

## Fear of Learning Foreign Languages: A Study Across Disciplines

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### Abstract

Learning a foreign language can be fun for a lot of learners, however, it can also be traumatic for many learners. Countless times, when they are anxious in the classroom, they choose to remain silent and passive. This study aims to detect the fear factors, motives, and challenges of learning a foreign language among learners from three different disciplines: business, social sciences, and science and technology at a public university in Malaysia. It adopted a quantitative method using a survey instrument adapted from Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). Data were collected from 100 participants (Male=50; Female=50) who were enrolled to learn French and were purposely chosen to represent the population. Data collected through questionnaires were analyzed using statistical analysis. The findings of this study indicated the participants experienced apprehension due to their own self-related psychological, self-perceptions, and beliefs. Above all, their personality traits and perceived psychology contribute to their anxiety level. It is reported that the three perceived psychological barriers like communication anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety are the major fear factors. This study suggests some pedagogical strategies which may be considered learning and teaching practices at tertiary level education. The findings will assist both learners and educators to be more conscious of foreign language anxiety to overcome this perturbing issue.

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

### Introduction

#### Background of Study

Foreign is a definition given by Moeller and Catalano (2015) to a language that is not spoken in a community where the instruction happens and when it is acquired mostly in the classroom setting. In Malaysia, learning French as a foreign language has always been a

challenging zone for learners where they are exposed to French only in a language class. Most learners express their worries and anxiety about learning French as a foreign language.

Numerous researchers coined the term fear as anxiety, worry, panic, tension, mental block, nervousness, passive, and apprehension (Abu-Rabia, 2004; Spielberger, 1983). These terms are used to describe the fear responses which hinder learners' ability to perform successfully in foreign language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986). They added that fear is restricted to the language learning milieu since it falls into the type of specific anxiety reactions.

There is a rising number of studies on French as a foreign language in the Malaysian context which are focusing on the fear of foreign language learning. For instance, there is a study on French as a foreign language employing a foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS) to examine the fear factors by (Ismail et al., 2022). In this study, it is also suggested that in higher education, foreign language anxiety is still very much present (Hashemi, 2011; Azman, 2009). Anxiety has a draining effect on any kind of learning process, in this case, foreign language learning which is vastly affected by numerous affective elements. The question of whether anxiety plays a crucial role in foreign language acquisition has only been partially answered. It is acknowledged that anxiety has an undesirable influence on the readiness of learners to communicate in the classroom.

Countless research has investigated the role of anxiety regarding four language skills (Yassin & Razak, 2017), in particular, foreign language speaking anxiety. While it is primordial to observe the pivotal role of gender in the fear of foreign languages (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2012; Tan & Xie, 2020), there is a growing number of studies that explored the relationship between FL anxiety and achievement, more specifically in the speaking domain (Nikosia & Esmero, 2019; Quinto & Macayan, 2019; Tanveer, 2007; Dalkılıç, 2001). The paradox of the relationship between FLA and learners' proficiency and performance has been long examined by many scholars and the studies have generated conflicting results.

Causal factors of distress are not the only approach to exploring FLA, finding the remedies or interventions would also aid learners to reduce their apprehension. Similarly, numerous academics are able to come up with several intervention strategies in a view to support learners to overcome their fear of foreign languages (Enisa & Karairmak, 2017; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009).

A limited number of scholars considered studying foreign language anxiety across disciplines, specifically in the Malaysian setting. For that reason, this research is carried out to bridge the gap in knowledge.

From a pedagogical view, the current study will bring new discoveries to both learners and instructors. During classes, learners will be able to identify their sources of fear and pick up how to navigate their fear during classes. Simultaneously, they will acquire methods how to overcome their anxiety during the learning setting. Hence, the instructors should be mindful and be able to diagnose the presence of different types of anxiety in FL for them to demonstrate empathy to their learners. Additionally, from the findings of the current research, it is hoped that the instructors are able to produce classroom activities to minimize the fear of foreign languages as didactic implications.

Fear of learning a foreign language is still considered to be a moderately new area within foreign language research in the Malaysian setting. Despite the increasing number of studies investigating foreign language anxiety (Daud et al., 2022; Fakhruddin et al., 2022; Böttger &

Költzsch, 2020; Rahmat, 2019; Tzoannopoulou, 2016), there is a limited number of research dealing with learners from different disciplines at the tertiary level in Malaysia. Following this, in a study done by Fakhrudin et al (2022), they recommend that future research could be carried out to investigate different kinds of fear triggered by diverse groups of learners coming from a specific target language, and in this study, we are looking at learners from different disciplines taking French as a foreign language. Hence, the present research aims to investigate in what manner fear factors are experienced by learners across disciplines during the foreign language learning process and the researchers have intended to relate fear with factors such as communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety.

### **Statement of Problem**

Studies have shown that language anxiety is a significant factor in both language proficiency and academic performance, with high levels of anxiety negatively correlated with both. Ainol and Isarji (2009) suggested that providing support and strategies to help students manage and reduce their anxiety could be beneficial for improving their language learning outcomes. Saranraj and Meenakshi (2016) found that anxiety among cross-disciplinary learners in an engineering course significantly affected their language use, particularly in group discussions. To address this, creating a supportive learning environment with opportunities for collaborative learning may help reduce anxiety and improve language learning outcomes.

Cross-disciplinary learners may experience anxiety related to learning a foreign language for various reasons. They may perceive themselves as being at a disadvantage compared to learners who are more focused on language learning, leading to concerns about their ability to communicate effectively. Furthermore, their lack of experience with the cultural and social contexts in which the language is used may result in anxiety related to using the language appropriately and in a culturally sensitive manner. Quinto and Macayan (2019) suggests that cross-disciplinary learners may experience anxiety related to the uncertainty of their language needs, their language goals, and the relevance of learning a foreign language to their field. Addressing these concerns may require tailored approaches to language learning that better align with the specific needs of cross-disciplinary learners. (See Young, 1994).

Hence, this study aims to investigate and compare the fear of learning foreign languages among individuals from different disciplines. This investigation is done to answer the following questions

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

### **Literature Review**

This section discusses the foreign language learning across disciplines, motives and challenges of foreign language learning. Additionally, the review on the past studies done with relation to the fear of learning foreign language and the conceptual framework that governs the study will also be provided in the following.

#### *Learning Foreign Language learning across Disciplines*

Research on fear of foreign language has attained an important place in language learning. Keeping into account the significance of affect in language learning, the study aimed

to investigate foreign language anxiety (FLA) from three major disciplines which are present in tertiary learners. In support of Horwitz et al (2017) found that learner's language anxiety from different disciplines is very much present in communication, evaluation and test (Horwitz et al., 1986). On the other hand, a large body of research has provided strong data about the harmful effects of fear of learning foreign language and Young (1994) has added that language learners from different disciplines may provide other enlightenments for difficulties which they face. It is normally observed that learners with better academic achievement, on average, have a much stronger approach to learning than the least performed learners and consequently less anxious in learning French as a foreign language. Thus, learners from three major disciplines are different in so many ways. Their traits and personality differ from each other, even more between the three disciplines (Ehrman et al., 2003). As suggested by Horwitz et al (1986), the fear of learning of foreign languages originates from three elements and they are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Taking some examination across disciplines, the researchers decided to pursue the current investigation. This will contribute to the scarce literature that SL/FL has currently in Malaysian context.

#### Past Studies

##### Past Studies for Motives for Learning Foreign Languages across Disciplines

Numerous studies have been done to investigate the motives for learning a foreign language. The study by Ainol and Isarji (2009), investigated Malaysian student's motivation to learn a foreign language. A triangulation method consisting of survey questionnaire, document analysis and focus group discussion were employed for data collection. 500 students from 2 Malaysian public universities responded to the survey. Responses to the survey were subjected to the Rasch and descriptive analyses in order to capture salient features of students' responses. The findings of the study indicate that students were extrinsically and intrinsically motivated to learn a foreign language.

Another study by Lu et al (2019), investigated Motivation for Learning Spanish as a Foreign Language: The Case of Chinese L1 Speakers at University Level. Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) was used as a framework. The respondents were 17 Chinese university students' majoring in English. A Q-methodology and complementary interviews were employed to analyse the data. The findings showed that these students displayed two types of foreign language motivation, the ideal L2 selves and "ought to L2 selves". The first had a strong motivation to learn English instead of Spanish. The latter, learned Spanish with a motivation closely related to their ought-to L2 selves.

##### Past Studies of Challenges in Foreign Language Learning across Disciplines

Many studies have been conducted to investigate the challenges in foreign language learning across disciplines. The study by Zakaria et al (2007) is done to investigate Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) students' challenges especially in terms of anxiety upon learning foreign languages & factors causing such feeling. Factors including communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, general feeling of anxiety and overall anxiety. Two types of students who learn foreign language, the Japanese language at UTM participated in this study. One is Teaching English as Second Language course (TESL) students who took this subject for course requirements (54 respondents) while the general students learnt this language as an elective subject (73 respondents). These respondents answered questionnaires in which

researchers had patterned after the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). Data then was extracted and analyzed through SPSS and shows that TESL and general students exhibit the same level of anxiety. Both students found that fear of negative evaluation is the main cause of anxiety while communicating anxiety is low among them. Generally, the two groups of students show high levels of anxiety.

Next, the study by Nicosia and Esmero (2019) also looked at challenges of learning foreign language. Similar as per above research, this study focused on students' challenges concerning anxiety, specifically English anxiety related to respondents' academic achievement. A total of 267 Grade 11 students from University of Boho, Senior High School Department in the Philippines took part in this study aged 16-18 years old. Among the participants, 144 are from General Academics Strand (GAS), 63 are from Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), 43 are from Accounting, Business, and Management (ABM) and 17 are from Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMMS). A questionnaire adapted from FLCAS was employed along with frequency, percentages, weighted mean, Chi-Square, T-Test (uncorrelated) and Pearson r. From this study, it can be concluded that overall students have a low level of English anxiety. On top of that, the level of anxiety is indeed affecting the student's academic performance as students with lower level of English anxiety perform better academically. However, despite coming from different strands, students display a similar level of anxiety with STEM, HUMMS and ABM had Outstanding results and GAS respondents had Satisfactory ratings.

### Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study. This study is adapted from (Horwitz et al., 1986). Learning a new language often forces the learners to embark into a new environment and that means leaving their comfort zone (Rahmat, 2019). This causes fear of learning. 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.

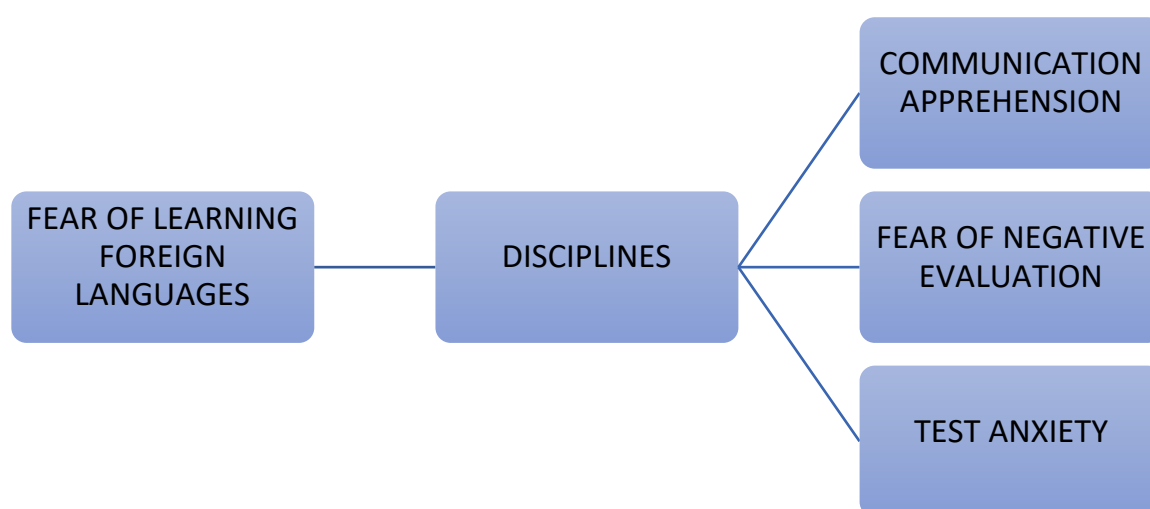


Figure 1- Conceptual Framework of the Study - Causes of Foreign Language Anxiety

**Communication Apprehension**

Speaking and communicating can be a stressful task for many foreign language learners in class and in public. This is due to the existence of foreign language apprehension that serves as an interference for the learners to speak in a foreign language. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) believe that communication apprehension (CA) is one of the focal reasons of foreign language anxiety. They define CA as a kind of shyness regarded as fear of or anxiety about speaking with others and the idea of CA is hypothesized within social and academic milieu such as stage fright or public speaking. In addition to that, one of the three aspects that influence language learning process is about what perceptions an individual has about himself or herself is examined in Tanveer's (2007). According to him, apprehension commences the moment and how learners perceive and believe in themselves and how they want others to see them. The theory of foreign language acquisition is often allied with Krashen's theory (1982) and he states that once there is a substantial input to language and with low apprehension levels, learners with a positive attitude towards language acquisition can be a successful language learner. Learners who generally have trouble expressing themselves in groups may appear more anxious when their performance is being monitored constantly in classroom settings (Horwitz et al., 1986). Hence, this communicative situation relates directly with test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, the other two determinants in foreign language anxiety. Nevertheless, language acquisition is not simply a transmission of knowledge but it is an intricate process of personal and social constructivism.

**Fear of Negative Evaluation**

Learning a foreign language can be a challenging task, especially for individuals from different disciplines. One of the main factors that can cause anxiety and impede the learning process is the fear of negative evaluation. This fear can be defined as the apprehension about being judged or evaluated negatively by others, which can result in a range of negative emotions, such as shame, embarrassment, and self-doubt. The fear of negative evaluation is particularly relevant for cross-discipline learners, who may have different expectations and communication styles than those of the target language. Several studies have investigated the impact of the fear of negative evaluation on language learning among cross-discipline learners. For example, a study by Horwitz et al (1986) found that the fear of negative evaluation was the most significant factor contributing to foreign language anxiety among college students. The study also found that students who experienced higher levels of anxiety were more likely to avoid participating in class, which further inhibited their language learning. Yassin and Razak (2017) examined the relationship between the fear of negative evaluation and speaking anxiety among Yemen learners of English. The study found that the learners who experienced higher levels of negative evaluation fear tended to have higher levels of speaking anxiety, which in turn inhibited their speaking performance.

These studies highlight the importance of addressing the fear of negative evaluation in language learning, particularly for cross-discipline learners. Strategies such as creating a supportive learning environment, providing positive feedback, and promoting learner autonomy can help to reduce the fear of negative evaluation and improve language learning outcomes. By recognizing the unique challenges faced by cross-discipline learners and providing effective support, language educators can help to foster a positive and successful learning experience for all.



*Test Anxiety*

Defined as an unpleasant emotional state in which an individual perceives danger, feels powerless and experiences tension in preparation for an unexpected danger, is a term associated with anxiety, which is categorized generally into three types: trait, state and situation-specific anxiety. Among these three, situation-specific anxiety is the type that correlated to L2 anxiety. L2 anxiety has three varieties: Communication Apprehension, Fear of Negative Evaluation and Test Anxiety. Test Anxiety is the variety that is highlighted in this section. Described as apprehension over academic evaluation, Test Anxiety is a fear of feeling incompetent in test situations and an uncomfortable experience held consciously or unconsciously by learners in various situations. It is a type of anxiety regarding apprehension over academic evaluation which originated from a fear of failure (Horwitz and Young, 1991). In a study conducted by Aydin et al (2006), learners' experiences, teachers' observations and the related literature underlined that Test Anxiety affects negatively on foreign language learning process and it mostly leads to negative effects which is a physical problem. In the same study, the learners with a high level of Test Anxiety experienced a headache, stomach, increasing heart pulse and acne, before, after and during test administration. Plus, Test Anxiety and bad grades cause some psychological problems which lead to low self-confidence and relations between learners and their parents and friends.

**Methodology**

This quantitative study is done to investigate. 100 participants were purposely chosen from a public university in Malaysia. 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 communication apprehension, section C has 7 items on fear of negative evaluation and section D has 15 items on test anxiety.

Table 1

*Distribution of Items in 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***Reliability Statistics**

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.795	33

Data is collected via google 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

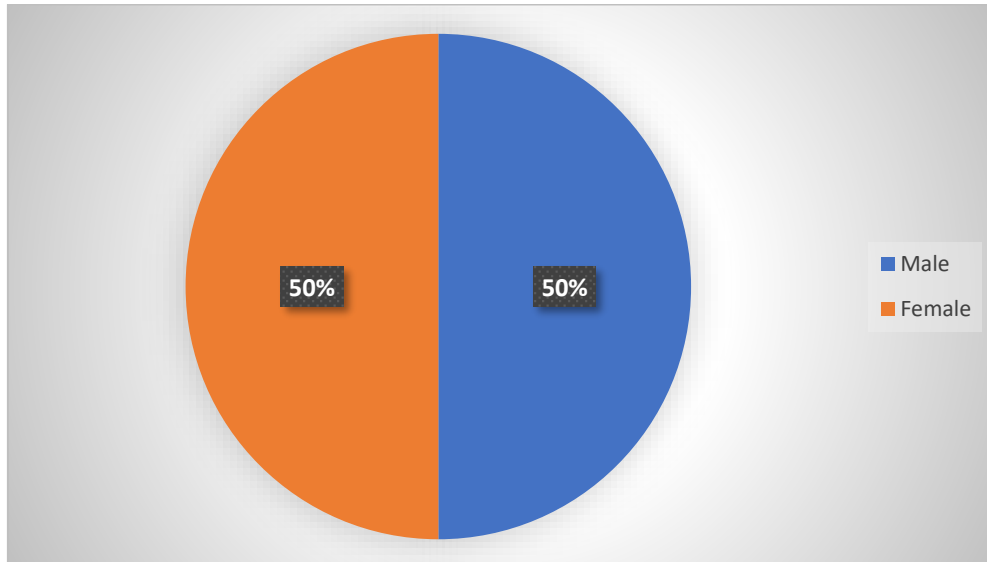


Figure 1 - Percentage for Gender

Figure 1 shows that male and female respondents are equally the same number of respondents, 50% respectively.

##### Q2 Level

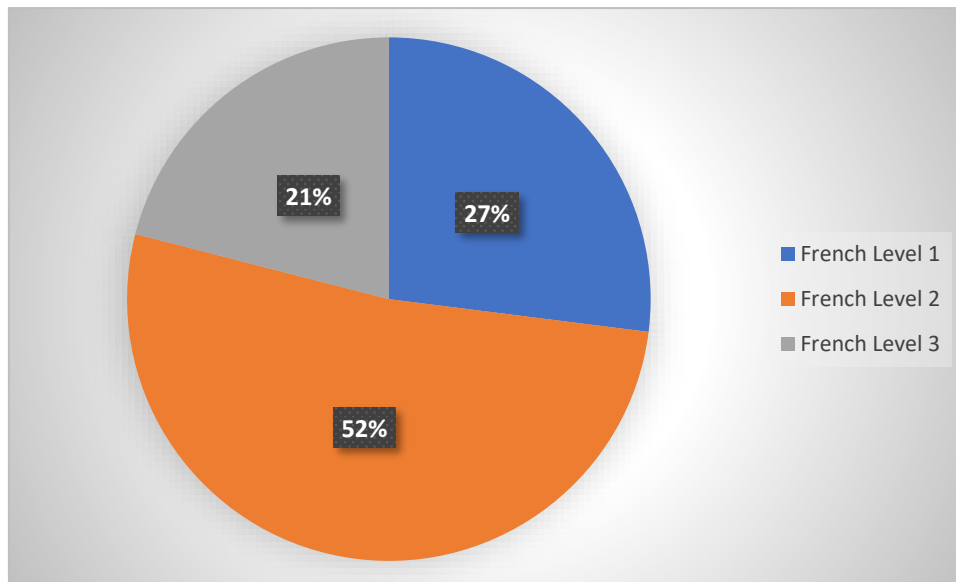


Figure 2 - Percentage for Level

Figure 2 shows that respondents are divided by 27% from French Level 1, 52% from French Level 2 and 21% from French Level 3.



Q3. Discipline

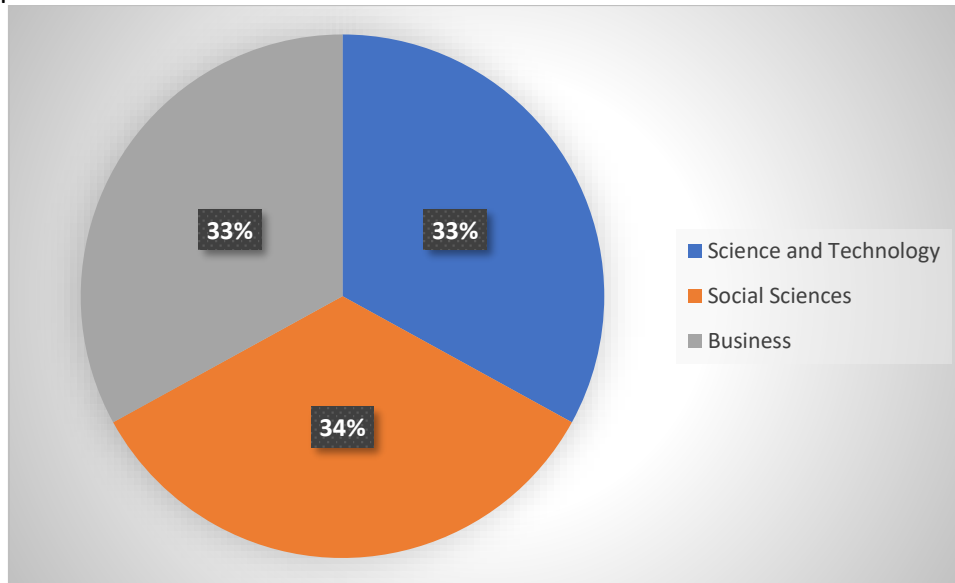


Figure 3 - Percentage for Discipline

Figure 3 shows that, the majority of the respondents are from social sciences (SS=42%), while other disciplines like business (B) and science and technology (S&T) take up 33% each.

*Findings for Comprehension Apprehension*

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

## Communication Apprehension

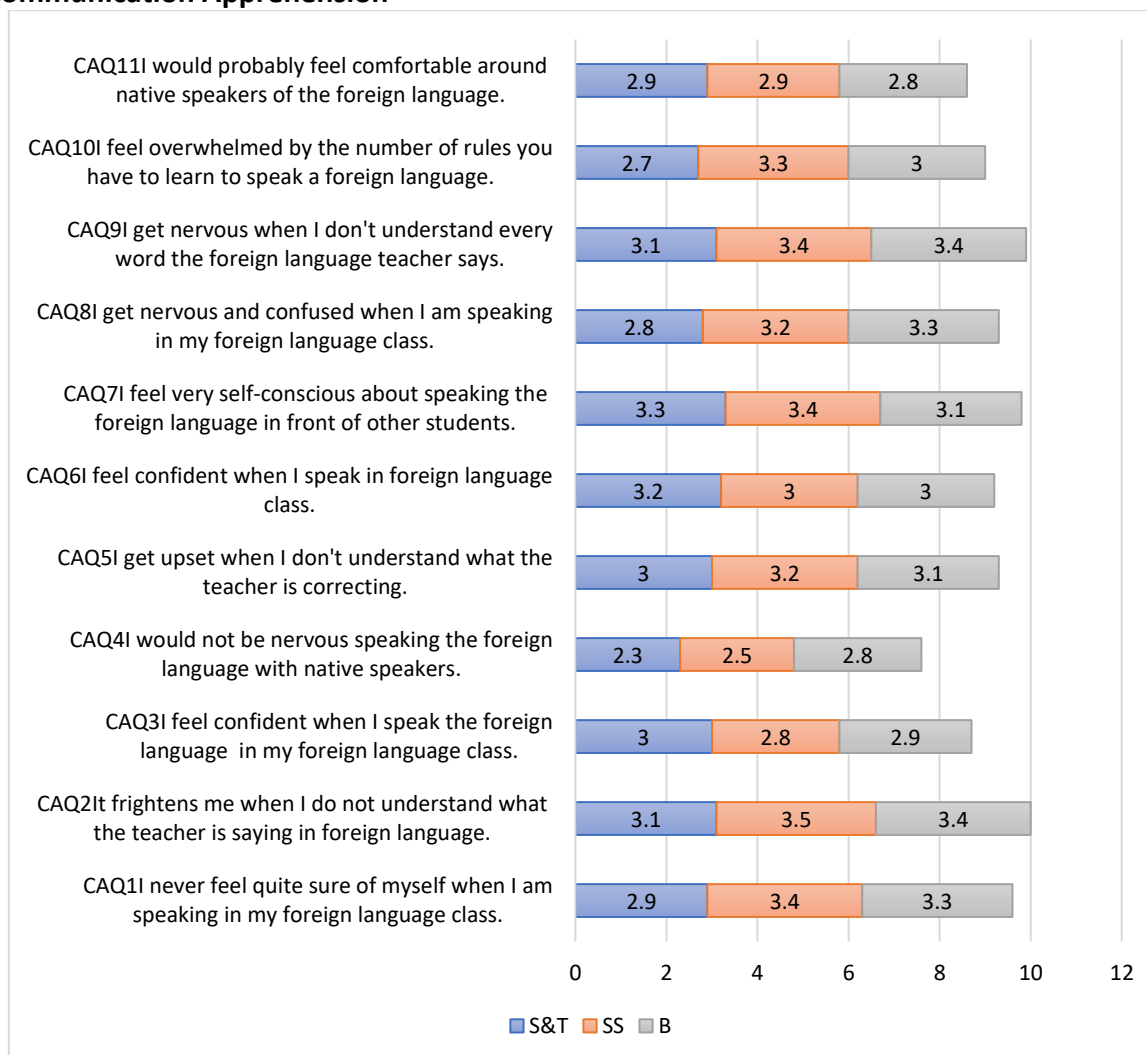


Figure 4 - Mean for Comprehension Apprehension

Figure 4 shows the comparison of mean for Comprehension Apprehension. S&T, the highest mean is for the item "I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students." (S&T = 3.3, SS = 3.4, B = 3.1). For SS & B students the highest mean is for the item "It frightens me when I do not understand what the teacher is saying in foreign language" (SS = 3.5, S&T = 3.1, B = 3.4). Similarly, SS & B students score the same mean for item "I get nervous when I don't understand every word the foreign language teacher says." (SS = 3.4, B = 3.4, S&T = 3.1). The lowest mean is for the item "I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers." (S&T = 2.3, SS = 2.5, B = 2.8).

*Findings for Fear of Negative Evaluation*

This section presents data to answer research question 2: RQ2 - How does fear of negative evaluation influence fear of language learning across disciplines?

### Fear of Negative Evaluation

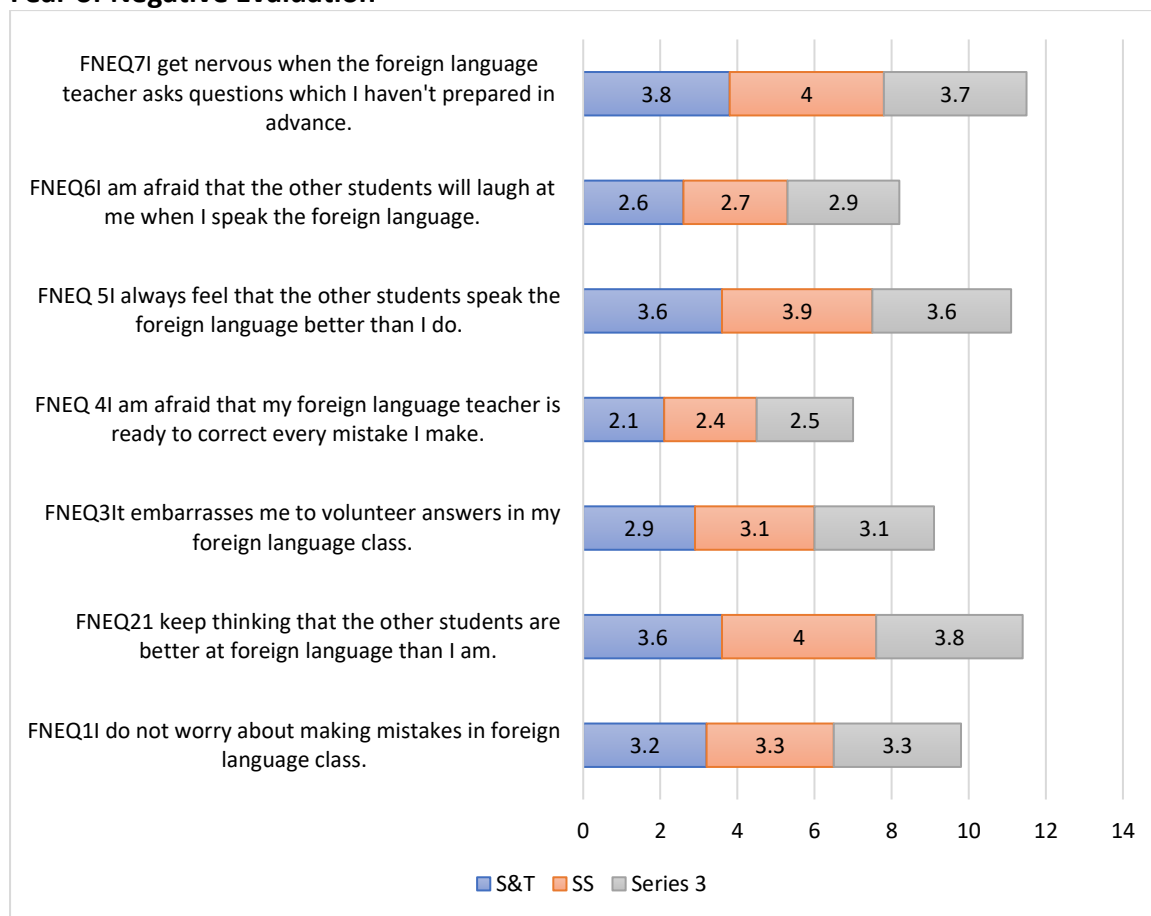


Figure 5 - Mean for Fear of Negative Evaluation

Figure 5 shows the comparison of mean for fear of negative evaluation. For item “keep thinking that the other students are better at foreign language than I am”, S&T had a mean of 3.6, SS had a mean of 4 while B had a mean of 3.8. Next, for the items “get nervous when the foreign language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance”, S&T had a mean of 3.8, SS had a mean of 4 while B had a mean of 3.7. The lowest mean is for the item “am afraid that my foreign language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make” (S&T=2.1; SS=2.4; B=2.5).

#### *Findings for Test Anxiety*

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

Anxiety

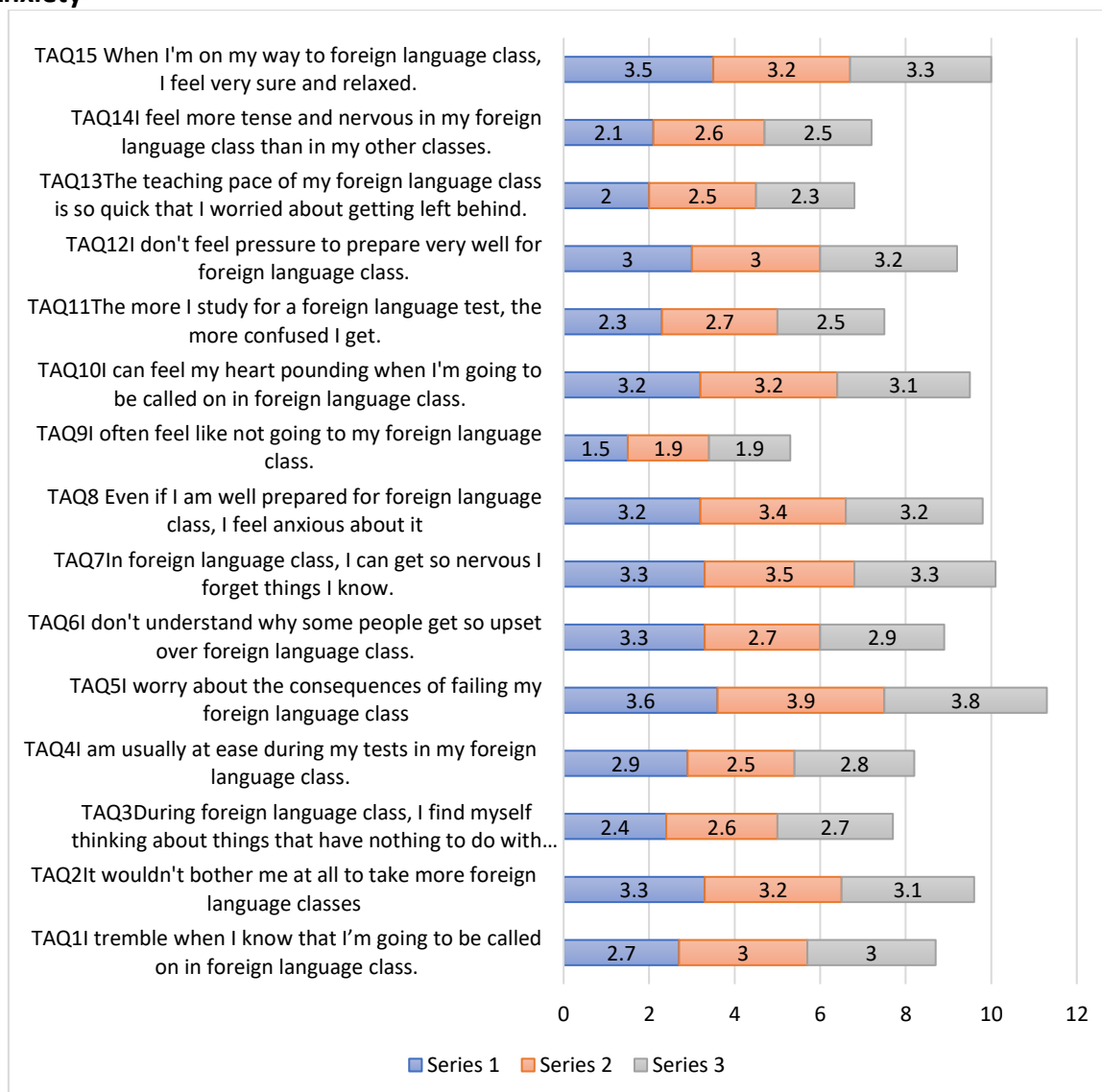


Figure 6 - Mean for Test Anxiety

Findings from Figure 6 for test anxiety revealed that across three disciplines in the survey, respondents from all disciplines exhibit almost similar means in a class, they can feel their heart pounding when they are going to be called on (SS=3.2, S&T=3.2, B=3.1). The least nervous group of respondents are from S&T when compared with SS and B. They are usually at ease during tests in foreign language class (2.9). Plus, they are the least likely to tremble when they know that they are going to be called on in class (2.7) in contrast with B (3) and SS (3). It is also discovered that while others often feel like not going to foreign language class (B, SS=1.9), the low mean of 1.5 shows that they fare better (1.5) than the rest. Moreover, it would not bother them at all to take more foreign language classes (3.3). Plus, they (3.3) do not understand why others (SS=2.7, B=2.9) get so upset over foreign language class. Furthermore, they are the most relaxed and feel very sure when they are on their way to class (3.5) among the others (SS=3.2, B=3.3). Nevertheless, the most anxious are from SS. They worry about the consequences of failing their foreign language class (3.9) compared to others (B=3.8, S&T=3.6). Additionally, they feel more tense and nervous in foreign language class than in other classes (2.6). They get upset about getting left behind when the teaching pace

of class is so fast (2.5). Also, the more they study, the more confused they get (2.7) in contrast with others (B=2.5, S&T=2.3). Similarly, they get so anxious in class, they forget things that they know (3.5) and even if they are well prepared for class, they still feel anxious about it (3.4). On the other hand, it is found that respondents from B (3.2) do not feel pressure to prepare very well for class, unlike the others (SS=3, S&T=3). To finish, they also find themselves thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course during class (2.7), not like other respondents (SS=2.7, S&T=2.4).

## **Conclusion**

### *Summary of Findings and Discussion*

According to the findings, it appears that students from science and technology disciplines tend to experience high levels of communication apprehension when speaking a foreign language in front of others, while social science students may feel intimidated by foreign language teachers who they believe may judge or criticize them for not understanding. In contrast, business students tend to experience anxiety when they struggle to comprehend every word spoken by the foreign language teacher. These findings suggest communication apprehension can manifest in different ways depending on the discipline of the learner, highlighting the importance of tailoring language learning strategies to meet the specific needs of each student. A study by MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) found that communication apprehension was a key predictor of foreign language anxiety among university students, and that learners who experienced high levels of apprehension tended to avoid language learning tasks and situations where the language needed to be used. Horwitz et al (1986) found that communication apprehension was one of the major sources of foreign language anxiety among college students, and that learners who were highly apprehensive tended to experience difficulties with communication, which further exacerbated their anxiety. These findings suggest that addressing communication apprehension is crucial for promoting successful foreign language learning among cross-disciplinary learners.

The findings of the study show that a significant number of students across various disciplines experience fear when learning a foreign language. To address this issue, several studies have investigated the impact of fear of negative evaluation on language learning. For example, Horwitz et al (1986) found that fear of negative evaluation was the most significant factor contributing to foreign language anxiety among college students, while Park (2019) found that learners with higher levels of negative evaluation fear tended to have more speaking anxiety, which in turn hindered their speaking performance. To help reduce fear of negative evaluation and anxiety, language educators can create supportive learning environments, provide positive feedback, and promote learner autonomy. Additionally, collaborative learning opportunities and a culturally sensitive learning environment could also help reduce anxiety and improve language learning outcomes.

### *Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research*

Findings from this study lend support to Horwitz et al (1986) which reaffirmed that the fear of negative evaluation was the most significant contributor to anxiety levels. To help alleviate anxiety and promote language learning, teachers should create a positive and supportive classroom environment, encourage participation, and provide opportunities for students to use the language in meaningful contexts. They should also provide clear and specific feedback to help students understand their strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, incorporating cultural activities and materials into language instruction can help to increase motivation and

interest in learning the language. Finally, teachers should address the sources of anxiety directly, helping students develop coping strategies and overcome their fear of negative evaluation.

Future research in the field of foreign language learning for cross-discipline learners should focus on investigating the factors that contribute to anxiety, including the impact of cultural differences. Effective intervention strategies should be developed and tested to alleviate this anxiety. The impact of different instructional approaches and technology on reducing foreign language anxiety and promoting language learning should also be explored.

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