

# Perceptions of Students Learning French as a Foreign Language in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

The study investigated the perceptions of students learning French as a foreign language in a Malaysian public university. The specific objectives were to examine: (1) the self-reported French language proficiency level; and (2) their perceptions of their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in French. Questionnaire data were collected from 80 undergraduates enrolled in French Levels 1 and 2 courses. The analysis showed that language learners from Level 1 and Level 2 rated themselves as having fair proficiency level when they made their rating without comparing themselves to a French native speaker. However, when they compared themselves with a native French speaker, more of them rated their proficiency as poor. The results showed that the relative difficulty of mastering language skills in French, from the most difficult to the easiest, are writing, speaking, reading and listening. Similar results were found for Level 1 and Level 2 French but the undergraduates struggled with writing and speaking at Level 2 more than at Level 1 because of an increased vocabulary range, greater grammatical complexity and longer texts. The results suggest that the difficulties are not much in comprehension of the language but more towards expressing themselves whether in speaking or writing.

Keywords: French language proficiency, Learning French as a Foreign Language

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## INTRODUCTION

Foreign languages are learnt for various reasons ranging from personal enrichment to fulfilling job requirements involving the use of foreign languages, particularly in the era of rapid economic and technological development. Proficiency in foreign languages increases the competitiveness of graduates (e.g., better work opportunities and higher salary potential) in a workplace where global communication is increasingly becoming seamless. On a personal level, learning a foreign language enables language learners to expand their worldview and develop a deeper understanding of other cultures (Tar, 2011).

Foreign language learning can be defined as the “learning of non-native language outside of the environment where it is commonly spoken” (Moeller & Catalano, 2015). A foreign language is a language which is taught in a society where the language is not spoken as a native language (Gass & Schachter, 1989), and the language is learned in a classroom situation (Moeller & Catalano, 2015). For instance, French, Japanese, Arabic and Korean are taught as foreign languages in Malaysia. The foreign language is primarily for communication with people outside one’s own community unlike a language which has social functions inside the community (Littlewood, 1984).

This paper focusses on French. French is considered as the second most studied world language after English, and it is an official language in 29 countries with about 76 million native French speakers and 274 million fluent French speakers worldwide (World Population Review, 2021). According to Chinedu and Anthonia (2015), French is one of the most spoken Romance languages that has been used as a language of instruction in most of the countries. French language is one of the languages used in meetings by the United Nations Organization and other international organisations (Adewuyi, Bernard & Adewuyi, 2015).

In Malaysia, there is a growing number of Malaysians learning the French language in schools and universities (The Star, 2019). Alliance Française which serves as an official French Language Centre in Malaysia provides French language classes to members of the public. Since 1998, over 28,000 have registered for Diplôme approfondi de langue française (Advanced diploma in French language) (Alliance Française de Kuala Lumpur, 2021). Other organisations such as Malaysia-France University Centre, French University Graduates Association of Malaysia, Malaysian Students' Association France and Malaysian-French Chamber of Commerce and Industry are the partners of Campus France Malaysia (Campus France Malaysia, 2016). Besides this, universities also teach French as a foreign language. For instance, Universiti Malaya offers a Bachelor's Degree in French Language, whereas Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and Universiti Sabah Malaysia offer French as an elective subject.

Despite the growing popularity of French courses, research has shown that the learning of French as a foreign language is difficult. Foreign language learners experience frustration, stress and confusion when learning and communicating in the foreign language (Pawapatcharandom, 2007). There is a lack of studies on students' experiences of learning French. Most of the studies on foreign language learning were on English, and they focused on grammar rather than language skills (Akalin & Zengin, 2007; Büyükyavuz & İnal, 2008; Solak & Bayar, 2015).

Here some findings on learning of English as a foreign language are reviewed to provide an indication of the challenges involved in learning a foreign language. Pawapatcharandom (2007) found that writing was the most difficult English skill for Thai learners of English. For adult foreign language learners in China, acquiring a native-like accent and speaking with confidence were the most difficult (Wu, Wu, & Le, 2014). Similarly, English as a Second Language students in the United States struggled with academic oral skills in oral presentations and interacting with others in class (Ferris & Tagg, 1996). Afshar and Asakereh (2016) focused on speaking skills in the learning of English as a foreign language by Iranian university students and they faced linguistic problems such as pronunciation. Yet another study, Nguyen (2011) pointed to pronunciation as a leading problem faced by the Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand students in learning English in an Australian university. The participants in this study also revealed the English instructors from their own countries did not teach language skills but focused on grammar. It is not sufficient to focus on grammar because there are seven aspects of language to learn, which are phonology, morphology, lexis or grammar, semantics, pragmatics, syntax and discourse (Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden, 1998). A study indicating the relative difficulty of language skills is that of Yahya (2012) conducted on learning of English as a foreign language at Arab American University of Jenin. The order of difficulty from highest to lowest is as follows: listening, grammar, speaking, writing, pronunciation, and reading. In order to find out the reasons for ineffective language learning, it is important to examine learner difficulties in aspects of language learning other than grammar.

Next, the findings of the few studies on learning of French as a foreign language are reviewed. Kolawole (2015) studied learning of French as a foreign language in three colleges of education in Oyo, Nigeria. Only a third of the students were interested to study French at the degree level due to unemployment of graduates with a French degree and the prevailing Anglophone learning environment where students used Pidgin English in the French language village at Badagry. As a result, immersion in a French-speaking environment did not take place. A majority of them also felt that the infrastructure was not adequate such as language laboratory, internet facilities and textual materials. The study also revealed that the government did not enforce the teaching of French although it is the second official language in Nigeria. Tar (2011) found that learning of French as a foreign language at the secondary school level in Odo, Nigeria was hampered by the lack of other people to communicate with by using the target language. The female and male students had similar views on other problems besetting French language learning, namely, shortage of teachers, textbooks, teaching materials and a lack of interest and motivation as well as discrepancies between their native language and French. The low perceived usefulness of French and the lack of support for French is understandable. English dominates in almost all domains, particularly government functions because of the historical, multi-ethnic and cultural nature of Nigeria (Ayeomoni, 2012).

These studies on learning of French as a foreign language did not touch on the relative difficulty of the language skills. The findings that are on the relative difficulty of language skills are available only for English (Afshar & Asakereh, 2016; Akalin & Zengin, 2007; Büyükyavuz & İnal, 2008; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Nguyen, 2011; Pawapatcharandom, 2007; Solak & Bayar, 2015; Wu et al., 2014; Yahya, 2012). Therefore, research in this area is needed to understand learner difficulties as they try to learn French for various communicative purposes in an environment where French is not used outside the classroom.

The study investigated the perceptions of students learning French as a foreign language in a Malaysian public university. The specific objectives were to examine: (1) the self-reported French language proficiency level; and (2) their perceptions of their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in French.

## **METHOD OF STUDY**

The study on challenges of learning French as a foreign language was conducted on university students enrolled in French Language Level 1 or Level 2 courses in a Malaysian public university.

A total of 80 undergraduates ranging in age from 19 to 23 years old participated in the study by filling in the questionnaire: 60 participants from French Language Level 1 and another 20 participants from Level 2 course. The difference in the number of students at Levels 1 and 2 is unavoidable because fewer students enrol in the Level 2 course. The students were from various faculties in the university. There were more females (72.5%) than males (27.5%). There are more females than males in tertiary institutions in Malaysia (Hirschmann, 2021; Malaysiakini, 2016).

The selection criteria for participants were students who were enrolled in the French Language Level 1 and Level 2 courses. Native speakers of French were excluded from the study. The participants in the study were bilingual or multilingual speakers. They could communicate with others in at least two languages, for example, Malay and English, Malay and Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, Mandarin and English, Mandarin and Tamil, Tamil and English, Malay and other indigenous languages such as Iban, Rungus and Melanau.

Out of the 80 participants who responded to the questionnaire, seven participants were interviewed to obtain further information on their experiences in learning French as a foreign language. Four participants were from French Level 1 and three participants were from Level 2. The rationale of using a semi-structured interview for this study is it elicits detailed information on challenges in mastering the four language skills in learning French language from the perspective of participants.

In this study, data were collected using a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire on challenges of learning a foreign language was adapted from Pawapatcharandom (2007). Section A of the questionnaire included seven questions on the basic demographic information of participants regarding their age, gender, level of French language courses taken, year of study, faculty and programme of their studies, and self-rating of their own French language proficiency level. They were asked to tick one of the options: poor, fair, good or excellent. Dewaele and Dewaele (2021) found a significant correlation between actual and self-reported proficiency scores in French. Their language proficiency data involving the four skills were collected at beginning, in the middle and at the closure of a study abroad period in a Francophone country. Section B contained 37 items which were categorised into four parts: part A (10 items on listening skills), part B (13 items on speaking skills), part C (7 items on reading skills) and part D (7 items on writing skills). A five-point Likert scale was used to measure the perspectives of participants involved in this study, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The interview guide for the semi-structured face-to-face interview was adapted from Nguyen (2011) and Afshar and Asakereh (2016). In Nguyen's (2011) study, two versions of interview questions were included which are teachers'

version and students' version. For the student's version, there are 16 interview questions regarding the students' opinions on the skills they are good and bad at among the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), their reasons, and the ways to improve their English language. On the other hand, Afshar and Asakereh (2016) included 11 interview questions regarding the factors causing the speaking problems in English, the types of linguistic-related problems affecting students' speaking skills and whether students' speaking ability can be improved by enrolling them in listening and speaking courses in university. In the present study, six main interview questions were adapted from Nguyen (2011) and Afshar and Asakereh (2016). The questions focused on skills which were given more or less attention by the language instructors and other aspects of their language learning.

The questionnaires were distributed to participants enrolled in French Language Level 1 and Level 2 classes. The second researcher asked for permission to speak to the students in the last 15 minutes of the French class. She gave a detailed briefing on the aim of the study and the instructions on how to fill in the questionnaires. In addition, the researcher reassured students on the confidentiality their responses. Students who agreed to participate in the study signed the consent form and proceeded to fill in the questionnaires. The questionnaires were collected at the end of the class.

For the interview session, seven participants who volunteered for the interviews were contacted to fix an appointment. Four were from Level 1 (Participants A-D) and three were from Level 2 (Participants E-G). Before the interview, the second researcher informed the participants that the interview conversations would be audio-recorded. The participants signed the consent form to confirm their agreement in participating in the study.

For the data analysis, the questionnaire data were keyed into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences for Windows version 20.0. Means and standard deviations were calculated in order to compare the perceptions between Level 1 and Level 2 language learners on the challenges they encountered in mastering listening, speaking, reading and writing skills when learning French as a foreign language. The recorded interviews were transcribed and coded to identify problems encountered when learning listening, speaking, reading and writing skills so that the information can be used to explain the questionnaire results.

## **RESULTS**

The results from the questionnaires are reported, and where appropriate, excerpt from the interview are used to explain the participants' perceptions of their proficiency in French so that the explanations are from the participants' perspective rather than the researchers'.

### **Self-reported French language proficiency level**

This section describes the results on participants' French language proficiency with or without comparing themselves to native speakers of French.

The results show that most of the participants in French level 1 and 2 courses rated their proficiency in French as fair when compared to non-native speakers of French. Table 1 shows that 61.7% of 60 participants in French Level 1 rated their proficiency as fair. Similarly, 60% of 20 participants in French Level 2 also rated their proficiency as fair. Fewer participants rated their proficiency as poor (Level 1, 21.7%; Level 2, 25%). Likewise, only a small percentage of the participants were confident of their proficiency in French (Level 1, 16.7 %; Level 2. 15.0 %). It seems that Level 1 French students were aware that they were only beginners in the language.

Table 2 shows that about half of the participants in French level 1 and 2 courses rated their proficiency in French as poor when compared with a native speaker (46.7% and 55% respectively). A fairly large proportion rated their proficiency in French as fair (Level 1, 38.3%; Level 2, 40%). In comparison, only a very small percentage of the participants were confident of their proficiency in French (Level 1: 6.7% good and 8.3% excellent; Level 2: 5% good).

From the perspective of the participants in the French Level 2 course, none of them reached excellent proficiency in French.

In short, the results indicate that language learners from both Level 1 and Level 2 rated themselves as having fair French language proficiency when they made the rating without comparing themselves to a native speaker. However, when they made the comparison to a native speaker, more of them rated their proficiency as poor. This means that the participants lacked confidence in their French language proficiency even though they had completed one semester of learning French at either Level 1 or Level 2. The next section shows the skills where they lack confidence.

**Table 1.** Number and percentage of Level 1 and Level 2 language learners' self-rated French language proficiency level (N=80).

Level	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	Total
Level 1	13 (21.7%)	37 (61.7%)	10 (16.7%)	0 (0.0%)	60 (100.0%)
Level 2	5 (25.0%)	12 (60.0%)	3 (15.0%)	0 (0.0%)	20 (100.0%)
Average	18 (22.5%)	49 (61.3%)	13 (16.3%)	0 (0.0%)	80 (100.0%)

**Table 2.** Number and percentage of Level 1 and Level 2 language learners' self-reported French language proficiency level when compared with native speakers (N=80).

Level	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	Total
Level 1	28 (46.7%)	23 (38.3%)	4 (6.7%)	5 (8.3%)	60 (100.0%)
Level 2	11 (55.0%)	8 (40.0%)	1 (5.0%)	0 (0.0%)	20 (100.0%)
Average	39 (48.8%)	31 (38.8%)	5 (6.3%)	5 (6.3%)	80 (100.0%)

### Participants' perceptions of their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in French

In this section, the participants' perceptions of their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in French are reported. On the five-point Likert scale, five shows strong agreement, one shows strong agreement and three shows a neutral response. A comparison of the results in Tables 3 to 6 showed that both Level 1 and Level 2 participants found listening the easiest, followed by reading, and both are receptive skills. However, there was a difference for productive skills: Level 1 participants found writing easier than speaking, whereas Level 2 participants found speaking easier than writing. The details on the results for the four skills will be described next.

Table 3 shows the perceptions of Level 1 and Level 2 participants on their proficiency in listening French. The average means scores show that the participants found listening at French Level 1 (mean of 3.74) easier than listening at Level 2 (mean of 3.01). Participants in French Level 1 reported that they could clearly hear the pronunciation by instructors (mean of 4.10) and they also felt comfortable listening to a native French speaking instructor in the classroom (mean of 4.10). These two aspects of listening skills in French were easy for the Level 2 participants (mean of 3.55 and 3.45 respectively). In addition, the Level 2 participants reported that they could understand the main idea expressed by the native French speaking instructor (mean of 3.45). However, the mean scores showed that Level 1 participants reported better listening skills than Level 2 participants.

**Table 3.** Mean scores showing Level 1 and Level 2 participants' perceptions of their listening skill in French.

<b>Aspects of listening skill</b>	<b>Level 1</b>	<b>Level 2</b>
1. I can clearly hear the pronunciation by instructors.	4.10	3.55
2. I feel comfortable listening to a native French speaking instructor in the classroom.	4.10	3.45
3. I can understand instructors in French classes.	4.05	3.40
4. I can understand the questions asked by the instructors in French in the classroom.	3.98	3.10
5. I can understand the main idea expressed by the native French speaking instructor.	3.95	3.45
6. I can understand the questions asked by the instructors in French during oral assessments.	3.93	2.60
7. I can understand the accent of the instructors in the classroom and during oral assessments.	3.77	2.95
8. I understand the tone of a native French speaker.	3.47	3.00
9. I can understand a native speaker speaking French at normal speed.	3.07	2.40
10. I never have any listening problem in French.	2.93	2.15
Average mean scores	3.74	3.01

The aspect of listening skill posing the most problem to Levels 1 and 2 participants was understanding a native speaker speaking French at normal speed (mean of 3.07 and 2.40 respectively). For example, Participant C from Level 1 said:

*Excerpt 1*

When French people, they talk French, they will talk in normal speed that maybe I can't catch up or maybe I can't really listen and understand to them. (Participant C)

Beginner learners of foreign languages may be able to understand speech enunciated clearly and slowly but not when French is spoken at natural speed. Consequently, non-native speakers would easily feel nervous and suffer from lack of confidence when they have to communicate with native speakers.

In addition, the Level 2 participants faced some problems understanding the questions asked by the instructors in French during oral assessments (mean of 2.60) but the Level 1 participants could cope with it (mean of 3.93). The Level 2 participants also found the accent of the instructors in the class and during oral assessments challenging (mean of 2.95) but the Level 1 participants could also cope with it (mean of 3.77). As the level of French increases, less familiar vocabulary and more complex grammatical structures are used, making it more difficult for the participants to understand what they hear.

Table 4 shows Level 1 and Level 2 participants' perceptions of their speaking skill in French. The average mean scores of below three shows that the language learners find it challenging to speak French (Level 1, 2.66; Level 2, 2.15), and much more difficult than listening to French. Speaking in French Level 2 was definitely more difficult for the participants because there was only one item with a mean of above three.

**Table 4.** Mean scores showing Level 1 and Level 2 participants’ perceptions of their speaking skill in French.

Statements	Level 1	Level 2
1. I can pronounce French words clearly after listening to the pronunciation given by instructors.	3.63	3.15
2. I can pronounce the consonant /r/ and vowel /u/ in French clearly and correctly.	3.35	2.70
3. I can have a simple conversation in French.	3.23	2.90
4. I can answer instructors’ questions in French in the classroom.	3.18	2.55
5. I feel comfortable talking with a native speaker instructor in the classroom.	3.10	2.55
6. I can pronounce the French accents clearly [e.g.: acute (´), grave (`), circumflex (^), diaeresis (¨) and cedilla (,)]	3.02	2.15
7. I can answer the questions by giving sentences fully in French during oral assessments.	2.98	2.25
8. I have clear pronunciation when I communicate in French.	2.82	2.30
9. I have an adequate French vocabulary for effective speaking.	2.77	2.20
10. I can ask questions in French in the classroom.	2.72	2.40
11. I find it easy to express myself in French.	2.52	1.85
12. I never have any speaking problem in French.	2.52	1.85
13. I can explain my ideas clearly in French.	2.38	1.75
Average mean scores	2.66	2.15

Among the different aspects of the speaking skill in French, the participants found it rather easy to repeat French words clearly after listening to the pronunciation given by instructors (Level 1, 3.63; Level 2, 3.15). In fact, the first researcher had encountered a student who could read aloud a passage in good pronunciation but did not understand much of what is in the passage.

Generally French pronunciation at Level 1 was within the capability of about half the participants as shown by the mean of 3.02. Examples of characteristic French sounds are /r/ and /u/ and examples of French accents are acute (´), grave (`), circumflex (^), diaeresis (¨) and cedilla (,). These were unfamiliar sounds to the participants. For instance, Participant A said that the back sounding of the “r” is very difficult for Malaysian learners because languages in Malaysia such as Malay, Mandarin and English do not have the back sounding of the consonant “r”. The French sounds became increasingly difficult for Level 2 participants, probably because these sounds appeared in more complex words. Excerpt 2 shows Participant G’s (Level 2) confusion over French accents:

*Excerpt 2*

Yeah, because French, obviously that is not our mother tongue language and plus we also have the Borneo language which is, I took Melanau. So, a bit confusing about the accents. Because it’s two different things and we have to learn how to pronounce it correctly or else it will have a different meaning. (Participant G)

Languages spoken in Malaysia such as Iban, Melanau, Bidayuh and Kayan do not have the accents to be marked on consonant and vowels of particular words as in French language. According to Participant G, the French instructors encouraged their students to practise the unfamiliar French sounds more often in order to improve their language skills.

The Level 1 participants were able to engage in simple conversations in French with their instructor (mean of 3.23 and 3.18 respectively). They felt somewhat comfortable talking with their native speaker instructor in class (mean of 3.10). However, the Level 2 participants reported that they did not feel capable of handling these aspects of speaking in French, as shown by mean scores of less than three (mean of 2.55 to 2.70, Table 4).

The greatest difficulty for both Levels 1 and 2 participants was explaining their ideas clearly in French (Level 1, 2.38; Level 2, 1.75). Speaking French was difficult for participants in both groups. Level 1 participants found it difficult to ask questions in French in class (mean of 2.72) and even more difficult to answer questions using full sentences in French during oral assessments (mean of 2.98). The mean scores are lower for Level 2 participants showing the greater challenge they faced to ask questions (mean of 2.40) or answer questions using full sentences in French (mean of 2.25). This could be caused by a lack of adequate French vocabulary for effective speaking and the problem worsened as the participants moved from Level 1 to Level 2. Taken together, the results suggest that they had more difficulties producing spontaneous speech as the French level increased because the speaking tasks in the classroom had changed and were more challenging. For example, in Level 1 they were given sample sentences they could use in conversations, but in Level 2 they had to formulate their own sentences by using information provided in task sheets.

Next, Table 5 shows Level 1 and Level 2 participants' perceptions of their reading skill in French. The average mean scores show that the reading French was easier at Level 1 (average mean of 3.43) than at Level 2 (average mean of 2.95).

**Table 5.** Mean scores showing Level 1 and Level 2 participants' perceptions of their reading skill in French.

Statements	Level 1	Level 2
1. I can read the letters in the French alphabet.	4.02	3.40
2. I can read the documents given by instructors in the classroom.	3.55	3.30
3. I can understand the French words printed on the documents during the assessments.	3.52	3.10
4. I can understand the meaning of words on the documents given by instructors.	3.37	3.00
5. I can guess the meaning of new vocabulary in French.	3.37	3.00
6. I can read the written French accents (e.g.: acute (´), grave (`), circumflex (^), diaeresis (¨) and cedilla (,)) on the documents.	3.32	2.50
7. I never have any reading problem in French.	2.83	2.35
Average mean scores	3.43	2.95

Interestingly, a similar pattern was evident in the aspects of reading mastered by the Levels 1 and 2 participants. Both groups reported that they could read the letters of the French alphabet, and this was the easiest for them. Most of the students could read and understand the documents given by instructors in class and during assessments (mean scores above 3). While Level 1 students could guess the meaning of new vocabulary in French (mean of 3.37), the Level 2 participants gave mixed responses on this (neutral mean of 3). Somehow the Level 1 students could read the written French accents (e.g.: acute (´), grave (`), circumflex (^), diaeresis (¨) and cedilla (,)) on the documents (mean of 3.32) but the Level 2 participants could not handle this (mean of 2.5). In sum, participants from both levels had problems reading the accents and comprehending meaning of words in French.



Finally, Table 6 shows results on Level 1 and Level 2 participants' perceptions of their writing skill in French. The average mean scores showed that writing in French was difficult for Level 1 participants (average mean of 2.74) and very difficult for Level 2 participants (average mean of 2.14).

**Table 6.** Mean scores showing Level 1 and Level 2 participants' perceptions of their writing skill in French.

Statements	Level 1	Level 2
1. I can write down the sentences in French given as examples by instructors during classes.	3.25	2.45
2. I can write down French words with correct grammar (e.g.: masculine ( <i>le garçon</i> ) and feminine ( <i>la fille</i> )).	2.95	2.60
3. I am able to write in the correct sentence structure in French.	2.77	2.10
4. I can remember and write French words with suitable accents (e.g.: acute (´), grave (`), circumflex (^), diaeresis (¨) and cedilla (,)).	2.63	2.15
5. I can use perfect grammatical rules when writing in French.	2.63	1.90
6. I have an adequate French vocabulary for writing short essay for an exam.	2.40	1.80
7. I never have any writing problem in French.	2.53	2.00
Average mean scores	2.74	2.14

The only aspect of writing in French that the Level 1 participants could cope with copying down sentences in French (mean of 3.25). These sentences were given as examples by instructors during classes, and students were asked to copy them down so that they could learn the vocabulary. Copying down sentences does not count as a productive skill, which could explain why the Level 1 participants reported some confidence in handling this task. Strangely, the Level 2 participants reported tremendous difficulties with copying down sentences, as shown by the mean of 2.45 which is below the mid-point of 3. By Level 2, the instructors do not write down all the sentences for the students to copy. French is not a phonetic language and the words are not written the way they are pronounced. In French, many letters are silent, particularly when they appear at the end of words. Hence, it becomes difficult to write French as the students advance in the French course.

The participants found it challenging to use correct grammar when writing sentences, and writing French words with suitable accents. Participant B from Level 1 explained why he could not do well in the examination because of the many grammatical rules that were different from Malay, Mandarin and English languages:

*Excerpt 3*

I guess because writing involves a lot of stuffs like grammatical rules and all and even though he does teach us, but, again it's not as heavily focused on as speaking. So, I find that a huge problem especially when I go for my final exam. (Participant B)

The final examination was focussed on essay writing whereas the coursework assignments were on oral assessments. Participant F from Level 2 said, "I quite do badly in writing in French when it comes to words that have a lot of accents in one sentence." Non-native speakers need to a long time to memorise the grammatical rules, and practise writing sentences with correct sentence structures as well as placing suitable accents on words when learning French as a foreign language.

The most difficult aspect of writing for French language learners is inadequate vocabulary for writing short essays in the examinations. Table 6 shows that Level 1 participants had some difficulties (mean of 2.40) while the Level 2 participants had severe difficulties (mean of 1.80). Interestingly, most of the participants interviewed highlighted the difficulty of differentiating masculine and feminine words because of cultural differences within French and Malaysia contexts. Each object has gender in French. Participant D from Level 1 said that French grammar was difficult and confusing because there are feminine and masculine words, and her view was echoed by Participant G from Level 2, as shown in Excerpt 4:

*Excerpt 4*

It's a bit complicated because they will have a feminine and masculine. So, it's very difficult to understand how to use the masculine and the feminine in grammar part. (Participant G)

As the languages commonly spoken in Malaysia (English, Malay, Mandarin and other indigenous languages) do not mark gender, grammatical gender-marking was difficult for the participants. Krenca, Hipfner-Boucher, and Chen's (2020) study showed that in a French immersion setting, the group of children whose first language marks gender has significantly different proportion of correctly marked feminine nouns compared another two groups whose first language did not have this feature of morphology.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this section, the results are discussed in relation to related findings on learning of foreign languages in other contexts due to the lack of studies on learning of French as a foreign language. Firstly, the finding on the different ratings of French proficiency when compared to non-native and native speakers of French is not surprising. In the present study, most of the participants rated their French language proficiency as fair in relation to non-native speakers of French and between poor to fair in relation to native speakers of French. The results show that the participants were aware that French native speakers have greater competence than non-native speakers of French. What can be considered surprising is that there was little difference between the Level 1 and Level 2 participants in their self-rating of proficiency in French. In Thailand, Pawapatcharandom (2007) also found out that the 70.00% of the language learners rated themselves having fair proficiency level when they were required to rate their own overall English proficiency compared with the proficiency of other students in their class. However, 63.33% of the language learners rated themselves as having poor English proficiency compared with the proficiency of English native speakers. In Pawapatcharandom (2007) and in the present study, the language learners were aware that they were only beginners in the foreign language when compared to native speakers of the language. In the present study, the only exposure to French was in the French class, and this restricts opportunities for them to experience the language in authentic use. More than five decades ago, Carroll (1967) had already found that students who have spent time abroad in French-speaking environments or started learning the language during elementary school attain greater competence than other language majors without these opportunities. A recent study (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2021) confirmed that progress in learning French was correlated with the presence of a strong local French social network. Their study involved British and Irish students who had spent some time abroad in Francophone countries, and these students were both language and non-language majors.

As for their perceptions of their language skills, the results showed that receptive skills (listening and reading) were perceived as easier than productive skills (speaking and writing). However, there were differences between Level 1 and Level 2 participants. Both groups of participants perceived listening as the easiest skill to learn. Level 1 participants perceived speaking as the most difficult skill whereas Level 2 participants perceived writing as the most difficult skill to learn. This is due to the skill focus of the two levels of French courses. Level 2 participants struggled with writing and speaking because of an incremental emphasis on productive skills. They struggled with longer sentences, less familiar vocabulary, and more complex grammatical structures. Students in another Malaysian

university felt that listening and speaking should be an important focus in their French class (Halim, Abd Rahim, & Mansor, 2017), showing that the attributed more value to oral skills than written skills in French. For the participants in the present study, listening was relatively easy but speaking was very hard for beginner learners. Use of productive skills like speaking and writing require a certain base of vocabulary. In Sahenk Erkan's (2017) study on Turkish university students, more than half of the learners indicated that they had structured nearly correct phrases in French, indicating that they could develop their vocabulary knowledge in French. In the study, an Internet site ([www.lexique.fle.fr](http://www.lexique.fle.fr)) was used to provide materials and native speaker models for the students learning French. Dewaele and Dewaele (2021) reported that British and Irish students reported a significant linear increase in speaking and listening proficiency from the beginning to the end of the study abroad period in a Francophone country, but proficiency in reading and writing increased significantly only after the mid-way point. Dewaele and Dewaele's (2021) results confirm the results of the present study on the greater difficulty of learning written skills in French than oral skills.

## CONCLUSION

The study was on perceptions of students learning French as a foreign language in a Malaysian public university. The findings showed the participants' awareness of their limited proficiency in French as seen in their self-rating of fair proficiency when compared with non-native speakers of French but fair to poor when compared with native speakers of French. Among the language skills, the receptive skills were found to be easier to learn, particularly listening. However, the Level 1 participants found speaking to be the most difficult skill whereas writing was the most difficult skill to Level 2 participants. This was reflective of the course context in the university where the study was conducted. Nevertheless, the results offer preliminary identification of learning difficulties in French. The results on the relative difficulty of the four language skills provide useful information to French language instructors and material designers to design the foreign language learning materials by preparing more speaking and writing activities. Future studies on challenges in learning of French as a foreign language can be conducted on a larger scale to verify the findings of this study.

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