Motivation and Language Anxiety in Learning Mandarin as a Foreign Language among Diploma Students at UiTM Kelantan Branch

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.101000735

Received: 25 October 2026; Accepted: 30 October 2026; Published: 17 November 2026

ABSTRACT

Learning a foreign language involves motivational and affective factors that shape students' learning experiences. This study examines motivation to learn Mandarin and three dimensions of language anxiety, communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety among Diploma students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Kelantan Branch during Mac-July 2026 Academic Session. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted using a questionnaire covering demographic characteristics, motivation, communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, internal consistency reliability analysis, and Pearson's correlation analysis. The findings revealed that students had a high level of motivation, while communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety were at moderate levels. Correlation analysis showed that motivation was significantly and negatively correlated with test anxiety but was not significantly associated with communication apprehension or fear of negative evaluation. All three anxiety dimensions were positively correlated, with the strongest relationship observed between communication apprehension and test anxiety. Overall, the findings suggest that high motivation can coexist with moderate levels of language anxiety and that motivation may be differentially associated with distinct dimensions of anxiety, particularly test anxiety. These findings highlight the importance of addressing motivation and language anxiety as complementary aspects of Mandarin language learning.

Keywords: Mandarin as a foreign language; language learning motivation; communication apprehension; fear of negative evaluation; test anxiety; Diploma students; UiTM Kelantan Branch

INTRODUCTION

Foreign language learning is far more than a purely cognitive or linguistic process. Motivation, self-confidence, anxiety, and perceptions of assessment profoundly shape students' classroom engagement and their management of learning demands. In second and foreign language research, motivation has long been recognized as a pivotal individual difference variable, while language anxiety is examined as a domain-specific affective factor unique to language learning. Dörnyei (2001) conceptualizes second language motivation as a dynamic, multidimensional construct encompassing learners' goals, attitudes, effort, and engagement. Conversely, Horwitz et al. (1986) formulate foreign language classroom anxiety as a situation-specific phenomenon composed of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. These dimensions represent distinct sources of discomfort that emerge within foreign language classrooms. Language anxiety is particularly critical because it directly impairs cognitive processing and academic performance. Mac Intyre and Gardner (1994) reported that language anxiety impedes information processing across the input, central processing, and output stages of second language acquisition. Contemporary research continues to validate foreign language classroom anxiety as a construct distinct from general anxiety. Psychometric studies on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) demonstrate that classroom language anxiety is conceptually distinct from general test anxiety, interpersonal communication apprehension, and generalized social fear.

In the Malaysian higher education context, Mandarin is widely pursued as an additional or elective foreign language. Previous studies among non-Chinese learners in Malaysia reported moderate foreign language anxiety, with communication apprehension identified as a dominant contributor (Ting et al., 2016). Subsequent research examining motivation and anxiety among Malaysian Mandarin learners corroborated that high learning motivation frequently coexists with persistent language-related anxiety (Tay et al., 2024). Recent psychometric validation studies in Malaysia further confirm that Mandarin foreign language anxiety is multifaceted, encompassing listening, speaking, and classroom environmental dimensions (Suo et al., 2025). These empirical findings underscore the necessity of examining motivation and anxiety simultaneously, challenging the assumption that highly motivated learners are inherently anxiety-free.

This study directly builds upon previous empirical research by Razali & Mohd Hatta (2023), which examined intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors among students enrolled in Mandarin Level II at UiTM Kelantan Branch from various academic fields, including Business Management, Accountancy, and Computer and Mathematical Sciences. Their findings highlighted students' motivation to learn Mandarin in relation to career prospects, personal interest, and course requirements. However, the study focused on motivational factors without concurrently examining language anxiety. Consequently, the relationship between learning motivation and different dimensions of language anxiety remain an area that warrants further investigation in this context. To address this research gap, the present study examines the relationship between learning motivation and three dimensions of language anxiety: communication anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety among Diploma students at UiTM Kelantan Branch during Mac-July 2026 Academic Session. By examining these affective dimensions together, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how motivation relates to anxiety in Mandarin language learning. The findings may inform teaching practices that support students' motivation while addressing the emotional challenges associated with learning and using Mandarin.

Research Objectives

1. To determine the level of motivation to learn Mandarin among Diploma students at UiTM Kelantan Branch.
2. To determine the levels of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety among these students.
3. To examine the relationships between motivation and the three language anxiety dimensions.
4. To examine the interrelationships among communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of motivation to learn Mandarin among Diploma students at UiTM Kelantan Branch?
2. What are the levels of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety among these students?
3. Is there a significant relationship between motivation and communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety, respectively?
4. Are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety significantly correlated with one another?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Participants

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design with convenience sampling. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents before the online questionnaire was administered. The study involved Diploma students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Kelantan Branch who were enrolled during

Mac-July 2026 Academic Session. A total of 70 complete responses were obtained from students learning Mandarin as a foreign language.

The demographic data indicated that 59 respondents (84.3%) were female and 11 (15.7%) were male. All res-

pondents were Diploma students. The majority were from the Business and Administration field (69; 98.6%), while one respondent (1.4%) was from the Social Sciences and Humanities field. In terms of academic semester, 52 respondents (74.3%) were in Semester 4, while 18 (25.7%) were in Semester 1. Most respondents were aged between 18 and 20 years (67; 95.7%), while three (4.3%) were aged between 21 and 22 years. Regarding prior experience in learning Mandarin, 12 respondents (17.1%) reported having previous experience, whereas 58 (82.9%) had no prior experience.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire comprised five main sections. Section A gathered demographic details. Section B contained 17 items measuring motivation to learn Mandarin (adapted from Dörnyei, 2001). Section C (11 items) measured communication apprehension, Section D (7 items) measured fear of negative evaluation, and Section E (15 items) measured test anxiety (all adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale; Horwitz et al., 1986). The original English instrument was translated into Malay using a rigorous back-translation procedure and validated by language experts to ensure content validity and item clarity. All substantive items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Positively worded anxiety items were reverse-coded prior to composite score calculation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) answered Research Questions 1 and 2. Mean score levels were interpreted according to a standard three-tier interval: 1 .00–2.33 (Low), 2.34–3.66 (Moderate), and 3.67–5.00 (High) (Best & Kahn, 2006). Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to examine relationships among primary constructs (Research Questions 3 and 4). Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 70)

Demographic Characteristic	**Category**	**n (%)**
Gender	Male	11 (15.7%)
	Female	59 (84.3%)
Academic Cluster	Business and Administration	69 (98.6%)
	Social Sciences and Humanities	1 (1.4%)
Semester	Semester 1	18 (25.7%)
	Semester 4	52 (74.3%)

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics, Internal Consistency, and Level Interpretation

Construct	**No. of Items**	**Mean (*M*)**	**Std. Dev. (*SD*)**	**Cronbach's α**	**Level**
Motivation	17	4.02	0.44	0.807	High
Communication Apprehension	11	3.12	0.49	0.703	Moderate
Fear of Negative	7	3.14	0.73	0.781	Moderate

Evaluation					
Test Anxiety	15	2.95	0.54	0.794	Moderate

Motivation yielded the highest mean score (M = 4.02, SD = 0.44), indicating high overall learning motivation. The three anxiety dimensions were recorded at moderate levels: fear of negative evaluation (M = 3.14, SD = 0.73), communication apprehension (M= 3.12, SD = 0.49), and test anxiety (M= 2.95, SD = 0.54). Cronbach's alpha values ranged from .703 to .807, confirming acceptable to good internal consistency.

Item-Level Patterns

Item-level analyses provided additional contextual nuance. For motivation, the highest-rated items pertained to enjoying learning with classmates (M = 4.50), enjoying dialogue practice (M = 4.47), and ensuring class attendance (M = 4.46). Conversely, parental expectations (M = 2.43) and peer requests (M = 2.64) received lower endorsement, demonstrating that motivation stems primarily from direct classroom engagement rather than social pressures.

Regarding communication apprehension, anxiety was highest when failing to comprehend teacher input word-for-word (M = 3.53) and feeling uneasy when unable to follow teacher instructions (M = 3.49). For fear of negative evaluation, being called on unexpectedly without preparation (M = 3.61) and perceiving peers as superior in Mandarin (M = 3.59) scored highest. For test anxiety, fear of failing the course (M = 3.89) was the single most prominent concern.

Correlation Analysis

Table 3. Pearson Correlation Matrix Across Main Constructs

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Motivation	1.000	−.226	0.012	−.329**
2. Communication Apprehension	—	1.000	.444***	.591***
3. Fear of Negative Evaluation	—	—	1.000	.436***
4. Test Anxiety	—	—	—	1.000

Note: ** p < . 01, *** p < . 001.

DISCUSSION

The first major finding is that respondents reported high motivation to learn Mandarin (M = 4.02), despite experiencing moderate levels across all three dimensions of anxiety. This pattern is important because it indicates that motivation and anxiety can coexist. Motivated students may value the language, attend classes consistently, enjoy interactive activities, and still experience nervousness when speaking, uncertainty when processing classroom input, or anxiety about evaluation. This interpretation is consistent with the view that motivation and anxiety are related but distinct affective dimensions in language learning.

The high motivation level (M = 4.02) observed in this sample of Diploma students is also consistent with previous findings by Razali & Mohd Hatta (2023), who reported that UiTM Kelantan students across various academic programmes consistently demonstrated strong motivation and positive attitudes towards Mandarin language learning. However, the present study extends this understanding by demonstrating that high motivation does not automatically eliminate affective anxiety. Instead, high motivation coexists with moderate levels of communication apprehension and fear of evaluation.

The highest-rated motivation responses were closely associated with classroom engagement. Students particularly enjoyed learning with their classmates, practising dialogues, and attending classes consistently. In contrast, parental and peer expectations were weaker sources of motivation. This pattern suggests that, within this sample, motivation may be more closely associated with direct learning experiences and personal

engagement than with external social pressure. This finding is consistent with multidimensional approaches to second language motivation, which distinguish learners' effort and positive attitudes from externally imposed reasons for learning (Dörnyei, 2001).

The moderate level of communication apprehension is consistent with previous research on Mandarin learners in Malaysia. Ting et al. (2016) reported moderate levels of Mandarin language anxiety among non-Chinese students and identified communication apprehension as the strongest contributing factor. In the present sample, uncertainty about the Mandarin input provided by the teacher was a notable source of anxiety. This finding suggests that listening comprehension during classroom interactions may be an important trigger of nervousness, particularly when students feel that they are expected to understand every word.

Fear of negative evaluation was also moderate. The highest levels of concern involved being asked questions without prior preparation and comparing one's Mandarin proficiency with that of other students. This finding is consistent with the conceptualisation of foreign language classroom anxiety, which partly involves fear of negative evaluation and anxiety about communicative performance (Horwitz et al., 1986). Thus, the classroom is not merely a setting for linguistic practice but also a social environment in which evaluation takes place.

Test anxiety recorded the lowest mean among the three anxiety dimensions. Nevertheless, one assessment-related concern was particularly prominent: anxiety about the consequences of failing the Mandarin course ($M = 3.89$). This distinction is important. Although the overall mean for test anxiety was moderate, the consequences of failure represented a salient individual concern. The significant negative relationship between motivation and test anxiety also indicates that students who reported higher motivation tended to report lower levels of assessment-related anxiety in this sample. However, the relationship was moderate in magnitude ($r = -.329$), and the cross-sectional design does not permit the conclusion that motivation causes a reduction in test anxiety.

An important contribution of this study is the distinct pattern of relationships across the anxiety dimensions. Motivation was not significantly related to communication apprehension or fear of negative evaluation, but it was significantly related to test anxiety. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to conclude that motivation generally reduces foreign language anxiety. Instead, the findings indicate a more specific association between motivation and assessment-related anxiety. This finding is also consistent with research suggesting that test anxiety and motivation can be examined as distinct yet interacting components of second language learning (Weng & Liu, 2024).

The strong positive relationship between communication apprehension and test anxiety ($r = .591$) indicates that students who feel nervous in classroom communication situations also tend to experience higher levels of assessment-related anxiety. Communication apprehension may form part of a broader affective pattern when students perceive Mandarin learning situations as challenging or evaluative. The positive relationships among all three anxiety dimensions reinforce the importance of viewing foreign language anxiety as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than treating each anxiety experience as an isolated construct.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have several pedagogical implications. First, lecturers should continue to implement activities that students perceive positively, particularly collaborative learning, dialogue practice, and interactive classroom activities. Second, lecturers can reduce communication apprehension by providing more comprehensible classroom input, allowing students sufficient time to process information, and normalising requests for clarification. Third, impromptu questions and public correction should be handled in ways that maintain psychological safety in the classroom. Brief preparation time, pair work, and supportive feedback may help students participate without excessive fear of evaluation. Fourth, as fear of failure was the highest-rated item related to test anxiety, assessment practices should emphasise formative feedback, transparent assessment criteria, and opportunities for improvement, rather than portraying failure as a final judgement of students' abilities.

Importantly, the findings indicate that motivation should not be treated as a substitute for anxiety-sensitive pedagogy. High motivation scores suggest that students are willing to engage in Mandarin language learning;

however, motivation does not automatically eliminate communication apprehension or fear of evaluation. Therefore, teaching strategies should be designed to support both student engagement and emotional safety.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the relatively small sample size (N = 70) and the collection of data from a single campus, namely UiTM Kelantan Branch, limit the generalisability of the findings to a broader population. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve a larger sample from several UiTM campuses to improve sample representativeness and broaden the generalisability of the findings.

Second, the sample distribution in terms of field of study and gender was uneven. The majority of respondents were students from the Business and Administration field (98.6%), while female students accounted for 84.3% of the total sample. This imbalance limits the study's ability to make comprehensive comparisons across gender and fields of study. Accordingly, future research should include students from a wider range of academic disciplines, such as accounting and information technology, and ensure a more balanced gender distribution to examine potential differences in motivation and anxiety in Mandarin language learning.

Third, the cross-sectional research design and reliance on self-reported data limit the ability to draw causal conclusions about the relationships between the variables examined. Future research employing qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews, or longitudinal research designs could provide a more detailed understanding of the factors that trigger anxiety in Mandarin language learning, as well as changes in students' motivation and anxiety over time.

Finally, this study relied on questionnaire data and did not directly assess observable classroom behaviours or students' actual Mandarin language proficiency. Therefore, future research is recommended to combine questionnaires with other data collection methods, such as classroom observations, interviews, and Mandarin language proficiency assessments. This multi-method approach could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between motivation, anxiety, and Mandarin language learning experiences among students.

CONCLUSION

This study examined motivation and three dimensions of anxiety among 70 Diploma students at UiTM Kelantan Branch who were enrolled in Mac-July 2026 Academic Session. The respondents demonstrated high motivation (M = 4.02), alongside moderate levels of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Motivation was significantly negatively correlated with test anxiety but showed no significant relationship with communication apprehension or fear of negative evaluation. The three dimensions of anxiety were positively interrelated, particularly communication apprehension and test anxiety. Overall, the findings indicate that motivation and anxiety can coexist among Diploma students learning Mandarin at UiTM Kelantan Branch. Both should therefore be addressed as complementary affective dimensions of language learning. For educators, the priority should not be limited to enhancing motivation but should also include creating classroom and assessment environments that enable highly motivated students to participate without experiencing excessive communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, or test anxiety.

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