

Motivation and Demotivation in Foreign Language Learning: A Study of French Language Learners in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the motivating and demotivating factors experienced by university students during foreign language acquisition. The questionnaire was given to 126 students learning French in Malaysia. A five-point Likert scale questionnaire was adapted from Gardner's (2001) motivation framework and Horwitz et al.'s (1986) anxiety framework to measure motivating and demotivating factors. The survey consisted of three sections. Section A contained the demographic profile with three items. Section B focuses on motivating factors with 11 items, and Section C has 33 items directed at demotivating factors. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and Pearson correlation. The result indicates a high level of motivation toward learning French ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.61$) and also a high tendency towards peer assistance when facing difficulties ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.59$). However, several anxiety-related factors were identified as sources of demotivation, such as communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and, test anxiety. Students become nervous when they are asked questions without being prepared in advance ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.97$). The correlation analysis indicated no significant association between motivating and demotivating factors, $r(124) = -.002$, $p = .979$. These results indicate that motivation and demotivation may exist at the same time as distinct variables in foreign language acquisition.

Keywords: motivating factors, demotivating factors, French language, foreign language acquisition, correlation

INTRODUCTION

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected and frontiers become less restrictive, the importance of learning other foreign languages becomes more evident. In Malaysia, since 1998, there has been a notable growth in the enrolment of students learning French, with, for example, a total of 28,000 students registered at the Alliance Française de Kuala Lumpur (Point et al., 2021). Although French language courses are popular in Malaysia, acquiring proficiency in French as a foreign language can be challenging (Awang, 2023). According to Lewis (1999), lack of motivation may hinder language learners, whereas high motivation may drive them forward. Research by Agustina et al. (2021) reveals that motivation has been established as a factor linked to academic success and the acquisition of proficiency in learning foreign languages. Motivation in language learning may also be influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Motivation can be described as the learners' drive that propels them to become involved in language learning (Gardner, 1985). Motivation serves as both an initial impetus for learners to start acquiring a language and a sustained driving force to persist in their learning efforts. The majority of language learning theories and concepts operate on the assumption that learners are motivated during the learning process (Liu, 2020). However, learners may gradually lose interest in continuing to learn the language and may develop negative attitudes toward the learning process. Language acquisition is a long-term process, and learners may gradually experience demotivation during the journey.

In their review of demotivation in students' foreign language learning, Gao and Liu (2022) classified demotivators into four categories: learner-related factors, teacher-related factors, curriculum-related factors, and environment-related factors.

The literature reveals conflicting findings on the correlation between language anxiety and motivation.

Wang et al. (2018) and Luo et al. (2020) said that anxiety and motivation to learn were linked in a positive way. However, Alico (2016) discovered that anxiety and motivation to learn a language were linked in a negative way. Although numerous researches have been conducted on foreign language learning, relatively few of the studies have examined Malaysians students learning French. French language classes are becoming increasingly popular in Malaysia, so it's important to know what makes students want to learn the language. The findings may contribute to the development of more effective pedagogical strategies.

In light of this research gap, the present study seeks to examine the motivating and demotivating factors experienced by Malaysian students learning French as a foreign language. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

- How do students regard the motivating factors to acquire a foreign language?
- How do students regard the demotivating factors to acquire a foreign language?
- Is there a connection between motivating and demotivating factors for foreign language acquisition?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Motivating Factors for Foreign Language Acquisition

Learners may be motivated to study a foreign language for a variety of reasons. It could be instrumental or practical reasons, such as securing a good job, passing an exam, and achieving career advancement (Getie, 2020; Rahmat, 2022). Learners may also be motivated by integrative reasons, such as the desire to communicate effectively with members of the target language community (Amoah et al., 2021). Both motivation factors, integrative and instrumental, play crucial roles during the learning process. According to Lewis (1999), great motivation can push learners forward.

Several empirical studies have examined how different factors influence learners' motivation in foreign language acquisition. Zheng et al. (2023) investigated Mandarin language learners' motivation in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) among British secondary schools. Fifteen participants from year 7 and 12, with Mandarin learning experience ranging from three months to five years, were interviewed individually. Their findings show that participants' learning experiences help to maintain motivation.

Another study by Zolkapli et al. (2023) examined the motivation and demotivation components related to English communication skills acquisition. The participants are 271 pre-university students from a university in Malaysia. A quantitative approach using a survey was employed. The instrument was based on Pintrich and De Groot (1990) for motivation and Campos et al. (2011), for causes of burnout. The findings of this study revealed two important components of learners' motivation. The first component is 'extrinsic goal orientation', such as getting good grades, and the second component is 'control beliefs for learning'. The study also mentioned the importance of managing emotional intelligence because it will directly affect learners' motivation.

In other words, while Zheng et al. (2023) found that learning experiences help sustain motivation among Mandarin learners, Zolkapli et al. (2023), on the other hand, emphasized the role of extrinsic goals and emotional intelligence. These findings suggest that a student's motivation might come from both internal and external factors. These findings highlight the complex relationship between cognitive and affective dimensions of learning.

Demotivating Factors for Foreign Language Acquisition

A number of studies have also been directed towards the investigation of demotivation. Dörnyei (2001) conceptualised demotivation as a deficiency in motivation emanating from external factors. According to Dörnyei (2001), demotivation involves external factors that undermine or weaken the motivational foundation of a behavioural intention or an ongoing action. These demotivating factors weaken learners' motivation and hinder the acquisition process. According to Gao and Liu (2022), there are four categories of demotivators such as factors related to learners, teachers, curriculum and environment. Factors related to learners include elements that can lead to negative emotions, such as lack of confidence and decreasing interest. Factors related to teachers generally consisted of teaching behaviours and instructional skills. Curriculum related factors include the content of the curriculum and the learning material. For environment related factors, generally it concerns the learning environment and school settings.

A study by Bonta (2019) revealed a total of 164 instances of demotivation. The factors related to learners were fear of learning or using a foreign language, embarrassment, nervousness, frustration, and a general aversion to foreign languages. Participants have low self-confidence and apprehension about losing face in social settings. Students often felt frustrated and embarrassed when they performed poorly on assessments. For external demotivating factors, there were two main categories: teachers and the school system. The study identified several issues within these categories, such as classroom management, teaching style, teacher attitudes, insufficient teaching materials, and frequent instructor turnover. These elements were recognized in the study as key sources of external demotivation.

Meanwhile, Zhang et al. (2020) conducted a study to investigate the factors influencing motivation and demotivation, as well as the mediating elements involved in the English language learning process among Chinese students. The study involved 713 students, and the collected data were analysed using quantitative methods. The study examined six demotivating factors: teacher behaviour, classroom characteristics, the classroom environment, instructional materials, experiences of failure, and declining interest. The findings revealed that engagement and anxiety were the important mediating factors in relation to demotivation. In particular, anxiety showed a strong association with students' experiences of failure.

While many of these studies focus on English learners, few have examined French language learners in the Malaysian context.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the research. When learning a foreign language, learners are faced with both motivating and demotivating factors. According to Rahmat (2019), learning is influenced by several elements, such as the learners themselves, the learning activities, and the environment they are put in. The framework for this study is rooted in Gardner (2001) and demotivating factors in the form of fear of learning a foreign language by Horwitz et al. (1986). According to Horwitz et al. (1986), learners are demotivated to learn if they have (i) communication apprehension, (ii) fear of negative evaluation, and (iii) test anxiety.

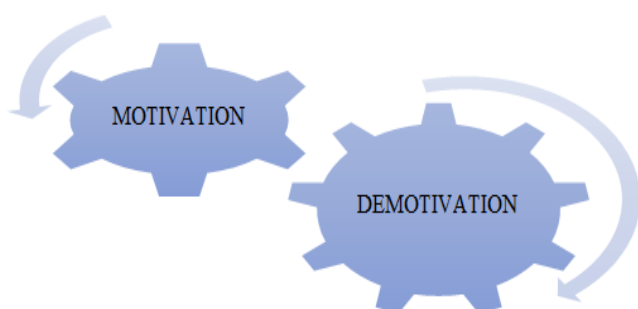


Figure 1- Motivating and Demotivating factors in Foreign Language Acquisition

METHODOLOGY

This research aims to investigate motivational factors that influence foreign language learning among students in higher education institutions. Purposive sampling was used and the questionnaire was distributed to 126 students learning French at a public university in Malaysia. Participation was voluntary and responses were anonymised.

The survey used a five-point Likert scale and the data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson Correlation analysis. The sample size is sufficient to ensure reliable statistical results (Cohen, 1988).

Table 1- Survey Items

SECTION	FACTOR	SUB-CATEGORY	NO OF ITEMS
B	MOTIVATING	-	11
C	DEMOTIVATING	COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION	11
		FEAR OF NEGATIVE EVALUATION	7
		TEST ANXIETY	15
Total:		44	

The survey instrument was based on Gardner (2001) for motivating factors and Horwitz et al. (1986) for demotivating factors. Table 1 lists the variables. The questionnaire has three sections. The demographic profile in section A contains three components. Section B focuses on motivating factors with 11 items, and Section C has 33 items directed at demotivating factors.

Table 2- Reliability of Survey

Cronbach's Alpha	No. of items
.883	44

Table 2 presents the reliability of the survey instrument. The findings show that the instrument has a high degree of reliability, as indicated by a Cronbach's alpha value of .883.

FINDINGS

Demographic Profile

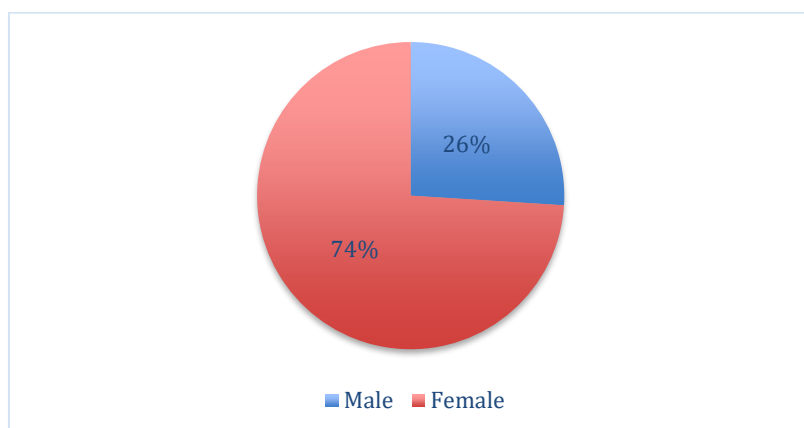


Figure 2- Percentage of Gender

Figure 2 depicts the demographic profile of 126 students learning French at the beginner level. The data shows that 74 % of the respondents are female, whereas the remaining 26 % are male.

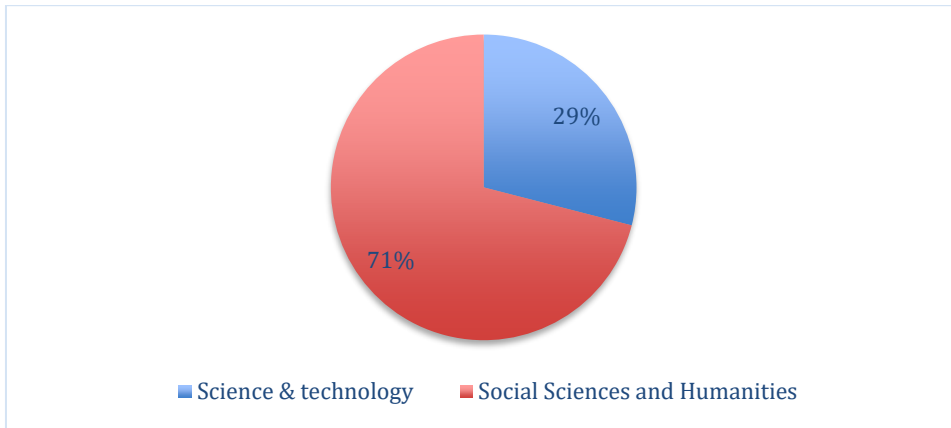


Figure 3- Percentage for Cluster

Figure 3 shows that 29 % of the students are from the Science and Technology clusters, whereas 71 % of the students come from Social Sciences and Humanities.

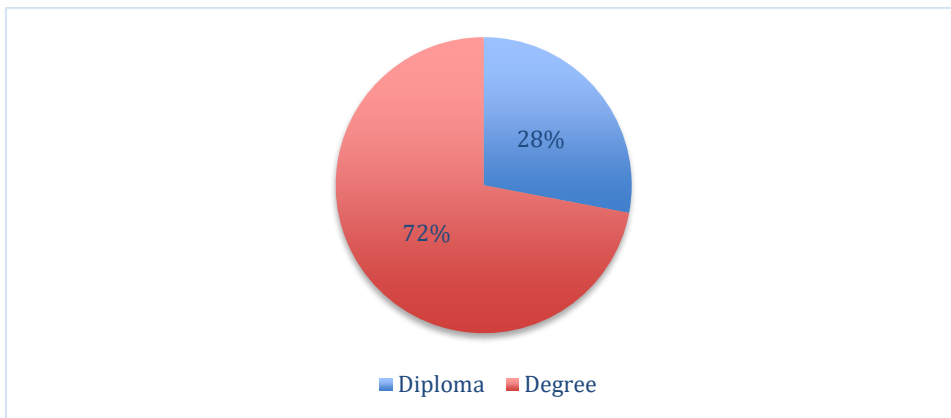


Figure 4 - Percentage for Level

As shown in Figure 4, the majority of respondents are at the degree level, with 72 %, while 28 % are from the diploma level.

Motivating factors

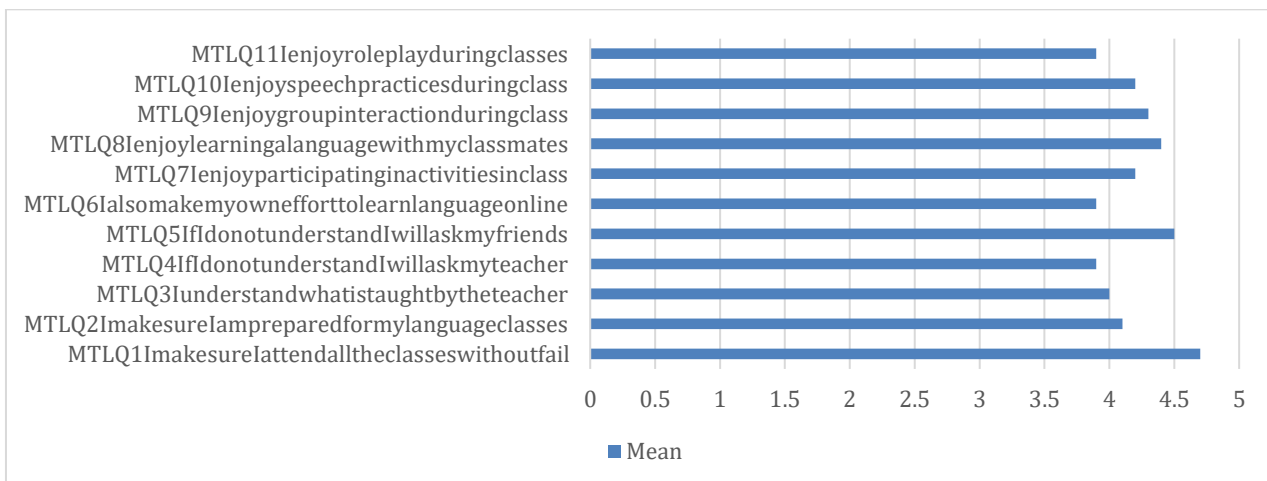


Figure 5 - Mean for Motivation

Figure 5 revealed the mean for motivation. The mean score is between 3.91 and 4.71. This result shows that most students are motivated to learn French. The mean score for attending the class without fail was the highest ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.54$) followed by asking friends for help when they do not understand ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.59$). These results indicate that students demonstrate a strong commitment to attend classes. They demonstrate strong behavioural motivation. Item No. 5 indicates that students rely heavily on peer collaboration during the learning process. Asking friends for help indicates that peer interaction significantly contributes to learners' support in foreign language acquisition. This finding supports social learning theory and a collectivist learning culture. Past studies have shown that collaborative learning settings can help raise students' motivation and engagement in language acquisition (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). The inclination toward peer assistance and the relatively high mean score for satisfaction in studying French with peers ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.61$) also indicate the collaborative learning dynamics shown in collectivist educational settings, where students rely on group help to overcome academic challenges (Hofstede, 2001).

Demotivating factors

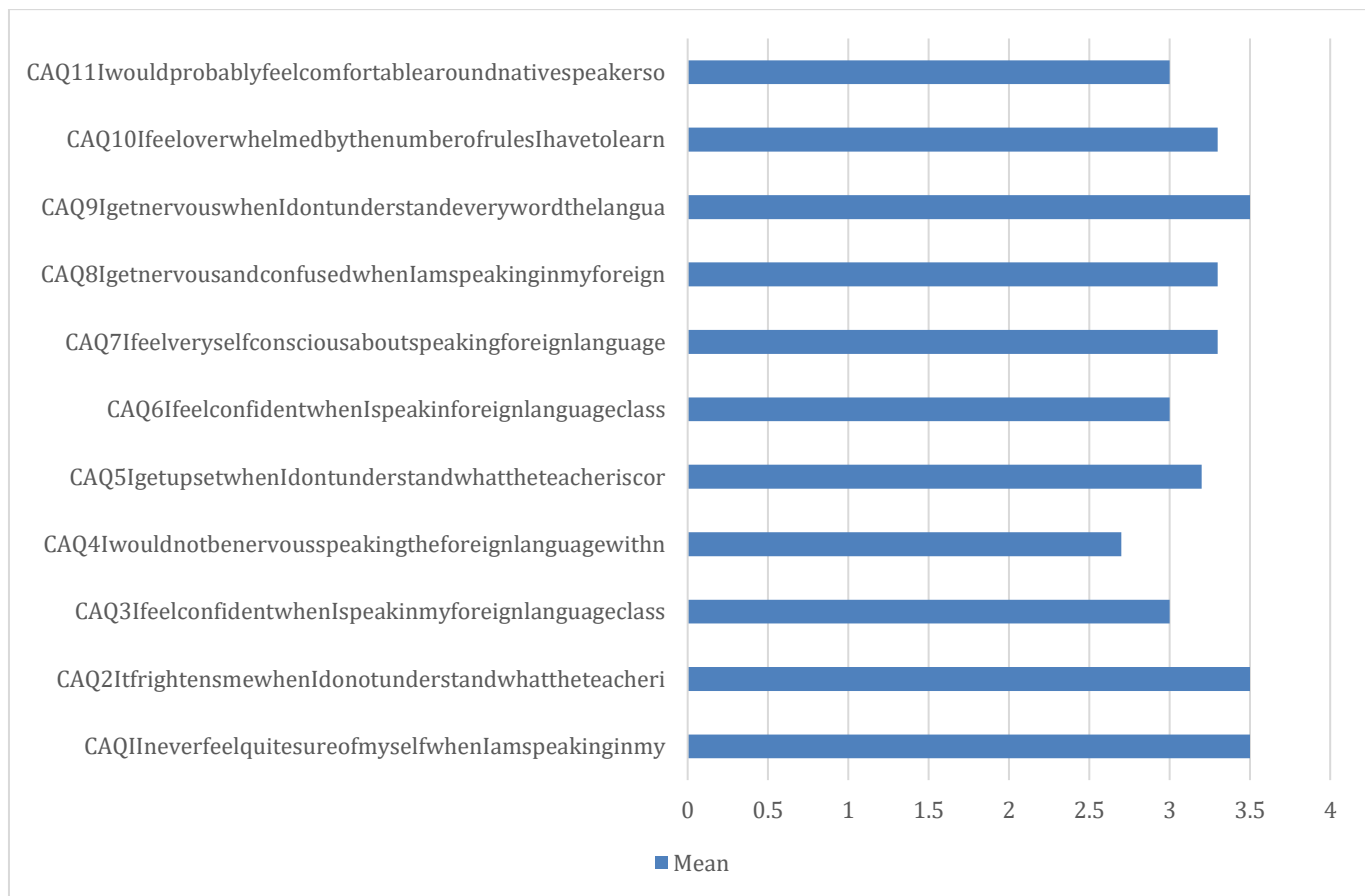


Figure 6- Mean for Communication Apprehension

Figure 6 illustrates the mean for communication apprehension. The results indicate that learners have a moderate level of communication apprehension. The lowest mean recorded is for item no. 3, "I feel confident when I speak French in my French class" ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.99$). This result suggests that students lack confidence when speaking in French. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), communication apprehension is a key component of foreign language anxiety.

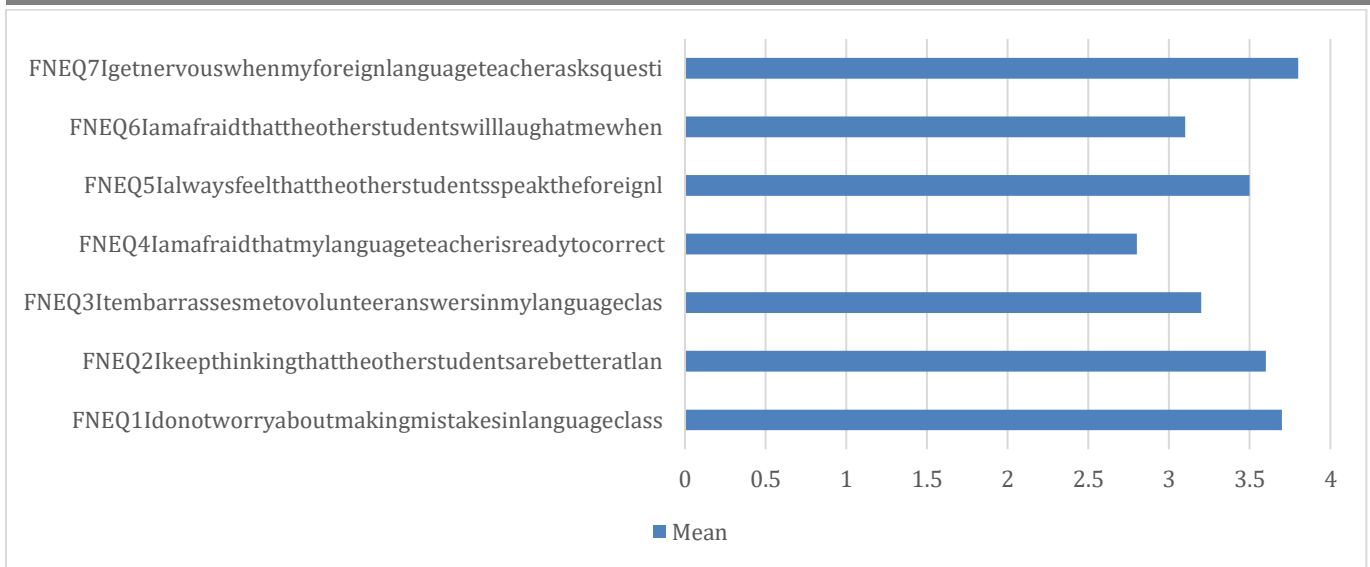


Figure 7 - Mean for Fear of Negative Evaluation

The findings shown in figure 7 revealed that fear of negative evaluation is a prominent demotivating factor. The highest mean for fear of negative evaluation concerns item no. 7, where the students stated, “I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions that I haven't prepared in advance” (M = 3.83, SD = 0.97). According to Horwitz et al. (1986), the fear of negative evaluation happens when learners are worried about being judged by teachers or peers. Fear of negative evaluation may discourage students from actively participating in classroom activities, particularly in oral communication tasks.

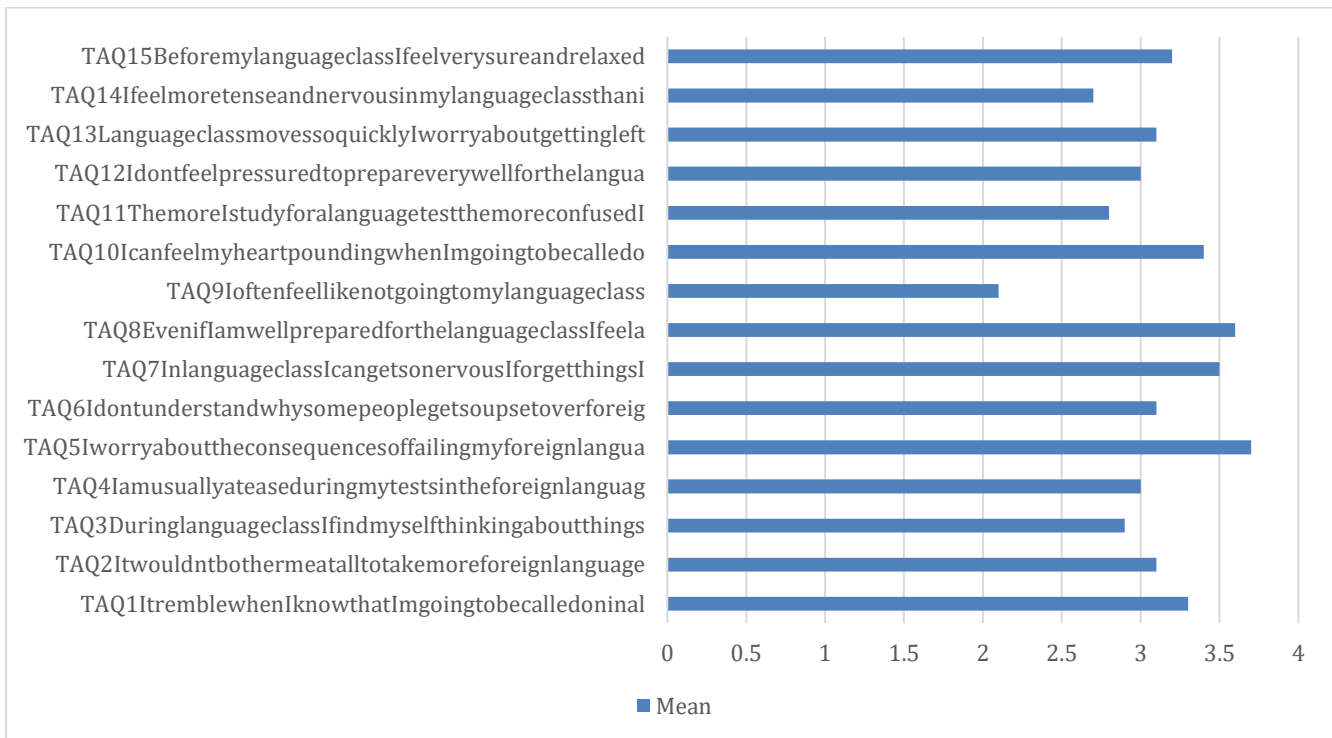


Figure 8 - Mean for Test Anxiety

Figure 8 above shows the mean score for test anxiety, which is another factor that contributes to learners' demotivation. The highest mean score is for item no. 5, “I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class” (M = 3.73, SD = 0.98). This result shows that assessment can put pressure on students and also influence their responses to language learning. Prior research by Zhang et al. (2020) suggested that anxiety that is associated with academic evaluation can negatively affect language performance.

The connection between motivating and demotivating elements

Table 3- Connection between Motivating and Demotivating Elements

		MOTIVATING	DEMOTIVATING
MOTIVATING	Pearson Correlation	1	-.002
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.979
	N	126	126
DEMOTIVATING	Pearson Correlation	-.002	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.979	
	N	126	126

Table 3 shows the correlation between motivating and demotivating factors. The results indicate no significant correlation between the two variables $r(124) = -.002, p = .979$. These findings suggest that motivating and demotivating factors are not linearly related.

The absence of a statistically significant correlation suggests that motivation and demotivation operate as independent psychological constructs. To put it another way, students may simultaneously have great motivation to learn a language while also having obstacles connected to anxiety when they are in the process of learning the language.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The first limitation concerns the demographic distribution of the respondents. Out of 126 respondents, 74 % were female and 26 % were male. The uneven distribution could influence the overall results of the study. Prior research has suggested that gender may influence language learning attitudes and motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Future study may consider a more balanced gender distribution.

The second drawback concerns the generalisability of the findings since it was distributed to a single higher education institution. Future research could expand the scope of the study by including participants from other universities in Malaysia.

Another drawback concerns the methodology. This research depended only on data from quantitative surveys and limited the depth of learners' perspectives. Furthermore, as the study relied on self-reported survey responses, participants may have provided socially desirable answers. For future research, researchers could adopt a mixed-methods approach and include interviews in the methodology.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the elements that motivate and demotivate Malaysian students during the acquisition of French as a foreign language. The findings show that students have a high level of motivation, especially in attending classes and working with their peers. According to Dörnyei (2001), the result shows the importance of social support in learning a foreign language, as interacting with classmates can positively influence learners.

However, several anxiety-related factors were also identified as sources of demotivation. These include fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, and communication apprehension. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), feelings of anxiety can affect learners' confidence and performance when learning a foreign language. The

results suggest that even if the students are motivated to learn French, they could still face challenges that affect their language learning process.

In summary, the results of this study demonstrated the significance of peer collaboration and effective pedagogical strategies in maintaining learners' motivation. Research has shown that supportive classroom environments encouraging meaningful interaction can increase learner's motivation and engagement (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 2001). The findings of the study also indicate that in order to enhance students' performance, it is necessary to address the factors that contribute to anxiety.

Overall, the study provides a deeper understanding of the relationship between motivation and demotivation in the Malaysian context. By understanding these relationships, educators can design better teaching strategies for students. The findings also add to the growing research on the roles of motivation and anxiety in foreign language learning.

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