



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i5/16708> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i5/16708

Received: 09 March 2023, **Revised:** 12 April 2023, **Accepted:** 26 April 2023

Published Online: 11 May 2023

In-Text Citation: (Ling et al., 2023)

To Cite this Article: Ling, T. H., Qi, C. P., Yui, L. S., Min, O. Y., & Wei, Y. S. (2023). Mandarin Learning Anxiety and its Associated Factors among form 6 Students in Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 13(5), 1332 – 1343.

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Vol. 13, No. 5, 2023, Pg. 1332 – 1343

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Mandarin Learning Anxiety and its Associated Factors among form 6 Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study aims to examine Malaysia Form 6 students' level of learning anxiety in learning Mandarin and identify the factors contribute to such anxiety. An online survey namely Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which was developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) were adapted. Five points Likert Scale was adapted in this study to measure anxiety among Form 6 students in learning Mandarin. 227 students who currently studying Form 6 Mandarin in Malaysia were invited to participate in this study. The survey consists of two sections which are demographic profile of respondent and 31-item related to learning anxiety. SPSS 26 were employed to analyze data collected from online survey. Findings revealed that majority of Form 6 students experienced a moderate level of anxiety when learning Mandarin. The factors that contribute to Form 6 students' anxiety while learning Mandarin were "Test Anxiety" which ranked the highest, followed by "Fear of Negative Evaluation", "Anxiety of Mandarin Classroom", and "Communication Apprehension". The findings from this study serve as a base for Mandarin teachers as it could assist Mandarin teachers to have a better grasp of how they could help students to alleviate and debilitate anxiety in learning Mandarin.

Keywords: Mandarin Learning, Anxiety Level, Factors of Learning Anxiety, Form 6 Students

Introduction

Background of Study

The Malaysian Higher School Certificate commonly known as STPM, is a pre-university programme in Malaysia. Mandarin language is an elective subject of STPM. Hence, the students enrolled in the course have about 13 years of Mandarin learning experience in primary and secondary schools.

In April 2022, Deputy Minister of Education Dato' Dr. Mah Hang Soon disclosed that in the past 30 years, the number of students who applied for the Form 6 Mandarin reached thousands, but currently there are less than 300 students to enroll the course. According to an article in Oriented Daily News, in 2021, the number of students who applied for the Mandarin subject was only about 270 (Xie, 2022).

Table 1

The number of students who enrolled the Form 6 Mandarin subject

Year	Number of students
2019	378
2020	289
2021	270

MCA Youth education development bureau chief Lim Ching Hao highlighted the predicament faced by STPM Form 6 candidates, they found that students hard to score A in the Mandarin subject due to the high cutting point for grades (Sun, 2017). Furthermore, Chairman of the Malaysia Chinese Language Development Association (PKBCM), Li Jin Quan lamented his concern about the shrinking number of STPM Form 6 students enroll the Mandarin Language subject might lead the subject remove from STPM (Xie, 2022). Thus, Associate Professor Dr. Pan Bihua, Head Department of Chinese Studies at the University of Malaya agreed with the suggestions on the revision of the STPM Form 6 Mandarin syllabus and model setting of examination paper (Xie, 2022).

One of the difficulties in language learning is the presence of anxiety among students, which significantly affects learners' language learning performance. There have been numerous studies (Ting & Sunarti, 2022; Sun, 2022; Zhu, 2022; Hu, 2020; Ting, 2016; Luo, 2015; Peng, 2012) attempted to examine the level of anxiety and factors that contributing language learning anxiety among Mandarin learners. However, most studies of language learning anxiety have relied on learning Mandarin as a third language (L3) or foreign language. To our knowledge, no prior studies have examined the level of anxiety and factors contributing language learning anxiety among Form 6 students who enrolled Mandarin language course. Therefore, to fill the gap, this paper aims to:

- identify the level of anxiety of Mandarin learning among Form 6 students.
- examined factor contributed language learning anxiety among Form 6 students.

Statement of Problem

According to Deputy Minister of Education Dato' Dr. Mah Hang Soon, the subjects selected in Form 6 determine the departments that the university can choose (Xie, 2022). Thence, before enrolling in the subject, students will consider clearly which subjects are more beneficial to applying to the university and studying in the future. Given that, STPM Form 6 students could encounter certain level of anxiety when it comes to enroll and learning Mandarin subject. It is therefore pertinent to examine Malaysia Form 6 students' Mandarin language anxiety.

This study addressed several questions as shown below:

- What is the Form 6 students' level of anxiety in Mandarin learning?
- What are the factors that contribute to Mandarin learning anxiety among Form 6 students?

Literature Review

What is Anxiety?

Various definitions of anxiety in the literature, each definition focusing on different aspects of the studies. Some definitions may focus on the physiological symptoms associated with anxiety, while others may focus on the cognitive and behavioral aspects (Wolman, 1989; Spielberger, 1983; Scovel, 1978). In recent years, it is widely acknowledged and accepted

among language researchers that there is a strong connection between anxiety and foreign language learning. Therefore, it is frequently and extensively employed in performing foreign language research.

Language learning anxiety is a type of anxiety that is specific to the process of acquiring a new language. Horwitz et. al (1986) defined language anxiety as “a distinct complex construct of self-perceptions, belief, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of language learning process”. MacIntyre (1995) defined language learning anxiety as the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language. Understanding and addressing language learning anxiety is therefore important for promoting a positive and effective language learning experience.

Past Studies on Mandarin language learning anxiety

Level of Mandarin language learning anxiety

Numerous studies have been done to investigate the level of Mandarin language learning anxiety. They are different causes of anxiety. Over the past few years, researchers have explained the anxiety level between Chinese Heritage learners and foreign language learners (FLLs).

Peng (2012) researched to investigate the studies of language learning anxiety among Mandarin learners in Thailand. The findings show that Mandarin learners experience high level of anxiety while learning Mandarin. Luo (2015) conducted a study on 447 Chinese language learners in Chinese language classes at two universities in the U.S. during the class sessions. The results found that the levels of anxiety of Chinese heritage learners in Chinese classes was lower as compared to MFL learner. However, frequency analyses of anxiety items shows that many Chinese heritage learners did experience a high level of anxiety in learning Chinese.

Hu (2020) conducted research to identify Chinese learning anxiety of Myanmar students at four universities in Kunming. The results of the study show that most of the Myanmar international students will have moderately high Chinese learning anxiety in the process of learning Chinese. Similarly, Zhu (2022) study of learning anxiety of Chinese learners in Confucius Institute at the University of León in Spain. The study shows that the Chinese learning anxiety of students at the Confucius is generally at an upper-middle level.

On the other hand, Sun (2022) study on the anxiety of online Chinese listening and speaking classes for high school students in Thailand. The results of Sun's (2022) study found that there was a general medium anxiety and high anxiety in the online Chinese listening and speaking class. In Malaysia, the findings (Ting & Sunarti, 2022; Ting, 2016) that included 221 Mandarin learners from Universiti Teknologi MARA revealed that learners experienced a moderate level of anxiety when they learn Mandarin in class.

Past research above revealed that there was a general medium anxiety and high anxiety level of Mandarin language learners, no student had extremely low or high anxiety while learning Mandarin.

Factor contributing Mandarin language learning anxiety

Past Studies have also examined the factors that caused Mandarin learning anxiety among Chinese heritage learners and foreign language learners. In Malaysia, Ting's (2016) study revealed that communication apprehension is the main factor contributing learners' language learning anxiety. It was followed by fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Ting et al (2022) took a deeper analysis to identify the factors that contribute learners'

language learning anxiety. Findings of Ting et al (2022) indicated that female learners experienced higher level of anxiety as compared to male learners in three major components.

The research conducted by Basith et al (2019) indicated that Chinese language anxiety among 250 foreign students in Wuhan, China was at a moderate level, with communication anxiety being the most dominant aspect, followed by fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. According to the findings, there is no significant difference in Chinese language anxiety based on gender.

Apart from that, Sung and Ko (2019) study on 149 native English speakers taking Chinese as a foreign language at universities in the United States. This study found four components of foreign language anxiety, which included Chinese class performance anxiety, the lack of mastery of all four language skills, writing Chinese characters, and learner confidence. Among the four components, the results of Sung et al's (2019) study highlighted the lack of mastery of all four language skills and writing Chinese characters were distinctive findings compared to other studies. Sung et al (2019) further explicated the male participants had lower anxiety levels than the females on class performance anxiety.

Sun (2022) reported the anxiety of students in the processing stage was significantly higher than that of the input stage and the output stage, and the anxiety of the three stages affected each other. The listening and speaking materials were the external factors that were most likely to cause students' anxiety, followed by the classroom factors. The findings further illustrated that Chinese listening and speaking anxiety among girls was significantly higher than boys.

Methodology

This study is quantitative research which aims to investigate Form 6 students' level of anxiety in learning Mandarin and to identify the factors that contribute to Mandarin learning anxiety among Form 6 students. The instrument employed in this study is an online survey modified from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). FLCAS is a set of questionnaires which was developed by (Horwitz et al., 1986). FLCAS can be relied upon to be employed in all languages (Mahfuzah Rafek, Nur Hani Laily Ramli, Halimatussaadiah Iksan, (Harith & Abas, 2014). Therefore, it has been thoroughly studied and applied to examine both foreign language learning and second language acquisition. The survey consists of two sections which section A has items on the respondents' demographic profile, while section B has 31 items on four major components of Mandarin learning anxiety. With reference to Table 2, there are 12 items on Anxiety of Mandarin classes, 12 items on communication apprehension, 4 items on Fear of Negative Evaluation, 3 items on Test Anxiety. Responses ranged the items from (1) "Strongly Disagree" to (5) "Strongly Agree" that best represented their response to the statements.

Table 2

Item Distribution in Questionnaire

Section	Variables	Number of Items
B	Anxiety of Mandarin classes	12
	Communication Apprehension	12
	Fear of Negative Evaluation	4
	Test Anxiety	3
Total Number of Items		31

Reliability test was conducted to confirm the reliability and validity of the instrument. As shown in Table 3, the instrument employed in this study was found to be highly reliable with a Cronbach alpha of .924. The data of this study was obtained from an online survey form. SPSS was employed for statistical data analysis. Descriptive analysis such as frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviations were used to present the analyzed data. Items that were phrased negatively were reverse-coded.

Table 3
Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
.924	31

Results and Discussion

The findings from the questionnaire will be presented in this section.

1.1 Statistical of Respondents' Demographic Profile

A total of 227 respondents living in Malaysia and currently enrolled in Form 6 Mandarin subject were included in this study. These group of respondents are now studying Form 6 Mandarin subject at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan (SMK) and Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan (SMJK). As shown in Figure 1, majority of participants were female (171, 75.3%), while only minority of participants were male (56, 24.7%). Their ages ranging from 18 to 21 years old.

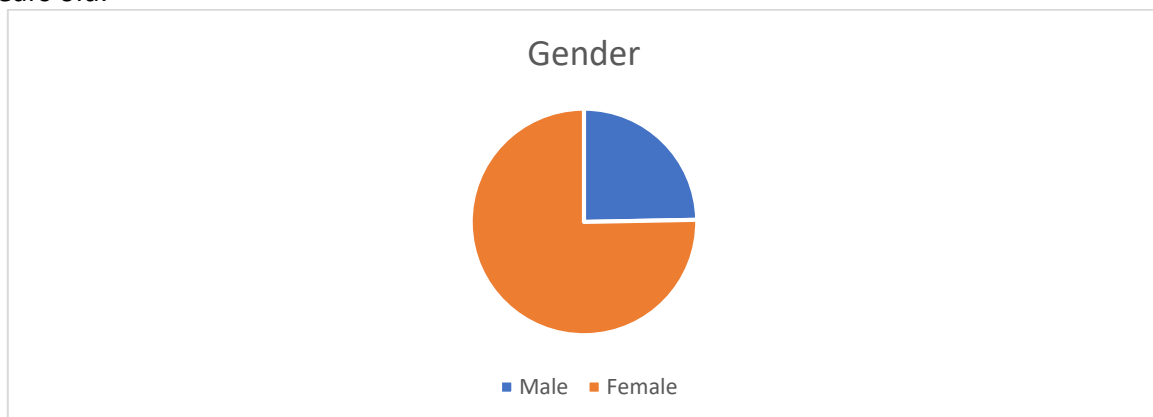


Figure 1– Respondents' demographic profile

1.2 Mandarin learning Anxiety among Form 6 students

This section presents the findings to answer the research question that mentioned earlier. Research Question 1: What is the Form 6 students' level of anxiety in Mandarin learning?

According to Ting and Sunarti (2022), classification of the three levels of Mandarin language learning anxiety included high level of anxiety (3.67-5.00), moderate level of anxiety (2.34-3.66) and low anxiety level (1.00-2.33). As manifested in Table 4, Form 6 students' level of Mandarin learning anxiety displayed the overall mean score of 2.81 which revealed that Form 6 students are experiencing a moderate level of anxiety in the process of learning Mandarin. It is similar to several findings on Mandarin language learning anxiety in which Mandarin learners felt anxious in the process of learning Mandarin (Ting & Sunarti, 2022; Ting, Yeo & Chin, 2016; Zhang, 2016).

Among the four major factors contributed to learning anxiety in Form 6 Mandarin subject, test anxiety has the highest mean of score ($M=3.21$). It is followed by fear of negative

evaluation (M= 2.89) and anxiety in Mandarin classroom (M= 2.60). Communication Apprehension has the lowest mean of score (M= 2.54). It is similar to the studies done by Zhang (2016) which also revealed that the main factor contributing learners' Mandarin learning anxiety is test anxiety. However, this finding varies from the findings yielded in some studies (Ting et al., 2016) which the findings indicated the communication apprehension is the main factor contributing Mandarin learning anxiety.

Table 4

Form 6 Students' Level of Mandarin learning anxiety

Four Major Factors	Mean	Standard Deviation
Test Anxiety	3.21	.770
Fear of Negative Evaluation	2.89	.801
Anxiety in Mandarin classroom	2.60	.535
Communication Apprehension	2.54	.840
Overall level of Anxiety towards learning Form 6 Mandarin	2.81	.604

Research Question 2: What are the factors that contribute to Mandarin learning anxiety among Form 6 students?

The related findings for four major factors of Mandarin learning anxiety will be discussed in the following.

A. Test Anxiety

Test Anxiety is found to be a major factor of anxiety among the respondents who currently learning Form 6 Mandarin subject. From the findings shown in Figure 2, the item "I worried about the consequences of failing Mandarin subject" shows the highest value of mean in this component (M= 3.66). Meanwhile, the item "The more I prepare for a test, the more confused I get" shows the lowest value of mean in test anxiety (M= 2.58). This study shows a similar finding done by Zhang (2016) that also revealed that learners of Mandarin were worried about failing Mandarin subject. Some scholar (Fadhli, 2015; Darmi & Albion, 2013) discovered that Malaysian learners frequently concerned about failing the exam, because emphasis placed on exams not only as the indicator of their professional success, but it is also an important factor in whether they will successfully pass through a particular academic level or graduate from their academic institutions.

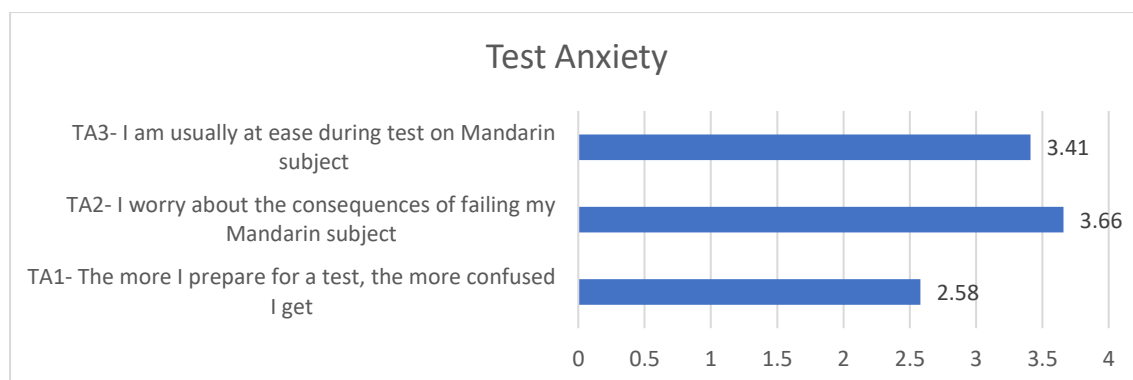


Figure 2– Means of the Items of Test Anxiety

B. Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of Negative Evaluation is also found to be an impactful cause of anxiety among respondents when they learn Mandarin. Referring Figure 3, it is found that the item “I think that my classmates’ Mandarin is better than mine” showed the highest value of mean (M= 3.58). Therefore, the findings reported that respondents were “worried about making mistake during Mandarin class” (M= 2.94). However, the item “I am afraid that other students will laugh at me when I have not answered the question correctly” showed the lowest value of mean (M= 2.44). These findings correspond to findings of previous studies done by Ting et al (2016) that also found Mandarin learners seemed to be shy to volunteer their answer in Mandarin class. As mentioned in Theory of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) that introduced by Horwitz et al.’s (1986), anxious learners usually tend to avoid receiving negative remarks. In addition, some researchers remarked that due to cultural characteristics, Asian students are generally afraid to feel embarrassed or being laughed at in front of others which makes them to lose their dignity as it reveals their flaws in front of others (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Zhao, 2007; Liu, 2007; Ohata, 2005).

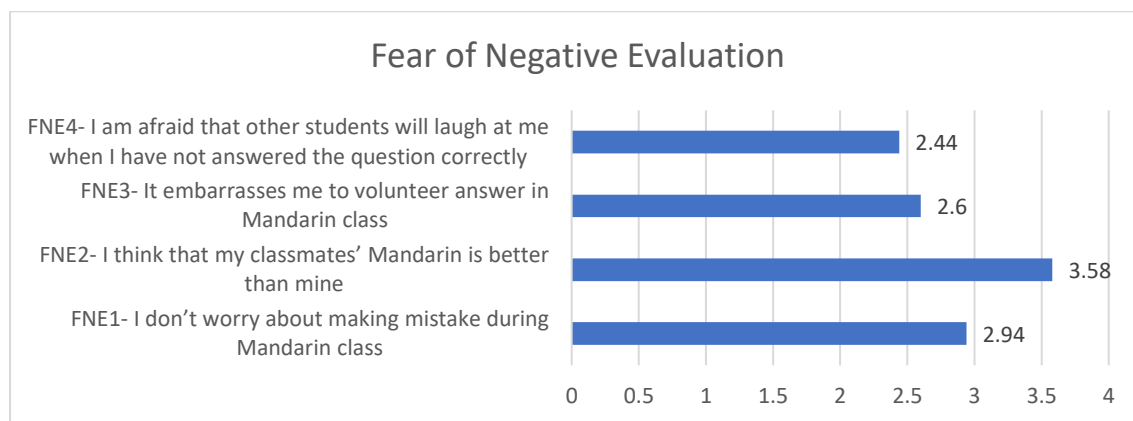


Figure 3– Means of the Items of Fear of Negative Evaluation

C. Anxiety of Mandarin classroom

The findings in Figure 4 revealed that the item “It bother me to extend the lectures hours of Mandarin subject” presented the highest value of mean (M= 3.63). It was followed by the item “I feel overwhelmed by the great number of literary works that I need to learn in Mandarin class” (M= 2.99). Therefore, respondents found to be “upset over Mandarin class” (M= 2.91) and they “start panic when teacher asks question which they have not prepare in advance” (M= 2.85). Items “I feel tenser and have more pressure in Mandarin class than in other class” (M= 1.77) and “I often feel like not going to Mandarin class” (M= 1.83) are both items that showed the lowest value of mean in this component, which the mean value are below 2.00. This result discovered that respondents were uninspired to attend Mandarin classes. According to Horwitz (1986), anxious learners may exhibit uninspired behavior in an effort to calm themselves in their process of learning. Therefore, this finding revealed that anxious students showed negative emotions in their thought and would decide to skip class entirely in order to avoid the source of discomfort.

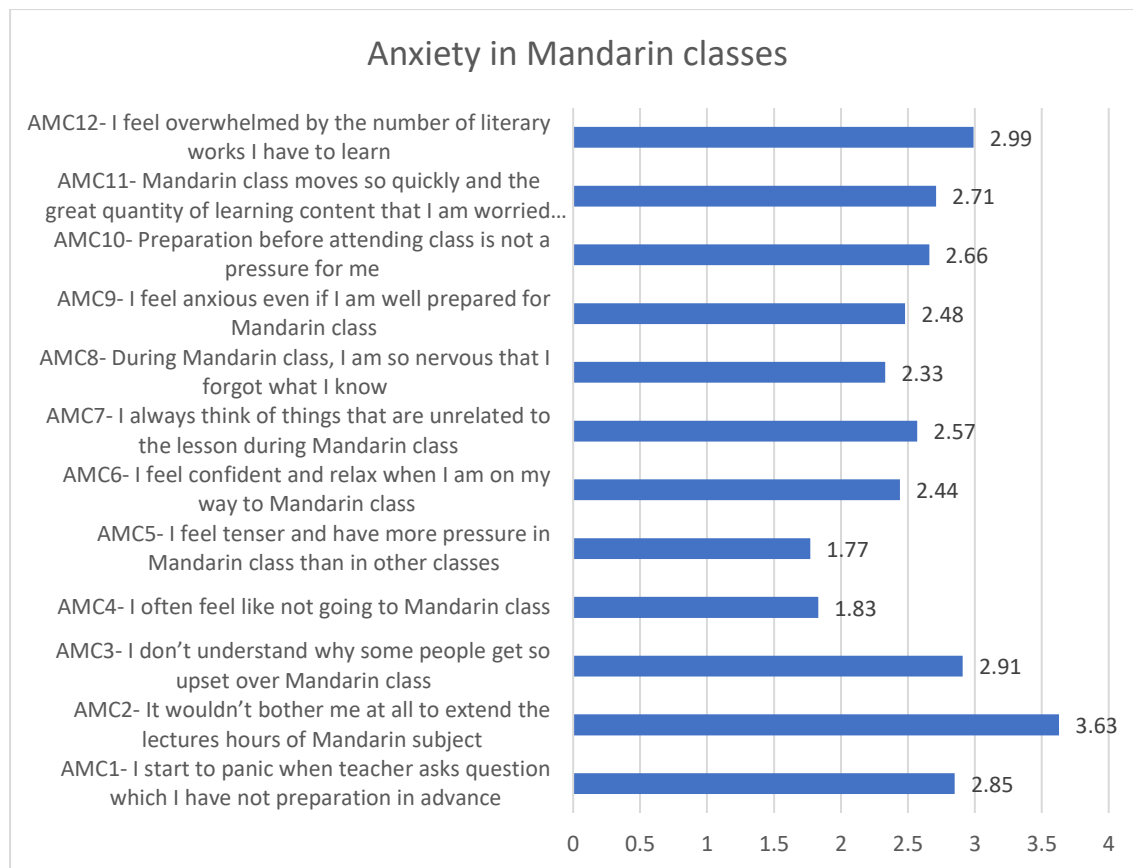


Figure 4– Means of the items of Anxiety of Mandarin classroom

D. Communication Apprehension

The findings in this study discovered that communication apprehension is the least impactful cause of anxiety among respondents. Nevertheless, it was found that the related item “I am less confident when answering a question” displayed the highest value of mean (M= 3.02). The following item are “I feel heart pounding when I am going to be asked to answer the question in Mandarin class” (M= 2.85) and “I start panic when I have to speak without preparation” (M= 2.69). The item “I am afraid that my teacher will correct every mistake I make” displayed the lowest value of mean (M= 2.07). This finding coincides with finding done by Ting et al. (2016) which also found that respondents have less confidence in anticipating in Mandarin class due to their anxious feeling when they were questioned by their Mandarin teacher in the class. This can be inferred that respondent are lack of self-confident. Thus, learners tend to be reserved and refuse to volunteer themselves when answering the questions.

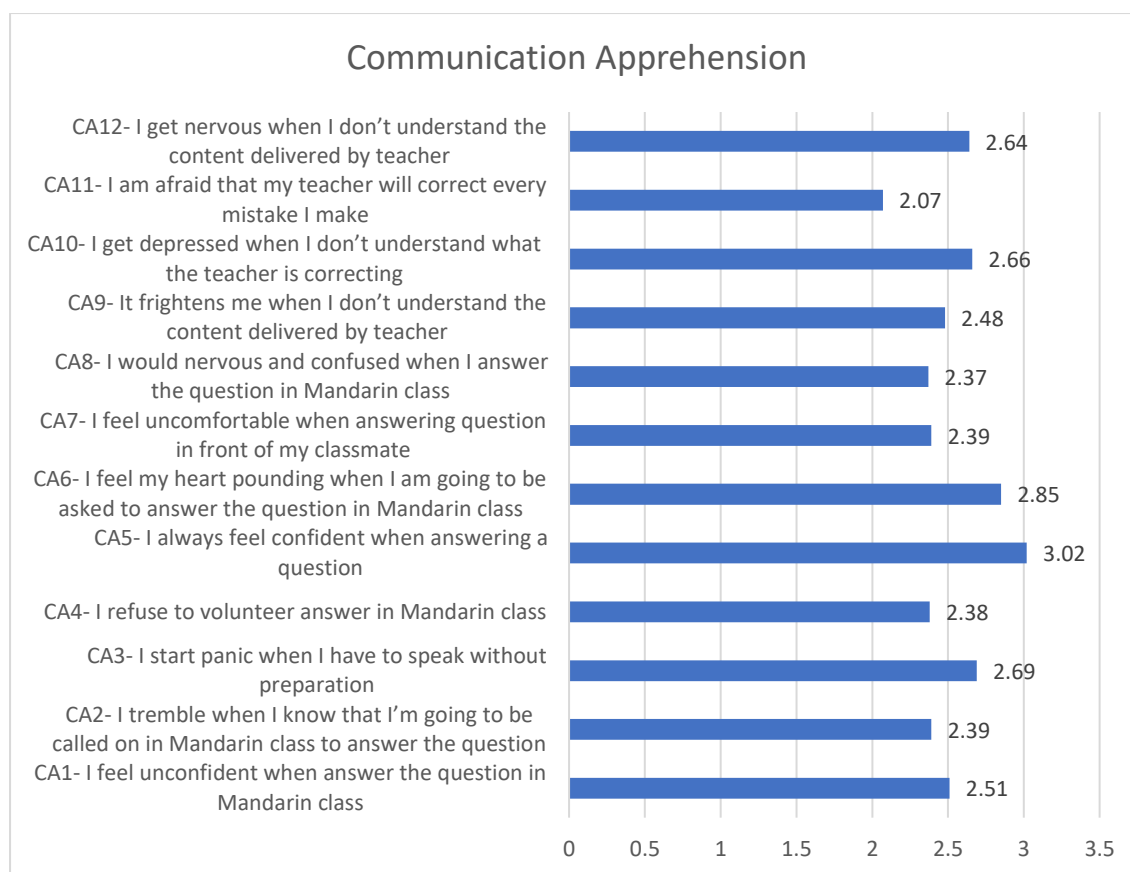


Figure 5– Means of the items of Communication Apprehension

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussion

Based on the findings above, it can be concluded that Form 6 students who enrolled in Mandarin subject have a high level of anxiety in the process of learning Mandarin. Among the factors contributing to Form 6 Students' learning anxiety in Mandarin subject are "Test Anxiety" which ranked the highest, followed by "Fear of Negative Evaluation", "Anxiety in Mandarin classroom" and "Communication Apprehension".

Test anxiety is considered as the main factor that contributing Mandarin learning anxiety among Form 6 students. They usually concerned about failing Mandarin subject due to the fact that examination usually draw people's attention to one's success in particular field. Fear of negative evaluation is another main factor contribute to Form 6 students' learning anxiety in Mandarin subject. Majority of respondents were embarrassed and shy to volunteer their answer in Mandarin class as a sign to avoid negative remark from teacher or classmate. On the aspect on anxiety in Mandarin classroom, respondents in this study exhibit uninspired behavior to attend a Mandarin class. Respondents experienced communication apprehension due to lack of self-confidence. They usually displayed nervousness in answering a question. A number of them felt heart pounding faster when they were asked to answer the questions which they have not prepare in advance.

1.3 Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Language learning anxiety can have a negative impact on genuine learning, as it can interfere with a student's ability to perform to their full potential on exams and can lead to decreased motivation and enrollment in the subject. Additionally, the pressure of high-stakes exams like

the STPM Mandarin subject can increase language anxiety among students, making it difficult for them to perform well on language tests. Therefore, many researchers are urgently needed to determine whether students experience higher levels of language anxiety due to STPM exams. More research is required before any definitive claims can be made.

This study showed important findings in understanding of Mandarin language learning anxiety among Form 6 students. Findings of this study could provide a great insight for educators as it can be a guidance for educators who teach Form 6 Mandarin to plan an effective yet interesting teaching and learning method to help students to overcome their learning anxiety. For that reason, a teaching and learning tool such as MOOC on 中六中文网 (zhongliuzhongwen.my) can be introduced to Form 6 students who enrolled STPM Mandarin as it was developed to provide plethora of learning materials which focus on STPM Mandarin. This MOOC can be utilized by students to prepare themselves for STPM Mandarin and hence, reduce their level of anxiety while learning STPM Mandarin.

Moreover, both novice teachers and experienced teachers may also experience certain anxiety as they attempt to deliver instruction in the school. As such, it is also important for future research to examine level of anxiety among language instructors who teach Form 6 students in order to develop strategies that support both students and instructors in managing their anxiety.

Acknowledgement

This study was funded by Persatuan Kemajuan Bahasa Cina Malaysia under grant no 600-TNCPI/PBT 5/3 (029/2022). The authors would like to express their sincere thanks and appreciation to Persatuan Kemajuan Bahasa Cina Malaysia for providing financial support to this research.

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