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Title of Thesis:

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE GENDER GAP AMONG FOREIGN LANGUAGES  
STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES, ST. AUGUSTINE:  
MALE VERSUS FEMALE ATTITUDES TOWARDS LANGUAGE LEARNING

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research paper sought to explore the gender gap within the foreign languages domain from a perspective that was lacking in previous scholarship. The objectives of the study were to determine the main factors that influence male and female students to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level as well as to identify the differences in the attitudes of male and female foreign languages students towards language learning. Data were derived using a mixed method approach of questionnaires and e-mail interviews. Thirty questionnaires were administered to foreign languages students at all three levels in the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics at the UWI, St. Augustine. The participants for the e-mail interviews included one male and one female level III foreign languages student. Statistical analysis was employed for the questionnaire data while thematic analysis was used for the e-mail interview data. The researcher found that the major factors influencing both male and female students to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level were their love for languages as well as encouragement from their past teachers. With regards to the differences in the male and female students' attitudes towards language apprenticeship, the findings indicated that the male foreign languages students were more motivated, confident and dedicated than their female counterparts. On the other hand, the female students were found to be more anxious, stressed and demotivated. Overall, it was concluded that the male students possessed a more positive attitude towards language learning than the female students.

**Keywords:** Foreign Languages, Gender Gap, Male versus Female, Attitudes, Language Learning, Language Apprenticeship

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## INTRODUCTION

Foreign languages is a diverse field that celebrates cultural differences across the globe. A country's culture is uniquely expressed through its language, which can take several forms ranging from creole to pidgin. While this academic sphere encompasses humanity in all its forms, there is a noticeable dominance of female learners as opposed to male learners. This gender gap has existed since the academic field emerged in educational institutions around the world and it is still prevalent today. While many consider foreign languages to be a "female subject area", most do not seek to find out why this is. Although I always knew that foreign languages was a female-dominated domain, I never realized the extent of the gender gap until I began my Bachelor's degree in Spanish and French at the University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine. Since then, I have been deeply curious about the possible reasons for a significant female student majority and male student minority in the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics (DMLL).

### *Rationale*

Motivated by a desire to understand the visible gender gap in my classroom, I felt compelled to conduct an inspired and original piece of research that would contribute to existing literature addressing the gender gap and gender differences in the foreign languages field, satisfying whoever may share an interest in this particular issue. This study will explore the distinctive attitudes of male and female foreign language learners as well as the factors that influenced them to pursue the subject area, which is a perspective that was lacking in previous scholarship. The

research would also confirm or deny popular perceptions of foreign languages as an academic field.

### *Aims and Objectives*

This study seeks to identify the principal differences in the attitudes of male and female foreign languages students at the UWI towards language apprenticeship, as well as to determine the leading factors that encourage male and female students to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level. The findings of the study should provide an explanation as to why male foreign languages students are vastly outnumbered by their female counterparts within the DMLL at the UWI, St. Augustine. The study will allow readers to gain an understanding of the distinctive traits of male and female foreign languages students. Readers will also be able to reflect on their own perceptions of foreign language apprenticeship.

### *Research Questions*

1. What are the major factors that encourage male and female students to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level?
2. What are the differences in the attitudes of male and female foreign languages students towards language learning?

### *Methodology*

The study was conducted using empirical research which included both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. A questionnaire was created and distributed by the researcher to obtain quantitative data and an e-mail interview with two students was conducted in

order to gather qualitative data. With regards to the research design, the basic qualitative research approach was taken as the researcher's intent was to explore multiple perspectives on the selected research topic.

The questionnaire was created using the Google Forms platform and was virtually distributed to undergraduate students at all three levels in the DMLL at the UWI, St. Augustine. The questionnaire was sent to the students via UWI e-mail as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic which does not allow for physical contact. However, distributing the questionnaires virtually seemed to have been more convenient than doing so physically, as this method was less time-consuming and of no cost since printing copies was not required. Participants also had the ease of responding on their own time in the comfort of their homes.

Responses from the students were virtually collected over the course of a week, after which the researcher adjusted the setting of the Google Form to stop accepting responses. The disadvantage of administering the questionnaires online was that the e-mail was unseen or ignored by some recipients, as eighty-one responses were received out of the approximately one hundred students that it was sent to. Of the eighty-one responses collected, only fourteen were from male participants. Due to this, the first sixteen responses collected from female participants were selected to be analyzed, totaling thirty participants. Sixteen female responses were used so that it would be proportionate to the number of male responses while meeting the minimum number of thirty responses. The questionnaire comprised fourteen questions, including thirteen close-ended and one open-ended.

As the questionnaire by itself would not have gathered sufficient qualitative data, the researcher also conducted an e-mail interview with two students soon after the questionnaires were administered. This e-mail interview was created using Google Docs and consisted of five open-ended questions which allowed the interviewees to provide more in-depth and insightful information in comparison to the questionnaire. The document was individually sent to one male student and one female student, who are both level III Spanish and French students in the DMLL. The participants' identities will remain anonymous to protect their privacy.

Their individual responses were recorded on the document minutes after it was sent to them via e-mail. This method of conducting an e-mail interview proved to be time-saving as a physical interview did not have to be arranged, nor was there the need for the researcher to record and transcribe the information shared. Typing their responses on their individual document also allowed the interviewees to answer the questions directly and coherently and gave them more time to think as they did not have the pressure of being put on the spot. However, there were also some disadvantages of this virtual modality. The absence of face-to-face contact may have removed the element of spontaneity in the interviewees' responses, and the researcher was not able to ask follow-up questions which could have provided additional information.

In relation to data analysis, a statistical analysis approach was used to analyze the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires whereas a thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the qualitative data from the e-mail interviews. After the completed questionnaires and e-mail interviews were collected, the researcher read the participants' responses and observed the outstanding trends and themes that emerged from the data. The questionnaire results were

presented in the form of graphs and charts in the results chapter while the interviewees' responses were analyzed thematically.

The following chapter will present a literature review of various studies based on the factors influencing foreign language learning as well as male versus female attitudes towards learning foreign languages.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Literature Review

The phrase “gender gap” can be used to describe a difference in behaviours or attitudes between men and women in relation to a specific domain or issue. Although there is an adequate amount of research on the gender gap that exists within the academic field of foreign languages, the focus is usually on male versus female academic performance, whereas my personal research seeks to discover the factors influencing foreign language learning as well as the difference in attitudes of male and female foreign languages students towards language learning. This literature review aims to contribute to the existing scholarship surrounding gender differences in foreign language learning, in addition to providing the readers with more knowledge of the general topic.

#### *Factors influencing foreign language learning*

Numerous studies explore different types of factors that influence persons to learn a foreign language. Van der Slik et al. conducted a study on the gender differences among immigrants learning Dutch as a second language which highlights the environmental, social and behavioural factors that influenced the immigrants to learn Dutch. These factors include years of education, hours spent studying Dutch, age of arrival and length of residence in a Dutch-speaking country. It was found that the number of years of education was the most significant gender difference among the immigrants towards learning Dutch, while the other previously mentioned factors had significantly less impact on their foreign language learning (Van der Slik et al. 12). The study found that women benefited more from higher education than men did in learning Dutch.

Another trend shows that the higher the educational level, the larger the differences between males and females, in favor of the females. In other words, the female advantage accumulates with an increasing educational level (Van der Slik et al. 13).

On the other hand, Figueredo's article entitled "Why do more women than men study foreign languages?" offers a different perspective on the possible factors that influence males and females to learn a foreign language. Unlike the environmental, social and behavioural factors that were observed in the previous study, Figueredo analyzes psychological factors. The author claims that the differences between the male and female brain may influence their desire to pursue a foreign language (Figueredo). Figueredo highlights the popular theory that males and females psychologically process languages in a different way. Scientists reveal that when learning languages, girls' brains show greater activity in the areas used for language encoding whereas boys' brains show more activity in the areas associated with visual and aural functions (Figueredo). Figueredo also suggests that the general perception of languages as a female domain may be another factor influencing more girls than boys to pursue this particular academic field. The author adds that the unequal number of male and female language teachers may cause young people to associate the subject area with female instructors, thereby reinforcing the common perception that foreign languages is a female domain (Figueredo).

Upon evaluating this research, it can be inferred that Van der Slik et al. and Figueredo have identified and analyzed different factors that may influence male and female learners to learn a foreign language, although their approaches were dissimilar. Van der Slik et al. found that the most significant influential factors were environmentally and behaviourally based whereas

Figueredo concentrated on a psychological outlook. According to Van der Slik et al., the number of years of education was the most significant factor influencing more females than males to learn Dutch (12). On the other hand, Figueredo theorized that female brains are more inclined than male brains toward language encoding, therefore more girls than boys have the desire to learn a foreign language. My personal research differs from these as it seeks to determine the external factors such as peers or teachers that influence boys and girls to study foreign languages.

*Male versus female attitudes towards learning foreign languages*

The various studies consulted highlight attitudes and behaviours that are specific to male and female students in the foreign languages field. A number of studies reveal that female students tend to outperform their male counterparts in foreign languages which could be partially due to girls comporting themselves differently than boys and possessing different attitudes towards learning foreign languages and/or towards the language itself.

In general, research has shown that females are more motivated than males to learn foreign languages (Dörnyei and Clément 413; Dörnyei et al. 55-59; MacIntyre et al. 547-557; Mori and Gobel 202-205). Furthermore, Diab's study on university students' beliefs about learning English and French in Lebanon deduced that the female students' motivation to learn French as well as their confidence to use the language were higher compared to the males' (90). Diab's finding is confirmed by Heinzmann's study on girls' and boys' motivation to learn English which indicated that the girls were significantly more motivated than the boys (27). However, Diab's finding that girls were more confident is inconsistent with that of Siebert's, who investigated "Student and Teacher Beliefs about Language Learning" among international

students learning English. Contrastingly, Siebert's research found that it was the male students who possessed a greater linguistic self-confidence and estimated their ability to learn the language higher than the female students did (28-30). At the same time, the male learners in Siebert's research tended to underestimate the length of time needed to master the English language (28).

In addition to the previously mentioned attitudes of male and female students, researchers Nikitina and Furuoka observed in their survey entitled, "Language Classroom: A 'Girls' Domain'?" that their male and female participants almost unanimously agreed with the statement that women are better than men at learning foreign languages (5). However, students of both genders disclosed that they wanted to learn the Russian language in order to have a better understanding of the native speakers of the target language and thought that the ability to communicate in a foreign language was important (Nikitina and Furuoka 7). In agreement with Siebert's findings, the male students were also somewhat more confident in achieving a high proficiency in the Russian language while the female students felt more shy to speak Russian in front of others (Nikitina and Furuoka 7-8). With regards to learning strategies, both female and male participants placed equal value on the importance of repeating and practicing often (Nikitina and Furuoka 8). In other words, the proposition of revising the learnt material and practicing one's language skills generated an overwhelming support from the students of both genders. However, the female respondents placed a far greater importance on the use of auditory materials like CD-recordings and audio tapes than the male students (Nikitina and Furuoka 8). Meanwhile, a higher percentage of male learners than female learners agreed with the statement

“You shouldn’t say anything in Russian until you say it correctly” and placed more importance on speaking with a native-like pronunciation (Nikitina and Furuoka 8).

Figueredo’s research derived similar conclusions to Nikitina and Furuoka’s. Figueredo discovered that female learners will engage in all types of language learning, including speaking, reading and pronunciation, while male learners will stick to only a small and limited handful of study methods, holding them back from advancing with languages. Furthermore, Figueredo also notes that studies have proven that female learners are four times more likely than males to chat with native speakers of their target language and that females are more willing to risk embarrassing themselves, which is in line with Nikitina and Furuoka’s finding that more females than males would approach native speakers in order to practice speaking the target language. Due to this, women are more motivated than men to learn a foreign language because of their desire to develop social connections and friendships that may be formed by interacting with native speakers (Figueredo).

In addition, research shows that language anxiety is another component that differs between males and females. In a study entitled “Gender Differences in Foreign Language Anxiety at an Ethiopian University: Mizan-Tepi University Third Year English Major Students in Focus” investigated by Gerencheal, it was found that females had higher anxiety levels in their English classes than their counterpart males which had a serious debilitating effect on the female students’ achievement (12). The high level of language anxiety amongst female students may be a result of their lower confidence levels as highlighted in Siebert’s and Nikitina and Furuoka’s research.

In conclusion, it is evident that there are agreements and disagreements in the reviewed literature. Heinzmann's and Diab's studies found that female students were more motivated to learn foreign languages and more confident in their use of the target language than male students. However, Siebert's and Nikitina and Furuoka's studies oppose Diab's finding, as they found that the male students possessed more confidence than the females. A couple trends were observed in Figueredo's and Nikitina and Furuoka's research; one being that female learners are more likely than male learners to converse with native speakers of the target language. Both investigations also inferred that female students use more comprehensive learning strategies and tools than male students. It was also found in Gerencheal's study that female students experience higher levels of language anxiety than their male counterparts (12). Unlike the majority of these studies, my personal research seeks to identify attitudes of male and female foreign languages students from the perspective of their work ethic and emotions.

The following chapter will present an analysis of the results obtained from the questionnaires and the findings from the e-mail interviews.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Results

This chapter presents the analysis of the quantitative data collected from the questionnaires and the qualitative data from the e-mail interviews. These were based on the previously stated research questions, i.e. the factors influencing students to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level and the attitudes of male and female foreign languages students towards learning languages.

#### Analysis of questionnaire results

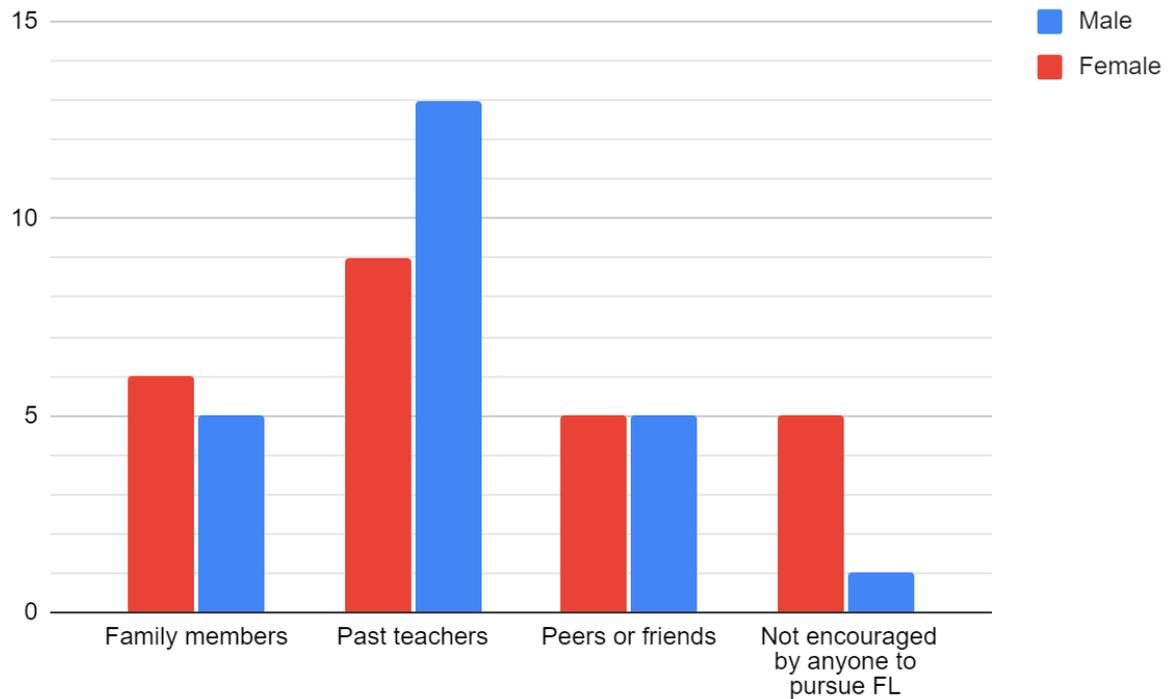


Fig. 1. Bar chart depicting external factors that encouraged male and female students to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level

The above chart (fig. 1) depicts the responses of 16 female participants and 14 male participants to question 3 of the questionnaire. The majority of both male and female participants indicated that they were encouraged by past teachers to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level, corresponding to 13 boys or 92.9% and 9 girls or 56.25%. Six females or 37.5% of the female participants indicated that they were influenced by their family members, while 5 males or 35.7% of the male participants agreed. An equal number of male and female participants shared that they were encouraged by their peers or friends, totaling 5 males and females each or 35.7% and 31.25% respectively. Five females or 31.25% and 1 male or 7.14% revealed that they were not encouraged by anyone to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level.

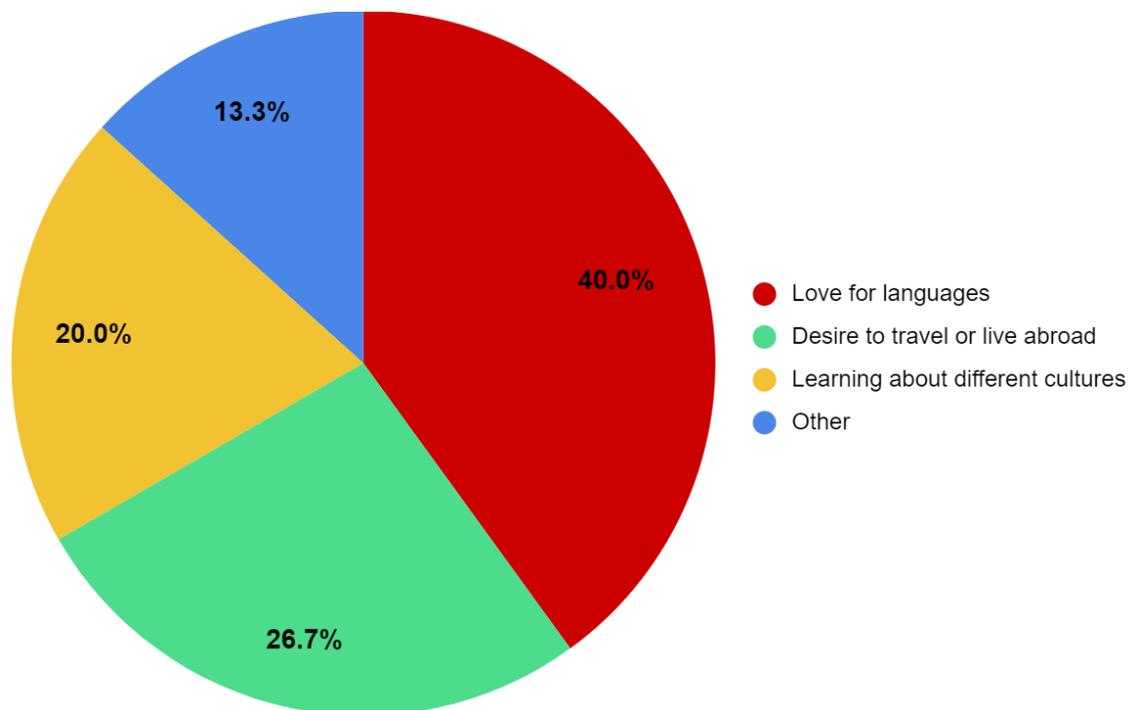


Fig. 2. Pie chart depicting non-external factors that influenced female students to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level.

The above pie chart (fig. 2) illustrates the non-external factors that influenced or inspired female students to pursue foreign languages. A total of 15 of the 16 female participants provided a response to this open-ended and optional question. A majority of 40% or 6 females expressed that their love for languages encouraged them to pursue the field. Four females or 26.7% indicated that it was their desire to travel or live abroad that encouraged them, followed by 3 females or 20% who were encouraged by their desire to learn about different cultures. Two other females or 13.3% listed other reasons.

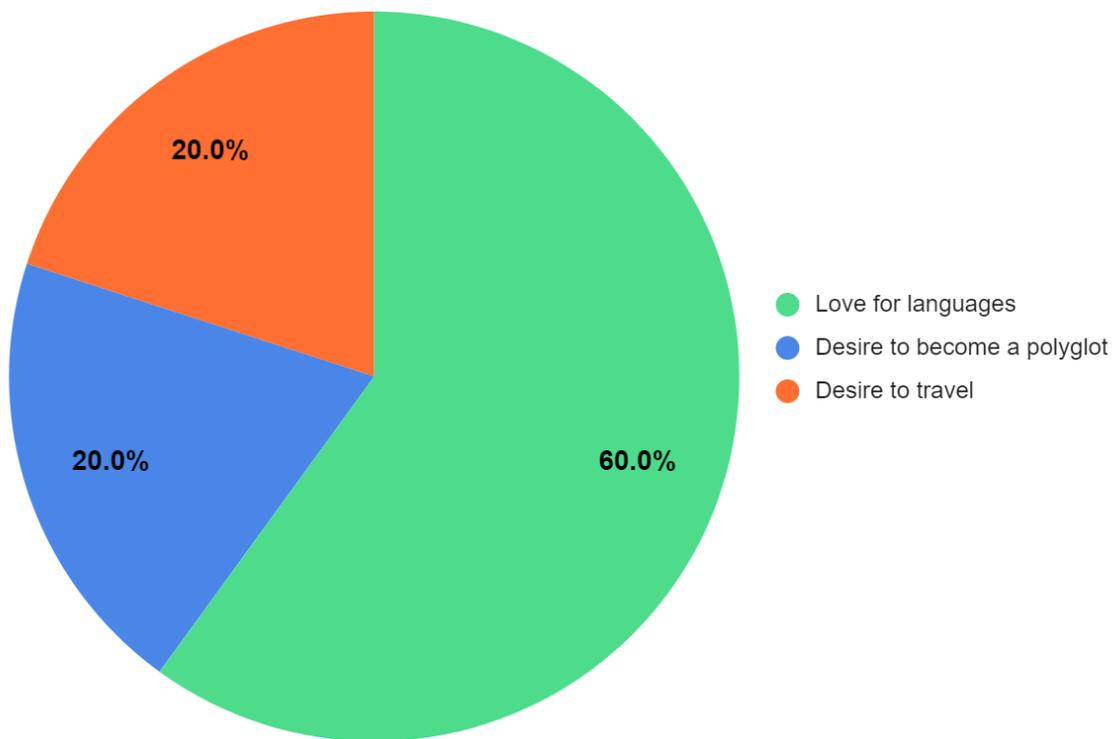


Fig. 3. Pie chart illustrating non-external factors that influenced male students to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level.

The above pie chart (fig. 3) depicts the non-external factors that inspired male students to pursue foreign languages. A total of 10 of the 14 male participants provided a response to this question. A whopping majority of 6 males or 60% stated that they were inspired by their love for languages. The two other factors indicated by two male participants each or 20% were the desires to become a polyglot and to travel.

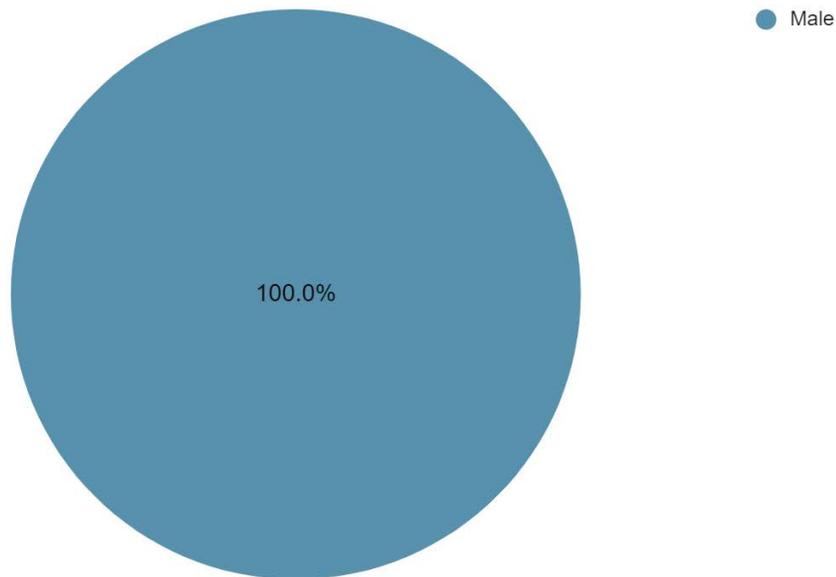


Fig. 4. Pie chart demonstrating the percentage of male students who were eager to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level.

The above pie chart (fig. 4) illustrates that all 14 male participants or 100% indicated that they were eager to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level.

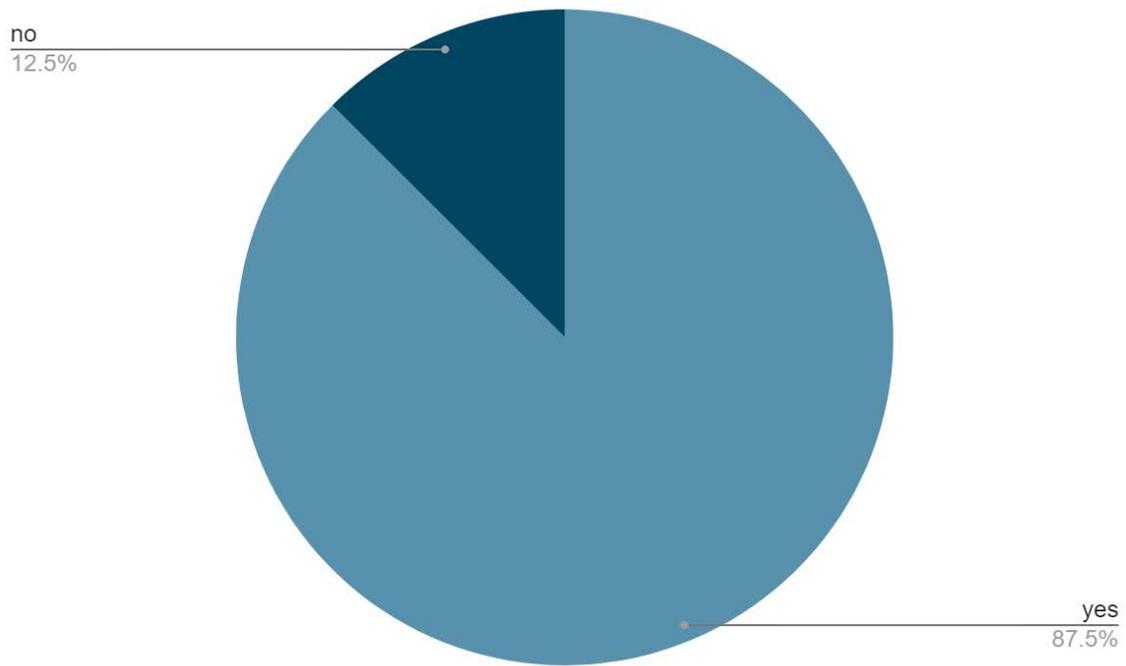


Fig. 5. Pie chart demonstrating the percentage of female students who were eager to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level.

The chart above (fig. 5) shows that 14 out of 16 female participants or 87.5% indicated that they were eager to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level, while a minority of 2 female students or 12.5% said that they were not eager.

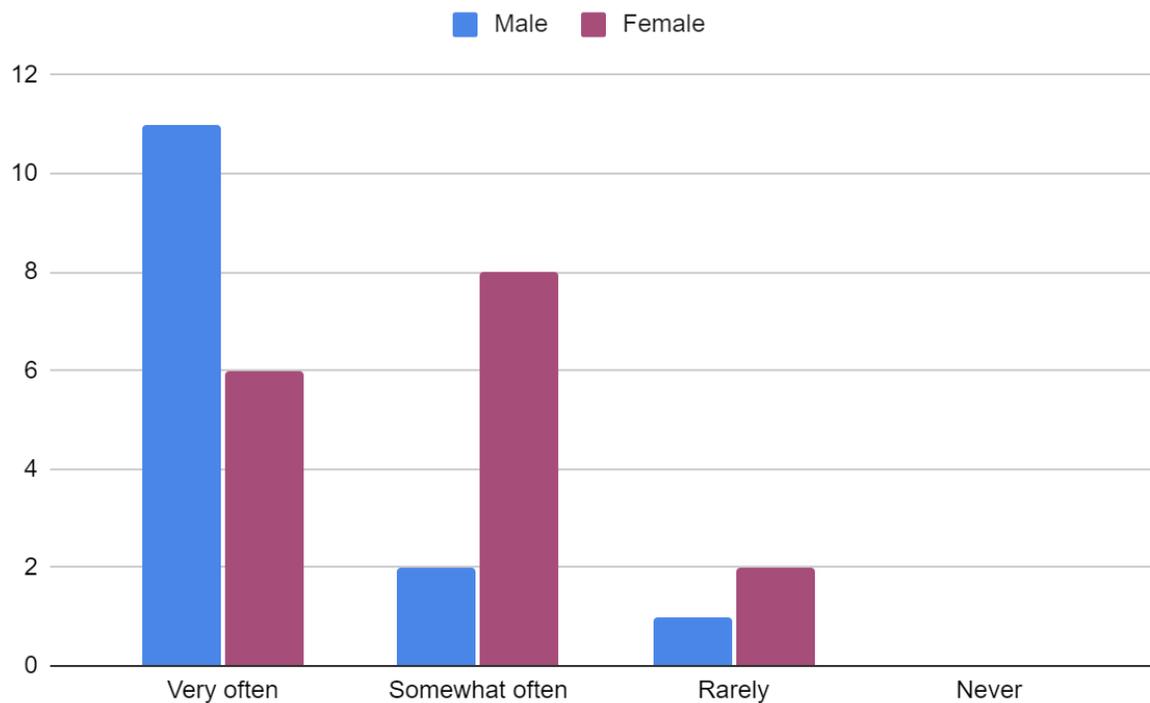


Fig. 6. Bar graph depicting how frequently male and female students willingly participate in foreign languages classes.

The bar graph above (fig. 6) shows that 11 male participants or 78.6% and 6 females or 37.5% indicated that they willingly participate in their foreign languages classes very often. Two males or 14.3% and 8 females or 50% indicated that they willingly participate in class somewhat often. One male or 7.14% and 2 females or 12.5% revealed that they rarely do so and 0 male or female participants said that they never willingly participate. The graph shows that the majority of male students indicated that they willingly participate in class very often whereas the majority of females selected “somewhat often”.

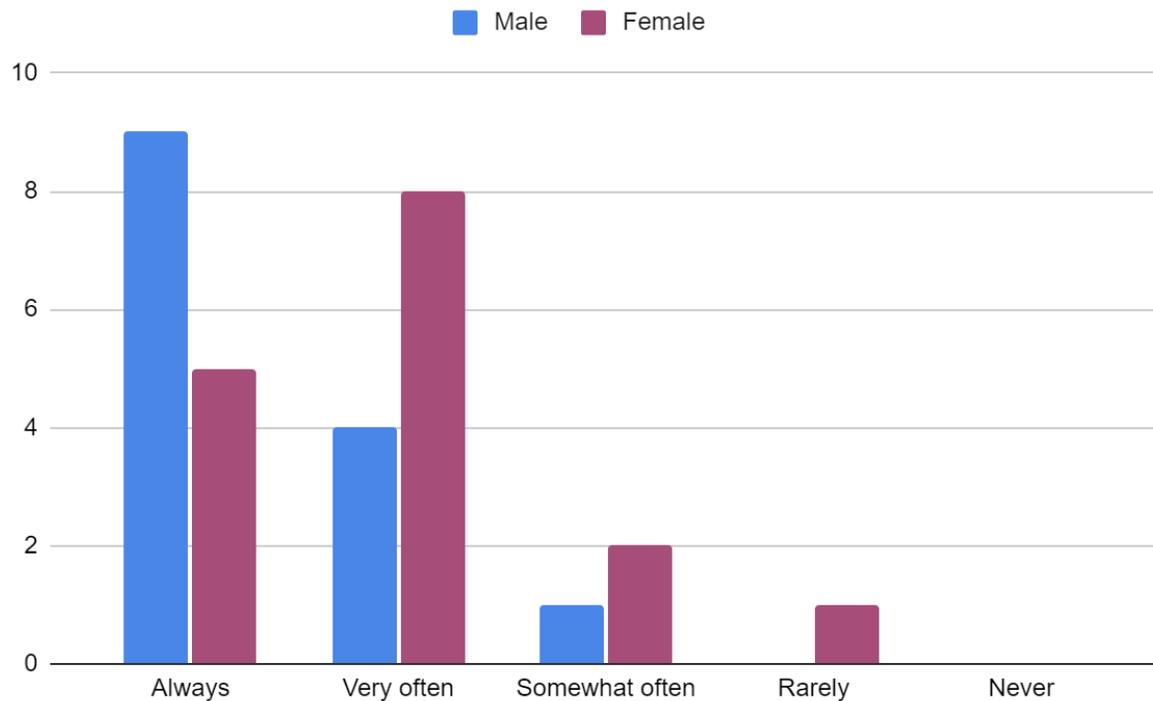


Fig. 7. Bar graph depicting attendance of male and female students in foreign languages classes.

The bar graph above (fig. 7) shows that 9 male participants or 64.3% and 5 females or 31.25% indicated that they always attend their classes. Four male participants or 28.6% and 8 females or 50% revealed that they attend their classes very often. One male or 7.14% and 2 females or 12.5% indicated that they attend somewhat often. No males and 1 female or 6.25% selected “rarely” and no participants indicated that they never attend classes. The majority of male students stated that they always attend classes while the majority of female students stated that they do so very often.

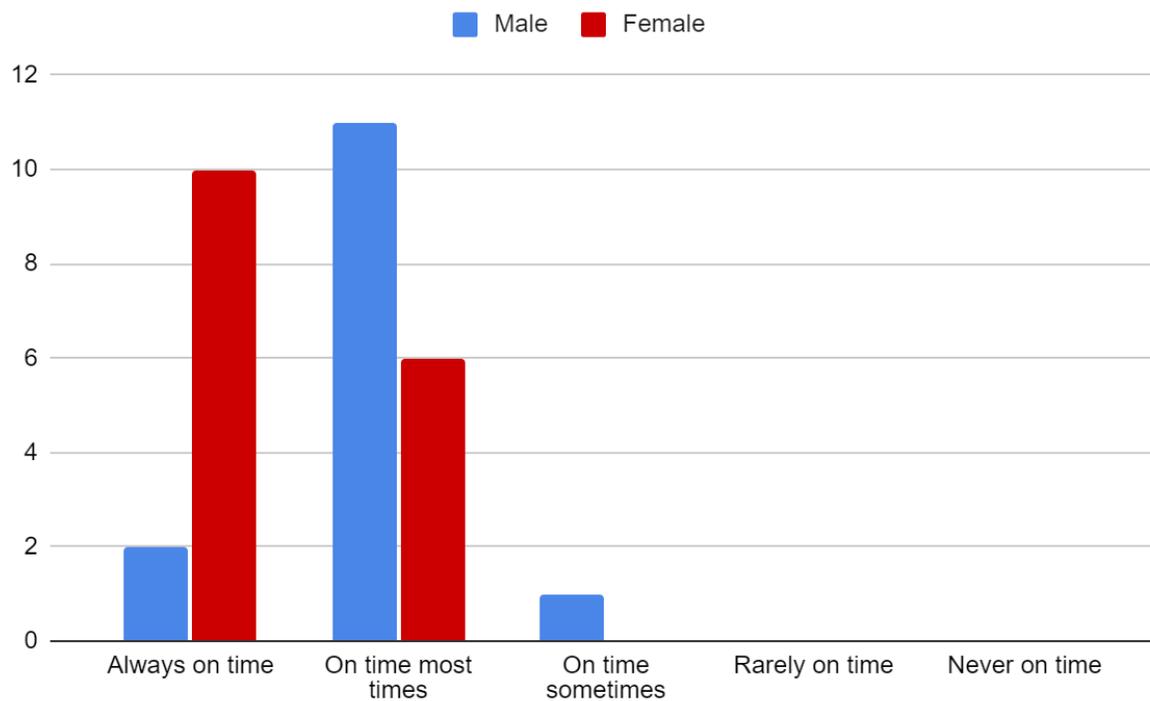


Fig. 8. Bar graph representing punctuality of male and female foreign languages students.

The graph above (fig. 8) shows that 2 male students or 14.3% and 10 female students or 62.5% indicated that they are always on time for classes. Eleven male participants or 78.6% and 6 females or 37.5% stated that they are on time most times. One male student or 7.1% of the male participants stated that he is on time sometimes while no female students shared this response. No male or female students stated that they are rarely or never on time. The majority of male participants indicated that they are on time most times whereas the majority of female participants indicated that they are always on time.

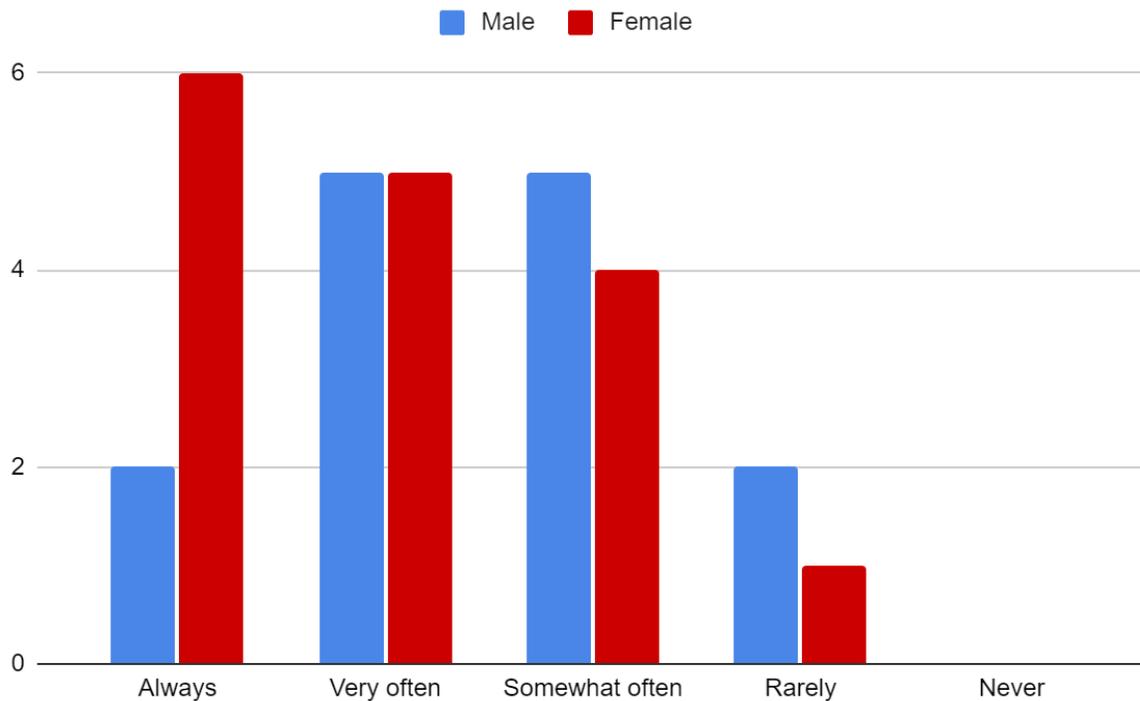


Fig. 9. Bar graph indicating how often male and female foreign languages students prepare homework.

The above chart (fig. 9) shows that 2 male students or 14.3% and 6 female students or 37.5% reported that they always prepare homework for their foreign languages classes. Five male students or 35.7% and 5 female students or 31.25% stated that they prepare their homework very often. Five males or 35.7% and 4 females or 25% selected “somewhat often” while 2 males or 14.3% and 1 female or 6.25% selected “rarely”. No male or female participants selected “never”. The majority of male students reported that they prepare homework very often or somewhat often while the majority of female students reported that they always prepare homework before class.

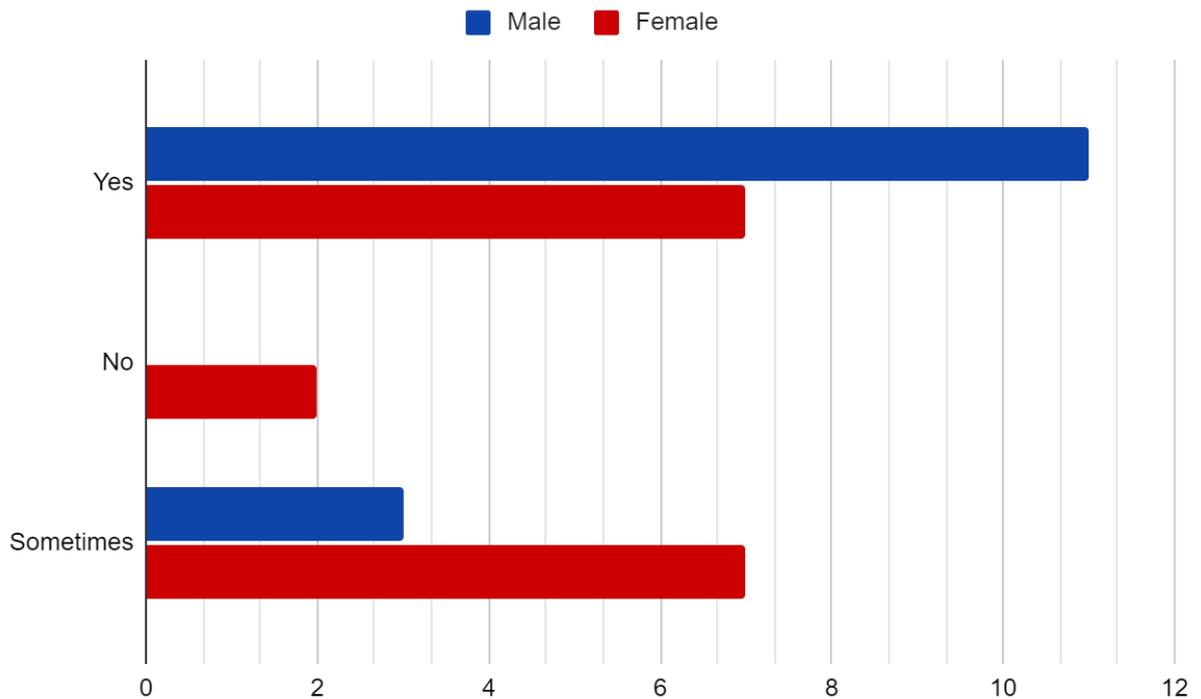


Fig. 10. Bar chart illustrating responses of male and female foreign languages students to whether or not they eagerly anticipate feedback on test performance.

The above chart (fig. 10) illustrates that the majority of male participants with a total of 11 students or 78.6% selected “yes”, indicating that they eagerly anticipate feedback on test performance from their foreign languages professors. Meanwhile, the majority of female participants selected “yes” or “sometimes”, totaling 7 students each or 43.75%. Three male students or 21.4% indicated that they sometimes eagerly anticipate feedback. Two female students or 12.5% selected “no”, indicating that they do not eagerly anticipate feedback on test performance while no male students selected “no”.

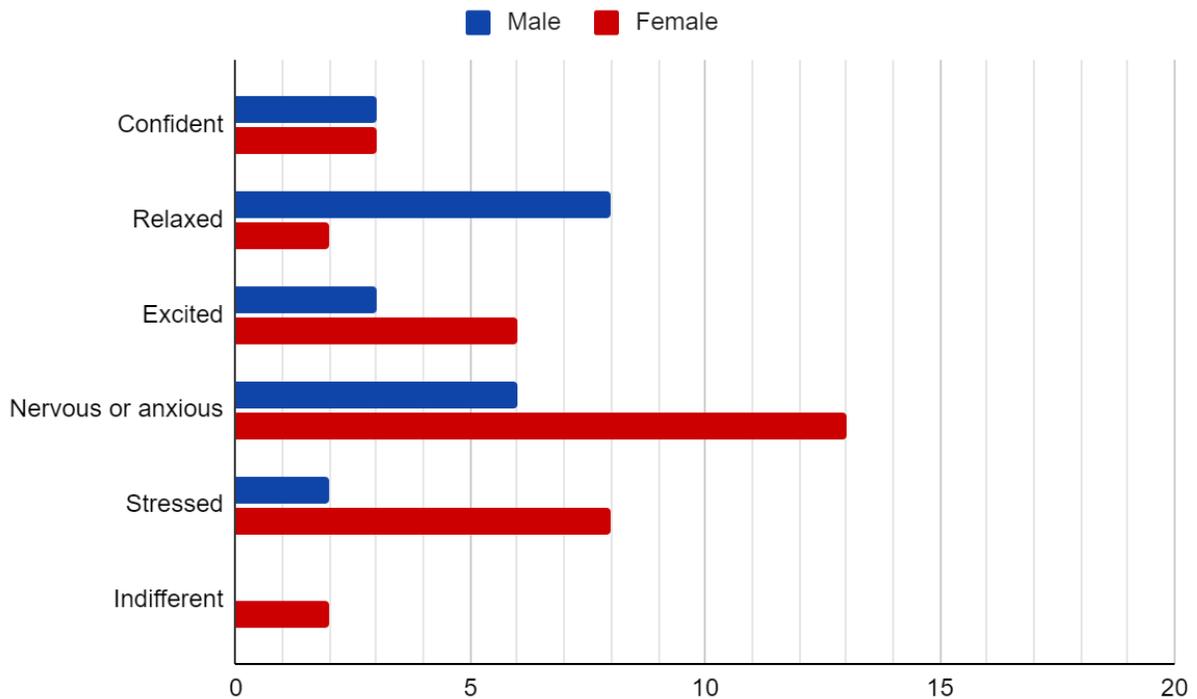


Fig. 11. Bar chart illustrating emotions felt by male and female foreign languages students before most of their language tests.

The bar chart above (fig. 11) reflects that 3 male students or 21.4% and 3 female students or 18.75% feel confident before the majority of their language tests. A total of 8 male students or 57.1% and 2 female students or 12.5% stated that they feel relaxed. Three male participants or 21.4% and 6 females or 37.5% indicated that they feel excited before their tests. Furthermore, 6 males or 42.9% and 13 females or 81.25% stated that they feel nervous or anxious. Two male students or 14.3% in comparison to 8 females or 50% reported that they feel stressed before the majority of language tests. Two female students or 12.5% and 0 males stated that they feel indifferent. The chart illustrates that the majority of male students feel relaxed before most of their language tests while the vast majority of female students feel nervous or anxious.

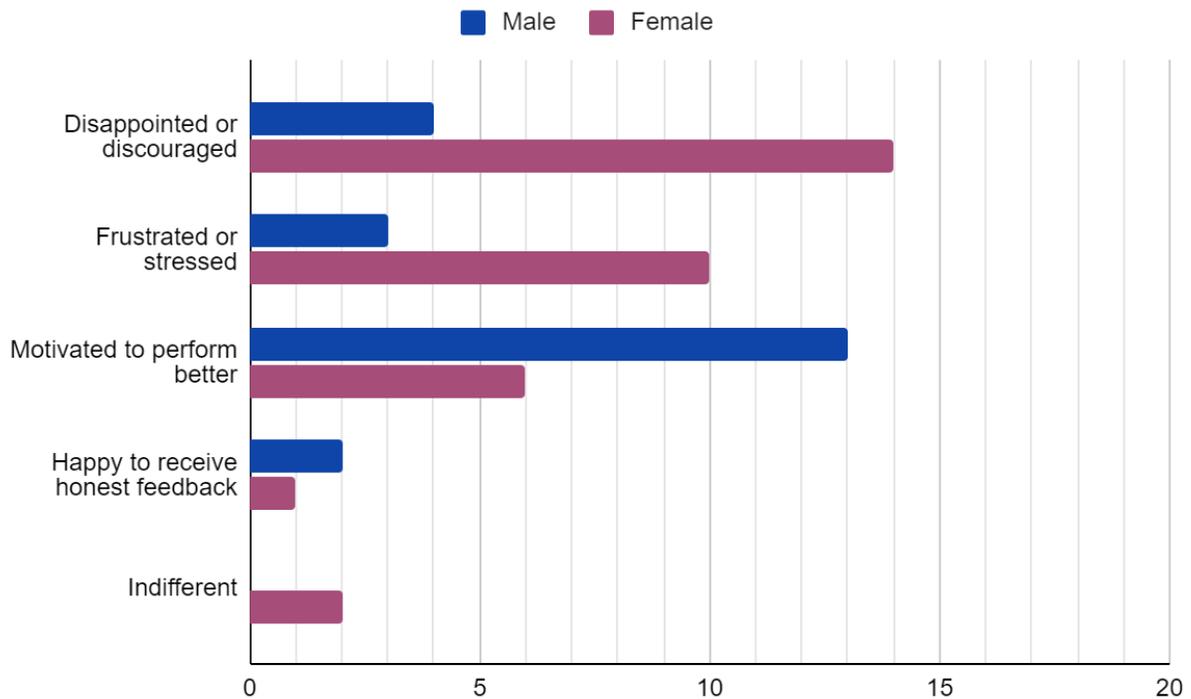


Fig. 12. Bar chart reflecting emotions experienced by foreign languages students upon receiving an unsatisfactory score on a language test.

The bar chart above (fig. 12) illustrates that 4 male students or 28.5% indicated that they feel disappointed or discouraged when they receive an unsatisfactory score on a language test whereas 14 female students or 87.5% reported that they feel this way. Similarly, only 3 males or 21.4% indicated that they feel frustrated or stressed while 10 females or 62.5% feel this way. Almost the total number of male participants, i.e. 13 males or 92.9%, reported that they feel motivated to perform better next time whereas only 6 females or 37.5% indicated this. Two male students or 14.3% stated that they feel happy to receive honest feedback after getting an unsatisfactory test score while 1 female or 6.25% shared this sentiment. Lastly, two females or 12.5% and 0 males feel indifferent towards this situation. The chart reflects that the vast majority

of male participants feel motivated to perform better in the next test while the majority of female participants feel discouraged or disappointed.

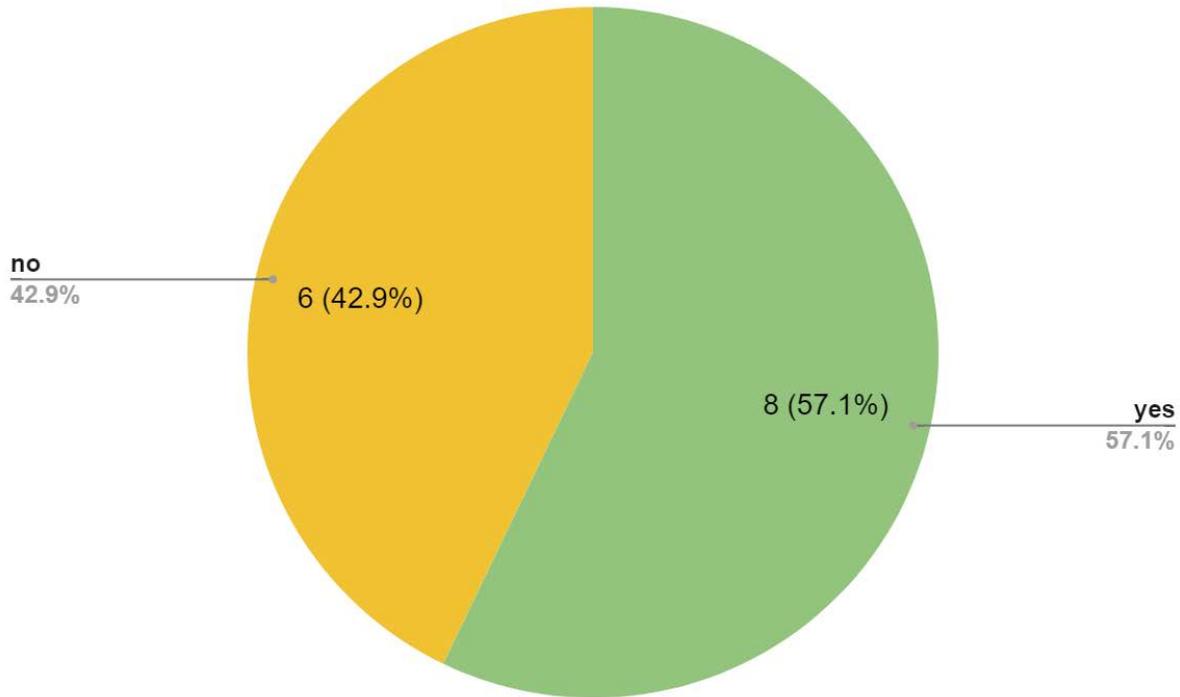


Fig. 13. Pie chart illustrating the number and percentage of male foreign languages students who experience language anxiety.

The pie chart above (fig. 13) reflects that a total of 8 out of 14 male participants or 57.1% stated that they experience language anxiety when having to speak in a foreign language during class or in an oral examination. The remaining 6 male participants or 42.9% indicated that they do not experience language anxiety in those situations. As we can see, the slim majority of male students reported that they experience language anxiety.

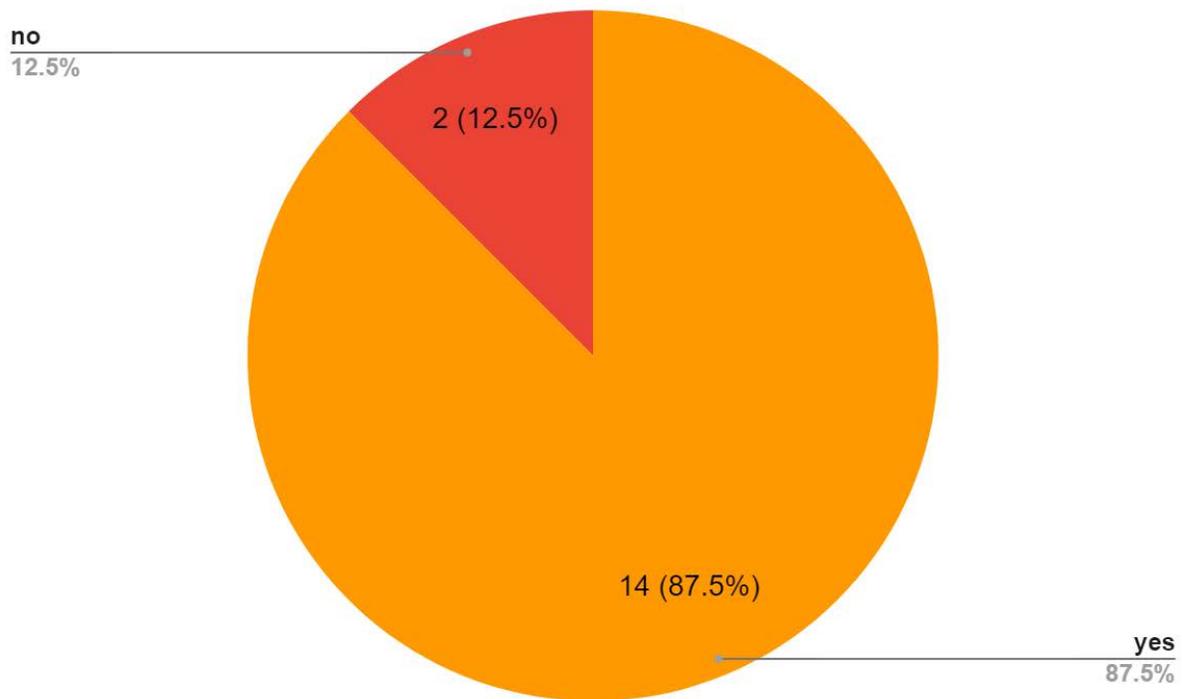


Fig. 14. Pie chart illustrating the number and percentage of female foreign languages students who experience language anxiety.

The pie chart above (fig. 14) demonstrates that a total of 14 out of 16 female participants or 87.5% stated that they experience language anxiety when having to speak in a foreign language during class or in an oral examination. The remaining 2 female participants or 12.5% indicated that they do not experience language anxiety in those situations. Evidently, the vast majority of female participants claim to experience language anxiety.

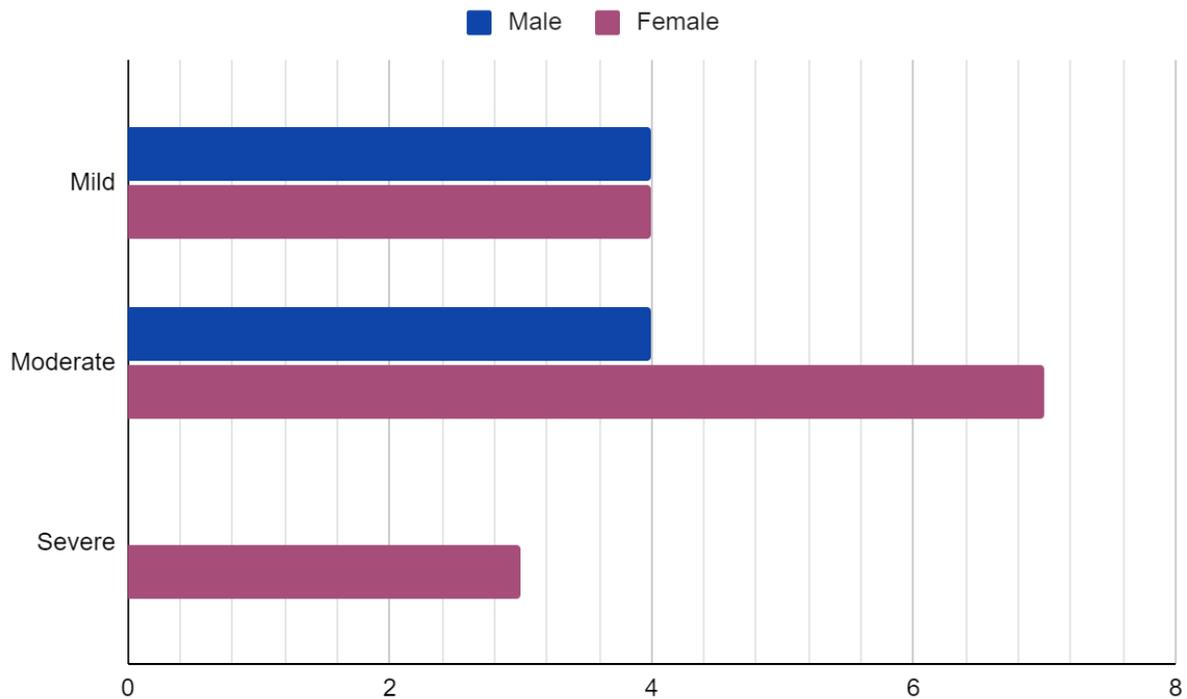


Fig. 15. Bar chart reflecting levels of language anxiety experienced by male and female foreign languages students.

The bar chart above (fig. 15) demonstrates that 4 out of 8 male participants (50%) who indicated that they experience language anxiety stated that it is mild. Similarly, 4 out of 14 female participants (28.6%) agreed that they experience a mild level of language anxiety. The remaining 4 males or 50% revealed that they experience a moderate level of language anxiety while 7 females or 50% agreed. A total of 3 female students or 21.4% and 0 males classified their language anxiety as severe. The chart illustrates that equal numbers of the male participants experience mild and moderate language anxiety, while the vast majority of female participants classified their anxiety as moderate.

## **Analysis of e-mail interview findings**

Two level III foreign languages students were selected as the e-mail interviewees. Both participants recorded their responses on a document with five open-ended questions. The findings are presented using thematic analysis.

### *Foreign languages: A female domain?*

The first question asked, “Do you believe that foreign languages as an academic field is better suited towards females rather than males? Why or why not?” The male interviewee responded, “I wouldn't say that it's better suited towards females or males. I think that language is a universal tool that any human being can make proper use of if he or she invests the time to do so.”

Similarly, the female interviewee answered, “No. I wouldn't say ‘better suited’ because each individual has strengths and weaknesses and there is also nothing in the nature of foreign languages or their structure that make them more female-oriented. However, I have noticed that more females than males tend to select foreign languages as a career choice, and also excel at it.” These responses indicate that neither interviewee held the belief that girls are naturally better at languages than boys, but rather viewed languages as a field that anyone can learn if they put in the effort, or as a field that some have an aptitude for regardless of their sex.

### *Factors influencing students to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level*

When asked, “Did you feel encouraged by others to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level?”, the male interviewee stated, “Yes. I went to an all male school and we were all very competitive as men to outperform each other in our academics. It wasn't anything personal at all, rather a way in which we were able to stay motivated. I had a few teachers as well who stuck

with me and believed in my capabilities and so, I remained in the field.” In agreement with the male participant, the female interviewee wrote, “Yes. My family, friends and teachers greatly encouraged me to pursue languages at university.” It is apparent that the female interviewee was encouraged by more people than the male interviewee, however both were encouraged by their past teachers.

### *The gender gap in the foreign languages domain*

The third question on the interview protocol asked, “Why do you think males are vastly outnumbered by females in the foreign languages domain?” The male interviewee responded, “Given that foreign languages do not require a high level of physical effort and energy exertion like male dominant fields, it is perceived as a field for women, but that's not the case at all.” He further shared that “Another reason why males are outnumbered in the field is due to personal choice. I witnessed with my own eyes well over 1000 male students over a 7 year period in my secondary school study Spanish and French up to Form 5, and despite performing very well, they privileged the science subjects over Languages. On the other side of the spectrum, I have seen a lot of females actively pick to pursue Languages. It's a really complex thing as to why males are outnumbered in the field.” Sharing a somewhat similar opinion, the female interviewee stated, “I believe that in the Caribbean, especially in Trinidad and Tobago, there is still this mentality that languages are “girly” subjects while maths and science and even business are “masculine” subjects. Therefore, I think that parents would more quickly push their sons to pursue these academic fields rather than languages. There is also the stereotype that males are not good at languages and I think that this may sometimes cause male students considering pursuing languages as a career to rethink their choice.” While the interviewees approached this question

differently, they both highlighted the stereotype that languages are perceived as a “girly” field, which influences students’ decisions in choosing an academic field to pursue.

The fourth question asked, “Do you think more males should academically pursue foreign languages? Why or why not?” to which the male participant replied, “Yes.” He elaborated, “It would be nice to see some gender diversity in the field because it would help to break down the stereotype that it is solely reserved for women. I also believe this to be true when it comes to fields that are dominated by men. If women appear in larger numbers in those fields, in the same way, the stereotypes would slowly be eroded.” The female participant concurred, stating, “Definitely. The domain of foreign languages is so vast and diverse that you can choose almost any language and pair it with almost any other field of study eg. management and French, criminology and Portuguese etc. because foreign languages are flexible like that. Additionally, knowing how to speak another language opens up many, many professional opportunities. I would love to see more males studying foreign languages.” The interviewees offered different perspectives on this question. Although they unanimously agreed that more males should study languages, the male student stated that this would be an efficient way to eliminate the stereotype of languages being a girls’ domain while the female student believed that learning foreign languages can be a gateway to accessing many professional opportunities for both men and women.

#### *Attitudes of male and female foreign languages students*

The fifth and final question asked, “Have you noticed any general differences between male and female foreign languages students? Please specify.” The male interviewee responded, “Yes I

have. From my point of view and personal experience, I have found that males tend to maintain higher levels of charisma and motivation in certain aspects of language learning like conversation, for example, than females. I have also found that males worry less about being judged by others than females do when it comes to practising the language.” Offering a different opinion, the female interviewee highlighted, “Work ethic. From my personal experience, I can say that the few male friends I have who pursue languages at a tertiary level have an incredible work ethic and they regularly try very hard to improve in their target language(s), whether this involves immersion programmes, independent practice with native speakers or participating in creative activities such as theatre, dance etc. The females I know who study foreign languages at a tertiary level are also very hardworking but their dedication to the language(s) is somewhat less “visible” in the sense that it may seem like they do not practise as intensely as the males do but they still perform very well in the language(s).” Both interviewees observed differences in male and female foreign languages students, highlighting the strengths of the male students. The male interviewee believed that males are generally more charismatic, motivated and confident. Additionally, the female interviewee observed that the male students possess an excellent work ethic and that the female students do not seem to be quite as dedicated to their target language(s).

In the following chapter, the main findings from the questionnaires and e-mail interviews will be interpreted as well as compared to the findings from the literature review.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Discussion

In this chapter, the most significant findings from the questionnaires and e-mail interviews will be interpreted and discussed in detail while drawing comparisons to the findings from the literature review. This chapter will also provide the answers to the two previously stated research questions.

#### *Factors influencing male and female students to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level*

With respect to the questionnaire results, the first observation made was based on the external factors that influenced male and female students to pursue foreign languages at university. The researcher found that the majority of both male and female participants were encouraged by their past teachers to pursue foreign languages (see fig. 1). Thus, past teachers were the most popular external factor influencing students to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level. Both interviewees also shared that they were encouraged by their past teachers. It was also discovered that more female students than male students were not encouraged by anyone to pursue foreign languages, suggesting that the male students were generally more encouraged to study foreign languages than their female counterparts.

The following question based on the non-external factors that influenced male and female students to pursue foreign languages showed that the vast majority of both male and female participants were motivated by their love for languages (see fig. 2 and fig. 3). These findings thereby prove that the main factors influencing male and female students to pursue foreign

languages at the tertiary level were encouragement from the students' past teachers as well as the students' love for languages, thus answering the first research question.

*Differences between male and female students' attitudes towards learning foreign languages*

The results chapter showed that every male participant of the questionnaire indicated that he was eager to pursue foreign languages at university (see fig. 4) while the majority of female participants concurred (see fig. 5). Thus, it can be generalized that the male students were more eager than the female students to study foreign languages at university. This finding contradicts that of Figueredo's which infers that females are more likely to study languages than males due to differences in their psychological make-up. Furthermore, concerning the level of participation in class, it was observed that the male students participated in class more frequently than their female counterparts. Most of the male participants indicated that they willingly participate in language classes very often while the majority of female participants indicated that they do so somewhat often (see fig. 6). This may be a result of the higher confidence levels among male students, which supports Siebert's finding that male students possess greater linguistic self-confidence (28).

Furthermore, the questionnaire results show that the male foreign languages students have better attendance than their female counterparts. The majority of males stated that they always attend their language classes whereas the majority of females stated that they attend very often (see fig. 7). With regards to punctuality, it was discovered that the female students are more punctual to class than the male students. Most of the female participants indicated that they are always on time to their language classes while most of the male participants reported that they are on time

most times (see fig. 8). The participants were also inquired about their preparation of homework for language classes. It was observed that the female students tend to be more prepared for language classes than the male students, as slightly more females than males prepare their homework (see fig. 9). The majority of the male participants indicated that they prepare homework very often or somewhat often whereas most females stated that they always prepare homework for class. However, the researcher found that more males than females eagerly anticipate feedback on their language test performance. In fact, almost the total number of male participants indicated that they are usually eager to receive feedback (see fig. 10).

Figueredo's research recognized that males and females have different psychologies which therefore influence their emotions differently. When asked about the emotions that they feel before language exams, almost every female student indicated that she usually feels nervous or anxious (see fig. 11). A significant number of females also stated that they feel stressed before their language tests. This sharply contrasts with the male responses which reveal that the most common feeling among male students was relaxed. It should also be noted that a larger percentage of male students than female students stated that they feel confident before a test. Based on these findings, the researcher can deduce that female students tend to feel nervous and stressed before language tests while male students are generally more relaxed and confident.

The female students also experienced more negative emotions than their male counterparts upon receiving an unsatisfactory score on a language test. Almost every female participant reported that she feels disappointed or discouraged after receiving an unsatisfactory score, meanwhile only a few males felt this way (see fig. 12). In fact, the majority of male students revealed that

they usually feel motivated to perform better in the next exam. The researcher also observed that a significantly higher number of female students than male students reported that they feel stressed or frustrated. According to these findings, it can be concluded that the male foreign languages students maintain a more positive outlook than female students with regards to test performance.

In relation to language anxiety, the questionnaire results revealed that a significantly higher percentage of female students experience language anxiety in comparison to male students (see fig. 13 and fig. 14). While just over half of the male participants indicated that they experience some degree of language anxiety, almost every female participant indicated so. More specifically, the male students who stated that they experience language anxiety reported that it was either mild or moderate. Meanwhile, most of the female participants stated that their anxiety level was moderate but some indicated that it was severe (see fig. 15). Therefore, it can be concluded that female students generally experience higher levels of language anxiety than male students. This finding correlates to that of Gerencheal's which found that the overall classroom anxiety amongst females was significantly higher than amongst the males (11).

With respect to the e-mail interview responses, it was discovered that neither of the interviewees believed that girls are "better suited" towards languages, thereby disproving the stereotype that girls are better at languages than boys. Their responses also contradict Nikitina and Furuoka's survey finding that male and female students almost unanimously agreed with the statement that women are better than men at learning foreign languages (5). The interviewees also shared their opinions on why males are significantly outnumbered by females in the foreign languages field.

They explained that the perception of languages as a feminine domain results in male students choosing to pursue the academic fields deemed as masculine. Moreover, the interviewees agreed that more males should enter the foreign languages field as this would facilitate the elimination of the stigma around languages as well as it would benefit both men and women in their professional careers.

They also shared their opinions on the differences in the attitudes of male and female foreign languages students, both suggesting that the male students generally have a more positive attitude towards learning languages. They collectively expressed that the male students tend to be more confident, motivated and charismatic, along with having a better work ethic than the female students. The female interviewee believed that the male students seem to be more dedicated to mastering their target language(s). These open-ended responses provided additional insight and information to the findings from the questionnaire on the attitudes of male and female foreign languages students.

Next, the key findings will be summarized and the limitations to the study, recommendations for future research and the overall significance of the study will be addressed.

## CONCLUSION

This study sought to determine the leading factors that encourage male and female students to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level as well as to identify the major differences in the attitudes of male and female foreign languages students towards language apprenticeship. The researcher used a mixed method approach of formulating a questionnaire and e-mail interviews to gather qualitative and quantitative data. The participants for the questionnaire comprised a total of thirty foreign languages students at all three levels in the DMLL and the e-mail interviews were conducted with two level III foreign languages students, one male and one female.

One of the main findings of the study indicated that the majority of male and female students were encouraged by their past teachers and their love for languages to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level, thus answering the first research question. However, the second research question yielded a more layered response. Contradictory to the popular belief that girls are better language learners than boys, as confirmed by Nikitina and Furuoka's finding (5), this study revealed that male students possessed more positive attitudes and behaviours than female students towards language learning. The questionnaire results found that most of the male students were relaxed and confident in their approach to examinations, while the majority of female students felt nervous, anxious and stressed. Most of the male students also felt motivated to perform better after receiving an unsatisfactory test score, whereas almost all the female students felt disappointed or discouraged in the same situation. The questionnaire results also revealed that the male foreign languages students had a better class attendance record, participated more frequently in class and experienced significantly less language anxiety than

their female counterparts. On the other hand, the female students were more punctual to class and prepared their homework more frequently than the males. Furthermore, the e-mail interview responses supported the belief that male students are more motivated and confident, along with the perception that they are more charismatic and have a stronger work ethic than their female counterparts.

At the beginning of the study, the researcher intended to find answers as to why males were vastly outnumbered by females in the DMLL, expecting the findings to indicate that female students were more encouraged than male students to pursue foreign languages and that the female students had more positive attitudes towards language learning. However, the study contrastingly found that it was the male students who were more encouraged to pursue foreign languages and who also possessed more positive attitudes towards language learning than their female counterparts.

### *Limitations*

The researcher found it difficult to locate an adequate number of literature sources that pertained to the attitudes of male and female foreign languages students, as most studies dealt with male versus female test performance in the field. This may have led to a limited scope of research on the topic. Another potential weakness of the study was using a relatively small sample size for the questionnaires. This was due to the researcher's inability to physically distribute the questionnaires which could have resulted in a larger number of participants, thereby making the generalizations more accurate.

### *Recommendations*

In order to fill the research gap in the attitudes of male and female foreign languages students towards language apprenticeship, more studies on this topic must be conducted. It is also recommended that researchers use relatively large sample sizes so that the results would be as accurate as possible. In addition, future research should investigate the perceptions of foreign language learning among males and females so that studies could widen their scope on the psychology of male and female language learners.

### *Significance of study*

Overall, this study has contributed to the existing scholarship based on the gender gap in foreign language apprenticeship, while introducing the perspective of male and female attitudes towards language learning which was lacking in previous research.

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## APPENDIX A

### E-mail interview transcripts

Transcript of e-mail interview with male interviewee:

1. Do you believe that foreign languages as an academic field is better suited towards females rather than males? Why or why not?

I wouldn't say that it's better suited towards females or males. I think that language is a universal tool that any human being can make proper use of if he or she invests the time to do so.

2. Did you feel encouraged by others to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level?

Yes. I went to an all male school and we were all very competitive as men to outperform each other in our academics. It wasn't anything personal at all, rather a way in which we were able to stay motivated. I had a few teachers as well who stuck with me and believed in my capabilities and so, I remained in the field.

3. Why do you think males are vastly outnumbered by females in the foreign languages domain?

Given that Foreign Languages do not require a high level of physical effort and energy exertion like male dominant fields, it is perceived as a field for women, but that's not the case at all.

Another reason why males are outnumbered in the field is due to personal choice. I witnessed with my own eyes well over 1000 males students over a 7 year period in my

Secondary School study Spanish and French up to Form 5, and despite performing very well, they privileged the science subjects over Languages. On the other side of the spectrum, I have seen a lot of females actively pick to pursue Languages. It's a really complex thing as to why males are outnumbered in the field.

4. Do you think more males should academically pursue foreign languages? Why or why not?

Yes. It would be nice to see some gender diversity in the field because it would help to break down the stereotypes that it is solely reserved for women. I also believe this to be true when it comes to fields that are dominated by men. If women appear in larger numbers in those fields, in the same way, the stereotypes would slowly be eroded.

5. Have you noticed any general differences between male and female foreign languages students? Please specify.

Yes I have. From my point of view and personal experience, I have found that males tend to maintain higher levels of charisma and motivation in certain aspects of language learning like conversation for example, than females. I have also found that males worry less about being judged by others than females do when it comes to practising the language.

Transcript of e-mail interview with female interviewee:

1. Do you believe that foreign languages as an academic field is better suited towards females rather than males? Why or why not?

No. I wouldn't say "better suited" because each individual has strengths and weaknesses and there is also nothing in the nature of foreign languages or their structure that make them more female-oriented. However, I have noticed that more females than males tend to select Foreign Languages as a career choice, and also excel at it.

2. Did you feel encouraged by others to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level?

Yes. My family, friends and teachers greatly encouraged me to pursue languages at university.

3. Why do **you** think males are vastly outnumbered by females in the foreign languages domain?

I believe that in the Caribbean, especially in Trinidad and Tobago, there is still this mentality that languages are "girly" subjects while maths and science and even business are "masculine" subjects. Therefore, I think that parents would more quickly push their sons to pursue these academic fields rather than languages. There is also the stereotype that males are not good at languages and I think that this may sometimes cause male students considering pursuing languages as a career to rethink their choice.

4. Do you think more males should academically pursue foreign languages? Why or why not?

Definitely. The domain of Foreign Languages is so vast and diverse that you can choose almost any language and pair it with almost any other field of study eg. management and French, criminology and Portuguese etc. because Foreign Languages are flexible like that. Additionally, knowing how to speak another language opens up many, many professional opportunities. I would love to see more males studying Foreign Languages.

5. Have you noticed any general differences between male and female foreign languages students? Please specify.

Work ethic. From my personal experience, I can say that the few male friends I have who pursue languages at a tertiary level have an incredible work ethic and they regularly try very hard to improve in their target language(s), whether this involves immersion programmes, independent practice with native speakers, participating in creative activities such as theatre, dance etc. The females I know who study foreign languages at a tertiary level are also very hardworking but their dedication to the language(s) is somewhat less “visible” in the sense that it may seem like they do not practise as intensely as the males do but they still perform very well in the language(s).

## APPENDIX B

### Questionnaire sample

1. Kindly select your gender:
  - Male
  - Female
  
2. Select your area(s) of study: (Select all that apply.)
  - Spanish
  - French
  - Portuguese
  
3. Select all relevant external factors that encouraged you to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level: (Select all that apply.)
  - Family members
  - Past teachers
  - Peers/friends
  - I was not encouraged by anyone to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level.
  
4. Kindly state any other factor not listed in question #3 that may have influenced or inspired you to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level.
  
5. Were you eager to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level?

- Yes
- No

6. How often do you willingly participate in your foreign languages classes?

- Very often
- Somewhat often
- Rarely
- Never

7. How often do you attend your foreign languages classes?

- Always
- Very often
- Somewhat often
- Rarely
- Never

8. How punctual are you to your foreign languages classes?

- Always on time
- On time most times
- Sometimes on time
- Rarely on time
- Never on time

9. How often do you prepare homework for class?

- Always
- Very often
- Somewhat often
- Rarely
- Never

10. Do you eagerly anticipate feedback from your foreign languages professors with regards to test performance?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

11. How do you feel before **most** of your language tests? Select all that may apply.

- Confident
- Relaxed
- Excited
- Anxious/nervous
- Stressed
- Indifferent

12. How do you feel after receiving an unsatisfactory score on a language test? Select all that may apply.

- Disappointed/ discouraged
- Frustrated/stressed
- Motivated to perform better next time
- Happy to receive honest feedback
- Indifferent

13. Would you say that you experience 'language anxiety' when having to speak in a foreign language during class or in an oral examination?

- Yes
- No

14. If you selected 'yes' for the previous question, select the level of language anxiety that you usually experience:

- Mild
- Moderate
- Severe

**End of questionnaire**

