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Student's Interests, Purposes, and Attitudes towards Learning French at Public Higher Educational Institutions in Malaysia

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Abstract

The teaching of French as a foreign language (FFL) has been introduced in the Malaysian education system since the 1980s. Following the Malaysian government's globalization policy, FFL teaching, and learning are now expanding in this nation including at the Public Higher Educational Institutions (IPTA) in Malaysia. The present study aimed to determine how interested and enthusiastic the respective IPTA students were in learning French. This quantitative study involves 329 students from twelve IPTAs: UITM, UKM, UPM, UPNM, UMK, USM, UM, USIM, UTM, UPSI, UUM, and UMT. The results of the study found that 91.8% of respondents had a strong interest in the French language. While their attitude toward the foreign language is average. To accomplish language learning objectives, interests, and attitudes must coincide. Consequently, self-learning activities such as reading newspapers, accessing the internet, and communicating in French need to be improved.

Keywords: Attitude, Language Learning, French Foreign Language (FFL), Public Higher Educational Institutions (IPTA)

Introduction

The disappearance of national borders represents one of the obvious consequences of global development in the 21st century. Subsequently, the community in Malaysia is currently becoming more interested in foreign language learning and mastery. This is a consequence of increasing awareness among people worldwide of the significance of acquiring numerous languages employed daily. Mastering foreign languages provides an advocate quality of human resources to achieve global anticipation, (Sudarmo, 2021). These circumstances have made foreign language education an ongoing issue on a global basis. However, learning and correctly handling a foreign language is a complex task (Mansor et al., 2022). In consideration of this scenario and realizing how crucial it is to possess multiple languages, the Malaysian government established multiple initiatives to encourage the study of foreign languages in secondary and tertiary institutions. The Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) first launched it in 1984, and French language teaching (FLT) developed quickly in the 2000s as higher education became more international. As time passed, not only has this foreign language

become a fixture of Malaysian boarding schools, but the MOE has also spread French study and instruction into selective daily schools and public universities in the country.

The proficiency of the teacher and the curriculum did not indicate the foreign language teaching and learning program's effectiveness. As mentioned by Kumar (2021), success in learning a foreign or second language is the result of an integrated response between three main factors, namely the teacher, the student, and the program itself. The student's interest, attitude, and concern toward the foreign language they are learning play crucial roles in this subject matter. However, the learners' interest in acquiring a new target language is complex and may be impacted by a wide range of circumstances. Generally, learning involves both internal and external motivation. Internal motivation is produced from the student's desire to learn a language, whereas, external encouragement is related to other parties such as praise, scholarship loans, job opportunities, and others (Ahmad, 1989). According to Galishnikova (2014), high motivation includes the student's intellectual ability, and innovative and critical thinking through language helps them to govern success in their language learning. On the other hand, students with poor motivation registered the culmination of varied demotivating experiences which will subsequently, reduce their willingness to language learning, (Gearing, 2019).

Moreover, interest and attitude are two distinct concepts. Interest is produced from inner emotions which might affect behavior and modify one's attitude. Meanwhile, attitudes are practices that can be clearly seen and persistently governed by internal factors including interests, tendencies, beliefs, awareness, and ways of thinking. Simultaneously, attitudes and actions are closely related to a person's preferences and attentiveness. To achieve a good level of language proficiency, students should implement practices that are in line with their interests and specialization such as accessing French information through the internet, reading French newspapers, short stories, and novels, listening to French news, writing letters to lecturers about the reasons for their absence in French, interacting and communicating with French students (native speakers). Apart from that, students should also practice the application of foreign languages in the varied contexts of their lives as students including the lecture room, outside the lecture room, in the dormitory, in the canteen, in the library, etc.

Simultaneously, there are variations in learning demands among students in language learning classes, such as motivation and academic achievement. Needless to say, these distinctions necessitate different approaches to language teaching and learning. It is conceivable that one method works best for a student, but it will not work for others. On the same basis, one method may increase students' motivation and academic achievement, but for others, the same method decreases their academic achievement. According to Anggriani (2022), learning strategies refer to the learners' concepts and behavior while acquiring language which is subsequently significant for their language success. Positive attitude, strong interest, and effort in learning will assist students in rapidly, easily, and effectively mastering their new target language, (Noor et al., 2016). This is because the students are constantly looking for appropriate and effective tactics to improve their language competency. Similarly, an appropriate learning strategy was remarkable to increase the learners' motivation and academic achievement, (Rahimi et al., 2019). The researcher exposed that language learners will be discouraged from their learning if they are constantly exposed to the same type of instruction.

Initially, language students who are competently motivated and have a positive outlook are more likely to achieve the goals in the foreign language learning process. Particularly, students who exhibit positive attitudes toward their language learning include coming to class on time, accomplishing their homework, participating in class, practicing what is learned, like to ask questions, like to find material from other sources, and coming out with genuine interest and having clear learning objectives. The purpose of the present study is to determine the attitudes and interests among Malaysian students who are studying French as a foreign language at the respective IPTAs. The researchers hope this study was beneficial to improve efforts toward strengthening FLL teaching and learning in Malaysia, precisely under the aspect of the foreign language teaching methods and learning curriculum

Research Questions

There were two research questions have been underlined in the present study:

- To what extent are students at the respective IPTAs in Malaysia interested in the French language skills course they learn?
- What is the attitude and concern of the respective IPTA students towards the French language skills course they learn?

Research Objectives

The present study was conducted to achieve the following objectives:

- Identifying the level of interest and purpose in learning the French language among the students at the respective IPTAs.
- Analyzing the IPTAs students' attitudes and the parallelism with the interest in the French language they learn.

Research Methodology

This quantitative study is carried out to explore the FFL students' interests and attitudes toward learning the foreign language they registered in twelve IPTAs in Malaysia namely, UITM, UKM, UPM, and UPM. The instrument applied to the present study is a survey consisting of eleven questions which have been distributed among a total number of 329 respondents. Figure (1) below manifests the overall distribution of respondents in the present study:

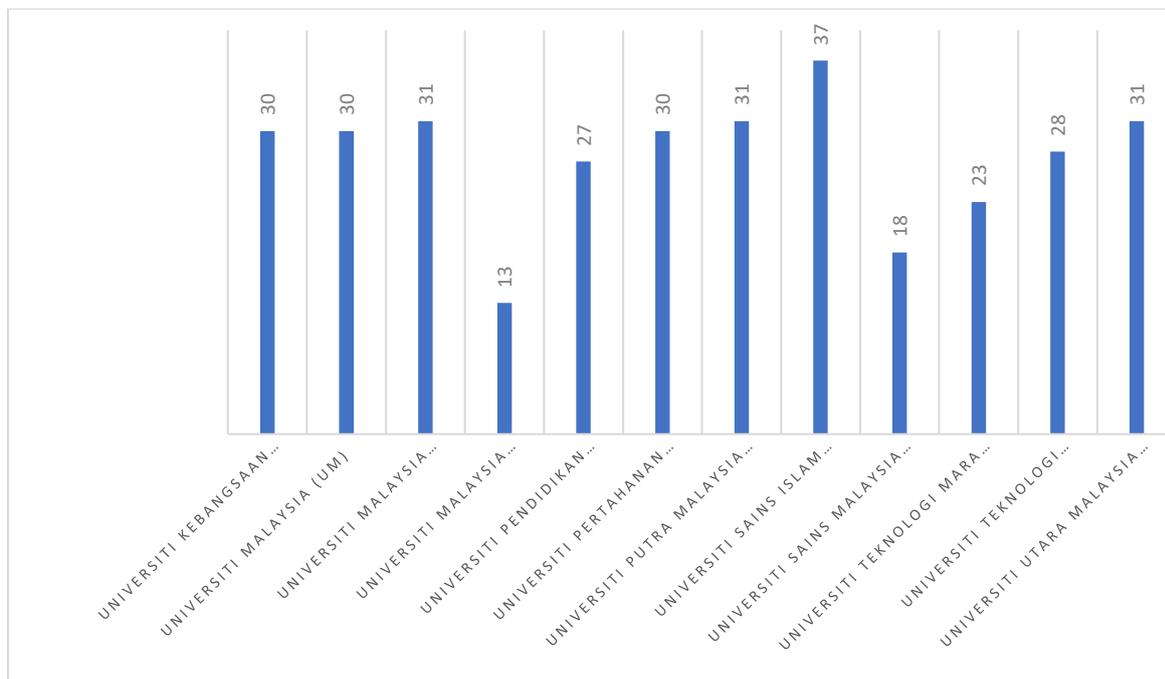


Figure (1): Number of respondents according to the University

Findings of the Study

The current study’s findings are divided into three broad sections. Interest is the subject of the initial section. Consequently, the second section is related to the purpose of learning that leads to interest in learning a language. The present study will simultaneously evaluate the students’ attitudes and initiatives on improving their French language proficiency.

Students’ Interest in French Foreign Language (FFL) Learning

The learners’ desire to produce successful acquisition of foreign languages has been an intriguing part of language learning and teaching in the Foreign Language Learning (FLL) field. Interest is broadly registered as some internal orientation that helps an individual to achieve success in life. Simultaneously, interest in learning a new target language gives rise to both internal and external variables.

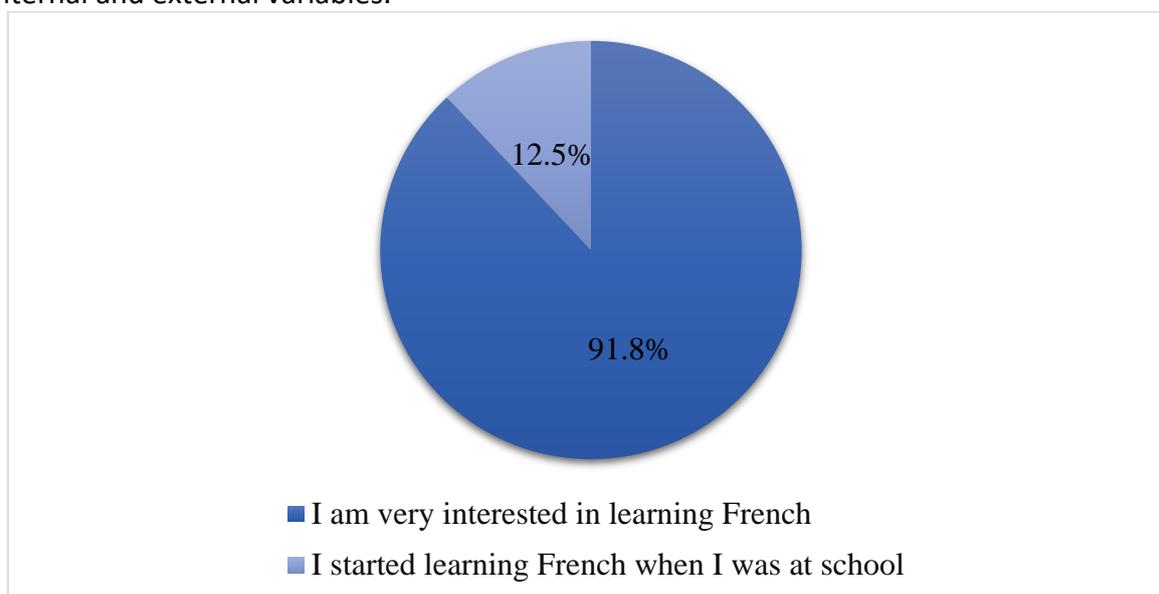


Figure (2): Students’ interest in French Foreign Language (FFL) learning

Based on the findings in Figure (2), there are total occurrences of 302 data (91.8%) respondents who expressed their substantial interest in studying French. This correlates with Brown in Mirhadizadeh (2016) who cited internal factors are dedicated to the elements that happen within language learners including their desire to learn a foreign language. Consequently, interest plays an important variable in the learners' enrollment while acquiring their target language, (Asgari et al., 2019). The study findings emphasized that a noteworthy degree of interest simultaneously enhances the successful learning process among students studying a foreign language which included presenting opportunities for more customized, coordinated, and desired of learning their respective target languages. Consequently, Xinjie et al. (2021) added that the language learners' interests allowed them to be harmoniously passionate about their target language. The research finding subsequently exposed passion helps to enrich the respective learners' willingness to communicate in the target language and personal well-being. These occurrences were beneficial in maximizing the learners' language learning process outcomes.

Meanwhile, the present study findings listed a total occurrence of 41 data (12.5%) respondents who stated they had been exposed to FFL since their early education at school. Simultaneously, success in learning a foreign language is integrated due to external factors which broadly refer to the reinforcement contingencies related to other parties. As mentioned in Thohir (2017), external factors including academic requirements or other sources of punishments and rewards were beneficial in enhancing the language learners' competency. Similarly, Jessner as cited in Hopp et al (2019) promoted, that early exposure to multiple languages comprehension contributed to advantages in metalinguistic awareness which included the ability to reflect on language structure independently of its meaning in implicit tasks or the capacity to reflect on language form and contrast overtly. Besides, Norris-Holt (2001) cited that an early introduction to a second/foreign language as an elementary subject at school is beneficial in assisting language learners' comprehensive understanding including vocabulary and grammatical constructions. The results underlined in her analytical study emphasized the comprehensive syllabus design that integrated communicative approaches permit the students to have outstanding exposure to the English language despite the monolingual nature of local society and poor disclosure of the foreign language outside the classroom.

As a consequence, the findings in the present study imply that the respective FFL students are integrated by varied dimensions which include both internal and external aspects in precipitating success towards their foreign language learning success. These phenomena relate to an analytical study carried out by MacIntyre and Wang (2021) which emphasized, a range of interrelated learner-internal and learner-external variables are associated with a learner's willingness to acquire a particular target language.

Purposes of French Foreign Language (FFL) Learning

Learning a language is a continuous process that demands self-devotion and attainable objectives to accomplish the learning outcomes, (Le Thi Nvoc and Vu Minh, 2021). Besides, foreign language learning is indispensable for varied domains including economy, science, technology, culture, politics, and education, (Durán et al., 2022). This occurrence correlates with the present study findings which underlined the FFL students' attentiveness was simultaneously governed by diverse circumstances including communication, tourism,

business, employment, understanding French culture, and mastering a foreign language other than English and the mother tongue. The detailed explanations relating to the purposes of the respective students towards FFL were presented accordingly in the following table (1)

Table (1)

Purposes of French Foreign Language (FFL) Learning

No.	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I study French for communication purposes	1 (0.3%)	6 (1.6%)	4 (1.2%)	158 (48.0%)	160 (48.6%)
2	I study French for tourism purposes.	1 (0.3%)	15 (4.6%)	19 (5.8%)	156 (47.4%)	138 (41.9%)
3	I study French for business purposes.	12 (3.6%)	82 (24.9%)	73 (22.2%)	111 (33.7%)	51 (15.6%)
4	I study French for work purposes.	2 (0.6%)	20 (6.1%)	25 (7.6%)	145 (44.1%)	137 (41.6%)
5	I study French to study French linguistics.	3 (0.9%)	42 (12.8%)	43 (13.0%)	143 (43.5%)	98 (29.8%)
6	I study French to understand French culture.	0 (0%)	14 (4.30)	19 (5.8%)	164 (50%)	131 (39.9%)
7	I study French to increase the number of foreign language mastery.	1 (0.3%)	1 (0.3%)	3 (0.9%)	106 (32.2%)	218 (66.3%)

Table (1) manifests the findings based on FFL students' assessment of the constraint purposes of learning the respective foreign language. The findings in the present study highlighted that the respective students learning French mainly to master a varied number of foreign languages with a total occurrence of 324 data (98.5%). A mixed-method study conducted by Huiyu et al (2020), exposed foreign language learning has been well-perceived by the majority of today's society, particularly among higher education students. Simultaneously, in Malaysia, foreign language courses including French, German, Spanish, Arabic, Japanese, and other languages have been offered in most higher education institutions in line with the Malaysian Education Development Plan (2013-2025) which aims to encourage and generate competent multilingual students, Nik Safiah Karim as cited in (Azmy et al., 2016).

Meanwhile, the students' ranked FFL courses were remarkable for communication purposes at second place with a total occurrence of 318 data (96.6%). This correlates with Axatovna (2022) who cited acquiring more than one language as a prominent life skill to compete in today's increasingly interdependent world. He added that foreign language learning produced communicative individuals competent in transmitting desires, feelings, and experiences while engaging with native speakers in a particular context of the discussion.

The process of learning a target language is not limited to its' grammatical comprehension but will also signify the importance of the cultural and customs aspects of the respective nation. Consequently, the third favorable purpose of FFL learning recorded in the present study was to recognize the French culture with 295 data (89.9%). To achieve comprehensive communicative competence, the cultural aspects of the target language should be also emphasized in the field of foreign language learning, (Fernández, 2022). In addition, the researcher also claimed sociocultural knowledge helps learners to convey messages that are correlated in a particular social and cultural context while interacting with the local community. This scenario will simultaneously help to fabricate open-minded language learners with high tolerance and understanding towards perceiving other cultural beings around the world.

Furthermore, the finding in the present study has also emphasized FFL learning significance toward the tourism sector, particularly at the fourth rank with 294 data (89.3%). Tourism sectors play a vital role in the economic business field and survival possibility for many nations including the post-industrial society like Malaysia. Simultaneously, foreign language mastery was beneficial in allowing a comprehensible interaction process in varied industries including tourism. An analytical study conducted by (Amirbakzadeh and Alroaia, 2020) revealed English language skills had a positive and significant effect on the tourism industry in Iran as it allowed the local communities to engage with tourists who visit their country using the well-spoken foreign language. Not only that, fluency in English language skills among the local community in Iran allowed them to build a worthwhile and deepened relationship has subsequently raised the tourist's satisfaction.

As a multiracial nation in this globalized era, Malaysia was also impacted by the current financial crisis. The current labor market conditions in Malaysia require graduates to develop employable skills including fluency in a third language. This occurrence was consistent with the present study's findings which recorded the benefits of FFL skills for employability at the fifth rank with 282 data (85.7%). Multilingualism is a prominent life skill which was necessary for a definite career privilege, Stein-Smith (2016); Ainol Madziah Zubairi and Isarji Sarudin as mentioned in (Ali et al., 2020). The researchers addressed foreign language proficiency as remarkable to produce human capital that can compete with other global communities. For instance, third language skills permitted creativity and occupied constructive engagement with the respective foreign suppliers or customers.

In addition, the overall results in the present study also emphasized 241 data (73.3%) agreed FFL knowledge was remarkable in enhancing their linguistic knowledge of the respective foreign language. In particular, linguistics refers to the study of every aspect of human speech which includes the units, nature, structure as well as modification of the language, (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Consequently, FFL learners must have intense linguistic knowledge of the respective target foreign language to allow precise and comprehensive understandings or skills while using it. Each language embodies its grammatical composition including pronunciation, vocabulary, and other elements. As a consequence, a simple sentence can be complex when it is constructed in different languages because the foreign language learner must comply with the grammar rules of the target language. Not only that, Abdul Karim and Subramaniam (2022) exposed that the learners in the FFL field are affected by the confusing grammar rules embodied in the foreign language.

The results of their analytical study manifest the learners' preference for the appropriate prepositions in their writing was affected by multiple forms of "in" in the French language like "à", "en", "à la", or "aux".

Besides, knowledge of foreign languages was advantageous as an economic commodity. The overall results in the present study listed FFL were significant for business purposes at the last rank with only 162 data (49.3%). An analytical study carried out by Rao (2019) underlined acquiring more than one language is important including in the domain of business correspondence. Foreign language acquisition permits an individual to engage effectively with ability, comprehension, skills, and attitudes to communicate in a common language used in a particular context. Similarly, Irawan et al (2022) stated multiple businesses for various sectors, including multinational corporations and SMEs derived to do business in the global workplace. Their finding exposed foreign language comprehension cultivates respect and the avoidance of various types of distortions and misunderstandings that might develop as a result of linguistic and cultural boundaries.

As a result, it can be concluded foreign language competence is understood as a complex life skill, the pursuit of which produces consequential circumstances for enhancing the educational and cognitive process as it subsequently allows psychologically full-fledged engagement in various mediums of communication through a foreign language application. Similarly, Nematilokizi et al (2020) argued learning a new target language was a notable skill for the growth of a specialist in varied sectors. The continual modernization of the world's economic growth is bringing multiple cultures and communities into more common contact with each other. Foreign language acquisition is significant for producing higher communicative competence through greater academic achievement, advanced cognitive development, and broad positive attitudes toward other languages and cultures that take into account the particular social, contextual, and linguistic elements of the target language. These occurrences were subsequently effective in assisting the students to compete in the modern global marketplace.

Attitudes towards French Foreign Language (FFL) Learning

Attitude has frequently gained considerable attention in the domain of foreign languages including FFL. Therefore, the interest of the present study subsequently lies in the students' attitudes toward French language learning at the respective universities. According to Getie (2020), the student's attitudes were an integral aspect that closely related to enhancing the learners' motivation toward outstanding proficiency in learning the respective foreign language. Besides, Yetkin and Özer (2022) exposed positive attitudes as one of the keys that motivate the learners' willingness to communicate using the target language they learned. The overall findings in the present study recorded the respective respondents manifest a gradually positive attitude toward FFL. Simultaneously, Table (2) below underlined the comprehensive understanding relating to this subject matter:

Table (2)

Student's Attitude Towards French Foreign Language (FLL) Learning

No.	Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I often learn French through the Internet.	15 (4.6%)	52 (15.8%)	41 (12.5%)	165 (50.2%)	56 (17.0%)
2	I always attend prescribed French classes.	2 (0.6%)	6 (1.8%)	7 (2.1%)	122 (37.1%)	192 (58.4%)
3	I always read newspapers and reading materials in French on the internet.	38 (11.6%)	138 (41.9%)	70 (21.3%)	70 (21.3%)	13 (4.0%)
4	I like to study French in a group	8 (2.4%)	28 (8.5%)	38 (11.6%)	138 (41.9%)	117 (35.6%)
5	I like to interact with friends using French	7 (2.1%)	37 (11.2%)	103 (31.3%)	129 (39.2%)	53 (16.1%)
6	I like to interact with the teacher using French.	3 (0.9%)	37 (11.2%)	83 (25.2%)	158 (48.0%)	47 (14.3%)
7	I make full use of the internet to learn French.	3 (0.9%)	16 (4.9%)	34 (10.3%)	136 (41.3%)	140 (42.6%)
8	I am proud to speak French	0 (0%)	4 (1.2%)	15 (4.6%)	158 (48.0%)	152 (46.2%)
9	I will encourage my friends to learn French	1 (0.3%)	3 (0.9%)	17 (5.2%)	149 (45.3%)	159 (48.3%)

Table (2) provides an extensive overview relating the students' language attitudes which includes the factors by which they express those views, students' learning experiences, and the methods they believe to be effective and practical in acquiring the French language. Based on the observations, the present study recorded the teaching and learning environment plays a vital aspect in their FFL learning success. There was a total number of 314 data (95.5%) exposed the student's preferences for attending the French language classes at their university. This circumstance is related to the finding made by Santos (2020) who argued language learning classrooms allowed a comprehensive understanding as the teachers were able to provide appropriate teaching and learning methodologies and strategies for their students who come from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the teacher's command to utilize the foreign language while minimizing the students' native

language usage in the classroom was significant in allowing intense exposure to the target language, (Lightbown and Spada, 2020).

Not only that, the language's status and prestige have a substantial impact on the language learning process and outcomes among learners, Tódor and Dégi (2016). Similarly, the present study has listed that the respective FFL students were proud to utilize the foreign language as the second aspect contributing towards their language attitudes, particularly with 310 data (94.2%). Not only that, there are total occurrences of 308 data (93.6%) in the present study revealed the respective learners were motivated to promote FFL programs among their friends.

As mentioned in the previous subtopic, success in language learning is not only determined by the learner's learning strategies but also by their desire to acquire the target language. This occurrence has resulted in the FFL learners' attitude toward self-learning methodologies. According to (Zimmerman and Schunk, 2011), in the sphere of the educational domain, self-regulated learning (SRL) is best understood as a dynamic, constructive process whereby learners define learning targets and then monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, and behavior. Based on the observations, the internet has immersive usage among the respective learners with 276 data (83.9%) stating they made full use of the internet to learn the French language while 221 data (67.2%) manifest they constantly surf the internet for their self-learning purposes on the target language. This corresponds with Sukri et al (2018); Zhakanonyina et al (2019) revealed the integration of the Internet allowed language learners to perform self-education by utilizing the language through creativity and innovation in developing approaches for a particular language lesson. However, the selected FFL students in the present study revealed their least preference for using the internet to read newspapers and reading materials in French, particularly with 83 data (25.3%).

Furthermore, the findings in the present study stated that FFL students were also interested in studying the respective foreign language in a group with 255 data (77.5%). Consequently, to achieve world-class education, the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) has dedicated the benefits of cooperative learning which emphasizes student-centered learning, particularly by making students work together to acquire knowledge, (Hamzah and Nasri, 2020). The result of their analytical study concluded this learning method produces positive impacts including motivation and perception of the respective language learned in the respective educational settings. In particular, high-achieving learners and low-achieving learners can cooperate and initiate good relationships during the English Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning process. Their findings correspond with previous analytical studies carried out by Hidayati et al (2018); Alghamdy (2019) that simplified language learners preferred corporative learning methodology compared to working individually as it helps them to comprehend the new language more easily and quickly. Learners in the group were able to underline varied solutions based on all their experiences and knowledge based on their teamwork to gain success in a particular task given to them. These circumstances enhance the language learners' participation while acquiring the target language.

Moreover, the result in the present study emphasized that FFL students were derived to apply French while talking to others including their teacher with 205 data (62.3%) as well

as their friends with 182 data (55.3%). As mentioned by Jean-Marc and Pavelescu (2021), the language learners' willingness to communicate in the target language was determined based on their personal experiences of foreign language usage which included the identification of specific emotional, affective, and cognitive purposes. In addition, Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) argued the learners' engagement process in foreign language classrooms distributed a crucial advantage towards their subsequent learning and development.

Indeed, the role of action is vital in determining the success of the FFL learning methodology among the selected students in the present study. The success rate of language input will affect language learners' views toward a particular language community and thus enhance their readiness to communicate, Gardner as mentioned in (Thuan, 2021). Subsequently, language students' attitudes are strongly influenced by several stimuli, thus implementing specific organizational and pedagogical approaches is essential for the successful development of language learner autonomy. This is similar to the finding of Assalahi (2019) who emphasized learners' positive attitude as a mandatory component to enroll their decision towards a particular foreign language course including determining their motivational inclinations and even examining whether the language learning endeavor will be a successful outcome.

Conclusion

The results of the present study revealed positive evaluations as the majority of the students are indeed very keen on learning the French language as an elective subject in their respective educational settings. According to Abad et al. (2015), a language learner is driven to take specific actions through an inner source, desire, emotion, reason, need, impulse, or purpose. Based on the observations, the student's interest in FFL learning was governed by both internal and external factors.

Besides, foreign language learning is varied from other courses, mainly because related to a complex social endeavor. Language represents an individual's whole social being which contributes to one's identity and way of expressing that identity to others. Hence, learning a new target language entails much more than acquiring brand-new skills, rules, or grammar but also includes changing one's self-perception and adopting new social and cultural behaviors and ways of being which subsequently have an intense impact on the language learner's social nature. The overall results present the respective FFL students' adaptation to various states of motivation and attitude in their French language learning process.

Nowadays, mastering varied target languages is not only remarkable for academic progress but also for reaching social and economic growth around the world, (Fandiño et al., 2019). This statement corresponds with the present study finding which emphasizes the French language knowledge to enhance the FFL students to compete in today's modern world which requires broad multilingualism skills. In particular, the respective respondents highlighted that French language acquisition helps them to have advanced professional communication skills in multiple industries including global business trade, tourism, culture, etc.

Simultaneously, the outcomes of the present qualitative study manifested the respective FFL students' agreement toward multiple learning strategies. The respective FFL's

motivational background highly affected their language learning attitude and efficiency. In particular, they responded that collaborative and personalized learning strategies helped them boost their desire to succeed in the French language learning process in an autonomous methodology. As mentioned by Ruyffelaert (2022), the implementation of an FFL evaluation along with group and individualized instruction should be implemented in all FFL courses to maintain the language learners' engagement in having a successful learning process when acquiring a certain foreign language.

The present qualitative analysis of the FFL students' responses to their determination toward the particular foreign language acquisition manifests motivation and attitudes are interwinding towards their language learning success. However, a quantitative analysis is required to complement it and to view deeper insights in explaining their choice and use of these particular approaches. The present study has established the basis for the upcoming analytical research in the field of FFL learning in the Malaysian context. Particularly, the researchers have underlined the correlations between the FLL students' interest, motivation as well as attitudes carried out a lot of academic potentiality in learning the foreign language at their respective universities. To allow a bigger repertoire of variables used by the students, similar research should be conducted in varied settings to examine the extent to which the findings could be imprecise to other contexts.

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