First-year students' communication apprehension in learning French as foreign language

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ABSTRACT
Learning a foreign language and being first-year students at the same time can be challenging as they struggle to make the transition in learning a new language and adjusting to their new lives as a university student. One of the significant challenges students frequently faces as a foreign language learner is a lack of communication confidence, which can turn into a hampering factor for their academic achievements. This mixed-methods study aimed to examine students' communication apprehension (CA) level and explore factors that contributed to their current level of CA. In this paper, the authors measured the level of CA in 57 first-year students of French Language departments in an Indonesian university. Quantitative data was analysed via McCroskey's Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24). Qualitative questions explored how the first-year students perceived their senses of experiencing the communication apprehension. In addition, the qualitative thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the qualitative data. The findings indicated a moderate level of CA in most of the first-year students such as fear of negative evaluation which was considered as the leading cause of the students' high level of anxiety. Meanwhile, while prior knowledge and a supportive teacher-student relation were appraised as the main foundation of the low level of CA students.

Keywords: Anxiety; communication apprehension; first-year students; French; foreign language learning

INTRODUCTION
As in any foreign language learning classroom, sometimes the most challenging students are the ones who are disengaged in the learning process. Since a classroom is a learning centre, educators as the learning providers have a responsibility to make sure that their students are back on track in the learning process. However, it is particularly tricky for reluctant students to fully engaged in the classroom (Min, 2016). As noted by Lucas (1984) students' communication disengagement in the classroom are triggered by such factors as unwillingness, nervousness, even fear, and this phenomenon is known as a case of communication apprehension.

Communication apprehension is widely known as one form of language anxieties along with fear of negative evaluation and fear of testing (Horwitz et al., 1986). Although the construction and concept of communication apprehension have emerged since

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1970 (see McCroskey, 1984), this phenomenon is still widely investigated in the past decade (e.g. Bragg, 2017; Mahdi, 2015; Matsuoka, 2008; Orbeta & San Jose, 2013; Pribyl et al, 1998; Rosenfeld et al, 1995; Sham & Azmi, 2018). In a foreign language classroom, the level of communication apprehension has more correlated to the students' level of proficiency of the target language or the students' linguistic background (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Mahdi, 2015), rather than to the students' study duration (Molnar & Crnjak, 2018).

French is one of the languages that has been spoken and studied throughout the globe. In 2018, there were 300 million French speakers worldwide (106 countries and territories). This fact sets French as the fifth most spoken world language, and it keeps growing ("La Francophonie en bref", n.d.). Additionally, the language has been spoken in a diverse language position, from spoken as a mother tongue, second language, official language, or even a foreign language.

Nevertheless, the teaching of a foreign language, no matter how popular the language is used, various challenges are always faced by both the teachers and the students' side. Regarding this, a study by Spetz (2018) on Swedish foreign language students indicated that the highest communication apprehension occurred on the beginner students; this phenomenon makes the work of a language teacher has become more challenging when it comes to working on the students' oral communicative competence. Another study from Aslim-Yetiş and Çapan (2013) has also shown anxiety that occurs during the speaking skill learning process; when the students are interviewed without having prepared for the task requested and not being able to be understood during their interaction.

There are four types of CA: (1) trait-like, which cuts across time, receiver, and situation; (2) context-based, which is associated with a single type of communication context cutting across receiver and time; (3) audience-based, which is associated with a single receiver or group of receivers cutting across context and time; and (4) situational, which is specific to a given context with a given receiver at a given time (McCroskey, 1984).

The French status in the Indonesian context is considered as one of the foreign languages that is formally studied from the secondary level of education to higher education. However, the acceptance of the language as a foreign language has its own challenges since there is no significant number of French learners or speakers. Comparing to other foreign languages such as English and Japanese, the language is not widely exposed and acknowledged. French language in Indonesian formal education institutions is offered at two levels of education: high school and college. For senior high school, out of a total of 27,205 schools (Kusnandar, 2019), only 200 schools are offering

French as school subjects (Hardini, 2019). Whereas for tertiary education, from a total of 4,670 higher educational institutions (see Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education, 2018), there are only six faculties and 20 vocational colleges (tourism, hospitality, culinary) that provide French language program (Hardini, 2019). Furthermore, in the non-formal education sector, there are only about 15,000 Indonesian students who study the French language in Institution courses such as *Institut Français d'Indonésie* (French Institute of Indonesia) and *Alliance Française* (French Alliance) (Hardini, 2019). The number is far less compared to 872.441 Japanese language learners and Mandarin with 1.046.490 students learning it (see Ichsan, 2015). This situation has resulted in French being a less popular foreign language to be learned in Indonesia.

The challenges in learning the language become more significant when the learning process has to deal with the learners' communication apprehension and the learners' preparedness as first-year students. As described above, the majority of Indonesian university students who enrolled in French study programs did not attend the language program-based in high schools, or in other words, they do not have any prior knowledge in the French language.

This fact poses particular challenges for the students in a way that the students have to study a foreign language and at the same time have to adjust to their transition period between high school and university life.

The transition period of first-year students could be very challenging since it exposes students to the new various challenges, especially in academic matters. Angelo and Cross (1993, as cited in Naong et al, 2009) stated that some of the academic challenges, for example, are the first-year students require new skills and need to adopt a new style of learning. For the first-year students, the teaching and learning methods are different and more challenging than in high schools since they are responsible for their own learning and this is what will then affect their academic performance. More specifically, Fook and Sidhu (2015) further explained that first-year students mostly would face the following challenges: cognitive challenges, learning to become an active learner, coping with reading materials, instructional problem, time management, assignment burdens, and adjusting with cultural differences. Thus, the first-year phase becomes crucial for the students since this transition may affect the development of attitudes towards continuing learning (Hillman, 2005), since failure to successfully manage such transition may result in significant distress, poor academic performance (Yorke & Longden, 2004, as cited in Hassel & Ridout, 2018) as well as a cause of students' anxiety and distress (Lowe & Cook, 2003)

Due to the fact that the French language is not widely studied in Indonesia, and considering the challenges faced by first-year students, it is interesting to explore how the learners thrive in studying the language by measuring their communication apprehension toward language learning. Based on the rationale above, this paper attempts to measure and investigate the communication apprehension occurred in the first-year Indonesian students who are studying French as a foreign language. This paper aims at exploring the phenomenon of communication apprehension in the classroom and why it happens. Thus, the authors formulate the following research questions: (1) what is the level of first-year students' communication apprehension in learning the French language? (2) What factors contribute to the students' level of communication apprehension?

METHOD

In the current study, the authors employed a mixed method of data collection to gain a deeper understanding of the research issues. As stated by Creswell (2013), a mixed-methods approach provides researchers with greater scope to investigate and a bigger chance to gain an in-depth understanding of the research problem. Hence, in measuring the communication apprehension, the authors collected the data quantitatively by distributing questionnaires that address questions concerning the students' communication apprehension (CA) when communicating using a foreign language. Subsequently, in order to comprehend what factors contributed to their CA score, the authors also conducted interviews with the participants.

Research site and respondents

The study was conducted at the French Language department in an Indonesian public university. The study involved all of the first-year undergraduate students at that department. The research site was chosen since the department is acknowledged as one of the top tier institutions for studying a French language in the country (see "Directory of Study Program Accreditation Results", 2019) and the only

French Language Department who has been accredited by an international accreditation service (see "International Directory," n.d.). There are 57 students in total, and all students voluntarily participated in the study. Freshmen students are chosen as the participants so the data can be used as a basis for a further review and develop the learning process in the future.

In regard to the study ethical consideration, the authors refer the ethical research standards based on the research code of ethics developed by the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (2013). The interviews and visual data collection were carried out with all the required consents. During the interview process, the participants were informed of their rights as an informant and their anonymity were guaranteed. Every participant had the opportunity to sign an informed consent document to guarantee the protection and privacy of their information. Throughout the study and afterwards, the confidentiality identity of the respondents was guaranteed, and the interview recordings were obliterated.

Quantitative data measurements

The participants completed the interactional based data measurement developed by McCroskey (1984) known as Personal Report of Communication Apprehension-24 (PRCA-24). The PRCA-24 is the instrument which is most widely used to measure communication apprehension. It permits one to obtain sub-scores on the contexts of public speaking, dyadic interaction, small groups, and large groups. The instrument is composed of twenty-four statements concerning feelings about communicating with others, especially in using French as a medium of instruction.

PRCA-24 revealed a four-dimensional structure consisting roughly of the four contexts of the PRCA: group discussion (questions 1 to 6); meetings (questions 7 to 12); dyad/interpersonal (questions 13 to 18); and public speaking (questions 19 to 24) The survey result is calculated using CA sub-scores Scoring Formula and then total scores are converted into three levels of CA classification (High, Moderate, or Low level of CA). The norms used in the scoring formula is described in Table 1.

Table 1
Norms of Personal Report of Communication Apprehension-24 (PRCA-24)

	Mean	Standard Deviation
For Total Score	65.6	15.3
Group	15.4	4.8
Meeting	16.4	4.8
Dyad (Interpersonal)	14.5	4.2
Public	19.3	5.1

Qualitative data collection and analysis

In collecting the qualitative data, interviews were conducted at the convenience of each participant with minimal interference by the authors. The

questions consist of semi-structured dialogue, open-ended questions, which provided some degree of freedom for the participant to describe the CA experience (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2014). Each

participant met with the authors twice, the first session was a focus group discussion and the second one was an individual interview session. Each session lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The data collection stopped when the authors reach the data saturation or when there were no new themes or information emerged from the iterative interviews.

The data were analysed using interpretive qualitative analysis adapted from Miles and Hubermann (1994) steps of analysis consist of data reduction, data display, and verified conclusions. This analysis approach allowed the authors to investigate influential moments in participants' lives such as self-disclosure strategies and experiences pertaining to the topic of the study. The interviews result were transcribed. After that, the authors coded the transcript and categorised the codes into broader conceptual themes. These themes were then categorised and organised chronologically according to the order in which they emerged. Once the transcripts were coded and themes were identified, the frequency of the themes was examined across all of the transcripts to find out the influential factors for the students' CA scores.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Students' communication apprehension level
As mentioned in the method section, the authors employed the communication apprehension measurement based on McCroskey's (1984)

Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24). In terms of the scoring formula, the PRCA-24 has 24 self-reflected statements that are computed and converted the four communication contexts into scores. The four communication contexts, including group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking, are computed into sub-scores, and the total average of the score is considered as the overall communication apprehension (CA). Each of the communication contexts has its own scoring formula based on the PRCA-24 (see appendix) as described in Table 2.

In answering the first research question, the authors start by presenting the overall communication apprehension (CA) score and its interpretation. Then the sub-scores of each PRCA-24 communication components are explained to portray which component that has a significant score toward the overall measurement. In interpreting the overall CA score, all of the four components sub-scores are added, and the scoring results are range between 24 and 120 with the following interpretation:

a) A high level of CA is indicated with the score between 83 and 120.
b) A moderate level of CA is indicated with the score between 55 and 83.
c) A low level of CA is indicated with the score between 24 and 55

Table 2
Scoring Formula for the PRCA-24 Sub-Scores

Group Discussion	Item 2 + Item 4 + Item 6 - Item 1 - Item 3 - Item 5 + 18
Meetings	Item 8 + Item 9 + Item 12 - Item 7 - Item 10 - Item 11 + 18
Interpersonal Conversations	Item 14 + Item 16 + Item 17 - Item 13 - Item 15 - Item 18 + 18
Public Speaking	Item 19 + Item 21 + Item 23 - Item 20 - Item 22 - Item 24 + 18

As a result, the overall CA measurement results in the first-year students' communication apprehension in learning French as a foreign language are described in the appendix.

The results for the students' communication apprehension level were based on 57 students (the total population) who completed the PRCA-24 questionnaires. The computation showed that 26% of the total students were categorised as high in CA level. Thirty-nine students or 68.4 % of the participants were categorised with a moderate level of CA, and only 5.3% of the participants got a low level of communication apprehension.

Based on the PCRA-24 score, it can be seen that communication apprehension occurs as a challenge for the first-year students of the French department. Only three students have a low level of CA with the score range from 50 to 55. The score can be interpreted that the students have less anxiety when they communicate in French than most of their classmates. However, with an average overall

score of 73.2, the first-year students were considered to have a moderate level of CA when they learn French in the classroom. The data reflect that averagely the students' communication apprehension is still in a tolerable state. As stated by Lucas (2009), a level of human anxiety up to a tolerable point is not entirely a bad thing because the physiological arousal associated with anxiety can contribute to more considerable mental preparation, sharper physical awareness, and general readiness for future situation.

In terms of for four communication contexts of the PRCA-24 (group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking), scores on the four contexts can range from a low level (6) to a high level of CA (30), and any score above 18 indicates some degree of apprehension (Wrench et al., 2009). Subsequently, the average sub-scores of the first-year students are described in Table 3.

Table 3
PRCA-24 Communication Context Score

PRCA-24 Communication Context	Average Score
Group discussion	16.0
Meetings	17.5
Interpersonal Conversations	18.5
Public Speaking	21.5

The table 3 shows that public speaking and interpersonal conversation recorded as the highest average score of the students' communication apprehension. Based on the findings, it indicates that the biggest challenge for the students in learning French is to speak the language in front of the classroom and to have a conversation by using the language. In relations to foreign language learning, speaking skill has been considered as a significant factor in generating language learners' communication anxiety (De Saint Léger, 2009; Horwitz, 2010; Lucas, 1984). Since the first-year students are required to deliver their thoughts publicly far more often than in high schools, hence they are struggling in coping with their communication apprehension, particularly when they have to speak in a foreign language in front of others. This finding confirmed previous studies that found students encounter communication apprehension due to their limited speaking skill of the language, and thus they do not feel convenient to communicate in the foreign language in front of others (Amiri & Puteh, 2018; Babapoor et al., 2018; Tsiplakides, 2009).

The Students' Communication Apprehension Level
Aside from examining the level of the first-year students' CA, another primary objective of this study was to explore the students' perspectives toward certain factors that contributed to their discomfort while communicating in the target language. After the authors obtained the computation data, follow-up interviews were conducted toward students who scored in the top and bottom tier to identify factors that cause their current level of CA. Subsequently, the authors found that the students were experiencing a high level of communication apprehension as a result of two main factors: 1) fear of their peers' negative evaluation, and 2) lack of the target language exposure. On the other hand, prior knowledge of the target language and proper classroom intervention were attributed to the students who have a low level of communication apprehension.

Factors Contributed to High Level of CA
In terms of having a high level of CA, the study showed that the students' communication apprehension was not caused by the fact that they did not realise the value of learning French, indolence, or lack of interest in the French language. The students' narratives provided a piece of strong evidence that they were hesitant to participate in classroom communication activities because they believed that they were not good at speaking. The students were also worried that their peers and teachers would evaluate them negatively. This hesitation can be seen in a statement from one of the highly anxious students:

"I like French, but I prefer not to take part in speaking because I am not confident with my French, I don't want to make mistakes cause I'm worried that my friends will laugh at me." (Interview Data R.56, 2019)

Another student also expresses her experience in avoiding mistakes in speaking the language:
"Since I don't know how to say it in French, it's better for me to stay quiet and say nothing rather than being exposed with the mistakes." (Interview Data R.43, 2019)

The statement highlights the respondent's social image concern and preoccupation with how the classmates would perceive the respondent. This type of concern often occurs in a situation where a student fears something, it is natural to avoid the fear or withdraw from it, and this is exactly what the apprehensive communication student does (Wrench et al., 2009).

Other high levels of CA respondents also believe that they always feel that they should produce error-free sentences when speaking in a foreign language and this pressure has become another source of their fear of negative evaluation This finding appears in unison with the study by Gregersen (2003) and Aeni et al. (2017) who concluded that anxious foreign language learners tend to focus on form rather than the central point of the message.

The second factor that experienced by the apprehensive communication student is the lack of language exposure. Another student with a high level of CA describes her insights on the lack of language exposure:

"Unlike English or Japanese, I need to work extra hard to get the language exposure in learning French; not many people learn the language and not many movies or other kinds of literature. So there is less opportunity to enhance the productive language skill." (Interview Data R.54, 2019)

It can be seen from the response that since Indonesia is not a francophone country, the opportunity to get the language exposure is limited. As recommended by (Yin, 2015), foreign language

learners should be continually exposed to the target language through various types of media to motivate and improve their language proficiency. Hence, this fact opens a gap that needs to be narrowed by the French language teachers by providing access and encouraging the students to get higher exposure to the language on a daily basis.

Factors Contributed to Low Level of CA

Students with a low level of CA tends to have low general anxiety, tolerates ambiguous situations, has a high degree of self-control, is adventurous, emotionally mature, extroverted, has high self-esteem, innovative, and can tolerate relatively high levels of disagreement (Wrench et al., 2009). In this study, the PRCA-24 result showed that only 5.3% of the total students have a low level of communication apprehension. In that case, it is interesting to see why those students have a peculiar level of CA comparing to other students.

Based on the interviews conducted with a low CA level students, they admitted that their prior knowledge and exposure of the target language have a significant contribution to their current level of communication apprehension. As a student commented:

> *"I had learned languages other than English when I was in high school, so I still remember how to use the language, and I think it also helps me manage my strategy in studying French right now"* (Interview Data R.36, 2019)

In addition, all the students who have a low level of CA had experience in studying the language previously. The responses indicate that since the students already learned the language, it eases the anxiety of communicating in the classroom because the students already know the necessary expression to communicate in the target language.

Another finding of this study also indicated that classroom intervention in the form of setting up a supporting system community and establishing a supportive teacher-student relation and classroom atmosphere. This kind of support that focus on classroom activities help students improve their verbal communication (Interview Data R.23 & R.53, 2019).

As an illustration of the support system, the French Department in this study has been establishing a support group consist of senior and first-year students. This type of learning community can provide an ideal environment for "optimal motivation" (Alderman, 2004), and a "collaborative atmosphere" that can assist the students in reducing their fear of language mistakes (Gregersen, 2003).

These findings can provide a basis for further evaluation for the curriculum development, especially for the French Language Department at the research site. The department policymakers could establish a strategy to narrow the gap in a way that a program can be designed to encourage as well as support those who have no prior knowledge of the language to thrive in the learning process with less anxiety. Establishing a language learning by relieving unnecessary anxiety means to create more effective language learning and to instil students' interest and motivation to learn a foreign language (Young, 1991).

CONCLUSION

In summary, communication apprehension (CA) or anxiety can be experienced by anyone, including first-year students. Therefore, the authors argue that it is essential that a learning center provides positive supports from students as well as creating an environment where students also engage in positive behaviours such as learning how to construct constructive, rather than negative criticisms.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that most of the first-year students of French Department have a moderate level of CA in which fear of negative evaluation becomes the primary source of the students' anxiety. On the contrary, prior knowledge and an establishment of supportive teacher-student relations were appraised as the main contributing factors for the students who have a low level of CA.

The findings of the study can serve as an additional insight into the development of coping strategies toward language anxiety, particularly students' communication apprehensions in the language classroom setting. This study can also contribute to the development of what?? language teaching-learning. Hence, in order to have more implication to the knowledge, the authors would like to recommend investigating the first-year students' communication apprehension in a broader geographical scope to recognise the current level of communication apprehension of foreign language learners in the country and how they will strive from it.

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Appendix

Overall PRCA-24 Results

Respondents	Group Discussion	Meetings	Interpersonal Conversations	Public Speaking	Score
		PRCA Components			
1	19	24	22	25	90
2	15	18	21	16	70
3	18	20	21	24	83
4	17	17	17	14	65
5	17	18	20	25	80
6	17	18	17	22	74
7	15	17	17	20	69
8	14	14	17	20	65
9	19	14	20	23	76
10	15	15	15	20	65
11	16	14	15	15	60
12	15	16	18	20	69
13	15	17	16	17	65
14	17	12	17	16	62
15	14	14	16	17	61
16	17	12	15	16	60
17	14	15	16	18	63
18	16	17	18	18	69
19	18	14	15	22	69
20	14	18	17	19	68
21	16	22	21	21	80
22	19	22	22	24	87
23	14	14	12	13	53
24	14	18	15	25	72
25	15	12	10	13	50
26	18	22	19	20	79
27	15	14	15	15	59
28	17	16	15	17	65
29	18	19	17	19	73
30	18	19	19	24	80
31	17	16	17	22	72
32	22	21	18	16	77
33	16	20	19	25	80
34	17	9	17	15	58
35	12	13	21	22	68
36	11	9	10	13	43
37	18	21	22	28	89
38	18	19	23	25	85
39	16	18	20	21	75
40	16	15	16	18	65
41	18	18	21	23	80
42	19	23	23	24	89
43	21	24	25	26	96
44	15	19	17	24	75
45	17	16	18	17	68
46	18	20	21	26	85
47	16	19	23	24	82
48	14	20	20	24	78
49	19	21	20	23	83
50	21	22	21	22	86
51	20	24	21	24	89
52	17	14	13	16	60
53	12	12	11	17	52
54	26	27	30	25	108
55	14	15	16	22	67
56	22	23	24	24	93
57	20	19	24	26	89
		Average Score			**73.2**