An Investigation on Reading Anxiety Across Gender

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Abstract

Reading helps language users gain knowledge and empowers the users with the power of reasoning. The use of reading skills makes the language users depend on their communication skills. Reading comprehension is challenging as it requires the coordination of multiple linguistic and cognitive processes, word reading ability, working memory, inference generation, comprehension monitoring, vocabulary, and prior knowledge. Past studies revealed that there is gender difference in the use of language learning strategies. More studies were suggested to investigate gender differences when it comes to language learning difficulties; especially reading comprehension. This study explores the reading comprehension strategies among male and female language learners; specifically, the perception of top-down and bottom-up reading anxiety across gender as well as the perception of classroom reading comprehension across gender. This study uses quantitative design with a survey as the instrument. 30 respondents from social sciences faculty in a public university were randomly chosen for this study. For both top-down and bottom-up anxiety, this study has shown that generally, female respondents reported higher anxiety than male respondents. When it comes to classroom teaching, male respondents reported higher anxiety. Findings in this study has interesting pedagogical implications for the teaching and learning of reading comprehension.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension, Top-Down, Bottom-Up, Interactive, Classroom Reading

Introduction

In the learning of language, people depend on appropriate communication strategies. Communication strategies are blueprints by learners for communicating with others. People use different forms of communication strategies to make themselves understood or to understand the person they are communicating with. The study by Sumarni & Rachmawaty (2019) found that both female and male often use social strategies to communicate. Social

strategies help language users connect with one another. Rahmat (2018) found that there is actually a significant difference in the use of social strategies across gender. Communication strategies can be either verbal, non-verbal or visual. Reading can be seen as a visual communication strategy. Reading helps language users gain knowledge as well as empowers the user with the power of reasoning. The use of reading skills makes the language user depend on his/her communication skills. However, according to Rahmat (2021), unlike oral communication, reading involves communication between the sender (writer) and the receive (reader). Rahmat et.al (2022) reported that readers depend on the readers' translation skills to understand what they are reading. "Translation" here refers to the translation from other forms of communication.

One difficult reading activity is reading comprehension. According to Elleman and Oslund (2019), reading comprehension is the product of word decoding and linguistic comprehension. Reading comprehension requires the coordination of multiple linguistic and cognitive processes including, but not limited to, word reading ability, working memory, inference generation, comprehension monitoring, vocabulary, and prior knowledge. There are four known components of reading comprehension that play prominent roles across theories of reading comprehension. The four components are (a) inference, (b) knowledge, (c) vocabulary and (d) comprehension monitoring.

Reading comprehension is challenging for many. According to Rahmat (2019), challenges faced in reading comprehension can be caused by the perception of reading difficulties that the learners have made their mind to believe. According to Ho and Ng (2016), female learners employed more strategies compared to their male counterparts. Their study revealed that female surpassed male learners in using more language learning strategies and females significantly employed more indirect strategies and direct strategies. Ho and Ang (2016) suggested that there are more studies to look at gender differences.

This study explores the reading comprehension strategies among male and female language learners. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions:

- How do the difficulties in top-down reading strategies differ across gender?
- How do the difficulties in bottom-up reading strategies differ across gender?
- How do the difficulties in classroom reading differ across gender?

Literature Review

This section discusses models of reading, past studies in reading and also the conceptual framework of the study.

Models of Reading

There are three basic models of reading. According to Baha (2017), there is a need to understand all these three models to understand reading comprehension difficulties. The three major models of reading are bottom-up, top-down, and interactive models. According to Browne (1998), the bottom-up models look at reading as a process that starts with the learner's knowledge of letters, sounds and words and how these words are formed to make sentences. This model is called part to whole model because it goes from partial to whole knowledge. This model is so effective in the early childhood, especially students as young learners.

The next model is top-down model. According to Browne (1998), this is an inside-out model and whole to part model. This model involves the reader's experience and what he/she brings to the reading material. The last model is the interactive models. According to Stanovic

(1980), this model gathers the features of the bottom-up and the top-down models and gives reading more meaning. Here, the readers are more involved in reading. They use their knowledge of subject theme, their pre-experience of written words, their reading, and their own expectations to make predictions about the reading text. So, the textual details are the best way in the recognition of the words and the letters the text contains.

Past Studies

The study conducted by Li (2021) investigated the correlation between foreign language reading anxiety and reading performance. 9785 participants were chosen for this study. Findings revealed two high evidence correlates for language anxiety and reading performance. Findings also showed two low evidence correlates for reading self-efficacy and reading strategy. In addition to that, the study also analysed variables such as target language, age, foreign language proficiency, language distance and test type. The results obtained a moderate correlation of language anxiety and reading performance. The two low-evidence correlates had moderate-to-large and moderate effect sizes, with reading self-efficacy being moderate-to-large and reading strategy being moderate.

Next, Katzir et al (2018) investigated the direct and indirect relations between reading and related skills (working memory, emergent literacy skills, word reading accuracy and rate, and gender) as sources of reading affect (reading self-concept and anxiety). 115 Hebrew speaking second graders participated in this study. A set of measures assessing reading accuracy and rate, emergent literacy skills (phonological fluency, rapid automatized naming and working memory) and reading affect questionnaires (reading self-concept and reading anxiety) were administered to the participants. Results indicated a negative moderate relation between reading self-concept and reading anxiety. The relations of working memory and emergent literacy to reading self-concept and reading anxiety were indirect via word reading accuracy and reading rate. Girls reported higher reading anxiety and lower reading self-concept, despite higher performance in reading accuracy and no difference in reading rate.

The study by Genc (2016) focussed on the relationship between reading anxiety and ambiguity tolerance of 295 Turkish EFL learners of English (180 females, 115 males). Data were collected via a survey and the results indicated that participants in this research generally have low level of second language ambiguity tolerance and their reading anxiety levels are mostly raised by nature of the text and personal factors. In addition, the research revealed that second language ambiguity tolerance, gender, and success in reading in a foreign language are significant and strong predictors of foreign language reading anxiety.

Conceptual Framework

This study is rooted from the reading anxiety by Somro, Khan & Younus (2019). Figure 1 below shows conceptual framework of the study. This study explores the perception of reading anxiety across gender. In the context of this study, the three types of reading anxieties are (a) top-down anxiety, (b) bottom-up anxiety, and also (c) classroom reading activities.
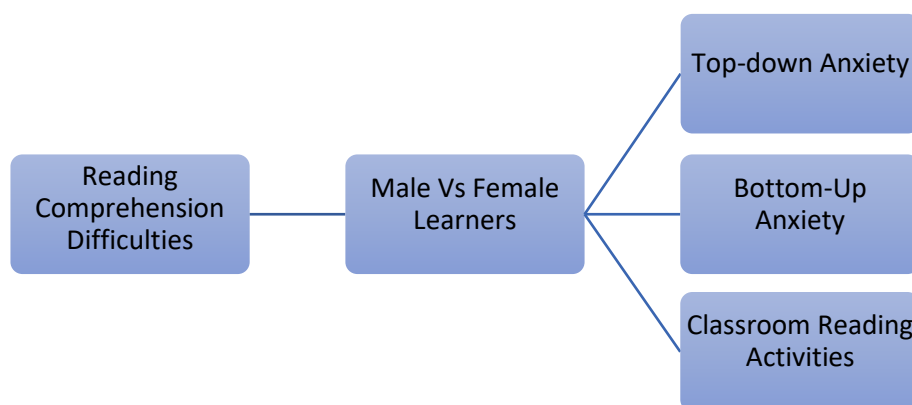

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study- Reading Comprehension Anxiety across Gender

Methodology

This study uses quantitative design. 30 respondents from social sciences faculty in a public university were randomly chosen for this study. The instrument (refer to table1) used is a questionnaire on perceived reading difficulties and adapted from Somro, Khan & Younus (2019) for reading anxiety. with 3 sections. Section A is about demographic profile; section B is about perceived difficulties in reading comprehension and section C is about reading anxiety.

SECTION	TYPE OF ANXIETY	NO OF ITEMS
B	TOP-DOWN ANXIETY	7
C	BOTTOM-AUP NXIETY	14
D	CLASSROOM READING ACTIVTIES	6
	TOTAL NO OF ITEMS	27

Table 1. Distribution of Items in Survey

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.965	27

Table 2. Reliability Statistics

The Cronbach alpha for the instrument was found to be 0.965 thus showing internal reliability (Table. 2). Data collected is analysed using SPSS version 26 to reveal frequency of mean scores.

Findings
Findings for Demographic Profile

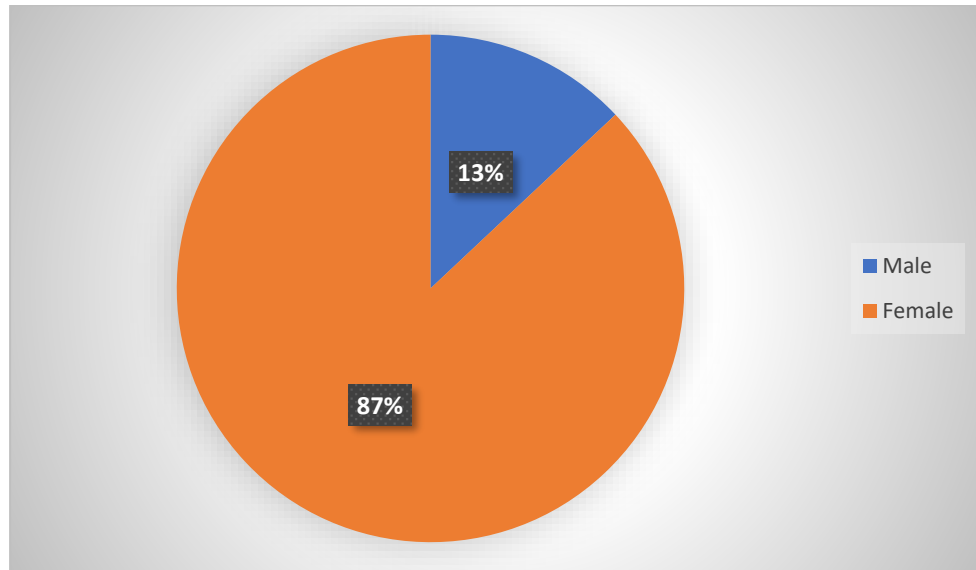

Figure 2. Percentage for gender

The distribution of gender is presented in Figure 2 above. 13 % are male and 87% are female.

Findings for Top-Down Anxiety

This section presents data to answer the first research question: How do the difficulties in top-down reading strategies differ across gender? In the context of this study, top-down reading refers to 3 items for (a) background and cultural knowledge and 4 items for (b) general reading ability.
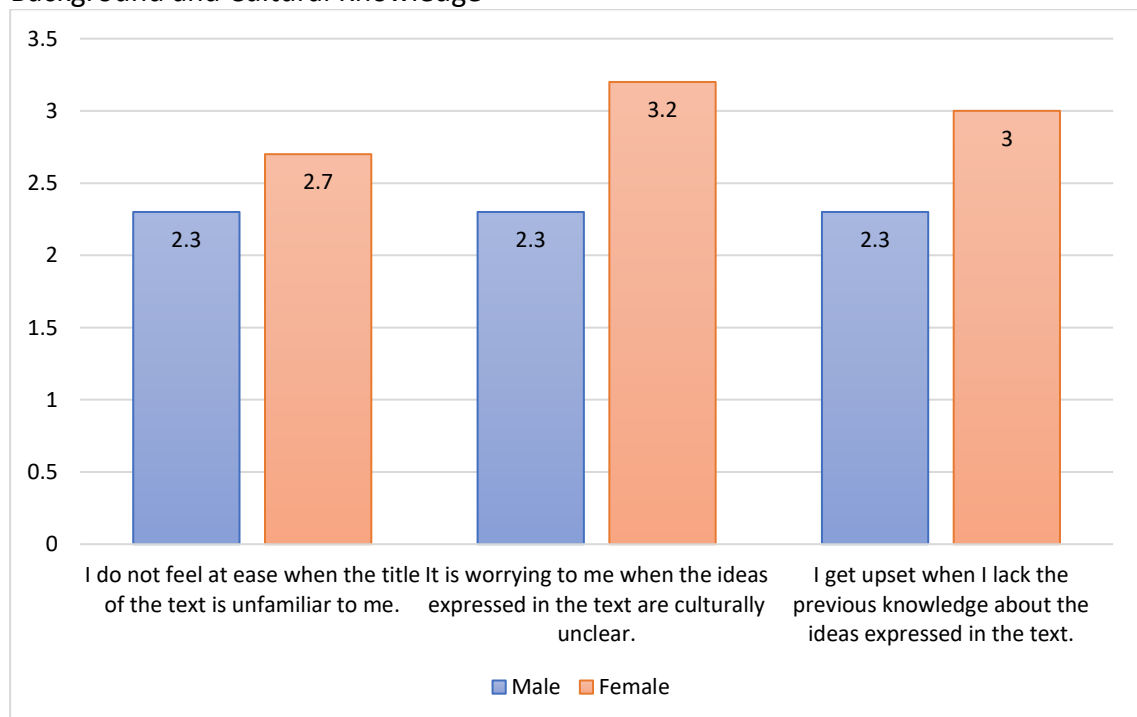
(a) Background and Cultural Knowledge

Figure 3. Mean for Background and Cultural Knowledge

The findings for background and cultural knowledge is presented in Figure 3 above. The mean for "I do not feel at ease when the title of the text is unfamiliar to me." is higher for female respondents (2.7) compared to male respondents (2.3). Next, female respondents also reported higher mean (3.2) than male (2.3) for "It is worrying to me when the ideas expressed in the text are culturally unclear" and also for "I get upset when I lack the previous knowledge about the ideas expressed in the text" (mean for female=3; mean for male=2.3).
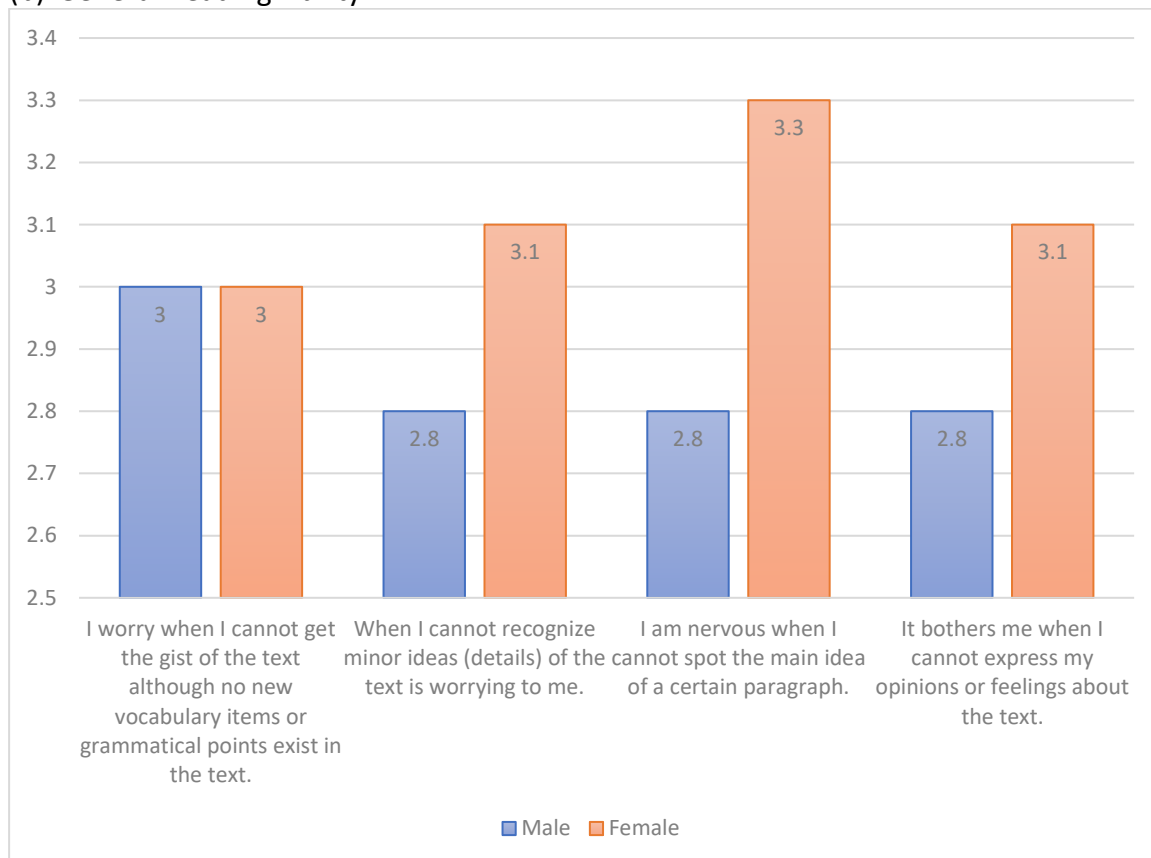
(b) General Reading Ability

Figure 4. Mean for General Reading Ability

The mean for general reading ability is presented in Figure 4 above. Generally, the mean for female respondents surpasses the mean for male respondents. The mean for "I am nervous when I cannot spot the main idea of a certain paragraph" is 3.3 for female and 2.8 for male respondents. The mean for "When I cannot recognize minor ideas (details) of the text is worrying to me" is 3.1 for female and 2.8 for male respondents. The mean for "It bothers me when I cannot express my opinions or feelings about the text' is 3.1 for female and 2.8 for male respondents.

Findings for Bottom-Up Anxiety

This section answers research question 2: How do the difficulties in bottom-up reading strategies differ across gender? In the context of this study, bottom-up anxiety refers to (a) vocabulary and (b) grammar.
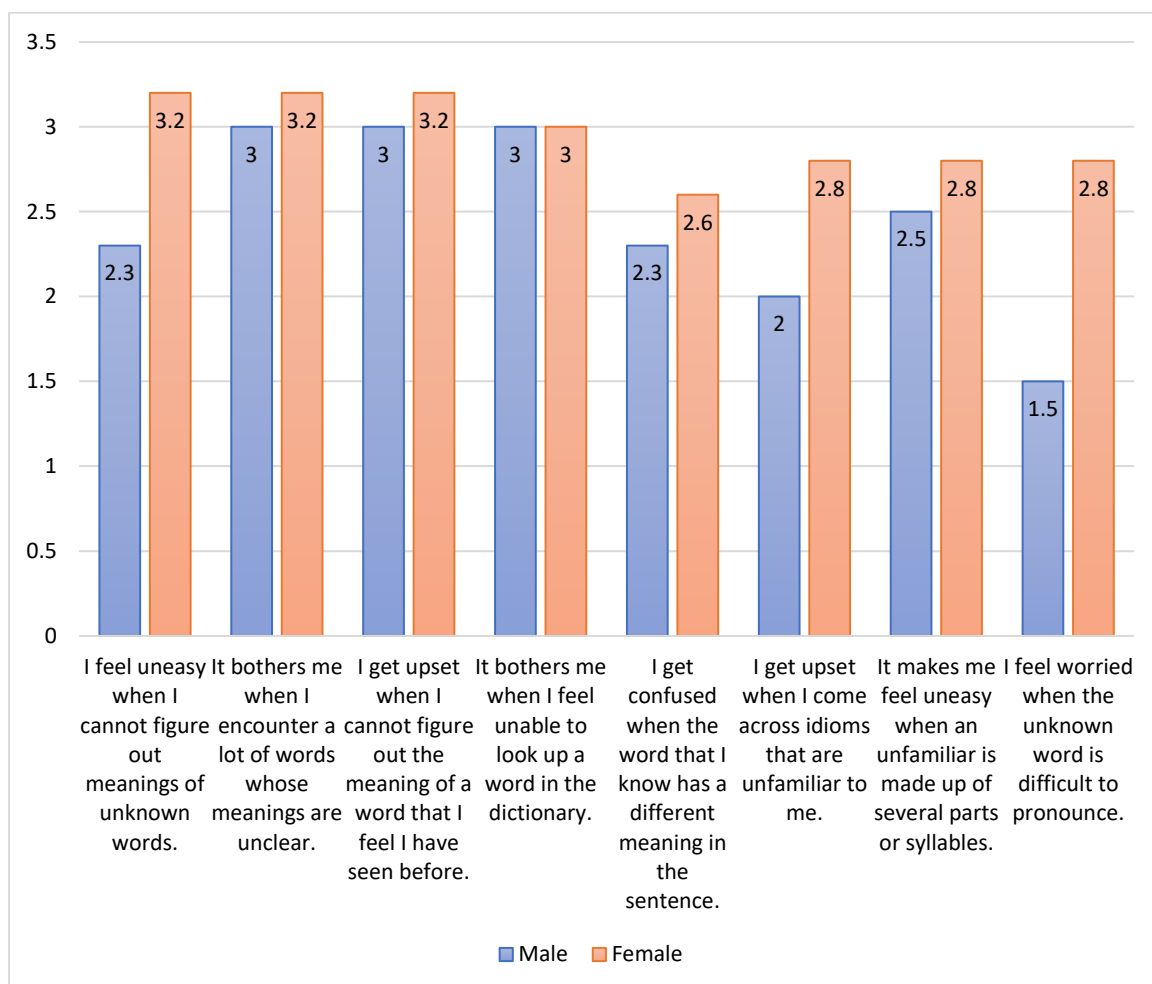
(a) Vocabulary

Figure 5. Mean for Vocabulary

Figure 5 shows the mean for vocabulary. The means for all items are higher for the female respondents. The mean for "I feel uneasy when I cannot figure out meanings of unknown words" is 3.2 for female and 2.3 for male respondents. The mean for "It bothers me when I encounter a lot of words whose meanings are unclear" is 3.2 for female and 3 for male respondents. The mean for "I get upset when I cannot figure out the meaning of a word that I feel I have seen before" is also 3.2 for female and 3 for male respondents.

(b) Grammar
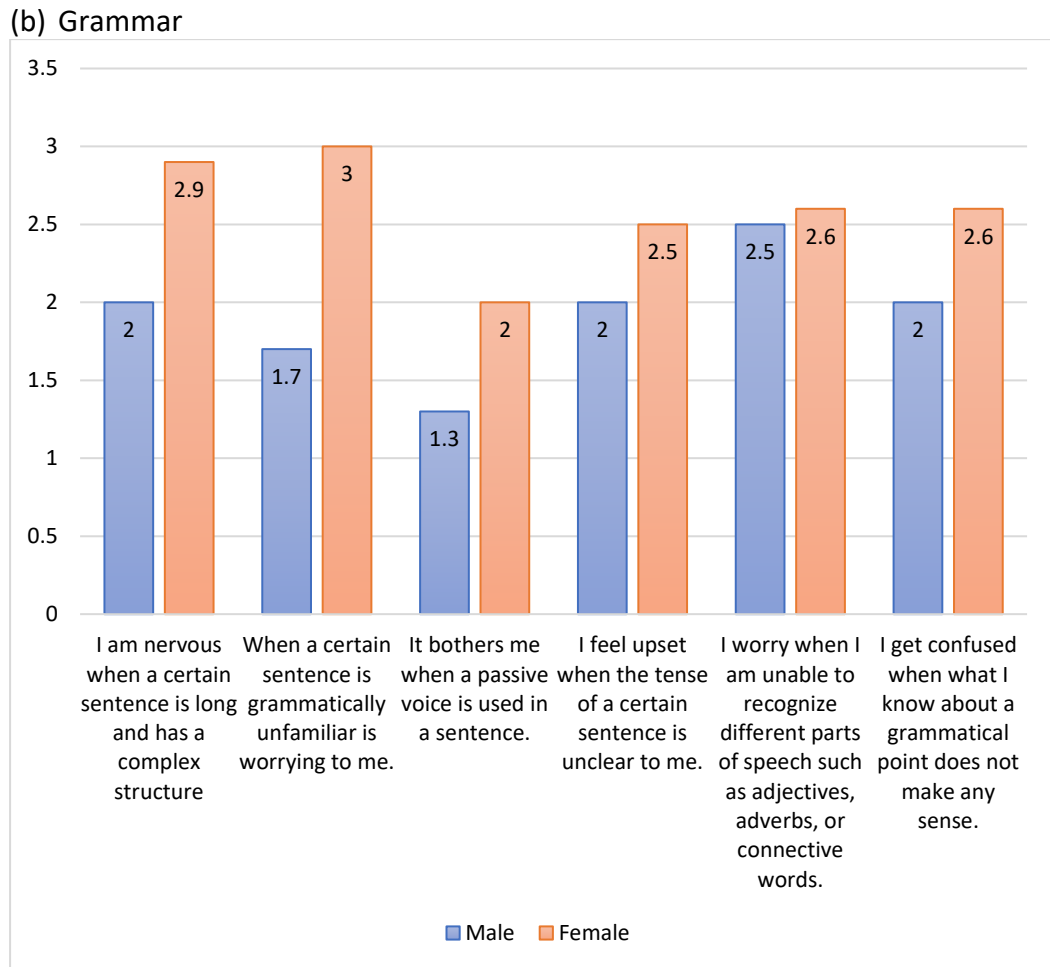

Figure 6. Mean for Grammar

Figure 6 shows the mean for grammar. The means for all items for female respondents are again higher. The mean for "When a certain sentence is grammatically unfamiliar is worrying to me" is 3 for female and 1.7 for male respondents. The mean for "I am nervous when a certain sentence is long and has a complex structure" is 2.9 for female and 2 for male respondents.

Findings for Classroom Reading Anxiety

This section presents data to answer research question 3: How do the difficulties in classroom reading differ across gender?
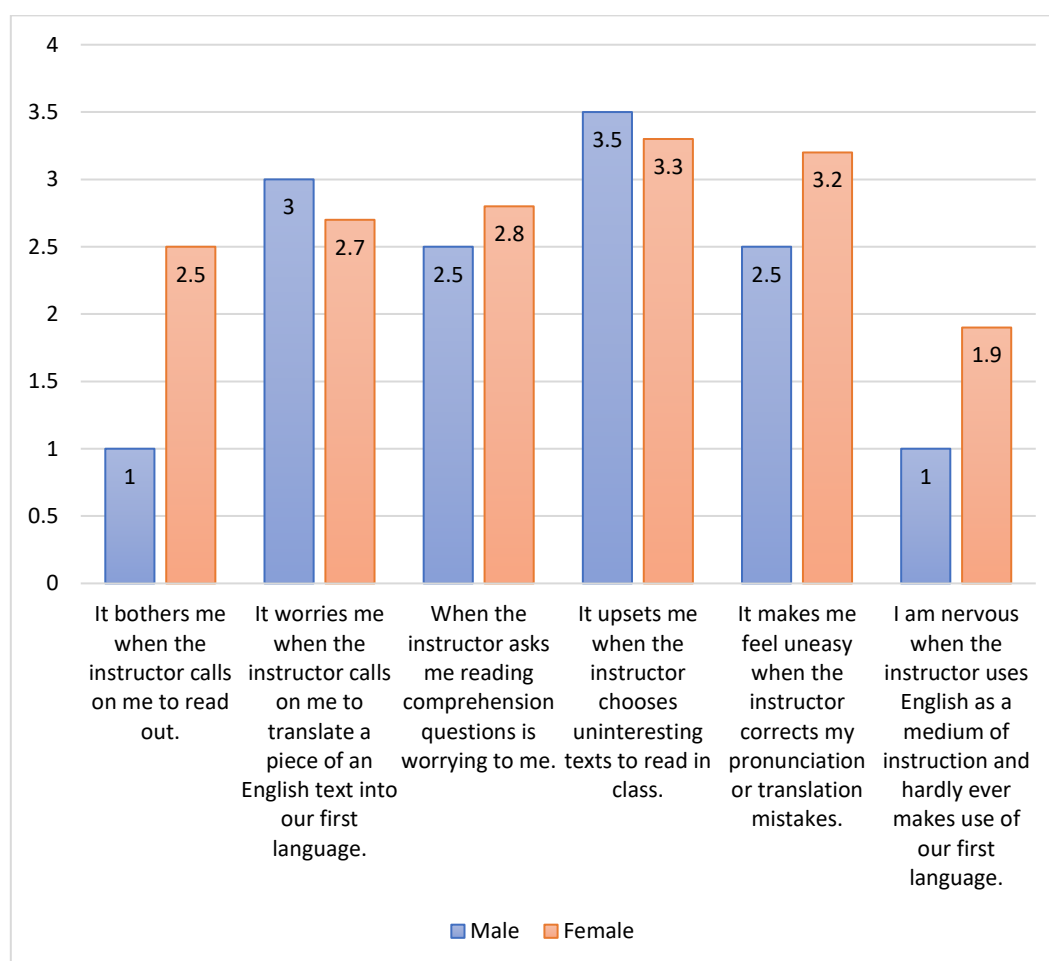

Figure 7. Mean for Classroom Teaching Method

Figure 7 shows the mean for classroom teaching method. Interestingly, two items reported higher mean for male respondents. The mean for "It worries me when the instructor calls on me to translate a piece of an English text into our first language" is 3 for male and 2.7 for female respondents. In addition to that the mean for "It upsets me when the instructor chooses uninteresting texts to read in class" is 3.5 for male and 3.3 for female respondents.

Conclusion
Summary of Findings and Discussion

A summary of the findings showed interesting findings for reading anxiety across gender. For top-down anxiety, this study has shown that generally, female respondents reported higher anxiety than male respondents. Female respondents had higher worry for unfamiliar text. Female respondents also reported higher worry when they found texts with culturally unfamiliar contents. Female respondents also said that they would get upset if they lacked previous knowledge in the reading texts. Similarly, when it comes to general reading ability, the female respondents felt nervous when they could not recognize the main and minor ideas in the text. Furthermore, the inability to express their feelings and opinions also contributed to higher worry. This finding is in accordance with the finding by Ho and Ng

(2016) who found that the female respondents were more anxious with using their language strategies during reading.

Next, when it comes to bottom-up anxiety, the female respondents again showed higher anxiety when it comes to vocabulary and grammar. They felt more uneasy when they could not figure out meanings of unknown words. They were also worried when they encountered words that had unclear meanings. In addition to that, female respondents were also more anxious when they encountered grammatically unfamiliar sentences. They were also more nervous with long complex sentences, passive voice, and the inability to recognise the different parts of speech. The study by Katzir, Kim and Dotan (2018) also reported that girls have higher anxiety than boys when it comes to reading comprehension.

When it comes to classroom teaching, male respondents reported higher anxiety. They were more worried when their instructor called on them to elaborate ideas. The male respondents were also more anxious when the teacher chose uninteresting texts. Interestingly, male respondents showed nervousness when they were asked to translate an English text into their first language. The study by Genç (2016) also found gender differences in the use of reading strategies and the focus on different strategies can then lead to more anxieties in the use of some strategies compared to others.

Based on the findings, it is clear that female respondents showed higher anxiety for both top-down and bottom-up anxiety, whereas, male respondents showed higher anxiety for classroom teaching.

Pedagogical Implication and Suggestion for Future Research
Anxiety in learning can snowball to other aspects of learning as well. According to Rahmat (2020), the fear of learning is a vicious cycle because a reaction at one stage may lead to consequences at another stage. If nothing is done to overcome the fear, learners will end up fearing even the foreign language classes. Although language should think of more activities to improve the learning of reading comprehension skills, measures should also be taken to reduce anxiety in reading comprehension activities so all learners can maximise their learning. Future researcher could investigate measure taken to reduce reading anxiety both from the teaching and also learning point of view.

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