

A Study of Motivation and Fear of Learning a Language

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v13-i3/21975> DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v13-i3/21975

Published Online: 30 July 2024

Abstract

Recent studies have focused on the motivational factors and anxiety associated with learning foreign languages, highlighting the growing importance of proficiency in English as a global lingua franca. It acknowledges that learners' fears and uncertainties can impede language acquisition. Additionally, the study delves into the attitudes influencing learners' motivation, highlighting its critical role in enhancing self-esteem and achieving success in learning new languages. This study investigates the interplay between motivation and fear in learning foreign languages among undergraduate students in Malaysia. Employing a quantitative survey methodology, data was collected through a structured questionnaire divided into three sections, targeting demographics, motivation, and fear of learning a foreign language. The sample comprised 20 purposively selected participants. The findings reveal a significant correlation between students' motivation levels and their fear of learning foreign languages, suggesting that anxiety often impedes language acquisition. The study emphasizes the necessity for educators to develop supportive learning environments and tailored pedagogical strategies to mitigate fear and enhance motivation. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological barriers in language learning, offering implications for educational practices and future research.

Keywords: Motivation, Fear, Foreign Language, Learning.

Introduction

Background of Study

Nowadays, the use of foreign languages such as English is increasingly seen as lingua franca and thus associated with teaching communication language, social and economic (Vonkova, et al., 2024) (Kirova, et al., 2012). Therefore, the widespread usage of English has raised the need for effective communication skills, but learners' fear, and uncertainty may prevent them from learning to speak a foreign language. Studies have shown that the attitude

would affect the learner's motivation, as the key factor, consequently driven to increase their self-esteem for learning success (Kirova, et al., 2012) (Li, et al., 2022) (Vonkova, et al., 2024). Jafar (2016), has defined motivation as the multifaceted construct that serves as a driving force in the challenging process of learning foreign language. In other words, motivation for learning a foreign language refers to the internal and external factors that stimulate an individual's desire and willingness to acquire proficiency in a language that is not their mother tongue. This motivation can be driven by various elements, including personal interest, cultural curiosity, career advancement, academic requirements, social integration, or travel needs. Thus, by understanding the learner's intention, it can significantly impact their approach, persistence, and success in language acquisition.

Anxiety or fear of learning a foreign language is defined as the anxiety or discomfort that individuals experience when faced during conversation by using a new language. This fear can be developed from various sources, including the fear of making mistakes, being judged by others, struggling with pronunciation, grammar and the complexity of the language. It often results in avoidance behaviours, reduced participation, and a lack of confidence, which can hinder the overall language learning process. According to Hussain et al (2011), the issue of foreign language anxiety became interesting in the 1990s when lots of researchers began studying it. The studies had shown the positive correlation between language anxiety (Hussain, et al., 2011). Javad et al (2022), had introduced a term which is foreign language enjoyment that relates to foreign language anxiety. The foreign language enjoyment is a complex emotion that relates to the interaction between challenge and perceived ability (Javad et al., 2022).

From the above definition of motivation and fear of learning foreign language, there is a significant interaction term between them. which is called motivated fear. This term is defined as the fear that sometimes acts as a motivator, particularly in situations where learners are driven to overcome challenges or avoid negative consequences. This definition indicates the relationship between motivation and fear in the context of the learning process. Integrating motivation and fear in learning a foreign language involves creating strategies that leverage motivation to reduce fear, thus fostering a more effective and enjoyable learning experience. The research of motivation and fear in learning foreign languages is highly relevant in Malaysia due to several factors related to the country's linguistic diversity, economic aspirations and social dynamics. In terms of linguistic diversity, Malaysia is multiracial country, therefore involve in cultural and language diversity such as Malay (Bahasa Malaysia), English, Chinese dialects (Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien), Tamil, and others. This diversity necessitates the learning of multiple languages for effective communication and integration within the multicultural society.

Statement of Problem

Nowadays, there are fewer researchers that analyse the relationship between motivation and fear towards learning foreign language. Javad et al (2022), had studied the integration between foreign language anxiety and enjoyment, within a validating quantitative data triangulation model with 96 Iranian undergraduate students. Besides, Jafar et al (2016), had focused on self-determination theory (SDT) and relationship between attitude and academic motivation for English teachers in Turkey. Moreover, Vonkova, et al (2024),

analysed the effect of socioeconomic towards student motivation to learn foreign language in Czech Republic.

In Malaysia, there is a growing concern about the challenges learners face in achieving proficiency in English as a foreign language. Previous research has shown that learners' attitudes, including fear and uncertainty, significantly impact their motivation and success in language acquisition. However, there is a notable research gap in understanding the interplay between motivation and fear in this specific context. The primary objective of this study is to explore the relationship between motivation and fear among undergraduate students learning foreign languages in Malaysia. The goal is to provide insights that can help educators develop more effective teaching strategies, thereby enhancing student motivation and reducing anxiety. This could have significant implications for improving language education practices and ultimately supporting better communication skills in a globally connected world.

Objective of the Study and Research Questions

This study is done to explore perception of learners on their use of learning strategies. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions:

- How do learners perceive their motivation to learn?
- How do learners perceive their fear in learning a language?

Literature Review

Motivation to Learn a Language

Motivation plays a crucial role in second language acquisition (SLA), influencing learners' engagement, persistence, and ultimately, their proficiency in the target language. An important factor in influencing a learner's decision-making process is motivation, specifically in terms of channelling their energy into constructive actions that support their learning goals. On the other hand, a lack of motivation to learn might hinder learners' advancement in their academic careers. Meanwhile, a highly driven individual has a higher chance of success while learning a new language. Motivation is often emphasized in connection to language and linguistics to show how it influences what, when, and how we learn. The goal of this review of the literature is to provide an overview of the many aspects of motivation for learning a second language, including both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators. According to Li (2024), intrinsic motivation involves undertaking activities for personal interest and enjoyment, extrinsic motivation focuses on a specific outcome, and amotivation is a lack of intentionality in the classroom due to perceived competence or lack of interest. Externally motivated students, who engage in tasks for external consequences, are more likely to engage in surface and unsustainable learning. This type of motivation may lead to negative outcomes, such as a negative reinforcement loop. In contrast, intrinsic motivation is more productive as it triggers an individual's inner drive to engage in activities based on their personal interests. This type of motivation can lead to positive effects such as improved mental health, enhanced creativity, and long-term learning outcomes. It also increases the effort and quality of student input into a task. In essence, intrinsically motivated students persist in their learning and are more willing to voluntarily attempt different challenges.

Conversely, intrinsic motivation is often seen as a connection to integrative motivation theory while extrinsic is referring to instrumental motivation. In summary, motivation to learn a second language is a dynamic and multifaceted construct influenced by intrinsic interests,

extrinsic incentives, motivational dynamics, and socio-cultural contexts. Understanding the interplay between these factors is essential for promoting learner engagement, persistence, and success in language learning.

Fear of Learning a Language

Recent scholarly inquiry has increasingly focused on language anxiety, a specific apprehension associated with the acquisition of a new language, and its significant implications for language learning. Studies have illuminated that language anxiety encompasses elements such as communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, which profoundly hinder learners' engagement and practice (Ruyu et al., 2024). This type of anxiety distinguishes itself from general anxiety and notably impacts learners' confidence and performance within language learning contexts (Xiaoyi et al., 2023). The role of classroom dynamics and teacher-student interactions has emerged as pivotal in influencing language anxiety, underscoring the importance of nurturing supportive environments to alleviate this concern (Miaomiao and Yongliang, 2024). Additionally, positive teacher behaviors and peer interactions have been identified as instrumental in mitigating language anxiety and enhancing learning outcomes (Yawen & Jian, 2023). Effective interventions, such as fostering supportive classroom climates and implementing anxiety-reducing strategies, have demonstrated efficacy in addressing language anxiety and improving educational experiences (Chengchen et al., 2021). Consequently, the aforementioned studies emphasised the critical need to address language anxiety in social science research to optimize language acquisition and overall educational achievement.

Past Studies on Motivation to Learn a Language

Many studies have been conducted to investigate the motivation behind learning a foreign language, defined as a language not native to the speaker's country or region, such as learning Chinese or English as a second language. Motivation for learning foreign languages is dynamic among university students and is influenced by three factors: integrativeness, attitude towards the learning environment, and language anxiety. Two key theories of motivation are central to understanding this phenomenon: instrumental motivation and integrative motivation (Gardner et al., 1985). These theories help researchers comprehend the significance of motivation in acquiring a new language.

Both instrumental and integrative motivation play crucial roles in language acquisition, with their relative importance varying based on the learner and context. Integrative motivation is often associated with more successful and sustained language learning due to its emphasis on emotional and cultural engagement. On the other hand, instrumental motivation can lead to high performance, particularly when learners have clear goals and valuable incentives.

There have been many past studies on instrumental and integrative motivation. The study by Neng Aprilia Purnama et al (2019), investigates the motivations of students and teachers in learning and teaching a second language, specifically focusing on the motivation of eighth-grade students at MTs Mathla'ul Anwar Sukaguna in West Java, Indonesia. The respondents included 22 students who completed questionnaires and 2 students who participated in interview sessions. The research utilized both questionnaires and interviews as instruments for data collection. Findings from the study revealed that students are

motivated to learn English; however, it was noted that teachers need to be more creative in their use of media, strategies, and materials to further enhance students' motivation in learning activities.

Liu (2023), investigates the dynamic motivation of university students to learn Chinese as a second language and its relationship with their learning experiences. The research involved 97 international students, with 15 participating in semi-structured interviews who were enrolled at a Chinese institution in Beijing. The study employed various instruments, including questionnaires and interviews. The study found that students' motivation to learn Chinese significantly increased over time, driven by their evolving learning experiences. Initially, students had an instrumental orientation, but their learning goals, experiences, and aspirations for future careers in China strengthened their motivation. With increased use of Chinese and interactions with locals, students developed a deeper integrative motivation, becoming more interested in the language and culture, and desiring to learn more native-like expressions and cultural nuances.

Next, the study by Yue (2022), investigates the motivation behind language learning among Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners studying abroad in the United Kingdom, focusing on instrumental motivation and parental support which signified the intended learning effort. Conducted in a multicultural environment with local native English speakers, the research involved 217 participants aged 22 to 23 years old. The study discovered that students' international posture had the most significant beneficial impact on their readiness to communicate, frequency of communication, and planned learning effort. This conclusion was drawn based on the use of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The presence of an ideal L2 self greatly influenced these motivated learning behaviours in a favourable manner, while the presence of an ought-to L2 self had a detrimental effect on students' desire to learn a language in a study abroad setting. In addition, the support and guidance from parents had a good impact on kids' motivation to study, but not as much as their attitude towards foreign culture and their ideal second language self-image. The results highlight the significance of developing a robust global stance and a well-defined desired second language self to boost motivation for language acquisition in a study abroad setting.

Past Studies on Fear of Learning a Language

Many studies have been done to investigate the fear of learning foreign language, emphasizing two critical aspects: the importance of cultural influences and the effects of technological integration (Alfred, 2020; Chunpeng & Santoso, 2023). Studies have highlighted the role of cultural backgrounds and societal expectations in shaping individuals' experiences of language anxiety, emphasizing the need for interventions tailored to diverse learner populations. Additionally, research has examined how technology, including digital tools and online platforms, influences language anxiety, offering insights into the design of technology-enhanced language learning environments to mitigate anxiety and promote positive learning experiences.

There have been many past studies on the importance of cultural influences. Alfred (2020), uses a cognitive perspective to explain how foreign language use in a Global Virtual Team (GVT) affects individual task performance. This study incorporates (a) cognitive neuroscience of foreign language processing to elucidate the relationship between foreign

language skills and individual task performance; (b) the theory of cognitive load to describe foreign language anxiety as a pathway through which low foreign language skills negatively impact individual task performance; and (c) the theory of intelligence to explore the moderating role of cultural intelligence in the mediation process. Analyzing 294 data pairs collected from GVT members and their supervisors in a multinational offshoring firm, the study found support for the mediation process and the moderating influence of cultural intelligence dimensions in mitigating the negative effect of foreign language anxiety on individual task performance in GVTs. Next, Chunpeng & Santoso (2023), investigate the use of AI dialogue systems to enhance the interactional competence of EFL university students. Through the PRISMA process, this study identified 28 articles published between January 2013 and August 2022 in journals and conferences from popular databases such as Google Scholar, ProQuest, IEEE, ScienceDirect, and Web of Science. The systematic review highlighted six dimensions and 25 sub-dimensions influencing the application of AI dialogue systems for EFL learning. The six dimensions are technological integration, task designs, student engagement, learning objectives, technological limitations, and the novelty effect. The study identifies gaps, noting that (1) debate and problem-solving skills in EFL acquisition at the university level are often overlooked in AI dialogue system design, and (2) the importance of embedding cultural, humorous, and empathetic functions is not adequately considered. The study concludes that the development and implementation of AI dialogue systems in EFL are still in the early stages. Future research should focus on meaning-based communication, intelligibility in language competency, and incorporating debate and problem-solving skills in university education.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is presented in figure 1 below. This study is rooted from (Gardner, 2001; and Horwitz et al., 1986). Learners' beliefs and expectations can be their motivation to learn (Rahmat, 2020). What the learners feel about the language they are learning can have an influence on how they perceive the learning tasks given. Gardner (2001), reports that learners' motivation to learn is the positive feeling they hope to get when they participate in the learning tasks. Horwitz et al (1986), said there are three causes of fear of learning foreign languages, and they are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety.



Figure 1 – Conceptual Framework of the Study-The Relationship between Motivation to Learn and Causes of Fear of Learning a Language.

METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study is done to explore motivation factors and fear of learning among undergraduates. A purposive sample of 20 participants responded to the survey. The instrument used is a 5 Likert-scale survey and is rooted from Gardner (2001), and Horwitz et al (1986), to reveal the variables in Table 1 below. The survey has three (3) sections. Section A has items on demographic profile. Section B has items on motivation to learn a foreign language and section C has items on fear of learning a foreign language.

Table 1

Distribution of Items in the Survey

Section	Variable	Sub-Category	No of Items		Cronbach Alpha
A	Demographic Profile	-			
B	Motivation to Learn	-		9	0.881
C	Fear of Learning a Foreign Language	Communication Apprehension	9	24	0.845
		Fear Of Negative Evaluation	9		
		Test Anxiety	6		
				33	0.833

The analysis in Table 1 shows a Cronbach alpha of 0.881 for motivation to learn and Cronbach alpha of 0.845 for fear of learning a foreign language; thus, revealing a good reliability of the instrument chosen/used. Further analysis using SPSS is done to present findings to answer the research questions for this study.

Findings

Findings for Demographic Profile

Figure 2 has shown the demographic profile of the research study based on gender, in which the respondents of the survey were 25% of male and 75% female.

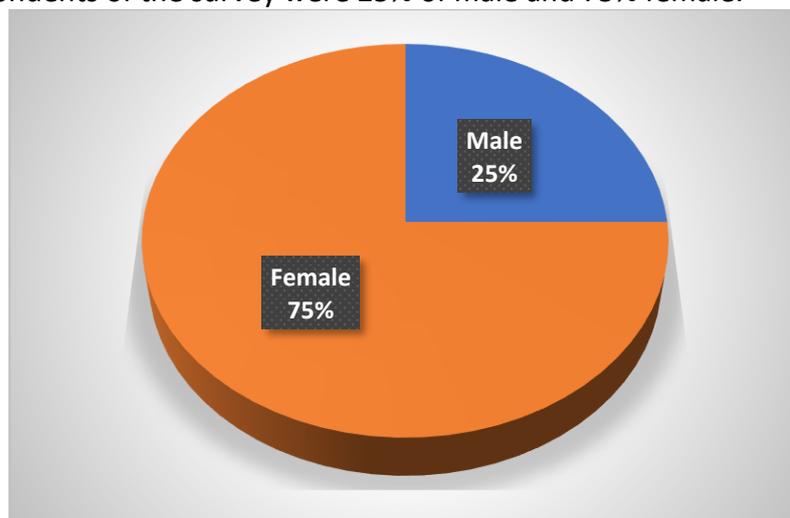


Figure 2 – Percentage of Participation based on Gender

Figure 3 has shown the demographic profile of the research study based on education level, in which the respondents of the survey were 90% of undergraduates and 10% postgraduates.

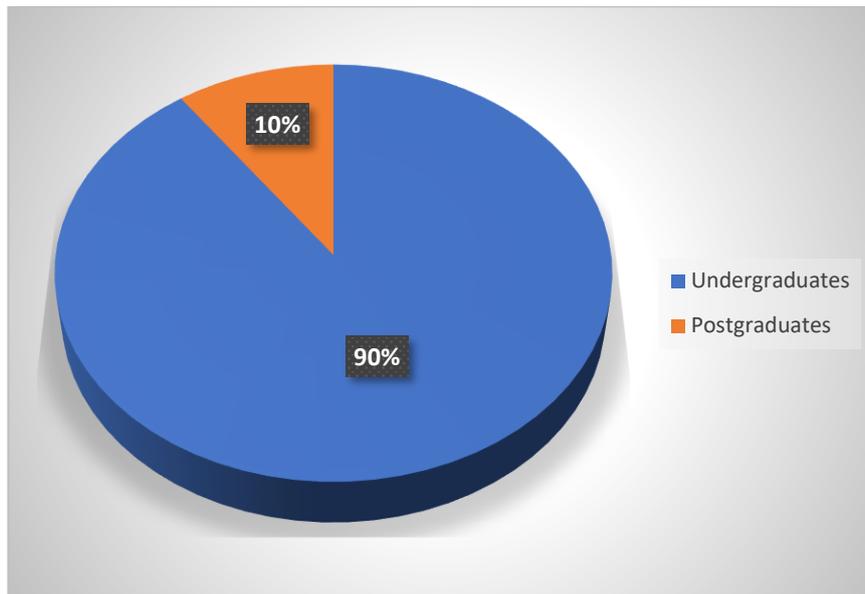


Figure 3 – Percentage for Education Level

Referring to Figure 4 of demographic profile of the research study based on cluster, the respondents of the survey showed 85% were from science & technology, 15% from social sciences & humanities and none from business & administration.

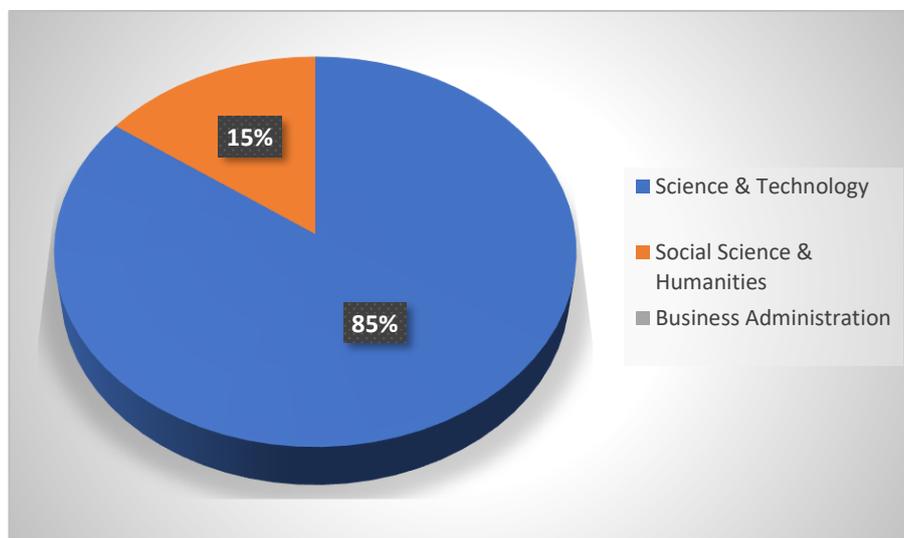


Figure 4 – Percentage based on Research Cluster

Findings for Motivation for Learning a Language

This section presents data to answer research question 1- How do learners perceive their motivation to learn? Based on the data in Table 2 reveals the perceptions of learners regarding their motivation to learn a foreign language. Overall, learners seem highly motivated to engage with their language classes and take proactive steps to ensure their understanding and participation. Notably, attending classes punctually and consistently is rated very high at mean value 4.7, indicating a strong commitment to learning. Additionally,

learners' express enjoyment and willingness to participate in various classroom activities, indicating a positive attitude towards the learning process where the mean value is 4.5. However, there are areas where motivation appears slightly lower, such as speech practices during class, which received a lower mean score of 3.6. This suggests that while learners generally enjoy the learning environment and activities, there may be specific aspects of language learning that they find less engaging or challenging. Overall, the findings indicate the importance of both individual effort and a supportive classroom environment in fostering motivation among language learners.

Table 2

Mean for Motivation to Learn a Foreign Language

STATEMENT/ QUESTION	Mean
MTLQ1 – I make sure I attend all the classes without fail.	4.7
MTLQ2 – I make sure I am prepared for my language classes.	3.9
MTLQ3 – I understand what is taught by the teacher.	4.0
MTLQ4 – If I do not understand, I will ask my teacher.	3.8
MTLQ5 – If I do not understand, I will ask my friends.	4.5
MTLQ6 – I also make my own effort to learn the language online.	4.0
MTLQ7 – I enjoy participating in activities in class.	4.3
MTLQ8 – I enjoy learning a language with my classmates.	4.5
MTLQ10 – I enjoy speech practices during class.	3.6

Findings for Fear of Learning a Language

This section presents data to answer research question 2- How do learners perceive their fear in learning a language? In the context of this study, fear of learning language is categorised into three (3) subcategories; (i) communication apprehension, (ii) fear of negative evaluation, and (ii) test anxiety.

Table 3

Mean for (i) Communication Apprehension

STATEMENT / QUESTION	Mean
CAQ1 – I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.	3.1
CAQ2 – It frightens me when I do not understand what the teacher is saying in foreign language.	3.4
CAQ3 – I feel confident when I speak Japanese in my Japanese class.	3.0
CAQ4 – I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.	2.7
CAQ5 – I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	3.1
CAQ6 – I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.	2.9

CAQ7 – I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.	3.4
CAQ8 – I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.	3.2
CAQ9 – I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.	3.5
CAQ10 – I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language.	3.4

The analysis of language anxiety among foreign language learners reveals varying levels of discomfort and confidence. Based on Table 3, the highest mean score (3.5) indicates that students feel most anxious when they don't understand every word the teacher says, highlighting a significant source of anxiety. The lowest mean score (2.7) shows that students feel comparatively less anxious about speaking with native speakers. The overall average mean score is approximately 3.17, suggesting a moderate level of anxiety. These results emphasize the need for targeted interventions to address specific anxiety triggers and improve learners' confidence in language learning settings.

Table 4

Mean for (ii) Fear of Negative Evaluation

STATEMENT/ QUESTION	Mean
FNEQ1 – I do not worry about making mistakes in language class.	3.5
FNEQ2 – I keep thinking that the other students are better at language than I am.	4.1
FNEQ3 – It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.	3.3
FNEQ 4 – I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	2.8
FNEQ 5 – I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.	3.6
FNEQ6 – I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.	3.1

Based on the fear of negative evaluation, the majority of the respondents keep thinking that the other students are better at language than they are with a mean value of 4.1 as shown in Table 4. This is followed by the feeling that the other students can speak the foreign language better than they can themselves (mean value of 3.6). On the other hand, more respondents are receptive when the language teacher corrects every mistake that they make (mean value of 2.8). Overall, this finding shows that the respondents fear of learning a language is driven by the negative evaluation that they may get from others.

Table 5

Mean for (iii) Test Anxiety

STATEMENT/QUESTION	Mean
TAQ1 – I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.	3.3
TAQ2 – It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes	3.1
TAQ3 – During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	3.2
TAQ4 – I am usually at ease during my tests in my language class.	3.9
TAQ5 – I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class	3.6
TAQ6 – I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language class.	2.1
TAQ7 – In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	2.9
TAQ8 – Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it	3.0

Table 5 had demonstrated the mean value for anxiety test. Based on data, most of the undergraduate students were relieved and did not experience any anxiety situation during the language test. This was shown with the highest mean value of 3.9. On the other hand, some students were worried about the consequences of failing and trembling when their name was called up during foreign language class with a mean score of 3.6 and 3.3 respectively. Despite that, with a lower mean value of 2.9, students get nervous in language class. It indicated that some of them are feeling anxiety and fear towards learning foreign language. However, there were also some students that wouldn't worry and did not focus on foreign language classes with mean score values of 3.1 and 3.2 respectively. In short, most of the students get anxiety and fear of foreign language learning classes, consequently making them well prepared.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussions

This study was focused on addressing two research questions. The first research question is on how the learners perceive their motivation to learn. From the findings, it was indicated that both individual effort and a supportive classroom environment had an important impact in fostering motivation among foreign language learners. The individual effort refers to the actions and contributions that initiate to complete a task. Whereas a supportive classroom environment. The supportive environment involves positive including reinforcement from teachers, students emotional safety, collaboration and cooperation during class. Liao et al (2018), highlight the creative pedagogy into foreign language classrooms. The result from the study indicated that creativity technique pedagogy significantly improved learners' English learning performance, creativity, and learning motivation. This previous study had supported the current study in which strengthening the importance of a creative classroom environment would impact the learning motivation. In addition, Vo et al (2024), had emphasised the relevant classroom-based practices would enhance students' long-term engagement and motivation theories in second language learning and teaching.

For the second research question, this current study was focused on how learners perceive their fear in learning a language. This study, there were three elements to be examined towards fear of learning foreign language which were communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and anxiety test. Based on the communication apprehension, the students would experience anxiety throughout conversation by using foreign language as communication language. This would emphasize the need for targeted interventions to address specific anxiety triggers and improve learners' confidence in language learning settings. Grant et al (2014), had studied this foreign language communication and the findings present the anxiety related to speaking a foreign language to the virtual environment. The fear of negative evaluation was the second element examined in this study. Negative evaluation refers to an assessment that highlights deficiencies, weaknesses, or areas of poor performance. From the findings, it was exhibited that the student's fear of learning a language was driven by the negative evaluation that they may get from others. This result was aligned with the anxiety test that showed most of the students get anxiety and fear of foreign language learning classes. In conclusion, this research provides the information on anxiety emotion that experience by undergraduate students and their need of supportive classroom environment and individual supports to improve learning process of foreign language.

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

The pedagogical implications of motivation and fear in foreign language learning is crucial for educators to create effective teaching strategies and supportive environments. There are some potential pedagogical implications regarding this study for example teachers need to be creative and create a Supportive Environment to cultivate a supportive and inclusive classroom environment where students feel safe to take risks and make mistakes. In addition, educators promote and encourage intrinsic motivation by fostering a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in language learners. For future research, there are some gaps of investigation on digital tools, online resources, and virtual learning environments that can either enhance or hinder students' motivation and alleviate or exacerbate language learning anxieties.

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