

The Relationship Between Motivation and Fear in Learning Mandarin as a Foreign Language among Undergraduates in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

In the Malaysian higher education context, learning Mandarin as a foreign language has become an increasingly important part of students' academic experience and future employability. Although motivation is often viewed as a key factor in successful language learning, many learners continue to experience fear and anxiety in the classroom. These emotional experiences may shape how students participate, respond, and persist in Mandarin language learning. The objective of this study is to examine the influence of motivation on fear of learning Mandarin among university students in Malaysia. In particular, the study focuses on learners' motivation and fear, the relationship between these two variables, and whether differences exist across academic clusters. This study adopted a quantitative research design using a survey method. The research instrument consisted of two main sections. Section B measured motivation to learn a Mandarin language in terms of effort, desire, and positive affect. Section C measured fear of learning Mandarin language, focusing on communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. A total of 234 undergraduate students from several campuses in a public university participated in the study. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and inferential tests. The findings show that learners generally demonstrate strong motivation and positive engagement in foreign language learning. However, fear remains present, particularly in situations involving speaking, understanding classroom input, and assessment. The analysis also reveals a weak but significant negative relationship between motivation and fear. While motivation does not differ significantly across academic clusters, fear shows a significant difference. Overall, the findings suggest that motivation alone may not be sufficient to reduce learners' fear in the Mandarin classroom. The study highlights the need for greater attention to emotional factors in the classrooms and points to the importance of teaching approaches that support both motivation and emotional well-being.

Keywords: Foreign language learning; learner motivation; foreign language anxiety; academic clusters; Malaysian university students

INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

In the modern Malaysian higher education landscape, the ability to communicate in a foreign language particularly Mandarin is no longer just an academic requirement but a vital skill for global employability. This paper investigates the psychological dynamics of Mandarin language acquisition among university students in

Malaysia, specifically focusing on the tension between their drive to learn and the anxieties that hinder their progress. Before engaging with the data, readers should understand that learning a complex language like Mandarin is not merely a cognitive exercise but an emotional journey where success is often dictated by the learner's internal state. According to Rahmat (2020), it is necessary to identify how fears may snowball into a cycle that can impede future learning. This study explores how positive motivational drivers can act as a buffer against the debilitating effects of "language fear" in a classroom setting.

To establish a clear academic foundation, several key terms from the title must be defined:

- **Motivation:** In this study, motivation is defined through Gardner's (2001) socio-educational model, which views it as a combination of effort (the time spent), desire (the want to achieve), and positive affect (the emotional enjoyment of the task) within the Mandarin learning process.
- **Fear of Learning Mandarin:** While originally conceptualized by Horwitz et al. (1986) as Fear of Learning a Foreign Language, this study focuses on the situational anxiety unique to Mandarin classrooms. It encompasses communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety specifically related to Mandarin language tasks.

The relevance of this topic remains high despite decades of research. Recent studies such as those by Li and Wei (2024) argue that the "emotional turn" in second language acquisition has shifted focus toward how positive affect can broaden a student's perspective, yet many still succumb to the narrowing effect of anxiety. Furthermore, Dewaele and Al-Saraj (2025) emphasize that in the Malaysian context, teacher support and the classroom environment play a critical role in balancing foreign language enjoyment against debilitating anxiety. Additionally, Liu et al. (2025) found that even highly curious and motivated learners in university settings often experience a disconnect between their desire to learn and their actual classroom performance due to the mediating role of foreign language anxiety. Understanding this relationship allows educators in Malaysia to move beyond traditional teaching and address the emotional well-being of the Mandarin learner to ensure long-term linguistic success.

Statement of Problem

Current research within the realm of language acquisition highlights that while motivation is a primary driver for success, it is often countered by persistent psychological barriers. According to Isnaini et al. (2025), learners today utilize various strategies to navigate language contexts, yet their progress is frequently hampered by internal affective factors. Shao and Pekrun (2024) further emphasize that the emotional state of a learner—specifically the tension between enjoyment and anxiety—acts as a critical determinant of academic achievement. Despite the identified importance of motivation, several issues persist within this field.

Al-Mahrooqi and Denman (2023) observe that students often experience high levels of communication apprehension, even when they possess a high desire to learn. Specifically, Rahmat (2020) notes that fear in foreign language learning tends to "snowball" into a cycle where initial anxiety leads to avoidance, which then prevents the development of proficiency, further fuelling the fear. These issues provide a strong impetus for this study, as there is a clear need to investigate how the specific motivational components of effort, desire, and positive affect can be leveraged to break this cycle of fear in the Mandarin language classroom.

A significant research gap is identified in the recent work of Dewaele and Al-Saraj (2025), who, in their "suggestions for future research," explicitly call for more localized studies that examine the intersection of student emotions across different academic backgrounds.

They indicate that researchers should explore if students from diverse clusters—such as Science and Technology versus Social Sciences—exhibit varying patterns of fear and positive affect when acquiring a new language. This study addresses that specific call by analyzing the influence of motivation on fear specifically among university students in Malaysia learning Mandarin across distinct academic clusters.

Objective of the Study and Research Questions

This study is done to explore the influence of motivation on fear of learning a foreign language. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following research questions (RQ);

RQ1: How do learners perceive their motivation to learn Mandarin?

RQ2: How do learners perceive their fear of learning Mandarin?

RQ3: Is there a relationship between motivation (effort, desire and positive affect) and fear of learning Mandarin? (H1- There is no relationship between effort, desire & positive affect and fear of learning a foreign language)

RQ4: Is there a significant difference for positive affect and fear of learning a foreign language across clusters?

(H2-There is no significant difference for positive affect and fear of learning a foreign language across clusters)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Vroom Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964) and Motivation to Write Information

Motivation has long been recognised as a crucial factor influencing learners' engagement and performance in academic tasks, particularly in language learning and writing. One of the most influential frameworks for explaining motivation is Vroom's Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964), which conceptualises motivation as a cognitive process shaped by individuals' beliefs about effort, performance, and outcomes. This theory has been widely applied in educational contexts to explain students' willingness to invest effort in learning activities, including writing tasks.

According to Vroom (1964), motivation is determined by three interrelated components: expectancy, instrumentality and valence. Expectancy refers to an individual's belief that their effort will lead to successful performance. In the context of writing, expectancy reflects students' confidence in their writing ability and their belief that putting effort into writing will result in improved performance. Previous studies have shown that learners with higher self-efficacy and expectancy are more likely to persist in challenging writing tasks and demonstrate greater engagement (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 2003).

Instrumentality is defined as the belief that successful performance will lead to a particular outcome or reward. In academic writing, instrumentality may involve students' perceptions that good writing performance will result in tangible outcomes such as higher grades, positive feedback, academic recognition, or future academic and career opportunities. Research indicates that when students perceive a clear link between writing performance and desired outcomes, their motivation to write increases significantly (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Wigfield et al., 2016).

The third component, valence, refers to the value or desirability an individual places on the expected outcome or reward. In writing motivation, valence is reflected in how much students value the rewards associated with successful writing, such as academic achievement, personal satisfaction, or improved language proficiency. If learners perceive these outcomes as meaningful and worthwhile, they are more likely to exert effort in writing tasks (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Vroom's Expectancy Theory posits that motivation is highest when all three components are present simultaneously: learners believe they can succeed (expectancy), believe that success will lead to desirable outcomes (instrumentality), and value those outcomes (valence). Applied to writing motivation, this framework suggests that students are most motivated to write when they feel capable of completing writing tasks, perceive clear benefits from good writing performance, and value the rewards associated with writing success. As such, Expectancy Theory provides a useful theoretical foundation for examining motivation to write in language learning contexts.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy (Merton, 1948) and Fear of Learning a Foreign Language

Robert K. Merton's (1948) concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy provides a useful framework for understanding fear of learning a foreign language, as it highlights how expectations and beliefs can shape learning experiences and outcomes. When learners enter a language classroom with the belief that they lack ability, will be embarrassed when speaking, or are destined to fail, these negative expectations generate anxiety and fear. This emotional state often leads to avoidance behaviors such as reluctance to participate, minimal practice, and fear of making mistakes. Over time, reduced engagement limits exposure to the language and slows skill development, resulting in weaker performance. This outcome then appears to confirm the learner's original belief that they are incapable of learning a foreign language, even though the failure was largely produced by the belief itself rather than actual ability. In this way, fear becomes both a cause and a consequence of poor performance, reinforcing a cycle that is difficult to break. The self-fulfilling prophecy thus demonstrates that fear of foreign language learning is not simply an individual weakness but a socially and psychologically constructed process, shaped by expectations, classroom experiences, and repeated confirmation of initially false assumptions.

Furthermore, this psychological phenomenon manifests through the specific dimensions of communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), when a student anticipates that they will appear incompetent in front of their peers, this cognitive preoccupation consumes the mental energy required for linguistic processing, leading to the very stumbles and silences they initially feared. This phenomenon is particularly damaging in formal university environments where oral participation is required, as the learner's fear of being judged by the instructor can paralyze their speech production.

In the final stage of this process, what began as a subjective "fear" becomes an objective "reality" of poor results, effectively closing the loop of the prophecy and creating a cycle that impedes future progress. Over time, reduced engagement limits exposure to the language and slows skill development, resulting in weaker performance which confirms the learner's original belief that they are incapable of learning. By understanding this framework, the present study seeks to identify whether high levels of motivation—specifically the "desire" and "effort" described by Gardner (2001)—can provide learners with the psychological resilience needed to interrupt this negative cycle before it becomes a permanent barrier to their linguistic development.

Past Studies

Past Studies on Motivation to Learn a Foreign Language

Many studies have been done to investigate the motivation in foreign language learning. The focus of motivation theory in second- and foreign-language learning has shifted from the distinctive elements of the motivation concept towards a process-oriented approach, combined with the idea of self-determination in learning, as cognitive and educational psychology have developed (Bower, 2019). Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) proposed a stage framework that has become a cornerstone of language motivation theory, characterising the development of L2 motivation theory into three stages: the social-psychological stage, the cognitive-situated stage, and the socio-dynamic stage.

The study by Krüsemann and Graham (2025) is done to investigate the motivation of German language learning among 13-14-year-olds in England and whether they will continue to learn German and gain a qualification in German language in GCSE at the age of 16. Four schools in England were selected, and a total of 391 questionnaires, including both quantitative and qualitative items, were collected. The results showed that learners were more likely to continue German study if they believed others' views of German were positive, had high expectations for success, and were of high socio-economic status. This finding indicates that the influence of a potentially social belief norm can be a key factor in learners' decisions of whether to continue the language study. The study by Iwaniec (2020) also looked at English language learning motivation of Polish secondary school students from the perspectives of parental education level and school location. 599 Polish English learners aged 15-16 from 10 schools participated in this study. The questionnaires, including motivational constructs and students' backgrounds, were used to collect data. The results showed that students from urban schools and those whose parents had higher levels of education tended to be more motivated than their peers from rural schools

with less educated parents. This study indicated that socio-economic status should be a factor considered in language learning motivation.

The study by Parrish et al. (2025) is done to investigate the motivation for studying modern foreign languages among secondary school students in England. The study investigated the association between English secondary school learners' perceptions of teachers' support, their sense of autonomy and language learning motivation and the learning motivation changes as they continue from year 7 to year 11. A total of 1775 student questionnaires from three secondary schools in England were selected. The findings showed that a decline in language-learning motivation occurred as the school year progressed, as students received less autonomy support. The results also showed a strong relation between motivation and curriculum policies. This study indicated that the factors at the school level can facilitate the students' learning motivation. Mayumi and Zheng (2023) also looked at the motivation of UK university students for learning Chinese. The study explored a small group of 5 university students' learning motivation of studying Chinese as an additional language from the lens of the L2 motivational self system and the ideal multilingual self. In-depth interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data. The findings showed that the students who achieved remarkable success in learning Chinese were linked with the practical benefit of Chinese learning and also a strong desire to integrate into Chinese society. This study suggested that the psychological relation to the target language and its culture played an effective role in motivation studies.

In summary, the studies mentioned above suggested that motivation can be studied from a multifaceted perspective as language motivation theory has developed. However, socio-psychological factors still played a fundamental role in the study of motivation, especially in Mandarin language learning among university students. Thus, the "effort, desire and positive affect" which was presented by Gardner will be explored in the current study focusing on Mandarin learners.

Past Studies on Fear of Learning a Foreign Language

Many studies have been conducted to investigate the complexities of learner anxiety and the psychological barriers that impede linguistic progress in higher education. This research often emphasizes how these internal affective constraints can significantly disrupt the cognitive processing required for effective language acquisition, particularly in formal university environments where students must balance academic performance with the challenges of mastering a new communication system such as Mandarin.

The study by Liu et al. (2025) was done to investigate the relationship between students' language learning curiosity and academic achievement, specifically looking at the mediating role of foreign language anxiety. This research was about how internal fear can block the positive effects of curiosity in a university setting. The respondents were university students, and the research utilized a quantitative approach involving the application of SPSS correlation analysis to measure the degree of association between variables. The findings revealed that foreign language anxiety significantly interferes with the path from curiosity to achievement. The implication of this study is that educators must prioritize the reduction of classroom anxiety to allow a student's natural curiosity to lead to successful learning. Next, the study by Dewaele and Al-Saraj (2025) also looked at the intersection of enjoyment and anxiety. This research explored how teacher support can mitigate fear in the Malaysian university context. The study involved university-level respondents and used a survey instrument. The findings indicated that while fear is prevalent, a supportive environment can significantly lower communication apprehension. The implication of this study is that teacher-student rapport is a critical factor in breaking the cycle of fear.

The study by Rahmat (2020) was done to investigate the cycle of fear in foreign language learning. This research focused on identifying how fear snowballs into a repetitive cycle that impedes future learning. The respondents were learners in a foreign language context, and the instrument used was a survey designed to reveal variables of anxiety. The findings showed that if these fears are not identified and addressed early, they create a cycle of avoidance and failure. The implication of this study is that early intervention and identifying the root of the fear are necessary for student progress. Next, the study by Al-Mahrooqi and Denman (2023) also looked at motivation and anxiety in the classroom. This research investigated how even motivated learners can be silenced by a fear of negative evaluation. The respondents were university-level learners, and findings revealed a strong presence

of communication apprehension during speaking tasks. The implication of this study is that language curricula should include activities that build self-confidence and reduce the fear of being judged by peers.

In essence, the collective findings of these studies suggest that fear is a powerful mediator that can negate even the strongest motivation. While experts like Liu et al. (2025) and Rahmat (2020) emphasize the structural and psychological nature of this anxiety, my study focuses on how these fears specifically manifest among learners of Mandarin within the Malaysian university cluster system. This study argues that by understanding the relationship between effort and fear in Mandarin acquisition, we can develop better pedagogical interventions tailored to different academic backgrounds.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the study. This study investigates the influence of motivation on fear of learning Mandarin. According to Gardner (2001), motivation depends on learners' (i) effort, (ii) desire and (iii) positive affect. In the context of learning Mandarin, what motivates learners are the factors like the effort given by the instructors and this effort resonates into the learners' intention to be successful in the learning experience. Next, learners are motivated by their desire to learn Mandarin as the target language. This desire can be a result of effort or become the reason for the learners to want to succeed in their learning. Lastly, learners' motivation to learn is also dependent on the positive affect they get from the learning tasks. The happier they are with the tasks, the more motivated they get.

However, for some learners, learning Mandarin may cause anxiety and fear. It is necessary to identify these fears as fear snowballs into a cycle and the fear may impede future learning (Rahmat, 2020). According to Howritz, et.al (1986), there are several reasons for learners' fear of learning a language and they are (i) communication apprehension, (ii) fear of negative evaluation, and (iii) test anxiety. This study also explores if there is a relationship between each motivation factor and fear of learning Mandarin.

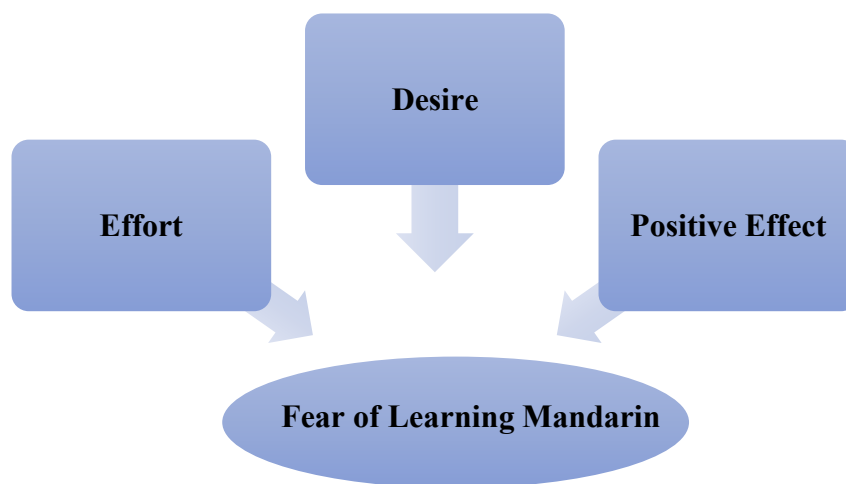


Figure 1- Conceptual Framework of the Study-The Influence of Motivation on Fear of Learning Mandarin

METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study is done to explore the influence of motivation on fear of learning Mandarin. A convenient sample of 234 participants responded to the survey. The instrument used is a 5 Likert-scale survey and is rooted from Gardner (2001), Howritz, et.al (1986) to reveal the variables in table 3 below. Table 1 below shows the categories used for the Likert scale; 1 is for Strongly Disagree, 2 is for Disagree, 3 is for Undecided, 4 is for Agree and 5 is for Strongly Agree.

Table 1- Likert Scale Use

1	Never
2	Rarely
3	Sometimes
4	Very Often
5	Always

Table 2- Distribution of Items in the Survey

SECTION	VARIABLE	CONSTRUCT	NO OF ITEMS	TOT ITEM	CRONBACH ALPHA
B	MOTIVATION TO LEARN (Gardner, 2001)	Effort	4	13	.895
		Desire	4		
		Positive Affect	5		
C	FEAR OF LEARNING MANDARIN Horwitz, et.al. (1986)	Communication apprehension	8	22	.949
		Fear of negative evaluation	6		
		Test anxiety	8		
				35	.910

Table 2 summarises how the questionnaire items were distributed across the study constructs and reports the reliability results. As shown in Table 2, the questionnaire was designed with two main sections and a total of 35 non-demographic items. Participants answered all items using the same five-point frequency scale, from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always) (Table 1).

Section B measured motivation to learn Mandarin, adapted from Gardner (2001). It consisted of 13 items covering Effort (4 items), Desire (4 items) and Positive Affect (5 items). The reliability for this section was high ($\alpha = .895$).

Section C measured fear of learning Mandarin, the items followed Horwitz et al. (1986) and covered Communication Apprehension (8 items), Fear of Negative Evaluation (6 items) and Test Anxiety (8 items), resulting in 22 items. Reliability for this section was excellent ($\alpha = .949$).

Overall, reliability for the full instrument was also strong ($\alpha = .910$), indicating that the questionnaire performed consistently in this study sample.

Table 3- Reliability Levels, Cronbach’s Alpha Ranges, and Their Interpretations

Reliability Level	Cronbach’s Alpha range	Interpretation
Excellent	0.9 and above	Indicates very high internal consistency
Good	0.80-0.89	Reflects strong internal consistency
Acceptable	0.70-0.79	Indicates acceptable internal consistency
Questionable	0.60-0.69	Reflects questionable internal consistency
Poor	Below 0.6	Indicates poor internal consistency

In order to determine the internal reliability of the instrument, reliability analysis is one. Table 3 above shows the distribution and interpretation of Cronbach Alpha range. According to Ahmad, et.al. (2024), Cronbach Alpha scores between 0.7 to 0.9 is considered acceptable to excellent.

Table 2 also shows the reliability of the survey. The analysis shows a Cronbach alpha of .895 for Motivation to learn Mandarin and .949 for Fear of learning Mandarin. The overall Cronbach Alpha for all 35 items is .910, thus, revealing a good reliability of the instrument chosen/used. Further analysis using SPSS is done to present findings to answer the research questions for this study.

FINDINGS

Demographic Analysis

According to Zienefuss, et.al (2021), researchers report demographic data in percentages to establish sample representatives, and allow for generalizability to a larger population. The reporting also provides an overview of participants' characteristics. Percentages offer a clear and understandable picture of the sample makeup.

Table 4- Percentage for Demographic Profile

Question	Demographic Profile	Categories	Percentage (%)
1	Gender	Male	21%
		Female	79%
2	Cluster	Science & Technology	39%
		Social Sciences, Humanities & Business	61%

The demographic profile of the respondents indicates a predominantly female sample, with females accounting for 79% of the participants and males comprising 21%. In terms of academic cluster, the majority of respondents are from the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Business cluster (61%), while the remaining 39% are from the Science and Technology cluster.

Descriptive Statistics

Why is there a need to report the mean and standard deviation? According to Vetter (2017), Mean (M) represents the average, or centre of a data set. Standard deviation (SD) indicates the typical distance of individual observations from the mean which shows the data's variability or spread. A low SD means the data points are clustered close to the mean while a high SD indicates they are more spread out. It is good to have a high SD.

Findings for Motivation

This section presents data to answer research question 1- How do learners perceive their motivation to learn Mandarin? In the context of this study, this is measured by (i) effort, (ii) desire and (iii) positive affect.

Table 5- Mean for Effort (the effort to learn the language)

STATEMENT/QUESTION	Mean	SD
EQ1-I make sure I attend all the classes without fail	4.69	0.62
EQ2-I make sure I am prepared for my Mandarin classes	4.40	0.68
EQ3-I make sure I am on time for class	4.54	0.70
EQ4-I make sure I understand what is taught by the teacher	4.44	0.64

Table 5 presents the mean scores for effort in learning Mandarin, indicating a generally high level of commitment among the respondents. The highest mean score is recorded for EQ1, "I make sure I attend all the classes without fail" (M = 4.69, SD = 0.62), suggesting that most learners consistently prioritize class attendance.

This is followed by EQ3, "I make sure I am on time for class" (M = 4.54, SD = 0.70), reflecting strong punctuality and responsibility toward Mandarin learning. EQ4, which focuses on understanding the teacher's instruction, also shows a high mean (M = 4.44, SD = 0.64), indicating that students actively try to comprehend the lesson content. Although slightly lower, EQ2, "I make sure I am prepared for my Mandarin classes" (M = 4.40, SD = 0.68), still reflects a high level of preparation.

Overall, the high mean values and relatively low standard deviations suggest that learners demonstrate consistent effort and positive engagement in learning the language.

Table 6- Mean for Desire (wanting to achieve a goal)

STATEMENT/QUESTION	Mean	SD
DQ1-If I do not understand, I will ask my teacher	3.96	0.91
DQ2-If I do not understand, I will ask my friends	4.59	0.64
DQ3-I also make my own effort to learn Mandarin online	3.95	0.82
DQ4-I try my best to do well in my Mandarin class	4.57	0.58

Table 6 shows the mean scores for desire in achieving Mandarin language learning goals, revealing a generally strong level of motivation among the respondents. The highest mean is observed for DQ2, “If I do not understand, I will ask my friends” (M = 4.59, SD = 0.64), indicating that learners are highly willing to seek peer support to improve their understanding of Mandarin. Similarly, DQ4, “I try my best to do well in my Mandarin class” (M = 4.57, SD = 0.58), reflects a strong desire to succeed and perform well. In contrast, DQ1, which involves asking the teacher for clarification, records a slightly lower mean (M = 3.96, SD = 0.91), suggesting moderate confidence or comfort in seeking help from instructors. DQ3, related to making independent efforts to learn the language online, also shows a comparable mean (M = 3.95, SD = 0.82), indicating a reasonable but less consistent level of self-directed learning. Overall, the findings suggest that learners demonstrate a strong desire to achieve their Mandarin learning goals, particularly through peer support and personal effort in the classroom.

Table 7- mean for Positive Affect (enjoy the task of learning the language)

STATEMENT/QUESTION	Mean	SD
PAQ1-I enjoy participating in activities in class	4.51	0.66
PAQ2-I enjoy learning Mandarin with my classmates	4.64	0.63
PAQ3-I enjoy group interaction during class	4.43	0.75
PAQ4-I enjoy speech practices during class	4.36	0.80
PAQ5-I enjoy activities during classes	4.50	0.68

Table 7 shows the mean scores for positive affect in enjoying the task of learning Mandarin (PA), revealing an overall strong positive statement in items related to the task of learning Mandarin. The highest mean score is 4.64 (SD=0.63) for PAQ2, “I enjoy learning Mandarin with my classmates”, indicating that learners are highly enjoyable to learn Mandarin together with friends. Followed by PAQ1, “I enjoy participating in activities in class” (M=4.51, SD=0.66) and PAQ5, “I enjoy activities during classes” (M=4.50, SD=0.68), revealing learners are willing to participate in activities in class and they also can enjoy them. Regarding the group interaction and speech practices, the learner shows less enjoyment, although they remain positive, as shown in PAQ3, “I enjoy group interaction during class” (M=4.43, SD=0.75) and PAQ4, “I enjoy speech practices during class” (M=4.36, SD=0.80).

Findings for Fear of Learning Mandarin

This section presents data to answer research question 2- How do learners perceive their fear of learning Mandarin? In the context of this study, this is measured by (i) communication apprehension, (ii) fear of negative evaluation, and (iii) test anxiety.

Table 8 -Mean for Communication Apprehension

STATEMENT/QUESTION	Mean	SD
CAQ1-I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my Mandarin class.	3.50	0.91
CAQ2-It frightens me when I do not understand what the teacher is saying in Mandarin.	3.67	1.08
CAQ3-I am not confident when I speak Mandarin in class.	3.34	1.07
CAQ4-I would be nervous speaking Mandarin with native speakers.	3.83	1.09
CAQ5-I feel very self-conscious about speaking Mandarin in front of other students.	3.56	1.03
CAQ6-I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my Mandarin class.	3.39	1.01

CAQ7-I get nervous when I don't understand every word the Mandarin teacher says.	3.51	1.16
CAQ8-I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak Mandarin.	3.30	1.07

Table 8 shows the mean scores for communication apprehension, revealing an overall positive score for these items. The highest mean score is 3.83 (SD=1.09) for CAQ4, "I would be nervous speaking Mandarin with native speakers", indicating that learners feel stressed when they talk to native speakers, as there is an obvious language proficiency contrast. The second highest mean is 3.67 (SD=1.08) from CAQ2, "It frightens me when I do not understand what the teacher is saying in Mandarin", revealing that students struggled to manage the poor Mandarin proficiency and polite policy toward the teacher in language class. The lowest mean score is 3.30 (SD= 1.07) from CAQ8, "I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak Mandarin", indicating learners feel stressed to face the learning challenges in Mandarin learning.

Table 9- Mean for Fear of Negative Evaluation

STATEMENT/QUESTION	Mean	SD
FNEQ1-I worry about making mistakes in Mandarin class.	3.65	1.05
FNEQ2-I keep thinking that the other students are better at Mandarin than I am.	3.56	1.17
FNEQ3-It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my Mandarin class.	3.27	1.21
FNEQ4-I am afraid that my Mandarin teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	2.72	1.21
FNEQ5-I always feel that the other students speak Mandarin better than I do.	3.59	1.16
FNEQ6-I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak Mandarin.	3.16	1.33

Table 9 presents the descriptive statistics for learners' concerns regarding being judged by others in the Mandarin classroom. The highest mean score is 3.65 (SD=1.05) for FNEQ1, which states, "I worry about making mistakes in Mandarin class". This indicates that the most prevalent concern among Malaysian university students is a self-imposed pressure to avoid errors, which acts as a primary psychological barrier during lessons. The second highest mean is 3.59 (SD=1.16) for FNEQ5, "I always feel that the other students speak Mandarin better than I do". This suggests that social comparison is a significant factor, where students frequently perceive their own competence as lower than that of their peers. The lowest mean score is 2.72 (SD=1.21) for FNEQ4, "I am afraid that my Mandarin teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make". This lower score indicates that students are relatively less concerned about direct teacher intervention compared to their internal anxiety about perfection and peer perception.

Table 10- Mean for Test Anxiety

STATEMENT/QUESTION	Mean	SD
TAQ1-I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in Mandarin class.	3.16	1.22
TAQ2-It would bother me if I have to take more Mandarin classes	2.75	1.21
TAQ3-I am usually nervous during my tests in my Mandarin class.	3.69	1.15
TAQ4-I worry about the consequences of failing my Mandarin class	3.92	1.09
TAQ5-In Mandarin class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	3.51	1.15
TAQ6-I often feel like not going to my Mandarin class.	2.06	1.21
TAQ7-The more I study for Mandarin test, the more confused I get.	2.52	1.13
TAQ8-I feel more tense and nervous in my Mandarin class than in my other classes.	2.67	1.24

Among the statements, the highest mean score is for worrying about the consequences of failing a Mandarin class (M = 3.92), indicating that this is the most strongly felt concern among the respondents. The second highest mean is related to feeling nervous during tests in the Mandarin class (M = 3.69), suggesting a relatively high level of test-related anxiety. In contrast, the lowest mean is for often feeling like not going to the Mandarin class (M = 2.06), indicating that respondents are less likely to experience avoidance of attending their language classes.

Exploratory Statistics

According to He (2024), correlation is a statistical technique that shows how strongly two variables are related to each other or the degree of association between the two. It's a common tool for describing simple relationships without making a statement about cause and effect. This section presents data to answer research questions on correlation. To determine if there is a significant association in the mean scores between motivation and fear of learning Mandarin, data is analysed using SPSS for correlations. Results are presented separately in table 11 and below.

Findings for Relationship between Effort and Fear of Learning Mandarin

This section presents data to answer research question 3-Is there a relationship between motivation (effort, desire and positive affect) and fear of learning Mandarin? (H1- There is no relationship between motivation (effort, desire and positive affect) and fear of learning a foreign language)

Table 11- Correlation between motivation and fear of learning Mandarin

		MOTIVATION	FEAR
MOTIVATION	Pearson (Correlation)	1	-.178**
	Sig (2-tailed)		0.006
	N	234	234
FEAR	Pearson (Correlation)	-.178**	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.006	
	N	234	234

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

Table 11 shows there is an association between motivation and fear of learning Mandarin. Correlation analysis shows that there is a weak significant association between motivation and fear of learning a foreign language ($r = -.178^{**}$) and ($p = .000$). According to He (2024), coefficient is significant at the .05 level and positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. This means that there is also a weak negative relationship between motivation and fear of learning a foreign language. Null hypothesis is rejected.

Inferential Statistics

According to He (2024), there are three main functions of a T-test and ANOVA. Firstly, both are done to compare means. This test is also done to determine if the average scores (mean) or values of two groups, or one group against a known value, are different enough to be considered statistically meaningful and are not just due to random chance. Secondly, T-test and ANOVA are done to test hypotheses.

Researchers use t-tests and ANOVA to test hypotheses about means, such as whether a new treatment significantly impacts a variable or if there's a difference in performance between two distinct groups. Lastly, T-test and ANOVA are done to identify significant differences. The output of a t-test provides a p-value (significance value). If this p-value is below a predetermined threshold (often 0.05), it indicates a statistically significant difference, allowing researchers to draw conclusions about the populations from which their samples were drawn.

Findings for Motivation and Fear of Mandarin Language Learning Across Clusters

This section presents data to answer research question 4- Is there a significant difference for motivation (effort, positive effect, affect) and fear of learning Mandarin across clusters?

(H2-There is no significant difference for motivation and fear of learning Mandarin across clusters)

Table 12- T- test for Motivation and fear across clusters

		Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance		Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper	
						One-Sided p	Two-Sided p					
MOTIVATION	Equal variances assumed	1.373	.243	-1.687	232	.046	.093	-.10574	.06266	-.22920	.01772	
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.635	171.709	.052	.104	-.10574	.06468	-.23342	.02194	
FEAR	Equal variances assumed	1.252	.264	2.942	232	.002	.004	.30642	.10416	.10121	.51163	
	Equal variances not assumed			3.021	208.056	.001	.003	.30642	.10144	.10645	.50640	

With reference to table 12, T-test was conducted to examine the effects of motivation and fear across clusters. The analysis shows there is no significant difference between motivation ($F=1.373$, $p=0.93$) across clusters. Null hypothesis is accepted. However, there is a significant relationship between fear of learning Mandarin ($F=1.252$, $p=0.04$) across clusters. Null hypothesis is rejected.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings and Discussions

This section summarises the key findings by Research Questions (RQ1–RQ4) and discusses how they relate to past studies reviewed in the Literature Review.

RQ1: How do learners perceive their motivation to learn Mandarin?

A clear message emerges from the data: learners in this study are generally highly motivated to acquire Mandarin. They show strong effort in basic but important ways. They attend classes regularly and make sure they are on time. Their desire to do well is also evident, especially in how actively they seek support when they do not understand. Interestingly, peer support stands out more strongly than teacher support. Learners tend to turn to friends first, while asking the teacher and learning independently online appear less consistent. In terms of positive affect, learners largely enjoy learning Mandarin in class, particularly when learning happens with classmates and through activities. Enjoyment remains positive across items, but speech-related practice appears to be the least enjoyable compared to other classroom activities.

These patterns make sense when viewed through the lens of motivation as a socially shaped experience. The strong peer-oriented tendency echoes the social dimension noted in Krüsemann and Graham (2025), where learners’ choices were influenced by perceived social norms and expectations. It also fits the idea that motivation changes with classroom conditions and learning experiences (Parrish et al., 2025). In addition, the generally positive classroom experience aligns with the broader view that motivation is not only an internal drive but is also sustained by the learning environment and meaningful engagement (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). While past work such as Iwaniec (2020) highlights background factors that may shape motivation, the present sample shows that, within the Mandarin learning context studied, motivation remains strong across learners overall. The emphasis on learning with others is also consistent with the way psychological connection and meaningful goals can support motivation in learning a challenging language like Mandarin (Mayumi & Zheng, 2023).

RQ2: How do learners perceive their fear of learning a foreign language?

At the same time, motivation does not mean fear disappears. Learners reported moderate levels of fear, and the “fear profile” is quite telling. For communication apprehension, learners feel most nervous when they have to speak Mandarin with native speakers and when they cannot follow what the teacher is saying. In other words, fear becomes stronger when real-time understanding and immediate speaking are involved. For fear of negative evaluation, worrying about making mistakes and comparing oneself with classmates is more common than fear of being corrected by the teacher. For test anxiety, learners were less likely to report avoidance of attending class. Their main concern centred on the consequences of failing, reflecting pressure related to academic outcomes.

This pattern reflects what earlier studies have warned about. Rahmat (2020) describes how fear can build into a cycle if it is not addressed early, and several of our results (mistake worries, failure concerns) look like the kind of triggers that can keep anxiety alive. The findings also resemble what Al-Mahrooqi and Denman (2023) observed: even learners who want to learn may hold back during speaking because they fear being judged. In university contexts, Liu et al. (2025) likewise showed that anxiety can interrupt the benefits of positive learner traits. In short, fear appears to be a real barrier even when learners have motivation and interest. This also connects to the Malaysian context emphasised by Dewaele and Al-Saraj (2025), where emotional experiences in class can shift depending on how supported learners feel.

RQ3: Is there a relationship between motivation and fear of learning a foreign language?

The relationship between the two variables is present, but it is not strong: motivation and fear are weakly and negatively related. Learners who report higher motivation tend to report slightly lower fear in the Mandarin classroom. This suggests that motivation may help, but it does not fully “solve” the fear issue by itself.

This finding fits well with the idea that positive learning resources can buffer negative emotions, but only to a certain extent. Dewaele and Al-Saraj (2025) highlight how supportive environments help balance enjoyment and anxiety, which helps explain why motivation could be linked with lower fear. At the same time, the weak relationship also matches Liu et al. (2025) and Al-Mahrooqi and Denman (2023): anxiety can remain meaningful even among learners who are eager to learn, especially in speaking and evaluation contexts.

RQ4: Is there a significant difference in motivation and fear across clusters?

When comparing clusters, the pattern is quite specific. Motivation does not differ significantly across clusters, suggesting that learners in both academic groups are similarly motivated overall to master Mandarin. However, fear shows a significant difference across clusters, which indicates that learners’ fear experiences are not uniform across academic backgrounds. Mandarin

This is important because it speaks directly to the research gap raised by Dewaele and Al-Saraj (2025), who called for more localised studies that examine emotional variables across different academic groups. The present study suggests that academic background may shape how learners experience fear in the Mandarin language classroom, even when motivation levels look similar. That difference matters for teaching, because fear tends to affect participation and performance.

Overall, the findings show a consistent pattern. Learners are motivated and tend to enjoy learning Mandarin with others. Nevertheless, fear remains present, particularly in speaking, comprehension, and assessment contexts. Motivation is related to lower fear, but only weakly. Finally, fear (more than motivation) appears to vary across clusters, pointing to the need for cluster-sensitive support in Mandarin language classrooms.

Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Theoretical and Conceptual Implications

The findings of this study can be clearly interpreted through the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1. The framework proposes that learners’ motivation, represented by effort, desire, and positive affect, is related to their fear of learning Mandarin. The results provide empirical support for this proposed relationship and offer further insight into how motivation and fear interact in the Mandarin language classroom.

The findings support the way this study defined motivation and fear in the conceptual framework. Learners reported high motivation across effort, desire, and positive affect. This fits Gardner's socio-educational view of motivation, where motivation is seen through what learners do, what they want to achieve, and how they feel during the process of learning Mandarin.

The fear results also match the classroom-based anxiety perspective described by Horwitz and colleagues. Fear was not shown as a single feeling. Instead, it appeared in different Mandarin classroom situations, especially speaking situations, moments of poor understanding, and assessment-related pressure. This supports the idea in the framework that fear in Mandarin language learning has several dimensions rather than one general emotion.

A key conceptual implication comes from the cluster comparison. Motivation did not differ across clusters, but fear did. This suggests that academic background may shape emotional experiences even when motivational levels are similar. In other words, motivation may be relatively stable in this sample, but fear of learning Mandarin seems more sensitive to contextual differences. This strengthens the conceptual framework by showing that cluster background can be treated as an important contextual factor when discussing fear.

The findings also connect well with the theories discussed earlier. Vroom's expectancy theory explains motivation as a result of believing that effort can lead to successful performance and that the outcome is worth it. Mandarin learners in this study showed strong motivation, which suggests they generally value success and are willing to invest effort. However, moderate fear was still present, especially in speaking and tests. This suggests that some learners may still doubt their ability to perform under pressure even when they want to succeed.

Merton's idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy also helps to interpret the fear pattern. When Mandarin learners frequently worry about mistakes, peer judgement, or failing, they may reduce participation or hesitate to practise. Over time, this can limit improvement and reinforce the fear. The weak negative relationship between motivation and fear suggests that motivation may help reduce fear to some extent, but it may not be strong enough to remove fear completely, especially in performance-related situations.

Pedagogical Implications

The results suggest that Mandarin teaching should do two things at the same time. It should maintain motivation and it should reduce fear.

Learners enjoy learning with classmates and they often seek help from peers. Teachers can use this as a strength. Peer learning can be planned more carefully so that it supports learning and builds confidence. Pair work and small group tasks can be used as a safe stage before learners speak in front of the whole class. Clear instructions and clear roles can help weaker learners participate without feeling exposed.

Communication apprehension was noticeable in speaking situations, especially when learners imagine speaking to native speakers. Teachers can reduce this fear by providing regular low-pressure speaking practice. Short speaking routines can be used frequently. Learners can start with prepared dialogues, then move to guided sharing, and later move to open speaking. This gradual build-up helps learners feel more in control. Learners also felt anxious when they could not fully understand the teacher. This suggests the need for stronger classroom scaffolding. Teachers can slow down key explanations, highlight key vocabulary before tasks, and check understanding more often. Teachers can also allow planned moments for questions so that learners do not feel stuck or embarrassed.

Test anxiety was strongly related to fear of failing and its consequences. This indicates that assessment design matters. Teachers can reduce unnecessary fear by using more formative assessment and clearer marking criteria. Practice opportunities can be increased before major tests. Feedback can focus on improvement and next steps. This keeps standards clear while reducing fear.

Because fear differs across clusters, teachers may also consider slightly different support for different groups. The group that reports higher fear may need more confidence-building activities, more reassurance, and more structured speaking practice.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research can extend this study in several ways. One useful step is to include a larger and more diverse sample, including students from other universities and settings. This can help confirm whether the same patterns in Mandarin acquisition appear beyond the current sample.

Future researchers can also explore cluster differences more deeply. The present results show that fear differs across clusters, but it is important to identify which dimension contributes most to that difference. Communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety may not behave in the same way across clusters among those learning Mandarin.

Qualitative methods can help explain the patterns found here. Interviews or focus groups can explore why Mandarin learners turn to peers more than teachers and what Mandarin classroom experiences trigger fear. This can provide richer explanations that survey data alone cannot capture.

Longitudinal research is also recommended. Motivation and fear can change over time. A longer study can examine whether fear of learning Mandarin becomes a repeated cycle, as suggested by the self-fulfilling prophecy perspective. Finally, intervention studies can test practical strategies. Researchers can examine whether structured peer support, gradual speaking practice, and assessment adjustments can reduce fear while maintaining motivation in the Mandarin as a foreign language context.

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