



Anxiety vs. Understanding: How Reading Stress Affects Language Learners' Comprehension?

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between students' foreign language reading anxiety and their reading comprehension. It involved 28 eleventh-grade students from SMK Yarsi Medika in Kabupaten Tangerang. The research used a correlational design, with the English Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Inventory (EFLRAI) to measure reading anxiety and a reading comprehension test to evaluate students' abilities. The findings showed that most students experienced moderate levels of reading anxiety, with bottom-up anxiety (related to unfamiliar vocabulary) being the primary cause. The correlation analysis revealed a weak negative relationship between reading anxiety and reading comprehension (correlation coefficient = 0.053), which was not statistically significant ($p = 0.788$). These results suggest that reading anxiety does not have a significant impact on reading comprehension in this group of students. The study concludes that although students feel anxious during reading activities, this anxiety does not notably affect their ability to understand English texts.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the language skills that students must master, especially for those studying English as a foreign language at the academic level. Reading is very important in everyday life because it can update the knowledge for its learners. Through reading, students can strive to understand the ideas or information that the author wants to convey. On the other hand, learners can also add new vocabulary by understanding the text, as well as obtain useful information as insight and knowledge (Ghalebi et al., 2020; Larisa et al., 2023; Ulfiah et al., 2024). Therefore, reading is indeed a fundamental skill that must be possessed by students at the academic level who study English as a foreign language (Yultisa & Panjaitan, 2023).

However, to improves students' reading comprehension is not easy, it is should be supported by linguistic and non-linguistic aspects (Juniardi, 2018), a study conducted by Wahyuni (2021) revealed that among 122 English Department students from 2015-2018 at a private university in Yogyakarta, almost half

of the students, 46.7%, were categorised as below standard (Band 4) in terms of reading comprehension. Directly, this study provides empirical evidence that students in Indonesia have very poor reading skills. Furthermore, at a lower level, namely at the Junior High School level, research by Devi et al (2023), shows that the level of reading skill possessed by SMPN 7 Cibeber students before being treated is at an average of 61 which indicates that their reading skill is still relatively low. The preliminary research results by Devi et al., (2023) also showed that English teachers have difficulties in increasing students' learning motivation in learning reading comprehension skills. From the two results of this study, it can be concluded that at both levels of education, both in higher education and junior high school, reading skill and reading comprehension skills are still fairly low. This shows that low reading skills are not only a problem faced at higher education levels, but also at more basic levels.

Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive process influenced by various interrelated factors, including vocabulary knowledge, main idea identification, perceptions of reading, and motivation. Suyanto (2024) highlights these as key determinants of low reading skills across different levels of education. Limited vocabulary knowledge presents a major obstacle, as unfamiliar words hinder students' ability to extract meaning from texts (Tran Ngoc Duc & Nguyen Thi Lan, 2023). Likewise, difficulty in identifying the main idea impedes students' ability to discern the essential message, thereby reducing their overall reading efficiency. Negative perceptions of reading and a lack of intrinsic motivation further exacerbate these challenges, discouraging students from fully engaging with texts and fostering a cycle of avoidance and weak comprehension skills (Permatasari & Wienanda, 2023).

Building on this, research by Moradi (2022), underscores the significance of affective factors—such as motivation, anxiety, and confidence—in shaping students' reading comprehension, particularly in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. Low motivation can diminish students' willingness to engage with reading materials, often due to a lack of perceived relevance or purpose. Anxiety, another critical factor, significantly disrupts comprehension by inducing psychological pressure that inhibits focus and information processing. Excessive anxiety, often stemming from fear of failure or judgment, can lead students to hesitate when interpreting texts, ultimately hindering their ability to construct meaning from what they read. Similarly, low self-confidence reduces students' persistence in tackling difficult texts, as they may prematurely give up or struggle to engage deeply with reading materials (Alghonaim, 2020).

The impact of anxiety on reading performance is further elaborated by Limeranto & Subekti (2021), who emphasize the role of reading anxiety—a specific subset of generalized anxiety that emerges during the reading process. Their study found that reading anxiety can cause cognitive overload, leading to confusion, decreased concentration, and an overall decline in reading performance. This aligns with Hajiyevea (2024) broader framework on language anxiety, which suggests that heightened stress levels interfere with cognitive resources necessary for effective language processing. Similarly, Dunifa et al. (2023) argue that anxiety



negatively affects the willingness to communicate and process linguistic input, reinforcing the challenges faced by students experiencing reading anxiety. Fitrawati et al. (2023) also highlight that foreign language anxiety, including reading anxiety, limits students' ability to process texts effectively due to excessive worry about making mistakes, leading to avoidance behaviors that further hinder reading development.

In a study by Mohammadpur & Ghafournia (2015) reading anxiety was said to be influenced by the negative stigma towards English owned by students. Where, students tend to feel that English is full of complex and complicated vocabulary, which causes them to be reluctant to learn it further. This stigma is further exacerbated by the perception that reading in English is always perceived as 'heavy' and only for people with high language proficiency. This creates a negative attitude towards reading in English, where many students feel trapped in the notion that they will never be able to master the language.

Based on the various previous studies mentioned above, it can be concluded that reading anxiety is generally caused by internal factors rather than external factors. Therefore, the researcher is interested in examining the situation of reading anxiety in the context of English language learning in Indonesia, focusing on how anxiety that arises in the reading process can affect students' reading comprehension. Research on the relationship between reading anxiety and reading comprehension needs to be done considering the results of previous studies which show that high anxiety can constrain students' ability to understand texts.

METHODS

This study uses correlational design to discover whether a relationship between students' foreign language anxiety and their reading comprehension. The population of this research is 28 students of eleventh grade of SMK Yarsi Medika Kabupaten Tangerang. English foreign language reading anxiety inventory (EFLRAI) is used to collect the data, which developed by Zoghi & Alivandivafa (2014). The EFLRAI contains 27 closed-ended statements about reading anxiety, measured on a 4-point Likert scale. The original questionnaire, written in English, was translated into Bahasa Indonesia and validated through a back-translation process to prevent any misunderstanding when completing the survey (Fitrawati et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, in collecting data for reading comprehension, the researcher used exercise for reading comprehension by Tibbitts (1977). Section one which consist of three types of text and 20 questions are used in this test. There are 3 kinds of question; short answer (10 question), true-false (5 questions) and fill the blank (5 questions). To investigate the relationship between students' foreign language reading anxiety and their reading comprehension, the researcher employed the Pearson product-moment correlation formula to compute the correlation coefficient. Furthermore, this study utilized the categorization of the correlation coefficient (R) proposed by Lodico et al. (2010). The statistical analysis was performed using SPSS version 26, a widely used software for data analysis in educational research (Murugan, 2022).

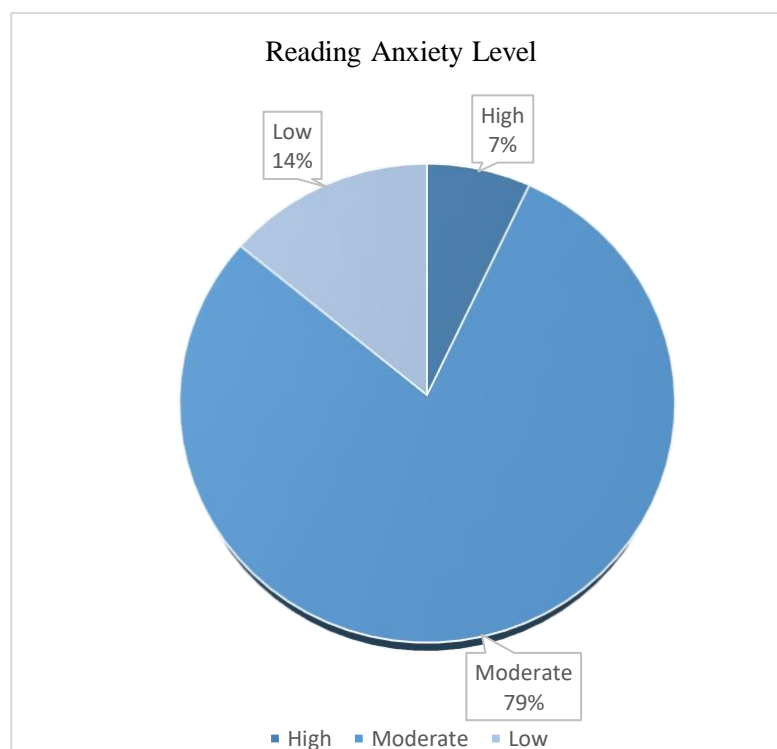


RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reading anxiety

Level in reading anxiety is categorized into high, moderate, and low levels. A student is classified as having high anxiety if their score on the EFLRAI questionnaire ranges from 82 to 108, indicating a significant level of anxiety while reading. For moderate anxiety, students who score between 55 and 81 are categorized in this group, meaning they experience some anxiety during reading. Lastly, students with scores between 27 and 54 are categorized as having low reading anxiety, indicating that they experience less anxiety when reading English texts. Chart 1 below is providing further details regarding the levels of students' reading anxiety.

Figure 1. Reading anxiety level results



The data shows that 79% of the 28 students experience moderate reading anxiety, indicating a common but not extreme level of discomfort with reading. 14% of students have low anxiety, suggesting a more positive reading experience, while 7% exhibit high anxiety, potentially impacting their reading performance. Overall, moderate reading anxiety is most prevalent, with fewer students showing low or high levels of anxiety.

The questionnaire of this study covers three aspects: top-down reading anxiety, bottom-up reading anxiety, and classroom reading anxiety, with a total of 27 items. More details are provided in the table below.

Top-down reading anxiety

Top-down reading anxiety includes situations where students feel nervous while reading English texts. These situations fall into two categories: cultural and background knowledge, and general reading skills. Cultural knowledge concerns include unfamiliar titles, unclear references, and lack of prior knowledge, while general reading skills involve difficulties in identifying details, understanding the main idea, and expressing opinions. The analysis of the results is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Top-down reading anxiety

No	Statement	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
		F	P	F	P	F	P	F	P
1	I don't feel comfortable when the title of the text is unfamiliar to me.	4	14%	7	25%	16	57%	1	4%
2	I am concerned when the ideas conveyed in the text are unclear due to cultural differences.	3	11%	8	28%	17	61%	0	0%
3	I feel frustrated when I have no prior knowledge of the ideas presented in the text.	2	7%	4	14%	21	75%	1	4%
4	I worry when I can't understand the main point of the text, even though there are no new vocabulary or grammatical elements in it.	1	4%	4	14%	19	68%	4	14%
5	I worry when I can't understand the small ideas (details) within the text.	2	7%	3	11%	18	64%	5	18%
6	I get nervous when I can't identify the main idea in a paragraph.	2	7%	9	32%	14	50%	3	11%
7	It bothers me when I can't express my opinion or feelings about the text.	3	11%	9	32%	14	50%	2	7%

The survey results reveal that respondents experience discomfort and concern when faced with unfamiliar titles (57%) or unclear ideas due to cultural differences (61%), highlighting the importance of clear titles and cultural context in enhancing comprehension. A significant portion of respondents (75%) expressed frustration when lacking prior knowledge about the ideas in the text, emphasizing the role of background knowledge in understanding content. Furthermore, 82% of respondents worry when they cannot

grasp the main point of a text, even if no new vocabulary or grammar is introduced, indicating that the central message is their primary concern. Many (64%) also expressed anxiety about missing small details within the text, showing the importance of detail-oriented reading. Lastly, half of the respondents (50%) feel nervous when they can't identify the main idea in a paragraph, underscoring the need for clarity in text structure.

Bottom-up reading anxiety

This section examines the factors contributing to students' reading anxiety, focusing on vocabulary and grammar. Vocabulary challenges include unclear word meanings, difficulty using a dictionary, multiple word meanings, unfamiliar idioms, long words, and pronunciation issues. Grammar-related difficulties involve unclear tenses, confusion with parts of speech, passive voice, unfamiliar structures, and complex sentence constructions. The second type of reading anxiety, bottom-up anxiety, is detailed in the table below.

Table 2. Bottom-up reading anxiety

No	Statement	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
		F	P	F	P	F	P	F	P
8	I feel uncomfortable when I can't understand the meaning of unfamiliar words.	3	11%	5	18%	15	53%	5	18%
9	It bothers me when I come across many words with unclear meanings.	4	14%	9	32%	14	50%	1	4%
10	I get frustrated when I can't find the meaning of a word that I feel like I've seen before.	3	11%	13	46%	9	32%	3	11%
11	It bothers me when I feel like I can't find a word in the dictionary.	1	4%	7	25%	15	53%	5	18%
12	I get confused when a word I already know has a different meaning in a sentence.	0	0%	5	18%	17	61%	6	21%
13	I get confused when I come across an idiom that feels unfamiliar to me.	2	7%	10	36%	13	46%	3	11%
14	It makes me feel uncomfortable when an unfamiliar word consists of several parts or syllables.	0	0%	2	7%	15	53%	11	39%

15	I feel worried when I come across a foreign or new word that's difficult to pronounce.	4	14%	8	29%	15	53%	1	4%
16	I get nervous when I encounter a long sentence with a complicated structure.	0	0%	6	21%	17	61%	5	18%
17	I worry when I come across a sentence with grammar that is unfamiliar to me.	2	7%	10	36%	13	46%	3	11%
18	I feel uneasy when I encounter a passive sentence.	0	0%	17	60%	10	36%	1	4%
19	I feel anxious when there is an unclear tense in a sentence.	1	4%	7	25%	19	68%	1	4%
20	I worry when I can't recognize different types of words, such as adjectives, adverbs, or conjunctions.	2	7%	8	29%	16	57%	2	7%
21	I get confused when my understanding of a grammatical element doesn't seem to make sense.	4	14%	6	21%	17	61%	1	4%

The majority of respondents generally feel uncomfortable or uneasy when they come across unfamiliar words or complex sentences. For example, a large portion of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they feel uncomfortable when they cannot understand the meaning of unfamiliar words (53% agree, 18% strongly agree). Similarly, many expressed frustrations when they can't find the meaning of a word that seems familiar but they cannot recall (46% disagree, 32% agree). The data suggests that participants feel a sense of discomfort or confusion when encountering language elements that are difficult to decipher, whether it's a word, idiom, or a sentence structure that seems unfamiliar.

Moreover, issues like encountering long sentences, complex structures, or unclear grammar cause anxiety for some participants. In the case of passive sentences, while most felt neutral or uncomfortable with them, a small percentage expressed feeling uneasy (4% strongly agree, 36% agree). Similarly, when faced with unclear tenses in sentences, 68% of respondents reported feeling anxious. This indicates that tense ambiguity or unfamiliar grammar forms trigger a sense of unease for a significant portion of the group.

Classroom reading anxiety

Classroom reading anxiety refers to factors that cause students' anxiety in the classroom, such as reading aloud, translating, answering comprehension questions aloud, dealing with uninteresting topics, receiving direct pronunciation corrections, and frequent use of English by the instructor. The students' responses regarding classroom reading anxiety are shown in the table below.

Table 3. Classroom reading anxiety

No	Statement	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
		F	P	F	P	F	P	F	P
22	I feel uneasy when the teacher asks me to read aloud.	5	18%	14	50%	5	18%	4	14%
23	I worry when the teacher asks me to translate a part of a text into Indonesian.	1	4%	11	39%	11	39%	5	18%
24	I feel anxious when the teacher asks questions about something from the text.	4	14%	14	50%	9	32%	1	4%
25	I feel restless when the teacher chooses a reading topic that is not interesting to read in class.	6	21%	12	43%	9	32%	1	4%
26	I feel uneasy when the teacher corrects my pronunciation and translation mistakes.	5	18%	13	46%	8	29%	2	7%
27	I feel nervous when the teacher uses English as the medium of instruction in class and hardly ever uses our native language.	3	11%	15	53%	9	32%	1	4%

The responses suggest that many students feel uneasy or anxious during specific classroom situations. For instance, a significant portion (50%) reported feeling uneasy when asked to read aloud in class, with 18% strongly agreeing. This indicates that speaking in front of peers or the teacher is a source of stress for many students. Similarly, when asked to translate a part of a text into Indonesian, 39% disagreed, while 39% agreed, indicating a mixed response, but some anxiety is still felt by those who worry about translation accuracy.

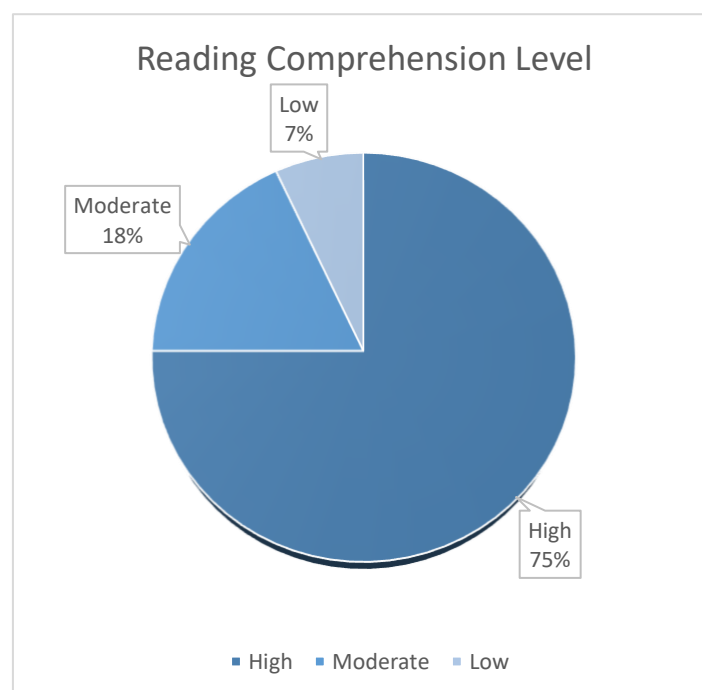
When it comes to being asked questions about the text, 50% of students reported feeling uneasy (14% strongly disagreeing), suggesting that the pressure of having to answer questions may cause discomfort or nervousness. This is further supported by responses regarding the teacher's correction of pronunciation and translation mistakes, where 46% disagreed but still reported unease or discomfort (7% strongly agreeing). The data also highlights that the topic of the reading material plays a role in student engagement. When the teacher selects a reading topic that the students find uninteresting, many students (43%) feel restless. This indicates that the choice of material can significantly impact students' motivation and attention.

Lastly, the use of English as the primary language of instruction seems to make some students nervous, with 53% feeling uneasy when the teacher rarely uses the native language for explanations. This response points to the challenge some students face when they are not confident in their ability to fully understand or express themselves in English.

Reading comprehension

The students' reading comprehension is categorized into high, moderate, and low scores. A student is considered to have a high score if they earn between 15 and 20 points, correctly answering more than 15 questions. An average score ranges from 10 to 14 points, indicating correct answers to more than half of the questions. Students with scores between 4 and 9 points are classified as having a low score, as they answer fewer than half of the questions correctly.

Figure 2. Reading comprehension level results



The data shows that 75% of the 28 students have high reading comprehension, indicating strong abilities in understanding texts. 18% of students fall into the moderate category, suggesting room for improvement, while 7% have low comprehension, which may hinder their academic performance. Overall, high reading comprehension is most common, with fewer students showing moderate or low levels. The researcher presented this information based on the reading comprehension questions, highlighting the frequency and percentage of students' scores. The data is shown in the table below:

Table 4. Classroom reading comprehension result

Number of question	Correct answer	
Text 1	F	P
1	27	96%
2	27	96%
3	26	93%
4	28	100%
5	23	82%
6	20	71%
7	21	75%
8	28	100%
9	28	100%
10	24	86%
Text 2		
11	12	43%
12	28	100%
13	21	75%
14	22	79%
15	23	82%
Text 3		
16	14	50%
17	9	32%
18	22	79%
19	25	89%
20	21	75%

The results of the reading comprehension assessment show varying levels of performance across different texts and questions. In Text 1, most students performed well, with questions 4, 8, and 9 receiving perfect scores. However, questions 5, 6, and 7 showed slight drops in performance, with correct answer percentages of 82%, 71%, and 75%, respectively. This suggests that while the majority of the content was understood, certain questions posed more challenges. Meanwhile, in Text 2, performance was more inconsistent. Question 11 had a notably low percentage of correct answers at 43%, while question 12 saw perfect scores. Other questions (13, 14, and 15) had mixed results, ranging from 75% to 82%. For Text 3, performance varied significantly, with question 19 having the highest correct answer percentage at 89%. In contrast, question 17 had the lowest score at just 32%, indicating a particularly difficult section. Questions

18 and 20 had moderate comprehension levels, with correct answer percentages of 79% and 75%, respectively.

The correlation of reading anxiety and reading comprehension

The analysis reveals a correlation coefficient of 0.053, which indicates a very weak positive relationship between the two variables. However, the strength of this relationship is negligible and lacks practical significance. The significance value (Sig. 2-tailed) is 0.788, which is far above the commonly accepted threshold of 0.05 for statistical significance. This indicates that the observed correlation is not statistically significant, suggesting that there is no meaningful or reliable relationship between reading anxiety and reading comprehension in this sample. Overall, these results suggest that reading anxiety does not significantly influence or correlate with reading comprehension among the participants in this study.

Table 5. The correlation result

	Correlation	X	Y
X	Pearson correlation	1	.053
	Sig. (2 Tailed)		.788
	N	28	28
Y	Pearson correlation	.053	1
	Sig. (2 Tailed)	.788	
	N	28	28

Generally, the findings from the reading anxiety questionnaire indicate that students' reading anxiety is at a moderate level. This suggests that their anxiety is neither too high nor too low. Similarly, a study by Mardianti (2021) also found that students experience moderate levels of reading anxiety, meaning they feel anxious during reading activities in class.

Reading anxiety can be attributed to three main sources: top-down reading anxiety, bottom-up reading anxiety, and classroom reading anxiety. Among these, most students identified as bottom-up reading anxiety, is that students feel anxious when they encounter unfamiliar words. In line with this, Aisyah & Yulia (2017) argued that vocabulary is a major factor contributing to students' reading anxiety. Students experience stress during reading activities when the English texts they read contain complex vocabulary, which often leads to reading anxiety due to their limited vocabulary knowledge. Then, It was followed by top-down reading anxiety: the students were struggling from difficulty in understanding the ideas in the text—as the most significant cause. In line with this, Lijun (2019) noted that the inability to comprehend the ideas in a text is

a key factor contributing to reading anxiety, as students experience stress when they struggle to understand this crucial aspect of reading comprehension.

The reading comprehension test, consisting of 20 questions, yielded a mix of correct and incorrect answers. Questions 4, 8, 9, and 12 were considered the easiest, as all students answered them correctly. In contrast, questions 11 and 17 were the most difficult, with only a few students answering them correctly. Two key points emerge from this: the easiest and the most challenging questions. The easiest, question 4, asked for explicit information, which was clearly stated in the text and easy for students to identify at a glance. On the other hand, question 17, the most challenging, required students to assess whether the ideas in the text were correct or incorrect. This task demanded a clear understanding of the text's ideas to determine the accuracy of the statement.

The findings indicate a negative relationship between reading anxiety and reading comprehension, suggesting that higher levels of anxiety during reading activities are associated with lower comprehension scores. These results are consistent with those of Mardianti et al., (2021) who also found a negative correlation between reading anxiety and comprehension. Additionally, Guimba & Alico (2015) highlighted that reading is a fundamental skill that supports other language skills, such as writing and speaking. Through reading, language input is absorbed and later produced in speaking and writing.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the correlation between students' foreign language reading anxiety and their reading comprehension. The findings reveal that most students experienced moderate levels of reading anxiety, with bottom-up anxiety related to unfamiliar vocabulary being the most significant source of discomfort. This is consistent with previous research indicating that vocabulary knowledge plays a critical role in students' reading anxiety. Additionally, top-down anxiety, arising from difficulty in understanding the main ideas of texts, also contributed to students' stress during reading activities.

However, the analysis of the correlation between reading anxiety and reading comprehension showed a negative relationship with a correlation coefficient of 0.053 and a significance value of 0.788, which is far above the threshold for statistical significance (0.05). This suggests that, within the scope of this study, reading anxiety does not have a meaningful impact on reading comprehension. The results imply that while reading anxiety exists among students, it may not directly influence their ability to comprehend texts. These findings are valuable for educators in understanding the impact of reading anxiety on student performance and can inform strategies for addressing anxiety to improve reading skills.

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