



Foreign Language Anxiety among Japanese Language Learners in IIUM Pagoh

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ABSTRACT

This quantitative research investigated the level of foreign language anxiety (FLA) between different genders of Japanese foreign language learners in the higher education context in Malaysia considering that studies specifically focusing on gender differences in the foreign language anxiety among Japanese language learners is not actively explored in Malaysia. The three factors of foreign language anxiety which are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety are the foundation of this study. The overall sample of this study consisted of 40 students who had taken the Japanese language course offered in a Malaysian higher education institution. The mean scores of the female and male learners were compared to determine if there was a great difference between male and female students in their level of foreign language anxiety based on the three factors. An independent sample t-test was also used to investigate if there were statistically significant differences between the three factors in relation to gender. The findings indicated that there were differences between male and female Japanese language learners in their level of foreign language anxiety for the factors of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. However, the findings revealed that the differences were not statistically significant and that there was not a great difference for each of the factors between male and female students. The results of the study also revealed that all the respondents regardless of different genders had a moderate level of foreign language anxiety for all the factors which indicated that they were slightly anxious.

Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety, Gender, Japanese Language

INTRODUCTION

The issues concerning foreign language anxiety as a critical and paramount issue have generated much debate among academicians as well as the general global community. According to Amiri and Ghonsooly (2015), the process of foreign language learning is complex whereby the learning process is affected by both linguistic and non-linguistic factors such as “cognitive, metacognitive, and affective”. As a preface, there are significant factors which have an influence on students’ language learning which include age, gender, and the learning environment. In recent years, several studies have been done to explore the differences of male and female students in relation to different anxiety levels (Gerencheal, 2016). In fact, the author claimed that the foreign language anxiety level of students can notably be varied based on their gender. For this reason, although there are large stereotypes illustrated towards the gender differences in language, emotional experience, and communication, several studies have noted that there are statistically significant issues related to gender differences in foreign language learning (Dewaele et al., 2016). As a result, there have been conflicting findings in research where the relationship between gender and foreign language anxiety is concerned.

Moreover, Gerencheal (2016) claimed that there is a difference in the level of anxiety between male and female students at the university level. Razak et al. (2017) contested that a study to explore the gender differences in the level of foreign language anxiety at the university level is a crucial subject area. It was illustrated by Ezzi (2012, as cited in Razak et al., 2017) that the education system applied in the university is co-education; hence, this creates a gender gap among the students which can influence the anxiety levels of students. This is similar in Malaysia as the Malaysian education system at the tertiary education level also practices co-education. In addition, Jelas et al. (2014) also contended that gender disparity in the Malaysian higher education context tends to favor girls in their performance. Therefore, investigating the gender differences in the foreign language anxiety levels among Malaysian university students can help to identify the possible gender gaps in education specifically with regards to foreign language anxiety. In order to address the gender disparity issue that may exist in the Malaysian higher education context, it is imperative to explore more on the factors that impede the language learning process.

The research objective for this study is to investigate the level of foreign language anxiety (FLA) between different genders of Japanese foreign language learners at a local higher education institution. In order to achieve the research objective above, three research questions are formulated, and they are:

1. Is there a difference between male and female learners of Japanese as a foreign language for the factor of communication apprehension in foreign language anxiety?
2. Is there a difference between male and female learners of Japanese as a foreign language for the factor of fear of negative evaluation in foreign language anxiety?
3. Is there a difference between male and female learners of Japanese as a foreign language for the factor of test anxiety in foreign language anxiety?

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Previous studies conducted on language anxiety in the Malaysian context primarily focused on English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Kamarulzaman et al., 2013; Miskam & Saidalvi, 2019). Hence, there is a research gap in previous studies as there is a lack of research done to explore foreign language anxiety among Japanese language learners in Malaysia. Zakari et al. (2017) stated that the ability to communicate in the Japanese language in Malaysia is regarded as a beneficial advantage in securing job opportunities. To the best knowledge of the researcher, only few studies had been done to investigate the foreign language anxiety among Japanese language learners in Malaysia and it was found in the studies that generally these undergraduates do experience language anxiety in the Japanese language (Musa et al., 2013; Rafek & Rajab, 2009). Due to the lack of research done on the foreign language anxiety in the Japanese language in Malaysia, there is limited information that can be obtained on the foreign language anxiety level experienced by Japanese language learners in the Malaysian context. Therefore, current research needs to be conducted to explore the foreign language anxiety experienced by Japanese language learners in Malaysia. This is because it can provide current information on the foreign language anxiety level experienced by these Japanese language learners and also supplement the limited existing information on the foreign language anxiety experienced by Japanese as a foreign language learner in Malaysia.

In addition, the existing studies that associate FLA and gender had shown mixed findings (Gerencheal & Mishra, 2019). Some studies supported that female students tend to be more anxious than male students in foreign language learning. However, there are studies that showed contradictory findings and also no differences in the language learners' anxiety based on gender (Alsowat, 2016). Thus, this paper is an attempt to explore the gender differences in the level of foreign language anxiety (FLA) among Japanese language learners in a local higher education institution in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Learning and Gender

In the context of language learning, gender is a paramount factor and it has a crucial role especially when learning a foreign language (Alsowat, 2016). Prior research generally substantiates that gender has an influence towards affecting a foreign language learner's anxiousness or apprehension when learning a foreign language (Alsowat, 2016). There is also a common belief that female language learners are more anxious than male learners; however, this supposition is still perplexing as there are conflicting findings in this subject area. Few studies had shown male students to be more anxious than female learners while several studies also indicated no differences in the language learners' anxiety based on gender (Alsowat, 2016). However, there is a link between language learning and gender which can contribute to the students' increased anxiety especially in the context of foreign language learning.

Anxiety

To grasp the broad overview of anxiety, it is vital to highlight the meaning of anxiety. Spielberger (2010) refers anxiety as the emotional condition of an individual which includes the feelings of apprehension, nervousness, tension, and worry which is followed with physiological arousal. As stated by Pappamihiel (2002), anxiety can generally be referred to as the "threat to self-efficacy and appraisals of situations as threatening" (p. 331). The author further contended that there are individuals who tend to be more susceptible to be anxious compared to others and that there is a need to distinguish between those who are frequently anxious and individuals who are not.

Foreign Language Anxiety

Language anxiety is defined by MacIntyre and Gardner (1994, as cited in Marwan, 2016, p. 38) as "the feeling of tension and apprehension experienced by learners in the foreign language classroom". It can be noted that language anxiety is concerned with foreign language learning as can be viewed with the definition of language anxiety. This is also in line with Horwitz et al. (1986) who were the first to propose the foreign language anxiety theory. They defined foreign language anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128).

Moreover, this theory proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986, as cited in Salehi & Marefat, 2014) can be referred to based on the three elements as below:

1. communication apprehension, arising from learners' inability to adequately express mature thoughts and ideas;
2. fear of negative social evaluation, arising from a learner's need to make a positive social impression on others; and
3. test anxiety, or apprehension over academic evaluation. (p. 931)

Communication Apprehension

To get a clear overview of the term Communication Apprehension or 'CA', it is defined by McCroskey (1977, as cited in Blume et al., 2013) that CA is primarily related to one's fear or their level of anxiousness due to the direct or anticipated communication with other people. As such, Yahya (2013) in his study revealed that this usually happens because of a learner's lacking communicative-competency skills to participate in an interactive communication with other people despite having well-thought ideas.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of negative evaluation is a term defined by Horwitz et al. (1986) as "apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively" (p. 128). The results of a research by Šafranĵ and Zivlak (2019) implied that students who suffer from the fear of negative evaluation were more susceptible to foreign language anxiety. To note, the authors interpreted that the general fear of negative evaluation which includes being negatively evaluated by the peers and language teachers would result in students' foreign language anxiety.

Test Anxiety

Test anxiety, a component of performance anxieties as outlined by Horwitz et al. (1986) can be defined as "a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure" (p. 127). They contended that test anxiety is an apprehension over academic evaluation. Moreover, Cakici (2016) stated that test anxiety can be regarded as the fear of failure in tests and also the distressing experience that a learner felt either consciously or unconsciously. Essentially, test anxiety is concerned with the apprehension of learners over academic evaluation due to the fear of failing.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research method by adopting a questionnaire developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). There are 33 items designed to measure the level of foreign language anxiety based on three factors which are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. This instrument used a five-point Likert type scale ranging from strongly agree (5 points) to strongly disagree (1 point).

Respondents of The Study

The sample of this study is 40 undergraduate students from various departments in the Kulliyah of Languages and Management (KLM), IIUM who were taking the subject Japanese Language as an elective in the second semester of session 2019/2020.

Table 1: Demographic information

Variables	<i>n</i> (%)
Gender	
Male	15 (37.5)
Female	25 (62.5)
Age (years)	
18 to 20	3 (7.5)
21 to 23	28 (70)
24 to 26	8 (20)
27 to 29	1 (2.5)
30 and above	0 (0)
Courses	
ARCOM	8 (20)
ENCOM	17 (42.5)
MALCOM	12 (30)
TPHM	3 (7.5)
Japanese language class level	
Level 1	13 (32.5)
Level 2	6 (15)
Level 3	8 (20)
Level 4	3 (7.5)
Level 5	2 (5)
Level 6	8 (20)

The demographic information of the respondents was summarized in Table 1 above. As shown in Table 1, majority of the respondents are female with a total

number of 25 (62.5 percent) while the total number of respondents for males are 15 (37.5 percent). Moreover, Table 3.1 above also illustrates the respondents' age, courses and also Japanese language levels based on the Japanese language class that they are attending.

Instrumentation

In this research, the students' foreign anxiety levels were investigated and they were divided into three elements which were communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. The instrument used as a frame of reference was a set of questionnaire namely the 'Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale' (FLCAS) adopted from Horwitz et al. (1986). This instrument was developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) and has been used in many research studies relating to foreign language anxiety as it has been found to be a highly reliable and valid instrument to measure students' foreign language anxiety level (Aida, 1994; Gerencheal, 2016; Horwitz et al., 1986; Tzoannopoulou, 2016). FLCAS is also deemed as the most valid instrument that has shown sufficiently reliability coefficients to measure anxiety specifically in the context of foreign language learning (Ezzi, 2012).

Data Analysis Procedures

In this research, the data collected was analysed using IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 to generate descriptive statistics. The average mean scores for items under the same factor for each section were compared. The independent t-test was also used to investigate if the differences of the level of foreign language anxiety between genders are statistically significant.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2: Score's range reference (Thaoprom, 2004)

Score's Range	Level
1.00-2.33	Low Scores
2.34-3.67	Average Scores
3.68-5.00	High Scores

FINDINGS FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 1:

Table 3 depicts the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) score for the component of Communication Apprehension of the students. The mean scores show that female students had a higher degree of anxiety level for the component of Communication Apprehension ($M=3.46$; $SD=0.47$) compared to male students ($M=3.26$; $SD=0.43$). The independent t-test indicates that the anxiety level of the students for CA is not significantly varied by gender ($t=-1.318$, $p=0.195$) as the significance level of t-value 0.195 is greater than the significance level of 0.05. On all accounts, female students showed a higher mean score ($M=3.46$) as compared to the male students ($M=3.26$) with a difference of only 0.20. Hence, there is not a significant difference between male and female learners of Japanese as a foreign language for the factor of communication apprehension in foreign language anxiety.

In relation to the first research question, since both male and female students are regarded as slightly anxious for the communication apprehension factor and the mean score comparison demonstrates a difference of only 0.20, there is a similarity in the level of anxiousness for the communication apprehension factor. Hence, there is not a significant difference between male and female Japanese language learners for the factor of communication apprehension in foreign language anxiety.

The findings of this study coincide with Hwa and Peck (2017) as the authors noted that female students tend to feel more apprehensive than the male counterparts in the communicative aspect of learning a foreign language. The author stated that this can be related to the stereotypical feminine role which promotes female inferiority. Hence, this is similar to the current study as there is a difference in the different perception between female and male students.

Table 3: Means, standard deviations, T-Value and level of significance for Communication Apprehension and gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Df	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Communication Apprehension	M	15	3.26	0.43	38	-1.318	0.195
	F	25	3.46	0.47			

Note. $P<0.05$

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of communication apprehension factor

Item Name	Communication Apprehension Items	Gender	Mean	SD
CA1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.	M	3.20	1.082
		F	3.52	0.198
CA2	It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language.	M	3.07	1.100
		F	3.80	1.041
CA3	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.	M	3.47	1.407
		F	4.32	0.802
CA4	I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.	M	2.33	0.976
		F	2.68	1.145
CA5	I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	M	3.8	0.941
		F	3.8	1.118
CA6	I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.	M	3.2	0.676
		F	2.8	1.080
CA7	I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.	M	3.73	0.704
		F	3.76	1.091
CA8	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.	M	2.87	0.834
		F	3.00	1.000
CA9	I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.	M	3.20	1.146
		F	3.64	1.075
CA10	I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language.	M	3.60	1.404
		F	3.56	1.044
CA11	I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.	M	3.40	0.828
		F	3.16	1.143

FINDINGS FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 2:

Table 4 depicts the FLCAS score for the component of Fear of Negative Evaluation of the students which is classified by gender. The mean scores show that female students had a higher degree of anxiety level for the component of fear of negative evaluation ($M=3.39$; $SD=0.63$) compared to male students ($M=3.34$; $SD=0.68$). The independent t-test indicates that the anxiety level of the students for the fear of negative evaluation is not significantly varied by gender ($t=-0.215$, $p=0.831$) as the significance level of t-value 0.831 is greater than the 0.05 significance level.

Figure 3 illustrates the mean scores comparison for items under Fear of Negative Evaluation. In general, it can be seen that there are differences in the levels of fear of negative evaluation between male and female learners. On all accounts, female students showed a higher mean score ($M=3.39$) as compared to the male students ($M=3.34$) with a difference of only 0.05. Hence, there is not a

significant difference between male and female learners of Japanese as a foreign language for the factor of fear of negative evaluation in foreign language anxiety.

This study noted that there is not a significant difference between male and female learners of Japanese as a foreign language for the factor of fear of negative evaluation in foreign language anxiety whereby both male and female students had an average level of anxiety for fear of negative evaluation. Both the male and female students are considered to be slightly anxious since the mean scores are around 3 (Horwitz, 2008, as cited in Elaldi, 2016). Hence, there is a similarity in the level of anxiousness for the fear of negative evaluation in foreign language anxiety based on different genders. This is supported by the findings of Shabani (2012) which revealed that there was no significant difference between male and female students in relation to their level of anxiety and the fear of negative evaluation.

Table 4: Means, standard deviations, T-Value and level of significance for Fear of Negative Evaluation and gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Df	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Fear of Negative Evaluation	M	15	3.34	0.68	38	-0.215	0.831
	F	25	3.39	0.63			

Note. $P < 0.05$

Table 5: Descriptive statistics of fear of negative evaluation factor

Item Name	Fear of Negative Evaluation Items	Gender	Mean	SD
FNE1	I don't worry about making mistakes in language class.	M	4.00	1.195
		F	3.48	1.159
FNE2	I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.	M	4.47	0.743
		F	4.12	1.013
FNE3	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.	M	2.93	1.486
		F	2.84	1.179
FNE4	I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	M	2.33	1.234
		F	2.08	1.256
FNE5	I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.	M	3.73	1.033
		F	4.00	1.000
FNE6	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language	M	2.47	1.356
		F	2.96	1.428
FNE7	I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	M	3.47	1.246
		F	4.24	0.831

FINDINGS FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 3:

The mean scores show that male students had a higher degree of anxiety level for the component of Test Anxiety ($M=3.24$; $SD=0.43$) compared to female students ($M=3.06$; $SD=0.47$). The independent t-test indicates that the anxiety level of the students for test anxiety is not significantly varied by gender ($t=1.181$, $p=0.245$) as the significance level of t-value 0.245 is greater than the 0.05 significance level. On all accounts, male students showed a higher mean score ($M=3.24$) as compared to the female students ($M=3.06$) with a difference of 0.18. Hence, there is not a significant difference between male and female learners of Japanese as a foreign language for the factor of test anxiety in foreign language anxiety. Both male and female students had a moderate level of anxiety for test anxiety with a mean score of ($M=3.24$) for male students and ($M=3.06$) for female students which indicates that the students neither agreed nor disagreed in their level of anxiousness regarding their fear of failure based on their performance in a foreign language.

Therefore, the results of the study coincide with the findings of Alsowat (2016) and Musa et al. (2013) as the researchers discovered that there was no significant difference between the level of foreign language anxiety between male and female students under the component of test anxiety. Similarly, Musa et al.'s (2013) supported that test anxiety is a major contributor to language anxiety among Japanese language learners in Malaysia due to several reasons. It was explained that the students were worried that their overall examination results or their Cumulative GradePoint Average (CGPA) will be affected if they were to fail the test (Musa et al., 2013). Similarly, the respondents in this study also have to take an examination for the Japanese language course at the end of the semester. In fact, it was pointed out by Musa et al. (2013) that the students felt apprehensive if they had to repeat the Japanese language class and hence, they might have to extend their period of studies. Thus, the students' apprehension over the consequences that come with failing a Japanese language class is also reflected in this study as both male and female students are reported to be slightly anxious in their test anxiety.

This study also found that despite both genders being regarded as slightly anxious in their level of test anxiety in the Japanese language, the mean score of male students are still higher than that of female students. It can be concluded that males are more anxious than females in this regard. This is also supported by Marwan (2016) as the findings indicated that male students were more afraid to fail than female students in a foreign language class.

Table 6: Means, standard deviations, T–Value and level of significance for Test Anxiety and gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Df	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Test Anxiety	M	15	3.24	0.45	38	1.181	0.245
	F	25	3.06	0.49			

Note. $P < 0.05$

Table 7: Descriptive statistics of test anxiety factor

Item Name	Test Anxiety Items	Gender	Mean	SD
TA1	I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.	M	2.87	1.302
		F	2.84	1.313
TA2	It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes.	M	4.00	1.000
		F	3.88	1.092
TA3	During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	M	3.27	1.163
		F	2.48	1.159
TA4	I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.	M	3.00	1.134
		F	3.12	1.236
TA5	I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.	M	3.13	1.356
		F	3.84	1.106
TA6	I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes.	M	3.47	1.125
		F	2.80	1.225
TA7	In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	M	3.53	1.246
		F	3.36	1.319
TA8	Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.	M	3.73	0.961
		F	3.32	1.249
TA9	I often feel like not going to my language class.	M	2.20	1.373
		F	1.80	1.118
TA10	I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.	M	2.87	1.187
		F	3.12	1.301
TA11	The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.	M	3.00	1.134
		F	2.40	0.913
TA12	I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.	M	3.47	0.915
		F	2.96	1.306
TA13	Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.	M	3.73	1.163
		F	3.64	1.186
TA14	I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.	M	2.93	1.335
		F	2.76	1.275
TA15	When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.	M	3.40	1.242
		F	3.56	1.044

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, there were differences between male and female Japanese language learners in their level of foreign language anxiety for the factors of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. However, the differences were not statistically significant and that there was not a great difference for each of the factors between male and female students. Furthermore, the results also indicated that for all the three components, the students demonstrated a moderate level of anxiety regardless of the different genders. Since the study indicates that all the respondents had an average degree of anxiety indicating that they were slightly anxious, more teaching techniques should be developed to help reduce language anxiety and encourage a more conducive learning environment for the students.

Moreover, given that two out of three components of this research showed that females were slightly more anxious in their level of foreign language anxiety, educators should be more attentive to the affective factors of the language learners. It is imperative to approach the students more attentively based on the different students' behaviours and characteristics to help facilitate their learning. Thus, this research can benefit the language educators and language learners to work out a more comprehensive learning approach that can cater to the students.

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