

Foreign Language Anxiety: Exploring Across Gender

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Abstract

Knowing multiple languages has always been an advantage to a person be it for work purposes or for personal gain. However, learning foreign languages is not a walk in the park. Most of the learners experience difficulty during foreign language lessons. Thus, this study is done to investigate one of the common students' struggles, which is foreign language anxiety especially in the context of genders. 100 participants consisting of 50 female students and 50 male students were purposely chosen from a public university in Malaysia to answer a quantitative survey adapted from Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). The survey is divided into 3 sections including communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Data extracted from both survey and SPSS revealed that students are indeed feeling anxious during foreign language classes particularly in the context of fear of negative evaluation. Findings from this study also shows that there is no significant anxiety level difference between female and male students though female students show a slightly higher number. Thus, despite the gender differences, educators ought to help students who experience difficulty during lessons.

Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety, Gender, Communication Apprehension, Test Anxiety, Negative Evaluation

Introduction

Background of Study

According to Knapp et al (2009), foreign language is a language that is not usually spoken in the country that the person resides in. Foreign language is also described as a language that is learned willingly by the person which is different from their native language (Álvarez-Sotomayor & Hidalgo-Clérico, 2020).

Language is a staple communication tool in daily life especially in learning settings. Having to learn an unfamiliar language with an evidently different language system, writing and phonology may trigger student's anxiety (Elkhafaifi, 2005). Besides that, Hortwitz (1986) also mentioned that learning foreign languages requires learners to study both sociocultural and linguistic which can contribute to anxiety too.

Malaysia is a notable country that has multiple language speakers due to its diverse race dynamic. However, foreign language learning anxiety is still seemingly an issue among learners (Majunggi & Halim, 2021). A recent finding at a Malaysian public university by Radzi et al. (2022) shows that students exhibit signs of worries during their foreign language lesson. They feel especially demotivated by other students' performance and feel anxious over spontaneous class activities.

Statement of Problem

There are numerous benefits in knowing more than one language. According to Point, Ng & Ting (2021), foreign languages are learnt for various reasons including for work purposes or for personal gain. In another study on edutourism, (Rahmat, 2020) students gain a holistic experience, not only they learn the language in context, but they get to understand the culture of the host country.

Unfortunately, for some learners learning a foreign language may not be a pleasant experience and can be stressful (Rahmat, 2020). In the past years numerous researches have been done in looking into foreign language anxiety amongst learners, most of which has indicated that anxiety has a negative or weakening effect on language learning. Findings from previous studies point to a significant correlation between communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety to foreign language anxiety, (Ismail et al., 2022); Darmawangsa et al., 2020; Boon et al., 2021). Furthermore, the study by (Rahmat 2019) reported that fear in language learning is a cycle. If one cycle of fear is not dealt with, it will snowball and language learners will encounter difficulties in their learning experience.

Hence, this study is done to investigate foreign language anxiety across gender. Specifically, this study is done to explore how communication apprehension, negative evaluation and test anxiety influence the fear for foreign language learning across gender. This investigation is done to answer the following questions;

- How does communication apprehension influence fear of language learning across gender?
- How does fear of negative evaluation influence fear of language learning across gender?
- How does test anxiety influence fear of language learning across gender?

Literature Review

This section discusses the Challenges in Foreign Language learning, Learning Foreign Languages across Gender, Past Studies and also the conceptual framework of study.

Challenges in Foreign Language learning

Learning a new foreign language can be challenging to everyone. Lack of motivation and the factor of the learning environment are amongst the challenges in learning a new language. Sometimes students embark on learning a new language with no real objective. This can create a great challenge and problem in the learning process. Bangnia (2020) found that lack of interest and motivation are the challenges faced in learning French as a Foreign Language

in Ghana. Students will find it difficult to adapt with a new language which is so foreign to them. With no motivation, learning a new thing can be very difficult. Some students will quit as it becomes too difficult to cope. Not only for students, but the teachers also need to find an interesting method to keep motivate the students. Solak & Bayar (2015) found that the objectives of learning English as a foreign language course should be designed as practice-based rather than theory-based. These challenges can affect the learners in so many ways. Failure to overcome the challenges not only can bring fear to students during the learning process but will also avoid the interaction among the students if they have the fear to interact and lose their confidence. Learning a new language should be a fun process and it should be done in a correct way in order not to kill the student's interests.

Learning Foreign Languages across Gender

Foreign language learning is a domain that is closely correlated to human psychology. Regarding this, numerous studies have been carried out to identify the relationship between language learning and affective variables. The similarity that can be portrayed among all these studies is that there exists a significant influence of affective factors towards the language learning process and this relationship between language learning and affective variables generally focuses on personality factors such as self-esteem, risk-taking, extroversion, motivation and anxiety. Other than these personality factors, another factor that is crucial and should be accentuated is the influence of gender in a language learning process which is highlighted in a study conducted by (Öztürk and Gürbüz, 2012). This study emphasizes that gender is an undeniable factor that contains remarkable effects on the variables affecting the language learning process, especially anxiety and motivation. Based on the findings of this study, illustrates that female students tend to be more anxious in comparison to male students while speaking English (in this context English has the status of a foreign language). Plus, the influence of gender has been confirmed to be a vital factor in the language learning process (Batters, 1986; Clark and Trafford, 1995; Powell, 1986; Pugsley, 1991), in particular on foreign language speaking anxiety and motivation. In literature, several studies (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Mendi, 2009; Csizer & Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Clement, 2001; Balemir, 2009; Huang, 2004) underlined the fact that gender plays a fundamental role in foreign language-speaking anxiety and learner motivation.

Past Studies

This section discusses past studies of learning foreign language and past studies on learning foreign languages across gender.

Past Studies of Learning Foreign Language

Numerous studies have been done to investigate learning French as a foreign language especially in terms of issues like anxiety or apprehension. The quantitative study by Ismail et al (2022), explores the variables and hindrances which affect French language learning as a foreign language in Malaysia. Questionnaire data were collected from 120 undergraduates enrolled in French Levels one, two and three courses. To measure learners' anxiety scale, the survey adapted from Horwitz et al (1986) which includes communication apprehension, test anxiety and negative evaluation is employed and it is discovered that negative evaluation is shown to be the highest element of anxiety through a mean score of 3.25. They recommend that educators play a main role in easing the learners' apprehension and suggest that teaching

approaches like cognitive and metacognitive can be assimilated during lessons. Plus, creating a comfortable learning setting.

In another study, Darmawangsa et al (2020) examine communication apprehension (CA) level of the first-year learners taking French as a foreign language and investigate issues that contributed to their current level of CA. In this mixed-methods study, data were collected from 57 first-year learners of French language departments in an Indonesian university. The first-year learners' perception on how their senses experiencing the communication anxiety is studied through qualitative questions and McCroskey's Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) is employed to analyse quantitative data. Furthermore, the quantitative data is also examined via qualitative thematic investigation. This research shares similar findings with the study done by Ismail et al (2022) and it is found that the first-year learners are worried of negative evaluation which is the vital reason for their high level of apprehension. This research suggests that positive support from a learning center in creating an encouraging setting, prior knowledge and supportive learner-educator relation could minimise the communication anxiety.

Past Studies on Learning Foreign Languages across Gender

Many studies have been done to investigate foreign language learning across gender. The study by Gerencheal (2016) is done to investigate a potential dissimilarity of anxiety among female and male students upon learning foreign language. A total of 28 females and 50 males English major third year students from Mizan-Tepi University participated in this study. The instrument used includes The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) established by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) and their English test result. These two methods were coherently done to discover the relation between anxiety level and test result. On top of that, interviews with three most anxious students from each gender were conducted to uphold the study. It was found that female students are indeed more anxious than male students. Female students also show a higher tendency to be affected by their anxious level through their test result. At the end of the study, Gerencheal recommended teachers to accommodate students and help students ease their worries. It was also suggested for teachers to govern FLCAS to spot anxious students.

Next, the study by Tan & Xie (2020) taking place at Jiangxi Normal University also looked at foreign language anxiety across gender. The study focused on the association of English language anxiety, gender, years of English learning and final oral English achievement. 41 English major students partake in this study by answering questions as per according to FLCAS developed by (Horwitz, 1986). The outcome of this study reveals that anxiety level between both genders is indistinguishable nor is there any difference between periods of learning English. Nevertheless, female students did show a slightly higher level of anxiety. Besides that, similar to the above study, this research found that high levels of anxiety does influence one's test result which causes lower oral test marks.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study. This study is adapted from (Horwitz et al., 1986). According to Rahmat (2019), exposure to new situations often brings fear and anxiety to individuals. For many, learning a new language forces learners to leave their comfort zone. 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. This study looks at whether there are differences in the sources across gender.

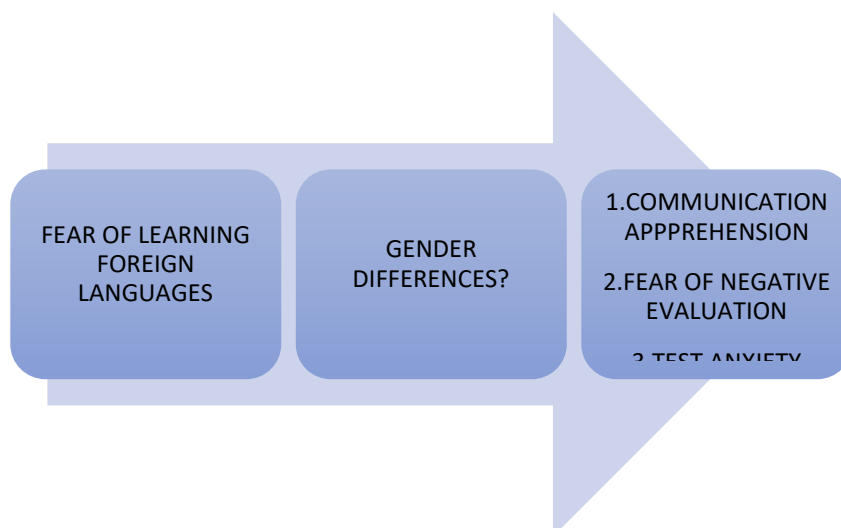


Figure 1- Conceptual Framework of the Study- Fear of Foreign Language Learning across Gender

Communication Apprehension

According to McCroskey and Beatty (1984), Communication apprehension is a broadly based anxiety related to oral communication. In another word, communication apprehension happens when a person feels the anxiety of speaking to another person in an anticipated or real conversation. They categorized communication apprehension into 4 situations: Trait-like communication apprehension, is the personality trait of the individual, Generalized-context communication apprehension, is identified as communicating in a certain context or situation. Person-group communication apprehension, is the response with whom the individual is communicating and Situational communication apprehension, is the individual response or reaction to the situation.

According to Allen and Bourhis (1995) communication apprehension refers to a family of related terms, including (a) reticence, (b) shyness, (c) unwillingness to communicate, and (d) stage fright. Even Though, there are arguments about the appropriateness and applicability of the various terms, they claimed that terms have many elements in common.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

When it comes to learning new languages, there is no doubt that one would have the fear of being judged by the others. The fear of being judged negatively is common for all new learners (Watson & friend, 1969). Although fear of negative evaluation is similar to test anxiety, it is not limited to test-taking environments, but rather, it is present in a wider situation which requires evaluation, such as being questioned in a foreign language class. It is not easy for students to participate in a new environment which is so foreign to them. Horwitz et al (1986) found that in the foreign language classroom is where an environment which constantly requires evaluation either by the teacher or the student's peers. According to Von Worde (2003) the students were very sensitive towards teacher's evaluations. Sometimes, teachers in language teaching ignore the fact that the students will feel uncomfortable in class due to the techniques of teaching. Von Worde also claims that most of the students in language classes will feel humiliated if they were being called in the class. Shabani (2012) in his studies found that leaving an unfavourable impression on others, negative judgement by

others, and fear of doing and saying wrong things can be the main sources provoking fear of negative evaluation and is a strong source of foreign language class anxiety.

Test Anxiety

Based on Sarason & Sarason (1990), test anxiety is a situation-specific personality trait generally regarded as having two psychological components: worry and emotional arousal. Test anxiety is regarded as a social problem for several reasons. It is a decidedly unappealing experience, plays a vital role in the personal phenomenology of numerous people and influences performances and personal development. One of the models presented by Spielberger & Vagg in 1995 that points out the concept of test anxiety in a foreign language learning context is the Transactional Process Model (Sapp, 1999; Spielberger & Vagg, 1995; Zeidner, 1998). This comprehensive model accentuates the functional relations between state emotions and tests anxiety over time (Ringeisen & Buchwald, 2010, p. 432) and therefore, test anxiety is considered as a situation-specific case that occurs because of trait stimulated that is triggered by state anxiety, worry and emotionality (Sapp, 1999). The objective is to clarify the antecedent conditions and dispositions that trigger students' reactions to tests, the mediating emotional and cognitive processes involved in responding to evaluative situations and the correspondence and outcome concerning test anxiety (Spielberger & Vagg, 1995, p.11). This Transactional Process Model consists of fundamental components of test anxiety: evaluative situations, state test anxiety, coping reactions and adaptive outcomes, illustrate a reciprocal and dynamic model in which all the elements regarding test anxiety are in prolonged state and interact simultaneously (Zeidner, 1998).

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 comprehension 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

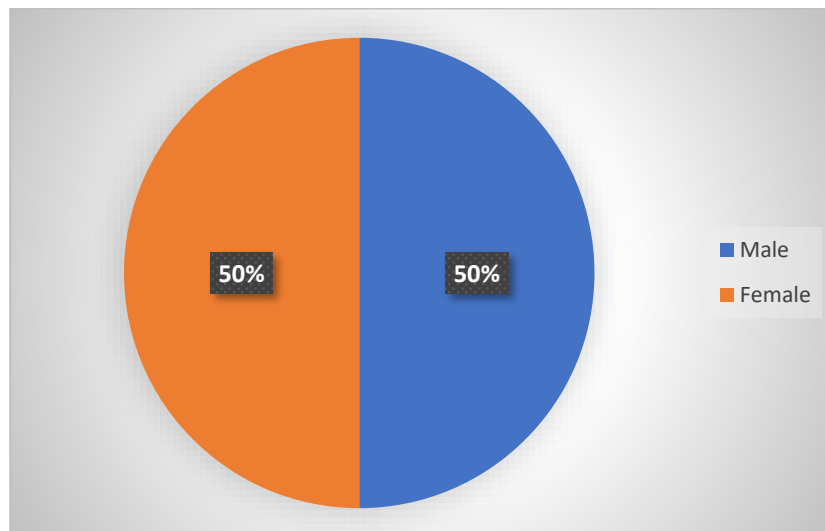


Figure 2- Percentage for Gender

Figure 2 shows that out of 100 respondents, 50% of them are female and 50% are male respondents.

Q2 Level

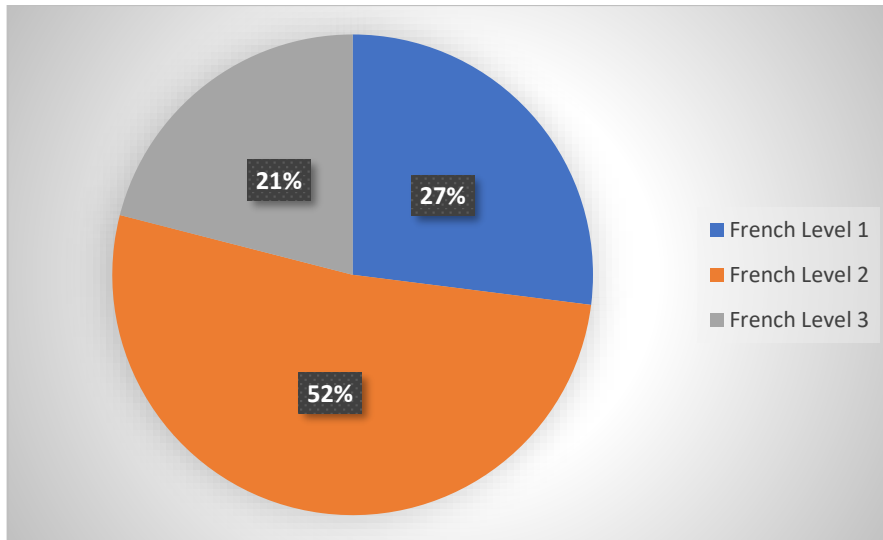


Figure 3- Percentage for Level

From the above figure 3, the highest percentage of respondents at 52 % is from the respondents of French level 2. The second highest is from French level 1 (27%) and finally respondents from Social Sciences at only (21%).

Q3.Discipline

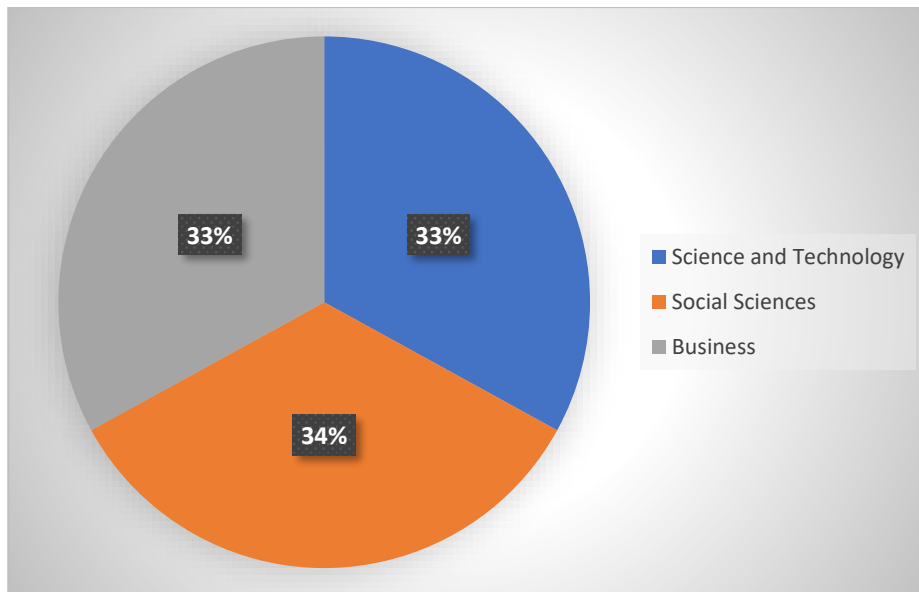


Figure 3- Percentage for Discipline

Figure 3 shows distribution by discipline. 34% of the respondents are from Social Sciences and 33% are from Science and Technology and Business.

Findings for Comprehension Apprehension

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

Communication Apprehension

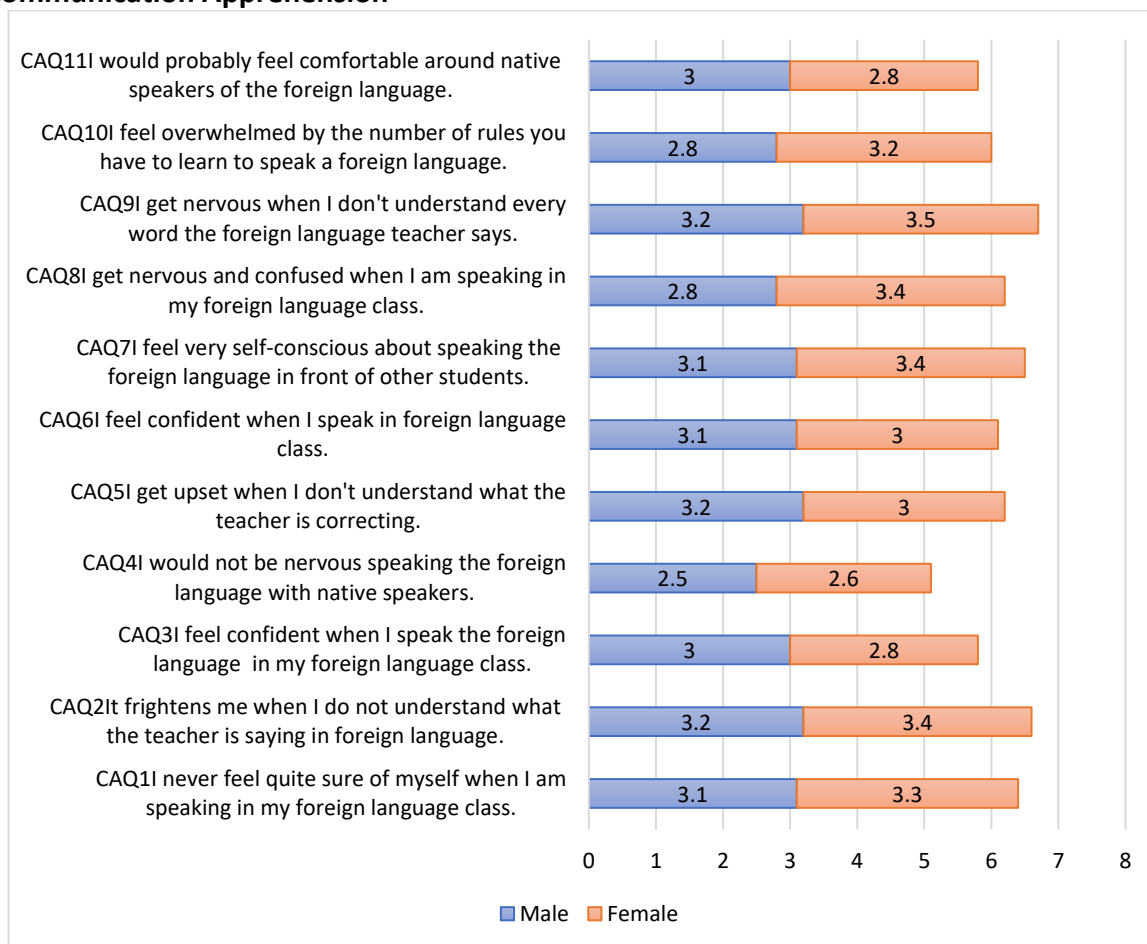


Figure 4- Mean for Comprehension Apprehension

Based on Figure 4 which illustrates the mean for comprehension apprehension, the highest mean portrays that in comparison with male respondents, female respondents tend to get nervous when they do not understand every word the foreign language teacher says (3.5). When it comes to feeling frightens when do not understand what the teacher is saying in a foreign language, feeling very self-conscious about speaking a foreign language in front of others and getting nervous and confused when speaking in a foreign language class, the findings portray the higher mean of (3.4) among the female respondents than male respondents. This is followed by the higher mean among female respondents in showing the feeling of being unsure when speaking in a foreign language (3.3). With the same mean of (3.2) but different regarding gender, female respondents tend to feel overwhelmed by the number of rules that need to be learned to speak a foreign language and male respondents tend to get upset when they do not comprehend what the teacher is correcting. Next, with higher mean than female respondents, male respondents feel more confident when it comes to speaking in a foreign language class (3.1), more confident when speaking a foreign language in a foreign language class (3.0) and feel more comfortable around a native speaker

of the foreign language (3.0). With the lowest mean of (2.6), female respondents would not be nervous when speaking a foreign language with native speakers.

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 gender?

Fear of Negative Evaluation

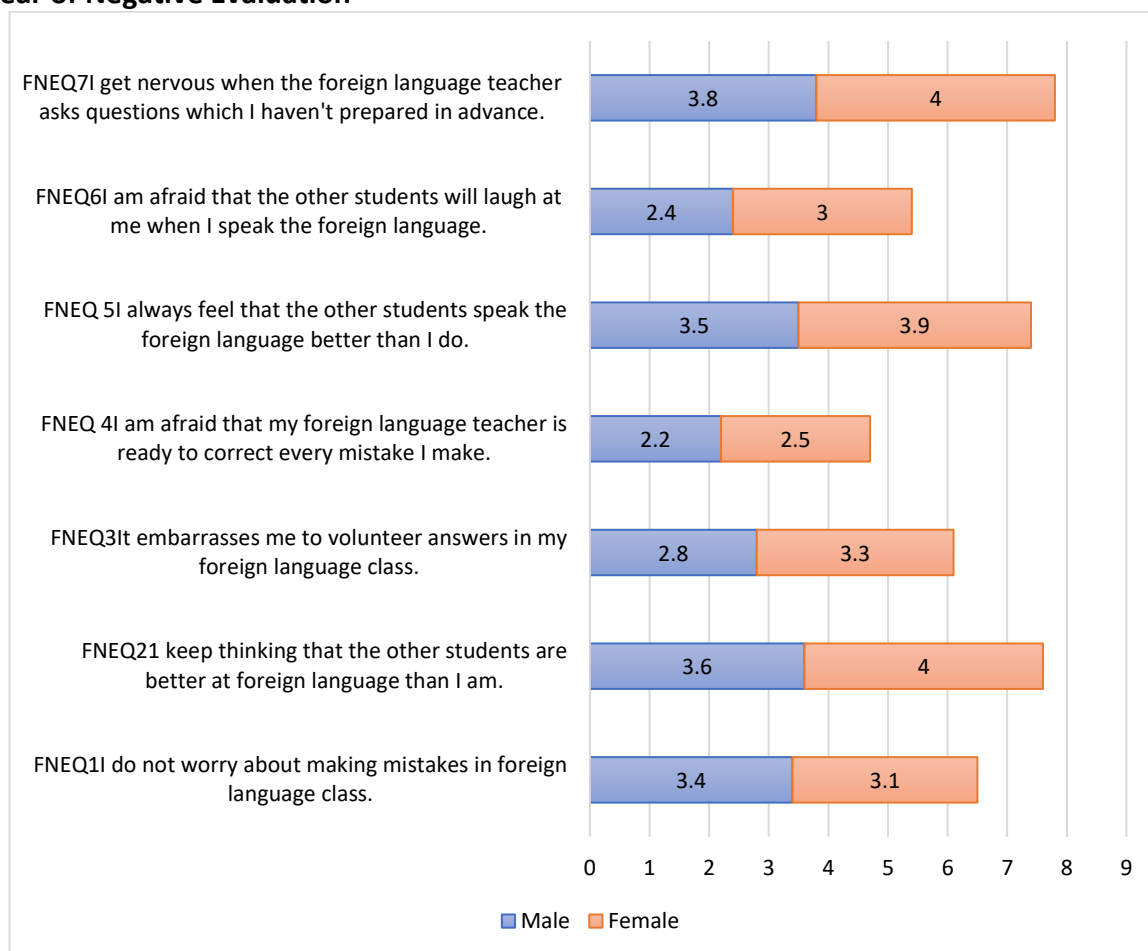


Figure 5- Mean for Fear of Negative Evaluation

Figure 5 presents the mean for fear of negative evaluation. Only item no 1 “I do not worry about making mistakes in foreign language class” showed a higher mean (3.4) for male students compared to their female (mean=3.1) counterparts. The highest mean of 4 for female learners are for items “keep thinking that the other students are better at foreign language than I am.” (male=3.6; female=4). Similarly item “get nervous when the foreign language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance” also showed the highest mean of 4 for female learners compared to 3.8 for male students. Next, the item “always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.” Revealed a mean of 3.9 for female students and 3.5 for male students”.

Findings for Test Anxiety

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

Anxiety

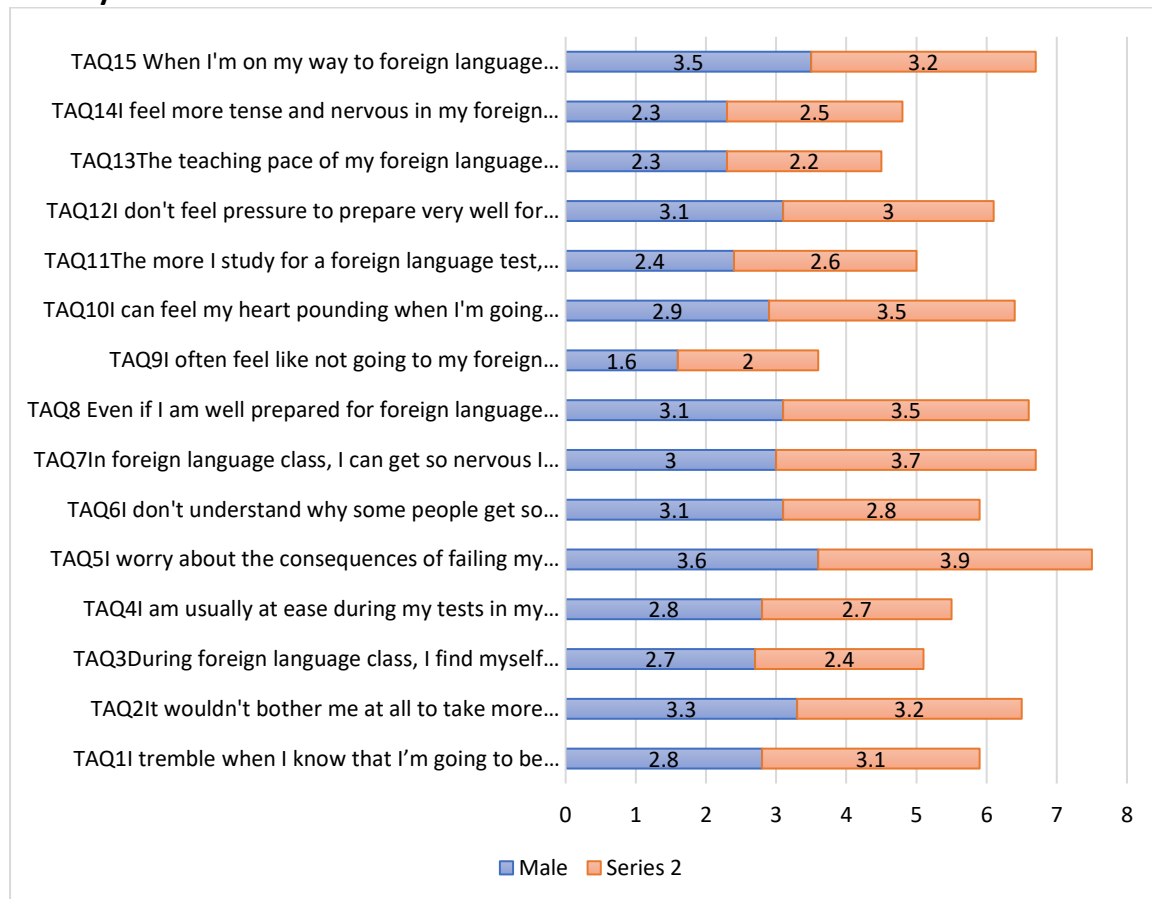


Figure 6- Mean for Test Anxiety

Figure 6 presents the mean for Test Anxiety. The mean scores reveal interesting findings. The highest mean for both female and male students is "I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class", (female = 3.9, male = 3.6). Female students score a higher mean in 8 out of 15 items. The highest different of mean is for "In foreign language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know." (female = 3.7, male = 3). Similarly, female students score a higher mean for items "Even if I am well prepared for foreign language class, I feel anxious about it" (female = 3.5, male=3.1) and item " I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in foreign language class" (female = 3.5, male = 2.9).

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussion

Table 3

Total Mean For Fear of Learning Foreign Language Across Gender

STATEMENT/ QUESTION	Male	Female
TOTAL MEAN FOR COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION	3	3.1
TOTAL MEAN FOR FEAR OF NEGATIVE EVALUATION	3.1	3.4
TOTAL MEAN FOR TEST ANXIETY	2.8	3

This study shows that both female and male students exhibit signs of anxiety when learning foreign languages because of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. This research also shows that fear of negative evaluation is the prime cause of anxiety among respondents. Past studies by Rahmat (2020) and Boon (2021) demonstrate the same findings as well.

Besides that, it can be seen from Table 3 that female students are more anxious as female students' mean figure is higher than male students'. However, the gap between the two genders is small. Hence, it can be concluded that there is no significant anxiety level difference between female and male students. Similar study by Tan & Xie (2020) also found that there are no distinct differences of anxiety level though female students have a higher tendency to be anxious upon learning foreign languages.

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Learning a new language has proven to be tough. This is because students need to learn a whole different language setting that is unfamiliar to them which includes grammar, pronunciation & the language culture itself (Elkhafaifi, 2005). Thus, it is natural for students to be nervous about not doing well in said lesson. Even so, learners should not let the feeling of anxiousness affect their learning progress.

As an educator, the lecturer shall anticipate students getting anxious during lessons especially regarding their communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Hence, lecturers ought to map out solutions to help students who are affected by the matters above.

To tackle this issue, educators are advised to set a comfortable classroom environment & encourage students during lectures. Despite the students' gender differences, this proposition deem to be suitable for both genders as both are showing similar levels of anxiety.

Future researchers could look into different causes of students' anxiety especially relating to external factors (outside classroom). Other than that, studies on ways to motivate students learning foreign languages are practical too particularly for newly elected educators who have limited experience. Besides that, interviews can be included as a research method to back up findings.

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