Self-Reported Awareness of Expository Text Structure and Reading Anxiety among Malaysian ESL Foundation Students

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ABSTRACT

Academic reading requires ESL students to understand not only individual sentences but also how ideas are organised across a text. This study examined the relationship between self-reported awareness of expository text structure and second language reading anxiety among Malaysian ESL foundation students. A cross-sectional correlational analysis involved 100 students from Law, Engineering and Science foundation programmes. The proposed measures comprised a 12-item Self-Reported Expository Text-Structure Awareness Questionnaire and the 20-item Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale. Based on the findings, students reported relatively positive text-structure awareness ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.56$) alongside reading anxiety ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 0.61$). A negative correlation was identified between the two variables, $r(98) = -.38$, $p < .001$, suggesting that greater perceived awareness was associated with lower reported anxiety. These findings highlight the potential value of helping foundation students recognise main ideas, supporting information and organisational relationships when reading academic texts

Keywords: expository text structure; self-reported awareness; second language reading anxiety; ESL; foundation students

INTRODUCTION

Academic reading becomes increasingly important as students move from secondary education into foundation and undergraduate programmes. At this stage, reading is no longer limited to locating information or understanding individual sentences. Students are expected to follow explanations, compare positions and recognise how evidence supports an argument. For ESL students, these demands may be particularly challenging when language difficulties occur alongside unfamiliar academic conventions.

One difficulty concerns the organisation of information. A student may understand the vocabulary in a paragraph yet remain unsure which sentence expresses the main point or how subsequent sentences contribute to it. When this happens repeatedly, reading can become a process of decoding isolated sentences rather than constructing meaning across a text. Such uncertainty may also be accompanied by anxiety, especially when students are expected to read independently or respond to comprehension tasks.

Saito et al. (1999) established reading anxiety as a distinct dimension of language learning, while Li (2022) examined its associations with reading-related factors across studies. Research on text-structure instruction, meanwhile, has shown that explicit attention to the organisation of expository texts can improve comprehension (Ghorbani Shemshadsara et al., 2019; Bogaerds-Hazenberg et al., 2021). Research on reading anxiety and text-structure awareness offers complementary insights into students' academic reading experiences. However, their relationship warrants further investigation among Malaysian ESL foundation students. The present study therefore examined the relationship between self-reported awareness of expository text structure and English reading anxiety. Its findings provide insight into how students' perceived ability to recognise text organisation relates to the anxiety they experience when reading in English.

The study addresses three questions: (1) What is the level of students' self-reported awareness of expository text structure? (2) What is their level of second language reading anxiety? (3) RQ3: Is there a statistically significant relationship between self-reported awareness of expository text structure and second language reading anxiety?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Second Language Reading Anxiety

Second language reading anxiety refers to the uneasiness learners experience when they are required to understand written material in a language they are still developing (Saito et al., 1999). Reading may appear less threatening than speaking because it does not always require an immediate public response. Nevertheless, students may worry when a passage contains unfamiliar vocabulary, when the writer's argument is difficult to follow, or when they are unsure whether they have interpreted a text correctly. These concerns are particularly relevant in foundation programmes, where students are moving from school-based reading exercises towards longer and more specialised academic texts.

Saito et al. (1999) identified reading anxiety as distinct from general language anxiety and developed the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) to examine learners' anxiety when reading in a foreign or second language. Their findings highlighted that reading can be an anxiety-provoking experience, particularly when learners perceive texts as difficult to understand. This work established a basis for examining the emotional challenges associated specifically with reading. In the present study, the term *second language reading anxiety* describes the anxiety Malaysian ESL foundation students experience when reading in English. Examining this anxiety alongside self-reported awareness of expository text structure provides insight into the relationship between students' understanding of text organisation and their emotional experiences during reading.

Li's (2022) meta-analysis examined the relationships between reading anxiety and several aspects of second language reading, including reading performance, self-efficacy and strategy use. The review highlighted the relevance of examining anxiety alongside both learners' beliefs about their reading abilities and their approaches to understanding texts. However, evidence concerning self-efficacy and strategy use was based on fewer studies than evidence concerning reading performance, indicating a need for further investigation.

More recently, Dang (2024) surveyed 324 Vietnamese university students and found a significant negative relationship between reading anxiety and reported reading strategy use. Students who reported using reading strategies more frequently tended to experience lower anxiety. This finding supports further examination of specific aspects of students' approaches to reading. The present study extends this line of inquiry by examining self-reported awareness of expository text structure and its relationship with English reading anxiety among Malaysian ESL foundation students. Specifically, it explores whether students who report greater awareness of how texts are organised also report lower reading anxiety.

Reading Strategies and Text-Structure Awareness in Relation to Reading Anxiety

Reading strategies help learners understand texts and address difficulties encountered during reading. These strategies include rereading, using contextual clues, identifying main ideas and summarising key information. Some strategies support understanding at the word or sentence level, while others help readers follow the organisation and development of ideas across a text. Awareness of text structure is particularly relevant to the latter, as it involves recognising how main ideas, supporting details and relationships between ideas contribute to meaning.

Previous research has linked reading anxiety with learners' reported use of reading strategies. Li (2022) identified an association between these variables in a meta-analysis, although the evidence concerning strategy use was drawn from a relatively small number of studies. Similarly, Dang (2024) found that Vietnamese university students who reported more frequent strategy use tended to report lower reading anxiety. Together, these findings provide a basis for examining how specific aspects of students' approaches to reading relate to their emotional experiences.

The present study focuses on self-reported awareness of expository text structure as a specific aspect of academic reading. This awareness includes recognising the main idea, identifying the functions of supporting details and understanding how ideas are connected within and across paragraphs. Examining this construct alongside reading anxiety offers a more focused understanding of how students' perceived ability to follow text organisation relates to their feelings when reading in English. The study therefore investigates whether greater self-reported text-structure awareness is associated with lower reading anxiety among Malaysian ESL foundation students.

Expository Text Structure: Evidence and Relevance to Academic Reading

Expository texts present information through organisational patterns such as cause and effect, comparison and contrast, problem and solution, and sequence. These patterns provide a framework for interpreting how a writer develops an explanation or argument. For example, recognising a problem-and-solution structure helps readers identify the issue, distinguish proposed solutions and evaluate the reasons supporting them.

Research has demonstrated the value of explicit instruction in these structures. Ghorbani Shemshadsara et al. (2019) examined text-structure instruction among 60 EFL undergraduate learners and reported better reading comprehension among students who received the instruction. Their findings suggest that directing learners' attention to organisational patterns can support their understanding of expository texts. Similarly, Xu et al. (2024) investigated a web-based text-structure intervention involving 207 adult Chinese English language learners and found a significant improvement in reading comprehension. Together, these studies demonstrate the instructional value of text organisation across classroom and digital learning environments.

Broader evidence comes from Bogaerds-Hazenberg et al. (2021), whose meta-analysis identified benefits of text-structure instruction for reading comprehension among upper elementary pupils. The review also showed that instructional features, including attention to paragraph structure, the construction of graphic organisers and summarisation, influenced outcomes. Although this population differs from Malaysian ESL foundation students, the findings reinforce the relevance of text organisation to reading development.

These studies primarily establish the contribution of text-structure instruction to comprehension. The present study complements this evidence by examining its affective relevance through the relationship between self-reported text-structure awareness and English reading anxiety. This focus extends the discussion beyond comprehension outcomes and contributes evidence from the Malaysian foundation context.

Research Gap

Previous research has established links between reading anxiety, reading performance and strategy use (Li, 2022; Dang, 2024). Studies on text-structure instruction have also demonstrated that recognising text organisation can support reading comprehension (Ghorbani Shemshadsara et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2024). Together, these findings provide a basis for examining the relationship between students' self-reported awareness of expository text structure and English reading anxiety. This relationship remains insufficiently explored among Malaysian ESL foundation students.

At foundation level, academic reading requires students to interpret explanations, follow arguments and connect ideas across texts from different disciplines. Understanding these relationships involves more than recognising individual words; it also requires awareness of how information is organised and developed. The present study therefore examined the relationship between self-reported awareness of expository text structure and English reading anxiety through a correlational survey of Malaysian ESL foundation students. By bringing these variables together, the study contributes a more focused understanding of how students' perceived awareness of text organisation relates to their emotional experiences during academic reading.

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CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

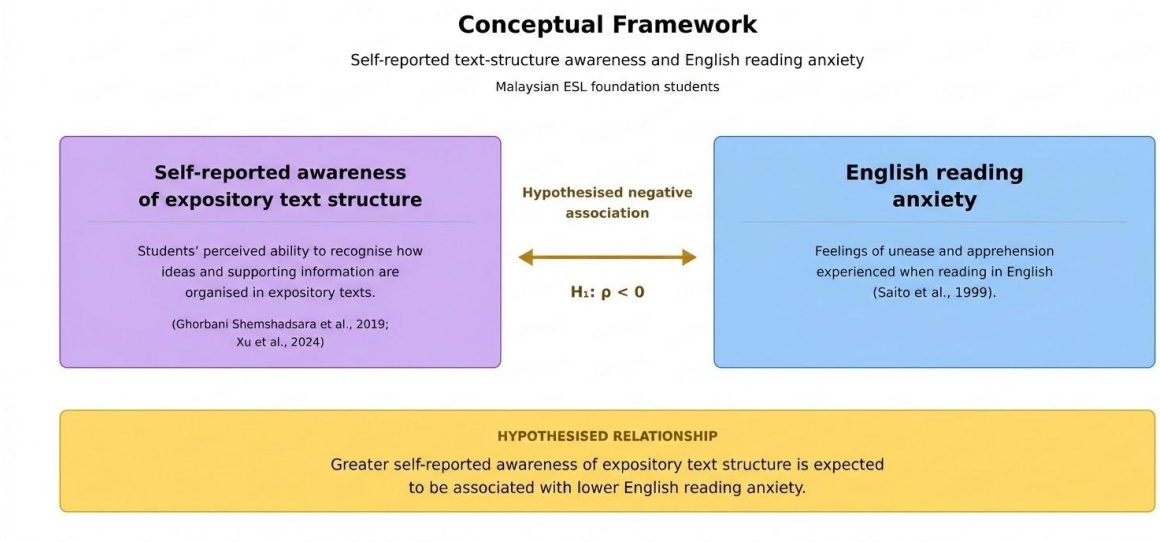


Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking self-reported awareness of expository text structure and English reading anxiety.

The conceptual framework examines the relationship between self-reported awareness of expository text structure and English reading anxiety among Malaysian ESL foundation students. Self-reported text-structure awareness refers to students' perceived ability to recognise main ideas, supporting information and connections between ideas in expository texts. Ghorbani Shemshadsara et al. (2019) and Xu et al. (2024) demonstrated the benefits of text-structure instruction for reading comprehension, providing a conceptual basis for examining students' awareness of text organisation.

English reading anxiety refers to the unease and apprehension learners experience when reading in English (Saito et al., 1999). Li (2022) and Dang (2024) identified associations between reading anxiety and reading strategy use. These findings support further investigation into how specific aspects of students' approaches to reading, including text-structure awareness, relate to anxiety.

The framework proposes that students who report greater awareness of expository text structure will report lower English reading anxiety. Recognising how ideas are organised may help students interpret texts with greater clarity and less uncertainty. The double-headed arrow represents the hypothesised negative association between the two constructs.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Participants

The study employed a cross-sectional quantitative correlational design to examine the relationship between self-reported awareness of expository text structure and English reading anxiety. Participants comprised 100 Malaysian ESL foundation students, all aged 18 years, at a Malaysian higher education institution. Of these, 35 were enrolled in Law, 35 in Science and 30 in Engineering.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling from classes taught by the researcher. The questionnaire was administered through Google Forms, and responses were monitored during data collection to encourage approximately balanced representation across the three programmes.

Students agreed to participate after being informed that participation was voluntary and that their decision would not affect their grades. Responses were anonymous, as no names, student identification numbers or other identifying information were collected. Only participants' programme of study was recorded.

Research Instruments

Two questionnaires were used. The first was the 12-item Self-Reported Expository Text-Structure Awareness Questionnaire (SETSAQ). Its content was informed by text-structure research, including Ghorbani Shemshadsara et al. (2019) and Xu et al. (2024). Items addressed identifying main ideas, recognising supporting information, understanding organisational patterns and following connections between ideas.

Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher mean scores indicated greater perceived awareness of text structure. The questionnaire measured students' perceptions rather than demonstrated reading skills.

The second instrument was the 20-item Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS), developed by Saito et al. (1999). References to "foreign language" were changed to "second language" to reflect the Malaysian ESL context. Relevant items were reverse-scored so that higher mean scores consistently indicated greater English reading anxiety.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through an online questionnaire administered using Google Forms. The link was distributed to students from the Law, Engineering and Science foundation programmes, and responses were monitored to obtain approximately similar numbers of participants from each programme.

Before analysis, responses were screened for missing values and scoring errors. Means and standard deviations were calculated to summarise self-reported text-structure awareness and English reading anxiety. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of each questionnaire.

Pearson's product–moment correlation was used to examine the direction and strength of the relationship between the two variables. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Self-reported text-structure awareness had a mean of 3.78 (SD = 0.56), indicating a general tendency towards agreement with the awareness statements. English reading anxiety had a mean of 3.04 (SD = 0.61), close to the midpoint of the five-point scale. Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .86 and .88 indicated good internal consistency for the two measures.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Items	M	SD	Cronbach's α
Self-reported text-structure awareness	12	3.78	0.56	.86
English reading anxiety	20	3.04	0.61	.88

Correlation Analysis

A statistically significant negative correlation was found between self-reported text-structure awareness and English reading anxiety, $r(98) = -.38$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.54, −0.20]. Students who reported greater awareness of text organisation tended to report lower reading anxiety.

The relationship was moderate in strength and supported H1. The two variables shared approximately 14.4% of their variance, highlighting an association between students' perceived text-structure awareness and their emotional experiences when reading in English.

DISCUSSION

RQ 1: What is the level of students' self-reported awareness of expository text structure?

The first research question examined students' level of self-reported awareness of expository text structure. Students generally reported favourable awareness (M = 3.78, SD = 0.56), with responses tending towards agreement with the questionnaire statements. This finding suggests that participants perceived themselves as familiar with identifying central ideas, recognising supporting information and following organisational relationships in expository texts.

One possible explanation is students' exposure to academic reading activities at foundation level. Tasks involving main ideas, supporting details and paragraph development may have helped students become more conscious of how writers organise information. Their reported awareness therefore suggests a useful foundation for developing more purposeful approaches to academic reading.

This interpretation complements Ghorbani Shemshadsara et al. (2019) and Xu et al. (2024), who demonstrated improvements in reading comprehension following text-structure instruction. While those studies examined instructional outcomes, the present finding highlights students' perceptions of their own structural awareness. Together, these perspectives establish the relevance of text organisation to academic reading and support its continued emphasis in foundation English lessons.

RQ 2: What is students' level of second language reading anxiety?

The second research question examined students' level of English reading anxiety. The mean score was close to the midpoint of the five-point response scale (M = 3.04, SD = 0.61). This indicates that anxiety remained a relevant aspect of participants' reading experiences, although its extent varied across students.

The coexistence of favourable text-structure awareness and a midpoint anxiety score suggests that familiarity with text organisation can accompany continuing emotional challenges during reading. Students may recognise how a passage is organised while still experiencing uncertainty when interpreting unfamiliar vocabulary, complex explanations or discipline-specific arguments. These are possible contextual explanations rather than difficulties directly established by the present analysis.

The finding is consistent with the recognition of reading anxiety as a distinct aspect of language learning in Saito et al. (1999). It also complements Li's (2022) meta-analysis, which identified relationships between reading anxiety and reading performance, self-efficacy and strategy use. In the Malaysian foundation context, the result highlights the value of addressing students' emotional experiences alongside the reading skills needed for undergraduate study.

RQ3: Is there a statistically significant relationship between self-reported awareness of expository text structure and second language reading anxiety?

The third research question examined whether self-reported awareness of expository text structure was significantly related to English reading anxiety. A statistically significant, moderate negative correlation was found ($r = -.38$, $p < .001$). Students who reported greater awareness of text organisation tended to report lower reading anxiety. The finding therefore supported H1.

A possible explanation is that recognising text organisation provides readers with a clearer framework for interpreting information. Students who can follow the development of an argument may feel better able to distinguish central points from examples, explanations and supporting evidence. This sense of direction may be associated with less uncertainty when approaching academic texts. The finding thus draws attention to the organisation of ideas as a relevant consideration in understanding students' reading anxiety.

The negative association is broadly consistent with Dang (2024), who found that more frequent reported reading strategy use was associated with lower anxiety among Vietnamese university students. It also complements Li

(2022), whose meta-analysis identified an association between reading anxiety and strategy use. The present study contributes a more specific perspective by examining perceived awareness of expository text structure among Malaysian ESL foundation students.

The correlation indicated approximately 14.4% shared variance between the two measures. This represents a meaningful association while suggesting that a fuller understanding of reading anxiety requires attention to additional factors. Vocabulary knowledge, topic familiarity, reading self-efficacy and academic reading demands offer useful directions for further investigation.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings offer useful directions for academic reading instruction at foundation level. In particular, the relationship between perceived text-structure awareness and reading anxiety suggests the value of helping students see how ideas are arranged within a passage. Reading lessons commonly focus on answering comprehension questions, but students also benefit from learning how to approach a text before deciding on their answers. When the organisation of a passage becomes clearer, students may feel better equipped to locate important information and follow the writer's reasoning.

One implication is that lecturers can introduce common expository patterns through short, authentic passages before moving to longer academic texts. For example, students could examine how a writer presents a problem and proposes a solution, or how two perspectives are compared within the same passage. Rather than asking students to memorise the names of structures, lecturers could guide them to identify the main idea, the supporting information and the relationships that connect the two. Signal words such as "however", "as a result" and "in contrast" may be useful starting points, although students should also learn that organisational relationships are not always marked by obvious linkers.

A second implication concerns the use of paragraph-level reading activities. Students can be asked to highlight a central claim, underline evidence and annotate sentences that explain or qualify the writer's point. Pair discussion may then be used to compare interpretations, particularly when a paragraph contains an implicit main idea or several supporting examples. These tasks shift some attention from finding the correct answer to explaining how meaning is developed. They may also help lecturers identify whether students struggle with vocabulary, the relationship between ideas or the overall organisation of a passage.

Text-structure awareness may also provide a useful connection between reading and writing instruction. Many foundation students have encountered paragraph-writing frameworks, including TEEEL, in their writing lessons. Lecturers could draw on this familiarity by asking students to work backwards from a completed paragraph and identify the functions performed by different sentences. Nevertheless, the purpose should be to examine how a writer develops an idea, not to force every paragraph into a fixed sequence. Academic texts vary considerably, and some paragraphs may not contain an explicit topic sentence, a separate example or a concluding link.

These approaches can be introduced gradually through familiar reading tasks and extended as students encounter more demanding academic materials. Lecturers may also encourage students to explain which structural clues helped them understand a passage. Such reflection can make reading processes more visible and provide opportunities for students to develop confidence in their own reading decisions. In this way, text-structure awareness offers a practical focus for strengthening both reading instruction and students' experience of academic reading.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study is situated within one Malaysian higher education institution and includes foundation students from Law, Engineering and Science programmes. These students provide a useful starting point for understanding text-structure awareness in the foundation context, although their reading experiences may differ from those of learners in other institutions or academic programmes. Research involving a wider range of foundation settings would help build a fuller picture of students' reading experiences.

The sample also provides an initial perspective on students from three disciplines with different reading demands. Further research could examine how particular features of disciplinary texts relate to reading anxiety. For instance, argumentative reasoning in Law, technical explanations in Engineering and scientific descriptions in Science may present different challenges. Comparing these experiences could help identify the reading demands that students find most difficult.

Another area for further research is the relationship between students' perceived awareness and their actual reading performance. The present questionnaire captures how students judge their ability to recognise main ideas and organisational patterns. A short reading task could complement these responses by showing how students apply that knowledge when working with unfamiliar academic passages.

Future research could broaden the focus to other aspects of second language reading anxiety. Vocabulary-related anxiety, anxiety when reading lengthy or unfamiliar academic texts, uncertainty about making inferences, and anxiety associated with time-limited reading tasks are particularly relevant areas to explore. Researchers could also examine the relationships between reading anxiety, reading self-efficacy, comprehension monitoring and students' confidence in interpreting discipline-specific texts. These directions would offer a richer understanding of why some reading situations feel more demanding than others and how students respond to those demands.

CONCLUSION

This study brings attention to the relationship between self-reported awareness of expository text structure and second language reading anxiety among Malaysian ESL foundation students. Academic reading involves more than understanding individual words and sentences; students must also follow the development of ideas and recognise how information contributes to a writer's overall message. Awareness of these relationships may offer students a clearer way to navigate academic passages, particularly as they move towards the reading demands of undergraduate study.

The findings highlights a positive perception of text-structure awareness and a promising negative relationship with reading anxiety. This pattern is consistent with the wider literature on strategic reading and provides a useful basis for examining the affective value of understanding text organisation. By bringing text-structure awareness and reading anxiety into the same discussion, the study broadens attention beyond comprehension scores to include students' experiences of reading in English.

The study also points towards practical opportunities for foundation-level teaching. Activities that guide students to identify main ideas, trace supporting evidence and recognise relationships between ideas can help make academic texts more approachable. Further research into vocabulary-related anxiety, inference-making, time pressure and disciplinary reading demands could extend this understanding. Overall, text-structure awareness represents a worthwhile area of inquiry for supporting students as they develop the confidence and skills needed for academic reading.

Ultimately, the value of this line of research lies in understanding how students approach academic texts and what may make those texts more manageable. A broader evidence base, combining self-report measures with reading tasks and students' own accounts, would help determine whether awareness of text structure has a meaningful place in efforts to support confident and effective second language reading.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no financial or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the conduct of this study, the interpretation of its findings or the preparation of this manuscript.

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