

Language Awareness and its Importance in French Language Learning among The Students at The Public Higher Educational Institutions in Malaysia

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i8/18085> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i8/18085

Published Date: 17 August 2023

Abstract

The development of French Language Learning and Teaching has been spreading in the Malaysian education system since the 1980s. Subsequently, French Foreign Language (FFL) teaching and learning are currently spreading in Malaysia, notably at the Public Higher Educational Institutions (IPTA), in compliance with the Malaysian government's globalization goals. The current study seeks to determine the students' awareness and the significance of French Language Learning (FLL) at the respective Public Higher Educational Institutions (IPTA) in Malaysia. The present analytical study involves 329 students from twelve IPTAs: UITM, UKM, UPM, UPM, UPM, UPM, UMK, USM, UM, USIM, UTM, UPSI, UUM, and UMT. The current qualitative examination of FFL students' replies to their resolve to learn a certain foreign language demonstrates that language awareness and importance are intertwined in their language learning success.

Keywords: Awareness, Importance, Language learning, French, Public Higher Educational Institution (IPTA)

Introduction

Languages were underlined as the communicative tools that permit us to discuss intensively with everyone else. According to Ahmad (2020), the ability to speak more than one language is essential to compete in today's globalized era. Furthermore, language can be regarded as a systematic system applied for a specific application among a group of people in their daily routines, (Nguyen, 2017). These days, French is taken as the common language in all parts of the world apart from English, Mandarin, Hindi, and Spanish. It may be a foreign language, but international in its significance. According to data obtained from the International Organization of Francophonie 2022, French was ranked as the fifth most spoken language in the world. Simultaneously, this foreign language was officially introduced in our

education system mainly at Malaysian boarding schools in the 1980s, on account of the initiative taken by a few Malaysian educators who had gained a certain comprehension during colonial times, (Machart and Lim, 2017). The Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) initially implemented it in 1984, and French language teaching (FLT) grew rapidly in the 2000s through the internationalization of higher education. As time passed by, this foreign language has not only become a feature of Malaysian boarding schools, but the MOE has also expanded French learning and teaching to selected local daily schools.

Not only that, it is critical for language learners to comprehend how the language that they are learning works. They must have a conscious awareness of how it is being utilized, accordingly. In language acquisition contexts, learners' awareness underlined individuals' competency to identify and verbalize the rules that govern a new target language, (Tang and Calafato, 2021). To support language learners' consciousness-raising and empowerment, language practitioners must be deliberately and critically aware of the ideological and social elements influencing text and speech. According to Jmila (2019), one of the most noticeable characteristics of language awareness is that when learners pay close attention to the process of learning, they get deeper knowledge and learning.

Besides, the significance of learning a foreign language is determined by numerous fundamental instances, including the fact that French is regarded as an intriguing and vital language around the world. Despite its status as a foreign language in Algeria, French holds a preferential position as a "language for wider communication" (LWC) that were remarkable as a medium of communication across linguistic or cultural divides, (Fadhila and Rosa, 2022). Their quantitative research has underlined French is the most common language in bilingual/multilingual shops in the city, as evidenced by 118 signboards, mainly to transfer information and comprehend what is written in other languages. The foreign language appeared as code preference in 41 signs (31.3%), while it was utilized to provide factual information in the remaining 77 items.

Initially, foreign language students who are competently aware and have an optimistic perspective are more likely to achieve their goals in the foreign language learning process. The current study seeks to ascertain the level of language awareness and importance 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 towards strengthening FFL teaching and learning in Malaysia, namely in terms of foreign language teaching techniques and learning curriculum.

Research Questions

The present study was governed to answer the following research questions

- To what extent are students at the IPTAs in Malaysia aware of the French language skills course they learn?
- What is the importance of the French language among the IPTAs students who are learning it at their respective universities?

Research Objectives

The present study was conducted to achieve the following objectives

- To identify the level of awareness toward the French language skills course the students learn at the respective IPTAs.

- To analyze the IPTAs students' opinions relating to the importance of the French language they learn at their universities

Research Methodology

This quantitative study aims to investigate FFL students' language awareness and its importance in studying French as a foreign language at twelve IPTAs in Malaysia, namely UITM, UKM, UPM, UPMN, UMK, USM, UM, USIM, UTM, UPSI, UUM, and UMT. The survey instrument used in this study consisted of thirteen items that were delivered to 329 respondents. The entire distribution of respondents in the current research is depicted in Figure (1) below:

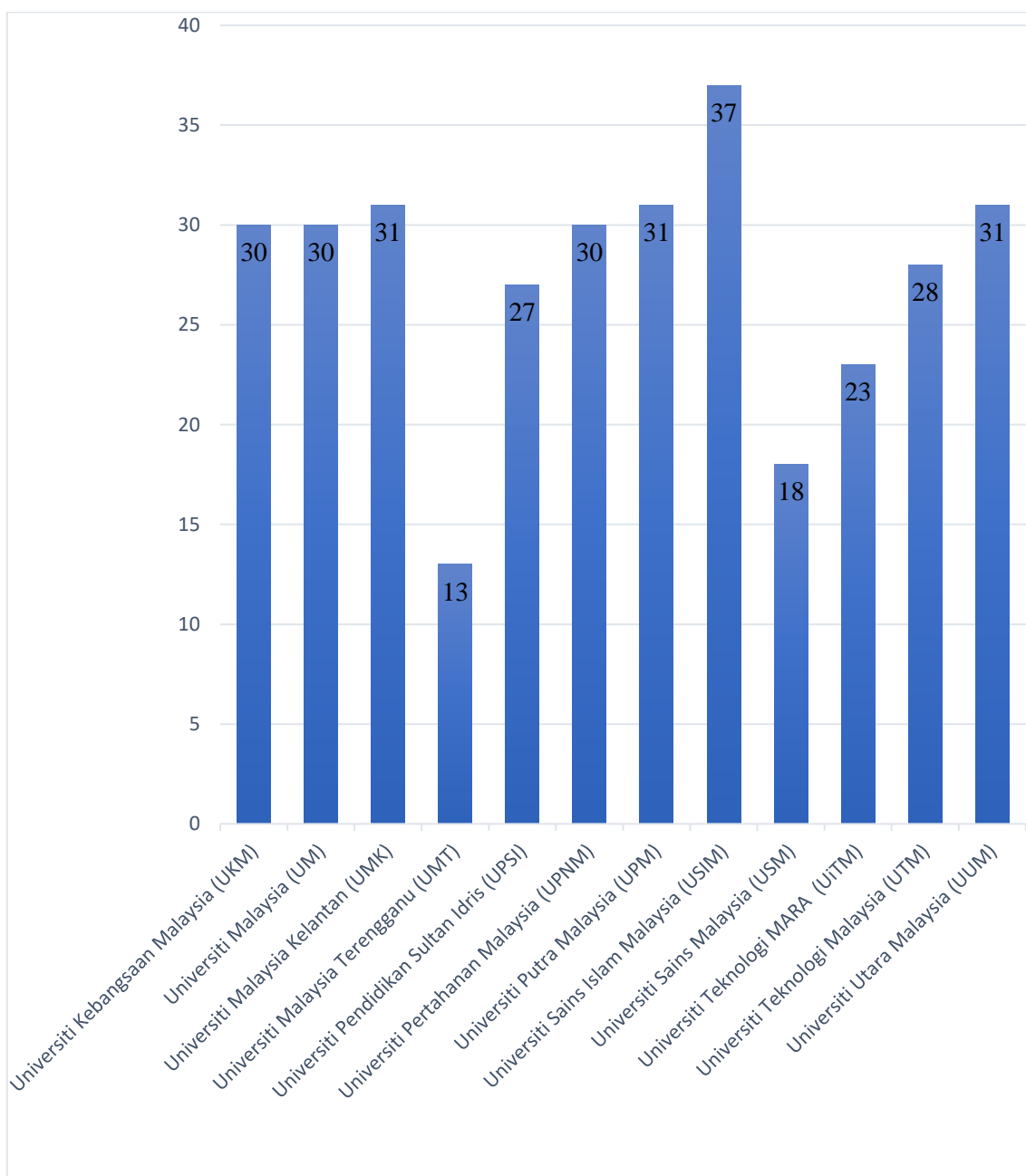


Figure (1): Number of respondents according to the respective Public Higher Educational Institutions (IPTA) in Malaysia

Findings of the Study

The current study's findings are divided into two broad sections. Language awareness (LA) is the subject of the initial section. Consequently, the second section is related to the importance of the French language among the respective students.

Students' Language Awareness (LA) of French Language Learning at Public Higher Educational Institutions (IPTA) in Malaysia

Table (1)

Students' Language Awareness (LA) of French Language Learning at Public Higher Educational Institutions (IPTA) in Malaysia

No.	Item	Strongly Disagree (SD)	Disagree (D)	Not Sure (NS)	Agree (A)	Strongly Agree (SA)
1	I am aware that French is an international language.	-	10 (3.0 %)	27 (8.2%)	127 (38.6%)	165 (50.2%)
2	I am aware that French is one of the main languages of the world	1 (0.3%)	23 (7.0%)	62 (18.8%)	152 (46.2%)	91 (27.7%)
3.	French is the language spoken in French colonies in most African countries.	1 (0.3%)	14 (4.3%)	118 (35.9%)	117 (35.6%)	79 (24%)
4.	I am aware that French has long spread in Malaysia.	1 (0.3%)	39 (11.9%)	97 (29.5%)	142 (43.2%)	50 (15.2%)
5.	I am aware that many Malaysians have mastered French.	36 (10.9%)	96 (29.2%)	111 (33.7%)	68 (20.7%)	18 (5.5%)
6.	French is an elective language offered in most	1 (0.3%)	9 (2.7%)	36 (10.9%)	161 (48.9%)	122 (37.1%)

	universities in the world.					
7.	French is taught in most schools in Malaysia.	29 (8.8%)	80 (24.3%)	109 (33.1%)	76 (23.1%)	35 (10.6%)
8.	French is taught in most universities in Malaysia.	3 (0.9%)	16 (4.9%)	44 (13.4%)	171 (52%)	95 (28.9%)

Table (1) provides an extensive overview relating to the student's awareness of learning French as a foreign language at their respective universities. Based on the observations, the respective FFL students presented their acknowledgment relating to French status and prestige. The overall result of the current study cited that FFL students were aware that French is an international language with 292 data (88.8%). Previously, French has been registered as a very useful interactive tool for certain international political and judicial purposes, having been employed in these domains for generations and having developed the lexis and structures necessary for them, (Wright, 2006). This correlates with Onichuk et al (2020) who promoted at the beginning of the 21st century, foreign language learning is undergoing significant changes. Subsequently, the English language is gaining importance, with French and other foreign languages taking a whole new position and ranking in second place after English. Furthermore, the expansion of French in academic writing and international research has been inclining over the years. According to Gella (2017), French has become the language of not only science, computing, diplomacy, tourism, and aviation but also research and academic writing. It has been widely accepted that the French language has come to dominate as the preferred language for many international scholarly journals. The trend is on the rise as academia is increasingly publishing in French in contemporary times, (Peter, 2019). In this regard, academic French represents both an opportunity and a threat to the majority. Therefore, it is undeniable that the status and prestige of this foreign language have an immense impact on the language acquisition process and results among learners, (Tódor and Dégi, 2016).

Besides, many nations regarded this language as an official or co-official language, and it is widely spoken in places where it does not have official status. French plays a vital role in varied aspects including the cultural, political, or economic life of many multinational countries in contemporary times. The overall result of the present study manifested the respective students also gave their agreement towards French credibility as one of the main languages around the world with 243 data (73.9%). This corresponds with Onichuk et al (2020) who assert at the beginning of the 21st century, foreign language learning is undergoing significant changes as French, German, and other foreign languages took a whole new position and ranked in second place after English.

Not only to forget, there are also 196 data (59.6%) recorded relating to the student's registration towards the foreign language's popularity as the most spoken language in French colonies in most African countries. This circumstance corresponds with Ngouo (2022) who declared most African nations have adopted the Western model of LIEP, which prioritizes ex-

colonial languages as official languages alongside the languages of education, media, and administration. The researcher explained some countries, such as Cameroon (home to over 270 African languages), have gone beyond preferring French and English as mediums of instruction in secondary schools and universities, to the expense of national languages.

Simultaneously, the significance of this international language in today's borderless world is apparent, and national growth is dependent on foreign domination including languages. One of the reasons for the worldwide advancement of the French language is due to organizations that contribute to the development of the foreign language via various programs developed and conducted by the government and non-government organizations. In the Malaysian context, the French language has begun evolving through the local educational system, (Zainul, 2015). The respective students in this study also recorded that they are aware the French language has long spread in Malaysia with 192 data (58.4%). The students also shared that they are aware of the raising amounts of Malaysians who can comprehend this foreign language with total circumstances of 86 data (26.2%).

In addition, language is a tool used for thinking which is the initial source of every student to be able to understand what is around them and tell humans or students to have their knowledge. As a result, language and education are things that are eternally connected. With the rapid growth of modern globalization, foreign languages are one of the most crucial forms of communication, particularly for students to improve their abilities. The application of foreign language learning in education is a form of interest and has functions and goals for the learners. Next, the results of this study embark that there are 283 data (86%) total of circumstances recorded in the respective students recognized the foreign language as an elective language offered in most universities in the world.

Despite the circumstances and the need to possess many languages, the Malaysian government proposed several programs to encourage foreign language teaching and learning in the nation's educational systems. In particular, the provision and learning of foreign languages including French has been introduced in line with the Malaysian Education Development Plan 2013-2025, which aims to encourage and produce more students with high competency in a new target language, (Abdul Karim and Subramaniam, 2022). The researcher added French language learning (FLL) is a popular subject that was taught in local educational settings including day schools, boarding schools, and higher educational institutions. Consequently, the current study exposed that French was taught in most schools in Malaysia with 111 data (33.7%) total occurrences. Meanwhile, there are 266 data (80.9%) gained from the present study manifest the students' agreement towards French learning and teaching at the higher educational institutions in Malaysia.

Initially, learning French as a foreign language is a competent life skill that is significant to transmit comprehensive engagement in various mediums of communication, Aririguzoh, S. (2022). Based on the observations in the current study, French has been inclusively perceived by varied levels among the respective students. This is an important aspect to sustain language learners' performances. As cited by Poldaufas in Hawkins (2018), language awareness is the competence, which goes conscious or not, to critically evaluate a language objectively. Similarly, an empirical study carried out by Tulasiewicz (1997) indicated language awareness (LA) can positively impact language curriculum development as it was functional in enhancing the students' motivation towards learning their new target language.

The importance of mastering French at Public Higher Educational Institutions (IPTA) in Malaysia

Table (2)

The importance of mastering French at Public Higher Educational Institutions (IPTA) in Malaysia

NO.	ITEM	Strongly Disagree (SD)	Disagree (D)	Not Sure (NS)	Agree	Strongly Agree (SA)
1.	Mastery of French is important to get a job at an international level.	-	11 (3.3%)	46 (14.0%)	158 (48.0%)	114 (34.7%)
2..	Provides an opportunity to understand French culture and philosophy.	-	4 (1.2%)	7 (2.1%)	139 (42.2%)	179 (54.4%)
3..	Facilitate interaction with native speakers.	-	1 (0.3)	9 (2.7%)	111 (33.7%)	208 (63.2%)
4..	Able to build social relationships at an international level more broadly	-	2 (0.6%)	5 (1.5%)	121 (36.8%)	201 (61.1%)
5.	Able to understand information written in French.	-	-	11 (3.3%)	114 (34.7%)	204 (62.0%)

Table (2) underlined the findings based on FFL students' assessment of the constraint importance of learning French at their respective universities. As a multicultural nation in this globalized period, Malaysia has been eventually affected by the present financial crisis. Malaysia's present job market constraints necessitated graduates to develop relevant abilities, including proficiency in a third language. This scenario was consistent with the findings of the current study, which documented the advantages and effects of FFL skills for a definite career privilege at an international level on the first rank with 272 data (82.7%). The introduction of a foreign language, particularly one whose native country retains a prestigious

position in the global economy, promises to be a valuable tool in promoting individual, national, and socioeconomic growth, (Makumane and Ngcobo, 2018). The findings listed in their study explained one common element that typically predominates in reasons stated by local societies is the availability of job prospects in several languages, including French. This scenario eventually manifests that the government of Lesotho is on the appropriate path toward encouraging the mastery of French as a foreign language besides official languages since this could potentially assist in overcoming socioeconomic crises and reduce reliance on other nations such as South Africa in the long term.

Not only that, the findings in the present study have subsequently manifested that FFL learning was remarkable to understand French culture and philosophy among the learners, particularly with 318 data (96.6%). According to Duff (2019), social aspects of target language acquisition also include cultural and philosophical aspects. Similarly, Lustyantje and Dewi (2020) cited the presence of French advocate impact on countries that preserve it as a foreign language since the cultural representation included in it has the potential to affect the perspectives of French language learners. Consequently, the findings of cultural aspects discovered in their qualitative study include verbal and nonverbal texts such as Cultural Knowledge (67%), *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité, LeFéminisme, LesArts*, Cultural Practice/Behavior (19%), and Cultural Artefacts (14%). The researcher added tracing cultural aspects through textbooks is a complicated and challenging academic endeavor since culture is connected with people's conventions, beliefs, attitudes, and way of life in a particular group of people. This scenario eventually contributes to the development of open-minded language learners with a high level of tolerance and understanding of other cultural practices from across the world.

The overall results in the current study agreed FFL skills were significant for communication purposes. Firstly, the students remarked acquiring French allowed them to interact with native speakers with a total occurrence of 319 data (96.9%). A mixed-method study conducted by Talip Gonulal (2019) underlined the application of Instagram can promote contact between native English speakers and students who are learning it as their second language, especially given how difficult it is for them to communicate with native speakers outside of the classroom. For instance, the respective social media appeared to drive the student to read fascinating items that included authentic language use, as well as to utilize the target language more frequently.

As advancements in science and technology occur, massive shifts are occurring in the lives of people all over the world. This scenario has subsequently made every continent become a global village and individuals must maintain positive relationships with one another. Beyond that, business, trade, and commerce have become multinational, with most corporate organizations having offices in most nations. Similarly, the present study cited this bilingual ability permitted them to construct social relationships at an international level more intensively with 322 data (97.9%) occurrences. An analytical study explored by Rao (2019) cited foreign language acquisitions as manifesting social relationships broadly among societies from all over the world. His findings emphasized English as a foreign language that plays a dominant role to enhance communicative competence among people around the world. The researcher claimed English act as a functional communicative tool that helps to preserve worldwide relationships in various fields including science, technology, business, education, and other fields.

The process of acquiring this target language was not limited to its social importance but will also signify its grammatical comprehension. Learning a new language significantly enhanced language learners' cognitive and metalinguistic capabilities, (Hopp et al., 2019). Based on their longitudinal study, bilingual students who comprehend English outperform monolingual German students in vocabulary and grammar in early foreign language learning. Simultaneously, the least favorable key feature of FFL learning recorded in this study was to allow them to comprehend information written in French with 318 data (97.7%).

Global's economic expansion is constantly modernizing, bringing different cultures and communities into closer contact. Therefore, acquiring a new target language was a crucial skill for the development of an expert in an assortment of fields, (Hernanda, et al., 2022). Based on the observations gained from the present study, mastering French as a foreign language is essential for increasing communicative competence among students under varied aspects including its social, contextual, and linguistic elements. These circumstances were eventually profitable in aiding the FFL students to compete in today's global marketplace.

Conclusion

Foreign language acquisition differs from other courses since it is associated with a complicated social undertaking. Language symbolizes an individual's entire social being, which contributed to one's identity and method of communicating that identity to others. As a result, learning a new target language entails much more than simply learning new skills, rules, or grammar. In addition, it also entails changing one's self-perception and adopting new social and cultural behaviors and ways of being, all of which have a significant impact on the language learner's social nature. The overall results show the adaptability of the individual FFL students to distinct stages of purpose in their French language learning process.

Besides, nowadays, knowing many target languages is important for academic advancement and achieving global social and economic growth (Fandiño et al., 2019). This remark is consistent with the current study's findings, which stressed the importance of French language knowledge in preparing FFL students to compete in today's modern world, which necessitates wide multilingual abilities. The various responders emphasized that learning French assists them to have competent communication abilities in a variety of professions, including worldwide commercial commerce, tourism, culture, and so on.

This qualitative examination of FFL students' responses to their determination to learn a certain foreign language demonstrates that language awareness and importance are interrelated in their language learning success. Based on the findings, language awareness involves the development of learners of greater awareness and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language. However, a quantitative study is necessary to supplement it and get deeper insights into why they chose and used these specific tactics. The current study has laid the groundwork for future analytical research on the topic of FFL learning in the Malaysian setting. Similar studies should be undertaken in different situations to determine the extent to which the findings may be imprecise in other scenarios to allow students to have a larger repertoire of factors to employ.

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