



## INVESTIGATING THE CYCLE OF FEAR IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

**Noor Hanim Rahmat<sup>i</sup>**

Akademi Pengajian Bahasa,  
Universiti Teknologi MARA,  
Malaysia

### **Abstract:**

Many learn foreign language for personal or job-related reasons. It is cliché to say that learning a foreign language is important for students to join the bandwagon of “globalized learning”; although that is true! Many reported they enjoyed participating in language related activities. However, for some learners, learning a foreign language may not be a pleasant experience. Anxiety for foreign language learning causes other problems for learners. These problems may snowball to effect other performance and achievement in other language related areas; thus, creating a cycle of fear. Two theories are merged to form the cycle of cycle of fear for foreign language learning. This study used the instrument by Horwitz (1986) who developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. There were 7 items on demographic profile, 8 items for communication apprehension, 5 items for fear of test anxiety. There were also 9 items of fear of negative evaluation, and items on fear of language classes. Findings reveal that the communication apprehension that students portray, can snowball to learners fearing taking test and getting negative evaluation and then this fear may extend to fearing the foreign language classes.

**Keywords:** foreign language, cycle of fear, communication apprehension, test anxiety, negative evaluation

### **1. Introduction**

There are numerous benefits of knowing more one language. According to Marian and Shook (2012), people who know more than one language perform better at tasks that require conflict management. They are also able to switch from one task to another. Perhaps that could be one reason why schools and universities made it compulsory for students to learn more than one language. It is cliché to say that learning a foreign language is important for students to join the bandwagon of “globalized learning”;

---

<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [patanim@gmail.com](mailto:patanim@gmail.com), [noorh763@uitm.edu.my](mailto:noorh763@uitm.edu.my)

although that is true! Universities are now introducing programmes related to internationalisation to attract international partners to encourage student mobility. These programmes encourage authentic learning (Rahmat, Abdullah, Yahaya, Choong & Whancit, 2020) in an environment for learners to learn a foreign language in the host country. These programmes are usually carefully planned to encourage cross-cultural communication. According to Reisberg (2017), knowing a foreign language is not merely knowing words. Learning a foreign language allows learners to gain deeper understanding of language and its relationship to the culture.

However, for some learners, learning a foreign language may not be pleasant experience. Some learners find that learning a foreign language is stressful. According to Oteir, and Al-Otaibi (2019), past studies show that anxiety for foreign language learners has made learning not enjoyable. Foreign language learning anxiety can be caused by many factors such as the learners themselves or the surrounding environment. Elaldi (2016) reported that anxiety causes other problems for EFL learners and may snowball to other performance and achievement. As such, there need to be more research and exploration on the causes. This study is done to investigate the factors that cause foreign language learning. The following questions guide the focus of this study;

- 1) In what ways do communication apprehension influence foreign language learning?
- 2) In what ways do fear of test influence foreign language learning?
- 3) In what ways do fear of negative evaluation influence foreign language learning?
- 4) In what ways do fear of language classes influence foreign language learning?

## **2. Literature Review**

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

In general, there are several categories of anxiety. According to Oteir & Al-Otaibi (2019), psychologically, anxiety can be categorised into three types. The first type is known as trait anxiety. Trait anxiety is the kind of anxiety that stems from the individual personality. For example, people who crave for perfection often live with anxiety when they did not get the results they had hope for. Next, state anxiety is the feeling of nervousness that a person feels when faced with uncertain situations. However, this nervousness can change over time or fluctuate depending on situations. An example for state anxiety is the temporary fear students feel when they have to face a test. The anxiety ends when the assessment ends. The last type is situation specific anxiety. This is the type of anxiety that occurs only when the person is faced with conditions that are not favourable to him/her. One example of situation specific is the anxiety that learners feel when they have to take up the course that they are not familiar with-like learning a foreign language.

One of the reasons why learners are afraid of foreign language learning classes in that they fear the communication that they have to participate in. Studies by Gopang, Bughio and Pathan (2015) and also Naudhani, Wu & Naudhani (2018) investigated majoring and non-majoring students of English and found that both categories of

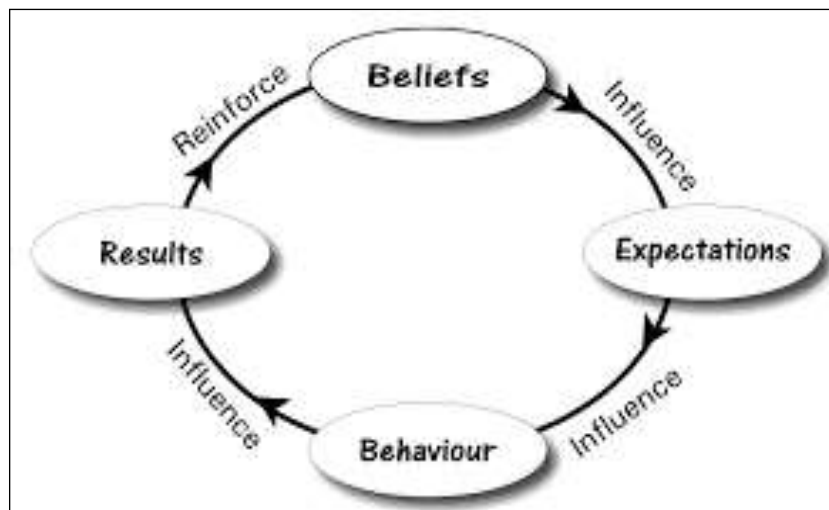
students reported anxiety when it comes to learning a language. It did not matter if the students were majoring in the language or taking the language as a foreign language elective, language learning gave them anxiety. This is especially so when the learners are asked to communicate using the target language. So, what about foreign language learning that causes learning anxiety among learners?

Sometimes foreign language learning anxiety may stem from the learners themselves. Suleimenova (2013) identified several major stressors when it comes to foreign language learning. He found that some learners reported having jumbled and confused thoughts when they are in the foreign language classrooms. This may then give them reasons to fear speaking in the target language. In addition to that some language related activities may cause more fear among the learners. Activities that require learners to perform in front of their peers may create major anxiety. Next, learners were said to be stressed when they were being called out to provide answers/responses. Even the act of waiting for their turn to speak also brings anxiety to some learners. In addition to that, some learners reported having a teacher who constantly corrects their mistakes is a major source of anxiety. This fear may snowball into more fear and the learner may end up not performing well in evaluation not because he/she was not fluent in the target language—they could just be anxious!

Next, there are also times when fear of foreign language learning may or may even be related to the subject being learnt. The study by Luo (2018) investigated seven learners variables considered to be cause of fear. He investigated variables such as age, motivation, perception of the difficulty of the foreign language, self-perceived achievement, self-perceived language learning ability, self-expectation in the language class, and perception of the importance of the target language. Correlation analyses showed that all seven variables were significantly correlated with anxiety level in isolation. Perception of the difficulty of the foreign language and age were found to have positive relationships with anxiety, whereas the remaining five variables were reported to have negative relationships.

## **2.2 Cycle of Self-Fulfilling Prophecy**

Have you ever “predicted a negative outcome for a situation and the prediction turned out to be true after all?” This could probably be the case of self-fulfilling prophecy. Merton (1948) defined self-fulfilling prophecy as a false definition of the situation that evoke a new behaviour. This new behaviour becomes internalized, thus making the originally false conception come true. Figure 1 explains further the cycle of self-fulfilling prophecy. It all begins with beliefs formed by a person. This belief then influences his/her expectations. The expectations then will influence his/her behaviour guided by his initial beliefs and thoughts. The behaviour would then influence the end results to the person. If the beliefs are positive, the end result will also be positive, and vice versa.



**Figure 1:** Cycle of Self-Fulfilling Prophecy (adapted from Merton, 1948)

### 2.3 Past Studies

Anxiety for language learning may lead to negative consequences for the learner. The study by Shabani (2012) investigated the levels and sources of anxiety and its relationship with fear of negative evaluation. The instrument used for this study is foreign language anxiety classroom scale (FLACS) and fear of negative evaluation (FNE) scale. 61 EFL learners responded to the survey. Descriptive analysis indicated that participants suffer from language anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. The result of independent sample t-test showed there was no significant difference between males and females in the levels of anxiety. The computation of means and standard deviations of statements in questionnaires revealed that the prime sources of language anxiety and fear of negative evaluation are fear of failing class and fear of leaving unfavourable impression on others, respectively.

Next, instructors can help to prepare a suitable foreign language environment. Al-Khasawneh (2016) studied the level and sources of foreign language learning anxiety experienced by Saudi students studying at King Khalid University (KKU). He also examined the differences between the level of language anxiety and the students' study level. 97 English majored students from different levels were purposively chosen to participate in this study. The research instrument used in this study was Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scales (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz(1986). The results obtained from this study revealed a moderate level of anxiety as reported by the students. The students experienced different sources of language anxiety such as communication apprehension, anxiety of English classes, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Also, no statistically significant differences were found between the students' level of anxiety and their level of study. The results of this study suggest that the classroom atmosphere should be motivating and encouraging.

Foreign language learning anxiety is one of the affective factors which influence language learning negatively. It has several sources and different types. Sadighi & Dastpak (2017) investigated the sources of foreign language speaking anxiety of Iranian EFL learners. 154 EFL learners participated in the study. They were required to fill out a

foreign language anxiety questionnaire which was developed based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz (1986). The results of the study indicated that “fear of making mistakes”, “fear of negative evaluation”, and “lack of vocabulary knowledge” were the main factors which caused anxiety among students. Some strategies are recommended for the students to use in order to cope with the anxiety-provoking factors.

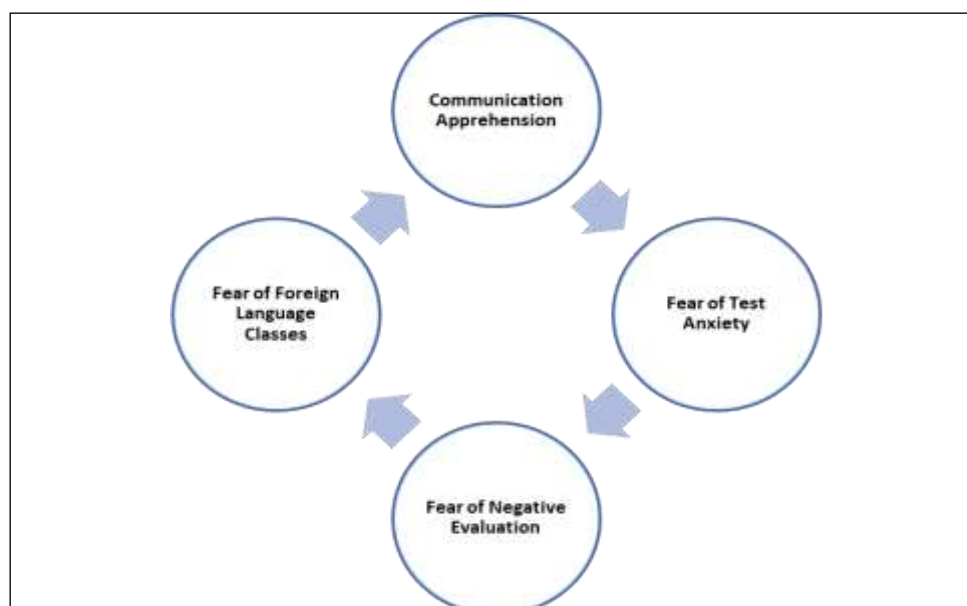
### 2.4 Theoretical Framework of the Study

This study is rooted from two main theories. These two theories are merged to form a cycle of cycle of fear for foreign language learning. The “template” to merge (Figure 2) for the cycle of fear is derived from Merton’s (1948) “cycle of self-fulfilling” prophecy. A person begins by implanting a belief (may or may not be true) of a situation. This belief affects his/her expectations. The expectation further influences his/her behaviour to create a result as expected.

**Figure 2: Merging Self-Fulling Prophecy and Fear of Foreign Language Learning**

<b>Beliefs</b>		<b>Communication apprehension</b>
Expectations		Fear of Test Anxiety
Behaviour		Fear of negative Evaluation
Results		Fear of Foreign Language Classes

How is the merge done? In this study, the belief is the learner embarking on the language journey with expectation and that is filled with apprehension for communication. Next, this apprehension is heightened when it comes to preparing for test taking. This anxiety then leads to more fear-related behaviour; the learner now also fears negative evaluation by the people associated with the learning. Finally, the results of this series of anxiety is that the learner fears foreign language classes. The merge of the two theories is seen in Figure 3 - the cycle of fear for foreign language learning.



**Figure 3: Theoretical Framework of the Study: Cycle of Fear for Foreign Language Learning**

### 3. Methodology

This quantitative study uses a survey adapted from Horwitz (1986)-Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. The details of the survey is;

- Demographic Profile (7 items) No 1-7;
- Communication Apprehension (8 items) No 8-15;
- Fear of Test Anxiety (5 items) No 16-20;
- Fear of Negative Evaluation (9 items) No 21-29;
- Fear of Language Classes (10 items) No 30-39.

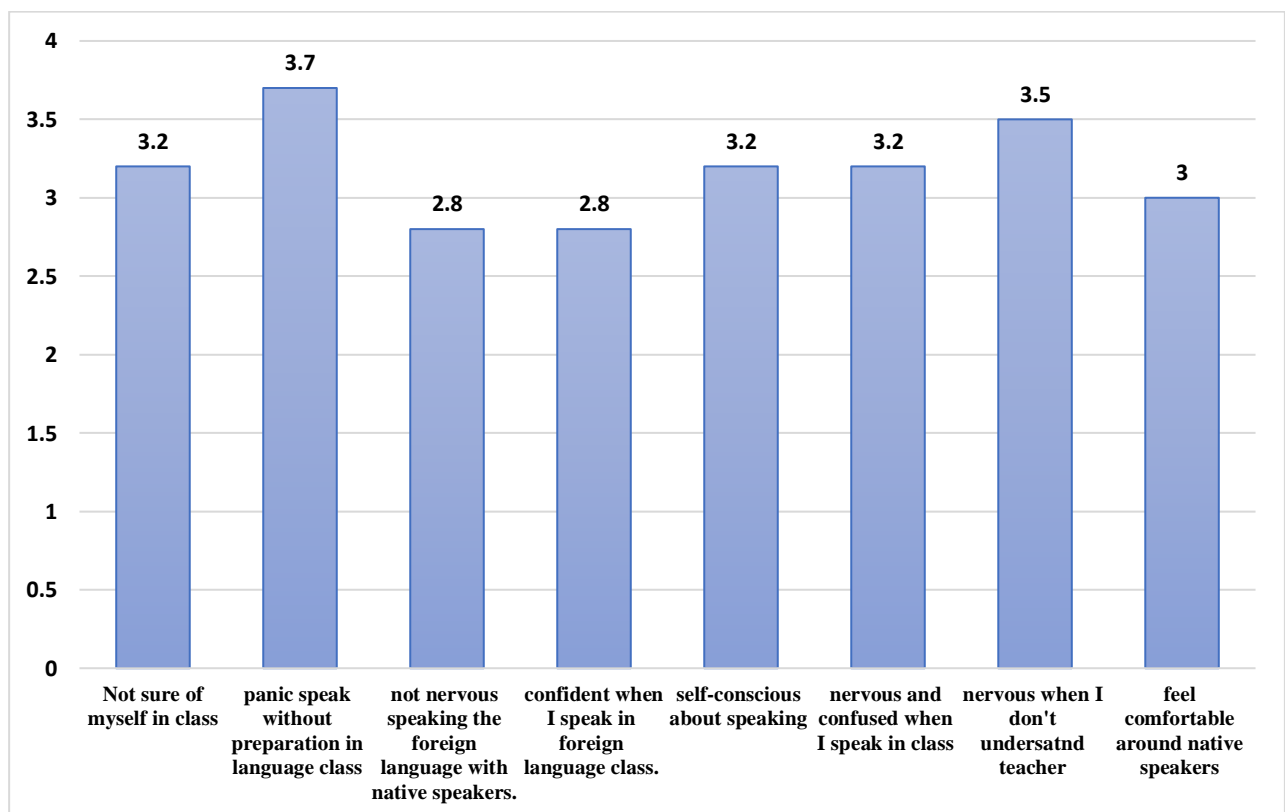
Data was randomly collected from 902 respondents who attended a semester of third language courses which includes languages such as Mandarin, Japanese, Arabic and also Italian. Data is collected from goggle form and analyse using SPSS version 26. Findings are presented based on the frequency of responses using mean scores.

### 4. Findings

A total of 902 respondents answered the survey. Findings is presented by answering the four research questions. 38.45 male, 61.6% female. Findings is presented in this section based on the research questions.

#### 4.1 Communication Apprehension

This section presents answer to research question 1: In what ways do communication apprehension influence foreign language learning?



**Figure 4:** Bar Chart showing mean score for Communication Apprehension

Section B of the survey investigates whether learners have communication apprehension (figure 4). Findings reveal that students were “nervous when they don’t understand” (3.5). They were also reported to “panic when they are asked to speak without preparation” (3.7).

#### 4.2 Fear of Test Anxiety

This section presents the answer to research question2: In what ways do fear of test anxiety influence foreign language learning?

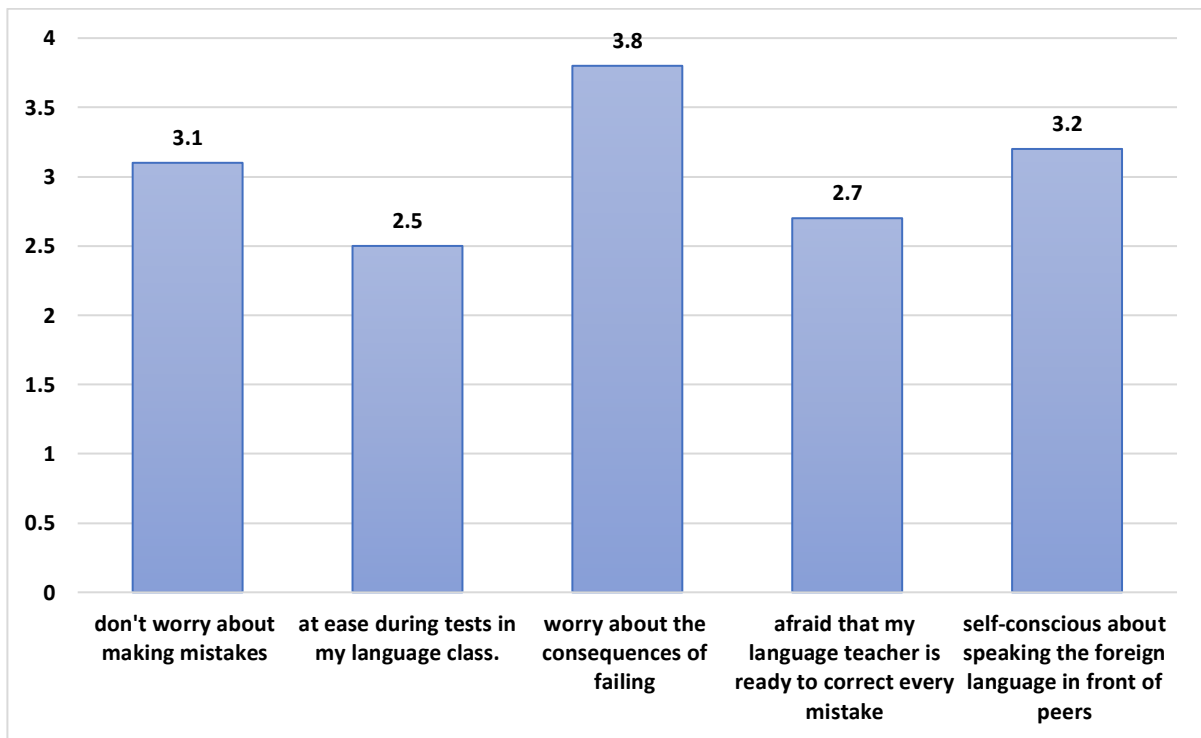


Figure 5: Bar Chart showing mean score for Fear of Test Anxiety

Figure 5 presents the frequency of responses for Section B-Fear of Test Anxiety. The mean scores reveal interesting findings. The highest mean is for “worry about consequences of failing” (3.8), and also “self-conscious to about speaking in front of peers” (3.2).

#### 4.3 Fear of Negative Evaluation

This section reports findings to answer research question 3: In what ways do fear of negative evaluation influence foreign language learning?

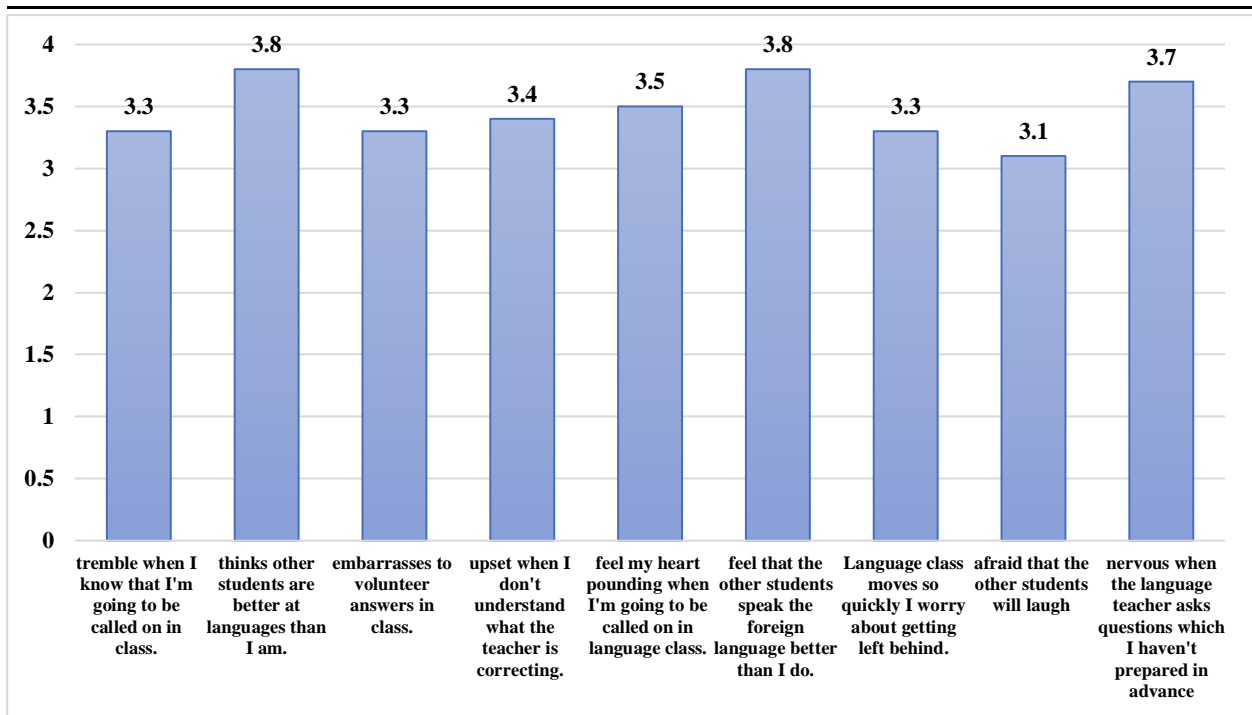


Figure 6: Bar chart showing mean score for Fear of Negative Evaluation

With reference to figure 6, findings for fear of negative evaluation reveal that the respondents “think that others were better”(3.8 when it comes to foreign language classroom. They also felt that “others speak better”(3.8) and they were “nervous when the teacher ask question that they had “not prepared the answer”.(3.7)

#### 4.4 Fear of Language Classes

This section reports findings for research question 4: In what ways do fear of language classes influence foreign language learning?

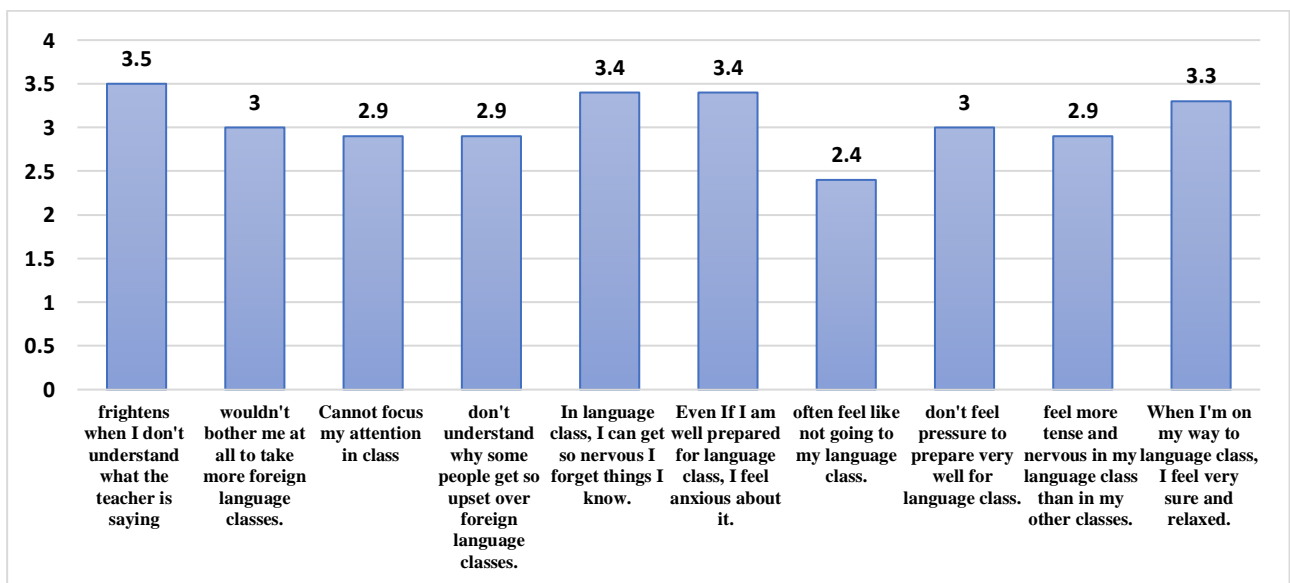


Figure 7: Bar chart showing mean for Foreign Language Classes



The culmination of communication apprehension, fear of test taking, fear of negative evaluation would eventually lead to the learners fearing foreign language classes (Figure 7). The highest mean score was for “frighten when they don’t understand what teacher is saying” (3.5). They also felt “nervous when they forget things they know “(3.4). On the other hand, they reported that “even if they were prepared, they would still be anxious” (3.4).

## 5. Discussions

A summary of the findings revealed when it comes to learning a foreign language, learners were less afraid if they were allowed to prepare for their responses. However, “preparing” for a response in the foreign language is not really communicating in that language; and communicating in the target language is what they feared. This is also agreed by Gopang, et al. (2015) and Naudhani, et al. (2018) who also found in their studies that learners had communication apprehension when it comes to foreign language.

The findings of this study are also in accordance with the studies by Al-Khasawneh (2016), Shabani (2012), and Sadighi and Daspak (2017) who found that foreign language learners fear test, fear negative evaluation. Fear of test and fear of negative evaluation is a type of fear that is related to the learners’ trait. The fear stems from the learners’ personality traits. This fear can be aggravated by the surrounding environment. According to Rahmat (2019) the fear of learning is a vicious cycle because a reaction at one stage may lead to consequences at another stage. If nothing is done to overcome the fear, learners will end up fearing even the foreign language classes.

### About the Author

The author is an associate professor at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia for the past 26 years. Her research interest includes TESL methodology, academic writing, and educational psychology. She has presented as keynote speaker at several international conferences, written several books, proceedings and journal articles in her field.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest towards the publication of this article.

### References

- Al-Khasawneh, F. M. (2016). Investigating Foreign Language Learning Anxiety: A Case of Saudi Undergraduate EFL Learners. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*. Vol 12(1), pp 137-148. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1105172.pdf>
- Elaldı, S. (2016). Foreign language anxiety of students studying English language and literature: A sample from Turkey. *Educational Research and Reviews*, 11(6), 219-

22. Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336048153\\_Foreign\\_Language\\_Anxiety\\_A\\_Systematic\\_Review](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336048153_Foreign_Language_Anxiety_A_Systematic_Review)
- Gopang, I. B., Bughio, F. A., and Pathan, H. (2015). Investigating Foreign Language Learning Anxiety among Students Learning English in a Public Sector University, Pakistan. *The Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Science*, Vol 3(4), pp 27-387. Retrieved from <https://www.moj-es.net>.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1986). Preliminary evidence for the reliability and validity of a Foreign Language Anxiety Scale. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20 (3), 559- 562. Retrieved from [https://www.jstor.org/stable/3586302?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3586302?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents).
- Luo, H. (2018). Predictors of Foreign Language Anxiety: A Study of College -Level L2 Learners of Chines. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, Vol 14(1), pp 3-24. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1515/cjal-2018-0001>.
- Marian, V., and Shook, A. (2012). The Cognitive Benefits of Being Bilingual. *Cerebrum*. Sept-Oct, 2012: 13. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3583091/>.
- Merton, R. K. (1948) The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy. *The Antioch Review*, Vol 8(2), pp1930210.
- Naudhani, M, Wu, Z., & Naudhani, S. (2018). Exploring the Factors of Foreign Language Anxiety among Chinese Undergraduate English Majors and Non-English Major. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, Vol 8(95), pp 142-150. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v8n5p142>.
- Oteir, I, N., and Al-Otaibi, A. N. (2019). Foreign Language Anxiety: A Systemic Review. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)*, Vol 10(3), pp 309-317. Retrieved from <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol10no3.21>.
- Rahmat, N. H., Abdullah, N. A. T., Yahaya, M. H., Choong, P. W., and Whanchit, W. (2020). Gender Differences on the Use of Metadiscourse on Reflective Essays: A Case Study of Inbound Students. *International Journal of Asian Social Science*. Vol 10(5), pp 248-261.
- Rahmat, N. H. (2019). Cycle of Fear in Learning: The Case for Three Language Skills. *American Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*. Vol 4(91) pp 151-162. Retrieved from <http://doi.org/10.20448/801.41.151.162>.
- Reisberg, L. (2017). Foreign Language Study Should be Mandatory! The World View. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/world-view/foreign-language-study-should-be-mandatory>.
- Sadigi, F. and Dastpak, M. (2017). The Sources of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety of Iranian English Language Learners. *International Journal of Education & Literacy Studies*. Vol 5(4), pp 640-646. Retrieved from <https://www.journals.aiac.org.au/index.php/IJELS/article/view/3930>
- Shabani, M. B. (2012). Levels and Sources of Language Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation among Iranian EFL Learners. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol 2(1), pp 2378-2838. Retrieved from <http://www.academypublication.com/issues/past/tpls/vol02/11/21.pdf>.

Suleimenova, Z. (2013) Speaking Anxiety in a Foreign language Classroom in Kazakhstan. *Procedia Social and Behavioural Sciences.*, Vol 93(2013), pp 1860-1868.

Creative Commons licensing terms

Author(s) will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions and conclusions of the author(s). Open Access Publishing Group and European Journal of Foreign Language Teaching shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflicts of interest, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated into the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).