Reading Anxiety among Indigenous Students in Kuala Tahan Primary Schools

Siti Khadijah Mohd Mohari[1], Nurain Jantan Anua Jah[2*], Shahira Adam[3]
& Nurul Jannah Ahmad Ghulamuddin[4]

[1,2,4] Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA Pahang, Bandar Tun Abdul Razak, Jengka, Pahang Malaysia
[3] Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA Johor, Kampus Segamat, Johor Malaysia
nurainanua@uitm.edu.my
[*]Corresponding author

Abstract: Reading is one of the vital skills necessary for literacy. Reading abilities allow learners to gain new information, broaden their knowledge, and improve their communication and language skills. The issue of lacking reading literacy is prevalent among indigenous students, which hampers their mastery of the English language. This study was conducted to investigate reading anxiety among indigenous primary school students in an EFL classroom. The research involved 23 indigenous children from two national primary schools. Employing a quantitative method, this study aimed to determine the level of reading anxiety among indigenous students and the types of difficulties they experienced when using reading strategies. Data were collected using a survey based on the EFL Reading Anxiety Inventory (EFLRAI) to measure their anxiety levels and identify the types of difficulties they encountered. The findings indicate that the students experience moderate anxiety, with vocabulary being the most challenging component, followed by grammar, and then general reading anxiety. These findings will help teachers select appropriate approaches to encourage and support indigenous students in improving their reading skills.

Keywords: EFL learners, reading anxiety, rural schools, indigenous students

Introduction

The acquisition of English language proficiency has posed an imposing and formidable challenge for a considerable cohort of Malaysian learners, as underscored by the scholarship of Noori, Shamary, and Yuen in 2015. A substantial portion of these learners can be categorised as both English as Second Language (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners. To attain mastery of this language, learners are required to assimilate four cardinal proficiencies, namely auditory comprehension, oral expression, textual interpretation, and written composition, particularly in the context of fostering early literacy capacities among children. The attainment of these proficiencies assumes an indispensable role in facilitating their scholastic prospects and achievements (Sénéchal et al., 2006 & Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2002).

Examinations of the literacy trajectories of indigenous progeny in nations such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have brought to light a disjunction in the developmental trajectory of literacy proficiencies between their indigenous and non-indigenous counterparts. This incongruity has culminated in the marginalisation of indigenous communities from meaningful societal participation (Cowley & Easton, 2004; Frigo et al., 2004; & Hare, 2011). In the Malaysian context, despite concerted efforts aimed at bolstering the educational pursuits of Orang Asli progeny, discernible

disparities persist in their academic performance and accomplishments vis-à-vis their non-Orang Asli counterparts (Wan & Idrus, 2021). For instance, Orang Asli learners in Gua Musang, Kelantan, Malaysia, contend with acute impediments in their pursuit of ESL competence, attributable to their unyielding and conventional predispositions.

Academic inquiries that have been centring on the educational environment within the Orang Asli community have revealed an insufficiency in addressing crucial issues revolving around education, literacy, language acquisition, and pedagogical methodologies (Edo et al., 2013). This inadequacy is particularly pronounced in relation to the dimensions of reading and communication. Despite the pivotal importance of these aspects in fostering substantive engagement and comprehension among learners, existing investigations have exhibited a relative neglect of these dimensions. The below-par academic accomplishments of Orang Asli students often manifest through suboptimal performance in examinations, irregular attendance patterns, and instances of disciplinary infractions. While these variables are of significance, the unequivocal cornerstone on which academic achievement hinges remains a robust mastery of reading proficiency. While it is customary to attribute substandard reading performance to a deficit in linguistic adeptness, instances have emerged that posit students' reading efficacy may also be susceptible to the influence of anxiety, particularly pertinent to learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

The process of reading is quite complex and involves various challenges for learners. This complexity, as described by Schoenbach et al. (1990), arises from the multiple aspects, the need for problem-solving skills, and the limitations presented by the context. If individuals do not have a habit of reading regularly, their vocabulary suffers. This lack of engagement with reading in everyday life leads to a decrease in their understanding of words. As a result, learners who do not read much tend to have trouble understanding written English, which makes their difficulties even worse.

A number of studies have been conducted to provide evidence for the difficulties people faced in understanding what they read and the prevalence of anxiety in the Malaysian population as well as various reasons for these challenges. However, there is a lack of comprehensive research on the specific issue of reading anxiety among indigenous learners. Despite being the original inhabitants of Malaysia, the education that the Orang Asli community receives is not up to the national standard. This worrisome trend is highlighted by the high dropout rate among Orang Asli children in 2017, which was 26%. This contrasts sharply with the consistently low national average of less than 4% between 2016 and 2018 (Wan & Idrus, 2021).

Given this context, the current study aims to measure the extent of reading anxiety experienced by these students and identify the specific challenges they faced when using reading strategies. This focus is especially relevant for indigenous students who are learning language skills. The study centres on the real-life experiences of 23 Orang Asli children between the ages of 7 and 12, who live in a specific Orang Asli community in Pahang.

Literature review

Issues in Education among Indigenous Students

In Malaysia, Orang Asli is known as the official name of the Peninsular Malaysia Indigenous community. There are a total of 18 diverse indigenous ethnic tribes among them and each tribe is distinguished through their unique ethnic languages and social-cultural identities (Tarmiji et al., 2013; JAKOA, 2015). However, they are considered as minorities, and it has severely disadvantaged them in terms of their social and economic positions. According to Mohd Asri (2012), most of the Orang Asli's economic level falls under the poverty line and are marginalised (Johari & Nazri, 2007; Tarmiji et al., 2013). The education for Orang Asli was formalised in 1952 (Edo, 2012). Since then, educating the community has been one of the Government's priorities to help improving their social and economic status. According to KPM (2018), there has been considerable progress in education among the Orang Asli. Nevertheless, research has found that there are difficulties in educational attainment among them (Wan Afizi et al., 2014; SUHAKAM, 2015; Norwaliza et al., 2015). There are several prevalent issues being pointed out among the indigenous students including learning disengagement

and low achievement. Their achievement has not been at par and far from the national progress (Nicholas, 2006; Sharifah et al. 2011; United Nation, 2011).

The outlook for Orang Asli children's education in achieving the National Education Blueprints targets is worrying due to the obvious lack of education engagement among them. While some claim that the problem of education among Orang Asli is originated from the lack of awareness among the community, specifically the parents (Mazzlida & Ruhizan, 2016; Sawalludin et al., 2020), there are other studies (IDEAS, 2020; Nicholas, 2006) which suggest otherwise. In addition to that, Abdul Razaq and Zalizan (2009) along with Norwaliza and Ramlee (2015) suggested that the KBSR and KBSM standard curricula, along with their teaching methods, may not effectively cater to the needs of indigenous students. They argued that these approaches could be inappropriate or insufficiently adapted for the unique learning requirements of this group. Particularly to learning English language, Abdullah et al. (2013) found that the English curriculum currently implemented for Orang Asli students fails to engage them or maintain their interest during lessons.

Orang Asli students face several educational challenges, including high dropout rates, especially in language learning, due to various factors (Sharifah et al., 2011). While there has been research on indigenous education, studies focusing on Orang Asli children's language education, particularly English, are limited. English is rarely used in their daily lives, making it a foreign language for them, known as EFL (Ganapathy et al., 2022). Additionally, English is seen as the language of colonials, and this historical association adds to the difficulties Orang Asli students face. The legacy of colonialism has influenced their perception of English, making language learning even more challenging. Given these complexities, further research on the specific difficulties they encounter, such as reading anxiety, is needed. Addressing these issues can lead to better understanding and solutions for improving Orang Asli students' engagement with English.

Reading Anxiety

Studies on the acquisition of second languages have been conducted for many years in an effort to comprehend how learners acquire speaking, writing, listening, and reading abilities in connection to emotional factors such as motivation, self-efficacy, and anxiety (Deb, 2018). Although many studies focus on the impact of anxiety on speaking skills, recent research has revealed that ESL learners experience anxiety associated with reading, which results in poor reading performance and contributes to adverse results while speaking (Song, 2018).

Reading anxiety is a common situation experienced by every language learner. Each person may experience anxiety to a different degree and in response to a distinct cause. However, in most cases, they are prone to experience anxiety when they read about unfamiliar subjects, struggle to understand words, have trouble pronouncing words, or have trouble translating texts word for word (Anwar et al., 2022). Anxiety related to reading can be divided into three categories: top-down anxiety, bottom-up anxiety, and classroom reading anxiety (Noorezam et al., 2022). Top-down anxiety refers to the feeling of worry triggered from the fear of reading due to a lack of prior information, cultural understanding, and overall reading proficiency. These are extremely important in order to facilitate understanding texts better and increase learner's motivation in reading. Conversely, the phenomenon known as "bottom-up anxiety" refers to a state in which grammatical and vocabulary errors prevent students from comprehending the material they are reading. The final form of anxiety is related to reading tasks in the classroom, which mostly impact language learners who have low self-esteem.

Aisyah (2017) conducted a study on secondary school students in Bandung, which unveiled that these pupils had a moderate level of reading anxiety. It was discovered that their foreign terminology, unfamiliar topic, and unfamiliar culture were the root cause of their reading uneasiness. In addition to that, they were reported to be afraid of making mistakes. Muhlis (2017) documented a corresponding study that yielded similar results about the underlying factors contributing to learners' anxiety when reading. In her study, Faruq (2019) revealed that most of the participants were reported to be experiencing anxiety at a moderate level. The primary sources of reading anxiety among pupils were found to be due to material features, specifically unfamiliarity of vocabulary and unexpected cultural references. The identified personal characteristics included the fear of making mistakes, which was shown to be less prevalent than concerns around the impact of reading.

Focussing on a local context, findings from a study conducted by Mohd. Zin & Rafik-Galea (2010) among ESL students in a Malaysian university suggested that the participants exhibited a moderate level of anxiety when presented with the task of reading English academic texts. A comparable outcome was identified in a more recent study conducted by Petrus and Shah (2020), which revealed that children enrolled in a rural secondary school in Sarawak exhibited a moderate level of reading anxiety. The principal cause of concern is attributed to the introduction of novel terminology. Noorezam et al. (2022) reported that the participants in their study experienced the highest level of classroom reading anxiety where they felt anxious whenever the teacher used uninteresting text in the classroom and followed by top-down reading anxiety which they got extremely anxious when they could not spot the main idea of the text given.

Zoghi and Alivandivafa's (2014) theoretical framework for reading anxiety identifies three main sources: Top-down Reading Anxiety (TRA), Bottom-up Reading Anxiety (BRA), and Classroom Reading Anxiety (CRA). TRA involves anxiety due to insufficient background knowledge and cultural context, making unfamiliar subjects particularly challenging. BRA pertains to difficulties with vocabulary and grammar that hinder comprehension. CRA relates to anxieties connected with the classroom environment and interactions with teachers, especially for learners with low self-esteem. For indigenous students in EFL settings, these issues are intensified by additional cultural and linguistic barriers. This framework helps explain the moderate levels of reading anxiety observed in studies like those by Mohd. Zin & Rafik-Galea (2010) and Petrus and Shah (2020).

Research on reading anxiety among Orang Asli learners is limited, despite their unique challenges with English. Orang Asli students are EFL learners with restricted exposure to the language, which is further complicated by its colonial associations (Ganapathy et al., 2022). Studies show that indigenous students encounter educational obstacles, leading to higher dropout rates (Sharifah et al., 2011) and increased anxiety from unfamiliar words and cultural references. While research on Malaysian students in rural areas indicates moderate reading anxiety (Petrus & Shah, 2020), little focus has been placed on Orang Asli learners. Therefore, this study aims to investigate reading anxiety among indigenous learners in Kuala Tahan, guided by the theoretical model introduced by Zoghi and Alivandivafa (2014).

Methodology

The study utilised 23 indigenous students from two national schools in Kuala Tahan, Pahang. They have been enrolled at the school for at least six months and study together with other Malay students. Their age ranges from eight years old to sixteen years old. They were selected to participate in the survey through purposive sampling procedures. The respondents were divided into smaller groups in two separate sessions and were facilitated by the researchers in answering the questionnaire. A brief reading session was conducted in class before the questionnaire was administered. Recognizing the status of English as the third language among the respondents after their native language and Bahasa Malaysia, the session involved reading aloud, assisted by the researchers. This reading session was conducted just to trigger the respondents on their comfort with the researchers, as well as their basics in reading.

ELF Reading Anxiety Inventory (ELFRAI)

The data were collected by using a questionnaire which comprised two parts. The items were adopted from the English Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Inventory (ELFRAI) which was developed by Zoghi & Alivandivafa (2014). The reliability of this instrument is ensured as the previous Cronbach Alpha was reported to be consistent. The recent study by Husain et al., (2020) reported it to be 0.927 while Husain et al., (2019) recorded it to be 0.813. Generally, the acceptable value of alpha coefficient must be $\alpha > .70$ to support the reliability of studies involving social sciences (Kalkbrenner, 2021). Hence, this confirmed the reliability of the instrument. This questionnaire consists of 27 items of closed-ended statements with 4-point Likert scale answers which '1' corresponds to 'totally disagree' and '4' to 'totally agree'. The first section contains eight items enquiring about respondents' demographic information. The second part consists of items probing on their reading anxiety. The

ELFRAI instrument is composed of three factors: Top-Down Reading Anxiety, Bottom-Up Reading Anxiety and Classroom Reading Anxiety. To facilitate understanding among the respondents, the questionnaire was translated into Bahasa Malaysia. The data was descriptively analysed using SPSS V28 and the findings are focused on the mean as well as the standard deviation (SD) to answer the research questions.

Findings and Discussion

Indigenous students' anxiety level

The findings are grouped into 3 aspects: top-down reading anxiety, bottom-up reading anxiety, and classroom reading anxiety. In addition to that, each aspect is further divided into two parts with the exception of classroom reading anxiety. Below are the elaborations of the results.

Table 1. Top-Down Reading Anxiety: Background & Cultural

	Mean	SD
C1: I do not feel at ease when the title of the text is unfamiliar to me.	2.65	0.93
BC2: It is worrying to me when the ideas expressed in the text are culturally unclear.	2.57	0.90
BC3: I get upset when I lack the previous knowledge about the ideas expressed in the text.	2.39	0.78

Table 1 above shows the top-down reading anxiety from the aspect of background and culture. This section depicts the indigenous students' feelings towards the reading texts presented to them including the unfamiliarity of the text, existence of foreign cultures and the lack of prior knowledge of the context. The indigenous students are most uncomfortable when reading unfamiliar texts (M=2.65). This is followed by the existence of unfamiliar culture in the text (M=2.57) and finally when they do not have enough previous knowledge on the ideas (M=2.39).

Table 2. Top-Down Reading Anxiety: General Reading Anxiety

	Mean	SD
GRA1: I worry when I cannot get the gist of the text although no new vocabulary items or grammatical points exist in the text.	2.74	0.75
GRA2: When I cannot recognize minor ideas (details) of the text is worrying to me.	2.74	0.86
GRA3: I am nervous when I cannot spot the main idea of a certain paragraph.	3.00	0.6
GRA4: It bothers me when I cannot express my opinions or feelings about the text.	2.83	0.72

Based on Table 2, the second part of the top-down reading anxiety probed on the respondents' general reading anxiety. This includes their incapacity to recognise details, identify the main idea and convey one's opinion. Based on the result, the students have moderately high anxiety for this aspect in which they have the highest worry when they are unable to identify the main idea of a paragraph (M=3.0) and have the least when they cannot identify the idea of the text given (M=2.74).

Table 3. Bottom-Up Reading Anxiety: Vocabulary

	Mean	SD
V1: I feel uneasy when I cannot figure out the meanings of unknown words.	2.96	0.56
V2: It bothers me when I encounter a lot of words whose meanings are unclear.	2.78	0.67
V3: I get upset when I cannot figure out the meaning of a word that I feel I have seen before.	3.00	0.52
V4: It bothers me when I feel unable to look up a word in the dictionary.	2.91	0.73
V5: I get confused when the word that I know has a different meaning in the sentence.	3.17	0.39
V6: I get upset when I come across idioms that are unfamiliar to me.	3.22	0.52
V7: It makes me feel uneasy when an unfamiliar word is made up of several parts or syllables.	3.09	0.73
V8: I feel worried when the unknown word is difficult to pronounce.	2.70	0.88

In general, the factor of this particular reading anxiety holds the greatest significance among the students, as evidenced by a total mean score of 2.98, surpassing the other aspects under consideration. With the highest mean among the items in Table 3, the students get extremely anxious if they are to encounter unfamiliar idioms while reading (M=3.22). This is followed by encountering homonyms, or words with multiple meanings (M=3.17). They feel least worried if they have difficulty pronouncing words which are not familiar to them (M=2.98).

Table 4. Bottom-Up Reading Anxiety: Grammar

	Mean	SD
G1: I am nervous when a certain sentence is long and has a complex structure,	2.91	0.60
G2: When a certain sentence is grammatically unfamiliar is worrying to me.	2.83	0.89
G3: It bothers me when a passive voice is used in a sentence.	2.39	0.89
G4: I feel upset when the tense of a certain sentence is unclear to me.	2.74	0.45
G5: I worry when I am unable to recognize different parts of speech such as adjectives, adverbs, or connective words.	2.70	0.47
G6: I get confused when what I know about a grammatical point does not make any sense.	2.74	0.75

Table 4 depicts the bottom-up reading anxiety among indigenous students from the aspect of grammar. This includes the students' nervousness in dealing with more complex sentences, passive voice, complex and unclear tenses as well as different parts of speech. It can be seen that the students are most anxious when dealing with sentence structures that are generally longer and more complicated (M=2.91). However, students are least anxious when a passive voice is used (M=2.39).

Table 5. Classroom Reading Anxiety: Teaching Method

	Mean	SD
CRA1: It bothers me when the instructor calls on me to read out.	2.74	0.96
CRA2: It worries me when the instructor calls on me to translate a piece of an English text into our first language.	2.43	1.12
CRA3: When the instructor asks me to read comprehension questions it is worrying to me.	3.09	0.67
CRA4: It upsets me when the instructor chooses uninteresting texts to read in class.	2.78	1.0
CRA5: It makes me feel uneasy when the instructor corrects my pronunciation or translation mistakes.	2.57	1.08
CRA6: I am nervous when the instructor uses English as a medium of instruction and hardly ever makes use of our first language.	2.57	1.08

Table 5 illustrates the mean scores for six items that assess the respondents' level of classroom reading anxiety. This aspect refers to the students' reading anxiety that occurs in a classroom setting. It encompasses the tasks of reading the material aloud, translating it, reading the comprehension questions loudly, addressing uninteresting topics, providing direct correction of students' pronunciation as well as the instructor's regular usage of English language. The most significant worry among students is when the teacher instructs them to read comprehension questions (M=3.087) and least would be when the instructor asks them to translate the text into their mother tongue (M=2.43)

Table 6. Total Mean

No.	Factors	Mean	SD	Reading anxiety level
1	Top-Down Reading Anxiety			
a	Background & Cultural	2.54	0.69	Moderate
b	General Reading Anxiety	2.83	0.55	Moderate
2	Bottom-Up Reading Anxiety:			
a	Vocabulary	2.98	0.50	Moderate
b	Grammar	2.71	0.42	Moderate
3	Classroom Reading Anxiety			
a	Teaching Method	2.70	0.81	Moderate
	Total	2.75	0.48	

The findings regarding the reading anxiety levels among indigenous students in Kuala Tahan, Pahang, reveal valuable insights into their classroom experience. Despite their general disengagement in academic settings and historically low achievement levels, as highlighted by Sharifah et al. (2011), these students exhibit only moderate levels of reading anxiety, with a mean score of 2.75. This suggests that while the students may not experience overwhelming fear or apprehension when

reading, they still face some degree of nervousness and discomfort. This level of anxiety, though not extreme, is significant because it may affect their overall learning experience and performance in subtle ways.

Interestingly, this finding aligns with previous research in the field. Studies by Muhlis (2017) and Faruq (2019) similarly identified medium levels of reading anxiety among students in other contexts, suggesting that this is not an isolated phenomenon. More recent studies, such as those by Nunung et al. (2021) and Nguyen et al. (2023), also support this conclusion, indicating that moderate reading anxiety may be a common challenge for students across different cultural and geographic backgrounds.

The consistency of these findings across multiple studies underscores the importance of addressing reading anxiety in educational environments, particularly for indigenous students. While moderate anxiety might not appear to be as debilitating as high levels of anxiety, it can still have a significant impact on student engagement, motivation, and achievement. Understanding and mitigating this anxiety could potentially enhance the students' learning experiences and improve their academic outcomes, especially in reading-intensive subjects. Therefore, future educational strategies should focus on creating more supportive and inclusive learning environments to help reduce anxiety and improve reading proficiency among indigenous students.

The types of difficulties encountered

There are a total of three reading anxiety sources namely top-down reading anxiety, bottom-up reading anxiety and classroom reading anxiety. Among these three sources of reading anxiety as shown in Table 6, this study found that the highest reading anxiety level comes from bottom-up reading anxiety, followed by classroom reading anxiety and lastly top-down reading anxiety. This is consistent with the finding conducted by Faruq (2019) and Nunung et al. (2021) where most of the reading anxiety stemmed from bottom-up. However, it is inconsistent with the result reported by Nguyen at al. (2023) which found that the highest reading anxiety stemmed from top-down reading anxiety.

The participants indicate that classroom reading anxiety is the second most prevalent form of reading anxiety. In relation to this particular form of anxiety, pupils exhibit heightened concerns when confronted with inquiries pertaining to their comprehension of the assigned reading material. This is mainly because apart from feeling overwhelmed by the reading context, they are also extremely pressured by answering the questions in public. The pressure of getting the answers right might drive the students to feel extra nervous. This is supported by the study conducted by Tsai (2012) where students were afraid to give the wrong answers, hence experienced higher anxiety levels.

Lastly, top-down reading anxiety that specifically deals with the main idea leads to reading anxiety among students. This is because students who are generally weaker in terms of vocabulary will have a harder time to understand the content, hence leading to difficulties in understanding and locating the main idea. This is supported by Rajab et al. (2012) and Guimba & Alico (2015) that unfamiliar words will impede students' comprehension which further causes difficulty in reading.

Conclusion

An overview of the results reveals intriguing findings on reading anxiety among the indigenous students in Kuala Tahan, Pahang. Apparently, they have a moderate level of reading anxiety which is similar to their counterparts across the country (Mohd. Zin & Rafik-Galea, 2010; Petrus and Shah, 2020) and even around the globe (Muhlis, 2017; Faruq, 2019; Nunung et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2023) as they are EFL learners. In addition to that, the factors of their reading anxiety seem to be consistent with the findings in other studies (Faruq, 2019; Nunung et al., 2021). These findings hold potential value to their language teachers as well as syllabus makers as there is a high chance the similar materials which have had great outcomes in the past could be effectively utilised in the educational settings. This discovery suggests that it is important for teachers to employ and provide rationale for instructional approaches in their English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom to assist students in reducing their levels of reading anxiety.

Co-Author Contribution

The authors confirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author 1, 2 and 3 carried out the fieldwork and did the statistical analysis as well as the interpretation of the results. Author 4 wrote the research methodology and prepared the literature review.

Acknowledgements

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