

The gender enrolment gap in foreign language education revisited: Contemporary issues in a Ghanaian higher education institution

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the intersection between gender and foreign language education with specific reference to subject choice, motivation, and achievement. The study was carried out at a Ghanaian public university, amongst students of the following Bachelor of Arts foreign language programmes: Arabic, Chinese, French, Kiswahili, Russian and Spanish. Through a thematic analysis of transcribed focus group discussions and desk-research of relevant administrative documents, the authors inquire why a gender enrolment gap exists in the foreign language programmes and if indeed, certain languages are perceived as more masculine than others. The findings of the study confirm the existence of a gender gap in foreign language education. Participants also considered some languages such as Spanish and French as more feminine. Regarding their motivation, participants noted both integrative and instrumental factors that motivated them to study the foreign language. Additionally, the study found no statistical significance between the performance of females and males. However, males performed slightly better than females in Arabic, French, Kiswahili and Russian whereas females performed better in Spanish and Chinese.

1. Introduction

Studies have long shown the existence of gender¹ segregation in career choices (Shafina, 2020). According to the 2017 Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum (WEF), “although gender does not statistically affect the overall diversity of educational fields studied, there are notable imbalances in the specific fields of study in which men and women tend to specialize” (Schwab et al., 2017, p. 31). The WEF report notes that there are typically more women than men in the areas of education, health, and welfare whereas the reverse can be observed in the fields of engineering, manufacturing and construction as well as information, communication and technology (Schwab et al., 2017).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, another area where the discrepancy between the gender distributions of enrolled students has been

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¹ We consider ‘sex’ in this study as a biological category based primarily on reproductive potential and ‘gender’ as a social category, and the latter is fluid. Gender identity is therefore a social construction, fluid and context-specific. However, although gendered performances are available to everyone, society sometimes puts constraints on who can perform which personae with impunity (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013).

observed is in the field of foreign language education (Sunderland, 2000). This gender enrolment gap has been researched from both sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic perspectives—in relation to issues such as subject choice, achievement, foreign language (FL) enjoyment and neuro-physiological sex differences (see Dewaele et al., 2016; Eklund, 2019; Field, 2000; Pearson, 2017). Other studies focus on motivation (Kissau, 2006; Kissau et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2002), FL learning styles strategies (Goh & Foong, 1997; Young & Oxford, 1997), beliefs (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2007) and masculinities (Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Chaffee et al., 2020; Pearson, 2017).

Although other general (pedagogic) factors will be examined in this study, our focus is on a sociolinguistic exploration of the intersection between gender and foreign language education (FLE). By ‘sociolinguistic exploration’, we refer to how gender (as a social variable) and other social factors like job opportunities, prestige etc. interact with learners’ decision to study a FL(s) and the learning experience itself (linguistic variable).

This study therefore contributes not only to research on gender and language education, but also to the field of language and gender as a whole within the ‘identities’ paradigm. It does so with insights from not just an under-studied context (Ghana), but also from six foreign languages (something which is uncommon in the literature on gender and FLE). This is useful in uncovering how gender may be linked to the hierarchies (created based on level of difficulty, job prospects, prestige etc.) across the various FLs.

2. What has FL learning got to do with gender?

At a first glance, the Ghanaian society might seem to have a less stringent focus on gender polarization. For example, the Ewe ethnic group of Ghana use unisex traditional names, a striking situation which seems to downplay the importance of differentiating between the masculine and the feminine. Additionally, Prewitt-Freilino et al.’s (2011) empirical examination of differences in gender equality between 111 countries with gendered, natural gender, and genderless language systems shows that Ghana (which they classify as a genderless language country) has a lower Global Gender Gap Index than several other ‘developed countries’ such as Germany, France, Russia, Spain, Switzerland and the United States.

However, a number of studies show that gender polarization in Ghana is as prevalent as can be found in several other countries around the globe (Adinkrah, 2012; Diabah, 2020; Lomotey, 2017). Diabah, for instance, affirms the existence of ideals of Ghanaian masculinities by noting that “a man who does not conform to these masculine ideals or who engages in feminine ideals risks being ridiculed” (2020, p. 265). Certainly, previous qualitative as well as quantitative studies provide mixed findings but quite a number of them also demonstrate a connection between masculinities and boys’/men’s motivation, and performance in (certain) FLs.

Nikitina & Furuoka, 2007 carried out a study among students learning Russian as a foreign language at a Malaysian university. Participants answered questionnaires which examined whether male and female students’ beliefs about language learning were significantly different. The results of their study were in tandem with previous research which found no prominent gender-related differences in students’ attitudes towards language learning. Female learners however attributed more importance to using audio materials and CD-recordings as support aids in the process of language study. Moreover, the male student participants were more concerned about having a good accent and speaking correctly. For this reason, they appeared to be slightly less confident language learners in comparison with their female peers. Among other things, they also emerged as being shyer to speak Russian in front of others. However, these differences were not statistically significant. They conclude that gender-related differences in beliefs about language learning were minimal among their participants.

Using a questionnaire on motivation administered to 228 students followed by interviews, Williams et al. (2002) investigated the motivation of secondary school students in the South-west of England to learn FLs. Their study revealed a higher level of intrinsic motivation among girls than boys. The boys were also strikingly more motivated to learn German than French. These findings were further investigated using interviews. Both girls and boys explained that girls tended to put effort into work that seemed tedious, whereas boys needed to enjoy it. Many of the participants also believed that it was not ‘cool’ for boys to like languages, and even if they did, it was not appropriate to show it. Interestingly, “the desire to be ‘cool’ and therefore disengaged from academic effort” (Carr & Pauwels, 2006, p. 25) has been discussed by several scholars (see also Kissau et al., 2010). In addition, other relevant observations about behavioral tendencies have been made in more recent studies. For instance, differences in male and female nervous systems and their response to stressors have been pointed out. Pearson (2017) notes that “the female autonomic system is often more influenced by the parasympathetic nervous system – the “rest and digest” mode – while the male autonomic system is more influenced by the sympathetic nervous system – the “fight or flight” mode” (p. 4)—a tendency which probably makes males abandon FL learning which is perceived as difficult.

Through the usage of questionnaire data that were analysed using Independent *t*-tests, Dewaele et al.’s (2016) study focused on gender differences in Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) among 1736 FL learners (1287 females, 449 males) from around the world. The findings of their research showed that female participants had significantly more fun in the FL class and were prouder of their FL performance than their male peers.

Perhaps more interesting for our study is Chaffee et al.’s (2020) investigation that focused on how masculinity threat and gender ideology suppress men’s language learning motivation. They examined threatened masculinity among men who hold traditional gender ideologies to gender-stereotypical occupational choices, and how threats to masculinity can lead men to distance themselves from femininity. 1673 introductory psychology students from a Canadian university participated in the study. Their study confirmed that 1672 of the undergraduate students stereotyped language learning as feminine. By applying a masculinity threat manipulation, they also investigated 182 men’s disinterest in studying FLs. Their findings showed that compared to men whose masculinity was affirmed or who reported less traditional masculinity beliefs, men with marked traditional masculinity ideologies were less interested in learning a foreign language and had less positive attitudes towards foreign languages. This could be interpreted as a result of masculinity threat. They concluded that due to traditional masculine gender roles, some men may avoid female-dominated university

subjects such as foreign language learning. This echoes Carr and Pauwels' (2006) observation that "the foreign language classroom turns out to be a particularly challenging site for boys in terms of identity constitution and performance" (p. 34).

Indeed, research conducted by Carr and Pauwels (2006) and Williams et al. (2002) suggest that men's disinterest in studying certain languages is due to social perceptions of appropriate behavior for men. Moreover, some studies revealed that the gender difference in the motivation to study French is due to society's perception of French as an effeminate language (Kissau, 2006; Williams et al., 2002). These studies also suggest that males and females have opposing preferences with respect to the choice of FLs to be studied. However, Kissau et al. (2010) point out less strong gender stereotypes towards Spanish than French. Their study, which was conducted through the administration of questionnaires and interviews, concluded that, Spanish did not suffer "the same irrational linguistic stereotype as Kissau (2006) discovered for French" (Kissau et al., 2010, p. 714). Rather, they found that participants associated Spanish with Spanish-speaking musicians and neighborhood friends. In addition, while the participants in Kissau's (2006) study perceived French as a language that led to female jobs (e.g., being a French teacher or a travel agent), Kissau et al. (2010) found that their participants believed that knowing Spanish provided advantages for careers in medicine, law, and engineering, which are considered masculine. On his part, in his study on FL learning motivation among post-secondary school students in Ghana, Fandoh (2013) found no considerable difference between female and male participants' motivation to learn French. They both had positive attitudes towards the French language, and they were highly motivated both integratively and instrumentally.

In sum, different accounts have been provided to explain the gender enrolment gap in FLE and an inconsistency in the findings has been observed. Additionally, whereas most of the studies have been carried out in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Continental Europe and Asia, other places such as Africa, Islamic countries, Eastern Europe, South America, and China remain under-researched—a concern raised by Sunderland (2000) more than two decades ago and reiterated by Chan (2021) in recent times.

As mentioned earlier, the literature review carried out by the authors for the current research suggests that in Ghana specifically, studies on the interplay between gender and FLE are still deficient (but see Fandoh, 2013; Lomotey, 2021). Furthermore, research that engage in comparative analysis of attitudes towards different FLs (six in our case) are scarce.

Additionally, noticeably missing from the above list of studies is the mention of any quantitative research conducted on the difference between male and female performance in FL learning. Our survey of the literature discovered a scarcity of studies that focus specifically on differences in male and female performance. Of the gender-related studies that exist, the focus has rather been in relation to specific skills (e.g., reading, writing) or other constructs such as foreign language anxiety and foreign language enjoyment (e.g., Gerencheal, 2016; Rezazadeh & Tavakoli, 2009). Many of this research do not focus specifically on whether a particular gender is hardwired to perform better than the other in FL learning. However, a few exceptions exist. An example is the study of Zoghi et al. (2013). Using descriptive analysis, pair *t*-test, and the effect size Zoghi et al. (2013) examined the effect of gender on English as a foreign language (EFL) achievement test among 100 (50 males and 50 females) young adults in Iran Language Institute. They found that EFL learning is to some extent related to gender, and it had a significant effect on the achievement test. Their female participants outperformed their male participants. However, their sample size was small, and the study was conducted on only one FL (English).

Perhaps, the lacunae in quantitative studies can be explained by Field's (2000) assertion that "it is almost futile to present statistics to demonstrate that girls out perform boys in MFLs" because "many research findings read as truisms to teachers of MFLs, who need no reminder that girls' results are better than those of boys" (p. 125). Consequently, research on the gender gap in FLE largely center on affective, motivational and behavioral factors. Yet, there is a need for empirical evidence on performance because as Field (2000) warns, "an acceptance at face value of stereotypical traits [in gender differences] is extremely dangerous, as it leads to limiting expectations and the internationalization of myths, which in turn can lead to an acceptance of these myths as the norm" (p. 126).

In response to these needs, the current study attempts to address this gap by examining from a sociolinguistic perspective, how gender affects learners' desire to study (particular) FLs and their classroom achievement. Specifically, the authors explore the following questions in six FL programmes in an African university context:

- 1) What are the gender patterns of subject choice and enrolment in FLE?
- 2) What are the sociolinguistic reasons for (non-) selection of (particular) FLs?
- 3) Is there differential achievement in FL learning by gender?

The authors consider the examination of this intersection important because the study of FLs has significant sociocultural, economic, and personal benefits for both males and females. As Ivanenko (2018) notes, the current shifting of geographical and cultural boundaries has led to an increasing awareness of the need to educate people to become "citizens of the world" (p. 494). In line with this growing awareness of the importance of global citizenship education, Ghana's new pre-tertiary education curriculum which was implemented since 2019 lists as one of its objectives "to encourage learners to learn a Ghanaian language and a modern foreign language as part of becoming a global citizen" (Ministry of Education [Republic of Ghana], 2018, p. 27)—thus, raising FL learning to global citizenship competences standards. These points highlight the need to promote the appreciation of FL learning among people of all genders and to adequately prepare the Ghanaian youth to compete and succeed in our globalized world.

2.1. Relationships between gender, motivation, and FL classroom performance

With respect to the potential relations among the variables in this study, a body of research has explored relationships between them. For instance, Carr and Pauwels (2006) study suggests that gender plays a significant role in shaping the sociolinguistic reasons that affect motivation for FLE. These sociolinguistic reasons include social perceptions of male-appropriate behavior (masculinities), gender-based perspectives on FL learning (level of difficulty, relevance to future career opportunities etc.), beliefs about the biological

argument that males are less able FL learners, and attitudes towards the foreign language situation. Gardner (1985) notes that FL learners' motivation is impacted by attitudes toward the FL, their learning orientation and attitudes toward the learning situation. These 'anxieties' can in turn result in Foreign Language Anxiety and affect FL performance (Park & Lee, 2005). A study by Dewaele and Dewaele (2017) found that Foreign Language Anxiety, perceived competence, self-confidence, and Foreign Language Enjoyment are interconnected. Park and Lee (2005) discovered a negative relationship between anxiety, self-confidence and classroom (oral) performance. Furthermore, beliefs about the biological hypotheses also affect academic confidence.

Taken together, in light of the theoretical underpinnings of the constructs discussed above and the reviewed empirical evidence, we hypothesized that there exists an intricate connection between gender, motivation, and FL classroom performance. The hypothesized model as well as the path directions are illustrated in Fig. 1. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were formulated.

Hypothesis 1. (H1): Masculinities and other societal beliefs negatively predict motivation for FLE.

Hypothesis 2. (H2): Male learners' beliefs about FLE can influence their self-confidence, self-rating and ultimately, their classroom performance—and vice versa.

Hypothesis 3. (H3): Gender-related lack of motivation for FLE affects the gender gap in FLE. Conversely, observations about the gender gap in FLE reinforce societal beliefs about FLE.

3. Method

3.1. Data collection and materials

Focus group discussions were conducted among students enrolled in six FL programmes at a Ghanaian public university. This method was considered advantageous because the interaction between participants and the discussion of conflicting views enables researchers to gather rich data even with few resources (Stewart et al., 2007). The researchers conducted one focus group discussion for each language (see Table 1 below) and tape-recorded them. The discussions were held in English because it is Ghana's official language, and it was the preferred language of the participants. However, since Ghana is a multilingual country with frequent usage of code-switching, participants sometimes used indigenous languages for socio-pragmatic purposes such as emphasis and while quoting others. Each session lasted approximately 1 h.

Additionally, through the desk-analysis of relevant administrative documents, the authors investigated issues such as quantitative gender differences in FL enrolment, the influence of University policies on the gender enrolment gap and differential gender achievement. Documents reviewed included reports on student enrolment, admission requirements as well as students' oral examination results for the first semester of the 2019/2020 academic year. Only the oral examination score was used for this study. This option was chosen after carefully considering the law of diminishing returns (Kvale, 2008). In other words, due to time and resource constraints, it is more profitable to have fewer (but sufficient) data in a study as this enables the dedication of more time to their analysis. Gathering extensive data could result in a decrease in the amount of "valuable knowledge" (Kvale, 2008, p. 44) obtained from the analysis.

The oral examination involves a 15-min (approximately) interaction between individual candidates and two instructors. During the semester students have oral lessons which consist of speaking, writing, reading, and listening drills. The oral examination itself consisted of similar activities under examination conditions. Oral examination scores were considered an appropriate avenue for testing the relationship between gender and FL performance because oral activities include aspects of all the other components of a FL course (grammar, composition, listening, speaking, reading, critical thinking etc.); and thus give an all-inclusive presentation of students' performance. The oral examination is assessed using the general speaking proficiency scale developed by Hughes (2003) consisting of five parts (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and comprehension). The 2019/2020 academic year was chosen because exams after that period were mostly online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This was unusual and results from that period would most probably not reflect the typical performance of students.

3.2. Participants

Forty-five undergraduate students of Arabic, Chinese, French, Kiswahili, Russian and Spanish, at the Modern Languages and French Departments of the research setting participated in the focus group discussions. Drawing on Kissau et al.,'s 2010 study, questions were asked based on the three central elements of Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model of L2 motivation (i.e., motivation [motivational intensity, desire, and attitudes toward the FL]; language learning orientation [integrative and instrumental orientations²]; and attitudes toward the learning situation [teacher and course evaluations]). Certainly, there has been an extensive trajectory of research relating to motivation in language learning. The literature on motivation indicates three main phases namely, the social-psychological period, the situated-cognitive period and the process-oriented period. In addition to these, more recent theories have emerged building on Gardner's (1985) seminal work which is "considered the primary instigator and source of research" (Omar & Harwood, 2021, p. 82)

² According to Gardner (1985), integratively oriented learners study FLs because they desire to improve their understanding of the L2 culture and community. However, instrumentally oriented students are motivated by practical reasons, such as job prospects. See also Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory.

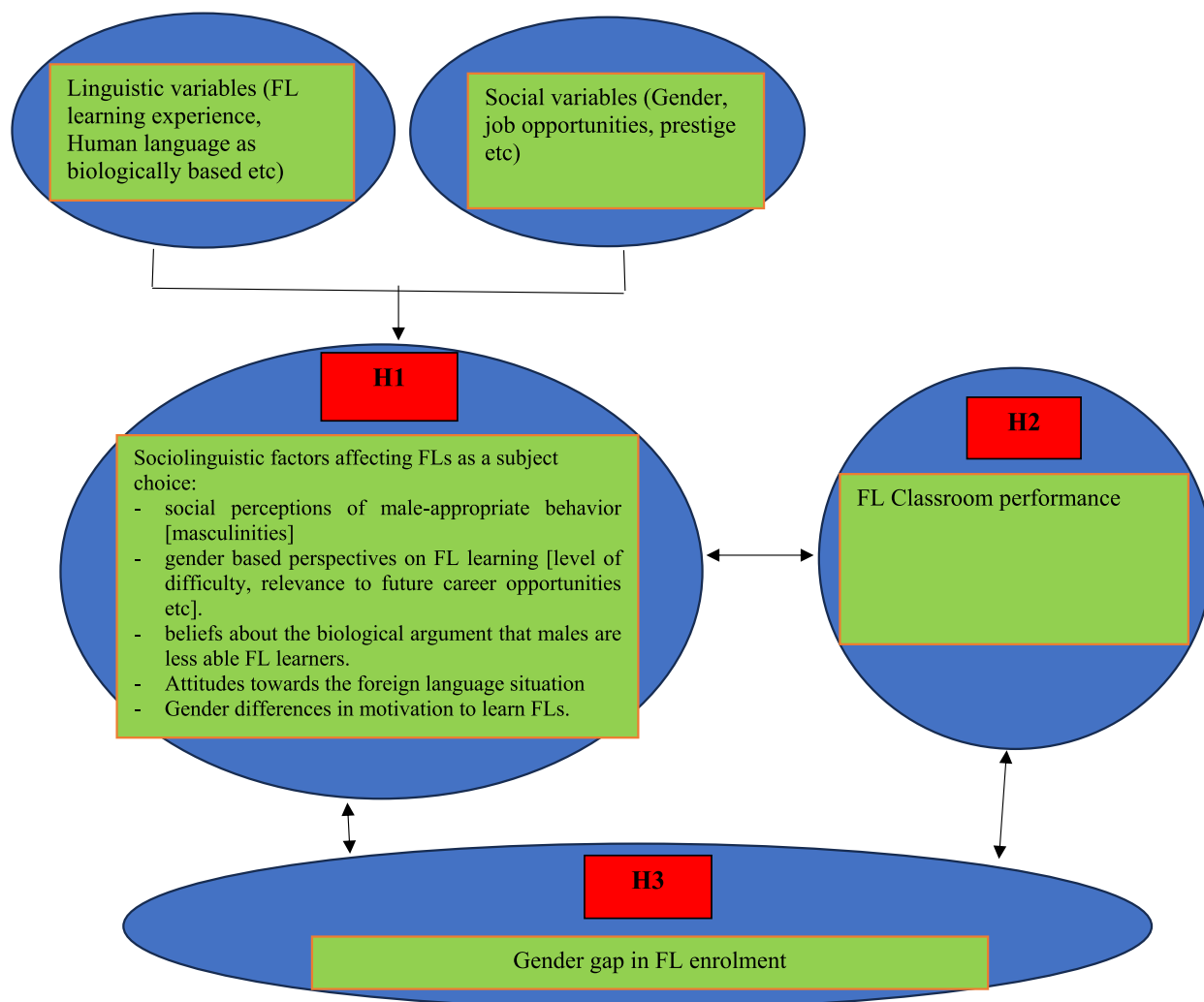


Fig. 1. The intricate connection between gender, motivation, and FL classroom performance.

Table 1
Number and gender distribution of focus group participants^a.

Language	No. of students	Male	Female
Arabic	8	4	4
Spanish	8	4	4
French	8	4	4
Kiswahili	6	4	2
Russian	8	4	4
Chinese	7	4	3
	45	24	21

^a See [Appendix B](#) for further details.

in the L2 motivation field. We considered [Gardner's \(1985\)](#) model as more appropriate for the current research because this framework focuses on language learners' attitudes and feelings towards the L2 communities and the second language itself. It therefore covers better all the intricate factors that are of interest to this study (e.g., attitudes, beliefs, self-efficacy, classroom anxiety and social perceptions of the FL etc.). Additionally, the researchers elicited participants' perceptions on the relevance of gender identity to the learning of (certain) FLs. The questions were posed to the entire group, and all participants were given an opportunity to answer each question.

Regarding the selection of participants, the authors had quotas for each language. Each focus group consisted of 8 participants (one male and one female for each level) except for Kiswahili and Chinese, as some invited participants did not turn up for the discussion.

Despite the differences in the number of enrolled students for each language category, the research population was neither over nor under-represented. The number of participants selected for each focus group was considered appropriate as confirmed by various studies which suggest that focus group discussions should consist of ideally six to eight participants (Hennink, 2014; Krueger & Casey, 2000). We also took into account the need to avoid the loss of “valuable knowledge” by gathering “fewer, but longer, more intensive interviews” (Kvale, 2008, p. 44). Furthermore, participants’ shared characteristics (i.e., course mates with similar FL learning experiences) and their level of acquaintance were the decisive factors in determining the number of participants for the focus groups. These factors are important in building rapport and making the sharing of information most likely and productive among participants (Hennink, 2014).

All 45 participants were invited for the current study through purposive sampling with the assistance of the respective Teaching Assistant³ for each FL. Participants filled university-approved consent forms. These provided general information about the research (purpose, duration, description of the procedures/methods, etc.), benefits/risks of the study, confidentiality, compensation, their freedom to withdraw from the study, and contact details for additional information. The focus group discussions were conducted in person. Participants were assured of anonymity and, thus, all original names and personal details were removed from the data to ensure complete de-identification of participants, the research setting, as well as other people and locations referred to in the study. Information about the participants is summarized in Table 1 (Further details are provided in Appendix B).

3.3. Data analysis

The focus group data was analysed qualitatively. The data was coded through a thematic analysis of emergent themes. This included (a) pre-coding (going through the transcript several times to get a general sense, while noting down initial ideas), (b) generating initial codes (giving specific labels to the interesting ideas in the data that address our research questions e.g. motivation for choice of subject, attitudes towards FL learning, experiences), (c) collating the data relevant to each code or label, (d) clustering units of meanings to form themes (see similar approaches by Maguire and Delahunt (2017)). Materials collected for the desk-research were analysed using a quantitative method (SPSS output descriptive and non-parametric tests). This method was considered appropriate because the focus of the study was to compare the scores between females and males, not to predict whether the change in the independent variables will cause changes in the examination scores.

4. Findings

This section is organised into three main subsections, each addressing our research questions namely, (1) gender patterns of enrolment and subject choice (2) reasons for the (non) selection of (particular) FLs (with a focus on sociocultural factors, situational peculiarities and biological hypotheses) and (3) differential achievement by gender (for individual as well as across languages).

4.1. Gender patterns of enrolment and subject choice

The analysis of the student data for the past four academic years showed that the number of enrolled female students was higher than that of males for all the six languages (with a grand total of 3399 males and 7728 females). However, the gender difference in enrolment was more pronounced for Spanish and French which had four times more females than males (total of 403 males vs. 1706 females and 628 males vs. 2544 females, respectively). The difference between the number of males and females was less pronounced in the case of Arabic, Chinese, Kiswahili and Russian. Although the females were still in the majority, the male population for these languages constituted about 40% of the total number of enrolled students. The details are provided in Table 2 below:

Using the 2019/2020 academic year as an example, the figures here contrast with the gender enrolment statistics at the university level, where males were slightly more than females (51.3% and 48.7% respectively. See Appendix A).

4.2. Reasons for (non-) selection of (particular) FLs

This section presents the findings on participants’ reasons for selecting (or otherwise) particular FLs. The factors mentioned by participants included socio-cultural expectations surrounding FLE, perceptions about the influence of gender on enrolment in FLE, and perceptions about gender stereotypes and the biological hypotheses in FLE.

Quotations were encoded and extracted using themes categorised under (i) sociocultural factors, (ii) situational peculiarities, and (iii) what has been termed the “biological hypotheses” (i.e., the relation of possible gender differences in language learning to biological factors such as relevant neuro-physiological sex differences [see Klann-Delius, 1981]).

4.2.1. Participants’ motivation and experiences regarding sociocultural expectations on FLE

Participants were asked to describe the reaction of their parents, relatives, friends etc. to their Foreign Language Programme (FLP). During the analysis of the data, issues such as (1) Relevance of gender identity to the learning of (certain) FLs and (2) differences in behavior, attitudes, values etc. according to gender were explored. Both male and female participants confirmed that reactions from

³ The Teaching Assistants served as Research Assistants who helped with the recruitment.

Table 2
Student enrolment by gender.

	2021–2022			2020–2021			2019–2020			2018–2019		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
Arabic	100	149	249	148	259	407	80	132	212	52	97	149
Spanish	156	644	800	186	763	949	103	553	656	83	455	538
French	316	1386	1702	373	1661	2034	343	1424	1767	271	1090	1361
Kiswahili	101	237	338	226	375	601	111	244	355	81	158	239
Russian	197	269	466	353	401	754	231	312	543	222	264	486
Chinese	344	617	961	414	720	1134	374	617	991	295	465	760

M = Male; F = Female; T = Total.

their parents, relatives and friends to their FLP were generally negative, especially at the beginning. These reactions, however, changed with time as their relations grew to appreciate the importance of the FLs they were studying. In some cases, participants explained that they had mixed reactions. The data showed that although parents, other family relations as well as friends/acquaintances showed a lack of appreciation for these FLPs, reactions from peers were worse as compared to those of relatives. The extracts below illustrate this further.

- **Speaker 4: Female, L200, Arabic:** my mom, she was like, what is this, what are you going to use it for? And then my dad was like, it doesn't matter ... but for my peers, they're like, "you didn't drop the Arabic, why?" ... They were so discouraging ... "what are you using it for?" ... And they give you so many questions and they make you feel like it's a demeaning course you are doing.
- **Speaker 2: Male, L300, Chinese:** my parents actually don't have any issue with it. My father actually pushed me to study it because he does business with them ... so that I'll be able to communicate with his business partners and stuff. And with the reaction of my friends, when I tell them I am studying Chinese, most of them ask "what are you going to use it for?" ... They always criticize you studying Chinese.

As illustrated in the examples below, reasons given for this lack of appreciations for FLE included the preference for other courses (especially STEM subjects), failure to understand the importance of FLE, the perception that FLs are difficult to learn and the belief that FLE leads to limited career options and lower income job prospects (a concern mostly emphasized by male participants).

- **Speaker 6: Male, L400, Spanish:** I chose Spanish because I wanted to do languages but then, I had a lot of, umm, should I say backlash, criticism? ... most of my cousins and family members are doing science courses: Engineering and other stuff, and they ask me "what are you going to do at the university?" and then, I'm like "Spanish, Political Science". There's-there's a way they look at you.
- **Speaker 5, Male, L100, Arabic:** at church and a lady called me ... and she was like, "what! What are you going to use Arabic for?". And she brought out a phone and she typed "how do we say, I'm hungry in Arabic?"; and the phone played it to her, and she was like, "so why are you learning the Arabic? Because with the technologies that we have, you can just punch it ... It is no more relevant as it used to be" ... And I think that day I got discouraged and even decided to drop the course. But from my personal experience I think I have to make an amendment to it.

A common question that therefore constantly recurred across all the languages was "what are you going to use this language for?" In some cases, the data showed that the negative reactions were not against FLE in general, but sometimes a preference for other languages other than the one being studied:

- **Speaker 3: Female, L100, Spanish:** my dad was not quite happy because in his mind, he thinks French is the best FL to study, so I remember he and my mum nearly had an argument because I was going to learn Spanish ... my brothers too were like, "what are you going to use the Spanish for?". And it's like that question, it gets to you.

Some participants however confirmed receiving positive reactions, while others reported receiving mixed reactions:

- **Speaker 5: Male, L200, Spanish:** ... I wanted to do Spanish because I *loved*⁴ Spanish and my mum too said that some of her friends in the States have been telling her that these big companies, most of them speak Spanish. So... she backs me up.
- **Speaker 4, Male, L300, Kiswahili:** For me, the reaction has been pleasant. ... Yeah. For me, my dad doesn't care ... So long as it makes you happy. That's what he cares about. And for my friends who get to know ... they are interested. So, I think the experience has been a pleasant one.
- **Speaker 9, Male, L200, Arabic:** my parents were very happy, they also encouraged me, they always encouraged me to study the language seriously.

⁴ Emphasis added.

Participants were also asked how they feel about peoples' reactions when they mention their FLPs. Whereas many of them confirmed experiencing feelings of discouragement, hurt and disappointment, they noted that they had learnt to disregard the negative comments and to feel proud about their FLPs. Some of the examples above speak to this; but the following illustrate these points further:

- **Speaker 5: Male, L200, Spanish:** I really don't mind what other people say. I just feel encouraged about the positive ones; [for the] negative ones, I try to tell them what I get from it.
- **Speaker 7: Male, L400, Chinese:** I don't make their opinions about the actions I'm taking affect me ... but then because you don't have much knowledge about what Chinese can offer me or what the FL can help me achieve in the future you start speaking ill of it. ... even with my parents I don't find it as a problem. My reaction to them is always a neutral one. If you don't agree with it, I don't force you to agree with it but then I am okay with what I am doing so importantly that is okay for me not necessarily what you think about it.

Some few participants however felt otherwise:

- **Speaker 8, Male, L300, Arabic:** I'm someone who sometimes pretends people's words don't hurt me, but it really does. So, people's reactions sometimes make me cry as to what I'm really pursuing. ... And funny enough, most of my friends are not even doing my course so it looks like I'm so out of the box, so I get so many demeaning statements regarding what I'm doing. Especially when you're like, you are from X University and they are like "X University. Wow! What course?". And what course, you know, political science and Arabic. Like, it really gets to me. Like, it really does.

Several quotations showed that the perceived difficulty of the FLPs was a major reason for the discouragement from relations, but these rather made the participants feel smart and special:

- **Speaker 4: Male, L100, French:** my friends [from Senior High School] ... more than half of the class went on to do ICT and about only 5 students did French. So, the ICT students will be laughing at us the French students ... So, they were judging me, "we did French aah ... we didn't even understand the thing" ... So, it makes me feel like, not superior but then it makes me feel like I have this upper hand over you because, after all, I can do it but you can't so what shows that you are, like, my level?
- **Speaker 4, Female, L200, Arabic:** I think sometimes it makes me feel discouraged, but sometimes it makes me feel special. Because the people around me think, since I'm doing Arabic, I'm smart because it's a different course. The writing is different, so it makes me feel special. And most of my peers dropped it, so it makes me feel different.

In order to understand learners' motivation for their FL study, participants' motivation, FL orientation and attitudes were investigated according to gender (See Section 3.2). In relation to participants' motivation, the data showed that both males and females had mostly intrinsic⁵ motivations for Spanish, French and Russian. Participants described their motivational intensity, desire, and attitudes toward the FL using words and phrases such as 'love', 'marriage made in heaven', and 'so good'. One participant affirmed: "it's (French) so beautiful" (Speaker 2: Male, L400, French). Others noted:

- **Speaker 4, Male, L400, Spanish:** Spanish has been a language I've loved since I was a child because I used to watch their movies, listen to their songs and actually, my big sister is in Spain so when she calls and sometimes, she uses *¿Cómo estás?* and those kinds of words, I feel happy.
- **Speaker 3: Female, L300, French:** from primary, I was studying French, ... I loved it. ... The interest became more. I really wanted to learn it because they [teachers] really made it interesting for me.
- **Speaker 6: Male, L100, Russian:** So as for me I think this question will bring out something nobody knows. This is the first time I am going to mention it. So my parents, they were not surprised that I was doing Russian ... the thing is, I am so, I don't know, I think it is a *marriage made in heaven* between Russia and I and when you touch Russia it is like you've touched me.

However, given the negative reactions of relations, the fact that some participants did not choose to study the FLP themselves (see Appendix B) and some learners' initial resistance to their FLP, the researchers considered it necessary to inquire about participants' plans for their FLP. Having confirmed their growing interest, the majority of participants noted their intentions to continue with the course.

- **Speaker 5: Female, L200, Chinese:** I don't think ... nothing would push me to drop the course because I'm also trying to prove to my parents ... this is the first time I am doing something challenging.
- **Speaker 4: Male, L100, Spanish:** I don't think there's anything that can make me stop *loving* the language and ... there's no other option than to drop Sociology because I won't drop Spanish and can't drop Human Resource Management too.

⁵ Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (1985) distinguishes between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is doing something because it is inherently interesting and enjoyable. Extrinsic motivation is doing something for its instrumental value such as to get good grades, a job etc.

Regarding participants' language learning orientation, some participants had instrumental orientation such as the possibility of receiving good grades as well as material rewards for winning competitions and embarking on a year abroad programme: "A factor like going to the year abroad ... This really gives me the passion to study the language" (Speaker 8: Male, L200, Chinese). It is worthy to note that this was especially the case for participants from the Chinese Section.

- **Speaker 4, Male, L100, Chinese:** when I learnt I was coming to the university to offer Chinese at first, I wasn't happy but when I came and with the first lecture I had and how I was introduced to the course, it made me develop more interest. And also, with some incentives that I learnt such as the scholarship, I learnt some dollars and stuff ... err ... it made me develop more interest.
- **Speaker 7, Male, L400, Chinese:** It's enjoyable and my reason for that is quite simple. You realize that learning Chinese in particular we are exposed to many opportunities even while we are studying it. For instance, each and every year, there is this Ambassadorial Award being given to students. Some get 100 dollars, 200 dollars, and above based on the position in the class. I think this is one thing that triggers more people to study the language. So, I enjoy studying it because I know that if I am able to do well, I will gain some reward.

Overall, most participants found their FLP difficult but interesting, and enjoyable. Participants generally perceived FLE as a new experience which was an important part of the school program for reasons such as communicating, understanding and integration in foreign cultures, security, the improvement of cognitive functioning and multitasking skills, international exposure/opportunities, the deepening of awareness of and respect for global cultural differences and diversity, as well as the promotion of bilateral relations and international business. Participants laid significant emphasis on the importance of FLE in the globalized world:

- **Speaker 7: Male, L400, Chinese:** in the contemporary world, we find the world being a global village and it being a global village implies that each and every one is able to move or commute from one place to the other. So having knowledge about the FL is very key.
- **Speaker 5: Male, L100, Arabic:** I think it helps you also to build a strong international relationship, especially when you become a leader of a country or something. So maybe I can speak Arabic, I can speak Chinese. So, when I'm communicating with the Chinese president, he sees me as a brother ... because we speak the same language.

When asked to identify factors that could influence their decision whether to drop the course or not, participants identified issues such as grades and job prospects. They mentioned its importance for careers in fields such as law, medicine, employment in the AU and UN, accounting, clinical psychology, lecturing, translating, human resource management, public administration, sports, politics, diplomacy and international relations. One participant noted: "It's [FLE] very relevant. Personally, I want to go into the world of aviation. I want to be an air host [flight attendant] or maybe a pilot, umm, I want to travel around the world" (Speaker 6: Male, Spanish, level 400). Another affirmed:

- **Speaker 4: Male, L300, Kiswahili:** I think Kenya is one of the countries in Africa that is very advanced in these technological and digital markets. So, if you are a businessperson and on top of it, you can speak the Kiswahili language, I think it really helps. And I also like stuff about Africa. I won't be wrong if I call myself a Pan-Africanist. So, I don't think it would be right to call myself a Pan-Africanist without learning to speak the language of Africa.

It is worthy to note that some participants who expressed their intention to drop the FLP attributed their decisions to reasons other than lack of interest in the course.

- **Speaker 3: Male, L300, Russian:** I am a working student and looking at the time I use in studying Russian and balancing it was very difficult, so I decided to minor it and major the Sociology. So it wasn't because I didn't have interest in Russian but because of the external factors.
- **Speaker 6: Male, L100, Russian:** Honestly, truthfully, I am in a dilemma right now as to which of the courses I am going to drop. Yeah, I'm *in love with Russian*. But sometimes it boils down to career path and what you really want. So, I think until the last semester the door is still open.

4.2.2. Participants' perceptions about the impact of gender on FLE enrolment

Participants were interviewed about their own beliefs about the appropriateness of FLE for any gender. They were asked if any gender came to mind when they picture their FLP and if so which. The majority of participants answered in the affirmative. One stated:

- **Speaker 5: Male, L200, Spanish:** Yeah, in level 100 when I came, most of the Spanish students were females ... So, when I entered the class, I was like, "ah, is Spanish a feminine language?" "Like, is it for girls?" ... And I realized that, it's just that boys don't really like Spanish as compared to girls and more boys are interested in French than Spanish ... anytime I think of Spanish, it's ... this feminine language that comes to mind.

For participants who perceived their FLP appropriate for a particular gender, some linked it to stereotypical female attributes like intonation, docility and stereotypical female careers:

- **Speaker 9: Male, L400, French and Spanish:** If I should give French a gender, I think it's a female. Mostly the tone-I don't know but everything in the language actually is beautiful, it's romantic, ...the other side too, ...the secretary aspect of French-the secretaries, they make French beautiful.

Interestingly, one participant attributed the whole concept of language to females by linking it to the term "mother tongue" (Speaker 9: Male, L 400, Russian). Others did not associate their languages of study with any particular gender. Rather, they perceived them as subjects that should be of interest to anybody irrespective of their gender identification: "although there is a slight imbalance where the females supersede the males, I don't really see a gender factor" (Speaker 7: Male, L400, Chinese) and "I don't think any gender comes to mind ... I don't have any specific gender" (Speaker 2, Female, L400, Arabic).

Importantly, the data suggests that before participants started their FL classes, they were not aware that their FLP was a field dominated by females. Neither did they have any preconceived ideas about the appropriateness of their FLP for their gender. They expressed surprise: "I remember in level 100, I think it was 3rd or 1st class, when I entered, I was like, wow! Err, ladies?" (Speaker 2: Male, L400, French). Another speaker affirmed: "No, I never thought of anything like that" (Speaker 5: Male, L200, Spanish).

Some participants attributed the gender enrolment gap in FLE to males' reluctance for risk taking, as well as laziness among males in relation to academic work. They also observed that males avoid FLPs because they dislike discipline, pressure and stress, unlike females.

- **Speaker 4, Female, L200, Arabic:** Men ... like to be comfortable where they are, ...but languages are demanding. They demand your time. Boys or men don't want to do that.
- **Speaker 8: Male, L200, Russian:** ... I think that the males, most of them, don't really like err that kind of pressure ... when the language is giving you more pressure you just drop it.
- **Speaker 4: Male, L100, Spanish:** Ghanaians have a perception that ... Spanish is a difficult language ... and then, boys really don't like languages. Yeah, boys really, really don't like languages; the girls like taking risks, they like let me go and explore boys are lazy.

The above quotations suggest that the perceived level of difficulty of FLE is a deterrent for boys from engaging in the learning of (some) FLs. When probed further, one female participant (Speaker 5: L400, Russian) noted that the males are often unwilling to "open up to the Teaching Assistants" for assistance. Participants unanimously agreed that this is linked to their ego, a mark of masculinity. A participant (Speaker 2: Male, L200, Spanish), however, observed that generally, learners might be more interested in French because French is a subject offered from the secondary school level whereas all the other languages are offered only at the University level, making students of such languages first time learners. Consequently, males in particular are more likely to consider the fact that French might be easier and resort to it rather than the other languages in order to avoid stress. Other participants made mention of males' preference for the use of pidgin English, an allusion that suggested males' incaution, or lack of conformity with language norms and probably, an indication of masculinities. They also suggested that females are in the majority in FLE probably because they have a heightened interest in telenovelas, reading and communication:

- **Speaker 5: Male, L200, Spanish:** I think with that, boys not liking languages, we are used to pidgin. We speak in pidgin well and then the girls are more into these telenovelas, these foreign books and all that so probably that is what, umm, that is what their appetite with FL is. But then for us, me myself, I don't like reading, I don't like telenovelas. All I watch is my English movies and then all that and then I talk with my friends in pidgin. So, the language thing-boys studying languages is going to be really hard as compared to a girl studying languages.

Some participants from the Arabic, Russian, and Kiswahili sections considered the gender enrolment gap to be probably a result of the University's admission policy: "Okay. I think in this university, actually, there is an affirmative action⁶ policy and that's maybe the reason we have more women than men" (Speaker 8, Male, L400, Arabic) and "I'll say it's from admission. Maybe more ... ladies were admitted than the guys. ... If both genders are dropping, and more ladies, even if the ladies drop, there will still be much [more] of them in the class" (Speaker 5, Female, L300, Kiswahili).

In sum, some participants believed women are more interested in languages whereas men prefer courses in the Sciences, Engineering and Accounting etc. and do not see the relevance of FLE. That notwithstanding, they unanimously maintained that despite the existence of the stereotype that FLE is for females they did not agree with that perception because, in the words of one participant, "we all need a language. So ... what if let's say, only women are speaking our local languages ... what will we use to communicate with them?" (Speaker 3, male, L400, Kiswahili).

4.2.3. Perceptions about gender stereotypes and the biological hypotheses in FLE

Participants were asked about their opinions regarding the sociocultural perception that FLE is more suitable for females and that they (females) perform better. Questions relating to participants' language beliefs about male/female FL performance as well as the

⁶ To ensure more equitable gender representation in the students' population at the research setting, an affirmative action is considered during admissions into the Business Administration (BSc) and Bachelor of Arts (BA) programmes. [Appendix 1](#) indicates the number of admitted students in the 2019–2020 academic year by gender.

biological hypotheses were posed. The male participants did not seem to have any difficulties with FL learning. There were some few variations, however, depending on the language.

When asked to answer the question “Which of the following words best describe your FLP? Enjoyable? Difficult? Easy? Interesting? Dull? Pleasant? Painful?” etc., Speaker 6 of the Spanish group, for instance, affirmed that although he started learning the language as a beginner it was not hard for him to start holding conversations and, on that point, concluded “people who are teaching play a very important role with that” (Male, Spanish L400). Generally, participants expressed the belief that learning Spanish is pleasant because speaking it makes “people ... wonder and then they give you respect” (Speaker 5: Male, L200, Spanish). Students of Russian also found it interesting and enjoyable “because, it is a new experience” which “is difficult for starters” but “enjoyable if only you are dedicated” (Speaker 9, Male, L400, Russian).

A striking observation on students of French was that the majority of them found it interesting and enjoyable although several references were made to the history of corporal punishment they had experienced during their lower-level French classes (which can be interpreted as painful experiences):

- **Speaker 8: Male, L200, French:** Monsieur’s way of correcting you was caning you, ...and so because of that, it was scary ... in SHS, I could’ve dropped it but I realized that in as much as there was this fear of the French teacher, umm, I *loved* the language ... as I came to the university, I was like, okay, well, I *love* French and there’s political science; I love politics. You know, it could go hand-in-hand. But then I would say it was challenging at some point ... You’re learning French and, umm, you know it theoretically but when you hear people speaking it ... You ask yourself, what are they speaking? ... so that is one of the most challenging things I encountered in French but regardless of that obstacle, I really find French quite enjoyable.

In the case of Kiswahili and Arabic, male participants generally described them as difficult. They described them as “stressful” and affirmed that although “at the beginning it was very enjoyable ... getting to the end ... it’s somehow difficult and time consuming” (Speaker 7, Male, L400, Arabic). Instructor’s teaching approach, time constraints and pressure were the stress factors identified by participants. Below are extracts from Kiswahili and Arabic participants:

- **Speaker 4, Male, L300, Kiswahili:** [L] 200, 100, we were enjoying it and everything. But at the beginning of 300, I think I didn’t really brace myself for an increment in effort. So, I started to think it was difficult. But I realized that ... if you increase the effort and the seriousness, you realize it becomes very easy.
- **Speaker 8, Male, L300, Arabic:** most of our colleagues not doing the languages read, I think, two courses. But when you’re doing Arabic or any other language, there is a plus one. So, it actually takes most of your time. there is much pressure on you as the individual, so you tend to spend more time on it neglecting the other things you are doing. And that is very, very stressful. So, you may realize that even though you may be good at political science, you may not be performing as you should be. And that is very, very challenging and interesting too sometimes.

Some, however, had more positive perceptions: “I have always dreamt of speaking Arabic so anytime I learn, or I see any Arabic thing, I really, really enjoy it. So, I find studying the course very interesting” (Speaker 9, Male, L200, Arabic).

Participants’ perceptions regarding the biological hypotheses were also elicited, i.e., their beliefs about effects of neurophysiological sex differences on FL performance. Once again, there were opposing views. From a scientific perspective, few participants confirmed their total or partial agreement with the claims: “professional wise, I think it could help both genders ... but I see it to be better for females because these studies have shown that they’re good at languages than even mathematics” (Speaker 9: Male, L400, French and Spanish). Another affirmed:

- **Speaker 5, Male, L400, Arabic:** I’ve grown to understand that women tend to use both parts of their brains to understand language. Unlike men. Men only use one part of their brain. So, if, let’s say a man gets stroke, the tendency that a man is not going to speak again is very high as compared to females. So, in that case, if a female is studying a FL or any language at all, she is able to grasp it more than a male ... I tend to agree with the fact that females show more interest in studying FLs than males.

Speaker 9 above based his agreement on the fact that this conclusion was backed by research findings. He was therefore reluctant to ponder on personal experiences or observations in order to critically think about its validity and draw his own conclusions. Unfortunately, this shows that such academic claims play a significant role in reinforcing gender stereotypes.

However, the clear majority of participants across the language groups were in absolute disagreement and strongly opposed the research claims. Some participants believed that the claims were based on the observation that FL classes were dominated by females, but if on the other hand there were at least an equal distribution between the genders, existing studies would have claimed that a person of any gender can have the aptitude for FL learning (Speaker 5: Female, L400, French). For Arabic, a participant referred to situations outside the confines of the university and noted that males study the language excellently in the Islamic religion than females and consequently, for her, “studying a language is not [specially] for women” (Speaker 2, Female, L400, Arabic). Other examples are noted below:

- **Speaker 5: Male, L200, Spanish:** I feel like it’s not so because I’m able to get what is going on ... when it comes to performance and communication, I feel like I do better than them [females] so if I realize that I’m doing better than some of them, then I don’t think it should be more feminine.

- **Speaker 6: Male. L100, Russian:** I think it all boils down to mentality and how you perceive what you are doing ... and what the individual or the boy really wants. If you have a perception that “look after all what is language?” ... And sometimes I think it boils down to ignorance.

In sum, participants strongly opposed the view that FL learning is more suitable for females and asserted that “it is just the external factors such as ... the stress and the ego that has made it look like it is meant for women” but “it is meant for everyone” (Speaker 4: Female, L200, Russian).

4.3. Differential achievement by gender

This section presents the findings of the study on the quantitative analysis of students' test scores for individual languages, as well as across languages.

4.3.1. Analysis of students' test scores for individual languages

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 3 indicate that males performed slightly better than females in Arabic, French, Kiswahili and Russian. In contrast, females performed fairly better than males in Spanish and Chinese. For Spanish and Chinese, the percentage difference between the mean score of females and males was 12.38% and 15.52% respectively. However, for Arabic, French, Kiswahili and Russian, the percentage difference was 2.84%, 1.42%, 2.89% and 5.40% respectively.

The Mann-Whitney *U* test (Table 4) was also carried out to test whether there is a significant difference between the performance of female and male students for the various languages. For Arabic, the test indicated that there was no significant difference between the scores of female students ($Mdn = 75.00$, $n = 9$) and the scores of males ($Mdn = 76.50$, $n = 4$), $U = 16.00$, $z = -0.309$, $p = .825$, with a small effect size $r = 0.09$.

Also, for Chinese, there was no significant difference between the scores of female students ($Mdn = 77.00$, $n = 73$) compared to the scores of male students ($Mdn = 67.50$, $n = 34$), $U = 965.500$, $z = -1.848$, $p = .065$, with a small effect size $r = 0.18$.

Again, for French, there was no significant difference between the scores of female students ($Mdn = 75.00$, $n = 256$) compared to the test scores of male students ($Mdn = 77.00$, $n = 49$), $U = 5664.000$, $z = -1.077$, $p = .282$, with a small effect size $r = 0.06$.

Similarly, there was no significant difference between the scores of Kiswahili female students ($Mdn = 81.50$, $n = 22$) compared to the test scores of their male counterparts ($Mdn = 84.50$, $n = 2$), $U = 15.500$, $z = -0.682$, $p = .522$, with a small effect size $r = 0.14$.

Also, the test revealed no significant difference between the scores of female students of Russian ($Mdn = 77.00$, $n = 17$) and male students ($Mdn = 77.00$, $n = 11$), $U = 88.000$, $z = -0.259$, $p = .817$, with a small effect size $r = 0.05$.

Equally, the test also revealed that there was no significant difference between the scores of Spanish female students ($Mdn = 71.00$, $n = 57$) compared to the test scores of male students ($Mdn = 59.50$, $n = 13$), $U = 259.500$, $z = -1.677$, $p = .093$, with a small effect size $r = 0.20$.

Overall, the findings from the Mann-Whitney *U* test indicate that there is no significant difference in performance between male and female students for the various FLs.

4.3.2. Analysis of students' test scores across all the languages

All females across the six FLs in this study were put together as a single variable, and the same was done for the males, to ascertain

Table 3
Learner achievement by gender for individual languages.

	Student Gender	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	<i>Mdn</i>
Arabic	Female	9	75.33	12.28	6.78	61	75.00
	Male	4	77.50	16.01	7.50	30	76.50
	Total	13	76.00	12.87			75.00
Chinese	Female	73	72.13	17.22	57.77	4217.50	77.00
	Male	34	63.72	21.51	45.90	1560.50	67.50
	Total	107	69.46	18.99			75.00
French	Female	256	74.66	6.54	150.63	38560.00	75.00
	Male	49	75.73	10.40	165.41	8105.00	77.00
	Total	305	74.83	7.29			75.00
Kiswahili	Female	22	82.09	6.21	12.20	268.50	81.50
	Male	2	84.50	3.54	15.75	31.50	84.50
	Total	24	82.2	6.02			82.00
Russian	Female	17	71.06	17.14	14.18	241.00	77.00
	Male	11	75.00	10.69	15.00	165.00	77.00
	Total	28	72.61	14.84			77.00
Spanish	Female	57	65.08	18.67	37.45	2134.50	71.00
	Male	13	55.71	18.63	26.96	350.50	59.50
	Total	70	63.34	13.45			68.00

Table 4
Mann-Whitney Test – Output significance tests for individual languages.

	Test Statistics ^a					
	Arabic	Chinese	French	Kiswahili	Russian	Spanish
Mann-Whitney U	16.000	965.500	5664.000	15.500	88.000	259.500
Standardized Test Statistic Z	-.309	-1.848	-1.077	-.682	-.259	-1.677
Asymp. Sig. (2-sided test)	.757	.065	.282	.495	.795	.093
Exact Sig. (2- sided test)	.825 ^b			.522 ^b	.817 ^b	

Note: ^a Grouping Variable. ^b Not corrected for ties. * $p < .05$.

whether any of the genders performed better than the other. Table 5 shows the results of the Mann-Whitney U test for all females and males across the various FLs. In all, females represented 79% ($n = 434$) of the population whereas males represented 21% ($n = 113$).

The test revealed that the mean score for females ($M = 73.23$ $SD = 12.23$) is slightly higher than that of males ($M = 69.96$ $SD = 17.19$). This implies that females attained higher marks than males. However, there was no statistically significant difference between the performance of females ($Mdn = 75$, $n = 434$) and males ($Mdn = 75$, $n = 113$), $U = 22976.50$, $z = -1.03$, $p = .302$, with a small effect size $r = 0.04$.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate (1) gender patterns of subject choice and enrolment in FLE, (2) sociolinguistic reasons for (non-) selection of (particular) FLs and (3) differential achievement in FL learning by gender. Intriguing findings were obtained from the analyses. First, it was found that masculinities and other societal beliefs did not negatively predict motivation for FLE among the participants of our study, contradicting H1. Indeed, participants generally reported that they had no prior knowledge that the language classroom is perceived as a “girls’ domain” (Sunderland, 1998; as cited in Nikitina & Furuoka, 2007, pp. 2–3). This notwithstanding, the findings show that they developed intrinsic motivations for their FLP once they engaged in it. It is worthy to note that once the discussion of masculinities was brought up, none of the participants (neither male nor female) were bothered by it. They were more concerned with issues such as job prospects. Whereas this finding contradicts that of Chaffee et al. (2020) which reports masculinity threat as a strong demotivational factor for FLE, it is in line with the findings of (Kissau et al., 2010). Kissau et al. (2010) found that in general their male participants did have positive attitudes toward studying the language. Similar to the participants in Nikitina and Furuoka’s (2007) research, all the participants in the present study were multilingual and had wide-ranging formal as well as informal experience in language learning. This probably explains their open, positive and practical attitudes towards language learning.

Second, in contrast to Zoghi et al.’s (2013) study, no significant differences were found between the FL performance of male and female participants, contradicting H2. Male participants generally showed high self-confidence and self-rating. It could be argued that this had a positive influence on their classroom performance (Park & Lee, 2005). In addition, it appears participants’ high appreciation of the importance of FLs, their high levels of Foreign Language Enjoyment as well as their perception of FL learning as something unique, challenging and adventurous outweighed the predicted negative sociocultural perceptions that discourage FL learning. This finding is in line with earlier studies (e.g., Dewaele & Dewaele, 2017; Park & Lee, 2005) which have corroborated the relationship between Foreign Language Enjoyment and performance. It also supports the outcomes of Gardner’s (1985) study, as well as that of Deci and Ryan (1985), that reveal that FL learners with high levels of motivation generally perform well in the language. Given the findings of our study, we can argue that when FL learners are aware of the importance of FLE, this knowledge enhances their motivation, thereby fostering their interest to put in more effort in the learning process. Overall, this finding contradicts the biological hypotheses that females are better language learners than males. It also provides evidence for the participants of the focus group discussions, the majority of whom disagreed with the claims of the biological hypotheses. This finding also confirms earlier research on beliefs about FL learning. Nikitina and Furuoka’s (2007) study echo the lack of association between gender and FL performance. They report that gender-related differences in beliefs about language learning was minimal among their participants.

Finally, our analysis of the admission statistics of the university and responses of the focus group participants also indicated that there exists a gender gap in FLE at the research setting, thereby corroborating findings from other parts of the world (see Chan, 2021; Kissau, 2006; Sunderland, 2000). However, our hypothesis that this could be attributed to a gender-related lack of motivation for FLE (H3) was not supported. Observations about the gender gap in FLE did not appear to reinforce societal beliefs about FLE in our research context. Participants attributed the disparity between the gender distribution in the entire university and that of the FLPs to the University’s affirmative action policy.⁷ This policy which is aimed at admitting more females to bridge the gender gap, largely applies

⁷ The Gender Policy of the research setting which was published in January 2022 states, among other things: “With regards to students, existing special measures put in place in the 1980s shall be continued, and expanded where necessary to increase the number of female students until equality is achieved in the numbers of male and female students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels” (pg. 6). Christel further explains this “50% men and 50% women” affirmative action goal by citing Atuahene (2014) as follows: “Realizing the existing gender-based disparities, successive governments, in collaboration with universities, have put in place several affirmative action policies to increase female participation at the tertiary education levels [in Ghana]. For example, public universities have introduced affirmative action policies to close the gender disparity gap by relaxing admissions standards for female applicants” (as cited in Christel, 2020, p. 35).

Table 5
Mann-Whitney test—descriptive & output significance tests across languages.

Gender	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Mean Rank	<i>Mdn</i>	Mann-Whitney	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i> -value
Female	434	73.23	12.23	277.56	75	22976.50	−1.03	.302
Male	113	69.96	17.19	260.33	75			
Total	547							

* $p < .05$.

to BA programmes, to which French and the Modern Languages Departments belong. Consequently, this is probably another reason why more males are enrolled in the science-oriented programmes whereas BA programmes have more females. This policy deepens generally held perceptions that Arts programmes are more suitable for females. Our findings are partially in agreement with previous studies (Chaffee et al., 2020; Shafina, 2020) which have reported the association between the selection of FL programs and job prospects. However, this was not in relation to concerns about gender stereotyped professions but rather career prestige and adequacy of remuneration.

6. Conclusion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that has investigated comparatively the interrelationship between gender and FLE in six languages. The study focused on affective, motivational, behavioral factors as well as statistical issues on performance. We found that masculinities were not a demotivating factor for FL learning among our participants. We also found that whereas learners of French, Spanish and Russian had integrative motivation, those of Chinese had instrumental motivation. Finally, the popular view that females perform better than males in FL learning was not supported. Rather than attribute the gender enrolment gap in FLE at the research setting to nature (biological factors) or entirely to nurture (influence of sociocultural expectations on gender performance), the findings from the current study suggest that gender attitudes (e.g., avoidance of stress and pressure) and situational factors (e.g., admission policy, classroom environment and teaching approach) have a greater effect on learners' decision whether to study a FL or not. Generally, both male and female participants had positive attitudes towards FL learning which they perceived as an essential passport to become competent global citizens. These findings contribute to our understanding of the sociocultural factors that influence gender imbalance in FLE.

This study has answered the widespread calls for researchers to provide empirical studies that investigate assumptions, anecdotes and stereotypes about issues of gender in FLE. It has generated some thought-provoking and unique data which hopefully, can contribute to finding solutions to what has been erstwhile termed the demise of modern foreign languages. Certainly, with the rebirth of a renewed importance given to FLs and the British Academy's (2019) description of monolingualism as "the illiteracy of the 21st Century" (cited in Sturt-Schmidt, 2020), the importance of improving FL teaching cannot be overemphasized.

The current findings provide a basis for some important pedagogical implications which are relevant for FL teachers and researchers as well as administrators of educational institutions who oversee admissions. We suggest that teachers set achievable learning goals by placing greater emphasis on communicative strategies in order to reduce learners' anxiety, enhance their positive emotions and boost their confidence. One key finding of the current study was that despite the apparent difficulty of their FL courses, participants were determined to pursue FL learning because they had high levels of foreign language enjoyment. Language instructors should thus take advantage of this and endeavor to sustain their learners' interests by making their lessons not only challenging but relevant to current trends. In relation to the gender factor, one way of doing this is by employing a diversity of teaching materials to include the arts as well as science/technology topics which are often underrepresented in the language textbooks. This will help in dissipating the perception of the FL classroom as a female domain. Additionally, considering the complexity and intricacy of FL learning, attention should be paid to eliminate stressors by avoiding situations where learners are overwhelmed with course contents. Stakeholders should also be made to understand the importance of FLE. Institutions can do this by clearly stating the benefits in their FL course descriptions. Moreover, caution should be taken during the admission process in order to avoid assigning mainly females to FLPs. Finally, we find it positive that learners in our research setting were unaware of the gendered stereotyping of FL learning. Instructors should maintain this by modifying task descriptions in order to de-emphasize these stereotypes. They should promote a growth mindset about FLE by providing feedback that motivates all students—irrespective of gender—to put more effort in their studies. One way of doing this is by inviting past FL students (both male and female) using the languages in their professions for career seminars and during orientation programs for first year students.

The present study has some potential limitations in that none of the results reported in this research is statistically significant. Several scholars (Gelman & Stern, 2006; Mehler et al., 2019; Schimmack, 2012; Visentin et al., 2020) point out that, while obtaining significant results in research may be desirable, non-significant results are also relevant and important. That notwithstanding, it would be beneficial to repeat the study using different methods and different test scores. Future studies could also focus on comparing motivation among learners of languages that belong to the same language group (e.g., romance languages, Germanic languages etc.). Finally, it would be interesting to conduct quantitative studies that examine the association between masculinities and FL motivation in our research setting.

Author statement

1) **Benedicta Adokarley Lomotey**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data collection, Data curation, Writing- Original draft preparation, Reviewing and Editing.

2) **Ildiko Csajbok-Twerefou**: Methodology, Data collection, Data curation, Reviewing and Editing.

3) **Alhassan Abdur-Rahim Husein**: Methodology, Data collection, Data curation, Statistical analysis, Writing- Statistical Analysis, Reviewing and Editing.

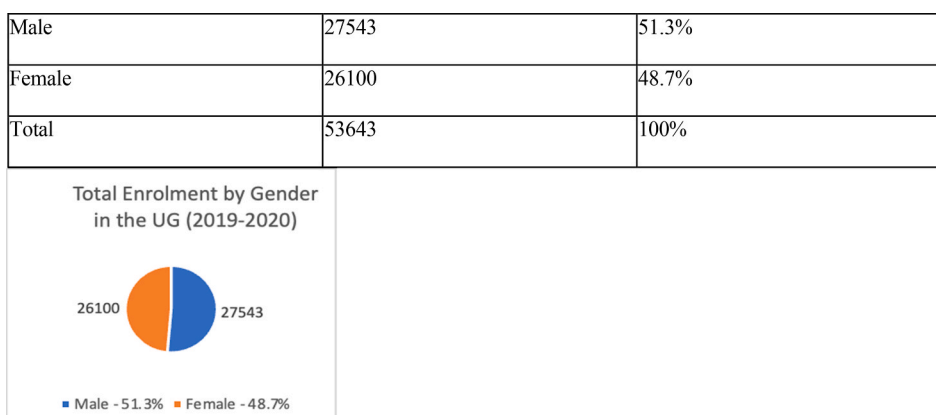
4) **Grace Diabah**: Methodology, Data curation, Reviewing and Editing.

Appendix C. Supplementary data

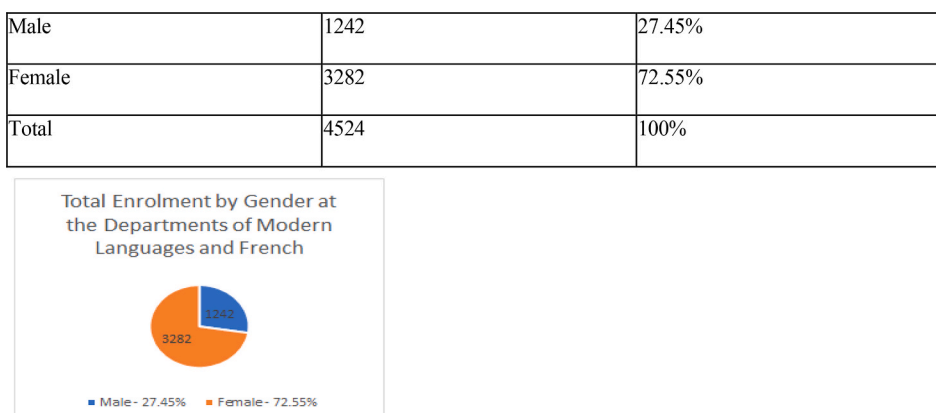
Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2023.103110>.

APPENDIX A

1. Total Enrolment by Gender at the Research Setting in 2019–2020 Academic Year



2. Total Enrolment by Gender at the Department of Modern Languages and Department of French in 2019–2020 Academic Year



3. Gender spread by department for Level 100 at the research setting: 2021/2022 academic year

DEPARTMENT	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	MALE %	FEMALE %
DEPARTMENT OF ACCOUNTING	167	80	247	68%	32%
DEPARTMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND HERITAGE STUDIES	727	709	1436	51%	49%
DEPARTMENT OF DANCE STUDIES	139	106	245	57%	43%
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS	660	427	1087	61%	39%
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH	30	212	242	12%	88%
DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE	64	38	102	63%	37%
DEPARTMENT OF FRENCH	95	360	455	21%	79%
DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT	762	664	1426	53%	47%
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY	519	529	1048	50%	50%
DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION STUDIES	615	619	1234	50%	50%
DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS	355	601	956	37%	63%
DEPARTMENT OF MARKETING AND CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT	32	64	96	33%	67%
DEPARTMENT OF MATHEMATICS	220	123	343	64%	36%
DEPARTMENT OF MODERN LANGUAGES	566	1067	1633	35%	65%
DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC	59	36	95	62%	38%
DEPARTMENT OF ORGANISATION AND HR MANAGEMENT	43	173	216	20%	80%
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY AND CLASSICS	712	685	1397	51%	49%
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE	702	754	1456	48%	52%
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY	382	792	1174	33%	67%
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND HEALTH	61	91	152	40%	60%
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK	223	297	520	43%	57%
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY	582	678	1260	46%	54%
DEPARTMENT OF STATISTICS	164	102	266	62%	38%
DEPARTMENT OF STUDY OF RELIGIONS	402	412	814	49%	51%
DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE ARTS	277	292	569	49%	51%

APPENDIX B

Detailed demographic information on focus group participants.

FOCUS GROUP 1- ARABIC						
Speaker	Age	¹ S	² L	FLP ³ chosen when applying for admission?	Plans to continue with FL course	Self-rating
Speaker 5	21–25	M	100	Yes	Unsure/Undecided	Beginner
Speaker 3	15–20	F	100	Yes	Unsure/Undecided	Beginner
Speaker 9	21–25	M	200	Yes	Yes	Low Intermediate
Speaker 4	21–25	F	200	No	Yes	Low Intermediate
Speaker 6	21–25	F	300	No	Yes	Low Intermediate
Speaker 8	21–25	M	300	No	Unsure/Undecided	High Intermediate
Speaker 2	21–25	F	400	Yes	Yes	High Intermediate
Speaker 7	21–25	M	400	Yes	Unsure/Undecided	High Intermediate
FOCUS GROUP 2- SPANISH						
Speaker 3	15–20	F	100	No	Yes	Beginner
Speaker 4	15–20	M	100	Yes	Yes	Beginner
Speaker 5	15–20	M	200	No response	Yes	Low Intermediate
Speaker 2	15–20	F	200	Yes	Yes	Low Intermediate
Speaker 9	15–20	M	300	Yes	Yes	Low Intermediate
Speaker 7	15–20	F	300	No	Yes	High Intermediate
Speaker 6	21–25	M	400	Yes	Yes	High Intermediate
Speaker 8	21–25	F	400	Yes	Yes	High Intermediate
FOCUS GROUP 3- FRENCH						
Speaker 7	15–20	F	100	Yes	Yes	Low Intermediate
Speaker 4	15–20	M	100	Yes	Yes	Low Intermediate
Speaker 8	21–25	M	200	Yes	Yes	Low Intermediate
Speaker 6	15–20	F	200	Yes	Yes	Low Intermediate
Speaker 10	21–25	M	300	Yes	Yes	Advanced
Speaker 3	15–20	F	300	Yes	Yes	High Intermediate
Speaker 2	26–30	M	400	Yes	Yes	High Intermediate
Speaker 5	21–25	F	400	Yes	Yes	High Intermediate
FOCUS GROUP 4- KISWAHILI						
Speaker 6	15–20	F	100	No	Unsure/Undecided	Beginner
Speaker 7	15–20	M	100	No	Unsure/Undecided	Beginner
Speaker 5	21–25	F	300	No	Yes	Low Intermediate
Speaker 4	21–25	M	300	No	Yes	Low Intermediate

(continued on next page)

(continued)

FOCUS GROUP 1- ARABIC						
Speaker	Age	1 ^s	2 ^d	FLP ³ chosen when applying for admission?	Plans to continue with FL course	Self-rating
Speaker 2	21–25	M	400	Yes	Yes	High Intermediate
Speaker 3	21–25	M	400	No	Yes	High Intermediate
FOCUS GROUP 5- RUSSIAN						
Speaker 7	15–20	F	100	Yes	Yes	Beginner
Speaker 6	15–20	M	100	Yes	Unsure/Undecided	Beginner
Speaker 4	15–20	F	200	No	Yes	Beginner
Speaker 8	21–25	M	200	No	Yes	Low Intermediate
Speaker 3	21–25	M	300	No	No	Low Intermediate
Speaker 2	21–25	F	300	No	Unsure/Undecided	Low Intermediate
Speaker 5	26–30	F	400	No	Unsure/Undecided	High Intermediate
Speaker 9	21–25	M	400	No response	Yes	High Intermediate
FOCUS GROUP 6- CHINESE						
Speaker 4	15–20	M	100	Yes	Yes	Beginner
Speaker 8	21–25	M	200	Yes	Yes	Low Intermediate
Speaker 5	21–25	F	200	Yes	Unsure/Undecided	Beginner
Speaker 2	21–25	M	300	Yes	Yes	Low Intermediate
Speaker 3	21–25	F	300	Yes	Yes	Low Intermediate
Speaker 7	21–25	M	400	Yes	Yes	High Intermediate
Speaker 9	21–25	F	400	Yes	Unsure/Undecided	High Intermediate

¹ Level (L) means year of study (e.g., L100 = first year, L200 = second year etc.). The BA course is a four-year program.

² S = Sex.

³ FLP = Foreign Language Programme.

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