

# The Impact of Cultural Factors on Reading Anxiety of EFL Students

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## Abstract

This study investigates the impact of cultural factors on reading anxiety among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, focusing on how unfamiliar cultural contexts and linguistic challenges contribute to anxiety levels. Reading is a fundamental skill essential for knowledge acquisition and cognitive development; however, many EFL students experience significant anxiety when engaging with texts in a foreign language. The research involved qualitative analysis through interviews with sixth-semester English education students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar. Findings reveal that while familiar cultural themes, such as batik, can enhance engagement, unfamiliar vocabulary and cultural references often induce anxiety. Most participants expressed a need for additional time and support when encountering texts with unfamiliar cultural elements, particularly regarding the symbolism of motifs like "parang" and "kawung." The results indicate that cultural unfamiliarity significantly contributes to reading anxiety, as students struggle to comprehend texts that require background knowledge of the culture. This study underscores the importance of addressing cultural factors in EFL education to mitigate reading anxiety and improve comprehension, suggesting that increased exposure to cultural contexts may enhance students' reading experiences and reduce anxiety levels.

**Keywords:** Reading Anxiety; Cultural; EFL Students

## INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental skill that enables individuals to acquire knowledge, develop critical thinking abilities, and enhance their overall cognitive development. According to (Mokoginta et al., 2023), reading proficiency is one of the four language skills that students should learn and practice in school. In the field of education, one activity that cannot be separated is reading. Then, the research of (Manuas et al., 2022), "reading is very essential in education," and children should become proficient in it since it can improve their reading skills. While, Based on (Kesuma et al., 2022), reading is a very important and necessary skill in learning activities as well as in daily life because reading is the only way to receive and interpret written information. However, for many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, reading can be a daunting task, often accompanied by feelings of anxiety and stress. This is termed reading anxiety, reading anxiety among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students is an increasingly recognized challenge in language acquisition. Based on A condition known as reading anxiety "occurs between the interpretation of the text and the concrete processing of reading text." (Saito, 1999), as referenced in (Zahro & Faruq, 2019). Then, as said by (Rianawati Devi, Pradana Arief Dian, Anwar Saiful, 2024), the worry, dread, or uneasiness that students feel when interacting with English literature is known as reading anxiety. As globalization expands, learning English has become an essential skill, and many non-native speakers face obstacles not only in mastering the language itself but also in overcoming the psychological barriers that hinder their academic success. Among these barriers, reading

anxiety is one of the most prevalent issues that EFL students encounter. As stated by (Muhlis Azhari, 2017), The term "foreign language reading anxiety" describes the uneasiness and fear that pupils experience as they attempt to read and understand texts written in a foreign language. It manifests as feelings of nervousness, fear, or stress when engaging with reading materials in a foreign language, which can significantly impede their learning process. Based on (Spielberger, 1983), as referenced in (Seinfeld et al., 2016), anxiety is characterized by emotions of tension, apprehension, uneasiness, and worry about possible unfavorable outcomes or events. Then, As claimed by (Dunifa et al., 2023) Anxiety can also refer to a person's emotional response to ambiguous circumstances or events. Cultural factors play a crucial role in shaping students' reading experiences. Reading in a foreign language often involves not only understanding the vocabulary and grammar but also interpreting cultural references, values, and context that may be unfamiliar to the learner. In addition to interacting with the author's ideas, reading tasks also allow the reader to interact with the printed materials' shared understanding of cultural history (In Tomasello, 1999), as cited in confirmed (Miyamoto, & Della-Chiesa, 2008), as cited in (Ahmad et al., 2013). Students' reading comprehension skills would be hampered by unfamiliar English or other foreign language cultures, and they would experience anxiety since the culture is unfamiliar to them (Rajab et al., 2012). One of the main factors thought to cause foreign language reading anxiety is unfamiliar culture. (Gonen, 2007), also finds that students found it challenging to interpret foreign language script due to unknown cultural elements. In this way, learners will either better grasp the book or misunderstand it if they are familiar with the culture it represents. Several studies found that according to (Aisyah, 2017) found that 51.5% of junior high EFL students experienced moderate reading anxiety. Key causes included new terminology, unfamiliar topics, and cultural references, with fear of mistakes being the top personal factor. Then, based on (Isler Cemre & Yildirim Ozgur, 2019) found Turkish EFL students generally experienced moderate reading anxiety. Key causes included personal factors (low confidence, poor strategies), text characteristics (unfamiliar topics, vocabulary, structure), and course-related factors (compulsory reading, exams). While, according to (Miao & Vibulphol, 2021) Results showed a moderate level of anxiety, primarily caused by difficulty in general reading proficiency and vocabulary challenges. Students felt anxiety when unable to understand everything and focused heavily on details. This research explores the impact of cultural and linguistic factors on reading anxiety among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, specifically focusing on the interplay between cultural unfamiliarity, linguistic challenges, and the resulting levels of reading anxiety. While several studies have previously investigated reading anxiety in EFL learners, Despite the growing recognition of this phenomenon, there is still a lack of comprehensive studies that explore the underlying causes of reading anxiety, particularly the influence of cultural factors. This study aims to investigate how cultural factors, such as unfamiliar culture and unfamiliar topics affect reading anxiety, based on students' personal experiences in reading descriptive text.

## METHOD

This research will apply a qualitative approach. According to Creswell (2016), qualitative research is a kind of study that looks into and comprehends how social issues affect a group of people or individuals. The subjects of this research are the sixth semester English education student academic year 2022/2023 at Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar. The sampling technique that will be used in this research is the purposive sampling technique because the sample is selected based on certain criteria or characteristics, in which the specific criteria that will be used as samples are sixth semester students who have learned critical reading. Using the sampling technique known as " Purposive sampling," the researcher chooses a sample based on

their prior knowledge about the sample. Purposive sampling, outlined by (Sugiyono, 2019), as referenced in (Meliawati, 2020), is predicated on norms or considerations that have already been established by research. Purposive sampling was thus selected by the researchers as one of the data gathering methods for this investigation. In this research, the instruments used will be descriptive text was adopted from (Wulandari Ari, 2011) and open-ended interview. Each question is designed to allow the students to express their thoughts and experiences in detail, providing in-depth insights into how cultural affect their reading anxiety.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

The results gathered from the subjects' responses in the reading analysis and interviews serve as the basis for the conclusions the impact of cultural on reading anxiety of EFL students.

- a. Question 1: "How does the cultural context of the text influence your interest in reading it? Does it make the text more engaging or anxiety-inducing? Why?"

Based on the responses from the subjects regarding this question, it was found that out of 8 subjects, all students mentioned that the cultural context of the text significantly influenced their interest in reading. Most students 7 stated that the cultural context made the text more engaging because they found learning about batik and its cultural significance interesting. However, 1 student expressed initial anxiety about the length of the text, which made them hesitant to start reading but found the content ultimately engaging. This is supported by the results of the interview on question number 1 which shows that all 8 students expressed anxiety related to unfamiliar vocabulary and unfamiliar cultural contexts. Most students 6 out of 8 felt anxious because they were afraid of misunderstanding words or meanings related to a culture they were not familiar with, while 2 students felt anxious because of cultural differences and unfamiliar meanings in the text. These findings show that although cultural context can increase reading interest, it can also trigger fear and confusion when reading.

- b. Question 2: "Is the theme of the reading above familiar or unfamiliar to you, and why?"

Based on the responses from the subjects regarding this question, it was found that out of 8 subjects, 6 of the subjects indicated that the theme was familiar because batik is an integral part of Indonesian culture. However, 2 of the subjects felt that certain aspects, such as the specific motifs or regional differences, were unfamiliar to them. This is in line with the findings in the interview in question number 2, where 4 students felt that the topic of batik was easy to understand because it was already known as part of Indonesian culture, while 4 other students mentioned difficulties with certain cultural elements, especially the symbolism of motifs such as "parang" and "kawung", which they considered less familiar. Some students 3 out of 8 also felt confused by specific cultural contexts, such as regional differences in batik, which made it difficult to understand the text more deeply.

- c. Question 3: "How do you usually understand texts on unfamiliar topics? Do you need more time or additional help?"

Based on the responses from the subjects regarding this question, it was found that out of 8 subjects, 6 of the students stated that they needed more time to understand unfamiliar topics. They often relied on additional help such as online resources, dictionaries, or translation apps. The remaining 2 students mentioned that while they needed more time, they also preferred to seek help from others who were more knowledgeable about the topic.

- d. Question 4: "Do you feel more anxious when reading about a new topic compared to a topic you already know? Why?"

Based on the responses from the subjects regarding this question, it was found that out of 8 subjects, 7 of the students reported feeling more anxious when reading about a new topic, mainly due to the lack of prior knowledge and fear of misunderstanding the content. Only 1 student stated that they did not feel particularly anxious, as they enjoyed learning about new topics. This finding is related to the interview results on question number 3, where 5 students felt unsure about their understanding, especially related to the symbolism and meaning behind the batik motif. Words such as “parang” and “kawung” caused confusion for many students, and 3 other students expressed that their ignorance of the symbols caused uncertainty about the overall meaning of the text. Both of these results indicate that uncertainty and anxiety often arise when students are faced with topics that they have not fully mastered.

e. Question 5: "Do you find it more difficult to understand texts that discuss unfamiliar cultures compared to texts that are closer to your own culture? Why?"

Based on the responses from the subjects regarding this question, it was found that out of 8 subjects, 6 of the students found it more difficult to understand texts about unfamiliar cultures, mainly due to differences in cultural context and unfamiliar terminology. The remaining 2 students felt that although texts about foreign cultures were harder to understand, they were still manageable with additional research. This is in line with the findings in interview question number 2, where 4 students felt that the topic of batik was easy to understand because batik is part of Indonesian culture that is already known, but 4 other students expressed difficulties with certain cultural elements, especially the symbolism of motifs such as "parang" and "kawung", which were less familiar to them. Some students 3 out of 8 also felt confused by specific cultural contexts, such as regional differences in batik, which caused confusion in understanding the text more deeply. Both indicate that even though batik is part of a known culture, deeper cultural elements can still be difficult for some students.

The analysis results show that cultural context significantly impacts the reading anxiety of EFL students. Most students found the text engaging due to familiar cultural themes, such as batik, but also experienced anxiety due to unfamiliar vocabulary or cultural elements. Students often needed more time and additional help to understand texts on unfamiliar topics, particularly when dealing with cultural symbolism that was difficult to grasp. While topics closer to their own culture were easier to understand, texts about foreign cultures caused more difficulty and anxiety due to differences in cultural context and unfamiliar terminology. This indicates that uncertainty in understanding foreign cultural texts can increase reading anxiety among students.

## Discussion

The discussion section provides a detailed explanation of the subject's responses by relating them to the theory of the cultural factors that affect reading anxiety.

The findings from this study underline the pivotal role that both cultural factors play in contributing to reading anxiety. Based on the responses of 8 students, it is evident that cultural contexts sources of anxiety. The anxiety caused by these factors often leads to difficulties in comprehension, affecting students' engagement and emotional responses when reading. These findings are supported by recent theories and research on reading anxiety, and unfamiliar cultural.

### Cultural Factors and Their Impact on Reading Anxiety

The impact of unfamiliar cultural on reading anxiety has been widely examined in recent research. (Doqaruni, 2022) suggests that when learners encounter texts from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds, they are confronted with new and potentially confusing cultural concepts, leading to anxiety. The current study found that students were anxious due to the unfamiliar symbolism

in batik motifs such as "parang" and "kawung," as they lacked prior cultural knowledge. This mirrors (Byram, 2020) theory on intercultural communicative competence, which argues that understanding the cultural context of a text is crucial for full comprehension. Without this cultural understanding, students often experience confusion and frustration, which are central to reading anxiety.

Moreover, the findings of this study align with (Oglu Huseyn Alisoy Hasan, 2024), who argues that cultural unfamiliarity can significantly hinder the reading process. The students' feelings of anxiety, particularly around specific motifs in the batik context, reflect their struggle with texts that require background knowledge of the culture to fully grasp the intended meanings. This corresponds with the work of (Selvathurai, 2024), who found that cultural differences in reading materials often lead to emotional barriers, such as anxiety, due to a lack of familiarity with cultural references.

Based on the findings discussed above regarding the impact of cultural factors on reading anxiety, it can be concluded that unfamiliar cultural significantly contribute to students' anxiety when reading texts. The unfamiliar cultural, particularly with symbols caused anxiety among students who lacked prior knowledge of cultural elements. Without understanding, students often experience confusion and frustration, which are core components of reading anxiety.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that cultural factors have a significant impact on reading anxiety of EFL students. The data reveals that unfamiliar cultural, particularly with specific motifs in batik, such as "parang" and "kawung," caused anxiety among students who lacked prior knowledge of these cultural symbols. This finding aligns with previous research, suggesting that cultural context plays a crucial role in comprehension and can lead to confusion and frustration when unfamiliar.

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