Examining the Relationship between Language Awareness and Motivation among French Learners at a Public University in Sabah: A Proposal

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ABSTRACT

The French language is recognized as a foreign language (FL) in Malaysia; however, the language's true value comes from the fact that it is commonly used internationally as a means of communication and diplomacy in continents such as Europe and Africa, while also holding a considerable amount of importance in parts of Canada. As a result, Malaysian students who learn French often aim to achieve a level of competence that enables them to explore a wider market of employability. Despite this, learners' views on studying French vary widely. This phenomenon becomes especially apparent for those learning the language in Sabah, which has historically been known to contain a rich multilingual and multicultural setting. Therefore, this conceptual paper aims to examine the role of Language Awareness (LA) in learning French as a Foreign Language (FFL) among undergraduates at a public university in Sabah. Specifically, the paper proposes to investigate the relationship between affective language awareness and learner motivation in FFL learning. The proposal employs a quantitative research approach that incorporates a cross-sectional survey of approximately around 200 undergraduate learners who are enrolled in French language courses. This paper draws on the concepts of language awareness and second language motivation and is expected to provide insightful information for French language acquisition by Malaysian learners while simultaneously also accentuating their relevance in Sabah's cultural and linguistic setting.

Keywords: Language Awareness, French as a Foreign Language, Sabah Public University, Cognitive Awareness, Affective Awareness

INTRODUCTION

The ever-growing demand for multilingual competencies has mainly been attributed to a combination of factors such as globalization, international mobility, and the need for increased connectedness between countries (Awang, 2023; Shaharuddin et al., 2024). As a result of this, many higher education institutions around the world are continuously offering a vast array of foreign languages to learn. The same trend can also be observed in Malaysia, with languages such as Mandarin, Japanese, and Korean among the third language courses often offered by public universities (Zubairi & Sarudin, 2009). The acquisition of the French language has also made its way into these institutions due to its critical importance in diplomacy, education, tourism, trade, and international relations (Hussin et al., 2023; Hussain et al., 2023). Furthermore, the language is widely recognized, as it is often found as the main medium of communication in Europe, Canada, and many African countries; therefore, it is a lucrative language to master in terms of potential employment opportunities (Point et al., 2021; Awang, 2023).

Despite its international significance, French is still seen as a rather niche foreign language in Malaysia, with this being especially apparent in language learners who often perceive the language to be rather challenging and of lower priority, especially when compared to other international languages such as English or Mandarin (Point et al., 2021; Awang, 2023). In Sabah, a Malaysian state defined by its immense linguistic

and cultural diversity, students often grow up with a number of languages and dialects (Hong & Johan, 2025). Subsequently, this multilingual environment may indirectly impact the student's perception, awareness, and motivation to learn a particular foreign language such as French.

Language Awareness (LA) is now a major focus of second and foreign language acquisition. Hawkins (1984) defines language awareness as being aware of what language is and being aware of the process of learning it, using it, and engaging with different languages. Consequently, developing language awareness may enable a learner to better understand the differences in language structures, cultural differences, and ways of communication, thereby fostering a positive attitude and motivation towards learning a second or foreign language (Hussin et al., 2023; Shaharuddin et al., 2024).

Motivation serves as another crucial factor in successfully mastering a language. According to Gardner (1985), learners who possess high motivation are more likely to demonstrate characteristics such as persistence, a positive attitude, and a stronger sense of achievement when learning a language. Applying this concept to the acquisition of FFL, it was hypothesized that students who were aware of the values and benefits of language could positively contribute to their learning motivation (Halim et al., 2017; Hussin et al., 2023; Shaharuddin et al., 2024).

Thus, the purpose of this conceptual paper is to investigate the relationship between language awareness and learner motivation, particularly in the case of undergraduate students in French language learning at a public university in Sabah. The study aims to make a valuable contribution to the existing body of literature on foreign language learning in multilingual societies and to offer language teachers and policymakers relevant insights.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Awareness in Foreign Language Learning

Understanding how a particular language works can be helpful in both learning and teaching it; Svalberg (2012) states that LA is a way to help deepen one's understanding of the language's grammatical structure and real-life communication. Rather than just absorbing rules passively, learners should be able to independently identify these patterns through the teachers' curated insights of the language's structure, purpose, and cultural setting (Hawkins, 1984). Likewise, James and Garrett (1991) added on to this notion by breaking LA down into several parts, which included cognitive, affective, social, and performance-related awareness.

In order for LA to be effective, one must consider an individual's emotional response to the language, as this intrinsic characteristic often shapes how they approach learning it (James & Garrett, 1991). According to Zhang et al. (2024), a learner's confidence, interest, and motivation towards a foreign language may be enhanced through effective awareness. Focusing on Malaysia's multilingual society, Hussain et al. (2023) found that learners who value the range of linguistic varieties may likely possess an increased positive attitude towards learning a foreign language.

Additionally, studies conducted by A.-B. Fenner et al. (2001) and McConachy (2022) suggested that LA is capable of boosting how well learners communicate and grasp cultures, as well as improving their ability to recognise and map out a language's structure. Moreover, awareness also enables learners of a new foreign language to notice how languages resemble or differ, which might subsequently build self-assurance while also supporting more productive learning experiences (Saadati & Talebi, 2025; Dewi, 2024).

Conceptualising Affective Language Awareness

LA is a multifaceted concept that encompasses several key aspects of a learner's relationship with the language, including cognitive awareness, linguistic sensitivity, and overall attitudes and perceptions of its benefits. In their work, James and Garrett (1991) outlined several dimensions that encapsulate LA, including the cognitive and affective dimensions. Subsequently, this study builds on this perspective; specifically, it

aims to investigate the affective dimension, comprising learners' emotional responses and personal experiences with the language and language learning, regardless of classroom context.

Crucially, a clear distinction between affective language awareness and motivation will be outlined. In this study, affective language awareness refers to learners' attitudes, preferences, feelings, and perceptions of the language, while motivation reflects learners' desire to learn the language, their effort, and their ongoing efforts to improve their language acquisition. Therefore, despite their intertwined constructs, they are not interchangeable. Hence, the study will explicitly use affective language awareness as the primary independent variable, with motivation representing the dependent variable. In doing so, the study hopes to establish a clear guideline regarding the adaptations of both variables within the questionnaire.

Motivation in Foreign Language Learning

Success in mastering a new foreign language often ties closely to motivation (Halim et al., 2017; Shaharuddin et al., 2024). While some learners aim to connect with another culture, others seek the practical benefits that come with it, and as a result of this varying motivation, Gardner and Lambert (1972) aimed to set a specific set of guidelines that would separate these fundamentally different drives clearly. In their distinction, they identified and separated motivation into two distinct groups: integrative and instrumental motivation.

An integrative motive is described as one's desire to connect with a particular culture and its speakers; this is often depicted as a more personal calling. In contrast, individuals that are found within an instrumental motivation group are known to be more interested in the socio-economic benefits that it brings, whether that be a job, academic achievement, or even travel. Looking particularly within the Malaysian context, instrumental orientation is often the primary driver, as Zanne et al. (2026) found that students often studied for French in the hopes of securing a job overseas and expanding the academic opportunities.

The same ideology was also emphasized by Dörnyei (2001), who noted that motivation almost never remains constant and is continuously being influenced by how a person perceives themselves and their overall learning structure, whether that be their learning experiences or environment. Consequently, increased engagement follows suit as long as the learners view French as a valuable asset to have (Shaharuddin et al., 2024).

French as a Foreign Language in Malaysia

Thanks to its geo- and socio-political status, French is now being offered as an academic course around the world. This universal recognition has also reached Malaysia, whereby French is now offered in universities, language centres, and even a handful of secondary schools (Hussin et al., 2023; Point et al., 2021). Although English remains as a dominant second language taught within these institutions, interest towards foreign languages such as French has steadily increased due to a combination of global engagement and cross-border relevance (Hussin et al., 2023; Shaharuddin et al., 2024).

Despite these promising trends, studies regarding the acquisition of French language learning within Malaysia remain scarce (Point et al., 2021; Awang, 2023), especially within East Malaysian states such as Sabah and Sarawak. The multicultural setting of Sabah offers a special opportunity to explore the relationship between multilingual experiences in the learner's life and language awareness and learner motivation. Students in Sabah are likely to speak more than one language, such as Malay, English, various indigenous languages, and regional dialects, which may have an impact on their positive orientation towards foreign language learning.

Accordingly, this study adopts the view that affective language awareness has an overall positive impact on the motivation of foreign language learners who are poised to acquire French. The study also assumes that students with a higher awareness of the importance, benefits, and cultural value of French will be more motivated to learn it.

The study defines "affective language awareness" as the independent variable, with "learner motivation" representing the study's dependent variable. From the following configuration, the relationships between both variables will be investigated and examined, with the participants of this investigation being undergraduates who are currently enrolled in French language courses within a public university located in Sabah. Additionally, the proposed framework is both inspired by and supported by Hawkins' Language Awareness Theory and Gardner's Socio-Educational Model.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

The proposed study will adopt a quantitative research approach using a cross-sectional survey design. This approach is considered appropriate as the study aims to examine the relationship between affective language awareness and learner motivation in learning French as a Foreign Language. A quantitative approach enables the systematic collection and statistical analysis of numerical data to identify patterns and relationships between the variables under investigation. The cross-sectional survey design allows data to be collected from participants at a single point in time, providing an overview of their affective language awareness and motivation towards learning French within the multilingual and multicultural context of Sabah.

Research Instruments

Data will be collected using questionnaires adapted from two sources: Gardner's (1985) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) to assess learners' motivation and Swadnyana's (2021) Critical Language Awareness questionnaire to measure affective language awareness. Since Swadnyana's instrument was developed in a different language-learning context, its items will be reviewed and adapted to reflect the experiences of undergraduate learners studying FFL in Sabah. The adaptation will focus specifically on items that capture the affective dimension of language awareness, particularly learners' feelings, attitudes, and emotional responses towards the French language and its learning process. Items relating to other dimensions of critical language awareness will be excluded or modified where appropriate to ensure alignment with the study's objectives.

Research Instruments Validity and Reliability

The adapted questionnaire will be reviewed by a panel of three experts to establish the content and face validity. Following that, a pilot study involving 30 students will be conducted to assess the instrument's reliability. Cronbach's alpha will be used to measure internal consistency, with a coefficient of 0.70 or above considered acceptable.

Sampling

The main target population will be active students who are enrolled in French language courses at Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Utilising simple random sampling, the study will aim for around 200 FFL learners to participate.

Data Analysis

Data collected will be analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. The questionnaire will employ a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Responses will be coded numerically, with negatively worded items reverse-scored where necessary. Mean scores will be calculated for each construct, with higher scores indicating greater affective language awareness or stronger learner motivation. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, will be used to summarise the responses. The internal consistency of the adapted scales will be assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Given that the questionnaire includes adapted items, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) will also be considered to examine its underlying factor structure and provide evidence of

construct validity, subject to sample adequacy and the number of items. Subsequently, Pearson's correlation analysis will be conducted, provided its assumptions are met, to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between affective language awareness and learner motivation. The findings are expected to provide empirical insights into the relationship between these variables among Malaysian undergraduates learning French.

CONCLUSION

The conceptual paper demonstrates the importance of language awareness in producing undergraduates with improved motivation characteristics when undergoing a French language course in Sabah, Malaysia. In today's rapid globalization, mastering multilingual competence becomes lucrative in avenues such as academia, professional practice, and intercultural communication. Therefore, by investigating the relationship between affective language awareness and learner motivation, the findings will provide greater insights into how foreign language learning is perceived within Malaysia's multilingual setting. The findings will also subsequently aim to assist educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers in the hopes of improving the strategies that are currently adopted in the foreign language learning landscape. Finally, the study can have a broader impact on the discourse on language education in multicultural societies, particularly in areas consisting of diverse languages like the state of Sabah.

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