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Social Learning Theory in Language Learning: Exploring the Fear for Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

Learning a foreign language has become a norm to most of the worlds' population as the world becomes globalised and the need to become bilingual/multilingual becomes a fundamental aspect for international communication. Despite the need to learn foreign languages, it has however triggered fear or anxiety in learners. For some, fear can be a driving force towards success in language learning yet, for most learners, it tremendously affects their learning process. This study is conducted to explore the fear of foreign language learning based on the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and framework of Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). A quantitative survey was distributed through Google Form, to 202 students from seven different foreign language courses (German, Mandarin, Japanese, Arabic, Korean, Italian and French) at a public university in Malaysia. Findings revealed that learners developed fear and nervousness when they were unable to understand what the educators were saying or any words spoken by the educators in the target language. Moreover, learners compared their low language ability with their peers which indicates low self-esteem. They also felt nervous when having to answer questions that they did not prepare in advance. Lastly, learners feel worried about the consequences of failing in their foreign language class. This study suggests that a strong support system involving language educators play an important role to ensure that fear in foreign language learning could be avoided or improved.

Keywords: Foreign Language Learning, Fear of Foreign Language Learning, Communication Apprehension, Test Anxiety, Negative Evaluation

Introduction

Background of Study

Foreign language learning (FLL) refers to the learning of a non-native language or a language that is not the first language acquired by a person, outside of the native environment or country where it is commonly spoken (Moeller & Catalano, 2015). In other words, a language is considered as a foreign language when it is learnt in a classroom setting by students or groups of people who do not speak the target language. In today's multicultural and

multilingual world, studying a foreign language has not just become a “trend” for people to learn and acquire but has also been developed into a practice by the population of the world. Even in Malaysia, various foreign languages are widely taught both in primary and secondary schools as well as in universities. Pre-school children as young as 5-year-old, are taught another language besides their mother tongue. Among the reasons for people to learn a foreign language are due to study purpose, integration into one’s culture, strengthening cultural identity, for intranational communication or to communicate with groups of people within the country and also to facilitate international communication with people of other countries (Johnson, 2017). Furthermore, according to Moeller and Catalano (2015), learning another language will not just allow speakers to effectively and creatively communicate with other people but will also allow speakers to engage in real-life situations through the language itself.

The importance of learning a foreign language has been upheld by the government of Malaysia as outlined in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan Beyond 2020, in order to prepare university graduates for the competitive and high demands of the current global economy as well as to meet the new challenges of the 21st century. In the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 for Higher Education, the learning of a global or foreign language becomes one of the important factors to ensure that the country will be able to develop human capital and to achieve its vision to be a fully-developed nation. The Malaysia Education Blueprint has encouraged students in higher education institutions to learn at least one global language apart from becoming proficient in *Bahasa Melayu* and English language (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). Therefore, it is unsurprising that most universities in Malaysia have been offering various foreign language courses like Japanese, Korean, French, German, Arabic language and many more as a graduation requirement or elective courses to students, in-line with Malaysia's aspiration.

Despite the good initiative made by the Malaysian government to encourage university students to learn another language, this new experience of having to learn a foreign language or new situation often creates fear or anxiety to some individuals (Rahmat, 2019) particularly among the learners themselves. Foreign language learning can also sometimes be a traumatic experience for many language learners (Zheng, 2008) resulting in them to fail in the course or drop the course half way. Fear or anxiety is considered as a central construct in most models of personality. In general, Spielberger (1983) defined the term anxiety as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system”. In the field of foreign language learning, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) conceptualized fear of foreign language learning as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128).

Statement of Problem

As the world becomes increasingly globalised, being bilingual or multilingual is the most useful real-world skill to ever exist. Learning foreign languages offers many benefits and advantages. Foreign language learners develop not only technical skills related to language use but also tangible advantages in the job market because of their increased communication skills (Weatherford, 1986). It also enhances both cognitive development and academic achievement. In the context of learning a foreign language, the process of mastering the

language is not an easy process. There are several challenges that need to be faced by the learners. One of the challenges is on the personality traits of the learners such as anxiety or fear of the language learning. Fear or anxiety can either aid or disrupt the process of mastering the language. Researchers had to accept the fact that personality traits such as self-esteem, inhibition, anxiety, risk-taking and extraversion, may well shape the ultimate success in mastering a foreign language (Dorney, 2005). Anxiety and fear can be the driving force towards their success in language learning as fear can be counterbalanced, outmatched, and even overcome when the learners have the drive towards mastering the language.

However, instead of being the driving force, fear can also disrupt the language learning process. While learning foreign language can be new to the learners, they tend to develop fear of foreign language learning. The core of human nature is feeling and emotion. It is normal to feel anxious or to develop fear of doing something that is new and unfamiliar. With growing concern being devoted to foreign language learning, anxiety has been ranked to be a crucial challenge to language learners (Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019). Other causes are significant in provoking fear for foreign language learning. Those causes are related to interpersonal issues and personal characteristics, such as fear of speaking a foreign language, low self-perceived foreign language proficiency, and low self-esteem. (Mahmoodzadeh, 2013). This fear and anxiety undermine the process of foreign language learning. Krashen (1982) explains that anxiety associated with a foreign language can be as barriers that prevent information from reaching the language acquisition area in a learner's brain. Understanding and exploring the fear of foreign language will assist to identify solutions for the fear of foreign language learning. Hence, this study is done to investigate the fear of foreign language learning. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions;

- 1.2.1 How does communication apprehension influence fear of foreign language learning?
- 1.2.2 How does fear of negative evaluation influence fear of foreign language learning?
- 1.2.3 How does test anxiety influence fear of foreign language learning?

Literature Review

Introduction

This section discusses the language learning in the social context, theoretical underpinning and categories of the fear of foreign language learning. Additionally, the review on the past studies done with relation to the fear of foreign language learning and the conceptual framework that governs the study will also be provided in the following.

Language Learning in the Social Context

Learning a language is best done in the context of the society. The learner may know the rules of using the language but the real test is when the learner uses the language with the target population. According to Bandura (1977) in Figure 1, social learning theory suggests that the social behaviour is learned through observation and also imitating the behaviour of others. Learning is then enhanced or limited in the context of the environment. Bandura (1977) adds that there are four steps in social learning theory and they are (a) attention, (b) retention, (c) reproduction and (d) motivation. In language learning, learning begins when learners give attention to the target language. They model behaviour from the role models around them and this encourages retention of the learning. The ability to reproduce is then influenced by the motivation that the learner receives in the learning process. Positive motivation leads to positive reproduction of the target language and vice versa.

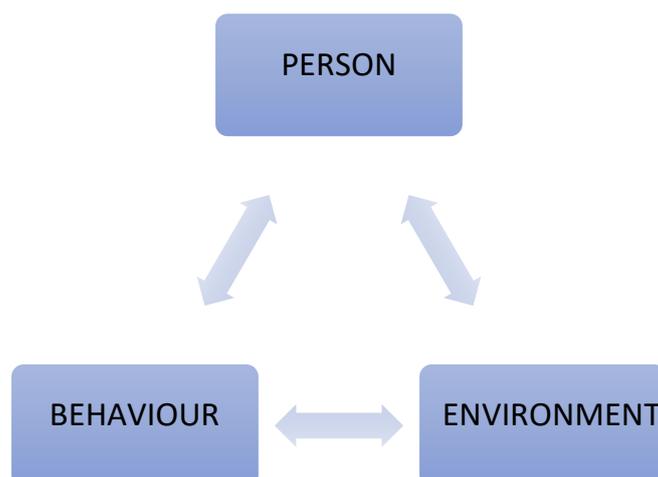


Figure 1- The Social Learning Theory (Source: Bandura, 1977)

Fear of Foreign Language Learning

One of the factors that is often connected with foreign language learning is fear among learners. Fear or commonly known as anxiety is experienced by learners due to various factors. It is crucial to acknowledge this experience as Horowitz, Horowitz and Cope (1986) claim anxiety reaction is the cause for learners not being able to perform their best in a foreign language class and achieve their desired goals. According to Horowitz, Horowitz and Cope (1986), there are three aspects of foreign language anxiety; communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. A kind of shyness due to anxiety experienced by learners or speakers in communicating with others is known as communication apprehension. Test anxiety is associated with fear of failure. Thus, learners are always highly concerned about their test performance and become anxious thinking they may not perform well. Lastly, fear of negative evaluation is referred to others' evaluation where learners mostly expect that to be negative and try to avoid the situation completely.

In addition, in a study by Zhang and Zhong (2012), the possible causes for anxiety were categorised into four. Firstly, as 'learner induced anxiety' which occurs as a result of learners' erroneous beliefs, unrealistic high standards or poor language abilities. Secondly, 'classroom related anxiety' which can be caused by instructors, peers or classroom practices. Thirdly, 'skill specific anxiety' which is related to learners' imperfect performance not only in listening and speaking but also in reading and writing tasks. Lastly, 'society-imposed anxiety' is caused by society mainly because of identity, cultural and parental differences. Although there are many factors that cause anxiety among learners, researchers generally highlighted that fear for foreign language learning is classified as specific anxiety which means learners experience anxiety only in specific situations (Horowitz, Horowitz & Cope, 1986; Kráľová, 2016; Rahmat, 2020).

Past Studies

Past Studies on Categories of Fear in Foreign Language Learning

Many studies have been done to investigate the fear of foreign language learning. Kitano (2001) in his study involving 212 college students of Japanese language in two major universities, investigated the potential sources of foreign language learning in oral activities. The study looked into two areas of language anxiety which were students' negative evaluation

and their self-perceived speaking ability. The study revealed correlation between anxiety and fear of negative evaluation and anxiety and perception of low ability in relation to peers and native speakers. Another related study was undertaken by Tsiplakides and Keramida (2009) involving fifteen students in the third grade of a lower secondary school in Greece. This qualitative study aimed at investigating foreign language learners' anxiety with everyday classroom practice. The analysis of the findings showed that speaking anxiety is apparent among respondents and it was believed to be the result of learners' fear of negative evaluation from their peers and their perception of their low ability in the language in comparison with their peers. Most of the respondents' anxiety in speaking stem from their self-perceived inability in performing in any speaking tasks and fear of their peers' negative view of their language ability. The studies above show that anxiety in language learning is still apparent among foreign language learners and calculative measures need to be crafted to address this issue.

Kitano (2001) suggested building a support system encapsulating a sense of community within the classroom and providing sufficient positive reinforcements to students as remedial actions to support students with learning anxiety in foreign language classroom.

Past Studies on Effects of Fear in Foreign Language Learning

Since fear or anxiety has been found to be a vital factor affecting foreign language learning, it is fundamental to comprehend how this factor gives effect to the language learners. Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the effects of fear in foreign language learning especially in terms of (a) students' achievements or performance and (b) attitude. A study by Phillips (1992) investigates the effects of students' language anxiety on their French oral test performance and their attitudes. 44 students taking French classes at a private university participated in the study. Students' oral exam performance based on their test scores and other performance variables were administered using Horwitz et al. (1986)'s Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The analysis of the study revealed significant, moderate negative correlation between foreign language anxiety and oral exam grades as well as on oral performance in general. In regard to their attitude, it was found that both high and low ability students have a negative attitude towards the test as they found the test very unpleasant despite them having done various practices throughout the semester, with some reported to going "blank", "nervous", "tense", "intimidated" and many more. This study thus indicated that educators should view foreign language anxiety as a serious problem and address the emotional concerns such as worry, and stress experienced by students. This is because anxiety plays an important psychological role that could affect students' tendency to acquire the foreign language and their decision to either continue studying a foreign language or not.

Similarly, Awan et al (2010) examines the fear in learning English as a foreign language in different types of situations that incite fear or anxiety during different stages of the learning process as well as looking at the relationship of anxiety with learners' achievement. 149 undergraduates enrolled in the second and sixth semester of different departments in the University of Sargodha, Pakistan, learning English as a foreign language, participated in the study. A set of questionnaires on FLCAS was adopted and distributed to participants to assess their anxiety during class. The results indicated that as the level of anxiety increases, the students' academic achievement decreases. This study thus implies that classroom educators

should encourage and motivate learners when learning a foreign language to ensure that they feel relaxed and confident thus reducing their level of fear or anxiety. Moreover, it was mentioned that educators need to carefully handle anxiety-provoking situations that could trigger anxiety among learners thus affecting their process in learning the target language.

Al-Shboul et al (2013) conducted a systematic review of past literature on the relationship between fear of foreign language or language anxiety with achievements. Although fear of foreign language does affect the students' learning process and outcomes, other factors such as target language, specific skill, different levels of language proficiency, student's background, and stages also play a significant role in the side effect of language anxiety on achievement. Lastly, Manipuspika (2018) examined the correlation between English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' language anxiety and attitude, specifically the willingness of the students to communicate. 98 students from the English Department in an Indonesia university participated in this study and two questionnaires were employed, namely the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Scale. Additionally, the study also examined the students' level of anxiety and the types of anxiety that they experienced. It was later found that there is a strong positive correlation between learners' foreign language classroom anxiety and their willingness to communicate. Furthermore, the types of anxiety experienced by the students are fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, and communication apprehension. Interestingly, the study also discovered that learners with high levels of anxiety have contributed to them having low desire to speak in the language learnt. This study implies that language educators should familiarise themselves with the construct of language anxiety, try to identify factors contributing to this anxiety as well as finding strategies to help learners reduce their anxiety level.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 2 presents the conceptual framework of the study. This study is scaffolded from the social learning theory by Bandura (1977) to explore the fear of learning foreign language (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986). To begin with the learner (Person) fears to learn a foreign language and this fear is displayed through his/her (i) Communication Apprehension. Next, the negative Environment that the learner is put in for the learning can lead to the learners to have (ii) Fear of Negative Evaluation. Finally, this learning fear (Behaviour) can then lead to the learner having (iii) Test Anxiety.

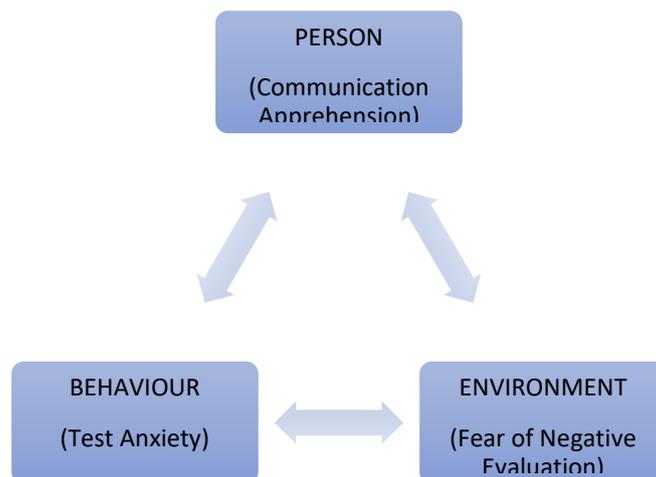


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of the Study - Understanding Fear of Foreign Language learning through Social Learning Theory (Source: Bandura, 1977 & Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986)

Methodology

This quantitative research is done to investigate the fear of foreign language learning. The instrument used is a survey adapted from (Wenden and Rubin, 1987; Horwitz et al., 1986). 202 respondents were purposively chosen to answer the survey. The survey has 4 main sections. With reference to Table 1, section A has items on the demographic profile. Section B has 11 items on Communication Apprehension. Section C has 7 items on Fear of Negative Evaluation and Section D has 15 items on Test Anxiety.

Table 1: Distribution of Items in the Survey

| SECTION | VARIABLES | No of Items |
|---------|-----------------------------|-------------|
| B | COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION | 11 |
| C | FEAR OF NEGATIVE EVALUATION | 7 |
| D | TEST ANXIETY | 15 |
| | Total Number of Items | 33 |

Table 2 presents the reliability statistics for the instrument. SPSS analysis revealed a Cronbach alpha of .847 thus showing a high internal reliability of the instrument used. Data is collected online via Google Form. Data is then analysed using SPSS version 26. Analysed data is presented in the form of percentages and mean scores to answer the 3 research questions.

Table 2- Reliability Statistics for the Instrument

Reliability Statistics

| Cronbach's Alpha | N of Items |
|------------------|------------|
| .847 | 33 |

Findings

Findings for Demographic Profile

The following discusses the respondents' demography which takes into account on gender, semester and the related foreign language.

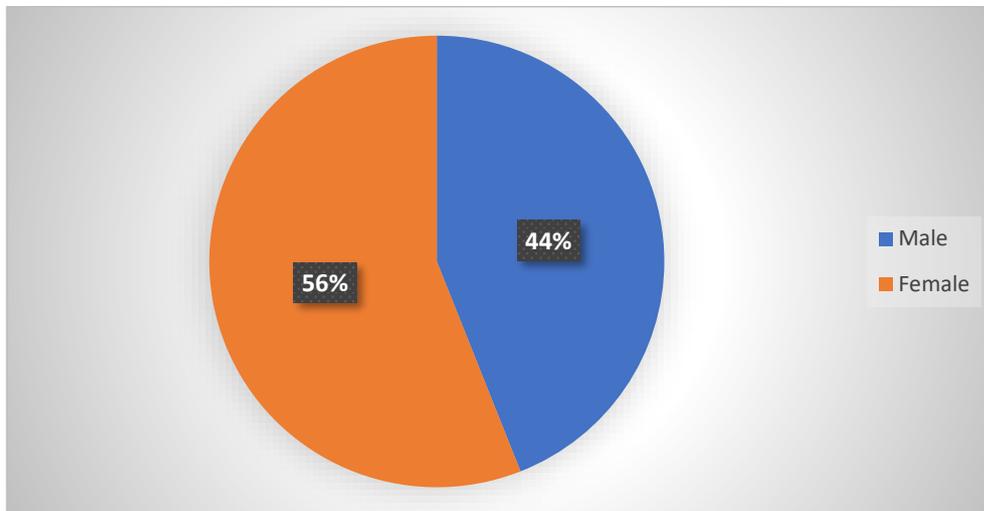


Figure 3- Percentage for Gender

Participants of the study were chosen from students who were required to take foreign language classes. A total of 202 participants were involved in this study. Figure 3 demonstrates that most of the respondents were female students with 56% while only 44% were male students.

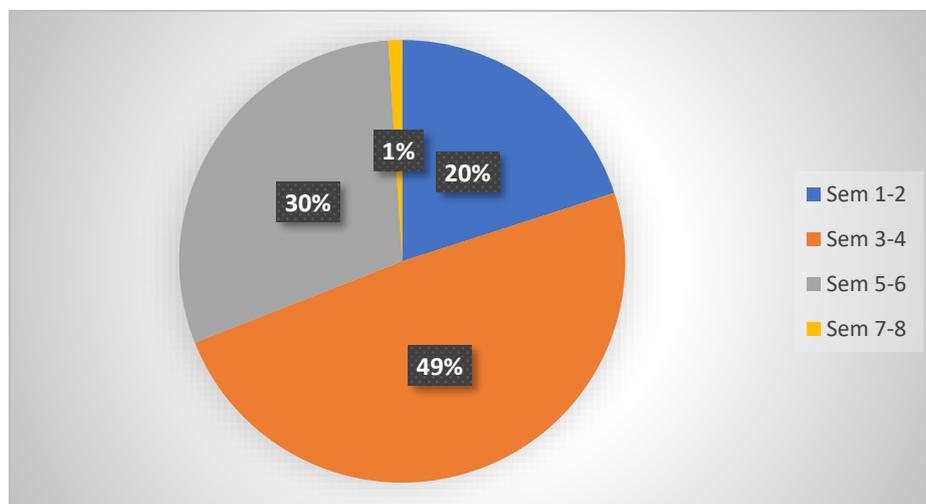


Figure 4- Percentage for Semester

Figure 4 shows responses to a questionnaire on fear of learning foreign language by 4 semesters. Based on the pie chart, most of the responses were from semester 3-4 students with 49%. Students from semester 1-2 made up 20% of the total participants while semester 5-6 took 30% of the total participants. The remaining 1% were respondents from semester 7-8.

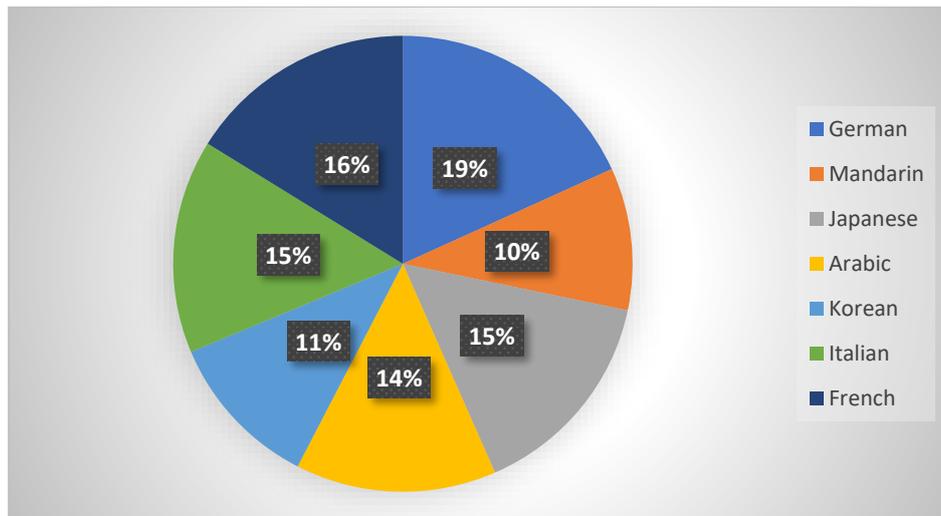


Figure 5- Percentage for Language

Figure 5 shows the distribution by foreign languages taken by the respondents. 19% of the respondents took German language while 14% of them took Arabic. Respondents who learnt Italian and Japanese had the same proportion of the sample which was 15%. Mandarin language respondents made up about 20 students or 10% of the total respondents. The remaining 11% of the respondents took Korean as their foreign language.

Findings for Communication Apprehension

This section presents the data that helps answer research question 1: How does communication apprehension influence fear of foreign language learning? The result of the analysis is presented in the form of mean as shown in Figure 6 below.

SECTION B -COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION

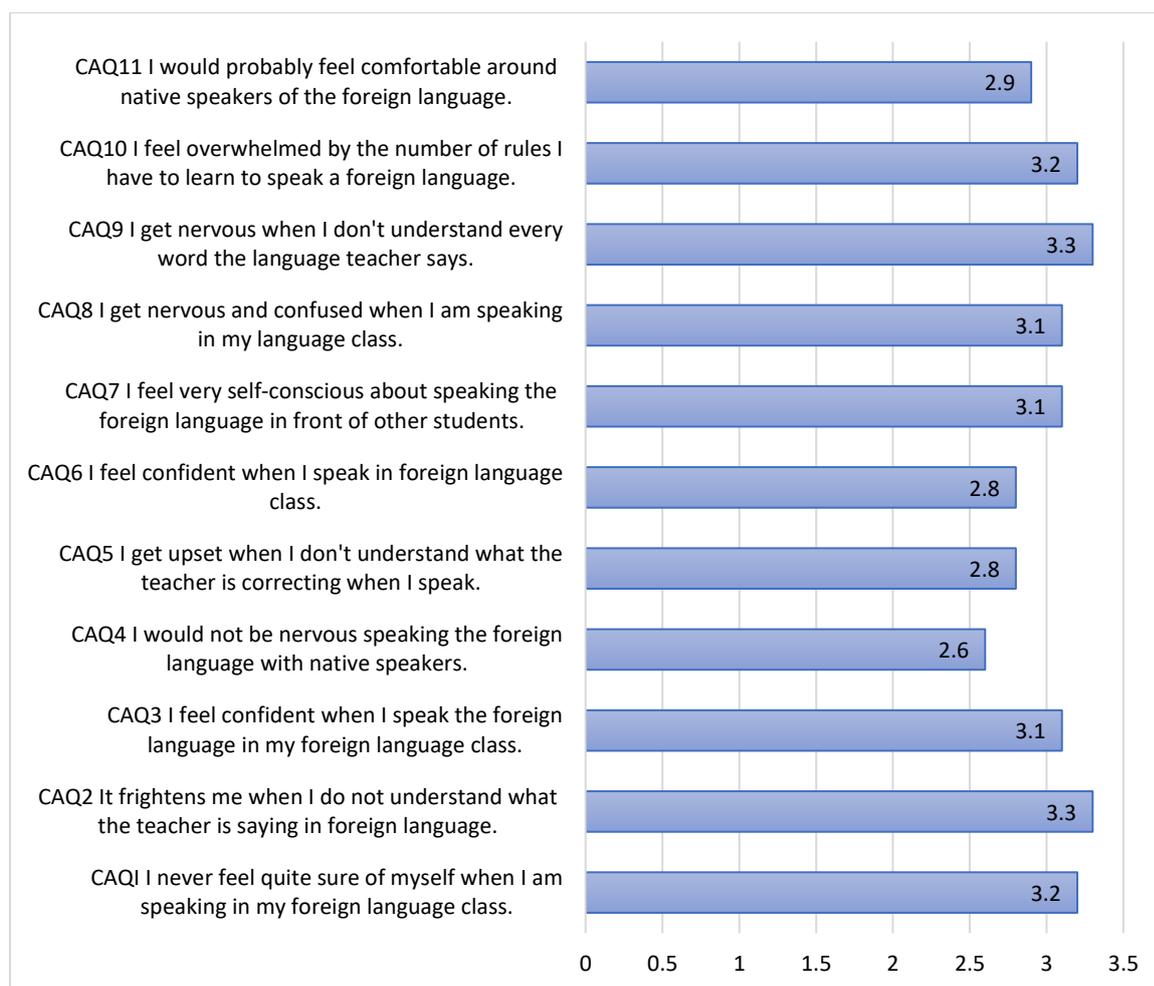


Figure 6- Mean for Communication Apprehension

Figure 6 presents the mean score for communication apprehension. There are two items with the highest mean score (3.3) which are “It frightens me when I do not understand what the teacher is saying in foreign language” and “I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says”. Similarly, there are two items that share the second highest mean score (3.2), “I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class” and “I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak a foreign language”. While, the mean score (3.1) is shared by three items, “I feel confident when I speak the foreign language in my foreign language class”, “I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students” and “I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class”. Next, the item with mean score (2.9) is “I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language”. The mean scores for the remaining items are (2.8) for “I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting when I speak” and “I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class” respectively followed by the lowest mean score (2.6) for “I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with the native speakers”.

Finding for Fear of Negative Evaluation

This section discusses the data obtained on the fear of negative evaluation which helps answer research question 2: How does fear of negative evaluation influence fear of foreign language learning? Figure 7 illustrates the mean for each statement under the variable of fear of negative evaluation.

Section C-Fear of Negative Evaluation

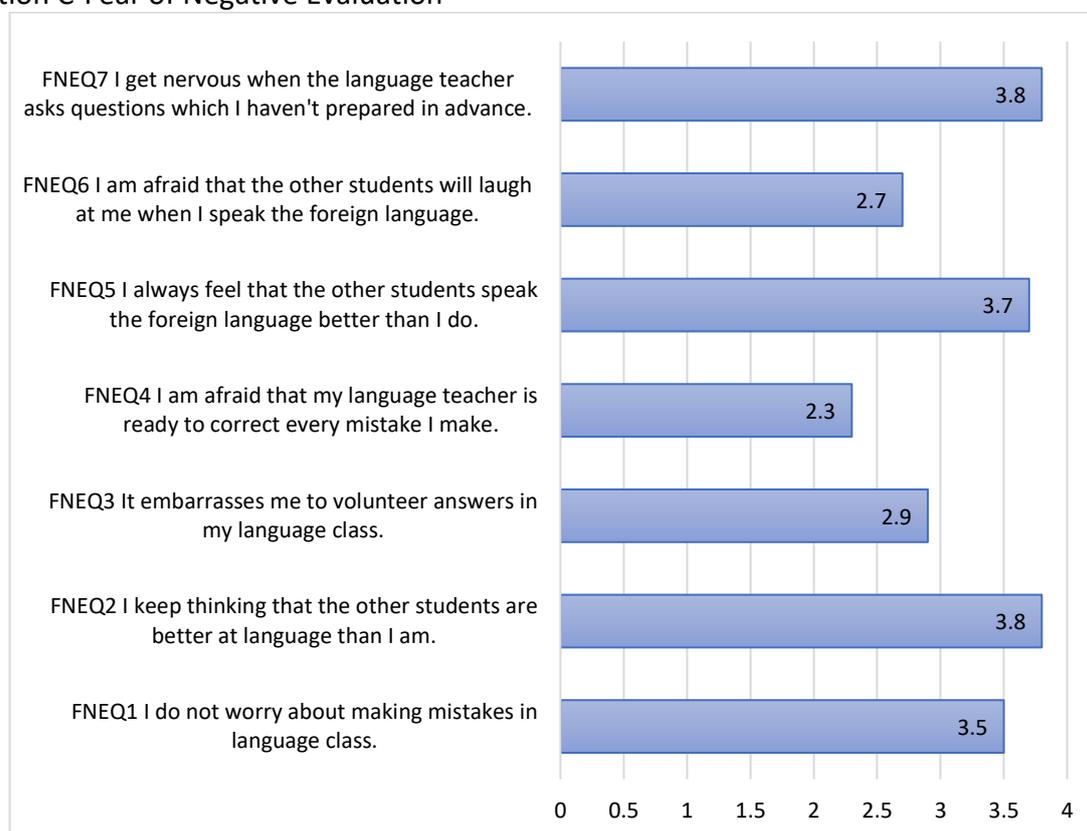


Figure 7- Mean for Fear of Negative Evaluation

Figure 7 illustrates the mean values for the constructs under fear of negative evaluation. As shown in the figure, statement in Q2 which states that *'I keep thinking that the other students are better at language than I am'* and statement in Q7 which states that *'I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance'* rated the highest mean values as compared to the rest of the statements under fear of negative evaluation with both statements rated (3.8). On the other hand, the statement in Q4 which states that *'I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make'* rated the lowest mean value with (2.3). From the findings above, it can be indicated that the respondents' perceived language ability of themselves being inferior to that of their peers as well as their lack of preparation during class activity are strong determinants of the fear of negative evaluation in foreign language learning. It can also be postulated that teachers' corrective feedback has appeared to be the least of students' concern in relation to the fear of negative evaluation in foreign language learning. This finding seemed to show parallelism with Tsiplakides and Keramida (2009) in their study where students' negative comparison between their speaking ability and their peers appeared to be one of the factors that caused speaking anxiety and low confidence among students in a foreign language classroom. Their study also showed that students were more willing to participate in speaking activities and experiment

with the language with the sole presence of the teacher, without their fellow classmates being present. As such, it is warranted that teachers' feedback in any language activities has the least effect in fear of negative evaluation as indicated by the lowest mean value in statement Q4. Students' lack of preparation being one of the causes for fear of negative evaluation as shown in this study has also been pointed out by Djafri and Wimbari (2018) in their study where students testified to be more anxious when asked to do oral presentations without prior preparation.

Findings for Test Anxiety

This section discusses the data obtained to answer research question 3: How does test anxiety influence fear of foreign language learning? The mean for the statements under the variable of test anxiety is presented in Figure 8 below.

Section D-Test Anxiety

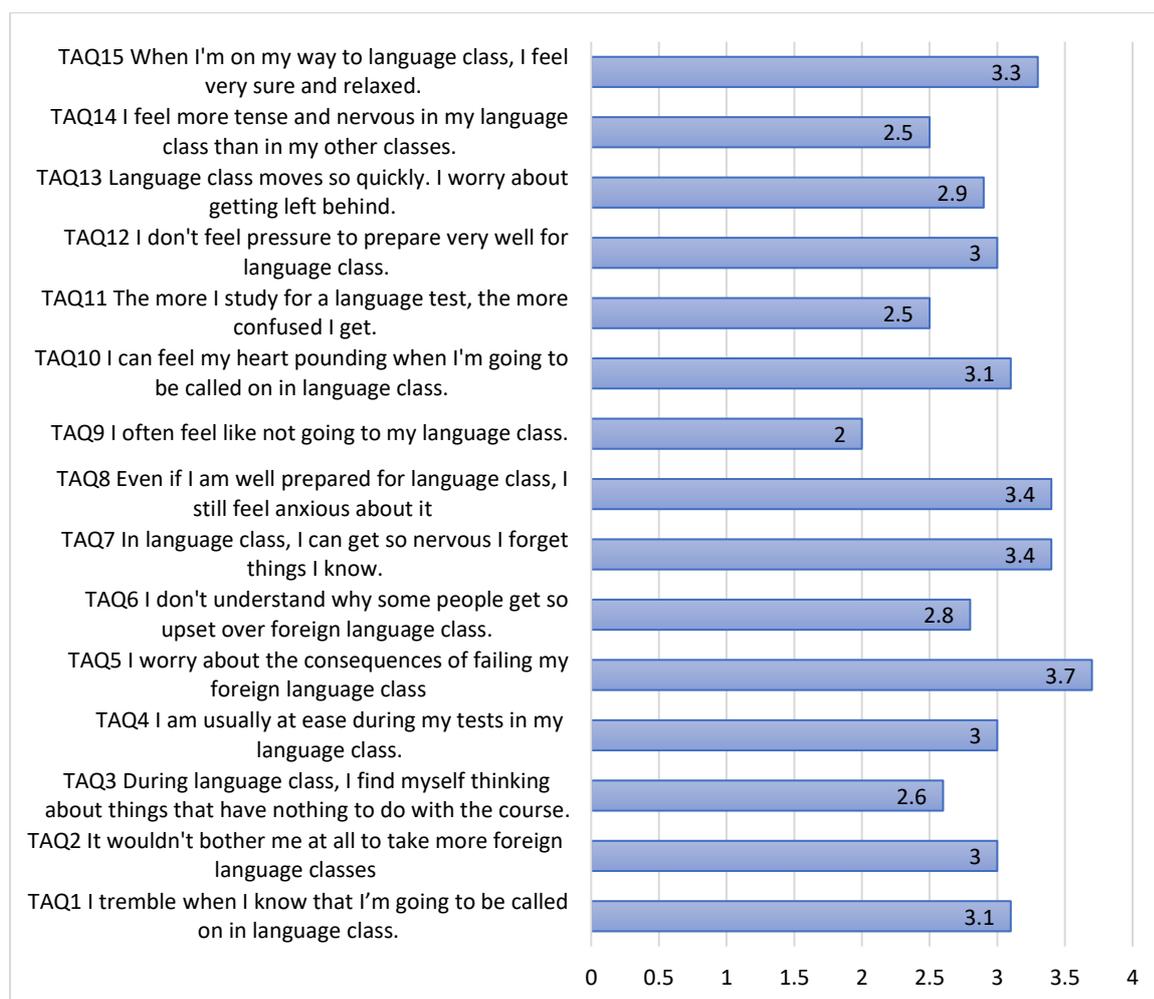


Figure 8- Mean for Test Anxiety

Based on Figure 8, the mean for test anxiety findings reveals that the respondents are concerned about failing the class “I worry about the consequences of failing the foreign language class” (3.7). The second highest mean score is (3.4) “In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know”, and “Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it”. The lowest mean score is (2) for “I often feel like not going to my language class”.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

In summary, the data analysis from this study revealed interesting findings in exploring the language learners’ fear of foreign language learning. Firstly, the findings on communication apprehension showed that most language learners felt “frightened” when they could not understand what the teacher was saying in the foreign language. Moreover, they also developed the feeling of “nervousness” when they could not understand every word that the teacher said. In regard to negative evaluation, most students felt that their peers are better at learning the language than themselves which clearly depicts that these students have low self-esteem among their peers. This finding is in line with Tsiplakides and Keramida (2009) who found out that learners compare their low language ability with their peers and felt fear

of being negatively judged or perceived by their peers. Additionally, learners felt "nervous" as well when their educators post questions that they are unprepared for in advance. Lastly, in regard to fear for foreign language learning and test anxiety, the study found that most learners are worried of the consequences of failing in their foreign language class.

Based on the above findings, although foreign language learners may benefit in both cognitive and academic achievements, through all the discussion upfront, it is evident that learning a foreign language can be a challenge to learners especially with regards to their psychological state namely communication apprehension, negative evaluation and test anxiety. Despite the findings from previous research that showed personality traits such as the above mentioned may have positive impact on foreign language learning in shaping success (Dorney, 2005), this study has shown that such traits may also be the limiting factors of learners' mastery of their foreign languages. However, these factors can be addressed accordingly as mentioned by Phillips (1992) who stated that the feeling of fear of foreign language is considered as a problem that needs to be seriously addressed especially in regard to the learners' emotional concerns as anxiety could affect their ability to successfully learn the foreign language.

Pedagogical Implication

The findings of this study suggest that foreign language teachers/educators need to take into consideration as well as pay attention to foreign language anxiety arousals while teaching in language class. Specifically, language teachers should support their students by providing more positive feedback. A study by Kitano (2001) suggested that building a support system within the classroom community and providing sufficient positive reinforcements like encouragement and motivation to students will help to support students with learning anxiety in foreign language classes. Furthermore, educators should avoid anxiety-provoking situations (such as asking questions to students that they are not prepared of and employing direct negative feedback) that could cause fear among the learners. This is to ensure that students feel relaxed and confident to learn the language. According to Bandura (1977), there are four steps in social learning theory and the last step is motivation. Positive motivation or positive feedback plays a crucial role for learners to reproduce the target language hence this shows how important it is for educators to employ positivity during the process of learning and teaching in the language classroom.

Suggestion for Future Research

This study generally focuses on exploring the fear of foreign language learning among foreign language learners from seven different foreign language courses. However, future researchers could focus on the different kinds of fear triggered by groups of students coming from a specific target language. Moreover, as this study did not focus on levels of language proficiency of the students in particular, future researchers can also investigate the correlation between levels of language proficiency and fear by selecting and comparing respondents from different levels of foreign language classes. Al-Shboul et al. (2013) stated that other significant factors such as target language, specific skill, different levels of language proficiency, student's background, and stages also play an important aspect on the side effect of language anxiety to their language achievement/performance. Last of all, as this study focuses on the students' perspective about their fear in learning a foreign language, it will also be interesting to explore the teachers/educators' perspective on this issue.

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