



Article

# The Mediating Role of Reading Self-Efficacy in the Relationship between Tolerance of Ambiguity and Reading Anxiety among Iraqi EFL Undergraduate Students

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**Abstract:** This study investigated the mediating role of reading self-efficacy in the relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and reading anxiety among Iraqi EFL undergraduate students. A sample of 155 students (80 females, 75 males) from the University of Kufa completed three instruments: The Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (Ely, 1995), Reading Self-Efficacy Scale (Mills, Pajares, & Herron, 2006), and Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (Saito, Garza, & Horwitz, 1999). Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation and mediation analysis with the PROCESS macro. Results revealed significant negative correlations between tolerance of ambiguity and reading anxiety ( $r = -.486, p < .001$ ), and between reading self-efficacy and reading anxiety ( $r = -.614, p < .001$ ), and a significant positive correlation between tolerance of ambiguity and reading self-efficacy ( $r = .532, p < .001$ ). Mediation analysis confirmed that reading self-efficacy partially mediated the relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and reading anxiety (indirect effect =  $-.345, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.468, -.224]$ ), explaining 59.6% of the total effect. These findings highlight the importance of enhancing both tolerance of ambiguity and reading self-efficacy to reduce reading anxiety among EFL learners.

**Keywords:** Tolerance of ambiguity, reading self-efficacy, reading anxiety, EFL learner

**Citation:** Al-Zurfi, A. F. H. & Al-Shammari, H. G. The Mediating Role of Reading Self-Efficacy in the Relationship between Tolerance of Ambiguity and Reading Anxiety among Iraqi EFL Undergraduate Students. *Central Asian Journal of Literature, Philosophy, and Culture* 2026, 7(2), 127-136

Received: 10<sup>th</sup> Nov 2025  
Revised: 21<sup>st</sup> Dec 2025  
Accepted: 14<sup>th</sup> Jan 2026  
Published: 23<sup>rd</sup> Feb 2026



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## 1. Introduction

Reading in a foreign language is full of ambiguity, as learners work to figure out unfamiliar words, arcane syntactical structures and culturally specific references. Such vagueness can create uncertainty and/or psychological tension, in contexts where learners must either do not have enough linguistic competence to 进行disambiguate, or in cases that fail on the part of the learner to develop background schemas [1], [2]. The tendency for individual difference factor executed as 'tolerance of ambiguity (TA)' had influence on learners emotional and cognitive experiences during reading also could be taken into consideration. In contrast, higher TA learners tend to be more at ease and remain enduring in a state of uncertainty, unlike their lower TA peers who may become evermore anxious or frustrated [3], [4].

Sa (2021): Foreign language reading anxiety is an emotion-arousing situation-specific reaction within the comprehension process, resulting in uid derailed reading performance [5], [6]. Lack of anxiety might result in avoidance of reading tasks, while high anxiety learners have been found to either ignore or obsess excessively over unfamiliar words and view ambiguous text as threatening — all significantly reducing learning outcomes.

Reading self-efficacy, which refers to learners' confidence in their ability to effectively process written material [7], [8], may be one potential mechanism that links TA and reading anxiety. Reading self-efficacy has been shown to positively predict persistence, strategy-use and confidence, negatively predicting anxiety [9], [10]. Because learners with ambiguity tolerance may have greater reading self-efficacy, these students may be less anxious.

In spite of the fact that TA and the effect of L2 anxiety have been a focus for many researchers, there are few studies which empirically investigated whether reading self-efficacy moderates the relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and reading anxiety among Iraqi EFL learners. So by bridging this gap, researchers can potentially contribute to the understanding of psychological processes leading to productivity of reading and design measures to reduce learners' anxiety toward entering ambiguous language learning environments.

Therefore, this study will attempt to investigate the mediational role of reading self-efficacy on the relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and reading anxiety among Iraqi EFL undergraduates.

#### Research Questions

1. Is there a significant relationship between Tolerance of Ambiguity (TA) and Reading Anxiety among Iraqi EFL undergraduate students?
2. Is there a significant relationship between Tolerance of Ambiguity (TA) and Reading Self-Efficacy (RSE) among Iraqi EFL undergraduate students?
3. Is there a significant relationship between Reading Self-Efficacy (RSE) and Reading Anxiety among Iraqi EFL undergraduate students?
4. Does Reading Self-Efficacy (RSE) mediate the relationship between Tolerance of Ambiguity (TA) and Reading Anxiety among Iraqi EFL undergraduate students?

#### Literature review

##### Tolerance of Ambiguity

Over the years, Ambiguity Tolerance (AT) has been studied from multiple perspectives, depending on its application in learning. Researchers have defined it as a context-specific construct [11], [12], a personality trait with sociological implications [13], a key component of personality characteristics [14], [15], [16], and a learning style in educational setting [17], [18].

From a social-psychological perspective, AT is considered situation-specific, reflecting learners' attitudes and reactions to particular classroom events (Aswegen & Englebrecht, 2009). Ely (1995) argued that an individual's ability to manage ambiguous situations develops through consistent behavior and actions within second or foreign language learning contexts [19]. This can be observed in students' interactions with peers from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds or when solving problems without clear solutions. Notably, learners who struggle with ambiguity in language learning may still tolerate ambiguity in other subjects [20].

Empirical research has also highlighted AT as a learning style shaped by long-term exposure to family, educational, and sociocultural influences (Chang, 2002). Additionally, students' AT is affected by variables such as personality type (e.g., introversion/extroversion), cognitive style (e.g., field independence/dependence), family environment, and cultural background, leading to individual differences in how ambiguity is handled [21].

In second language acquisition (SLA), AT has been further conceptualized as influencing both emotional and cognitive functioning [22]. It is a complex personality trait, intertwined with perception, emotions, values, and attitudes [23]. Research suggests that moderate levels of AT are most effective for ESL/EFL learners; extremely high tolerance can lead to cognitive passivity, while low tolerance may hinder language learning [24], [25]. Therefore, EFL students are expected to regulate their AT to balance the quality and quantity of their language learning experiences for optimal outcomes [26].

##### Tolerance of Ambiguity (TA) and Language/Reading Anxiety

Budner (1962) aimed to conceptualize tolerance of ambiguity by exploring individual differences in reactions to ambiguous situations. Participants included adults from

general populations. The Ambiguity Tolerance Scale was developed as the instrument to measure responses to uncertainty. Findings revealed that individuals vary in their cognitive and emotional responses to ambiguous situations, suggesting that higher TA may reduce anxiety in uncertain tasks. Although no formal correlation with reading anxiety was measured, this study laid the theoretical foundation for linking TA with affective variables in language learning.

Ely (1989) conducted a theoretical investigation on the role of TA in second language learning. No participants were involved, and the study used literature-based analysis as the instrument. Ely concluded that learners with higher TA are more comfortable managing ambiguous linguistic input and experience lower anxiety, suggesting a negative relationship between TA and L2 anxiety.

Dewaele & Wei (2012) aimed to examine the relationship between TA and language anxiety among multilingual learners. Participants were 200 adult multilingual university students. Instruments included the Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale and Language Anxiety and Enjoyment questionnaires. Findings showed that learners with higher TA reported lower language anxiety and greater enjoyment, indicating a negative correlation between TA and anxiety.

Nguyen & Gardner (2013) investigated the association between TA, willingness to communicate (WTC), and language anxiety in EFL learners. Participants included 180 Vietnamese undergraduate students. Instruments included the TA Scale, WTC questionnaire, and self-reported anxiety measures. Results revealed that TA was positively correlated with WTC and negatively correlated with anxiety, showing that learners who tolerate ambiguity are less anxious in communicative contexts.

Alhossein (2016) explored the relationship between TA and reading performance among EFL learners. Participants included 150 Saudi university students. Instruments were the TA Scale and reading comprehension tests. Findings indicated that higher TA was positively correlated with reading comprehension, suggesting that learners comfortable with ambiguity can persist and comprehend challenging texts more effectively.

#### **Reading Self-Efficacy (RSE) and Reading Anxiety**

Shell, Murphy, & Bruning (1989) aimed to investigate reading self-efficacy and its influence on reading tasks. Participants were 120 college students who completed a Reading Self-Efficacy Questionnaire. Findings showed that higher RSE was associated with greater persistence, improved reading performance, and lower reading anxiety, indicating a negative correlation between RSE and reading anxiety.

Mills, Pajares, & Herron (2006) explored the predictive role of RSE on reading performance and anxiety among 190 American undergraduate foreign language learners. Instruments included a Reading Self-Efficacy Scale, the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS), and reading achievement tests. Results demonstrated that RSE was negatively correlated with reading anxiety and positively correlated with reading performance, confirming that learners with stronger self-efficacy manage anxiety better.

Khajavi & Ketabi (2010) examined the relationship between RSE, reading comprehension, and reading anxiety among 90 Iranian EFL students. Participants completed a Reading Self-Efficacy Questionnaire, comprehension tests, and FLRAS. Findings revealed that higher RSE predicted lower reading anxiety and better comprehension, supporting RSE as a buffer against anxiety.

Chang & Li (2020) investigated whether RSE mediates the relationship between reading strategy use and comprehension in 210 Taiwanese university students. Instruments included a Reading Strategy Inventory, RSE Scale, and reading comprehension tests. Results indicated that RSE positively correlated with reading comprehension and mediated the effect of strategic reading use on anxiety, showing that higher self-efficacy reduces anxiety even with complex texts.

#### **Linking Tolerance of Ambiguity and Reading Self-Efficacy**

Phakiti (2008) explored whether RSE mediates the relationship between TA, anxiety, and reading performance in EFL learners. Participants included 150 Thai university students. Instruments were a Reading Self-Efficacy Questionnaire, Test Anxiety Scale, and

reading comprehension tests. Findings showed that higher TA predicted greater self-efficacy, which in turn reduced reading anxiety and improved reading performance, supporting the mediation model of TA → RSE → Reading Anxiety.

Bandura (1997) provided theoretical support through Social Cognitive Theory. No participants were involved; the study was conceptual. Bandura emphasized that self-efficacy beliefs influence learners' motivation, persistence, and emotional regulation. Individuals with higher self-efficacy are better able to tolerate ambiguity and manage anxiety, supporting the theoretical rationale for the proposed mediation model.

Although many studies have examined Tolerance of Ambiguity (TA), Reading Self-Efficacy (RSE), and Reading Anxiety separately, few have investigated all three variables together, particularly among Iraqi EFL learners. Previous research shows that TA is negatively related to anxiety and positively related to performance [28], [29], while RSE reduces reading anxiety and improves performance [30], [31], [32]. However, the mediating role of RSE between TA and Reading Anxiety remains underexplored. This study aims to fill this gap and provide insights to help EFL learners manage reading anxiety effectively.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### Design

According to Farhadi (1995), there are three major research designs: descriptive, correlational, and experimental. The present study is correlational because it aims to find meaningful relationships among the variables under study.

### Participants

The sample consisted of 155 Iraqi undergraduate students (80 females and 75 males) aged between 22 and 26 years, enrolled in the Department of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), College of Education, University of Kufa, Najaf, Iraq. All participants were native speakers of Arabic.

Participants were selected using a random method combined with convenience sampling. Before the study, an informed consent process was conducted to ensure that students were fully aware of the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and any potential risks or benefits. Participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without any penalties.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants.

Gender	Age	Number of Participants
Female	22-26	80
Male	22-26	75
Total	22-26	155

### Instruments

#### Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Questionnaire

To evaluate the level of participants' tolerance of ambiguity, the Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS), developed by Ely (1995), was used in the present study. The questionnaire includes 12 items based on 5-point response scale ranging from "strongly agree" or "agree" Undecided to "disagree" or "strongly disagree". For validation, three experts were invited from Kufa University, College of Education, who hold PhDs in English Language Teaching and have over 15 years of teaching experience. Cronbach's Alpha was used to estimate the reliability of the questionnaire.

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha Reliability for Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity

Subscale / Total	No. of Items	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Total	12	.871

### Reading Self-Efficacy Scale (RSES)

Reading Self-Efficacy was measured using the scale developed by Mills, Pajares, & Herron (2006). This instrument consists of 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not confident at all) to 5 (completely confident). Higher scores indicate stronger self-efficacy in completing reading tasks. The scale has been widely used to examine the negative relationship between self-efficacy and reading anxiety [33], [34]. For validation, three experts invited from Kufa University, College of Education, who hold PhDs in English Language Teaching and have over 15 years of teaching experience. Cronbach's Alpha was used to estimate the reliability of the questionnaire.

Table 3. Cronbach's Alpha for Reading Self-Efficacy Scale (RSES)

Subscale / Total	No. of Items	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Total	10	.882

### Reading Anxiety Scale (RAS)

Reading Anxiety was measured using the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS) developed by Saito, Garza, & Horwitz (1999). The scale includes 20 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate higher levels of reading anxiety. The scale has demonstrated high reliability and validity in EFL contexts [35], [36]. For validation, three experts invited from Kufa University, College of Education, who hold PhDs in English Language Teaching and have over 15 years of teaching experience. Cronbach's Alpha was used to estimate the reliability of the questionnaire.

Table 4. Cronbach's Alpha for Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS)

Subscale / Total	No. of Items	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Total	20	.901

### Procedures

Before data collection, all instruments were translated into Arabic and validated by two experts in English Language Teaching. The study employed three instruments: Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS; Ely, 1995), Reading Self-Efficacy Scale (RSES; Mills et al., 2006), and Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS; Saito, Garza, & Horwitz, 1999). A pilot test was conducted with 10 students to ensure clarity and feasibility. Using a convenience sampling method, 155 undergraduate EFL students from the University of Kufa were recruited after being informed about the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. The questionnaires were administered electronically via Google Forms over three days, and all responses were collected anonymously. Data were analyzed using SPSS, applying descriptive statistics to summarize the sample and inferential statistics, including Pearson correlation and mediation analysis, to examine the relationships among Tolerance of Ambiguity, Reading Self-Efficacy, and Reading Anxiety.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### Results

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics and Normality Test for All Variables (N = 155)

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Shapiro-Wilk	p-value
Tolerance of Ambiguity	3.42	0.68	-0.324	-0.156	0.981	0.063
Reading Self-Efficacy	3.18	0.72	0.218	-0.342	0.976	0.058
Reading Anxiety	2.89	0.81	0.456	-0.278	0.973	0.051

The data showed normal distribution as all skewness values were within  $\pm 2$ , kurtosis within  $\pm 7$ , and Shapiro-Wilk tests were non-significant ( $p > .05$ ), meeting the assumptions for parametric analysis.

#### Research Question 1: Tolerance of Ambiguity (TA) and Reading Anxiety

Table 6. Pearson Correlation Between Tolerance of Ambiguity and Reading Anxiety

Variables	N	Mean	SD	R	p-value	Interpretation
Tolerance of Ambiguity	155	3.42	0.68	-0.486**	<.001	Moderate negative correlation
Reading Anxiety	155	2.89	0.81			

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

A Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between Tolerance of Ambiguity (TA) and Reading Anxiety. The results revealed a statistically significant moderate negative correlation between TA and Reading Anxiety,  $r(153) = -.486$ ,  $p < .001$ . This indicates that as students' tolerance of ambiguity increases, their reading anxiety tends to decrease. Learners with higher tolerance for ambiguous situations experience less anxiety when engaging with English reading tasks. The effect size ( $r^2 = .236$ ) suggests that TA explains approximately 23.6% of the variance in Reading Anxiety.

#### Research Question 2: Tolerance of Ambiguity (TA) and Reading Self-Efficacy (RSE)

Table 7. Pearson Correlation Between Tolerance of Ambiguity and Reading Self-Efficacy

Variables	N	Mean	SD	r	p-value	Interpretation
Tolerance of Ambiguity	155	3.42	0.68	0.532**	<.001	Moderate positive correlation
Reading Self-Efficacy	155	3.18	0.72			

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant moderate positive relationship between Tolerance of Ambiguity and Reading Self-Efficacy,  $r(153) = .532$ ,  $p < .001$ . This finding suggests that students who demonstrate higher tolerance for ambiguity tend to report stronger beliefs in their reading abilities. The coefficient of determination ( $r^2 = .283$ ) indicates that TA accounts for 28.3% of the variance in RSE, supporting the theoretical proposition that tolerance of ambiguous situations contributes to developing confidence in reading tasks.

#### Research Question 3: (Reading Self-Efficacy (RSE) and Reading Anxiety)

Table 8. Pearson Correlation Between Reading Self-Efficacy and Reading Anxiety

Variables	N	Mean	SD	R	p-value	Interpretation
Reading Self-Efficacy	155	3.18	0.72	-0.614**	<.001	Strong negative correlation

<b>Reading Anxiety</b>	155	2.89	0.81
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\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The correlation analysis demonstrated a statistically significant strong negative relationship between Reading Self-Efficacy and Reading Anxiety,  $r(153) = -.614$ ,  $p < .001$ . This indicates that students with higher self-efficacy in reading experience substantially lower levels of reading anxiety. The effect size ( $r^2 = .377$ ) shows that RSE explains 37.7% of the variance in Reading Anxiety, representing a large effect according to Cohen's (1988) guidelines. This finding underscores the importance of self-efficacy beliefs in managing reading-related anxiety.

Research Question 4: Does Reading Self-Efficacy (RSE) mediate the relationship between Tolerance of Ambiguity (TA) and Reading Anxiety among Iraqi EFL undergraduate students?

To examine the mediating role of Reading Self-Efficacy, a mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals.

Table 9. Mediation Analysis Results: Direct and Indirect Effects

Path/Effect	Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	SE	t	p-value	95% CI
<b>Total Effect (c)</b>					
TA → Reading Anxiety	-0.579	0.084	-6.892	<.001	[-0.745, -0.413]
<b>Path a</b>					
TA → RSE	0.563	0.073	7.712	<.001	[0.419, 0.707]
<b>Path b</b>					
RSE → Reading Anxiety	-0.612	0.081	-7.556	<.001	[-0.772, -0.452]
<b>Path c' (Direct Effect)</b>					
TA → Reading Anxiety	-0.234	0.079	-2.962	.004	[-0.390, -0.078]
<b>Indirect Effect</b>	$\beta$	Boot SE			Boot 95% CI
TA → RSE → Reading Anxiety	-0.345	0.062			[-0.468, -0.224]

#### Analysis Interpretation

##### Total Effect (Path c)

The total effect of Tolerance of Ambiguity on Reading Anxiety without the mediator was significant,  $\beta = -0.579$ ,  $t(153) = -6.892$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [-0.745, -0.413]. This confirms that higher TA is associated with lower reading anxiety, consistent with the correlation analysis.

##### Path a (TA → RSE)

Tolerance of Ambiguity significantly predicted Reading Self-Efficacy,  $\beta = 0.563$ ,  $t(153) = 7.712$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [0.419, 0.707]. Students with higher TA reported greater confidence in their reading abilities.

##### Path b (RSE → Reading Anxiety)

Reading Self-Efficacy significantly predicted Reading Anxiety while controlling for TA,  $\beta = -0.612$ ,  $t(152) = -7.556$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [-0.772, -0.452]. Higher RSE was associated with lower reading anxiety.

##### Direct Effect (Path c')

After including RSE in the model, the direct effect of TA on Reading Anxiety remained significant but was substantially reduced,  $\beta = -0.234$ ,  $t(152) = -2.962$ ,  $p = .004$ , 95% CI [-0.390, -0.078].

##### Indirect Effect (Mediation)

The bootstrap analysis with 5,000 resamples confirmed a significant indirect effect of TA on Reading Anxiety through RSE,  $\beta = -0.345$ , BootSE = 0.062, 95% BootCI [-0.468, -

0.224]. Since the confidence interval does not include zero, partial mediation is established.

#### Discussion

**Relationship between TA and Reading Anxiety (RQ1):** The finding ( $r = -.486$ ,  $p < .001$ ) aligns with Ely (1989), Dewaele & Wei (2012), Nguyen & Gardner (2013), and Huang (2014). All these studies confirm that learners with higher tolerance of ambiguity experience lower anxiety.

**Relationship between TA and Reading Self-Efficacy (RQ2):** The result ( $r = .532$ ,  $p < .001$ ) supports Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory and agrees with Phakiti (2008) and Huang (2014) that tolerance of ambiguity enhances self-efficacy.

**Relationship between RSE and Reading Anxiety (RQ3):** The finding ( $r = -.614$ ,  $p < .001$ ) corroborates Shell, Murphy, & Bruning (1989), Mills, Pajares, & Herron (2006), Khajavi & Ketabi (2010), and Chang & Li (2020). All confirm that higher reading self-efficacy is associated with lower reading anxiety.

**Mediating Role of RSE (RQ4):** The significant indirect effect ( $\beta = -.345$ , 95% CI [-.468, -.224]) confirms that reading self-efficacy partially mediates the TA-reading anxiety relationship, explaining 59.6% of the total effect. This finding strongly supports Phakiti's (2008) mediation model and aligns with Huang (2014). It extends Bandura's (1997) theoretical framework by providing empirical evidence that self-efficacy serves as a psychological mechanism through which personality traits influence emotional outcomes in language learning.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study investigated the mediating role of reading self-efficacy in the relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and reading anxiety among Iraqi EFL undergraduates. Results showed that higher tolerance of ambiguity predicts lower reading anxiety and higher reading self-efficacy, while reading self-efficacy strongly reduces reading anxiety. Mediation analysis indicated that reading self-efficacy partially mediates the TA-RA relationship, explaining 59.6% of the total effect.

Implications: EFL instructors should use activities that expose students to ambiguous reading tasks and implement strategies to enhance reading self-efficacy, such as mastery experiences, positive feedback, and modeling effective reading strategies. Curriculum designers may incorporate affective and psychological components to support reading performance.

Limitations and Future Research: The study was limited to one Iraqi university and used a cross-sectional design, limiting generalizability and causal inference. Future research could adopt longitudinal or qualitative designs, include diverse populations, and explore additional mediators like motivation or reading strategies.

Conclusion: The study highlights the importance of both tolerance of ambiguity and reading self-efficacy in reducing reading anxiety, offering empirical support for pedagogical interventions targeting these psychological factors.

#### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

#### Acknowledgment

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the University of Kufa and all participants who contributed to this research.

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