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Indonesian Theology Students' Foreign Language Reading Anxiety and Reading Performance: A Correlational Study

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Abstract

This study investigated Theology students' Foreign Language Reading Anxiety (FLRA) and the relationship between their FLRA and their reading achievement. A number of 63 Theology students participated in this quantitative study. A questionnaire developed by Saito et al. (1999) was used in obtaining the data for the study. The study was conducted to fill the void in the literature on the scarcity of empirical research on FLRA in the Indonesian English for Specific Purpose (ESP) context, especially among Theology students who were required to read a lot of English text and thus were very likely susceptible to experience reading anxiety. The study found that in general, the students experienced a medium level of FLRA. Low self-perceived reading competence and the unfamiliar topic of reading passages were reported to be attributed to higher FLRA levels whilst the formation of reading habits, reading exposure, and reading strategies were believed to reduce reading anxiety. This study further found a statistically significant negative correlation between the students' FLRA and their reading achievement, albeit the strength being weak. This finding suggested that students' FLRA could be a factor hampering learning. The present study's specific finding on the possible positive impacts of reading strategies and the duration of reading exposure may indicate the urgency to incorporate these two aspects in the instructional design of English reading classes. Based on the findings, contributions, limitations, and suggested future studies were formulated.

Keywords: FLRA, reading performance, theology students, ESP, correlation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign language learning includes specific processes involving public practices and trial and error and as such it is often considered tedious by learners (Gusman, 2004; Trang, 2012). In this tedious process, learners can then consider learning a foreign language pressure and this leads to anxiety (Horwitz, 2001). Compared to other classes, language classes are often considered the most anxiety-provoking (Trang, 2012). Hence, it is quite common to find learners who are good in other classes or subjects struggling in learning foreign languages (Subekti, 2018).

Though speaking class is often regarded as the most anxiety-provoking (Trang, 2012), reading class and learning reading skills can also instil learners' anxiety (Saito et al., 1999). Anxiety experienced by learners in reading has been defined as Foreign Language Reading Anxiety (FLRA) (Saito et al., 1999). It is referred to as a feeling of worry and apprehension when learners attempt to read foreign language texts (Muhlis, 2017). When learners experience reading anxiety, they tend to have low self-perceived competence, feel hopeless, and overwhelmed (Aisyah, 2017). Hence, FLRA is seen as an essential influencing factor in learning and it can determine learners' reading achievement (Lien, 2011; Sari, 2017).

Recognition of the important role of FLRA in learning could be seen through numerous studies investigating FLRA in various language learning contexts (Al-Shboul et al., 2013; Cetinkaya, 2011; Chow et al., 2018; Estrada-Madronero, 2019; Jafarigohar, 2012; Stawiarska, 2013; Tsai & Li, 2012). In the Indonesian context, FLRA studies are not totally new as several studies have been conducted in this field at various educational levels (Aisyah, 2017; Al Faruq, 2019; Mawardah et al., 2019; Muhlis, 2017; Sari, 2017).

Despite the possible contributions of the previous studies on FLRA, there are several points worth further investigation. Specific in the Indonesian context, for example, studies conducted by Aisyah (2017) and Muhlis (2017) may have given contribution in the field of FLRA among Indonesian Middle School students whilst studies conducted by Sari (2017) and Mawardah et al. (2019) may have given contribution on investigating English Department students' FLRA. However, little is known on the FLRA phenomenon among English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students at the university level. The learning demand of ESP is higher than that of regular English classes (Nazarinasab et al., 2014) and may be different from that of reading classes in the English Department, and thus ESP learners could be very prone to anxiety. Besides, the mentioned previous studies in the Indonesian context mainly focused on learners' anxiety levels. In comparison, this study is designed to investigate the possible relationship between learners' reading anxiety and their actual reading achievement.

To be more specific, investigating ESP learners in the Theology department could be worthwhile. It is because most of these learners will be pastors or ministers, future religious leaders in society after they graduate. Hence, to investigate their possible learning difficulty, reading anxiety in this case, and facilitate their learning, could have future merits. It is related to the demand of the profession in which pastors or ministers should read a lot and read more (Hussey, 2015). In the process, they may have some problems in comprehending some foreign language texts (Hussey, 2015). To absorb some preaching materials, for example, they need to read a lot of foreign-language texts. For this reason, they might experience reading anxiety in reading class.

Based on the rationales, this study seeks to answer two research questions. First, to what extent do Theology students experience reading anxiety? Second, what is the relationship between their reading anxiety and their achievement in English for Theology reading class? Hence, the study has two objectives. The first is to investigate Theology students' level of reading anxiety and the second is to investigate the relationship between this level of reading anxiety and their achievement in reading class.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading poses challenges for the second language (L2) learners. Though speaking class is often considered the most-anxiety provoking (Subekti, 2018), learners also feel anxious to a varying degree in reading class and this anxiety could be one of the main factors affecting their reading achievement (Saito et al., 1999). Related to this, Hermida (2009) found that the participants regarded reading as the most difficult skill to master in L2 learning. She further found that students' reading anxiety harmed their cognitive processing in reading. The participants in her study were unable to process some information in texts that they read due to experiencing anxiety, suggesting that reading anxiety negatively affected the participants' reading comprehension.

There have been several early studies investigating the relationship between students' FLRA and their L2 reading achievement in the different learning contexts (e.g.: Jafarigohar, 2012; Tsai & Li, 2012). Both mentioned studies found a statistically significant negative relationship between learners' FLRA and their L2 reading achievement, with the strength of correlation being weak. Additionally, in the Taiwanese context, Tien (2017) also found that anxiety negatively contributed to the reading achievement of students who had a low reading level, suggesting that low proficient learners were more prone to the debilitating effects of reading anxiety than the higher-achieving ones. In more recent studies, Chow et al. (2018) in a Chinese university context and Estrada-Madronero (2019) in a high school context in the Philippines also found that reading anxiety and reading performances were in general negatively correlated.

Several studies on FLRA have also been conducted in the Indonesian context from various education levels (Aisyah, 2017; Al Faruq, 2019; Mawardah et al., 2019; Muhlis, 2017; Sari, 2017). Both Aisyah (2017) and Muhlis (2017) found that their senior high school participants experienced a medium level of FLRA. In line with that, the other three studies conducted at the university level also found that in general learners were medium-anxiety readers (Al Faruq, 2019; Mawardah et al., 2019; Sari, 2017). This may suggest that thus far, Indonesian learners irrespective of their education levels experienced a medium level of FLRA.

Related to the FLRA level, furthermore, Soltani, and Malaee (2015) stated that students facing linguistic difficulty when trying to comprehend reading texts tended to have higher FLRA. Learners may not be familiar with the topics of the reading texts and may not have sufficient background knowledge to help them comprehend the texts. These factors could cause anxiety (Soltani & Malaee, 2015). The unfamiliarity of topics as an anxiety trigger has also been reported by several other studies (e.g.: Al-

Sohbani, 2018; Estrada-Madronero, 2019; Saito et al., 1999; Sparks et al., 2018; Zhang, 2000).

Self-confidence and self-assurance may also play a role in affecting learners' FLRA level. Lack of self-confidence makes learners feel afraid of making mistakes (Aisyah, 2017) if they are not familiar with the topics (Estrada-Madronero, 2019). When learners feel unsure whether or not they are capable, they also tend to excessively judge themselves negatively (Al-Shboul et al., 2013; Monobe et al., 2017) and this tends to instil the anxiety even more.

In comparison, there were several studies in various learning contexts that found that learners were quite confident in reading. Studies by Cetinkaya (2011) in Turkey, Stawiarska (2013) in Poland, and Al-Sohbani (2018) in Yemen were the examples. This self-confidence in reading was obtained from three to five years of L2 reading exposure, suggesting that learners need to be familiarised with reading activities for them to develop confidence. With familiarisation and being accustomed to reading regularly, learners can form a reading habit in which reading becomes a pattern of behaviour (Khoirunnisa & Safitri, 2018). The good reading habit, Daniel et al. (2017) mentioned, helps learners to have effective study skills facilitating them to comprehend learning materials better. Hence, learners with reading habits may likely have lower reading anxiety. It could also be attributed to learners' getting familiar with various reading strategies during reading exposure and the formation of reading habits. Zeynali et al. (2017) proposed that the use of reading strategy is one of the effective ways to identify students' mood and anxiety levels that can help them to deal with their problems in reading. The use of reading strategy can be more emphasised in interactive activities in which learners collaborate with peers to work on reading tasks (Zeynali et al., 2017).

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design

The study used quantitative methods to answer the research questions by distributing FLRAS questionnaires developed by Saito et al. (1999). This choice of method was popular in the FLRA field. There have been many previous studies on FLRA conducted quantitatively using Saito et al. (1999) FLRAS questionnaires (e.g.: Chow et al., 2018; Mawardah et al., 2019; Sari, 2017; Tsai & Li, 2012; Zhao et al., 2013). The FLRAS used in the present study consisted of ten items. The participants were required to give one of the following responses: "Strongly Agree" (equal to 4), "Agree" (equal to 3), "Disagree" (equal to 2), and "Strongly disagree" (equal to 1). The option 'neutral' was not provided in the questionnaire because, to the best of our knowledge, the participants would more likely choose a 'neutral' option rather than report their actual opinion. In the present study, the ten FLRA questionnaire items had .77 Cronbach's alpha coefficient, indicating that the internal reliability was quite high because it was close to one (1).

The Theology students' reading grades were obtained from the English for Theology classes' teachers per the student participants' consent to participate in the present study. The grades were the grades that had been collected in the class up to the middle of the even semester of the 2019/2020 academic year. The results of the

questionnaires and the participants' grades were recorded and processed in SPSS. This study used descriptive statistics to find the answer to the first research question about students' level of reading anxiety in the form of a mean, maximum and minimum, and percentage. Moreover, this study used a correlation formula to find the answer to the second research question on the relationship between students' FLRA and their reading achievement.

3.2 Research Participants

The participants were 63 Theology students from three different English for Theology classes at a university in a major city in Indonesia in the second semester of the 2019/2020 academic year. The participants were in the fourth semester of their study at the Theology Department. There were 34 male participants (54%) and 29 female participants (29%). The minimum age of the participants was 18, whilst the maximum was 26 ($SD = 1.75$). The selection of the participants at this university was based on convenience sampling, in which participants were selected per our convenience in terms of access (Dornyei, 2007; Gray, 2014) with Indonesian Theology students taking English classes at the university level as the whole population. Additionally, English for Theology class students were selected because of their extensive exposure to English reading prior to this study. Among other Theology students taking reading classes at the same university at the time, these participants had been exposed to English reading classes for the longest period. Before they took English for Theology class, these students had passed three different reading classes in three semesters, Active Reading class in the first semester, Integrated Reading class in the second semester, and Introduction to English Theology class in the third semester. Hence, these student participants had obtained four different reading classes in the last two years.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

The participants were given a consent form that was attached to each questionnaire to maintain the participants' voluntary participation and no coercion principle (Israel & Hay, 2006). It contained the purposes of the study, demands, and risks (Israel & Hay, 2006). When given the questionnaires, the students had choices about whether to participate. If they were willing to participate, they could put their signature in the consent form. However, if they did not want to be involved in this study, they could ignore it. The students' grades were given per the returned and signed questionnaires.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the following sections, the results of each research objective are presented along with the analysis of results.

4.1 The Extent of Theology Students Experiencing Reading Anxiety

The mean of participants' responses on each questionnaire item could be observed in Table 1 whilst the complete result of the participants' responses could be observed in the Appendix.

Table 1. The means of participants' responses to FLRA questionnaire items.

Item Number	Mean
1	3.00
2	2.75
3	2.35
4	2.24
5	2.81
6	2.70
7	2.76
8	2.37
9	2.40
10	2.03

The mean score of the total ten questionnaire items was 25.39 ($SD = 3.86$), indicating that the participants' responses were mostly on "Agree" and "Disagree" options, suggesting that the students generally had a medium FLRA level. As could be seen in Table 1, nine items had mean scores lower than 3.00 and only one item yielded a mean score of 3.00. It indicated that in the majority of the items, students showed lower to medium anxiety levels in reading. The finding on the medium composite level of reading anxiety was similar to the results of five previous studies in the Indonesian context across different education levels (Aisyah, 2017; Mawardah et al., 2019; Muhlis, 2017; Sari, 2017). The similar findings between the present study and those of studies by Aisyah (2017) and Muhlis (2017) in junior and senior high school contexts respectively were quite surprising. The present study's participants had, at the very least, more reading exposure than the participants in these two previous studies.

Hence, it was assumed that the present study's participants would have a lower level of reading anxiety than that of the participants in the studies conducted by Aisyah (2017) and Muhlis (2017). However, the reading demand for the present study's participants was higher than that of the junior and senior high school participants in both previous studies. Despite having more extensive reading exposure, the present study's participants still experienced a certain degree of anxiety. Furthermore, the similar findings on the participants' medium-anxiety level between the present study and that of studies conducted by Sari (2017) and Mawardah et al. (2019) in the English Department contexts may suggest that the participants in these studies had relatively same high demand of reading in L2, the present study's participants being pre-service pastors or ministers and those of the two previous studies being pre-service English teachers, both requiring a lot of reading in L2.

As seen in Table 1, items number one and five had the highest mean scores. Item number one yielded a mean score of 3.00, whilst item number five yield a mean score of 2.81. Furthermore, item numbers three and ten produced the lowest mean scores, item number three at 2.24 whilst item number ten at 2.03. These four top and bottom results would be explained further.

First, item number one, “I feel anxious when I am not sure with what I am reading in English” had the highest mean score of 3.00, which indicated that the students felt anxious when they felt unsure whether they understood what they were reading in English. It may be caused by a lack of confidence. According to [Aisyah \(2017\)](#), lack of confidence in reading will increase learners’ anxiety and affect their reading comprehension negatively. Furthermore, this lack of assurance in reading leads learners excessively to judge themselves negatively ([Monobe et al., 2017](#)). The present study’s result was in line with the result of the study conducted by [Al-Shboul et al. \(2013\)](#) in the Jordanian context. In that study, it was found that learners also felt anxious when they were not sure about the passage they read. It may indicate that EFL learners in the Indonesian and Jordanian contexts faced this similar challenge in reading. They felt nervous because they did not always know what they were reading. In contrast, this result was different from the results of several previous studies (e.g.: [Al-Sohbani, 2018](#); [Cetinkaya, 2011](#); [Stawiarska, 2013](#)). These studies found that their participants felt confident with what they were reading because they believed that English was easy to comprehend. The differences in findings may be attributed to the different levels of reading exposure. The participants of these three previous studies had at least three and a half up to five years of exposure in reading, whilst the participants of this present study only had two years. Hence, these students may develop better reading behaviour to build their self-confidence in reading and thus a more advanced level of proficiency in reading.

Second, item number five, “I feel anxious when I am reading a passage in English when I am not familiar with the topic” produced the second highest mean score, at 2.81, which indicated the students tended to have a high level of English reading anxiety. The students felt anxious because they thought they could not get something from the reading. They were afraid when they could not comprehend the English text because they were not familiar with the topic they were reading. Related to the finding that unfamiliarity of topic stimulated anxiety, [Soltani and Malae \(2015\)](#) stated that unfamiliar topics or contents in the second language reading may become extra challenges for readers. One of the challenges that learners will find in reading English texts is linguistic difficulties ([Soltani & Malae, 2015](#)). Furthermore, this present study’s finding was almost the same as the result of several previous studies (e.g.: [Al-Sohbani, 2018](#); [Estrada-Madronero, 2019](#); [Saito et al., 1999](#); [Sparks et al., 2018](#); [Zhang, 2000](#)). [Zhang \(2000\)](#), for example, also found that learners tended to get upset and anxious easily when they were not familiar with the topic because they were afraid that they could not do well in the reading task. When learners faced unfamiliar topics in reading, they might feel that reading took a lot of their time and energy and it could affect their reading performance ([Soltani & Malae, 2015](#)).

Third, item number four, “I feel anxious whenever I see a whole page of English in front of me” yielded the lowest mean score, at 2.24. About 38.1% of the participants disagreed with the statement. It indicated that they tended to have low anxiety when they saw a whole passage or read a long passage. This result could be attributed to the fact that these student participants had been exposed to reading since they were in the first semester, as previously explained. Hence, these students may have been trained to build a good reading habit by their teachers. Regarding this, [Daniel et al. \(2017\)](#) stated that having a good habit of reading can help students to have effective study skills. The effective study skill helps them to understand the learning materials easily ([Daniel et al., 2017](#)). This may explain why students having reading habits tend to have

less reading anxiety. The present study's finding was in line with the finding of the study conducted by Zeynali et al. (2017). They found that their learner participants did not feel anxious when reading because they used socio-affective reading strategies. Besides students with a good habit of reading tend to have low anxiety because they are accustomed to reading long passages regularly until it becomes a pattern of behaviour (Khoirunnisa & Safitri, 2018).

The last, item number ten, "The hardest part of learning English is learning to read" had a mean score of 2.03. About 81% of the participants indicated their disagreement with the statement. This indicated that they did not face difficulty in learning reading skills. However, this study found that 19% of participants stated their agreement which indicated that for some participants, albeit being a minority, reading skill may be one of the most difficult skills to master. It was different from the finding of the study conducted by Hermida (2009) in Canada. She found that most of her participants considered reading the most difficult skills to master. The different findings might be attributed to some factors. Firstly, Theology students in the present study might have more exposure to reading rather than the participants who took an academic reading class in the study conducted by Hermida (2009) in Canada. Secondly, the Theology student participants may also have previous exposure to reading strategies and reading habits that could reduce the level of their anxiety.

4.2 The Relationship between Theology Students' Reading Anxiety and Their Achievement in English

The finding on the relationship between the students' reading anxiety and their reading achievement could be observed in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation between students' FLRA and achievement

	FLRA	Score
FLRA Pearson Correlation	1	-.251
Sig. (2-tailed)		.048
N	63	63

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As seen in Table 2, the study found a significant negative correlation between the students' FLRA and their reading achievement, $r(61) = -.25, p < .05$. The strength of the relationship was weak. Though the correlation strength was weak, this finding indicated that the higher the students' FLRA, the lower the score tended to be. This finding was the same as those of some previous studies. For instance, a study conducted by Jafarigohar (2012) in Iran yielded $r(110) = -.21, p < .05$, and a study in Taiwan by Tsai and Li (2012) yielded $r(300) = -.33, p < .01$. The relatively same findings among these three studies could be attributed to several factors. First, all of these three studies were conducted in university contexts. Hence, it is safe to state that the FLRA level of university students from different educational contexts was negatively correlated with their L2 reading achievement, with the strength of correlation being weak.

Furthermore, even though correlation cannot show cause and effect, the result of these three studies might support Saito et al. (1999) that anxiety is one of the main factors affecting students' reading achievement. Hence, both teachers and students should work together to find ways to reduce learners' reading anxiety. Subekti (2020),

for example, proposed the use of small group cooperative activities rather than whole-class individual activities to create a psychologically safer environment for learners to learn, to develop self-confidence, and adopt more risk-taking behaviours beneficial for learning.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study has several possible contributions. Firstly, this study investigated FLRA among ESP students from the Theology department, which could be a first in the FLRA field. This study could pave a way for further research in the participants' context. Secondly, the finding that the students' FLRA correlated negatively with their reading achievement suggested that the issue of FLRA should be taken seriously and teachers should design instruction in such a way that learners' reading anxiety could be minimised. The present study's specific finding on the possible positive impacts of reading strategies and the duration of reading exposure may indicate the urgency to incorporate these two aspects in the instructional design of English reading classes.

Furthermore, the main limitation of the study was inherently from the limited number of participants. Hence, the results of this study should be seen in the context where it was conducted, students of the Theology Department. It may be unpersuasive to state that the findings could be generalised to Indonesian university students irrespective of departments.

Last, there are several suggestions for further studies. It is recommended to involve more participants in ESP contexts to boost the possibility of gathering generalisable data. Moreover, to investigate the factors contributing to learners' FLRA as well as strategies to alleviate that through qualitative methods could also be worthwhile. Such a qualitative study will be able to obtain in-depth perceptions of the participants' experiences regarding FLRA. Regarding the finding of the supposed impact of reading exposure to minimise FLRA, it could also be beneficial if future studies investigate FLRA experienced by learners periodically, across a longer period, to see whether their FLRA fluctuates as learners gain more reading exposure.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Participants' responses on FLRA questionnaire items in percentages.

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I get upset when I'm not sure whether I understand what I am reading in English.	17.5	66.7	14.3	1.6
When reading English, I often understand the words but still can't quite understand what the author is saying.	3.2	71.4	22.2	3.2
When I'm reading English, I get so confused I can't remember what I'm reading.	3.2	31.7	61.9	3.2
I feel intimidated whenever I see a whole page of English in front of me.	1.6	28.6	61.9	7.9
I am nervous when I am reading a passage in English when I am not familiar with the topic.	19.0	42.9	38.1	0.0

Table A1 continued...

I get upset whenever I encounter unknown grammar when reading English.	12.7	49.2	33.3	4.8
When reading English, I get nervous and confused when I don't understand every word.	9.5	58.7	30.2	1.6
It bothers me to encounter words I can't pronounce while reading English.	7.9	30.2	52.4	9.5
I usually end up translating word by word when I'm reading English.	4.8	42.9	39.7	12.7
The hardest part of learning English is learning to read.	1.6	17.5	63.5	17.5