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Levels in Learning French-do They Differ?

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Abstract

Undergraduates at Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Malaysia are required to pass a foreign language of their choice in order to graduate. As this is only a requirement, many students feel they are forced to study these languages without much interest on their part. Quite often Mandarin, Japanese and Arabic languages are their first choice, leaving French in the background. Learning French in Malaysia can pose many difficulties for new students. Due to a lack of exposure to the language and culture, many students will find the learning process extremely challenging and will face obstacles such as fear of learning, which can decrease their motivation. In this quantitative study, the researchers will investigate if the fear and anxiety levels among students are relatively consistent across all levels of proficiency. The study included 50 male and 50 female students from various academic backgrounds, divided into three groups based on their French proficiency level (27% for Level 1, 52% for Level 2, and 21% for Level 3). The objective of the study is to determine the correlation of fear in learning French despite the different level of proficiency. The findings revealed that fear was a common problem experienced by most of the respondents regardless of their different level of proficiency. To overcome these challenges, several strategies to overcome the difficulties have been suggested in the hopes of improving both learners and educators.

Keywords: Learning French, Foreign Language, Challenges, Proficiency Levels, Malaysia

Introduction

Background of Study

Learning French as a foreign language in Malaysia will always be an interesting topic to discuss among educators and learners. The difficulties of learning the language, from beginner to advanced levels, will always be debated. Despite the different levels of French knowledge they have, learners seem to always face the issue of anxiety or fear when it comes to learning the language. There will be many challenges in the learning process. For example, the new learners may struggle with the vocabulary, pronunciation, verb conjugation and gender of nouns in learning French (see Leo, 2019). The challenges may vary and depend on the individual learner. Zubairi (2009) suggested that foreign language programme providers in

Malaysia should have a good plan, taking into consideration the content of the course and the learning method. Anxiety about communication, fear of negative evaluation, and anxiety about learning a foreign language will always be on the front lines and appear in the picture. These obstacles may not be solved completely, but at least with the right strategies, hopefully can reduce the difficulties and can be beneficial for both educators and learners.

Statement of Problem

Learning French as a foreign language in Malaysia imposes so many challenges. One could not escape from comparing their language skills with the native speakers, in spite of learning taking place in a classroom setting. The challenge for many learners is to express themselves in speaking and writing, despite the fact that they are capable of comprehending (Point et al., 2021). In the study, they pointed out other challenges confronted by learners from level 1 and level 2, for instance, grammatical complexity, genders, accents, sound, inadequate vocabulary, inability to produce spontaneous speech, restrict opportunities to experience authentic use of French and many more. The similarity found that all learners rate, from the most difficult to the easiest skills, are writing, speaking, reading and listening. Interestingly, when both levels 1 and 2 struggled with writing and speaking, learners from level 2 encountered more hurdles in these tasks due to the complexity of the French language.

On the other hand, Saito et al (1999) examined the possibility of anxiety in foreign language reading of different target languages even though most focused on the challenges triggered by anxiety in oral communication. The study revealed that first semester learners' reading anxiety levels increased with their perceptions of the difficulty in reading and among the three foreign languages studied, French learners were found to have the highest levels of reading anxiety despite the fact that French employs the same alphabet as English. The current study is to reveal more answers on the level of anxiety across levels of study.

In relation to the current study, Yassin and Razak (2017) found that the first-year learners showed the least level of apprehension and the second-year learners followed by third and fourth experienced the highest level of apprehension in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, the level of anxiety of learners in the four years revealed no significant difference. The preceding study was looking at English as a foreign language in Yemen. More importantly, the conflicting viewpoint regarding the correlation between the three types of fear with levels of learning foreign language requires investigations of the factors that might influence language acquisition. This recent study attempts to bridge the gap and highlight the factors underlying fear of learning French as a foreign language across levels in the context of Malaysia.

Hence, this study is done to investigate the difference and the relationships between types of anxiety such as communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety with levels of learning French as a foreign language in Malaysia. This investigation is done to answer the following questions

- RQ1-How does communication apprehension influence fear of language learning across levels?
- RQ2-How does fear of negative evaluation influence fear of language learning across levels?
- RQ3-How does test anxiety influence fear of language learning across levels?

Literature Review

Levels in Learning French as a Foreign language

In the direction to improvise into a better and more qualified language teaching and learning method, anxiety had been a referent accentuated by numerous scholars and researchers. For this reason, there have been diverse studies conducted about anxiety and its efficiency in language learning. A current study by Kuşçu (2017) highlights that it exists a strong bond between one's language learning process and anxiety and this study leads toward the eminence role of anxiety on language learning at a certain level. The findings of this study underlined that second language learning anxiety levels of high school students do not contrast according to the gender of the students, their schools, their parents' educational background and their occupations. However, most of the changes in the Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) levels of the students happen between their grade levels and the success levels in French lessons. This might occur because of these vital reasons: university selection and placement exams, changes in course hours of grade levels, and effects of other lessons and/or social perception. In another study regarding (1) self-reported French language proficiency level; and (2) perceptions of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in French conducted by Point et al (2021) the findings underline that the relative difficulty of mastering language skills in French, ranging from the most difficult to the easiest, are writing, speaking, reading and listening. For this, similar results were portrayed for language learners in Level 1 and Level 2. However, for Level 2, the learners struggled the most with writing and speaking in comparison with Level 1 because of an increased vocabulary range: complexity in grammar and longer texts. Plus, in the same study, language learners from Level 1 and Level 2 rated themselves as having fair proficiency levels when not compared to a French native speaker but the result is inverse when the language learners compare themselves to a French native speaker. They rated themselves as poor proficiency level.

Challenges in the Levels Foreign Language learning

As accentuated by Al-Shboul et al (2013), numerous components play a significant determinant on the side effect of language anxiety to foreign language achievement and different levels of language proficiency is one of them. Hence, this is in line with the purpose of the current study. A considerable amount of studies examined the challenges confronted by learners in the levels of foreign language learning; for example, Elaldi (2016) focused on FLA in low and high level of English learners, Marcos-Llinás and Garau (2009) examined the effects of FLA in three levels of Spanish, and Elkhafaifi (2005) explored the FLA in Arabic listening comprehension of the first, second and third year learners. Studies by Point et al (2021); Elaldi (2016); Marcos-Llinás and Garau (2009) shared similar findings whereby advanced learners were found to be more anxious compared to beginner levels of foreign language due to various reasons. Elkhafaifi (2005) too accentuated the similarities in Arabic listening comprehension even though the study did not support that anxiety causes poor performance.

Learning French as a foreign language seems to be perplexing for Malaysian learners. Various aspects of French as foreign language learning may provoke anxiety in learners, but the unfamiliar aspects and the complexity of French language, as well as the foreign language context of the less commonly taught languages, appear to produce greater fear in learning as pointed out by (Point et al., 2021). In listening, all learners from level 1 and 2 faced difficulties due to the natural speed which is too fast. Level 2 learners have more trouble understanding questions asked. In writing tasks, learners found that it is more challenging for them to write

French as they advance since the words are not written the way they are pronounced, many letters are silent and many grammatical rules are different from the languages that they are used to. From their study, in reading skill, all learners had difficulties reading the accent and understanding the meaning of French words. In the speaking task, the French sounds are making the task tougher for level 2 learners since these sounds appeared in more complex words. In the current study, researchers plan to investigate the correlation between levels in learning French by looking at the sources of fear like communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. The findings proved that there is a correlation and difference in levels of foreign language learning and foreign language anxiety.

Past Studies

Past Studies for Levels of Learning Foreign Language

Many studies have been done to investigate the levels of learning foreign language. The study by Yassin & Razak (2017) was done to investigate the levels of learning foreign language. The main objective of the research was to study the correlation between foreign language anxiety and the year of study among students. A total of 155 year 1 to year 4 students from the Faculty of Arts of Ibb University, Yemen participated in the study by answering questionnaires. The questionnaire measures four skills including writing, listening, speaking and reading based of Foreign Language Anxiety Scales. Data extracted from the survey was analysed using SPSS version 22 and one-way Anova. The study found that second year students display high levels of anxiety while the first year students experience the lowest level. Besides that, the study also found that there is no significant relationship between foreign language anxiety and the year of study. In the end, both researchers concluded that the interference of mother tongue and novelty effect might influence the interrelation between foreign language anxiety and the year of study.

The study by Rezazeh (2009) also looked at the levels of learning foreign language. This study has three different focuses; correlation between gender, academic achievement, years of study and levels of test anxiety. 25 freshmen, 35 sophomores, 19 juniors and 31 senior students answered The Suinn's Test Anxiety Questionnaire for this descriptive analytic study. The total of 110 students were from the University of Isfahan, Iran. Findings extracted from data correlation coefficient and chi square test shows that there is no significant relationship between years of study and test anxiety among students. Besides this finding, the study also discovered that females exhibit higher level of test anxiety. Also, academic achievement and test anxiety level have a reverse ratio.

Past Studies of Challenges in the learning Levels of French as Foreign Language Learning

Challenges in learning French as a foreign language are caused by few factors, such as, grammatical complexity, insufficient vocabulary and limited opportunities to experience and practice authentic use of French. There have been very few studies that explore the challenges faced by learners learning French as a foreign language in different learning levels. The study by Point et al (2021) used a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview to investigate the perceptions of students learning French as a foreign language in a Malaysian public university. 80 respondents responded to the survey and 7 involved in the interview. The researcher found that learners from level 1 and 2 rated themselves as having a fair proficiency level but when compared to native speakers, many rated their proficiency level as poor. Similar results were found for Level 1 and 2 concerning difficulty in mastering French.

The production skills, writing and speaking are more difficult compared to receptive skills reading and listening. However, for production skills, students struggled more in Level 2, compared to level 1. This is due to an increased vocabulary range, greater grammatical complexity and longer texts.

Conceptual Framework

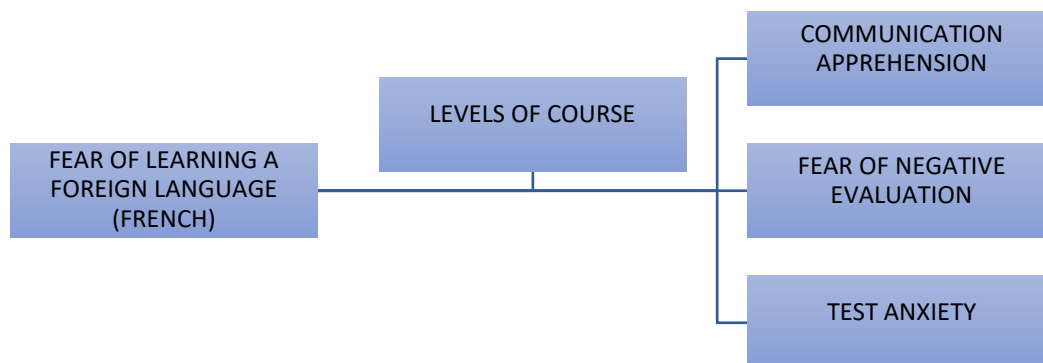


Figure 1- Conceptual Framework of the Study- LEVELS IN LEARNING FRENCH-DO THEY DIFFER?

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study. This study is adapted from Horwitz et al. (1986). Fear often stems from a person's moving out of his/her comfort zone (Rahmat, 2019) leaving the person feeling fearful and anxious. The source of fear of language learning comes from three factors and they are (a) communication apprehension, (b) fear of negative evaluation and (c) test anxiety.

Communication Apprehension

McCroskey and Richmond (1982) introduced the concept of communication apprehension as a type of shyness characterised by fear or anxiety when communicating with people. It has been identified as a psychological factor that can reduce confidence and the fear of negative peer evaluation. Communication apprehension is closely related to the fear of anxiety when it comes to learning a foreign language. This factor can prevent learners from communicating with others and can demotivate learners in the learning process (see Molnar, 2008). Past studies have shown communication apprehension can be influenced by many factors, such as environments, experiences, personalities, and cultural backgrounds. It is important for educators to understand the problem to provide the right solution. This will help to reduce learners' anxiety during the learning process. The role of communication apprehension needs to be understood and handled wisely by educators to overcome the students' fear.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

One of the main stressors of foreign language anxiety is fear of negative evaluation and foreign language learning is unique since it requires continual evaluation by the instructors (Horwitz et al., 1986). Furthermore, learners are found to be more vulnerable and experience communication apprehension in receiving feedback from their peers especially during

speaking tasks. Watson and Friend (1969) defined fear of negative evaluation as anxiety, uneasiness, concern or worry about evaluations of others, avoidance of situations which necessitate assessments, and the beliefs that others would appraise oneself in negative ways. According to their study, learners who experienced fear of negative evaluation (FNE) inclined to become more anxious in settings which require evaluation from instructors or peers and they struggled either to avoid disapproval or gain approval. FNE may occur in a wider social setting which requires constant evaluation such as in the classroom, whereas test anxiety is specific to test-taking environments. Test anxiety determinant is part of foreign language anxiety stressors since performance assessment is a continuing element of foreign language classes (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Test Anxiety

Test anxiety has certain influences on the foreign language learning process and achievement. According to Julkunen (1992), Test anxiety reduces the level of achievement in foreign language learning and it gives a negative impact on learning potential. Plus, it creates an inconsistency between the scores obtained and the actual use of the target language (Latulippe and Light, 1983). Portray also as a barrier to reflecting the learners' real performance (see El-Banna 1989), test anxiety generates certain physical and psychological problems among learners, decreases learning motivation and interest in language learning and increases the number of mistakes (Aydin et al., 2006). In a study conducted by Aydin et al (2020), test anxiety is considered a strong predictor of achievement in the English as a foreign language (EFL) learning process and has major influences on proficiency in the target language. The findings of this study show that EFL learners suffer from test anxiety as a result of several reasons and they experience also physical problems, problems related to tests and affective problems. In other words, EFL learners experience eating and sleeping disorders, portray a low level of performance on the test, lose their concentration on tests, feel fear of failure, experience difficulties in test management and have difficulties in remembering answers during the tests, in which all of these are due to test anxiety.

Methodology

This quantitative study is done to investigate 100 participants from a public university (Universiti Teknologi Mara) with different level in French were purposely chosen. The instrument (refer to table 1) used is a survey adapted from Horwitz et al. (1986). Apart from the demographic profile in Section A., there are 3 other sections. Section B has 11 items on comprehension 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 Survey

SECTION	FACTORS	NO OF ITEMS
B	Communication Apprehension	11
C	Fear of Negative Evaluation	7
D	Test Anxiety	15
	TOTAL NO OF ITEMS	33

Table 2
Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.795	33

Data is collected via goggle form and analysed using SPSS version 26. With reference to table 2, the SPSS analysis revealed a Cronbach analysis of .795 thus showing high internal reliability for the instrument. Data is presented in terms of percentage for the demographic profile and mean scores to answer the research questions.

Findings

Findings for Demographic Profile

Q1.Gender

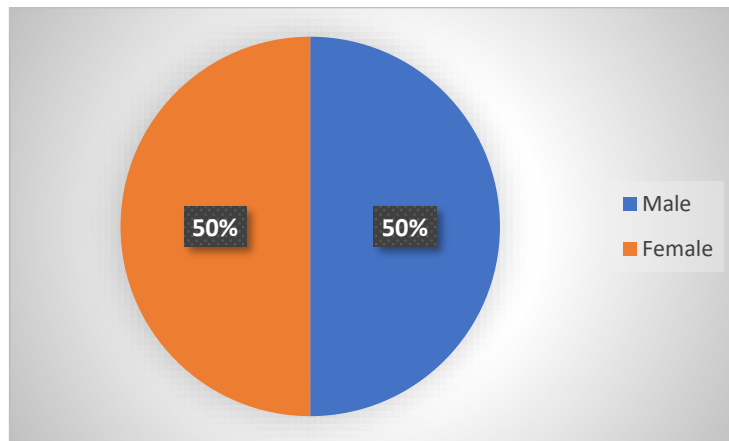


Figure 2- Percentage for Gender

Figure 2 shows that out of 100 respondents, 50% of them are female and 50% are male respondents.

Q2 Level

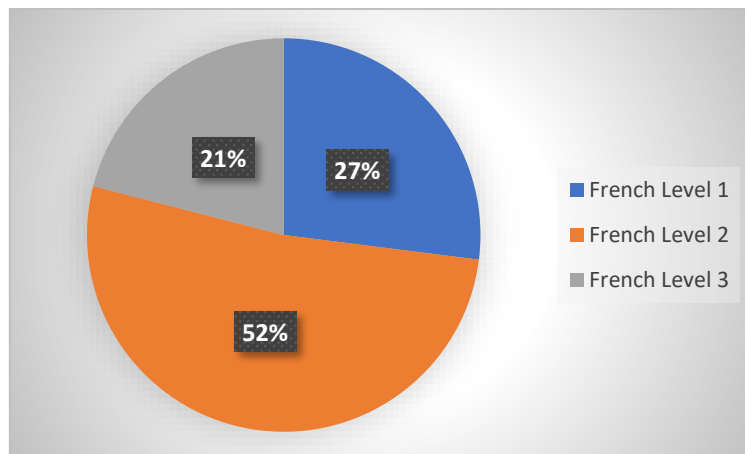


Figure 3- Percentage for Level

From the above figure 3, the highest percentage of respondents, 52 % are from French level 2. The second highest respondents, 27 % are from French level 1 and 21% of the respondents are from French Level 3 (21%).

Q3.Discipline

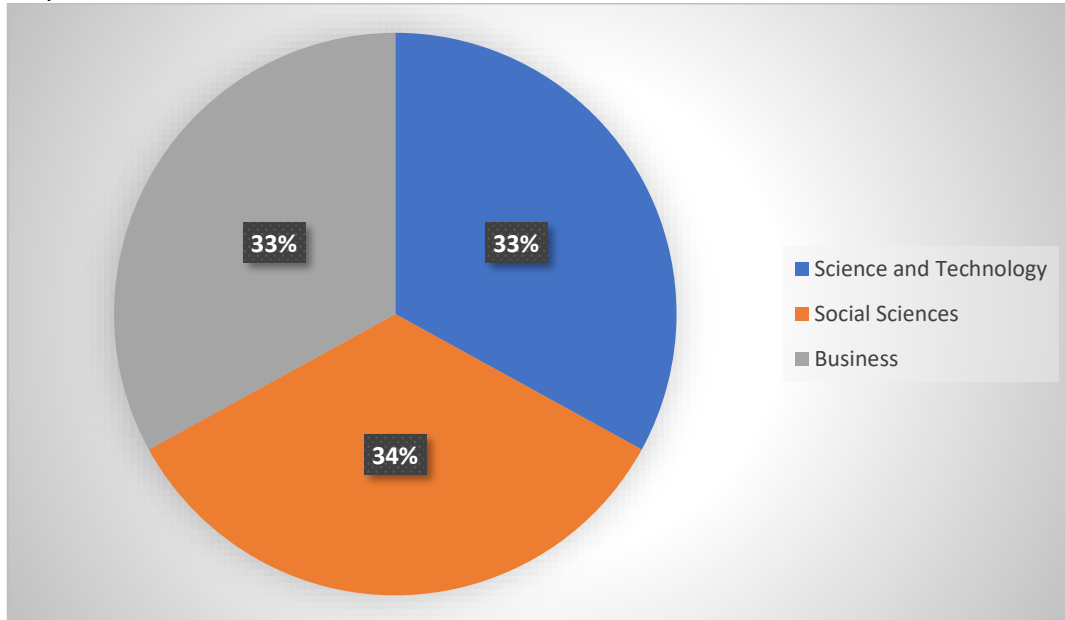


Figure 3- Percentage for Discipline

From the above figure, 33% respondents come from Science and Technology, 34% from Social Science and another 33% respondents come from Business studies.

Findings for Comprehension Apprehension

This section presents data to answer research question 1- RQ1-How does communication apprehension influence fear of language learning across levels?

Communication Apprehension

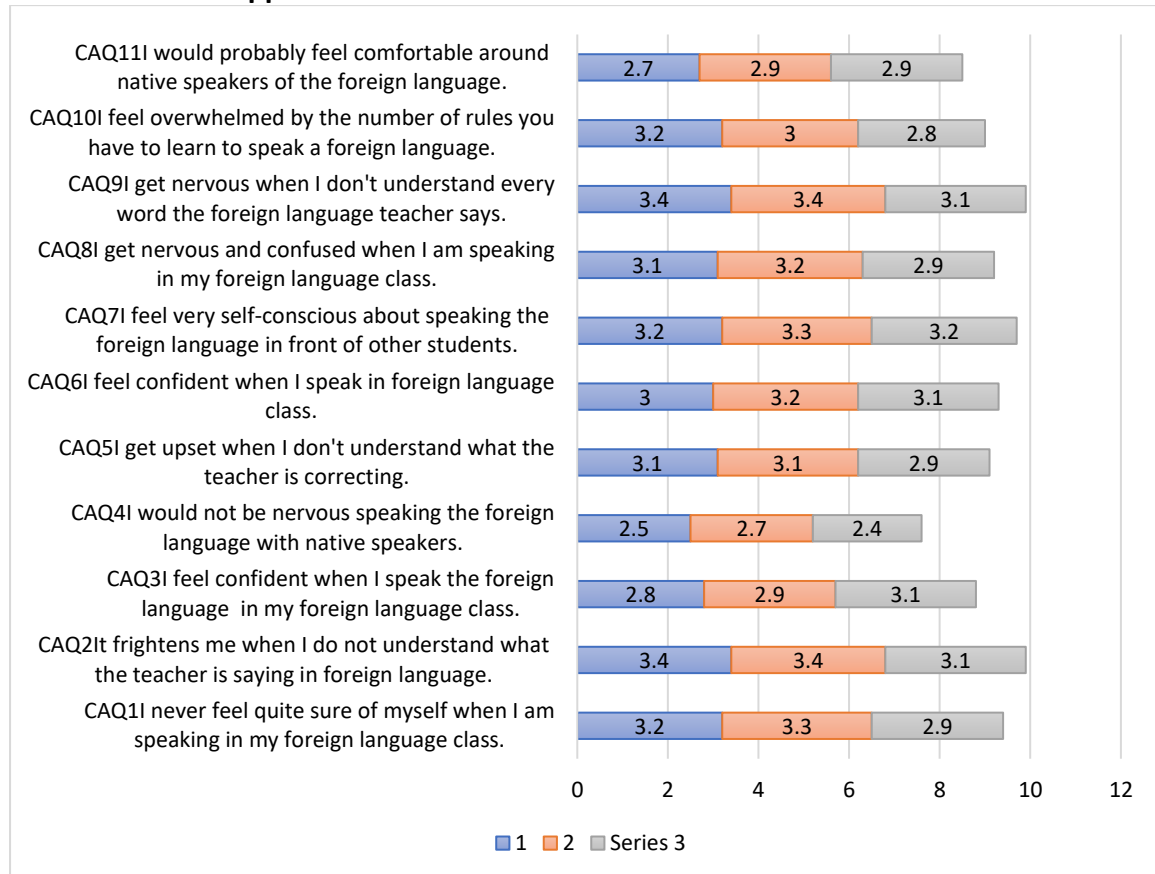


Figure 4- Mean for Comprehension Apprehension

Figure 4 shows the mean for comprehension apprehension. All levels exhibit the same degree of comprehension apprehension with the lowest mean being “I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.” (level 1=2.5; level 2=2.7; level 3=2.4). Besides that, all levels also have two highest corresponding mean. One being “It frightens me when I do not understand what the teacher is saying in foreign language.” and another one is “I get nervous when I don't understand every word the foreign language teacher says.”. (level 1=3.4; level 2=3.4; level 3=3.1)

Findings for Fear of Negative Evaluation

This section presents data to answer research question 2-How does fear of negative evaluation influence fear of language learning across levels?

Fear of Negative Evaluation

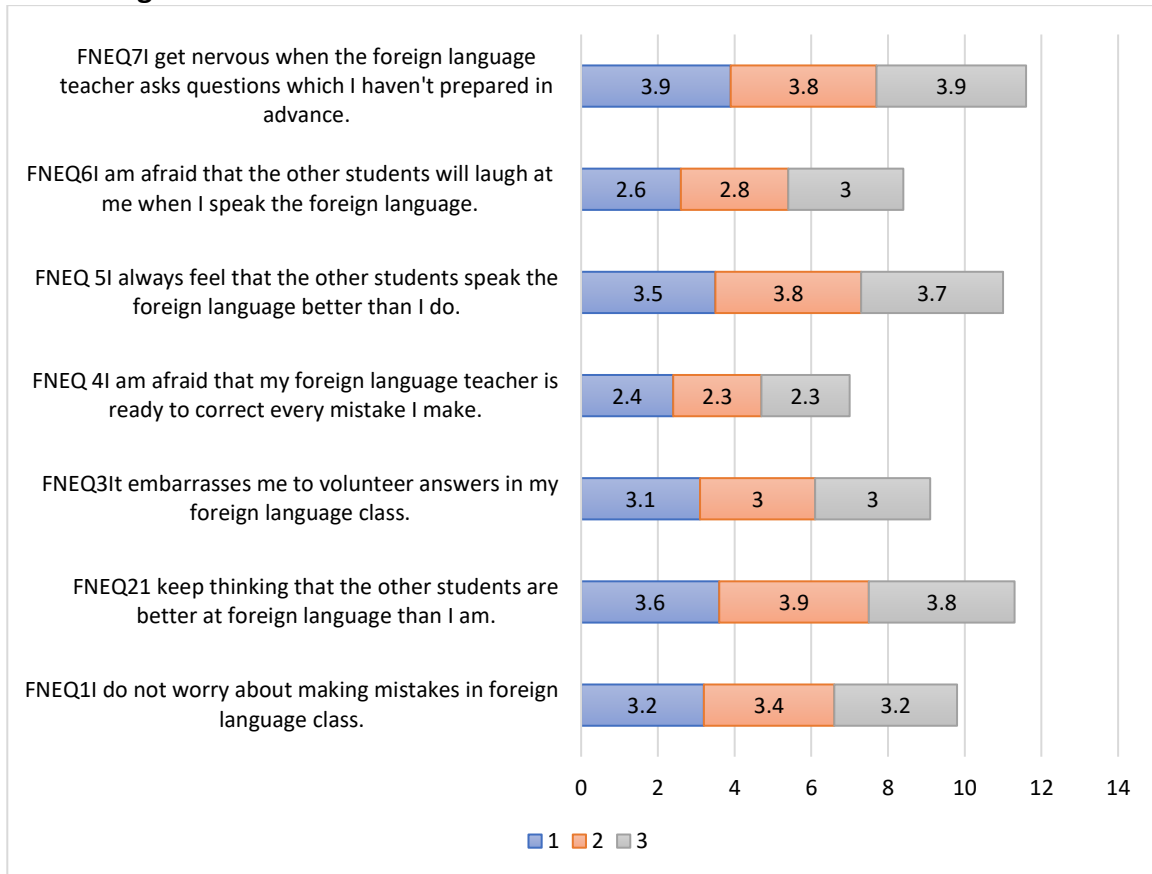


Figure 5- Mean for Fear of Negative Evaluation

Figure 5 shows the comparison of mean for fear of negative evaluation. For the item, “I get nervous when the foreign language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance”, all levels showed high mean scores (level1=3.9; level 2=3.8; level 3=3.9). Next comes the item “I keep thinking that the other students are better at foreign language than I am” with quite high mean scores too (level1=3.6; level 2=3.9; level 3=3.8). However, the item “I am afraid that my foreign language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make” showed reasonably low mean scores (level 1=2.4; level 2= 2.3; level 3=2.3).

Findings for Test Anxiety

This section presents data to answer research question 3: RQ3-How does test anxiety influence fear of language learning across levels?

Anxiety

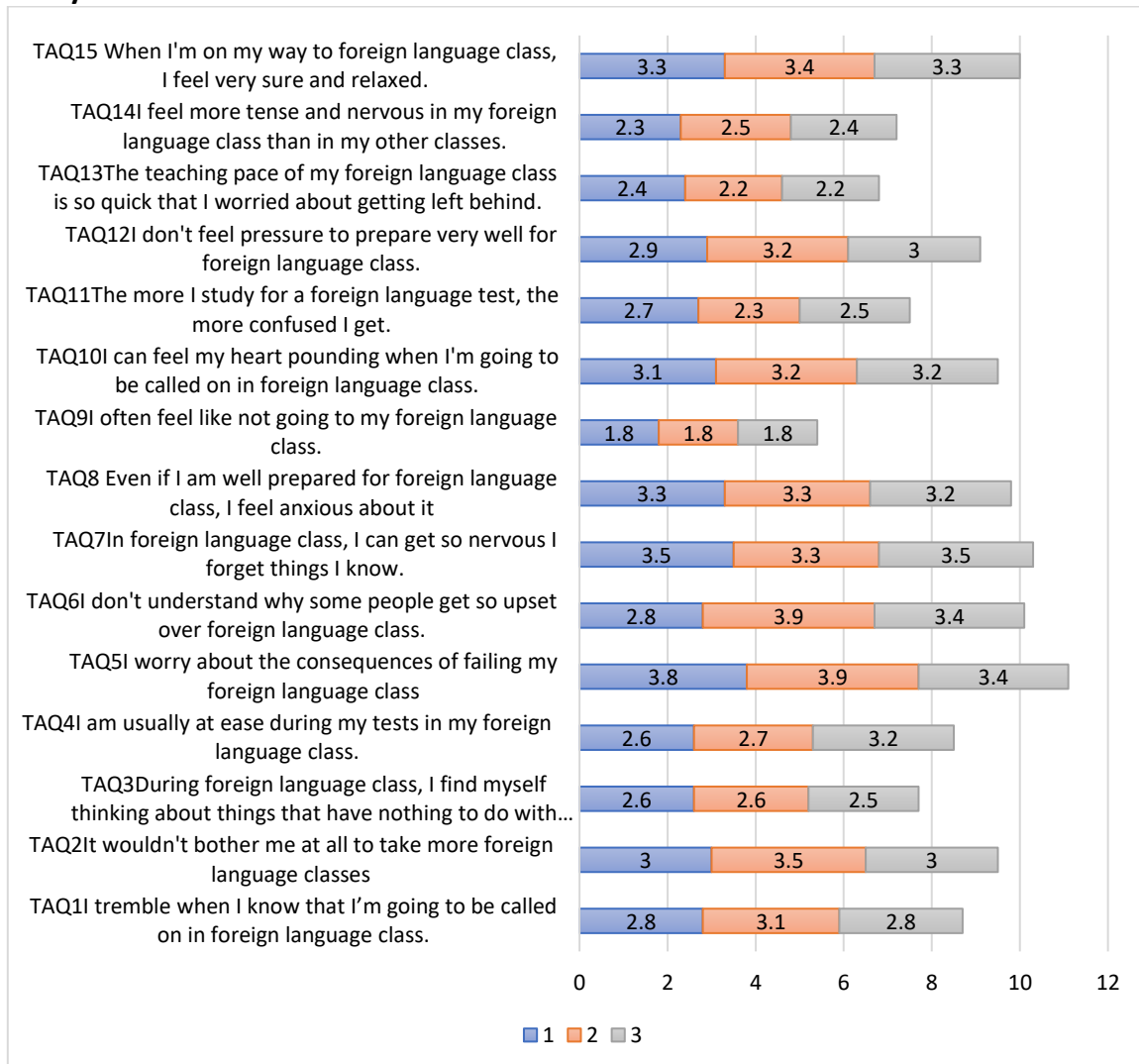


Figure 6- Mean for Test Anxiety

Findings from Figure 6 for anxiety revealed that across three French levels in the survey, respondents from all levels often feel like not going to their foreign class (1.8). The most nervous group from the survey is from French level 2. This anxiety is shown in different situations. They tremble when they know that they are going to be called on in class (3.1). Plus, they also worry about the consequences of failing their foreign language class (3.9). In addition to that, they feel more tense and nervous in foreign language class than in other classes (2.5). Similarly, with respondents from level 3 (3.2), they can feel their heart pounding when they are going to be called on in class (3.2). Nevertheless, respondents from level 2 exhibit less apprehension outside of the foreign language class. They feel very sure and relaxed when they are on their way to class (3.4). Moreover, they do not feel pressure to prepare very well for class (3.2). Furthermore, they feel that it would not bother them at all to take more foreign language classes (3.5) and they do not understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes (3.9). Surprisingly respondents from level 3 are the

least worried amongst the three levels since they are usually at ease during the tests in their foreign language (3.2). Compared with respondents from level 1, they are worried about getting left behind due to the teaching pace of class is so fast (2.4). Not only that, the more they study, the more confused they get (2.7). All the respondents share the same sentiment for two scenarios and it shows almost similar means. Firstly, they find themselves thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course during class (level 1 and level 2, 2.6, level 3, 3.2). Secondly, even when they are well prepared for class, they feel anxious about it (level 1 and level 2, 3.3, level 3, 3.2). Finally, respondents from level 1 and 3 share that they can get so nervous they forget things they know (3.5) compared to level 2 (3.3).

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussion

Summarise Findings to answer Research Questions and relate to past studies.

Communication Apprehension

Table 3

Summary of total mean

STATEMENT/ QUESTION	1	2	3
TOTAL MEAN FOR COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION	3.1	3.1	2.9
TOTAL MEAN FOR FEAR OF NEGATIVE EVALUATION	3.2	3.3	3.3
TOTAL MEAN FOR TEST ANXIETY	2.9	3	2.9

The table summarizes the results of a study on communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety among students at three different levels. The total mean for communication apprehension was found to be the lowest for students at Level 3 (2.9), while students at Level 1 and Level 2 had the same lower score (3.1). The total mean for fear of negative evaluation was found to be similar for students at Level 2 and Level 3 (3.3), but slightly higher than the mean for students at Level 1 (3.2). Finally, the total mean for test anxiety was found to be the highest for students at Level 2 (3.0), while students at Level 1 and Level 3 had the same lower score (2.9). This data seems to agree with Horwitz et al. (1986), who reaffirmed that the fear of negative evaluation was a significant predictor of lower proficiency in both oral and written communication in a foreign language. The students at Level 1 scored the lowest when asked if they thought the other students spoke better French than them. They also scored the lowest when asked if they were afraid of being laughed at by others when they spoke French in the classroom. To support this, see (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994). Finally, the data showed that the students at Level 2 scored the highest mean for test anxiety, while students at Level 1 and Level 3 scored the same at a lower score of 2.9. This finding shows no significance when it comes to different levels of proficiency. See (Yassin et al., 2017).

It cannot be denied that language proficiency may be related to communication apprehension and test anxiety levels. Fear of negative evaluation is an important factor in language learning. Pedagogical implications include creating a positive and supportive learning environment, providing strategies to reduce communication apprehension and test anxiety, and providing explicit instruction and feedback. Further research is needed to explore the relationship between affective factors and language learning outcomes.

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

According to this recent study, it can be concluded that the fear and anxiety levels among students are relatively consistent across all levels of proficiency. This is true regardless of the students' academic backgrounds, which indicates that foreign language anxiety can be a persistent issue for many learners (see Rezazadeh & Tavakoli, 2009). To address this, it is essential for teachers to improve their teaching methodology and implement new techniques to help students overcome their fears. One way to achieve this could be to expose students to French culture and language in both formal and informal settings. Collaborative online teaching with native speakers can also provide valuable support and increase students' confidence. Ultimately, it is crucial for educators to take the lead and provide students with a supportive and enjoyable learning environment to help reduce their anxiety levels and make learning French a positive experience.

This research makes significant contributions to both theoretical and contextual research in the field of language learning and teaching.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the understanding of the role of affective factors such as communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety in language learning. The findings provide evidence for the importance of these affective factors in language learning outcomes and highlight the need for language teachers to address these factors in their teaching practices.

The study also contributes to the development of theoretical models that explain the relationship between language proficiency and affective factors. By identifying the differences in communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety among students at different levels of language proficiency, the study provides empirical evidence for the validity of these models.

From a contextual perspective, the study provides insights into the affective factors that affect language learning outcomes in a specific context. By focusing on French language learners in a particular educational setting, the study highlights the importance of contextual factors such as language program design, classroom environment, and teacher-student interactions in shaping students' affective experiences in language learning.

Overall, the study contributes to the development of a more comprehensive understanding of the role of affective factors in language learning and teaching. It provides insights into the ways in which language teachers can address these factors to improve language learning outcomes and highlights the need for further research in this area.

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