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The effects of virtual environment on young adolescents' foreign language anxiety / Yeşîlyurt Özer, S. D. & Görgülü, E.

80. The effects of virtual environment on young adolescents' foreign language anxiety

Sena Damla YEŞİLYURT ÖZER[1]

Emrah GÖRGÜLÜ[2]

Abstract

Foreign language learning is a tough process which contains gaining of knowledge, comprehension and finally employing acquired knowledge into practice. Since acquisition of foreign language knowledge include emotional capabilities as well as mental activities, foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a crucial component of this process. While there has been various research on FLA in literature for years, most of the previous research mainly focuses on adults or young adult learners (aged 18-25) in formal education environment. There exists a certain gap when it comes to FLA levels of learners from different ages and learning activities in various educational environments. In that sense, this study uniquely spotlights young adolescent learners of foreign languages and their FLA levels in virtual classrooms. Considering the fact that young adolescents have a very close relationship with technology, such students' FLA levels present distinctive variations in virtual classrooms when compared to face-to-face classrooms. This study fundamentally aims to reveal to what extend virtual classrooms and online materials affect young adolescents' FLA and to explore the reasons lying behind the possible changes in FLA levels by using a sample group of learners of English studying in middle school. A questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data. Based on the collected data, it was discovered that the upsides of virtual education positively affected young adolescents' FLA levels. However, certain shortcomings of virtual education have also been unveiled during this study. This study presented crucial insights on young adolescents' FLA levels and how these levels showed an alteration in virtual classrooms.

Keywords: Foreign language anxiety, young adolescents, middle school, virtual learning

Sanal öğrenme ortamının genç ergenlerin yabancı dil kaygısı üzerindeki etkileri

Öz

Yabancı dil öğrenmek; bilgi edinme, anlama ve son olarak edinilen bilgiyi kullanıma koyma adımlarını içeren zorlu bir süreçtir. Yabancı dil bilgisi edinimi zihinsel aktivitelerin yanı sıra duygusal kapasiteleri de içerdiğinden, yabancı dil kaygısı bu sürecin çok önemli bir unsurudur. Literatürde yabancı dil kaygısı üzerine çok sayıda çalışma olsa da önceki çalışmaların büyük çoğunluğu yetişkinlere, genç yetişkinlere (18-25 yaş) ve örgün eğitim ortamına odaklanmıştır. Konu farklı yaş gruplarının yabancı dil kaygısına ve farklı öğrenme ortamlarına geldiğinde ise literatürde bir boşluk bulunmaktadır. Bu anlamda, bu çalışma genç ergen yabancı dil öğrencilerine ve onların sanal

[1] Öğr. Gör., Altınbaş Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, Temel İngilizce Bölümü (İstanbul, Türkiye), damla.yesilyurt@altinbas.edu.tr, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1526-2586 [Araştırma makalesi, Makale kayıt tarihi: 12.10.2022-kabul tarihi: 20.12.2022; DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1222265]

[2] Doç. Dr., İstanbul Sabahattin Zaim University, Eğitim Fakültesi, İngilizce Öğretmenliği Bölümü (İstanbul, Türkiye), emrah.gorgulu@izu.edu.tr, ORCID ID: 0000-0003-0879-1049

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sınıflardaki yabancı dil kaygılarına ışık tutması açısından özgündür. Genç ergenlerin teknoloji ile çok yakın bir ilişkisi olduğundan dolayı, bu öğrencilerin yabancı dil kaygı seviyeleri yüz yüze sınıflara kıyasla sanal sınıflarda belirgin farklılıklar gösterir. Bu çalışmanın temel amacı sanal sınıfların ve çevrimiçi materyallerin genç ergenlerin yabancı dil kaygısını ne derecede etkilediğini ve bu seviyelerdeki olası değişikliklerin altında yatan nedenleri ortaokulda okuyan örnek bir grup İngilizce öğrencisi kullanarak araştırmaktır. Veri toplamak amacıyla bir anket çalışması ve yarı-yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Elde edilen verilere göre, sanal eğitimin avantajlı yönlerinin genç ergenlerin yabancı dil kaygı seviyelerini olumlu anlamda etkilediği bulgulanmıştır. Ancak, bu çalışma süresince sanal eğitimin belirli eksiklikleri de açığa çıkmıştır. Bu çalışma, genç ergenlerin yabancı dil kaygı seviyelerine ve bu seviyelerin sanal sınıflarda nasıl bir değişiklik gösterdiğine dair önemli bilgiler sunmuştur.

Anahtar kelimeler: Yabancı dil kaygısı, genç ergenler, orta öğretim, sanal eğitim

1. Introduction

Foreign Language education is a puzzling process involving the instructor, the learner, learning materials, learning/teaching methods, assessment, and evaluation. It is a process which stimulates not only cognitive abilities but also emotional capabilities. (Kayhan 2021). Foreign language learning is about both "knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis and synthesis but also emotions and feelings." (Krashen 1982) Therefore, foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a crucial part of this process. FLA research has covered several perspectives so far and regardless of the age of the learner or the medium of instruction, there is no doubt that so many students experience FLA on various levels. Regarding that most of the research focus on formal education and adult learners (18-25 ages), this study is unique as it focuses on FLA in young adolescents in virtual classes. It aims to find out the answers to the following questions:

1. How does virtual learning affect young learners' anxiety levels? Do virtual classrooms increase or decrease young adolescents' foreign language anxiety?

2. Which features of online education increase or decrease FLA in young adolescents?

3. What needs be done to eliminate Foreign Language Anxiety in young adolescents in virtual classroom environment?

2. Literature review

a. Anxiety & foreign language anxiety

The term anxiety has been researched by numerous academics and is defined as "a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object." (Scovel 1978). Another definition by Brown (1994) puts forward that "anxiety is related to the feelings that consist of frustration, apprehension, uneasiness and self-doubt." Cassady (2010) defines the term "academic anxiety" as a "unifying formulation for the collection of anxieties learners experience while in schools." Hence, anxiety interferes with language learning and performance. Besides, MacIntyre and Gregersen (2014) argue that language anxiety "involves fear related emotions" and includes both second and foreign language learning together with productive language skills of writing and speaking.

With their introduction of the construct of FLA as a situation-specific anxiety, in 1986 Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope became preeminent names in language anxiety research. Thus, FLA has started to be

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considered as one of the reasons for failure in foreign language classes. Their study mainly indicates that FLA should not be seen as a general classroom anxiety. No other field of study implicates self-concept and self-expression as much as foreign language learning. This makes FLA distinctive. Horwitz et. al. (1986) put forward that this type of anxiety comes from "the inherent inauthenticity associated with immature second language abilities" and define FLA as "a phenomenon related to but distinguishable from other specific anxieties." Speakers are aware of the socio-cultural standards of their native tongue, therefore, speaking in their first language is easy. However, speaking in the second/foreign language includes risk taking, nonspontaneous mental operations and bravery. Any performance in second/foreign challenges an individual's self-concept. Even the competent communicator may feel panic, fear, and self-consciousness. To measure FLA, Horwitz et. al. (1986) introduced Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). It acts as a particular measurement for FLA, solving the issue of proper anxiety measurement.

Consequently, although there are multiple debates regarding whether FLA can be considered as a learning disability or to what extent it causes and/or affects students' achievement in second/foreign language, FLA is a crucial part of language learning. To fully comprehend the relation between language achievement and language anxiety, distinguishing the role of anxiety in language learning and its role in linguistic performance is crucial.

b. Components of foreign language anxiety

Having explained FLA, it is important to elaborate on its components. According to Horwitz et.al. (1986), three main components of FLA are communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. *Communication apprehension (CA)* is "a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people." (Horwitz et. al. 1986) That is, CA is fear of engaging with someone else in a foreign language. People having trouble speaking in front of people experience this even greater. *Text anxiety* is defined as "a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure." (Horwitz et. al. 1986) It emerged from the fear of failure. In that, once students set unrealistic expectations regarding their foreign language learning process, rate or success and failure is inevitable, their text anxiety hits the roof. *Fear of negative evaluation* is "apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectations that others would evaluate oneself negatively." (Horwitz et. al. 1986) It is not restricted to test taking and may transpire in all types of social evaluative situations such as dates or job interviews.

c. Foreign language anxiety over the course of online education

Although many believe that online education and virtual classes became a part of education with the global pandemic of 2019, it was in fact a medium of instruction which has been applied in some parts of the world and being talked about in all around the globe. There is a big debate regarding its fruitfulness, yet there is no doubt that virtual classrooms are great tools to reach places where means of education is out of reach. Could e-learning be the future of education? According to Reynard (2003) online education "will be the preferred instructional technology of post-secondary institutions for the future." In that, Kaisar & Chowdhury (2020) investigates whether e-learning makes a difference in the FLA levels of learners and whether it is possible to create FLA-free classrooms. Many of their participants showed a positive attitude and expressed that virtual classes are more comfortable, more relaxed, more autonomous, and less intimidating. Before them, there have been several studies proposing that implementations of technology could be used as a coping strategy. Al-Qahtani (2019) suggests that

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tel: +90 505 7958124, +90 216 773 0 616	**phone:** +90 505 7958124, +90 216 773 0 616

virtual classes enhance communication skills significantly. In his research, he found out most of the teachers and the learners maintain a positive attitude towards virtual learning. Huang & Hwang (2013) found out that students find computer-based learning less threatening, more relaxed, and positive atmosphere. Therefore, virtual learning reduces learning anxiety and stimulates learning. Aydın (2018) proposes that technology in teaching has great potential to develop communication and interaction. Via technology, educators can present immediate feedback and individualized education. It also helps learners and instructors deliver authentic context and instructional materials. As opposed to Kaisar & Chowdhury (2020), Huang & Hwang (2013), Aydın (2018) and Al-Qahtani (2019); Doğan (2020) indicates that the level of FLA is higher due to less student-teacher interaction, lack of body language, eye contact and instant feedback. Overall, there are mixed and controversial results on FLA studies in a virtual classroom and this field requires more research to fully come to a decision.

d. Young learners & foreign language anxiety

There is a limited amount of data on children in FLA research since most of the FLA research focuses on young adult (undergraduate students) or adult learners. The reason why FLA research is centred around adults is that children are a rather "homogenous" group of learners, and they have a more positive self-perception, high level of confidence and they are more attentive as opposed to less confident adults who tend to avoid speaking in foreign languages altogether. Although the amount of data in children's FLA is few, one of the most important research projects conducted within Turkish EFL context is Aydın et. al. (2018)'s study. Based on their study's results, the main reasons underlying moderate amount of anxiety are exams and grammar-based language activities. Some of the other sources of high levels of FLA are having to speak without preparation, fear of making mistakes, talking about unfamiliar topics and negative evaluation from teachers/instructors or peers.

3. Method

a. Participants

This study was carried out during 2021-2022 education year in a private school in Istanbul, Turkey. During this education year, both virtual education, hybrid education and face to face education were being sustained due to the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak. Students aged between 10-14, from two 5th grade, two 6th grade and two 7th grade classes participated in the study. All classes which have taken the questionnaire were chosen randomly. Overall, 129 students completed the questionnaire. The descriptive statistics of the participants regarding gender and grade are presented in Table 1. After the application of the questionnaire, 12 students were chosen for a semi-structured interview. Students with the highest level of FLA were chosen for these interviews.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Participants

	Grade	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Grade 5	46	35,7	35,7	35,7
	Grade 6	41	31,8	31,8	67,4
	Grade 7	42	32,6	32,6	100,0
	Total	129	100,0	100,0	

	Gender	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	70	54,3	54,3	54,3
	Female	59	45,7	45,7	100,0
	Total	129	100,0	100,0	

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b. Instruments

In this study, the data was collected from two main sources: Foreign Language Anxiety in Young Adolescents in a Virtual Environment Questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The researcher took certain parts from Horwitz et. al (1986)'s Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and Kaisar and Chowdhury (2020)'s Foreign Language Virtual Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLVCAS); modified them into more convenient statements for teen students and created Foreign Language Anxiety in Young Adolescents in a Virtual Environment Questionnaire. It consists of 31 items and is divided into two parts: (1) Foreign Language Anxiety (first 10 questions) and (2) Virtual Classroom Experiences (last 21 questions). This questionnaire uses 5- point Likert Scale to score the items ranging from 1 to 5; strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4), strongly agree (5). The questionnaire was translated into Turkish and Turkish version was applied to the students since their English level is not advanced, and the researcher wanted to avoid any possible confusion, misunderstanding or receive correct data.
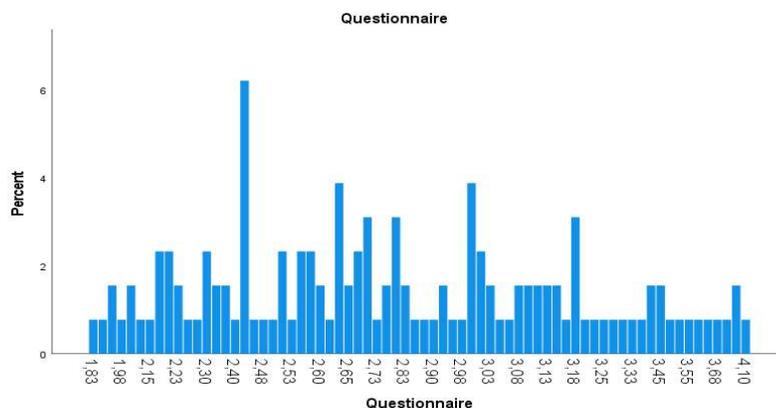
As a qualitative data source, semi-structured interviews were put into use. Interviews were held with 12 students. Questions were translated into Turkish to provide a sense of safe space for the students and later translated to English by the researcher. Each participant is asked 10 questions and when they needed further information/explanation, the researcher explained the questions clearly. Each one of the interviews lasted around 10 minutes.

SPSS 28 is used to analyse the data obtained from the questionnaires. The anxiety levels of the participants were determined by using descriptive statistics. Content analysis was used to analyse semi-structured interviews to focus on students' perspectives based on Creswell's method of content analysis. The answers were categorized to find common and recurring themes. They were explained in detail to determine FLA and its sources.

4. Results & discussion

129 participants from Grades 5, 6 and 7 were selected randomly using the convenient sampling method from a foundation school in Istanbul, Turkey. This questionnaire is designed to analyse the FLA levels of the participants in face to face and in virtual classrooms as well as researching their technophobia, their attitude towards participation and communication in virtual and face to face classrooms, physical and mental health issues in virtual classrooms, and online test taking.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Test on Likert Scale (1-5)

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tel: +90 505 7958124, +90 216 773 0 616 | **phone:** +90 505 7958124, +90 216 773 0 616

The descriptive statistics of the questionnaire on a Likert Scale (1-5) are provided in Table 2. According to Horwitz et al. (2010), students with mean score of 1-2 are anxious, students who scored around 3 are slightly anxious, and if a student scores around 4-5, s/he considered to be highly anxious.

In the light of the data obtained from Table 2, the mean score of the participants' FLA level is 2,77 reflecting that most of the participants have a low level of FLA. However, the student with the highest anxiety level scored 4,10 which means some highly anxious students are a part of the group as well. To find out an answer to the first question, the descriptive statistics of part A ("Foreign Language Anxiety") & B ("Virtual Classroom Experiences") of the questionnaire are compared. The lowest score in Part A is 1,85 and the highest score is 3,90. The mean is 2,85 suggesting that the participants suffer from low level of FLA in face-to-face classrooms. However, in Part B, the lowest score is 1,60 and the highest score is 2,70. Considering these data, it can be inferred that even though higher scores can be encountered in Part B, the mean is lower suggesting lower levels of FLA in virtual classrooms.

To find out the correlation between FLA in face to face and virtual classrooms, Pearson Correlation coefficient has been used. Based on the results, (r=0,398) suggests that there is a weak positive correlation. It can further be interpreted that virtual education lowers FLA levels of students.

To fully understand which features of online education increase/decrease FLA in young adolescents, this part of the research was separated into seven main headlines: technophobia, participation and communication in a virtual environment, partnership, connection issues, online test taking, physical and mental health, fear of making mistakes in a virtual environment.

In the questionnaire, item 12 "I am not very confident with using technology" serves as a point to measure whether there are any participants suffering from technophobia in this study. 37% of the participants do not think that they are struggling with the use of technology. The number of students who think they are having trouble with virtual world is 12%. Overall, almost half of the participants do not have technophobia (57,2%) and it does not affect their FLA levels negatively in virtual classrooms.

Based on the answers of item 6 "I find it easy to participate in the foreign language activities in front of teachers and classmates in real classroom" 27,1 % of the students think it is easy to participate in the lesson in front of their teacher and peers. However, more than half of the participants (53,5%) believe the otherwise scenario is true. Based on the answers given to item 15 "I find it easy to participate in the foreign language activities in virtual classroom" the majority (49,6%) of the participants find it easy to participate in virtual classrooms. However, the participants who feel more involved in face-to-face lessons are 64,3%. That is, participants believe that face to face lessons are more gripping.

Group work or pair work is one of the methods that has been used quite often in foreign language learning. However, creating a group/pair work environment in virtual classrooms can be hard. The answers given to Item 17 "I feel incomplete when I can't reinforce what I have learned with a partner" presents that 32,6% of the participants strongly disagree and 26,4 % disagree to the fact that they cannot reinforce the subjects they have learned when they are not a part of a group or pair work.

Participants of the study are asked whether they fear to be disconnected during online lessons. The results of item 19 present that most of the participants (55,9%) do not suffer from any state of anxiousness towards disconnection or not sharing the same physical space with the instructor.

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Online test taking has been a great topic of debate in the education community. Taking a test online provides the test taker with faster results, less human error on marking, a much more economic and environment-friendly process, high security, and reliability for the results. It is also very popular among young adolescents and teenagers since it is more relaxing for digital natives. Item 21 asks students whether they feel more comfortable when they take an online test rather than a paper-pen test. Results reflect that more than half of the students (58,1%) feel more comfortable taking an online test.

Fear of making mistakes and being judged by the instructor or peers are big triggers for language learners with FLA. They feel nervous and reluctant to participate and even to show up to class. To see the level of participants' fear of making mistakes in virtual classrooms, item 29 was created. 42,7% of the participants feel less scared of making mistakes in online lessons.

Another crucial point in online education is the lack of physical activities and the feeling of solitude. Item 23 was created to find an answer to whether students feel anxious regarding their physical and mental health during their virtual lessons in front of computers. 40,4% of the participants agree and 42,7% of the participants do not agree with this premise. Although such issues could be considered as one of the downsides of virtual classrooms, it does not necessarily cause higher anxiety among the participants.

As the final step of the research, semi structured interviews were held with 12 students who has the highest level of anxiety to have a deeper insight on students' awareness of FLA, their FLA levels in virtual classrooms and to figure out what could be done to improve FLA levels in face-to-face and virtual classrooms. The answers of the participants were analysed based on five common themes: main triggers of FLA, teacher & student interaction, anxiety levels in virtual classroom, sense of isolation and solitude, general advantages & disadvantages of virtual education.

According to the answers of the participants the main triggers of FLA as public speaking, fear of judgement, fear of mispronunciation and fear of making mistakes. The participants stated that expressing themselves in public in a foreign language triggers their anxiety and makes them feel more nervous. When the participants were asked "do you feel ensured when you have eye contact with your teacher?" 3 out of 12 participants admitted that they felt much better when they had non-verbal interaction with their teacher. Yet, 4 out of 12 participants reported that they felt quite bad when they had eye contact with the teacher. When they were asked whether it was easier to reach and communicate with the teacher in virtual classrooms in question 5; 5 out of 12 students replied that face to face communication was better since they could find their teacher anywhere at school and talking face to face with people is easier than typing or sending emails, which takes   a lot of time. However, 7 out of 12 participants reported that virtual classrooms were efficient medium for an easier access to the teacher. In line with the answers given above, in interview question 6, students were asked "do you feel safer and less anxious in a virtual classroom, if so, how?" and their answers reflected that they felt safer and more comfortable. In question 2 students were asked "do you feel isolated during virtual classes?" A great number of participants asserted that they did not because they were already a part of that community through virtual devices. Students were asked to further explain the advantages and disadvantages of virtual education. Most of their answers suggested quite a lot of positivity towards virtual classrooms. They mainly expressed that it was more comfortable, timesaving and less stressful. The participants also suggested that virtual education saves a lot of time and energy, and they have plenty of time left to study as well as play. However, there are of course certain shortcomings of virtual education. Students explained them, such as the lack of interaction and physical activities during break times and lack of

school trips. Considering the fondness of sports and physical activities and high energy of younger students, their desire for physically active break time activities is understandable.

For the final interview question, the participants were asked if they would like to experience their entire foreign language education in virtual classrooms. They expressed a preference towards a hybrid education. Although there are multiple positive effects of virtual education on students' FLA, due to the points of socialization and physical activities, the participants prefer to receive a foreign language education which provides them with what they mentally and physically need.

Based on the data collected from the questionnaire, it is reflected that FLA levels are lower in virtual classrooms; therefore, online education can be utilized as a great tool as the future of education and a remedy for students with anxiety, especially FLA. Although some educators believe that foreign language education requires face-to-face interactions and teacher's intervention to the student in times when students get distracted, majority of the foreseeable negative outcomes can be fixed and/or overcome by simple adjustments. The interesting point of this research is that majority of the students believe face-to-face classrooms to be more overwhelming when they are asked to choose. As a matter of fact, certain aspects of face-to-face classrooms such as eye-contact, active use of body language, and corrective feedback are quite intimidating to the students. That is why, this study also aimed to raise awareness over the fact that some actions which teachers consider very effective and calming for the students may have the exact opposite effect over the students, especially students with high level of FLA. Accordingly, instructors (especially the teachers of younger leaners) need to bear in mind that one size does not fit all and methods/materials which turn out well with a group of leaners can actually lead a student to get intimidated, anxious and eventually lose the will to learn.

Regarding the age of the participants and, as forementioned, their partake in digital world, virtual education and being a part of the virtual world and an online community affected their will to learn, emotional state and eagerness positively. When the students are asked whether they believe participation is easier in virtual or face to face classrooms, they suggested that communication with the teacher and participating in the classes are easier in virtual classrooms. They also suggested that they are in control in virtual classrooms, and it makes them feel so much better and less stressful. Considering that students with high levels of FLA feel that they need as little intervention and interaction as possible, creating a world which they can be the captain of their own ship is an exceptional way of motivating and leading them towards success. Presenting such students with more opportunities to be more autonomous learners will surely lead them to more success and a more positive attitude towards foreign language learning. In addition, fear of making mistakes, another crucial trigger for FLA sufferers, is severely reduced in virtual classrooms as there are no other student and/or teacher physically exist in the same room to judge them. Finally, the data on test taking reflects that online testing also creates a less intimidating exam environment which helps reducing FLA levels of students.

The data collected from semi-structured interviews proposes that highly anxious students find virtual learning environment more comforting. Many teachers believe that using eye-contact and body language is a powerful tool to ensure the learner. However, if the student is suffering from FLA, this tool can backfire, and such students would feel more intimidated and anxious. The data presents that receiving online education calms the student and enhance their focus, or even their enthusiasm and participation. Once the level of anxiety falls away, success will follow.

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Although there are certain disadvantages of virtual classrooms in terms of educators and students, creating more inclusive virtual classrooms, keeping lesson time shorter, enabling students to move in front of the screens occasionally, coming up with creative ways to form group/pair activities, and finally making sure that the classroom is a safe space are some ways of eliminating FLA and boosting engagement in virtual classrooms.

5. Conclusion & implications

This research aimed to find out the effects of virtual education in relation to foreign language anxiety in young adolescents (age 10-14) and to explore the relation between FLA in face-to-face classrooms and virtual classrooms. To discover the answers to the questions asked before, 129 students who study at a foundation middle school in Istanbul, Turkey were given a questionnaire. To further explain students' own perspectives, semi-structured interviews were conducted. In consideration of the findings from the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, the mean score of the students who have taken the questionnaire is 2,77 which present a group with mediocre level of anxiety. However, students with high level of anxiety (e.g. 4,10; 3,68; 3,65) also exist within the group. Based on the research questions and the data presented, virtual education helps reducing FLA in young adolescents. Students with high levels of anxiety prefer virtual classrooms since it enables them to feel in control, less stressful and more comfortable. Eliminating the constant fear of judgment enables them to be more successful and develop a more positive attitude towards foreign language learning. Although there have been certain drawbacks of online education such as physical and mental issues, connection issues or lack of socializing, to eliminate or at least decrease the level of FLA virtual education can be considered as a great tool. With the Covid-19, virtual classrooms have become a new reality to the education community, and it turns out that this new system is here to stay and to serve as a big remedy for the students suffering from FLA. In that sense, receiving online education calms the student and enhances their focus, or even their enthusiasm and participation. Once the level of anxiety falls away, success will follow.

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