

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF READING DEVELOPMENT IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

Second language acquisition relies heavily on reading, but a combination of linguistic proficiency and various internal psychological factors influences the process. This study investigates how affective and cognitive factors, such as motivation, anxiety, self-confidence, and the strategic management of reading, interact and affect learners' reading development. This study draws on principles from both educational psychology and SLA research to investigate the emotional and strategic aspects that accompany English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading. University students who participated in questionnaires and semi-structured interviews indicate that individuals with higher motivation and greater confidence in their capabilities generally achieve better results in comprehension exercises. On the other hand, readers who often experience anxiety are more likely to disengage and struggle with fluency. Research also underscores the importance of utilising metacognitive strategies, which seem to enable learners to control their reading habits and counteract the impact of unfavourable emotions.

The results imply that reading instruction is improved by combining psychological support with linguistic training. A teaching approach that fosters motivation, reduces anxiety, and encourages reflective reading practices can lead to more substantial improvements in learners' reading skills.

Keywords: SLA, reading comprehension, cognitive factors, metacognitive strategies, psychological support, improved results

BAZAT PSIKOLOGJIKE TË ZHVILLIMIT TË TË LEXUARIT NË MËSIMIN E GJUHËS SË HUAJ

Abstrakt

Përvetësimi i gjuhës së huaj mbështetet shumë në leximin e teksteve, por ky proces ndikohet nga kombinimi i aftësisë gjuhësore dhe faktorëve psikologjikë të ndryshëm. Ky studim vëzhgon mënyrën se si faktorët afektivë dhe konjitivë, të tillë si motivimi, ankthi, vetëbesimi dhe menaxhimi strategjik i të lexuarit të tekstit, bashkëveprojnë dhe ndikojnë në zhvillimin e aftësisë të të lexuarit të studentëve. Ky studim mbështetet në parimet e psikologjisë arsimore por edhe të hulumtimit të përvetësimit të gjuhës së huaj për të vëzhguar aspektet emocionale dhe strategjike që e shoqërojnë leximin e teksteve në gjuhë angleze si një gjuhë e huaj. Studentët e universitetit të cilët morën pjesë në pyetësorët dhe në intervistat gjysmë të strukturuar raportojnë se në përgjithësi individët me motivimin më të lartë dhe vetëbesimin më të madh në aftësitë e tyre arrijnë rezultate më të mira në ushtrimet e të kuptuarit të tekstit. Nga ana tjetër, lexuesit që përjetojnë shpesh ankth kanë më tepër gjasa të heqin dorë nga leximi dhe të kenë vështirësi me rrjedhshmërinë e tekstit. Ky hulumtim gjithashtu thekson rëndësinë e përdorimit të strategjive metakognitive, të cilat u mundësojnë studentëve ti kontrollojnë zakonet e tyre të të lexuarit dhe ta luftojnë ndikimin e emocioneve negative.

Rezultatet tregojnë se mësimdhënia e të lexuarit të tekstit përmirësohet duke kombinuar mbështetjen psikologjike me trajnimin gjuhësor. Qasja ndaj një mësimdhënie që inkurajon motivimin, zvogëlon ankthin dhe promovon një reflektim të thelluar mbi praktikën e të lexuarit mund të rezultojë në përmirësime më të dukshme të aftësive të të lexuarit të studentëve.

Fjalët kyçe: *Përvetësimi i gjuhës së huaj, kuptimi i tekstit, faktor konjitiv, strategji metakonjitive, mbështetje psikologjike, rezultate të përmirësuara.*

Introduction

Reading is crucial in foreign language acquisition, providing a base for developing vocabulary, grasping grammatical concepts, and achieving overall communicative proficiency. Recent views on language education highlight that reading goes beyond just decoding text; learners' emotions, motivations, and self-perceptions have a significant impact on how they approach reading tasks. Designing instruction that supports learners both cognitively and emotionally is,

therefore, essential. Achieving this, however, first requires a deep understanding of the internal psychological dimensions that shape the reading experience.

Internal factors such as motivation, reading-related anxiety, self-efficacy, and awareness of reading strategies significantly affect how readers engage with written text. Motivation drives persistence, but anxiety obstructs understanding and diminishes a person's desire to participate. In contrast to these fluctuating emotional states, the more stable belief of self-efficacy plays a distinct role. Students who trust in their reading abilities tend to employ effective strategies and tackle challenges with confidence. Learners with well-developed metacognitive skills can review their reading, fine-tune their methods, and assess their comprehension, linking emotional experiences with cognitive activity.

Research on SLA has increasingly focused on psychological variables, yet their collective impact on reading development still requires further investigation. This study examines the relationships between these factors and their cumulative effect on EFL learners' reading abilities, aiming to improve teaching methods that consider learners' cognitive and emotional needs.

Literature Review

Studies in both educational psychology and applied linguistics have repeatedly demonstrated that psychological factors significantly influence reading development. Theories of early reading, including Rumelhart's (1977) and Stanovich's (1980) models, mainly concentrated on cognitive processes. Current academic research recognizes that reading is shaped by both emotional and motivational factors. Learners' attitudes, beliefs, and emotional responses significantly impact both their interpretation of text and the depth of their engagement with the reading process. Motivation is a key factor in predicting reading achievement. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) found that motivated learners spend more time and focus on reading and are more inclined to tackle obstacles. In EFL settings, intrinsic motivation—driven by interest or enjoyment—is notably influential (Dörnyei, 2005). The more motivated students are, the more they engage with reading materials, thereby enhancing vocabulary and comprehension.

Learners with reading anxiety may struggle to fully comprehend material and, consequently, may opt to avoid complex texts altogether. According to Saito, Garza, and Horwitz (1999), anxious learners often resist reading or resort to superficial processing techniques, thereby limiting their exposure to substantial written language.

According to Bandura (1997), belief in one's ability to accomplish specific tasks is a key component of self-efficacy, which significantly affects reading performance. Individuals with greater confidence in their abilities are more apt to establish objectives, persist, and utilise efficient methods, ultimately leading to improved reading results (Mills et al., 2007).

Understanding of and control over one's own reading techniques are other crucial elements. Learners with higher metacognitive awareness, as Flavell (1979) and Zhang (2010) have suggested, are better equipped to manage difficulties and regulate comprehension processes, linking psychological and cognitive aspects of reading. The development of reading proficiency is influenced by the dynamic interplay of motivation, anxiety, self-efficacy, and metacognitive awareness. However, the combined effects of these factors in EFL settings are still relatively understudied, which provides the reason for the current research.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A mixed-methods design was utilised in the study to gain a thorough understanding of the psychological factors affecting reading in an English as a foreign language context. The quantitative aspect investigated connections between psychological factors and reading results, whereas the qualitative aspect looked into learners' personal understandings and emotional experiences associated with reading. This approach was chosen to address two main research questions:

- (1) To what extent do motivation, anxiety, self-efficacy, and metacognitive awareness correlate with EFL reading performance?
- (2) How do learners perceive and emotionally experience these factors during reading tasks?

Participants

The investigation comprised 82 undergraduate students enrolled in an English and literature programme at a public university. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 24 years ($M = 21.3$, $SD = 1.5$), with a gender distribution of 65% female and 35% male. All had studied English for an average of 8.2 years ($SD = 2.1$). All participants were English as a foreign language learners with proficiency levels spanning from B1 to B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference scale. To guarantee that participants had prior experience with academic reading tasks, purposive sampling was employed. Data collection began only after volunteers had provided their consent. Participation was voluntary, and consent was obtained before data collection.

INSTRUMENTS

The following instruments were used:

- **Reading Motivation Scale (RMS)** – adapted from Wigfield & Guthrie (1997) demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$).
- **Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS)** – Saito et al. (1999) showed strong reliability in the current study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$).
- **Reading Self-Efficacy Questionnaire (RSEQ)** – based on Mills et al. (2007) yielded a Cronbach's α of .84.
- **MARSI (Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory)** – Mokhtari & Reichard (2002) exhibited excellent reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$).

Participants additionally completed a standardized reading comprehension test matched to their individual level of expertise. Twelve participants took part in follow-up interviews to gather qualitative data. Data collection occurred over a six-week period. During the initial phase, all participants completed the questionnaires and the reading comprehension test in controlled classroom settings.

For the qualitative phase, twelve participants were selected using maximum variation sampling based on their questionnaire scores to represent differing levels of motivation, anxiety, and self-efficacy. The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of eight open-ended

questions addressing emotional responses to reading, perceived challenges, strategy use, and self-evaluations of reading performance. Interviews lasted approximately 8–10 minutes, were audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, including descriptive statistics, correlations, and regression analyses. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring psychological and strategic patterns in learners' experiences. The integration of both data types provided a richer understanding of how psychological factors influence reading.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Findings

To address the first research question, correlation and regression analyses were conducted. Reading comprehension scores were strongly and positively correlated with motivation ($r = .62, p < .01$) and self-efficacy ($r = .58, p < .01$). In contrast, reading anxiety demonstrated a moderate negative correlation with comprehension ($r = -.49, p < .01$) and was also negatively associated with motivation ($r = -.46, p < .01$). Metacognitive awareness was positively correlated with reading comprehension ($r = .53, p < .01$), motivation ($r = .55, p < .01$), and self-efficacy ($r = .60, p < .01$), while showing a moderate negative correlation with reading anxiety ($r = -.41, p < .01$).

A multiple regression analysis was then conducted to determine the predictive contribution of these variables. Motivation and self-efficacy together explained 41% of the variance in reading scores ($R^2 = .41$). When metacognitive awareness was entered into the model, it accounted for a substantial additional 18% of unique variance ($\Delta R^2 = .18$). Reading anxiety emerged as a negative predictor, although its contribution was smaller than the other factors. These findings highlight the interconnected nature of cognitive and emotional variables, suggesting that learners with greater strategic awareness tend to report higher motivation and confidence, alongside lower anxiety levels.

Qualitative Finding

Thematic analysis of the twelve semi-structured interviews generated three dominant themes. The frequency of responses within each theme is specified to clarify the weight of each pattern across participants.

1. Emotional Influence on Reading (10 of 12 participants)

Ten participants described anxiety as directly interfering with concentration and comprehension. These students reported symptoms such as rushing through texts, losing focus, or abandoning difficult passages. One participant stated, *“When the text looks difficult, I start worrying immediately and I read faster, but I don’t really understand.”* Another explained, *“I sometimes avoid long academic texts because I feel tired before I even start.”* Anxiety-related comments were more frequent among B1-level students and those who scored lower on the self-efficacy questionnaire. In contrast, B2-level learners acknowledged occasional anxiety but reported being better able to regulate it through strategy use.

2. Beliefs About Competence (8 of 12 participants)

Eight participants explicitly referred to their perceived competence as shaping their engagement with reading tasks. Learners with higher self-efficacy scores described persistence and strategic effort. One participant noted, *“Even if I don’t understand at first, I try again and use different techniques.”* In contrast, four participants with lower self-efficacy scores reported disengagement and anticipatory failure. As one student expressed, *“Sometimes I stop because I think it’s too difficult for me.”* A comparison across self-efficacy levels indicates that confidence influenced not only emotional reactions but also behavioral persistence. Higher-efficacy learners were more likely to complete complex tasks, whereas lower-efficacy learners demonstrated avoidance patterns, particularly when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary.

3. Use of Metacognitive Strategies (9 of 12 participants)

Nine participants reported regular use of strategies such as previewing headings, highlighting key ideas, summarizing paragraphs, or re-reading challenging sections. These learners described feeling more in control of their comprehension process. One participant explained, *“When I summarize after each paragraph, I feel calmer because I know I understand.”*

Notably, participants with higher metacognitive awareness scores and B2 proficiency levels demonstrated more consistent and flexible strategy use. In contrast, three lower-proficiency learners reported limited or inconsistent use of strategies, often relying solely on dictionary consultation.

Across interviews, strategic awareness appeared to function as a regulatory mechanism, reducing anxiety and strengthening perceived competence. Learners who actively monitored comprehension reported fewer emotional disruptions during reading.

Analytical Integration

A cross-theme comparison suggests that self-efficacy and metacognitive awareness may buffer the negative effects of anxiety. Participants with higher confidence and stronger strategic habits acknowledged experiencing stress but described concrete methods for managing it. In contrast, lower-efficacy and lower-proficiency learners reported a more direct link between anxiety and task avoidance.

These qualitative findings support the quantitative results by illustrating how psychological variables interact dynamically rather than functioning independently.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that reading development in EFL contexts is shaped by the interaction of linguistic competence and psychological variables, particularly motivation, self-efficacy, anxiety, and metacognitive awareness. While linguistic knowledge provides the structural foundation for comprehension, affective and strategic dimensions appear to regulate how effectively that knowledge is deployed during reading tasks.

Consistent with socio-cognitive models of learning, motivation and self-efficacy emerged as strong positive predictors of reading performance. Learners who believed in their competence were more likely to persist when encountering difficulty. This finding supports Bandura's (1997) assertion that self-efficacy is not merely an emotional state but a behavioral driver: perceived capability directly influences the effort one chooses to expend on a task. At the same time, anxiety demonstrated a negative association with comprehension, reinforcing theoretical claims that emotional tension consumes cognitive resources needed for processing text.

However, the findings also reveal nuances that complicate a purely linear interpretation. A small subset of learners reported moderate comprehension success despite elevated anxiety levels. This suggests that anxiety does not uniformly impair performance and may, in some cases, coexist with compensatory mechanisms such as stronger linguistic knowledge or more disciplined strategy use. This pattern aligns with perspectives that distinguish between facilitative and debilitating anxiety, indicating that moderate tension may not always be detrimental.

Metacognitive awareness emerged as a particularly significant variable, not only correlating with comprehension but also showing negative associations with anxiety and positive associations with motivation and self-efficacy. This pattern suggests that strategic awareness may function as a regulatory bridge between affect and cognition. Rather than operating independently, emotional and cognitive factors appear dynamically interconnected, with metacognitive control potentially buffering the disruptive effects of anxiety.

At the same time, the data do not support an overly deterministic interpretation. The explained variance in reading performance, while substantial, indicates that additional factors—such as prior linguistic proficiency, text difficulty, and instructional context—also contribute meaningfully to comprehension outcomes. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design prevents conclusions about causality. It remains unclear whether higher motivation leads to better reading performance, or whether successful reading experiences strengthen motivation and self-efficacy over time.

Taken together, the results support integrative models of reading that conceptualize comprehension as a multidimensional process influenced by cognitive skills, emotional regulation, and strategic behavior. The findings reinforce the need to move beyond purely linguistic instruction and toward pedagogical frameworks that address the psychological conditions under which reading occurs.

CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study confirms that reading development in EFL contexts is not solely a function of linguistic competence but is significantly shaped by the interaction of motivation, anxiety, self-efficacy, and metacognitive awareness. The findings demonstrate that these variables do not operate independently; rather, they form a dynamic psychological system that influences how learners approach, process, and persist in reading tasks.

A central contribution of this study lies in empirically demonstrating the mediating role of metacognitive awareness within this system. While previous research has examined affective variables separately, the present findings highlight how strategic awareness connects emotional regulation and comprehension performance, suggesting that metacognitive instruction may serve as a practical intervention point in EFL reading classrooms.

The results support the integration of psychologically informed practices into reading instruction. These implications can be operationalized in concrete ways:

- **Building self-efficacy through structured success experiences:**

Teachers can design reading sequences that move from shorter, manageable texts to progressively more complex materials. Providing immediate formative feedback and highlighting specific successful strategies (e.g., “Your summary captured the main argument accurately”) reinforces competence beliefs.

- **Reducing anxiety through pre-reading scaffolding:** Brief vocabulary previews, guiding questions, and collaborative prediction activities before reading can lower anticipatory stress. Think-aloud modeling by the teacher can

also normalize difficulty and demonstrate how to manage comprehension breakdowns.

- **Enhancing intrinsic motivation through text choice:** Allowing students to select from thematically related texts or incorporating contemporary, culturally relevant materials may increase engagement. Structured discussion following reading can further reinforce personal connection to the text.
- **Explicit metacognitive strategy instruction:** Rather than assuming strategy use develops naturally, instructors can model and practice specific techniques such as summarizing paragraphs, generating questions, monitoring comprehension, and reflecting on emotional reactions in reading journals. Periodic guided reflection prompts (e.g., “What strategy helped you most today?”) can strengthen awareness and transfer.

Collectively, these practices shift reading instruction from a purely text-centered approach to a learner-centered model that addresses emotional regulation and strategic control.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies should adopt longitudinal or intervention-based designs to determine whether targeted metacognitive and motivational training produces sustained improvements in reading performance. Experimental classroom implementations would further clarify causal relationships among psychological variables and comprehension outcomes.

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