention to factors that impact reading anxiety (Chow et al., 2017). It is important to investigate learning anxiety further and more systematically because we know that such a condition usually obstructs the development of second language acquisition and impairs the ability of learners to acquire and retain reading strategies (Ismail, 2015). Therefore, a serious inquiry into the main sources of FL reading anxiety is necessary so teachers are in a more advantageous position to mitigate the apprehension experienced by students of a foreign language (e.g., Aida, 1994; Brantmeier, 2005; Horwitz et al., 1986; Saito et al., 1999). This is particularly relevant in the case of Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in Saudi Arabia who have displayed trends of struggle in their reading performance (Al Nooh & Mosson-McPherson, 2013).

On this account, the present investigation sets out to examine the levels, sources and underlying factors of FL reading anxiety among EFL students at the tertiary level. It will additionally seek to determine the extent to which background variables and self-perceived proficiency in English reading can predict FL reading anxiety.

Literature review

FL anxiety vs. FL reading anxiety

According to Horwitz et al. (1986), foreign language anxiety (FLA) refers to "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). It is associated primarily with speaking and listening since these skills are most affected by anxiety (Králová, 2016). Therefore, the most commonly used instrument to measure the general anxiety of foreign language learners in the classroom is the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986), whose purpose is to account for fretful feelings associated with speaking and listening in the foreign language classroom (Luo, 2014). In the late 1990s, researchers started to examine language skill-specific anxieties, because they are different from general FL classroom anxiety and also distinguishable from each other (Pae, 2013; Xiao & Wong, 2014; Zhang, 2019). The bulk of research on skill-specific anxieties focused primarily on FL writing (e.g., Cheng et al., 1999), listening (e.g., Elkhafaifi, 2005) and to a lesser extent, reading (e.g., Saito et al., 1999). Foreign language reading anxiety is associated with reading passages in the target language. Saito et al. (1999) found a correlation between FL anxiety and FL reading anxiety. They reported that the two constructs share about 40% of the variance. Saito et al. (1999) concluded that "FL reading anxiety is a phenomenon related to, but distinct from, general FL anxiety" (p. 211). In other words, and as clarified by Zhao et al. (2013), instructors do not easily detect anxiety in FL processes of reading. Foreign language reading anxiety varies in its manifestations depending on the target language itself (Saito et al., 1999), whereas generalized language anxiety does not necessarily depend on the identity of the target language. Saito et al. (1999) reported that students of French, Japanese, and Russian exhibited unequal levels of reading anxiety. Learners who find it difficult to read in the target language tend to have higher reading anxiety by comparison to those learners who believe that reading in the target language is an effortless task. The authors concluded that the disparities in FL reading anxiety are likely linked to the perceived difficulty of the target

language. These findings confirm the fact that reading anxiety must be construed more as an independent construct (Wu, 2011).

Individual difference variables and FL reading anxiety

The process of learning a foreign language is mediated by an array of factors including ID variables (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Pawlak, 2019). These ID variables interact with each other and tend to change over time. In other words, they are no longer static attributes of a learner (Dörnyei, 2010). When students are engaged in FL reading, they bring with them their individuality (Pawlak, 2019). The latter can be better understood in relationship to a number of other variables that interact with each other including anxiety. MacIntyre (2017) opines that “anxiety is continuously interacting with a number of other learner, situational, and other factors including linguistic abilities, physiological reactions, self-related appraisals, pragmatics, interpersonal relationships, specific topics being discussed, type of setting in which people are interacting, and so on” (p. 23). For this reason, perhaps Dörnyei (2009, 2010) and DeKeyser (2012) call for more research on the systematic interaction between ID variables. A thorough overview of all variables associated with anxiety goes beyond the scope of the present paper. Only a selected number of variables relevant to the current study will be discussed.

Researchers have identified several ID variables linked to FL reading anxiety such as unfamiliar culture, gender, topic familiarity, experience abroad, and number of foreign languages learned (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2013; Joo & Damron, 2015; Saito et al., 1999; Zhao et al., 2013). Unfamiliar culture for the learner is one of the main causes of FL reading anxiety. Unfamiliar culture refers to the “interaction between the reader and the shared knowledge of the cultural history in the printed materials” (Ahmad et al., 2013, p. 92). Ahmad et al. (2013) pointed out that the lack of cultural understanding prevented students from fully understanding the text. This shortcoming triggers immediate anxiety. On the other hand, Saito et al. (1999) asserted that students who study a language that is very different from their own culture tend to experience lower levels of reading comprehension and increased anxiety. In their study, Ahmad et al. (2013) found that students struggled and thus displayed increased levels of anxiety particularly with texts dealing with cultural modes and representations.

The results of several studies on the correlation between gender and FL reading anxiety have been inconsistent. In a study involving Iraqi high schoolers learning English in Malaysia, Sabti et al. (2016) found that female students reported higher levels of reading anxiety than their male counterparts. Conversely, Shi and Liu (2006) reported that male students had scored significantly higher levels of FL reading anxiety than the female students. The authors attributed this outcome to the competent performance of female students in foreign language tests. Shi and Liu (2006) have argued that Chinese female learners are mostly perceived to be more advanced as foreign language learners, and are capable of becoming more self-reliant in reading in a foreign language by comparison to their male peers (Shi & Liu, 2006). However, other studies have reached divergent conclusions; that there is no significant discrepancy across levels of anxiety among male and female learners. Zhao et al. (2013), for example, have remarked that gender was not a predictor of FL reading anxiety among Chinese students learning EFL. Interestingly enough, the findings of Joo and Damron (2015) reached similar conclusions.

It should be pointed out that the relation between gender and foreign language reading anxiety might be affected not only by the sociocultural context of foreign language learning, but also by other factors such as learner’s familiarity with the topic. Brantmeier (2003) found

that knowledge of a topic influences reading comprehension by gender among intermediate level students of Spanish. Results showed that male and female participants scored higher on reading comprehension tasks for passages with evident levels of self-reported familiarity. As a result, it is likely that the gender group with higher levels of topic familiarity might experience lower levels of reading anxiety. Experience with the target country is another background variable that may be related to the condition of FL reading anxiety. In their study, Zhao et al. (2013) have shown that students who had travelled to China to study Chinese had a lower level of FL reading anxiety when compared to students who had not experienced contact with the target country. However, no difference in anxiety levels was reported between learners who had taken a trip to China for other purposes such as travel, and those who did not travel to China.

Finally, one should not underestimate the role of multilingualism in FL reading anxiety. Reading strategies learned in one language are inevitably transferable to another (Grabe, 2009). Therefore, learners who study several languages will become more experienced readers, and will predictably encounter reduced reading anxiety or even no anxiety at all. In their investigation, Joo and Damron (2015) have concluded that the number of foreign languages acquired predicted levels of reading anxiety among learners.

Self-perceived proficiency in the foreign language

Stringer and Heath (2008) have established from their analysis that there is no causal relationship between self-perception of performance and real academic achievement. Nevertheless, previous studies (Dewaele & Al-Saraj, 2015; Liu & Chen, 2013; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Thompson & Lee, 2013) have determined that self-perceived proficiency in the FL is one of the most significant predictors of FLA. Individuals who feel proficient in the target language tend to experience lower levels of FLA, while those who perceive themselves less competent in the target language typically suffer from higher levels of anxiety. In their study involving Saudi EFL students, Dewaele and Al-Saraj (2015) found that self-perceived proficiency was the strongest overall predictor of FLA. Participants who felt more proficient in oral English exhibited lower levels of FLA in English.

Previous Research on FL Reading Anxiety

Most of the research related to FL reading anxiety has focused on speakers of Asian languages, namely Chinese and Korean, and to a lesser extent, Spanish and Arabic. Zhou (2017) investigated the FL reading anxiety level of learners of Chinese as a foreign language in the United States, and identified the major sources of FL reading anxiety as worry about unfamiliar topics, unknown pronunciation, and feeling uncomfortable reading out loud in class. Joo and Damron (2015) studied FL anxiety among students enrolled in Korean language courses at a university in the United States. Findings indicated that students who took advanced Korean classes felt less anxious about reading than those students in lower reading levels. No difference was found between levels of reading anxiety among males and females.

In the Arabic EFL context, Al-Shboul et al. (2013) examined the factors of FL reading anxiety among EFL Jordanian students with different levels of proficiency in English. Their study revealed that unfamiliar topics, grappling with a new culture, and unknown vocabulary were the three main sources of reading anxiety.

The very few studies involving Spanish learners have reported mixed results. Sellers (2000), for example, reported a direct relationship between FLA and FL reading anxiety. In other words, students with higher levels of FLA exhibited higher levels of FL reading anxiety. Sellers also found a negative correlation between reading anxiety and L2 reading comprehension. These results were confirmed in Young's (2000) inquiry, which involves a group of second-year college-level Spanish students who were instructed to rate four different reading passages in Spanish. Results revealed a significant relationship between participants' reading anxiety and their level of understanding from two of the rated passages. This is really to say that the higher the reading anxiety is, the lower self-rating and understanding of the target texts become. Whilst these investigations have reported participants experiencing FL reading anxiety, Brantmeier (2005) uncovered contradictory outcomes. In fact, Brantmeier found that participants of advanced learners of Spanish did not experience FL reading anxiety, and therefore, they concluded that post reading activities could trigger anxiety.

To conclude, it has become clear that previous experimental studies have focused primarily on identifying sources of reading anxiety, and on the relationship between reading anxiety and reading comprehension. However, our study has aimed to underscore the relevance of background variables and self-perceived proficiency in the target language in predicting FL reading anxiety. These variables have not received enough attention in the context of FL learning among native speakers of Arabic, and in the specific linguistic and cultural contexts of the Arab Peninsula.

The present study

This preliminary study investigates reading anxiety in the EFL context of Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the relationship between self-perceived proficiency in FL reading with FL reading anxiety merits continued exploration. With EFL students in the tertiary level, the present study examines the underlying factors of FL reading anxiety first. Second, it measures FL reading anxiety levels and its sources among both male and female participants. Finally, this study determines to what extent background variables and self-perceived proficiency in English reading can predict FL reading anxiety. On this account, the research addresses the following questions:

- RQ1. What are the underlying factors of FL reading anxiety experienced by Saudi EFL learners?
- RQ2. What are the learners' levels of FL reading anxiety?
- RQ3. Do male and female EFL students exhibit similar levels of FL reading anxiety?
- RQ4. To what extent do learner background variables (i.e., experience abroad and knowledge of a third language) and self-perceived proficiency in English reading predict FL reading anxiety?

Method

Participants

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants. Questionnaires were administered in the classrooms of two public universities in Saudi Arabia. Table 1 provides basic information

about the participants. About 600 students were invited to participate in the study; then only 225 undergraduate students (82 males; 143 females) EFL students volunteered to answer the questionnaires. Forty (17.8%) were from the elementary level; 68 (30.2%) were from the pre-intermediate level; 78 (34.7%) were from the intermediate level and 39 (17.3%) were from the advanced level. The age of students enrolled in English language courses ranged between 19 and 29 years. French is reported to be the only third language alongside Arabic and English. Participants self-rated their proficiency in reading comprehension in English (see Table 2).

Table 1*Descriptive Statistics of the Participants*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Year	Freshman	30	13.3
	Sophomore	55	24.4
	Junior	71	31.6
	Senior	69	30.7
Level	Elementary	40	17.8
	Pre-intermediate	68	30.2
	Intermediate	78	34.7
	Advanced	39	17.3
Knowledge of a third language	Yes	173	76.9
	No	52	23.1
Travel to an English-speaking country	Yes	150	67
	No	75	33

Table 2*Self-perceived Proficiency in Reading (max = 10)*

Level	Frequency	Percentage
1	4	1.8
2	2	0.9
3	6	2.7
4	12	5.3
5	37	16.4
6	31	13.8
7	58	25.8
8	36	16
9	21	9.3
10	18	8

Instruments

Self-report instruments are used to collect data. Below are details about each instrument.

Background questionnaire. This questionnaire was designed to elicit information about the participants' age, gender, and year in college, knowledge of a third language, and whether they had an opportunity to travel to an English-speaking country. Information about the length of travel was not collected. In order to measure self-perceived proficiency in the target

language, participants were instructed to rate their proficiency in reading in English on a scale from 1 to 10 following the same method used in previous studies (e.g., Bensalem, 2018; Santos et al., 2017; Thompson & Lee, 2013).

Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS). Reading anxiety was assessed using an adapted version of the FLRAS instrument designed by Saito et al. (1999). Participants responded to the 20-item questionnaire using a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = 'strongly agree'. The Cronbach's α analysis of scale reliability was .79, which indicated that the instrument was a reliable measure of reading anxiety. The anxiety score was the total sum of students' ratings of all 20 items. A high score represented higher levels of FL reading anxiety. Possible scores ranged from 20 to 100.

Procedure

Data were collected online. Consent was gained from the students prior to participation. Participants who volunteered to answer the survey were briefed about the purpose of the study. They were assured of the confidentiality of all shared background information. Completion of the questionnaire was anonymous. Both questionnaires were translated into Arabic by a professor of translation. The researcher worked with the assumption that an Arabic version would increase the participation rate as students were more comfortable with Arabic. The survey took about 10 minutes to complete.

Data analysis

In order to analyze the collected data, descriptive statistics were used to summarize participants' responses. A Varimax rotated exploratory analysis was performed in order to unravel the underlying factors of FL reading anxiety of Saudi EFL learners. Additionally, an independent t-test was conducted to examine any statistically significant difference between the FLRAS scores of male and female participants. Finally, a multiple regression analysis was performed in order to assess the simultaneous effect of the learners' background variables and self-perceived proficiency in English reading, and to determine their contribution to the prediction of FL reading anxiety.

Results

RQ1. What are the underlying factors of FL reading anxiety experienced by Saudi EFL learners?

A Varimax rotated exploratory analysis examined the underlying factors of FL reading anxiety. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(190) = 1569.58, p < 0.001$). Therefore, the use of this factor analytic model on the data was appropriate. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy showed that the strength of the relationships among variables was high (KMO = .88), and thus the data were suited for factor analysis. Only items loaded onto a factor with a value of 0.3 or higher were included. On this account, Item 14 was eliminated from the analysis. Initially, five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were generated. Based on the scree test, parallel analysis, and the interpretability of the factor solution, only three factors were retained. The pattern matrix generated three factors, namely Factor 1: worry about comprehension, Factor 2: lack of satisfaction in reading ability, and Factor 3: unfamiliar phonics rules (see Table 3). These factors explained 49.2% of the

variances. Factor 1 was a robust factor made up of nine items (Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 15), with a high eigenvalue of 6.41, and it accounted for 32.04% of the variance in the data. It included worry about comprehension (Item 1), unfamiliar topics (Item 5), unknown grammar (Item 6), and lack of familiarity with vocabulary (Item 7). Factor 2 comprised six items (Items 9, 13, 17, 18, 19, and 20) and had a probability of 9%. It highlights students' lack of satisfaction in their reading abilities (Item 18, I am not satisfied with my current level of reading ability in English), which may explain the students' tendency to resort to literal translation when engaged in reading a text (Item 9: "I generally resort to word-by-word translation when I'm reading a passage in English").

Table 3

FLRAS Factor Analysis with Varimax Rotation (N = 225)

Items	Worry about comprehension	Lack of satisfaction in reading ability	Unfamiliar phonics rules	h^2
1. When I don't understand for sure what I'm reading in English, I get frustrated.	.514			.271
2. I often understand the words of a text in English but I can't grasp what the author is saying.	.482			.409
3. When I'm reading a text in English, I often get very confused so much so I can't remember the content I'm reading.	.703			.591
4. It is very intimidating to read a whole page in English.	.707			.630
5. When I read a text in English with an unfamiliar topic I get nervous.	.693			.569
6. When I read a passage in English and come across unknown grammar I get upset.	.778			.603
7. I get confused and nervous if I don't understand each word of the text that I'm reading in English.	.779			.626
8. It is annoying to come across words that are hard to pronounce when reading a text in English.	.641			.488
15. Learning how to read is the most difficult task of learning English.	.582			.427
9. I generally resort to word-by-word translation when I'm reading a passage in English.		.477		.290
13. I read passages in English with confidence.*		.7.00		.539
17. I would rather read English to myself than read aloud as that makes me feel uncomfortable.		.598		.390
18. I am not satisfied with my current level of reading ability in English.		.666		.462
19. I'm not familiar with Anglo-Saxon culture and ideas.		.709		.689
20. Knowledge about Anglo-Saxon history and culture is necessary in order to be able to read English.		.668		.585
10. I usually forget what I'm reading			.778	.622

about once I pass the unfamiliar letters in English.		
11. I am concerned about phonics rules I have to learn in order to read a text in English.	.728	.594
12. Reading a passage in English is fun.*	.696	.531
16. I would be more interested in learning to speak English rather than learning to read English.	.574	.381
Eigenvalue	1.65	
% Variance	8.24	

RQ2. What are the learners' levels of FL reading anxiety?

The means and deviations for participants' responses to each FLRAS item were calculated to measure the level of FL reading anxiety of the participants as shown in Table 4. The mean reading anxiety score for the 225 participants was 66.31 ($SD = 10.26$). The range of mean scores was 43-92 (see Table 5). Following an adapted version of common scale used by several researchers (e.g., Jee, 2016; Tallon, 2014; Xiao & Wong, 2014), participants had three levels of anxiety. Mean scores between 20 and 55 can be identified as low anxiety; mean scores between 51 and 66 would be considered an average anxiety; and mean scores between 67 and above would represent high scores.

As displayed in Table 4, the majority of students (52.44%) experienced high levels of FL reading anxiety. However, only 16.9% had low levels of FL reading anxiety, while 30.66% experienced average levels of anxiety. Most participants had mid to high levels of anxiety (83.1%).

Table 4

FL Reading Anxiety Scores on FLRAS

Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. When I don't understand for sure what I'm reading in English, I get frustrated.	4.01	.98
2. I often understand the words of a text in English but I can't grasp what the author is saying.	3.26	1.09
3. When I'm reading a text in English, I often get very confused so much so I can't remember the content I'm reading.	3.10	1.21
4. It is very intimidating to read a whole page in English.	2.87	1.31
5. When I read a text in English with an unfamiliar topic I get nervous.	3.07	1.26
6. When I read a passage in English and come across unknown grammar I get upset.	3.63	1.08
7. I get confused and nervous if I don't understand each word of the text that I'm reading in English.	3.49	1.18
8. It is annoying to come across words that are hard to pronounce when reading a text in English.	3.50	1.14
9. I generally resort to word-by-word translation when I'm reading a passage in English.	3.15	1.17
10. I usually forget what I'm reading about once I pass the unfamiliar letters in English.	4.04	.90
11. I am concerned about phonics rules I have to learn in order to read a text in English.	3.95	.99
12. Reading a passage in English is fun.*	4.38	.81
13. I read passages in English with confidence.*	2.41	1.32
14. Reading English texts becomes easy once one gets used to it.*	3.73	1.17
15. Learning how to read is the most difficult task of learning English.	3.34	1.35
16. I would be more interested in learning to speak English rather than learning to read English.	3.52	1.29
17. I would rather read English to myself than read aloud as that makes me feel uncomfortable.	2.72	1.16
18. I am not satisfied with my current level of reading ability in English.	3.11	1.21
19. I'm not familiar with Anglo-Saxon culture and ideas.	2.62	1.16
20. Knowledge about Anglo-Saxon history and culture is necessary in order to be able to read English.	2.48	1.21

Note. *Items are reverse-coded

Table 5

FL Reading Anxiety Levels for Participants

Level	Means	Level of FL reading anxiety	Frequency	Percentage
1. Low	43-55	Low	38	16.9
2. Medium	51-66	Moderate	69	30.66
3. High	67-92	High	116	52.44

RQ3. Do male and female EFL students exhibit similar levels of FL reading anxiety?

As displayed in Table 6, results of the two-independent samples t-test show that mean FLRAS scores differ between males ($M = 64.23$, $SD = 10.55$, $n = 82$) and females ($M = 67.50$, $SD = 9.93$, $n = 143$) at the .05 level of significance ($t = 2.34$, $df = 223$, $p < .05$). On average, females tend to have higher levels of FL reading anxiety than males.

Table 6

Results of T-test and Descriptive Statistics for FLRAS Scores for Male and Female Participants

	Gender						<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	Male			Female				
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>			
64.23	10.55	82	67.5	9.93	143	2.32*	223	

Note. * $p < .05$

RQ4. To what extent do learner background variables (experience abroad and knowledge of a third language) and self-perceived proficiency in English reading predict FL reading anxiety?

Multiple regression analysis was performed to investigate the effect of three variables: experience abroad, knowledge of a third language, and self-perceived proficiency in English reading ($M = 66.79$, $SD = 20.06$) on the participants' FL reading anxiety level. Table 7 shows that the presented model is significant since there was a significant relationship between the three variables and reading anxiety ($p = .001$; $R^2 = .155$; $R = 0.393$). R^2 was .155, which means experience abroad, knowledge of a third language, and self-perceived proficiency in reading combined to explain 15.3% of the variance in the participants' reading anxiety. This indicates a small effect size according to Cohen's (1988) criteria for assessing the predictive power of independent variables. In other words, there is a small relationship between experience abroad, knowledge of a third language, and self-perceived proficiency in reading and FL reading anxiety. Among the predictor variables, self-perceived proficiency in reading ($\beta = -.309$, $p < 0.01$) had the highest relative impact on reading anxiety. Experience abroad ($.180$, $p < 0.05$) was the second highest significant predictor of FL reading anxiety. Knowledge of a third language ($\beta = -.155$, $p < 0.05$) was the lowest significant predictor of FL reading anxiety, suggesting that learners with knowledge of other languages are more likely to experience less reading anxiety.

Table 7*Regression Model for Predicting FL Reading Anxiety*

Variable	<i>b</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Self-perceived proficiency in English reading	-0.164	-0.309	-4.215	0.001
Experience abroad	5.306	0.18	2.508	0.013
Knowledge of a third language	-3.609	-0.155	-2.137	0.034

Note. Model $R = .393$; $R^2 = .155$; Adjusted $R^2 = .140$; *Std. Error* = 9.641; $F = 10.366$; $p = < .01$

Discussion

The present study has reached several important findings that may help increase our knowledge about the construct of reading anxiety. First, it reveals important outcomes related to the underlying factors of FL reading anxiety. Factor analysis yielded three factors: Factor 1: worry about comprehension; Factor 2: lack of satisfaction in reading ability, and Factor 3: unfamiliar phonics rules. The first factor demonstrates worry about comprehension, which stems from unfamiliar topics, unknown grammar, and lack of familiarity with vocabulary. Unfamiliar topics proved a source of anxiety among foreign language learners as demonstrated by previous studies (Brantmeier, 2003; Zhao et al., 2013). However, most of the elements of anxiety related to comprehension stem from linguistic features. Zhao et al., (2013) and Zhou (2017) identified such features in their investigation to be a noticeable problem for foreign language learners. One of the plausible reasons for the persistent presence of comprehension worry is that there is a linguistic distance between English and Arabic, the latter being the participants' native language. Arabic has a non-Roman script. Unlike learners of languages who use the same script as English such as French and Spanish, Arab learners may need more extensive processing in order to extract meaning of new words (Winke et al., 2013). It is a similar problem for learners of Japanese (Saito et al., 1999) and Korean (Joo & Damron, 2015) as well as learners of Chinese as a FL (Zhou, 2017). Zhao et al. (2013) argued that "unlike the English-speaking learners of French and Russian, who can utilize their familiar word decoding skills in reading the target languages and thus experience less FL reading anxiety than general FL anxiety, the different writing system of Chinese makes the familiar word recognition skills of English-speaking learners inadequate for the unfamiliar scripts and thus reading in Chinese is a very challenging activity for them" (p. 772).

Lack of satisfaction in reading ability is the second prominent factor reported by this study, reflected in the participants' tendency to translate the reading passages word for word in an attempt to improve their reading performance. While literal translation may not be the best strategy, it raises the question of whether participants were being taught the proper strategies in the classroom that would equip them to tackle reading difficulties.

Finally, unfamiliar phonics rules emerged as a new factor that influenced the reading anxiety of participants. Making the connection between written words in English and how they are pronounced proved to be a source of anxiety for EFL learners. Unlike Arabic, which has a system of short vowels that helps achieve accurate pronunciation, English spelling and pronunciation are at times unpredictable. In fact, English has many exceptions to its spelling rules and multiple ways of spelling the same sound. Obviously, adequate practice is needed

to have a good command of phonics rules so that reading in English becomes less intimidating.

Another preliminary finding revealed by this study is that the majority of Saudi EFL students exhibited medium to high levels of reading anxiety. This result could be explained by the educational setting in Saudi Arabia, where reading is not taken seriously by students (George, 2014). Saudi students do not read enough (Al-Qahtani, 2016), because they lack the motivation to read (Rajab & Al-Sadi, 2015). In fact, Saudi students show little interest in reading both in Arabic and in English (Al-Mansour & Al-Shorman, 2011). They prefer to read social media posts rather than books (Rajab & Al-Sadi, 2015).

Third, the findings reveal that gender is associated with reading anxiety. In fact, female students showed higher levels of reading anxiety than their male peers. This result concurs with the findings of Shi and Liu (2006) involving Chinese learners and Sabti et al. (2016) in the Iraqi secondary school context. Recent studies have reported that Saudi females had higher levels of FL anxiety than their male counterparts (see Bensalem, 2018). Song (2018) attributes this condition of high levels of anxiety among female students to cultural norms in Saudi Arabia. Girls strive to maintain an ideal image of themselves as well-regarded women, which in turn may prevent them from engaging in academic activities. Song (2018) claims that it even affected their classroom participation. This seems to be the case in patriarchal societies such as Korea, where women are expected to take submissive roles (Park & French, 2013).

Finally, the present study lends support to the role played by the learner's background variables (experience abroad, and knowledge of a third language) and self-perceived proficiency in English reading in predicting FL reading anxiety. Knowledge of a third language was a significant predictor of FL reading anxiety. This outcome suggests that learners who know other languages tend to experience less reading anxiety than monolinguals. This result corroborates the findings of Joo and Damron (2015) who demonstrated that the number of foreign languages learned was a significant predictor of reading anxiety among college students learning the Korean language as a FL. Thus, this study provides more empirical evidence for establishing the role played by multilingualism in alleviating anxiety, as demonstrated by previous research (e.g., Dewaele, 2007, 2010; Thompson & Khawaja, 2015; Thompson & Lee, 2013). Multilinguals tend to become better language learners (Kemp, 2001) with more experience in language learning (Cenoz, 2013; Santos et al., 2017).

Similarly, experience abroad was a predictor of FL reading anxiety. This finding is in line with previous studies (Aida, 1994; Zhao et al., 2013) that reported a positive correlation between experience abroad and reduced levels of anxiety. However, such a result diverges from Zhou's (2017) recently reported study findings. She argued that the purpose of travel determines its level of impact on anxiety. They found that traveling to a country where the target language is spoken for non-educational purposes such as sightseeing or visiting friends does not lead to a decline in anxiety. On the other hand, students who had a study abroad experience in China were able to reap the benefits of attending language classes. They had the opportunity to be involved in many reading activities, which led to a reduction of reading anxiety in the Chinese language. Similarly, in this study, participants were instructed to report on whether they had travelled to an English-speaking country for any purpose.

Self-perceived proficiency in English reading was another significant predictor of FL reading

anxiety. The current study provides evidence to the significant role played by self-perceived proficiency in predicting FL reading anxiety. Learners who highly rate their proficiency in the target language tend to experience lower levels of FL reading anxiety. Previous studies (e.g., Bensalem, 2018; Dewaele, 2007; Dewaele & Al Saraj, 2015) have demonstrated that self-perceived proficiency was a predictor of anxiety.

Pedagogical implications

Foreign language teachers should develop awareness among FL students about the existence of reading anxiety, which may not be easy to conclude, unlike speaking anxiety. Anxiety among female Saudi students is even harder to identify because of constraints on expressing their feelings due to cultural pressures. Therefore, FL teachers have a vital role to play in reducing anxiety triggers. They should prepare students for the potential difficulties they may face while engaging in the learning of reading. This strategy may alleviate the effect of anxiety among highly anxious learners (Sellers, 2000). Second, the inclination of participants of the current study to translate the meaning of every single word may suggest teaching pedagogy that emphasizes less efficacious reading strategies. Foreign language instructors should instead stress such strategies as guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words using semantic and syntactic clues, as well as deducing meaning from context in order to lessen reading anxiety. As learners develop solid strategies to improve their reading, they become more independent and less anxiety-ridden readers.

Limitations and directions for future research

This preliminary study has several limitations. First, even though the sample size was large enough to generalize results, the outcomes should be interpreted with reservation, given that the data were collected from only two universities in Saudi Arabia. Second, only self-reporting surveys were used to collect data. Self-reporting could affect reliability because students could be biased when reporting on their own experiences. Furthermore, some of the elements associated with the learners' background such as their reading proficiency and the purpose of travel to English speaking countries were not necessarily controlled. Another limitation is that the three analyzed variables (experience abroad, knowledge of a third language, and self-perceived proficiency in English reading) only accounted for 15.3% of the total variance in the participants' reading anxiety.

On these accounts, we suggest future studies should examine the EFL learners with different levels of reading proficiency, especially advanced students who are more likely to read a wide range of texts with different styles and topics as suggested by Zhao et al. (2013). It would be revealing to examine if textual genres have a relationship with FL reading anxiety. Another study, for example, could focus on the potential connection between reading anxiety and other types of anxiety, namely writing and speaking. Such an investigation would contribute to the literature on reading anxiety among EFL learners whose native language has a non-Roman script. Finally, since most Saudi students lack the necessary reading habits in L1 reading (Al-Qahtani, 2016), a future inquiry could examine the relationships between anxiety and reading performance covering both L1 and L2. Above all, given the fact that the ID variables are not static, it would be illuminating to see their impact on FL reading anxiety over the course of a semester or two.

Conclusion

This study has explored the reading anxiety profile of EFL students at the tertiary level in the Saudi educational context. It lends further support to previous research, which evidenced that reading anxiety is a prominent problem among FL learners whose native language has a non-Roman script, with females experiencing higher levels of anxiety than males. The study has also demonstrated that knowledge of a third language predicts FL reading anxiety. Key factors underlying FL reading anxiety were brought to light. The researcher focused on uneasiness about comprehension, lack of satisfaction in reading ability, and unfamiliar phonics rules that appear to explain the challenges in reading among EFL students in Saudi Arabia. The results point clearly to the need for foreign language instructors to create a more conducive classroom learning environment that may reduce the levels of anxiety experienced by students, and possibly supply them with instrumental strategies to become resourceful readers.

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