Journal of Education and Educational Research
ISSN: 2957-9465 | Vol. 4, No. 3, 2023

The Relationship between English Reading Anxiety and Reading Strategies among Chinese College Students

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Abstract: Reading, as an important input skill, is crucial in both teaching and learning processes. However, few researchers pay attention to the research of English reading. Thus, this study tried to explore the relationship between English reading anxiety and reading strategies. The research adopted the descriptive research way. In the research, respondents completed the adopted questionnaire. A total number of 358 freshmen and sophomores majoring in liberal arts, sciences, and engineering from a university in the central part of China were participated in the study. Results show that the higher level that the students are experienced anxiety, the better reading strategies they will employ. Finally, teaching and learning recommendations were put forward to help Chinese college students to reduce reading anxiety and improve reading strategies for enhancing their reading ability in the process English learning.

Keywords: English Reading Anxiety; Reading Strategies; Chinese College Students.

1. Introduction

The Ministry of Education issued the College English Teaching Guide in 2017, emphasizing the significance of emotional factors in the process of learning foreign language. The role of English reading in language acquisition is of paramount importance as it encompasses vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar, writing style, and cultural knowledge. It serves as a fundamental means of language input and is reflected in the significant weightage given to reading comprehension in nearly every English examination. The evident value of reading in English learning stems from its interconnectedness with the other language skills. Enhancing students' reading proficiency can consequently stimulate the development of these skills. However, students often encounter difficulties in comprehending the main ideas of texts, struggle with completing reading tasks within designated time limits, and experience negative emotions during the process. Thus, there exists an urgent need to improve students' English reading proficiency.

Reading, as the main way to help college students achieve these goals, is crucial in both teaching and learning processes. Excellent reading abilities can lay a solid foundation for other language skills. Although teachers have put a lot of time and energy to improve students' reading in teaching, the learning effect is still not ideal. Language learning process is influenced by sorts of factors due to its inherent complexity. Among them, anxiety has emerged as one of the major emotional factors that hinder effective EFL learning. Current studies have recognized that anxiety can also arise during the processes of reading, listening, and writing when the students are learning foreign languages (Wang, 2016). Previous studies have demonstrated that reading strategies interrelated with reading anxiety closely. Among them, learners' English reading anxiety is negatively correlated with reading strategies. Yao (2015) pointed out that the correct use of reading strategies can help alleviate learners' reading anxiety, help them better understand the text content, and thus improve their reading achievements. Therefore, alleviating reading anxiety and employing appropriate strategies are important in improving students' English reading levels.

Reviewing the former studies, it appears that most studies are centered on the relationship between reading anxiety and reading achievements, or the relationship between reading motivation and reading achievements. The relationship between reading anxiety and reading motivation has not been paid much attention to by the scholars. As it is known that reading is a significant and essential skill for Chinese college students in their second language acquisition. Relieving reading anxiety and cultivating positive motivation play an important role in improving their reading skill. Based on the above reasons, this study attempts to explore the relationship between the above two variables.

Shi and Liu (2015) conducted an experiment involving 211 sophomores who were non-English majors. The purpose was to test the correlation between foreign language reading anxiety and English achievement, utilizing the FLCAS developed by Horwitz and the FLRAS designed by Saito. The study yielded the following findings: foreign language reading anxiety levels were significantly lower among American college students compared to their Chinese counterparts. Both CET-4 scores and English reading comprehension scores displayed a negative association with English reading anxiety.

Wang (2022) conducted a study to investigate the impact of English reading anxiety, gender, and personality tendencies on their achievement. The findings indicated that female students exhibited lower levels of English reading anxiety when comparing with male students, and their reading performance was also higher. Furthermore, introverted students generally had higher levels of anxiety in English reading when they are comparing with the extroverted students, while the English reading performance of introverted students was lower than that of extroverted students.

However, the research also has some limitations. On the one hand, their research objects are not randomly selected. On the other hand, some subjects learn the target language as a compulsory course, while others study the target language as a selective course. However, their contributions to the study

of reading anxiety, especially the discovery that reading anxiety is related to but different from foreign language anxiety, and the design of the FLRAS have built a firm foundation for future studies on reading anxiety.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Literature Review of Reading Anxiety

There are varying perspectives among scholars and researchers regarding the definition of reading anxiety, which can be viewed from multiple angles. Scovel (2008) holds that reading anxiety is "an unpleasant emotional state, often characterized by subjective feelings of nervousness, strain, and distress when reading."

Chen (2015) examined the association between English reading anxiety and achievement in a group of 46 vocational college students. The study revealed that the respondents generally have high levels of reading anxiety. Moreover, there was a negative correlation between reading anxiety and achievement. Furthermore, reading anxiety was found to have a significant predictive impact on achievement. Interestingly, the predictive effect of anxiety on the achievement of female students was higher compared to that of male students. Female students' reading anxiety was more likely to influence their performance in English reading. Shi and Liu (2015) conducted an experiment involving 211 sophomores who were non-English majors. The purpose was to test the correlation between foreign language reading anxiety and English achievement, utilizing the FLCAS developed by Horwitz and the FLRAS designed by Saito. The study yielded the following findings: foreign language reading anxiety levels were significantly lower among American college students compared to their Chinese counterparts. Both CET-4 scores and English reading comprehension scores displayed a negative association with English reading anxiety.

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2.2. Literature Review of Reading Strategy

According to Rubin (2015), reading strategies serve the purpose of constructing language systems and improving language acquisition. Stem (2013) argues that reading strategies are representative of an individual's learning methods while Weinstein and Mayer (2016) suggest that they are a set of behaviors and thoughts aimed at influencing reading information encoding process. Reading strategies are described as "specific thoughts and actions that assist language learners in comprehending, acquiring, and retaining new information from reading" by Oxford views reading strategies as the actions, steps and methods that learners adopt to enhance their reading skills. Despite the lack of fixed definitions, all the above-mentioned definitions have their own theoretical basis and have greatly influenced and are widely acknowledged by scholars of language.

Oxford (2010) provide a comprehensive and theoretical classifications of reading strategies, while other classifications tend to focus more on specific strategy behaviors, and many strategies overlap, like using contextual cues to guess meaning or making predictions. Thus, this thesis will draw upon Oxford's classification and conduct empirical research on English reading strategies. Liu (2017) suggests that reading strategies are divided into pre-reading planning, in-reading actions, and post-reading reflection, which are activities that readers actively engage in to overcome reading obstacles. Li and Qin (2015) view reading strategies as a combination of implicit knowledge and explicit behavioral activities, which include the psychological activities involved in the learning process, the reading methods applied, and the behavioral activities carried out by the reader.

Liu (2016) conducted a study with 30 successful and unsuccessful first-year non-English major students respectively, using formal exams, questionnaire surveys, and other methods to group students according to their overall English proficiency, and studied their strategy use. The results showed that successful learners are better than unsuccessful learners in macro-regulation and self-evaluation strategies. They are also better at flexibly applying the knowledge learned from reading to speaking and listening, and are more willing to consciously engage in extracurricular reading. Successful learners use more metacognitive and functional exercise strategies, while for cognitive strategies, some strategies are favored by successful learners, while others are favored by unsuccessful learners. In the subfield of empirical research on comparison of reading strategies. Liu (2015) conducted an experiment involving a total of eight participants, comprised of four proficient readers and four struggling readers. Through methods such as reading method surveys, reading tests, personal interviews, and oral reports, a comparative study of reading strategies was conducted for successful and unsuccessful readers. The results revealed that Chinese students exhibited significant disparities in their utilization of reading strategies. These variations were evident both in the quantity and frequency and in the quality of their implementation. Successful readers demonstrated a higher capability to effectively and flexibly employ correct reading strategies.

Within the domain of empirical research on the utilization of metacognitive awareness of reading comprehension. Zhang (2017) and Yu (2017) conducted an empirical study and the results demonstrated a positive connection between metacognitive awareness and reading comprehension abilities. This indicates that students up-grade their reading ability by the way of mastering their strategies and regulating their metacognitive awareness during the process. Therefore, it is of vital grand-ness for teachers to help students develop and apply specific metacognitive strategies.

From the above literature review, we can see that the research subjects were mostly participants who were English majors, primary and secondary school students, with a limited number of non-English majors in schools. However, they all

shared a common characteristic: the sample size was not large, mostly under one hundred, and concentrated in the same experimental location. The experimental methods were complex and varied, including questionnaire surveys, reading comprehension tests, reading training, interviews, and thinking-aloud experiments. The primary area of focus is the exploration of the cognitive processes involved in the utilization of reading strategies, which involves cognitive thinking processes, and the current research in this area has given limited attention to understanding these processes.

3. Methods

3.1. Objectives and Research Design

The main objective of this study generally aims to contribute to the improvement of Chinese college students' reading proficiency. More specifically, the thesis focuses on the following objectives. The study aims to: assess the significant relationship between English reading anxiety and strategies; propose an English reading enhancement program for Chinese college students to improve their English reading.

This study generally aims for exploring college school students' differences in sex, major and grade of English reading anxiety and reading strategies respectively. To thoroughly explore the relationship between the two variables, this study utilized a quantitative research design. which is a scientific method used to measure the quantity of a specific aspect of a phenomenon. It involves using numerical data to express and analyze problems and phenomena to derive meaning.

3.2. Participants

The research was carried out at a local university of Anhui Province in central China. The total number of freshmen and sophomores of this university is 5,240 students. For this study, the researcher employed the Raosoft online calculator to determine the appropriate size. Based on the calculator's recommendations, a sample size of 358 respondents was deemed necessary. This calculation considered a 5% margin of error, a 95% confidence level, and an assumed response distribution of 50%. Consequently, the researcher distributed a total amount of 358 questionnaires to the targeted respondents for data collection. They were asked to complete an online survey published on the Questionnaire Star online platform with the name of Questionnaire Star.

3.3. Instruments

To investigate the correlation between reading anxiety and reading strategies, the research employed the FLRAS and ERSQ as the research tool. The purpose of Part I is to assess college students' agreement with English reading anxiety. To do this, the study employed the revised Chinese version of FLRAS, which was originally developed by Satio et al. in 2009. This part contains 3 dimensions with 20 items and it conforms to the Chinese cultural context. The first dimension is "general reading comprehension apprehension", which contains 6 items (1-6 items); The second dimension is "script and cultural apprehension" with 7 items (7-13 items) and the third dimension is "emotional apprehension" with 7 items (14-20 items).

Part II of the questionnaire focuses on the English reading strategies employed by college students. To gather data on this aspect, the researchers utilized a questionnaire that was adapted from ERSQ. This inventory is based on a classification of learning strategies used in language learning contexts. It has five subscales, with the purpose of evaluating the respondents' effective use of English reading strategies. Memory strategies is evaluated through 3 statements (1-3 items); cognitive strategies are assessed by 10 items (4-13 items); compensation strategies are verified by 2 items (14-15 items); metacognitive strategies are assessed by 3 items (16-18 items); affective strategies are verified by 2 items (19-20 items).

The questionnaire scale employed a 4-point score. The rating scale employed in this study assigns numerical values ranging from 1 to 4 to indicate the degree of agreement, with "strongly disagree" corresponding to 1 point, "disagree" corresponding to 2 points, "agree" corresponding to 3 points, and "strongly agree" corresponding to 4 points. This scale allows for the quantitative measurement of respondents' agreement levels.

3.4. Data Collection and Data Analysis

The data were collected by employing the online platform named "Questionnaire Star". The link to the survey were distributed directly to students known to the researcher or through other teachers who share it with their students via WeChat. To ensure the accuracy of responses, the researcher provided detailed explanations of the survey questions to other teachers by phone, who then assisted their students in completing the questionnaire. The researcher contacted experts within her department and conducted a pilot study with 20 participants to validate the instrument before distributing the questionnaire. Based on the satisfactory results, the researcher conducted a formal large-scale survey with the informed con-sent of all respondents. The results were downloaded from Questionnaire Star and the data were tabulated, interpreted, and analyzed into an Excel format before sent to the research center for SPSS encoding.

Once the data have been collected, each questionnaire was reviewed individually to eliminate incomplete responses. Out of the 358 questionnaires considered usable, they were then coded for statistical analysis to address the re-search questions. The software SPSS was employed for the statistical analysis. This study utilized quantitative data analysis. Descriptive statistical procedures, including frequencies, percentages, weighted mean, and ranking, were performed to assess the students' responses regarding their English reading anxiety, reading motivation, and reading strategies. Non-parametric tests, specifically the Mann-Whitney U test, were used to determine if there were any significant differences. Additionally, Spearman rho was employed to examine any significant relationships among the three variables.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Relationship between Reading Anxiety and Reading Strategy

From the results, the computed rho-values ranging from 0.198 to 0.506 indicate a very weak to moderate direct relationship among the sub variable of English reading anxiety and English reading strategies. There was significant relationship between reading anxiety and reading strategies because the obtained p-values were less than 0.01.

The correlation between reading anxiety and strategies can be examined as follows. Reading anxiety can stem from various elements like fear of failure, or previous negative experience with reading (Wang, 2022). Reading strategies are

the cognitive and meta-cognitive processes individuals use to comprehend and interpret written text. These strategies can include previewing, summarizing, making connections, questioning, and self-monitoring, among others (Wang & Zhang, 2016).

The findings indicate a noteworthy association between reading anxiety and reading strategies. This implies that an individual's level of reading anxiety can impact their selection and utilization of reading strategies. In the study of Wen (2022), she also founds that higher levels of reading anxiety may hinder the effective use of reading strategies. When individuals experience high levels of anxiety, their cognitive and metacognitive processes may be impaired, leading to difficulties in employing appropriate reading strategies. Conversely, individuals with higher reading anxiety may rely more on reading strategies as a compensatory mechanism. Individuals who experience reading anxiety may actively employ a range of strategies to effectively manage their anxiety and enhance their reading comprehension.

4.2. Suggestions for Improving Reading Proficiency

College students can select reading materials on topics they are genuinely interested in, which can help them stay engaged, overcome anxiety, and develop a genuine reading habit. Then, they can set achievable goals, break down the reading tasks into smaller, manageable goals. Celebrating the successful accomplishment of mini-goals will enhance their motivation and build a sense of achievement; Lastly, they can learn to use effective reading strategies, which can help them approach texts with a purpose, understand the main ideas, and extract relevant information efficiently. With improved comprehension, anxiety tends to decrease.

English faculties can choose various topics of reading materials, and ensure that students from different majors and genders can find relevance and participation in reading. Teachers can also select reading materials with different degrees according to students' abilities. It is also very important for teachers to create a relaxing classroom atmosphere to reduce reading anxiety. Class-room interaction between students and teachers can be based on encouragement and positive reinforcement, paying more attention to praise students' efforts and progress.

University administrators should create a conducive reading environment. Establish reading spaces on campus that are cozy, well-lit, and free from distractions. This can be a designated reading room, library corners, or outdoor areas. They can also foster an atmosphere that promotes concentration and relaxation, reducing anxiety and providing a positive reading experience. Additionally, they can organize book clubs or reading circles to create opportunities for administrators, faculty, and staff to come together and discuss books of mutual interest. These reading groups foster intellectual discussions, create a sense of community, and provide motivation for continuous reading.

5. Conclusion

This study offers valuable insights into the present state of English reading anxiety, and reading strategies among Chinese college students, as well as verifies the relationship between them. According to the findings, it demonstrates a significant relationship between the reading anxiety and reading motivation. The higher level that the students are experience anxiety, the better reading strategies they will employ. Then, an English reading enhancement program was proposed to reduce Chinese college students' English reading anxiety and refine their effective use of reading strategies.

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