



SOCIAL LEARNING OF FEAR: AN INVESTIGATION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING ANXIETY




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ABSTRACT

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Fear of foreign language learning can stem from the learners, the instructors and also the activities planned. Learners learning anxiety can be increased or decreased depending on the learning environment they are in. Instructors play an important role to allow maximum learning to take place. Activities planned for language learning can facilitate or hinder learning. This study investigates the fear of foreign language learning among undergraduates. The instrument is rooted from Horwitz (1986) survey on Foreign Language Communication Apprehension Survey mirrored onto (Olsson & Phelps, 2007) Social Fear of Learning. 902 respondents were chosen to answer the survey. Data is collected via google form online and analysed using SPSS version 26. To reveal the frequency of the responses. Findings is presented in the form of mean scores. The findings for this study revealed interesting information about fear of foreign language learning. Sadly, fear foreign language learning can begin in the classroom through direct learning. Some activities may seem normal to one class but may add anxiety to another class.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature of foreign language learning anxiety. However, it links language learning anxiety to the theory of social learning of fear which means fear is derived from social means. Learners' interaction with the surrounding can either facilitate or hinder language learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of Study

The fear of learning a foreign language differs by types of language, aspects of language and also learners' attitude. Suleimenova (2013) describe this fear as the uneasiness and anxiety when asked to speak in foreign language. According to Djafri and Wimbari (2018), Japanese learners have the highest foreign language anxiety level. This is followed by Arabic, French, Korean, and English learners. The fear is due to the different writing system of Japanese, including the using of three different kinds of alphabets in the same time, and the gradual increasing of difficulty as the learners move to intermediate and advanced level. It is also found that the non-Latin

languages (Japanese, Korean, and Arabic), has a greater anxiety level than Latin languages (English and French). This is because of the different writing systems used. Interestingly, in some countries like Indonesia where English is the foreign language, learning English gives the learners less anxiety compared to learning other foreign languages. This is because English is used informally in many English language institutes throughout the country. Students' perception of teachers' behaviors, the learning procedures and environment inside the classroom also contribute to the occurrence of the foreign language anxiety among learners. As such Duxbury and Tsai (2010) suggested the use of cooperative learning as part of foreign language learning activities. Duxbury and Tsai (2010) found that there is a positive relationship between foreign language learning in the Taiwanese schools. This study also suggested that the influence of instructors and their choice of activities can have a huge impact on learners' attitude towards learning a foreign language.

1.2. Statement of Problem

Ideally, one might assume that finding the problems to learning a foreign language can help learners to overcome the fear in foreign language learning. The study by Unal and Ilhan (2017) reported that among some of the problems with foreign language are instructors' choice of activities, materials used in the classroom, learning environment for the learners and also learners' attitude. In another study, Akbari, Naderi, Simons, and Pilot (2016) found that learning a foreign is best done through engagement. Nevertheless, interaction can pose some problems among individuals and this can affect learning. This is agreed by Al-Khasawneh (2016) who found that one of the causes of foreign language fear is communication apprehension. The interaction itself may pose as a threat to the learners towards language learning. The real test of learning a language is the ability to communicate and for many that is scary. Unfortunately, the fear in language learning is a cycle (Rahmat, 2019). If one stage of fear is not dealt with, there is a fear that the language learner may face further problems with the language learning experience. Fear is learnt from the social experiences that the learners faced.

Generally, this study looks into how fear of foreign language learning mirrors social learning of fear. Specifically, this study is done to explore how direct learning, conditioned stimulus, direct learning experience and unconditioned stimulus influence the fear for foreign language learning. This study is done to answer the following questions;

- 1) How does indirect learning influence the fear for foreign language learning?
- 2) How does conditioned stimulus influence the fear for foreign language learning?
- 3) How does direct individual experience influence the fear for foreign language learning?
- 4) How does unconditioned stimulus influence the fear for foreign language learning?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Learning Behaviour

Learning is not a passive process between the learner and the content to be learnt. Learners need some other elements in the learning process. Bandura (1977) social learning theory mentioned the connection between three elements in learning; person (learner), environment and behaviour Figure 1. The learner is influenced by the environment in the learning process. This influence in turn affects his/her behaviour in learning. All three elements are connected to one another in the learning process.

According to Rahmat (2018) the cognitive factors of the learner affect his/her perception of the success of the learning process. If the learner has a positive perception of the learning activity, the chances of a positive learning outcome is high too. Similarly, if a learner perceives a learning behaviour as negative (fear in learning), the outcome may not be positive.

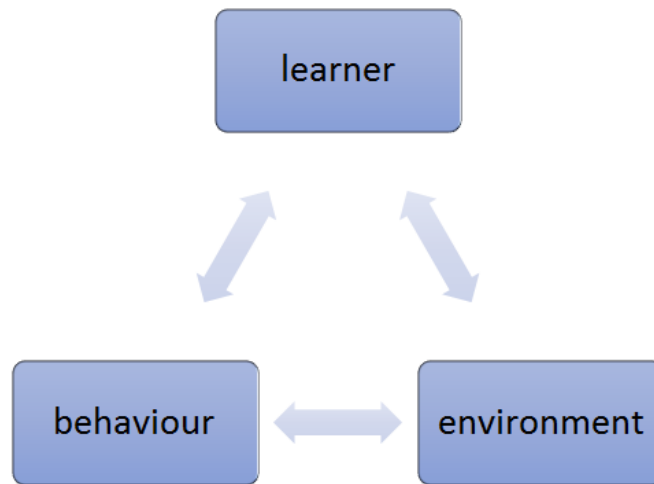


Figure-1. Social learning theory.

Source: Bandura (1977).

2.2. Social Learning of Fear

Sometimes, the fear of learning a foreign language is the result of unconditioned and conditioned behaviour. This fear happens because the observational and instructed fear is associated by social-emotional behaviour of the learners. According to [Olsson and Phelps \(2007\)](#) social learning of fear (SLoF) refers to the acquisition of fear through social means. This can be done through interacting, observing and listening to others. [Olsson and Phelps \(2007\)](#) defined social learning of fear as an indirect learning experience in contrast to direct learning procedures, such as fear conditioning, and fear is ignited through conditioned stimulus, individual experiences and is paired with an aversive unconditioned stimulus.

2.3. Fear in Foreign Language Learning

The fear of learning a foreign language can be traced from many factors. [Eysenck \(1979\)](#) divided this fear into two; (a) worry and (b) emotionality. Worry is a cognitive manifestation of the learner. The learner compares his/her personal performance with his/her peers. In addition to that, the learner also considers the consequences of failure. This is due to his/her low levels of confidence in performance in the target language. Next, emotionality refers to the concomitant negative feeling that is caused by some physiological functioning. Some learners may suffer from symptom such as increased heart rate, dizziness, feeling of panic when asked to communicate in the target language. Similarly, [Zheng and Cheng \(2018\)](#) investigated the causes of fear of foreign language. They found that learners have (a) class anxiety, they lack (b) test confidence and they have (c) test anxiety. [Zheng and Cheng \(2018\)](#) also reported that there is a negative association between class anxiety and test confidence. There is also a negative association between test anxiety and test confidence.

2.4. Past Studies

Group work can sometimes decrease anxiety when learning a foreign language. A mixed method research was done by [Yalcin and Incecay \(2014\)](#) at a private university in Istanbul, Turkey. 12 students were chosen to participate in the study. The questionnaire used was adopted from Horwitz's "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale" ([Horwitz, 1986](#)) and [Burgoon \(1976\)](#) "Unwillingness to communicate scale". The participants were also asked to reflect on the activities through open-ended essay questions. Finally, a focus group interview was conducted. Findings revealed that students felt more comfortable because they helped each other. Another advantage of group-work was the increased interaction between students in the target language and the student-centred classroom environment.

Nevertheless, some say, students fear foreign language no matter if the foreign language is for academic or social purpose. The study by [Gopang, Bughio, and Pathan \(2015\)](#) looked at foreign language anxiety among students of Lasbela University, Baluchistan, Pakistan. The questionnaire is adopted from Horwitz's "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale" ([Horwitz, 1986](#)). 240 respondents which includes 26 female and 214 male students participated in the study. Findings showed that there was no significant difference in majoring and non-majoring students' level of anxiety. There was only no significant difference in language anxiety between male and female respondents. The study concluded that Lasbela University students experience high anxiety in learning and using English for academic and social purposes.



[Al-Khasawneh \(2016\)](#) investigated the level and sources of foreign language learning anxiety by Saudi students studying at King Khalid University (KKU). This study is done to look into the differences between the level of language anxiety and the learners' study level. 97 students of different levels from an English major participated in the study. The research instrument used in this study was Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scales (FLCAS) developed by [Horwitz \(1986\)](#). Findings showed that the students experienced different sources of language anxiety such as communication apprehension, anxiety of English classes, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety.

There are some instances where the surrounding environment may not be positive enough for foreign language learning. [Duxbury and Tsai \(2010\)](#) investigated the level of foreign language anxiety in the classroom. They also looked at the correlation between foreign language anxiety with cooperative learning attitudes and practice among university students at one university in United States and three universities in Southern Taiwan. The instruments used were (The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety scale ([Horwitz, 1986](#)) and the Style Analysis Survey ([Oxford, 1999](#)). Findings showed that there was no significant correlation. between foreign language anxiety and cooperative learning at the United States University. In addition to that, of the three Southern Taiwan colleges, findings from only one school (the only school with a Taiwanese teacher) showed a significant correlation. Cooperative learning worked only if the instructor is a native speaker; otherwise, the group interaction may create more anxiety than anticipated. Another similar study was done by [Djafri and Wimbari \(2018\)](#) who investigated foreign language anxiety among Indonesian undergraduate students (182) of English, French, Japanese, Korean and Arabic language programs. The study looked at the students' motivation and their perception of teachers' behaviours. Findings revealed that learners of non-Latin languages group (Japanese, Korean, and Arabic) have a higher foreign language anxiety level than those of Latin language group (English and French). It was also discovered that learners' motivation does not affect foreign language anxiety. The learners' perception of their teachers' behaviour significantly affects their anxiety. This study suggested that foreign language teachers should give more attention to their teaching method and behaviors applied inside the classroom. They should to create a more conducive learning environment in the classroom in order to reduce foreign language anxiety.

2.5. Theoretical Framework of the Study

[Horwitz \(1986\)](#) reported three aspects of fear of communication apprehension [Table 1](#) and they are (a) fear of test anxiety, (b) fear of negative evaluation and (c) fear of language class. Similarly, [Olsson and Phelps \(2007\)](#) said that the feeling of fear is a conditioned behaviour and this is called social learning of fear. People are conditioned to fear something from indirect learning, and this is done through (a) conditioned stimulus, (b) direct individual experiences and (c) unconditioned stimulus. By association, comprehension apprehension ([Horwitz, 1986](#)) that learners experience mirrors indirect learning by [Olsson and Phelps \(2007\)](#).

Table-1. Mirroring fear of foreign language learning onto social learning of fear.

Communication Apprehension		Indirect Learning
Fear of Test Anxiety		Conditioned Stimulus
Fear of Negative Evaluation		Direct Individual Experiences
Fear of Language Classes		Unconditioned Stimulus

Source: [Horwitz \(1986\)](#) & [Olsson and Phelps \(2007\)](#).

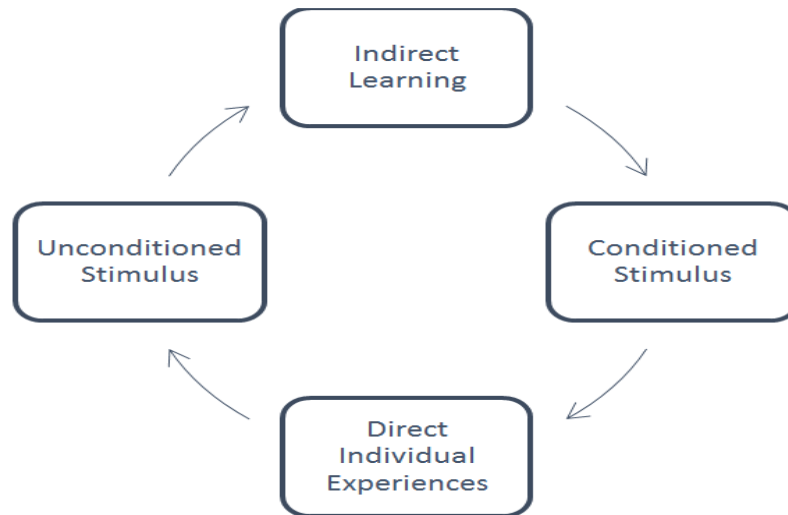


Figure-2.Theoretical framework of the study.
 Source: Horwitz (1986) & Olsson and Phelps (2007).

The mirroring effect of communication apprehension and indirect learning is thus presented in the theoretical framework in Figure 2. The fear of learning a foreign language is the product of indirect learning from negative experiences of learners using the target language. This learned behaviour becomes a conditioned stimulus. The learners are more conditioned to fear any future activities related to the learning of that foreign language. This conditioned (perceived) fear leads to less positive individual experiences when they attempt communication in the target language. The negative attitude will then turn into an unconditioned stimulus where the learners would bear a negative attitude towards learning the foreign language.

3. METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study is done to explore how the fear of learning language mirrors the fear of social learning. 902 respondents participated in this study. The respondents are students in foreign language courses in a public university in Malaysia. They enrolled for English, Mandarin, Japanese, Arabic and Italian. Students came from Science and Technology, Social Sciences and Humanities, as well as Business Management cluster. The instrument is rooted from Horwitz (1986) survey on Foreign Language Communication Apprehension Survey mirrored onto (Olsson & Phelps, 2007) Social Fear of Learning. Section A consists of the demographic profiles with 7 items. Section B is on Direct Learning through Communication Apprehension (8 items). Section C is about Conditioned (Fear of Test) Stimulus (5 items). Section D is about Direct Individual Experiences via Fear of Negative Evaluation (9 items) and Section E is about Unconditioned Stimulus (Fear of Language Classes) (10 items). Data is collected via goggle form online and analysed using SPSS version 26. To reveal the frequency of the responses. Findings is presented in the form of mean scores.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

This section presents findings of the study. The findings are presented based on the research questions they answer.

4.2. Findings for RQ 1- Direct Learning through Communication Apprehension

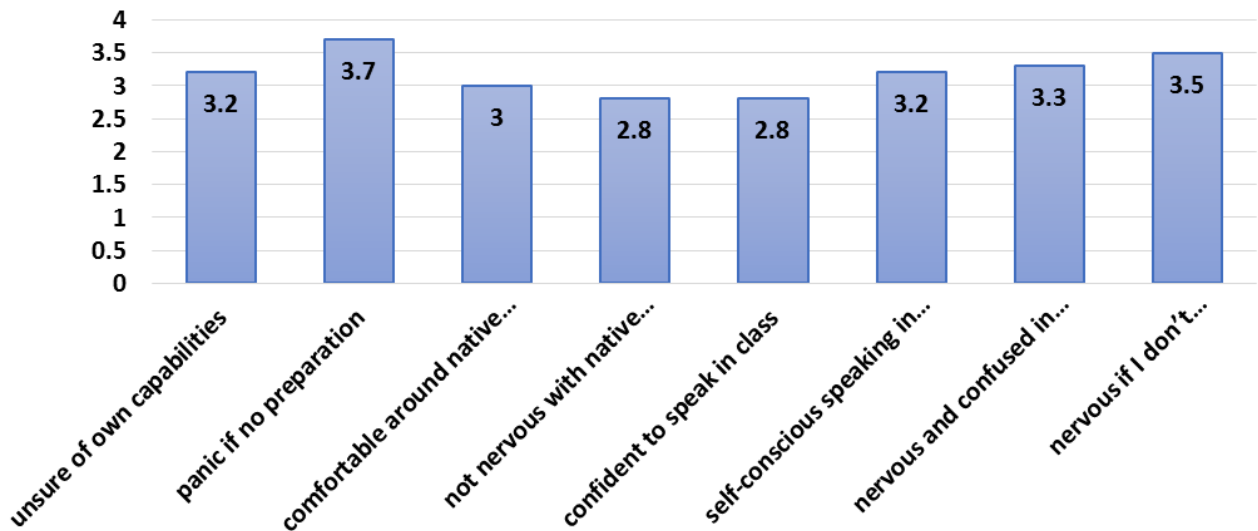


Figure-3. Mean score for direct learning through communication apprehension.

Figure 3 presents the findings for direct learning through communication apprehension. Direct learning refers to the specific instructions that the teacher gives to the learners to facilitate learning. Olsson and Phelps (2007) said that direct learning can sometimes cause fear of learning in foreign language. Findings showed that direct teaching can sometimes makes the learners “panic is they had no preparation” beforehand (3.7). Learners also get “nervous when they do not understand” what is being taught in the foreign class (3.5). Direct learning can also make some learners “nervous and confused in class” (3.3)

4.3. Findings for RQ 2- Conditioned (Fear of Test) Stimulus

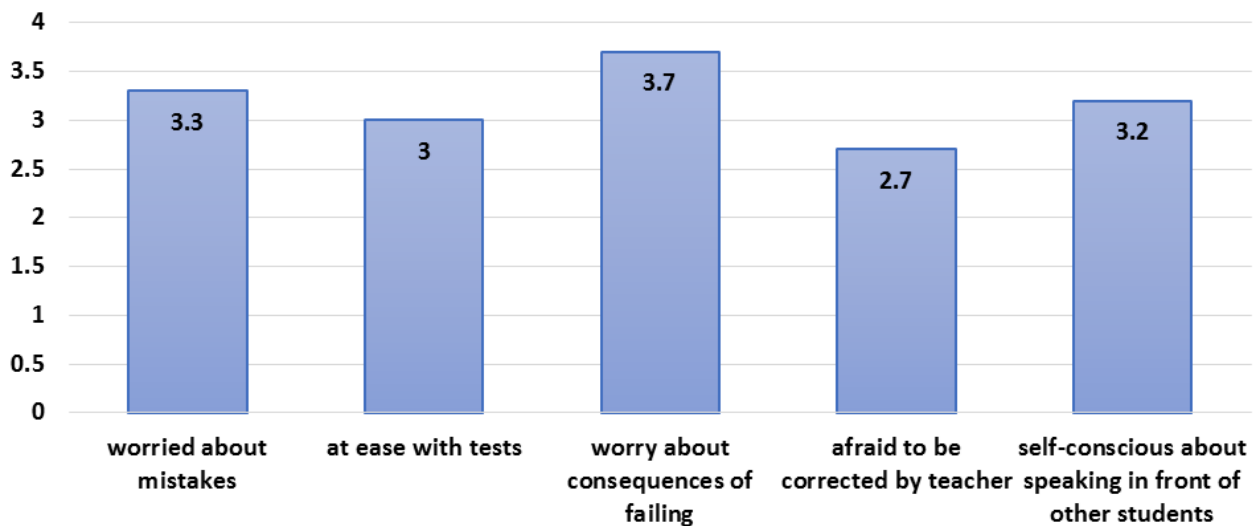


Figure-4. Mean score for conditioned (fear of test) stimulus.

The findings for research question 2 are presented in Figure 4. Previous learning experience can sometimes cause learners to be conditioned to fear tests. Many students actually “worry about the consequences of failing” (3.7). Interestingly, they were least “afraid to be corrected by the teacher” (2.7) although the were “worried about making mistakes” (3.3).

4.4. Findings for RQ3- Direct Individual Experiences via Fear of Negative Evaluation

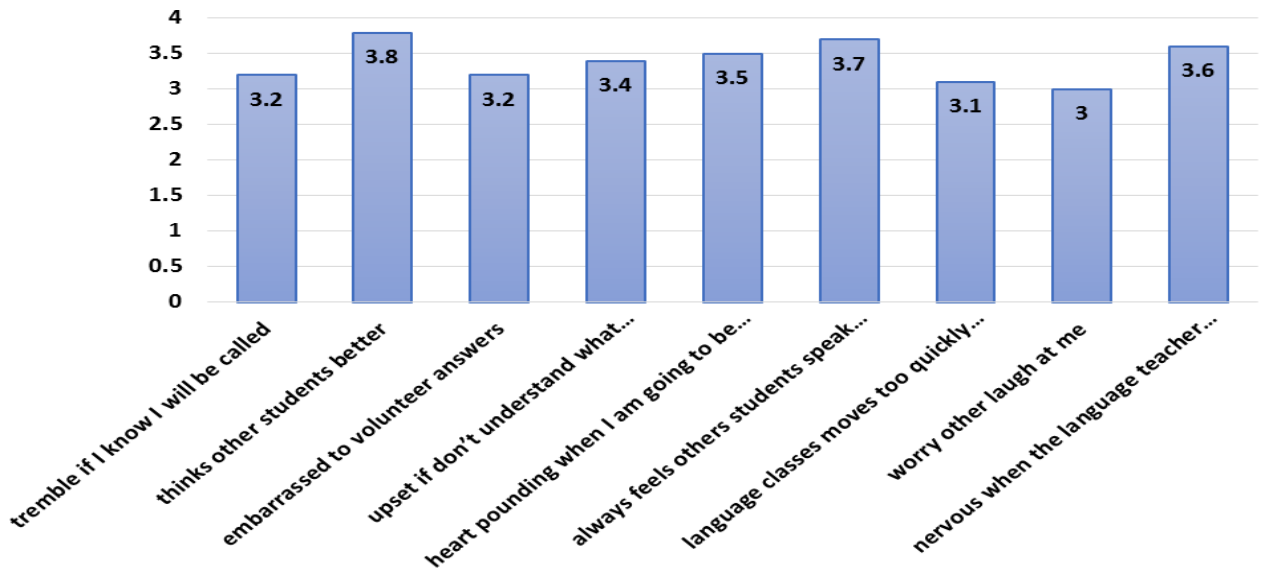


Figure-5. Direct individual experiences via fear of negative evaluation.

The findings for research question 3 are presented in Figure 5. Classroom language learning sometimes leaves learners with individual experiences. These experiences often make learners “think that other students are better” (3.8), or “feel other students speak better” (3.7). Their experiences make them feel inferior compared to their friends”.

4.5. Findings for RQ 4- Unconditioned Stimulus (Fear of Language Classes)

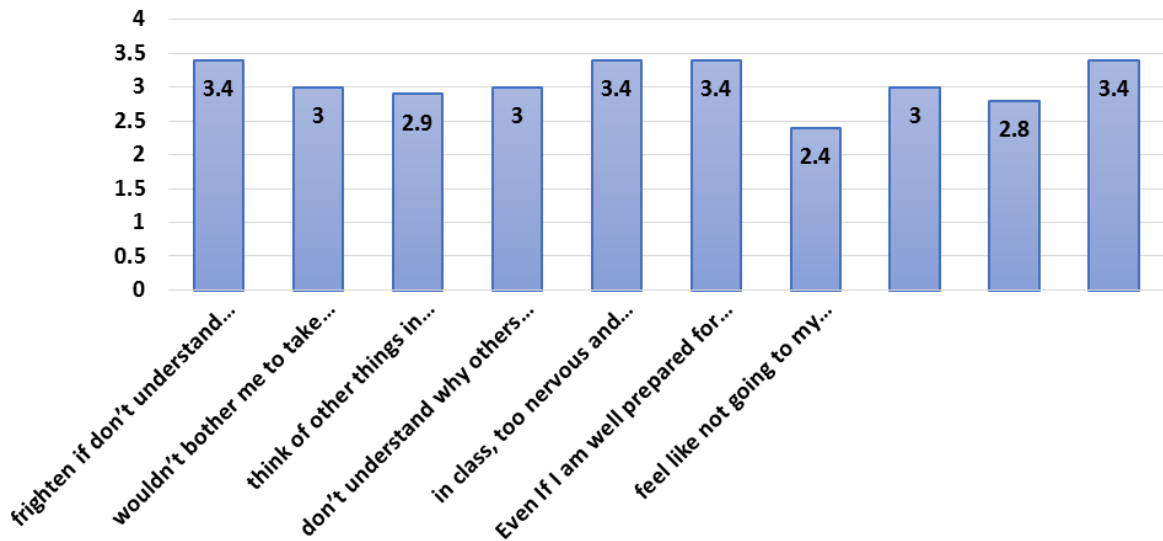


Figure-6. Unconditioned stimulus (fear of language classes).

Figure 6 presents the mean score for unconditioned stimulus. Interestingly, fear of foreign language learning take place in the classroom environment because findings showed that “ on the way to language class, they felt sure and relaxed”. Fear of foreign language learning becomes unconditioned after the learners have undergone direct teaching, experiences. This unconditioned stimulus makes the learners “frightened if they do not understand the teacher” (3.4). Sometimes, in class, they may be “too nervous and forget even the things they know” (3.4). This happens when they are “still anxious” even if they are prepared” (3.4).

5. CONCLUSION

The findings for this study revealed interesting information about fear of foreign language learning. Sadly, fear of foreign language learning can begin in the classroom through direct learning. Some activities may seem normal to one class but may add anxiety to another class. According to Djafri and Wimbari (2018) the teacher is responsible to plan activities that best suits a variety of class to suit different needs of learners. Just as learners can be conditioned to learn from activities, they can also be conditioned to fear learning from unsuitable activities. Gopang et al. (2015) felt that happening in the classroom can indirectly encourage the conditioning of fear for the learning of the foreign language.

Finally, past experiences that learners went through while learning can shape learners' future motivations for learning. This is agreed by Al-Khasawneh (2016) who felt that fear of foreign language learning can stem from what the learners went through in the past while learning a language.

5.1. Pedagogical Implications

Interaction and communication is the best way to learn a foreign language. Learners need to be given the opportunity to use the language; make mistakes and improve as they go along. However, according to Duxbury and Tsai (2010) sometimes, group interaction can create more anxiety among learners. Some learners may feel inferior over the others. Some learners may take over the interaction and leaving little chance for other team members to communicate. Teachers could plan interactions with less learners in a group. Perhaps pair communication activities would be suitable for some classes, some need more group work. In addition to that, more scaffolded activities could be given to learners who have more anxiety for learning. Future research could look deeper into the thoughts of learners about different types of interaction activities.

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