

# The Cycle of Fear in Learning a Foreign Language that Leads to Motivation

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## ABSTRACT

Motivation is crucial in foreign language studies to ensure a good understanding of the subject matter. However, the fear of learning a foreign language will affect students' motivation to learn, ultimately affecting their determination to master a foreign language. This research investigates the perception regarding the motivation and fear of learning a foreign language among pre-university students. A three-section quantitative survey was conducted involving 151 respondents who were recruited via simple random sampling from pre-university students in a Malaysian public university with science and engineering backgrounds. The results revealed that motivation, communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety varied from moderate to high. Furthermore, significant associations were found between communication apprehension with fear of negative evaluation and fear of negative evaluation with test anxiety. The findings offer pedagogical implications and suggestions for future research.

**Keywords:** Foreign language, motivation, fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, test anxiety

## INTRODUCTION

### Background of Study

Foreign language refers to any language other than the national language of a country. It is usually acquired through language lessons at school, self-teaching, or attending language courses. While foreign language is critical for gaining new knowledge and skills, learning an unfamiliar language can be challenging for many individuals. This is because various factors can influence one's determination to master a language. Past research has propounded motivation and fear of learning as significant factors in learning a foreign language. Motivation may lead to actions that make a change in the environment, subsequently enhancing or diminishing self-determination (Tranquillo & Stecker, 2016).

Whereas, fear of learning is a major problem in learning a foreign language because it falls into the specific anxious reactions category (Horwitz et al., 1986). In Malaysia, learning a foreign language is necessary in the academic syllabus, particularly in higher education institutions. Among the widely used foreign

languages in Malaysia are English, Arabic, and Chinese. Aside from academic benefits, higher education students need to master a foreign language to increase their marketability in future careers post-graduation.

### **Statement of Problem**

In most countries, exposure to foreign language learning and its usage for communication and formal purposes begins as early as primary education. Despite the early exposure, many students of higher education still struggle with foreign language acquisition, owing mainly to its complexity. Some students also encounter difficulties in communicating and expressing themselves effectively (Mohamad Razif *et al.*, 2023). Motivation is one of the necessary conditions for learning a foreign language; yet, fear of learning it can inhibit students' enthusiasm. A successful student who lacks motivation will almost certainly not obtain good results (Fazlinda *et al.*, 2023; Nur Anisah *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, speaking is one of the components taught in foreign language learning. This productive ability entails producing words and sentences in the target language that may lead to anxiety among students, particularly during speaking class (Darwina *et al.*, 2022). The argument thus suggests a potential link between motivation and fear of learning that may influence students' performance in learning a foreign language, which calls for further exploration.

### **Objective of the Study and Research Questions**

This study explores the perception of pre-university students on the motivation and fear of learning a foreign language. It aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do students perceive their motivation for learning a foreign language?
2. How do students perceive their communication apprehension for learning a foreign language?
3. How do students perceive their fear of negative evaluation for learning a foreign language?
4. How do students perceive their test anxiety for learning a foreign language?
5. Is there a relationship between motivation and fear of learning a foreign language?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section contains a thorough review of existing literature regarding the motivation and fear of learning a foreign language along with empirical evidence reported by prior research. It also presents the conceptual framework underpinning the present research.

### **Motivation to Learn a Foreign Language**

Motivation is defined as a force driving a person to undertake an action and persist until the goal is achieved. It has been identified as an important factor to successfully learn a foreign language. According to Yue *et al.* (2022), research on language learners' motivation in a study-abroad context deserves more attention in an era where international mobility is becoming the new normal. In the Malaysian context, motivation has been recognised as a serious determinant of success in gaining a new language. A study by Othman *et al.* (2022) showed that the perceptions of Malaysian students regarding the language's utility in attaining their academic and professional objectives have a significant impact on their motivation to learn a foreign language.

### **Fear of Learning a Foreign Language**

Many students are believed to have the fear of learning a foreign language. Previous research revealed that learners face communication anxiety when it comes to foreign language learning (Naudhani *et al.*, 2018).

Language anxiety consists of several categories, namely trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety (Khau & Thach, 2021). Trait anxiety is a personality-related fixed trait whereas state anxiety is caused by a transient state that can shift over time or fluctuate based on the situation (Rahmat, 2020). Meanwhile, scenario-specific anxiety is triggered by a specific scenario or incident, which only occurs when language learners are faced with a bad situation. Rahmat (2019) believes that the three main causes of fear are the learners themselves, the task, and the teaching-learning environment. While foreign language acquisition is a critical component of Malaysian education owing to the necessity for a unified language and the country's multicultural populace, past evidence indicates that Malaysian students who are acquiring a foreign language encounter heightened levels of fear (Miskam & Saidalvi, 2018).

### **Past Studies on Motivation to Learn a Foreign Language**

Many studies have been done to investigate the learning of foreign languages. In a survey involving more than 500 students from university Kembangan Malaysia (UKM) and university Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Zubairi and Sarudin (2009) found that the majority of Malaysian students learn a foreign language both for extrinsic and intrinsic reasons, with those in the former category require constant encouragement to promote their interest to the learning process. The study also reported by Mowafg Masuwd et. al (2024) that making foreign language learning a requirement can prompt people to become more motivated on their own.

This suggests that students are motivated to learn foreign languages in different ways because of different laws. Furthermore, Course (2021) conducted a survey with 91 learners taking French lessons at the elementary and intermediate levels and found that it is important for learners to be motivated when learning a foreign language. One way to motivate learners is to eliminate fear in the classroom, which can be inflicted by elements like the teacher, failure, and being ridiculed for their mistakes. Hence, it is crucial for educators to create a culture of success for learners and be concerned with those with academic difficulties.

### **Past Studies on Fear of Learning a Foreign Language**

During the process of learning a foreign language, students frequently exhibit fear of the foreign language, which makes the learning process more difficult. Past studies have explored the relationship between language fear and self-determined motivation from various contexts. For instance, Alamer and Almulhim (2021) conducted a study with 134 undergraduate students studying English at a public Saudi University to evaluate the depth of relationship between the two variables. The qualitative study examined the types of language fear faced by students during foreign language learning and how motivational variables in the Self-Determination Theory can predict these types of fear.

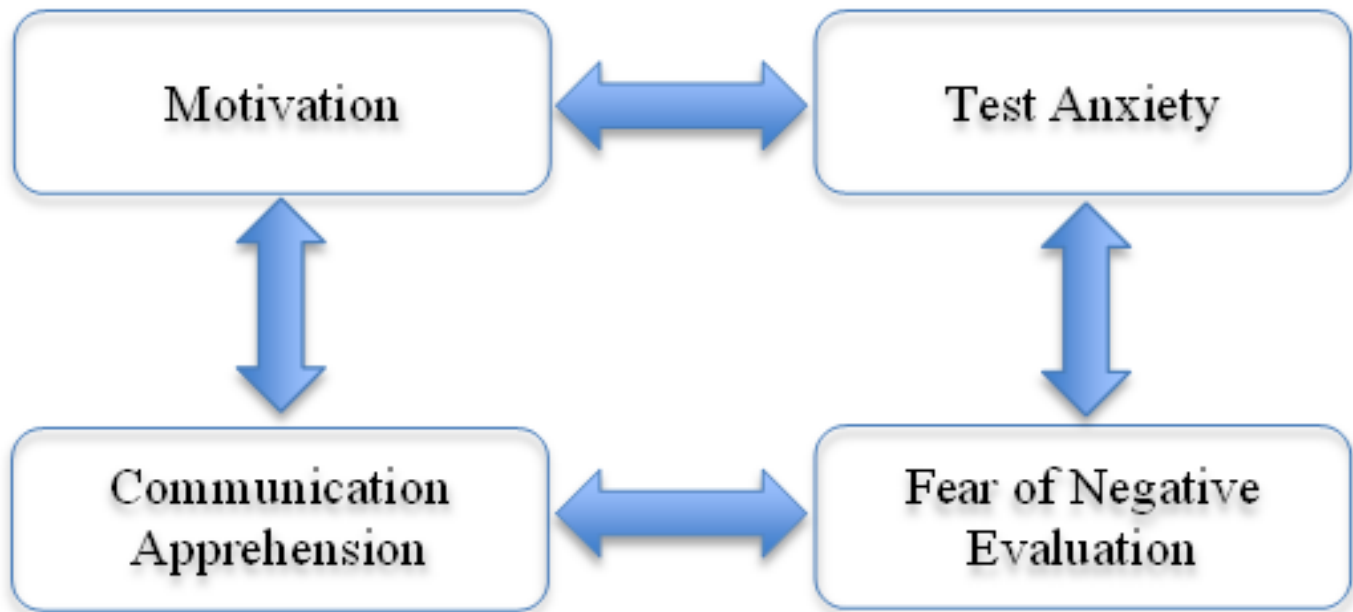
The results showed that a sense of competence and relatedness negatively predicted certain types of fear while controlled motivation positively predicted only the general language fear. However, perception of autonomy and autonomous motivation did not predict any sub-types of language fear while sense of relatedness positively predicted psychological fear. Another study by Abdul Latif (2021) consisted of 40 students enrolled in a Japanese language course at a Malaysian higher education institution.

The mean scores of both female and male learners were compared to determine any gender-wise difference in their level of foreign language fear. The findings showed statistically insignificant differences in foreign language fear between male and female Japanese language learners concerning the factors of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. The results further indicated that for all three components, the students demonstrated a moderate level of fear regardless of gender. Since all learners in the study had an average degree of fear indicating that they were slightly anxious, more teaching techniques should be developed to help reduce language fear and encourage a more conducive learning environment.

## Conceptual Framework

Fear of learning a foreign language causes other problems for learners, which can snowball to affect the performance and achievement in other language-related areas (Rahmat, 2020). The present study is rooted in motivation for learning (Mahon et al., 2001) and fear of learning a foreign language (Horwitz et al., 1986). Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of this study.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study: Relationship between Motivation and Fear of Learning a Foreign Language



## METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study was done to explore the motivation to learn and fear of learning a foreign language among pre-university students. The sample size was determined based on the size of the population and degree of error the research is willing to tolerate. The sample size was determined based on the sample size determination table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). Based on the table, the sample size for the 240 population is 148. However, the respondent's responses to the survey were 151. The survey instrument consisted of three (3) sections, each containing items measuring the variables under investigation using a 5-point Likert scale. Specifically, Section A had 2 items on the respondents' demographic profile, Section B had 11 items on motivation to learn that were adapted from Gardner (2001), while Section C had 33 items on fear of learning a foreign language that were adapted from Horwitz et al. (1986) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of Items in the Survey

Section	Variable	Sub-Category	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
B	Motivation to Learn (Gardner, 2001)		11	0.843
C	Fear of Learning a Foreign Language (Horwitz <i>et al.</i> , 1986)	Communication Apprehension	11	0.767

		Fear of Negative Evaluation	7	0.804
		Test Anxiety	15	0.813
			33	0.902
			44	0.886

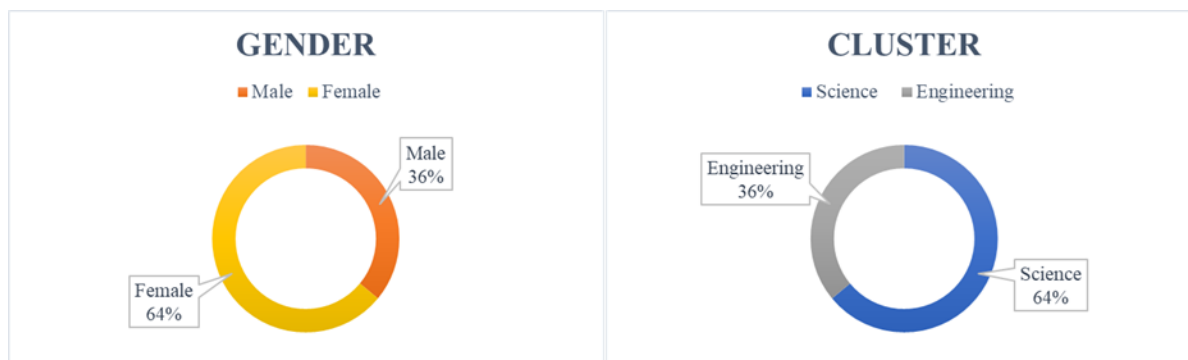
Table 1 shows the distribution of items in the survey along with the reliability analysis. The results revealed Cronbach’s Alpha values of 0.843 for Section B and 0.902 for Section C, indicating high reliability of the instrument. Further statistical analysis using the SPSS software was conducted to determine the answers to the research questions.

## FINDINGS

### Respondents’ Demographic Profile

The respondents of this study were 151 pre-university students enrolled in a foreign language course at a public university in Malaysia. Analysis of their demographic profile revealed that 64% of the respondents were female while 36% of them were male. Additionally, this study targeted two different clusters of students, namely from the engineering and science. Only 36% of the respondents were from the engineering cluster while a vast majority of them (64%) were from the science cluster. This shows that many of the respondents were female students from the science cluster.

Figure 2: Demographic Profile of the Respondents



### Motivation to Learn a Foreign Language

This section presents the data to answer the first research question: How do learners perceive their motivation for learning a foreign language?

Table 2: Mean for Motivation to Learn a Foreign Language (Gardner, 2001)

	Statement/Question	Mean ( $\mu$ )
MTLQ1	I make sure I attend all the classes without fail.	4.8
MTLQ2	I make sure I am prepared for my language classes.	4.2

MTLQ3	I understand what is taught by the teacher.	4.3
MTLQ4	If I do not understand, I will ask my teacher.	4.0
MTLQ5	If I do not understand, I will ask my friends.	4.6
MTLQ6	I also make my own effort to learn the language online.	4.2
MTLQ7	I enjoy participating in activities in class.	4.5
MTLQ8	I enjoy learning a language with my classmates.	4.5
MTLQ9	I enjoy group interaction during class.	4.4
MTLQ10	I enjoy speech practices during class.	3.9
MTLQ11	I enjoy role play during classes.	4.0

Table 2 shows the results on the average motivation level to learn a foreign language. The variable with the lowest mean value was MTLQ10 ( $\mu = 3.9$ ) with the statement “I enjoy speech practices during class”. Whereas, MTLQ1 exhibited the highest average score ( $\mu = 4.8$ ), indicating a strong agreement with the statement “I make sure I attend all the classes without fail”. This indicates that the degree of motivation to acquire a foreign language range between medium to high.

### Communication Apprehension

This section presents the results to answer the second research question: How do learners perceive their communication apprehension for learning a foreign language?

Table 3: Mean for Communication Apprehension

	Statement/Question	Mean ( $\mu$ )
CAQ1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.	3.2
CAQ2	It frightens me when I do not understand what the teacher is saying in foreign language.	3.3
CAQ3	I feel confident when I speak Japanese in my Japanese class.	3.4
CAQ4	I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.	3.2
CAQ5	I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	3.3
CAQ6	I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.	3.3
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.	3.3

CAQ10	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language.	3.1
CAQ11	I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.	3.3

Table 3 shows the results for communication apprehension. The variable with the lowest mean value was CAQ10 ( $\mu = 3.1$ ) for the statement “I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language”. Meanwhile, CAQ3 exhibited the highest mean value ( $\mu = 3.4$ ), indicating a strong agreement with the statement “I feel confident when I speak Japanese in my Japanese class”. This indicates that the degree of communication apprehension is within the moderate range.

### Fear of Negative Evaluation

This section presents the results to answer the third research question: How do learners perceive their fear of negative evaluation for learning a foreign language?

Table 4: Mean for Fear of Negative Evaluation

	Statement/Question	Mean ( $\mu$ )
FNEQ1	I do not worry about making mistakes in language class.	3.3
FNEQ2	I keep thinking that the other students are better at language than I am.	3.7
FNEQ3	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.	3.2
FNEQ4	I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	2.8
FNEQ5	I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.	3.7
FNEQ6	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.	3.1
FNEQ7	I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	3.6

Table 4 shows the results for fear of negative evaluation in learning foreign language. The lowest mean was recorded by FNEQ4 ( $\mu = 2.8$ ) related to the statement “I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make”. Whereas, both FNEQ2 and FNEQ5 had the highest mean value ( $\mu = 3.7$ ) for the statements “I keep thinking that the other students are better at language than I am” and “I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do”, respectively. This suggests that students lack self-esteem in delivering what they have been taught in foreign language classes.

### Test Anxiety

This section presents the results to answer the fourth research question: How do learners perceive their test anxiety for learning a foreign language?

Table 5: Mean for Test Anxiety

	Statement/Question	Mean ( $\mu$ )
TAQ1	I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.	3.2
TAQ2	It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes	3.5
TAQ3	During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	3.0
TAQ4	I am usually at ease during my tests in my language class.	3.2
TAQ5	I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class	3.5
TAQ6	I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language class.	3.1
TAQ7	In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	3.3
TAQ8	Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it	3.4
TAQ9	I often feel like not going to my language class.	2.3
TAQ10	I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.	3.3
TAQ11	The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.	2.6
TAQ12	I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.	3.2
TAQ13	Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.	3.0
TAQ14	I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.	2.8
TAQ15	When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.	3.4

Table 5 shows the mean value for the independent variable, namely test anxiety. TAQ5 had the highest mean value ( $\mu = 3.5$ ), indicating that students were constantly worried about the consequences of failing their foreign language class. The lowest mean value was for TAQ11 ( $\mu = 2.6$ ), suggesting that students became more confused as they prepared themselves for the language test.

### Relationship between Motivation and Fear of Learning a Foreign Language

This section presents the results to answer the fifth research question: Is there a relationship between motivation and fear of learning a foreign language?

Correlation analysis was conducted to determine any significant association in the mean scores between motivation, communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. The results are presented in Tables 6, 7, 8, and 9, respectively.



Table 6: Correlation between Motivation and Communication Apprehension

CORRELATIONS			
		MOTIVATION	COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION
MOTIVATION	Pearson Correlation	1	0.131
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.111
	N	150	150
COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION	Pearson Correlation	0.131	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.111	
	N	150	150

The results in Table 6 show that there is no significant association between motivation and communication apprehension ( $r = 0.131$ ).

Table 7: Correlation between Communication Apprehension and Fear of Negative Evaluation

CORRELATIONS			
		COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION	FEAR OF NEGATIVE EVALUATION
COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION	Pearson Correlation	1	0.575**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001	
	N	150	150
FEAR OF NEGATIVE EVALUATION	Pearson Correlation	0.575**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001	
	N	150	150

**\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)**

Table 7 shows there is a highly significant association between communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation ( $r = 0.575^{**}$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). According to Jackson (2015), a coefficient is significant at the 0.05 level and positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation usually ranges between 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation is between 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation is between 0.5 to 1.0. The result indicates a strong positive relationship between communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation.

Table 8: Correlation between Communication Apprehension and Fear of Negative Evaluation

CORRELATIONS			
		FEAR OF NEGATIVE EVALUATION	TEST ANXIETY
FEAR OF NEGATIVE EVALUATION	Pearson Correlation	1	0.670**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		< 0.001
	N	150	150
TEST ANXIETY	Pearson Correlation	0.670**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001	
	N	150	150

**\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)**

Table 8 shows there is a highly significant association between fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety ( $r = 0.670^{**}$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). According to Jackson (2015), a coefficient is significant at the 0.05 level and positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale.

Weak positive correlation ranges from 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation ranges from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation ranges from 0.5 to 1.0. This indicates a strong positive relationship between fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety.

Table 9: Correlation between Fear of Negative Evaluation and Test Anxiety

CORRELATIONS			
		MOTIVATION	TEST ANXIETY
MOTIVATION	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.46
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.574
	N	150	150
TEST ANXIETY	Pearson Correlation	-0.46	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.574	
	N	150	150

The results in Table 9 show that there is no significant association between motivation and test anxiety ( $r = -0.046$ ).

## CONCLUSION

### Summary of Findings and Discussion

In conclusion, the present study answered the research questions and successfully achieved the intended objectives. The results showed medium to high mean values for motivation to learn and fear of learning a

foreign language. Motivation to learn is an important key to obtain good grades and prevent failure. Teachers should pay attention on how to maintain students' motivation to learn foreign language. The Correlation analysis results further indicated significant associations between communication apprehension with fear of negative evaluation and fear of negative evaluation with test anxiety. The findings agree with the empirical evidence reported by Hiu and Chen (2015), Seven (2020), and Krishnan et al. (2023). Helping students overcome their communication barriers and reduce their fear of criticism, can strengthened their motivation to learn. Additionally, minimising test anxiety can build student confidence and create a more supportive learning atmosphere. According to Yunyi Yang (2024), these findings emphasise that addressing emotional challenges is fundamental to enhancing students' foreign language learning journey.

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

This study explored the relationship between motivation, communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety in influencing the foreign language learning of pre-university students in Malaysia. It emphasises the necessity of overcoming psychological barriers to foreign language learning and investigates students' adapting methods. The results highlight the importance of holistic methods that include emotional well-being into foreign language teaching, establishing supportive settings to minimise anxiety and improve learning outcomes reported by Ainul Rasyiqah Sazali et al. (2024). Future investigations should look at the causes and consequences of anxiety, as well as internal and environmental factors such as educational and financial background, purpose of learning, and personality in influencing language achievement, to help educators design tailored strategies that boost students' academic and linguistic achievement.

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