

Investigating the Effect of Scaffolded Extensive Reading as an Anxiety Reducing Strategy in an Iranian EFL Context

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Abstract

Foreign Language Reading Anxiety (FLRA), distinguished as a distinct phenomenon from general language anxiety, has been shown to have a negative impact on reading comprehension skill especially for less proficient EFL learners. FLRA is believed to originate from "unfamiliar writing system" or learners' difficulty in pronouncing words and sentences (Saito, Graza, & Horwitz, 1999). Slow or word by word readers are often anxious while trying to read unfamiliar words. In addition, readers experience anxiety when they want to relate texts' message to their background knowledge; FLRA comes from "unfamiliar cultural materials" (Saito, et al., 1999). Pedagogical implications of FLRA studies usually suggest anxiety free situations as well as anxiety reducing strategies to help low level learners overcome their reading anxiety and better develop their reading skills. This study was conducted to find the possible effect of an amalgamate of scaffolded and extensive reading (SER) to relieve FLRA. Forty low-ability readers were divided into two groups, control and experimental groups. Experimental group read 10 story books during ten weeks in a scaffolded environment, whereas control group continued their traditional reading class. Analysis of the results of the study indicated that after treatment, the experimental group was significantly less anxious than the control group and confirmed the effectiveness of the program to reduce FLRA of Iranian low proficient readers.

Keywords: Foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA), extensive reading (ER), scaffolded reading

Due to the importance of reading as a valuable source of authentic input, encouraging EFL learners to read more has been a big concern of many teachers. However, for many of them, especially less proficient ones, it is a challenging task. Both cognitive and affective factors are involved and equally important in developing reading proficiency (Cramer & Castle, 1994; Brown, 2000). Fitzgerald (1994, cited in Brown, 2001) argues that second language readers' success can only be achieved if both cognitive and affective factors are accounted. Similarly, Gee (1999) believes that affective factors should not be neglected in promotion of reading competence. He explains their role as a cycle in which successful readers develop a positive attitude toward reading and read more. Reading more results in a larger vocabulary and grammatical competence which in turn is motivating and leads to reading more. On the other hand, if learners, especially less proficient ones, are entrapped in the "vicious circle", introduced by Nuttal (1996, p.127), it will be very difficult for them to improve their reading skill. Nuttal explains that low level EFL learners do not read much, so their reading proficiency will not improve. If they fail to improve their reading comprehension, they cannot enjoy reading, leading to the feeling of frustration and disappointment. Gee (1999, p.4) says that in first language literature it is called "Matthew effect" referring to "the Biblical

passage in which the rich get richer and the poor poorer”. Correspondingly, good readers get better by reading more, while poor readers get poorer by inadequate reading.

In addition to affective factors like attitudes, motivation, prior experiences and expectations (McKenna, Ellsworth & Kear, 1995 cited in Gee, 1999), foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA) has proved to play a key role in developing reading proficiency (Saito, Graza & Horwitz, 1999). They state that in addition to oral skills of speaking and listening that are expected to be more anxiety provoking in language learning process, FLRA does exist as a phenomenon negatively influencing language learning process.

Background of the Study

It is not exaggerating to assume Saito et al.’s as the most contributing study on FLRA. According to the results of their study, “foreign language reading anxiety varies by target language of the learners, and reading anxiety levels correlate positively with their perception of reading difficulty. As their levels of FLRA increase, their scores in reading comprehension decrease” (p, 202). Young (2000) identified a significant relationship between L2 reading anxiety and L2 reading comprehension. She found that L2 students with higher levels of anxiety rate their reading comprehension lower than other students. Young also explained that the length and structures of the texts could produce less anxiety than "linguistically dense texts". In a study, Kargar (2002) indicated that less proficient EFL readers were highly anxious compared to mid or high level learners. The mean and standard deviation of the anxiety scores of low level learners measured by FLRAS, were significantly higher than mid and high level learners. The results were in line with Young (2000) and Sellars (2000) who concluded that anxiety affects reading comprehension with students of lower levels of instruction. In another study by Brantmeier (2005) it was concluded that advanced learners did not feel anxious about reading in a second language. Saito et al. (1999, p.215) concluded that FLRA seems to be “a mediating variable that intervenes at some point between the decoding of a text and the actual processing of textual meaning" and more problematic for beginning learners. Moreover, Macintyre (1999 cited in Arnold, 2007) and Onwuegbuzie et al. (2000) showed that foreign language anxiety can hinder information from reaching the processing system and disturb the retrieval of the information.

Based on the results of their study, Saito et al. (1999) concluded that foreign language reading anxiety is indeed distinct from general foreign language anxiety, since unlike general FL anxiety, levels of FLRA varied by target language and seemed to be related to the specific writing systems. Comparing French, Japanese and Russian reading anxiety levels of three groups of American participants revealed that they were significantly different. It was concluded that reading in a foreign language may be anxiety provoking due to two factors: “(a) unfamiliar scripts and writing systems and (b) unfamiliar cultural material” (p.203). The results of the study may have the potential to predict FLRA in similar situations like Persian EFL learners whose native language has a distinct writing system from English as in the case of Kargar (2002) in which low level Iranian EFL readers were significantly more anxious than more proficient ones.

Although previous research like Saito et al. (1999) has indicated the negative impact of FLRA on reading performance, few studies have investigated the effect of different instructional strategies on FLRA (Arnold, 2007). Horwitz et al. (1986 cited in Saito et al.) suggest two basic options to reduce FL anxiety, helping students cope with anxiety producing situations and making the learning context less stressful. In case of reading anxiety, Saito et al. (1999, p.216) suggest that teachers should prepare the students for “the possibility of reading difficulties and possible anxiety when introducing reading assignment”. They also suggest that to reduce anxiety, teachers should develop reading practices that are more

effective than word for word translation and help learners abandon their “unrealistic expectations for understanding everything they read” (p.216). Also, they asserted that teachers should be careful enough in text selections particularly authentic texts because the materials should be at appropriate levels of difficulty. Gee (1999, p.5) suggests that EFL teachers should develop positive affective factors and love of reading among students. In this way he says, "students will have chance to become better readers, to be students who can read and choose to read".

Recently the focus of many studies has been directed toward extensive reading as a key to improve both reading proficiency and positive attitude toward reading skill (Anderson, 1996; Brown, 2001; Day & Bamford, 1997; Elley, 1996; Krashen, 1993; Ng, 1988). Krashen(1998, cited in Brown, 2001) calls it free voluntary reading (FVR). Richards and Schmidt (2002) define ER as "reading in quantity in order to gain a general understanding of what is read." In ER as Yamashita (2004, p.14) states, "students are expected to read a large amount of texts especially in a foreign language context". According to Richards and Schmidt (2002, p.194), ER has several purposes including "to develop reading habits, to build up vocabulary and grammar, and to encourage a liking for reading". Brown (2001, p.313) defines ER as “pleasure reading” and reading outside the class time; in his exact words “by stimulating reading for enjoyment or reading where all concepts, names, dates and other details need not be retained, students gain an appreciation for the affective and cognitive window of reading: an entrée into new worlds”.

Many studies have shown the effectiveness of ER programs in various aspects of general language proficiency, reading comprehension, writing, vocabulary, and speaking (e.g. Cho & Krashen 1994; Ellev & Mangubhai 1983; Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Green & Oxford, 1995; Hafez & Tudor, 1989; Hafiz & Tudor, 1990; Hayashi, 1999; Hedgcock & Atkinson, 1993; Janopolous, 1986; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Pitts, White & Krashen, 1989; Polak & Krashen, 1988; Robb & Susser,1989; Tsang, 1996;). Other studies on the effects of ER on affective factors also show its effectiveness in producing positive environment and attitude for the learners (e.g., Cho & Krashen, 1994; Constantine, 1994; Hayashi, 1999; Yamashita, 2007).

Bamford and Day (1997, p.7) argue that "automaticity of bottom up (word recognition) processing upon which comprehension depends is the consequence of practice". They state that ER is the most appropriate choice for low level students when reading difficult texts written for native speakers. Barrett and Datesman (1992) showed that ER leads to reading with more ease and confidence in high-intermediate to advanced students, although the studies done on the effects of ER focus more on low level learners. A good example is a program for elementary level language learners at the British Council Language Center in Sanaa, Yemen (Bell, 1998). The result of the study confirmed the effectiveness of large amounts of input in developing students' skill, encouraging reading, and leading students along a path to independence and resourcefulness. Mason and Krashen (1997) also conducted a study for university level EFL students who had failed in their reading course. In the study, they designed a semester of ER in place of the traditional curriculum. The gains in reading comprehension were significantly greater compared to other regular students, and they clearly enjoyed the class.

The rationale for ER can be sought in Krashen’s comprehensible input hypothesis, arguing that simplified and contextualized (fine-tuned) input, a little beyond the current level of the learner ($i+1$), is necessary for the acquisition to take place (Ellis, 1994). Accordingly, ER can be implemented to provide learners with such input. To answer the question of how much reading is called extensive, a book for a week is recommended (Nation & Wang, 1999; Day & Bamford, 2002, cited in Yamashita, 2008). However, Grabe and Stoller (2002, cited in Yamashita, 2008) assert that benefits of ER on L2 acquisition can only be observed in the

long term and depend on factors like, age, level of L1 literacy and levels of L2 proficiency. Day and Bamford (2002, cited in Yamashita, 2008, p.662) also offer a practical guideline for conceptualizing ER in a teaching and learning process:

1. The reading material is easy.
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available.
3. Learners choose what they want to read.
4. Learners read as much as possible.
5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.
6. Reading is its own reward.
7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.
8. Reading is individual and silent.
9. Teachers orient and guide their students.
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader.

Scaffolded reading can also be taken as an alternative to ER. It is based on the belief that what someone can achieve with support from others and/or cultural artifacts is different from what he/she can achieve when acting alone (Lantolf, 2000). The underlying assumption is Vygotsky's concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) initially applied to first language acquisition, referring to the idea that a child can accomplish more with collaboration, help or support than he/she can alone. In learning situations, it reflects the active and sensitive role of the teacher to provide expert guidance (Parkinson, Jackson, Kirkwork & Padayachee, 2007). Furthermore, they state that for reading skill, scaffolding consists of tasks such as asking questions, offering guidance, small group discussions, developing reading strategies like guessing the meaning of unknown words from the context and finding the main idea of the text. According to Vygotsky's ZPD, learning will create motivation and self awareness and finally leads to development (Newman & Holtzman, 2005).

To sum up, there is a partial match between the constructs of FLRA defined by Saito et al.(1999) and characteristics of ER stated by Bell (2001) and Prowse (2002). The following table shows this:

Table 1. *FLAR Constructs vs. ER Characteristics*

FLAR Constructs	ER Characteristics
Unfamiliar writing system	Reading as much as possible Increasing learners' exposure to language Building confidence with the extended texts Enhancing learners' general language competence
Unfamiliar cultural material	Reading what they want Providing comprehensible input Consolidating previously learnt materials Encouraging the exploitation of textual redundancy Facilitating the development of prediction skills

In fact, both FLRA constructs and ER characteristics refer to the two reading comprehension levels. First levels of FLRA come from the EFL learners' inability to read words and sentences. Correspondingly, ER as emphasized by Grabe (1991) and Paren (1996, p.30) provides learners with practice and increases the learners' exposure to language resulting in "automaticity of word recognition and decoding the symbols on the printed page" (also called bottom up processing). In addition, it is believed that redundant elements in texts

are helpful in processing, while slow and word by word readers transfer a lot of these visual signals, but only a few of them are needed to be processed to interpret the text. At a higher level, FLRA originates from inability to grasp the meaning of the texts, especially authentic texts. Conversely, ER provides comprehensible input, consolidates previously learnt materials and facilitates the development of prediction skills, so it helps the learners overcome unfamiliar cultural materials and relate their background knowledge to what they read leading to comprehension of the text, what is called top down processing.

Based on the aforementioned correspondence between FLRA and ER, the present study aims at investigating the efficiency of ER in an Iranian EFL context in terms of reducing FLRA. In addition, since the study addresses less proficient readers, it was attempted to conduct it in a scaffolded environment, highlighting the role of the teacher as a more proficient helper.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The present study was designed to investigate whether scaffolded extensive reading (SER) reduces foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA). More specifically, the following research question was formulated for this study: Does scaffolded extensive reading (SER) have the potential to reduce foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA)?

Methodology

Participants

The present study was conducted with 40 freshmen majoring in English translation. All of them had either failed their first reading course or passed it with a low score. Their scores on reading comprehension pretest confirmed their low reading proficiency. Also, as expected based on the studies mentioned in the literature review, their responses to FLRA scale indicated that they were highly anxious. The age range was between 19-22. They were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups.

Materials

A standardized reading comprehension test including 6 passages and 40 multiple choice items was used as a pre-test of reading ability. The internal consistency of the test in the study was estimated .84 by using Cronbach's alpha.

To determine the level of foreign language reading anxiety, FLRAS developed by Saito et al. (1999) was used. It is a Likert-scale questionnaire including 20 items and five possible choices: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) undecided, (4) disagree, (5) strongly disagree and theoretical ranges of 20 to 100. The mean and standard deviation of FLRA were in Saito et al's study 52.9 and 9.4 respectively. It showed good internal reliability of .86 Cronbach's alpha.

Simplified graded readers were preferred for extensive reading because they offer appropriate conditions for learning and increasing motivation (Nation & Wang, 1999; Wodinsky & Nation, 1988). To create an optimal level of scaffolding and because "choice" is considered as a prerequisite to extensive reading (Day & Bamford, 1998), the participants were given 4 CDs consisting of 35 simplified English stories. The CDs designed by Taha Gostar Software Company of Isfahan provide the learners with texts, pictures and audios of the stories. It has also the possibility of repeating each page of the texts as frequently as they like. It is believed that simultaneous reading and listening have great benefits for pronunciation and increasing reading speed (Taguchi, 2004). Furthermore, Bell (2001) recommends that audio materials are necessary for ER programs. He states that the voice of a recorded native speaker as a model of correct pronunciation is necessary, and "students' confidence in their ability to produce natural speech patterns and to read along with the voice

of a recorded speaker is central to maintaining their motivation to master the language as a medium for talking about their reading (p.4)”. It may also have beneficial effects on FLRA originating from unfamiliar and difficult pronunciations. Ten stories were selected based on their difficulty levels suggested by their publishers and negotiation with the participants. They had the chance to change the stories if they did not like them or thought they were difficult for them. The information about the story books and sequence of their presentation is summarized in the following table.

Table 2. *Descriptive Information of the Stories*

NO.	NAME	LEVEL	Pages
1	Love or Money	Beginner	35
2	Anna and the Fighter	Beginner	30
3	Phantom of the Opera	Beginner	50
4	Elephant Man	Beginner	51
5	Mummy I	Elementary	52
6	Mummy II	Elementary	56
7	Stealing the Hills	Elementary	51
8	Black Cat & Other Stories	Pre – intermediate	50
9	Railway Children	Pre - intermediate	79
10	Mill on the Floss	Intermediate	66

Data Collection Procedure

The program was predicted to have its maximum benefits for the learners who had more problems with reading comprehension – low level learners. As mentioned before due to their problems in both bottom–up and top–down processing, low-level readers are expected to have higher levels of FLRA. In the first phase of the study low level readers were identified. The standardized reading comprehension test was given to a group of freshmen to ensure their homogeneity as low level readers. Forty students were selected based on their scores on the test. Then the participants were given FLRAS to respond. The results confirmed their high level of FLRA. They were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups, each including 20 students.

Then ER was introduced to the experimental group as a part to their reading course, while control group participated in their traditional reading classes. Both classes were managed by the same teacher. The CDs were given to the experimental group, and ten readers were selected. They were told that they had the chance to change the stories they did not like. In addition, they promised to listen to the audios of the stories as well as reading the texts. The program lasted 10 weeks during which they were supposed to read the story books, each week one story book. After they finished reading the stories, there was a discussion on different parts of each story book. Learners' questions about meaning or pronunciation of words and grammar of the sentences were answered. For example, if a student could not understand the meaning of a sentence, the teacher would paraphrase it.

Essay type questions followed the reading of each story to ensure the students' comprehension. The questions were both information and inferential ones. After essay type questions, they listened to two parts of the story selected and read by the teacher. Then the teacher asked them to write the setting, place and time of the parts. The reason for the oral questions was to make the learners listen to the audios of the stories. In addition, Bell (2001) suggests that using audio materials, maximizing the learners' involvement, written work based on reading, and interviewing and monitoring the learners are essential practical points in running extensive reading programs.

After the tenth story, FLRAS was given to the participants of the two groups to determine their level of FLRA. Finally, the participants of the experimental group were interviewed to

find out their opinions about the effectiveness of the program as well as their feeling regarding their current reading ability. The results of both pre- and post-tests as well as interviews were used to test the hypothesis of the study, the effectiveness of SER program in reducing FLRA.

Results and Discussion

The first phase of the statistical analysis of the descriptive data aimed at confirming homogeneity of the two groups of participants, before the treatment started. By using SPSS software (version17), independent sample t-test was applied to determine homogeneity of the groups in terms of both reading proficiency and FLRA levels. The following tables summarize the results.

Table3. *Descriptive statistics of reading comprehension pre-test*

Groups	N	Mean	SD	t	Df	Level of sig.
Control experimental	20	16.65	4.59	1.006	38	.321
	20	15.25	4.20			

Table4. *Descriptive statistics of FLRA pre-test*

Groups	N	Mean	SD	t	Df	Level of sig.
Control experimental	20	63.2	8.16	.072	38	.943
	20	63	9.27			

Results of both tables indicate that the groups are homogenous, since the difference between the means of the groups is insignificant.

The second phase of the analysis of the data was to test the research hypothesis. The results of both groups' FLRA post-tests are summarized in the following table. Again the same t-test procedure was used to determine whether or not the difference between the means of the groups is significant.

Table5. *Descriptive statistics of FLRA post-test*

Groups	N	Mean	SD	t	Df	Level of sig.
Control experimental	20	65.2	7.59	-4.8	38	.000
	20	54.05	6.83			

Table 5 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the two tests. The results show that the difference between the means is significant suggesting that the experimental group was significantly less anxious than control group at the end of the study. In addition, the results of the pre- and post- tests of each group were analyzed to investigate the effectiveness of the SER program. The following tables indicate the descriptive statistics and the results of paired t-test procedure.

Table6. *Descriptive statistics of FLRA pre- and post-tests of the control group*

test	N	Mean	SD	t	Df	Level of sig.
Pre-test	20	63.2	9.27	1.21	19	.239
Post-test	20	65.2	7.59		19	

Table7. *Descriptive statistics of FLRA pre- and post-tests of the experimental group*

test	N	Mean	SD	t	Df	Level of sig.
Pre-test	20	63	8.16	5.61	19	.000
Post-test	20	54.05	6.83		19	

Tables 6 and 7 indicate that unlike the control group, there is a significant difference between the means of pre- and post tests of experimental group. It suggests that SER had an effect on reducing FLRA of the experimental group.

Finally, students of the experimental group participated in a semi-structured interview. They were asked to express their feeling about their current reading ability compared to the past and the effectiveness of the program. All of them answered three questions prepared in advance; moreover, they had the chance of discussing other points they liked. The first question was about their feeling about the usefulness of the program. All of them agreed that their reading ability had been improved as the result of the program; however, only 9 students said that it had improved their vocabulary, and 3 students had noticed improvement in their oral skills of listening and speaking. The second question was whether or not they liked reading English stories. All of them mentioned that they enjoyed reading stories, and they preferred reading stories to other topics, yet 6 students added that it had been a time-consuming task. The last question was about their feeling when they looked at English texts. 17 students believed that they were more confident about their reading ability. 15 students mentioned that they would continue reading more stories; however, the other 5 students stated that it was difficult for them to continue reading one story a week.

To sum up, the results of the pre- and post-tests and the interview with the students at the end of the study confirmed that the program was effective in relieving FLRA specially the learners who had hard time reading foreign language texts.

Conclusion

Previous research on FLRA confirms that it exists as a distinct affective factor from general language anxiety, and its negative impact on learners' reading comprehension especially for the low level learners has been investigated. Although most of the studies done so far have suggested different anxiety-reducing strategies in their pedagogical implications, the field suffers from the lack of experimental research on their effectiveness. Consequently, the present study was designed to investigate the effect of the amalgam of scaffolded and extensive reading (SER) with the thought that they have the potential to reduce FLRA. Based on the definition of ER program and the research done on its effects on different language skills and sub-skills as well as learners' attitude, the present study attempted to find the effect of the SER on Iranian learners' FLRA especially those with low reading proficiency levels. Results of the study suggest that less proficient readers have the potential to improve if they are helped. It can also be concluded that although actual reading processing is usually discussed in cognitive terms, as Gee (1999) states, development can only be achieved when both cognitive and affective aspects are considered.

Pedagogical Implications

The conclusions drawn from the study have implications for both EFL teachers and learners. For teachers, it shows the role SER can play in improving learners' reading proficiency and reducing FLRA. The project can be used by teachers to prevent EFL learners from getting frustrated and help them move forward. As learners improve their reading, they enjoy reading more and more. If they enjoy reading, their access to language input will increase dramatically, which will further promote their language development.

For learners, the results are heartening. It shows a way by which they can overcome their anxiety, lack of motivation and fear they usually experience at the beginning of their foreign

language learning. It makes the difficult task of language learning an enjoyable time, full of fun and entertainment. They can speed up their decoding processing, increase their reading speed, develop their comprehension processing and be better readers.

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