



# Reading Strategies, Engagement, and Anxiety Among Chinese EFL College Students

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## Abstract

This research aimed to investigate the relation between Chinese EFL learners' reading strategies, reading engagement, and reading anxiety. In this paper, the researcher investigated the relationship between the three variables among the undergraduates in Anhui province by using the quantitative and descriptive approach. English majoring students and females showed better performance in reading strategies, reading engagement, and had lower levels of reading anxiety. It was found to be of greater relevance to the three variables, suggesting that the greater the use of reading strategies, the higher reading engagement in the classroom. This study is valuable for the learners to select and apply proper reading tactics, and provide some insights to teachers on how to increase the effectiveness of class engagement and decrease their reading anxiety.

## Keywords

Reading anxiety, college students, classroom reading, the effectiveness

## 1. Introduction

Comprehension, as the most important part of reading, includes the process of extracting and reconstructing meaning (Robinson, 2019). With the development of the social economy and changes in educational background, the significance of reading comprehension has changed. Improving students' reading comprehension ability through appropriate training is an important direction in language teaching. Abdelhalim (2017) believed that although reading strategies are very helpful, engagement in reading is not the product of strategies alone but a fusion of strategies with mental dispositions. Therefore, learning to use reading strategies and integrating their use into class engagement is a very important direction and content for reading teaching research.

Cognitive engagement has traditionally been regarded as monitoring the completion of learning tasks by students, evaluating classroom participation and extracurricular activities, with a particular emphasis on the interaction between students and teachers under teacher guidance, as well as student participation in classroom discussions (Appleton et al., 2006). Rotgens and Schmidt (2011) found cognitive engagement is highly related to autonomy. For activities with strong independence such as independent online search for materials, students have higher autonomy, which is accompanied by higher cognitive engagement. Meanwhile, emotional engagement is also an important indicator for measuring student classroom participation. Harmonious teacher-student relationships and peer relationships among students can help them form positive emotional engagement and contribute to positive life development in the future. (Crespo et al., 2013; Israel ashvili, 1997). The research has shown that a significant factor affecting emotional engagement and reducing anxiety is a sense of belonging. There is a significant relationship between a sense of belonging and students' persistent efforts, concentration, and perseverance in completing tasks (Li & Lerner, 2013). The anxiety is closely related to the emotional engagement of students and has a significant impact on their emotional and psychological state in participating in the classroom. How students can maintain positive emotions in

learning activities and reduce anxiety has a positive promoting effect on improving emotional engagement.

## 2. Objective of study

The aim of this research is to investigate the relationship between Chinese EFL students' reading strategies, reading engagement, and reading anxiety. More particularly, this research attempts to characterize Chinese EFL undergraduates' sex, grade, and major based on the assessment of their reading strategies, reading engagement, and reading anxiety and how the three variables relate to and interact with each other.

## 3. Literature review

### 3.1 Reading strategies

Reading strategies are a kind of tactics that students use to deal with problems in reading. The research results of Block (1986) indicated that successful readers have strong meta-cognitive abilities, can monitor the reading process, and consciously use various reading strategies. Anderson (1991) has demonstrated that successful L2 learners are able to make good use of reading strategies and coordinate them with other strategies.

Studies have demonstrated that the choice of English books is strongly correlated with students' interests, which can significantly influence their reading and study performance (Wang, 2019).

### 3.2 Reading engagement

The emphasis in English teaching is on developing the subjective character of the students, which is realized by the participation of the students (Zhao, 2002). Austin (1984) noted that the engagement of students not only means the explicit actions of the students when they accomplish their study mission but also their ideas, namely, hidden actions. It is pointed out that not only does the student perform in a variety of ways, but it also involves additional work outside the classroom (Tan, 2021). Pei (1999) defined the notion of student engagement, which is how much time and energy a student puts into a variety of teaching activities. Zhao (2002) emphasized the positive engagement of students in the definition of the learner's engagement in order to foster the learner's independence and initiative. Zeng (2003) considered that student class engagement was a dynamic process, and the resonance of ideas, thinking ability, and interaction was the key to student participation, not just the effect of behavior.

### 3.3 Reading anxiety

Initially, most researchers thought that there was a close relationship between anxiety and the circumstance, but later research indicated that there was a correlation between anxiety and study. There was a marked difference between the two groups in the acquisition of English language skills, and the primary cause of anxiety was reading (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Luand and Singh (2017) believed that anxiety is the source of reading disorders. The key element of the study is the inner development of students' mental and intellectual abilities. Some studies indicated that, according to the performance of student's reading assignments, teachers should raise the demand for high English levels and compliment them in the classroom, set a good example, strengthen self-confidence, decrease the stress of failing to finish the work, improve the feeling of accomplishment, and decrease self-esteem and anxiety (Zhang, 2014).

There are some gaps in previous research: previous studies lacked empirical analysis of the correlation and interaction between reading anxiety, reading engagement, and reading anxiety; previous research did not put enough emphasis on the effect of reading strategies, reading engagement, and reading anxiety on sex, grade and major. Thus, this paper attempts to solve the problem by evaluating the impact of the three variables on sex, grade, and major and the analysis of the correlation of the three variables.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research design

In this paper, the method of description and quantification was used. This research adopts the self-rated questionnaire to gather the data of the members of the survey. The Descriptive Study Approach and Correlative Analysis were applied to study the interaction among three different variables in Seeram (2019). Through a better understanding of these three variables, this paper puts forward some constructive proposals and beneficial results to enhance the level

of Chinese college students' reading competence.

## 4.2 Participants

The research was conducted on a sample of undergraduates from 3 universities in China, and there were approximately 35,000 students totally. The Raosoft sample size calculator was used to calculate for the sample size of the survey. Altogether 457 students took part in this study. The questionnaire adopted a 4-point Likert scale (4=strongly agree; 3=agree; 2=disagree; 1=strongly disagree).

## 4.3 Procedure

First, the researcher carried out a trial of 30 students in order to validate its reliability and then sent out the questionnaire to the large-scale investigation with the agreement of all participants. The researcher gathered the information with Questionnaire Star. The researcher sent an online questionnaire link to the students through the QQ and WeChat group and also requested the college teachers from various departments to distribute the link of the questionnaire. Then, after the collection of the data, the researcher deciphered the data with SPSS20.0.

## 4.4 Research on data analysis

In order to analyze the results, the weighted average was used to describe the responses of the participants in the various dimensions. 3 variables have different sub-domains and indicators, and it was possible to evaluate their preference for each indicator by using the method of weighted average and ranking. F-value, p-value, and r-value were tested to present the correlation among the three variables and their relevance when grouped according to profile, and the results were analyzed from a descriptive dataset.

## 5. Results and discussion

**Table 1. Difference in Responses on Engagement in English Reading When Grouped According to Profile**

Sex	F-value	p-value	Interpretation
Behavioral Engagement	11.548	0.001	Significant
Emotional Engagement	3.716	0.055	Not Significant
Cognitive Engagement	13.468	0.000	Significant
<b>Grade</b>			
Behavioral Engagement	2.977	0.085	Not Significant
Emotional Engagement	8.860	0.003	Significant
Cognitive Engagement	3.332	0.069	Not Significant
<b>Major</b>			
Behavioral Engagement	4.496	0.004	Significant
Emotional Engagement	4.561	0.004	Significant
Cognitive Engagement	6.418	0.000	Significant

Note. Legend: Significant at p-value < 0.05.

The data in Table 1 show that female students perform better in Behavior and Cognitive Engagement. The female students had some superiority in the participation of the class, particularly the focus, the hard work, and the perseverance and they are able to apply machine memory and reading techniques. Liu (2018) found that women have more difficulty in their career choices, therefore, they are more motivated to take part in class. Female students are more diligent in their studies, more enthusiastic about their English studies, and have the motivation to engage in class in order to gain more specialized knowledge and technical training.

The emotional engagement (F-value=8.860) of the new students is good. The freshmen are very curious about new things and fresh. First-year students have fewer negative feelings when engaging in class. However, as time goes on,

the examinations will become more difficult, and the academic burden is heavier, there will be more chances for them to fail their studies. Students will be under pressure from their studies, so they will be frustrated and stressed emotionally. The subject of "I have confidence when I talk or reply to a problem" was the one with the lowest weighted average. This shows that the students are more fearful of talking and asking questions. This could be due to the frustration of the experience. First-year students are more daring to talk and express their ideas in class. But with the increase in enrollment year, they tend to be afraid and anxious. They inevitably experience failure and critical opinions and can feel the peer pressure and academic burden. These are also the causes of the decline in emotional engagement as time goes on.

Students from English majors are more likely to be engaged than those from other majors. English major students have strong motivation for learning and classroom participation. English majors actively engage in English classroom learning in order to better master English knowledge and improve their English proficiency. English major students have high requirements for their English proficiency, and fully utilizing classroom time to participate in English learning is a necessary path. They usually show positive performance in the classroom participation process.

**Table 2. Difference in Responses to Anxiety on English Reading When Grouped According to Profile**

<b>Sex</b>	<b>F-value</b>	<b>p-value</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
Error-based Anxiety	15.230	0.000	Significant
Text-Genre and Text-Length Anxiety	9.208	0.003	Significant
Teacher-based Anxiety	4.844	0.028	Significant
Peer-based Anxiety	3.038	0.082	Not Significant
Reading Order-based Anxiety	9.440	0.002	Significant
Reading Classroom-based Anxiety	3.890	0.049	Significant
Reading Anxiety	6.765	0.010	Significant
No Anxiety	1.267	0.261	Not Significant
<b>Grade</b>			
Error-based Anxiety	1.941	0.164	Not Significant
Text-Genre and Text-Length Anxiety	0.157	0.692	Not Significant
Teacher-based Anxiety	0.616	0.433	Not Significant
Peer-based Anxiety	0.103	0.748	Not Significant
Reading Order-based Anxiety	1.904	0.168	Not Significant
Reading Classroom-based Anxiety	0.091	0.763	Not Significant
Reading Anxiety	0.002	0.963	Not Significant
No Anxiety	13.635	0.000	Significant
<b>Major</b>			
Error-based Anxiety	2.226	0.084	Not Significant
Text-Genre and Text-Length Anxiety	1.889	0.131	Not Significant
Teacher-based Anxiety	4.013	0.008	Significant
Peer-based Anxiety	5.161	0.002	Significant
Reading Order-based Anxiety	2.918	0.034	Significant
Reading Classroom-based Anxiety	2.611	0.051	Not Significant
Reading Anxiety	2.499	0.059	Not Significant
No Anxiety	1.427	0.234	Not Significant

Note. Legend: Significant at p-value < 0.05.

Table 2 presents women have a stronger feeling of anxiety. Sabti (2016) examined EFL students. Research has shown that there is a positive relationship between students' level of anxiety and their sex. Indeed, women tend to have higher rates of error-based anxiety (F-value=15.230) than men. Perhaps it's because men are braver than women. Sabti's research has also shown that the majority of anxiety is caused by discomfort, stress, and embarrassment over spelling errors. According to the results of our study, the main reason for female students' anxiety is their fear of mistakes. Men have more courage, so they are more self-confident and less shy when they are faced with reading publicly. They are not afraid of making a mistake publicly because they tend to be neither shy nor nervous when they are ridiculed or criticized. But women's sexual characteristics, such as modesty, shyness, and modesty, often make them afraid of being laughed at if they make a mistake in public.

First-year students often experience the lowest level of anxiety (F-value=13.635) when they start learning. The main goal of all the students is to improve their English. Mutual familiarity among students may result in more connections and competition between them. Competition among students may cause them to experience more anxiety and pressure if they lose in a competition or examination.

Besides, teachers (F-value=4.013) have a significant impact on students' learning careers, especially English majors. During their learning process, English majoring students usually pay attention to their teachers' opinions and evaluation. Offending a teacher or being incapable of answering a question can cause students to be anxious. English majoring students are more influenced by their teacher's evaluation.

English majoring students may face greater pressure during English lessons, which may lead to poor performance in the classroom and anxiety. According to Brantmeier (2005), there is a significant correlation between self-evaluation and EFL anxiety, as students' anxiety is highly influenced by their class performance. Sabti (2016) indicated that deep-level anxiety among students often comes from false comfort feelings, mainly due to their poor language proficiency. Students majored in English tend to be not satisfied with their English ability because of the high academic level requirement for English proficiency.

**Table 3. Relationship Between Reading Strategies and Engagement in English Reading**

<b>Global Policy Strategies</b>	<b>r-value</b>	<b>p-value</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
Behavioral Engagement	.772**	0.000	Highly Significant
Emotional Engagement	.660**	0.000	Highly Significant
Cognitive Engagement	.773**	0.000	Highly Significant
<b>Problem-solving Strategies</b>			
Behavioral Engagement	.777**	0.000	Highly Significant
Emotional Engagement	.641**	0.000	Highly Significant
Cognitive Engagement	.761**	0.000	Highly Significant
<b>Auxiliary Strategies</b>			
Behavioral Engagement	.807**	0.000	Highly Significant
Emotional Engagement	.689**	0.000	Highly Significant
Cognitive Engagement	.774**	0.000	Highly Significant

Note. Legend: Significant at p-value < 0.01.

Based on the statistical findings there is a strong correlation between the use of reading strategies by students and their engagement. Guthrie (1996) found that students' engagement on successfully completing the task has a significant relationship with cognitive reading and intrinsic motivation.

Abdelhalim (2017) indicated that behavioral engagement will be cultivated in a lifetime. Significant positive correlation between global policy strategies(p-value=0.772), problem-solving strategies(p-value=0.777), auxiliary strategies(p-value=0.807), and behavioral engagement. Behavior engagement is most closely related to the application of reading strategies. There is a strong correlation between global policy strategies and behavioral and cognitive engagement because global policy strategies are a process of observing the reading process. Students are conscious of supervising, planning, and management. For example, they should have a definite aim and take into account that they

are compatible with their reading objectives.

Cognitive engagement are positively correlated with global policy strategies( $p$ -value=0.773). Cognitive engagement is to comprehend the meaning of the text, to make adjustments to the text by monitoring the text, and to control the time of the reader. As cognitive engagement is also a monitoring behaviour of the reading process and global policy strategies also relate to particular reading behaviour, there is a large degree of similarity between Cognitive Engagement and Global Reading Strategies, which mainly focus on monitoring and controlling the reading process. Blumenfeld et al. (2005) also indicated, cognitive engagement and learning strategies used have very significant relationships. Global reading strategies can be used to promote cognitive engagement. In order to obtain optimal reading outcomes, the students should make adjustments to various methods and strategies in reading engagement.

Auxiliary strategies have a strong correlation with behavioral engagement( $p$ -value=0.807). Behavioral engagement is primarily about all the perseverance, effort, detail, and behavior that are associated with the process of reading. Assistant tactics can be used to help students to comprehend the text by reading a dictionary, making notes, and emphasizing important points, so as to improve the comprehension of the main points and difficulties of the essay, to make a summary and design of the text by making notes.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

To sum up, both English students and women showed an overall positive attitude toward reading strategies and engagement. Both English major students and women are more likely to be anxious about reading. Significant correlations are found between the three variables and suggest that the more frequent use of the reading strategies, the better reading engagement.

Teachers should fully consider the emotional state of students and improve their emotional engagement. Teachers should create a relaxed and comfortable classroom environment, encourage students to actively participate in classroom activities, think independently, provide creative insights, develop critical perspectives on reading issues, and avoid mechanical reading. Teachers should provide sufficient tolerance for students' mistakes, avoid publicly criticizing and blaming students for their mistakes in reading, help students reduce anxiety and inferiority, and build confidence. There should be sufficient trust between teachers and students, which can enhance their sense of belonging and security. A sense of belonging is helpful for focusing attention and persevering in learning while reading.

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