



# The Effects of Virtual Education On Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety in Saudi Learners of Chinese

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the effects of virtual education on foreign language classroom anxiety in university learners of Mandarin Chinese at the University of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Studies of foreign language anxiety have been conducted broadly in the context of actual classrooms and have specifically focused on English, which is widely spoken worldwide. This study bridges the gap in this area as it deals with the context of virtual education, which was applied suddenly due to the spread of COVID-19 in 2020, and on a language that is rarely spoken in Saudi Arabia. The aim of this study is to provide educators and practitioners in the field of foreign language teaching with insights into possible future applications of virtual educational tools. Quantitative and Qualitative methods were applied to collect data for this study of 28 sophomore students in the department of Chinese Language. A questionnaire was conducted, based on Al-Saraj's (2014) Arabic Foreign Language Anxiety Questionnaire (AFLAQ), a modified version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Questionnaire (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). Data from interviews with the participants and the instructor were used to validate the quantitative data and to understand in greater depth the participants' experiences with virtual education. According to the participants, virtual education greatly reduced feelings of anxiety due to the absence of anxiety-provoking factors in physical classrooms. Results indicated that foreign language classroom in this context is caused by technical issues and the uniqueness of the language. Blended learning was recommended by almost all the participants in this study to be applied in the future by incorporating technology in the education systems more effectively to maximize the benefit of both modes of communication.

**Keywords:** virtual education, Mandarin Chinese, COVID-19, foreign language anxiety.



## Introduction

In 2019, the Saudi government invested in various fields with China and decided to offer Mandarin Chinese language in selected schools and universities. Unfortunately, this decision coincided with the sudden global shift to virtual education prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this shift in the mode of education was not preplanned, the Saudi education systems have taken extra effort to maintain the quality of education and learning outcomes with tutorial videos and technical support services (Alnofaie, 2020). This is evident by the unexpected high performance of students of Chinese at the University of Jeddah despite the announcement of the quarantine in early March 2020. Until the end of April 2021, the Saudi government promoted virtual education as part of the strict precautions to limit the spread of the virus. This article investigates the effects of virtual classrooms on learners' anxiety provoked by the atmosphere of physical classrooms. The past few years have seen a growing interest in studies of foreign-language learning anxiety; however, there have been relatively few studies of the effectiveness of virtual classrooms in relation to anxiety about learning rarely-spoken foreign languages. The study uses quantitative and qualitative research methods to answer the following questions:

In the absence of physical classrooms, does virtual education reduce foreign language learning anxiety for students of Mandarin Chinese in Saudi universities?

How can virtual education be implemented in the Saudi Arabian education systems in the future?

The first section of this article contextualizes the study, followed by a literature review of studies of foreign language classroom anxiety, and then a description of the data collection and data analysis. The conclusion reports the main findings and pedagogical implications of this study.

## Context of the study

The emergence of Mandarin Chinese in Saudi Arabia

China is one of the largest economies in the world. As a result, Mandarin Chinese, a member of the Sino-Tibetan language family and the official language of China, has become a global language, attracting a growing number of learners worldwide, with both economic and political motivations. Following the Second World War, Chinese was taught in the United States, and this interest spread to various European countries including France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Spain (Alshammari, 2020). Interest in learning Chinese is widespread in Africa; for example, in Uganda, learning Chinese is compulsory for high school students, and in Kenya, Chinese lessons were added to elementary school curricula in 2020 (Yinka, 2018). Mandarin Chinese has also attracted attention in the Arab world. In 2019, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia signed 35 agreements with China, with a value of \$28 billion. These agreements covered different fields such as productive energy, technology, modern industries, and medical research, resulting in new job opportunities. In Saudi Arabia, Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) has been offered in selected schools and universities since 2020, though Chinese is rarely spoken there. The University of Jeddah was one of the



first universities in Saudi Arabia to establish a Chinese language department offering a bachelor's degree in Chinese.

The gap between CFL and Arabic is significant in all areas, including writing, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and culture, which creates many challenges for Saudi learners who need to memorize the strokes and components of characters (Alshammari, 2020). The logographic writing system of Chinese, with over 47,000 characters in the Kangxi Dictionary, is a notable challenge for learners; however, Modern Chinese contains approximately 2,500 common characters (Huang, 2009), which is more manageable but can still be intimidating to new learners. Tones are also considered difficult for Saudi learners, because in Arabic, tones are used for emphasis or emotion, but in Chinese they are used to distinguish meaning.

Learners of CFL need certain cognitive demands to process semantic, phonological, orthographic, and grammatical information, which "include the need to produce lexical tones, be familiar with the extensive use of homophony, recognize tone alteration, be aware of a broad range of semantic changes" (Alshammari, 2020, p. 78). Meeting these demands takes a great deal of time and effort.

#### Virtual Education in 2020-21

The spread of COVID-19 in 2020 prompted a full shift to virtual education in much of the world. Virtual teaching and learning can be delivered either asynchronously or synchronously. Unlike synchronous modes of education, "asynchronous online communication does not require the real-time participation of instructors and students, which can be supported through tools such as e-mails, discussion boards, blogs, wikis, or video/audio recordings" (Huang & Hsiao, 2012, p. 15). On the other hand, synchronous e-learning requires software that allows "students and instructors to communicate orally, exchange messages through typing, upload PowerPoint presentations, transmit video, [or] surf webs together" (McBrien, Jones & Cheng, 2009, p. 2). Rudd and Rudd (2014) point out that in synchronous sessions, non-verbal communication signals make students feel more connected and engaged; thus, defeating the feeling of isolation. In Saudi Arabia, Blackboard (BB) is a common teaching and learning platform in most universities. It is normally used as a complementary tool to in-class teaching in higher education, but had not been used effectively by all instructors prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the wake of COVID-19, synchronous and asynchronous features of virtual learning were essential in providing alternative assessment strategies and achieving the best learning outcomes. Virtual classrooms provide live, contextual, and interactive environments for students practicing social distancing.

Many studies have investigated the effectiveness of virtual language learning environments (VLLEs). Instructors at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah have expressed a positive attitude toward virtual classrooms in the distance learning program, indicating that virtual classrooms facilitate communication with the learners (Al Kahtani, 2010). Huang and Hsiao (2012) also reported that university students appreciate the communication opportunities that an asynchronous environment provides. On the other hand, other studies have identified the absence of direct communication as a weakness of online learning (Al-Nofaie, 2020). Anas (2020)



confirms that although students appreciate the interactivity of online tools, they value blended learning more.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of virtual education in reducing language classroom anxiety for Chinese learners in Saudi Arabia and the best way of using virtual educational tools according to students' opinions of their experiences with this mode of education during the quarantine period.

## Literature Review

Feeling of worry, nervousness, and stress when learning a foreign language are symptoms of foreign language anxiety (FLA), which can differ with each learner. Horwitz et al. (1986, p. 128) defined FLA as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to language learning arising from the uniqueness of the (foreign) language learning process," which affects both the nervous system and the body as a whole. Accordingly, foreign language classroom is considered one of the unfamiliar situations that leads sometimes to anxiety which is a normal feeling caused by "any internal or external changes, uncertain situations, or feeling of uncertainty" (Aljadili, 2014). He further defines anxiety as "a negative feeling that overcomes one's emotions that include fear, apprehension and worry" (Aljadili, 2014, p. 36). MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) identify three types of anxiety: trait, state, and situation-specific anxiety. Trait anxiety is a stable personal characteristic marked by easily becoming anxious; state anxiety is "a relatively temporary feeling of worry experienced in relation to some particular event or act" (Brown, 2007, p. 390). Situation-specific anxiety is caused by certain sets of conditions or stimuli; for example, in the context of education, such situations may be related to public speaking, completing examinations, and speaking in class (Ellis, 2008).

Foreign language anxiety is a particular type of situation-specific anxiety, with many potential causes. Tsiprakides and Keramida (2009), for instance, found that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking factor in foreign-language classrooms. Unfortunately, many language instructors relate the unwillingness of students to speak in class to lack of motivation or general poor performance. Yan and Horwitz's (2008) study of a sample of 532 Chinese university students studying English as a foreign language revealed that language anxiety can be related to social issues such as students' feelings of superiority or inferiority in their families. Teaching methods might also provoke stress and anxiety for learners from different cultural backgrounds. For example, Chinese learners of English develop stress when deviating from the formal student-teacher relationship (Yan & Horwitz, 2008). MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) noted that foreign language classroom anxiety is caused mostly by excessive self-evaluation, frustration over failure or potential failure, and concern over others' evaluation. These worries will eventually lead students to waste the cognitive resources they need to complete the task and will disrupt processing of information, thus slowing down the learning process and lowering expectations of learning outcomes (Dewaele, 2007). FLA can result in poor learning due to disappointment in one's performance and to fear of failure (Ehrman, 1996). According to Krashen's



affective filter hypothesis (1982), anxiety blocks linguistic input from entering a learner's mind.

Anxious learners may tend toward general avoidance behaviours such as missing classes, arriving late, or withdrawing from the course; or may have physical symptoms such as headache, sweating, heartbeat, muscle tension, dry mouth, or inability to reproduce the sounds of the target language that have been practiced repeatedly (Tanveer, 2007). Tanveer also notes that anxiety can have psychological manifestations such as feelings of embarrassment, inability to recall information, fear, or going blank. Learners may also tend to avoid competing with others or putting themselves in risky situations when communicating complex ideas (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; MacIntyre, Noels, & Clement, 1997). These behaviours place extra burdens on the learner, and the instructor may misinterpret resulting silence as a lack of interest in the subject.

Yahya (2013) investigated the factors that lead to speaking anxiety among 104 English language learners at the Arab American University in Palestine. The highest factor as perceived by the subjects was the fear of negative feedback, followed by communication anxiety and test anxiety. Woodrow (2006) found that the most frequent source of anxiety was interacting with native speakers.

Many scholars have considered language anxiety a static feature of a learner's personality. Recent research, however, regards anxiety as dynamic and dependent on a particular context. This leads to a distinction between feeling anxious when giving a presentation but not when talking to other peers in the classroom. In other studies, a certain amount of tension is sometimes perceived positively, as it leads the learner to put in extra effort before, for example, an oral presentation, giving the learner the perfect combination of motivation and focus to succeed. Spielmann and Radnofsky (2001) used the term "tension" rather than "anxiety," which they consider negative.

Recent studies have focused on improving oral proficiency and acquiring communicative skills through web-based instruction (WBI) programs (Lee & Pyo, 2003) which create a realistic language learning environment by providing interactive features that can be easily used. Certain principles relating to oral production of the language should be taken into account to create a successful online learning environment: creating authentic activities, providing learners with opportunities for practical reflection, adopting methods that lead to cooperative construction of knowledge, and coaching the learners to enhance the proposed learning outcomes (Lee et al., 2005). These factors contribute to the effectiveness of WBI in providing learners with meaningful contexts that encourage active engagement, collaborative learning, and increased motivation.

Other studies have also proved that computer-assisted language learning instruction contributes to a positive and relaxed environment among EFL learners. Balcikanli (2012) examined two groups consisting of eight Turkish EFL learners studying English in Turkey and seven American learners studying Turkish in the USA, in which Second Life produced authentic interaction with native speakers and was used as a bridge for cultural competence and a less threatening learning environment despite the different challenges that the learners encountered. Aljadili (2014)



recommended the necessity of virtual classes for developing language students' speaking competence and enhancing the teaching and learning processes. In terms of linguistic anxiety, Thompson and Ku (2005) reported that Chinese learners of English feel more confident when sharing their opinions in asynchronous online forums than in face-to-face discussions, as they have more time to understand the language before they communicate with others (Zhao & McDougall, 2008).

Most of the aforementioned studies of foreign language anxiety are concerned with English, a widely spoken foreign language. However, this study focuses on foreign language anxiety among learners of a rarely spoken language in the context of virtual education.

## Methodology

This study used mixed methods to investigate the effects of virtual education on foreign language classroom anxiety among Saudi university learners of Mandarin Chinese, and to seek future opportunities in implementing virtual education in the Saudi Arabian education systems. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in the stages of data collection and data analysis.

The 28 female sophomore participants in this study were newcomers to the Chinese language department at the University of Jeddah. They were already familiar with learning a foreign language due to the inclusion of English in the school education system in Saudi Arabia. However, a high majority of the students do not have a good background in the Chinese language (table 1).

The quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire based on Al-Saraj's (2014) Arabic Foreign Language Anxiety Questionnaire (AFLAQ), a modified version of the Foreign Language classroom Anxiety Questionnaire (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). Since this study is concerned with oral production anxiety in virtual classrooms, a few items of AFLAQ were selected and modified, and others were added to suit the nature of the virtual classrooms. The questionnaire items were designed to measure participants' point of view on a 5-point scale. The data were analyzed with descriptive statistics.

For more in-depth information, the participants were interviewed individually over a one-month schedule via Zoom meeting rooms, a virtual platform, or phone calls, to elicit qualitative data. These meetings focused on the participants' experience with anxiety in actual classrooms when they were studying English, a widely spoken foreign language in Saudi Arabia, in contrast with their experience learning Chinese, a rarely spoken foreign language in Saudi Arabia, in virtual classrooms. The unexpected high performance of these learners, especially in the oral production of the video clips they recorded, provoked an interest in the role of virtual education in reducing foreign language anxiety among Saudi university students of Mandarin Chinese during COVID-19. Participants are identified in this study by initials. An interview with their instructor also was conducted to evaluate students' progress throughout the 2020-21 academic year and to discuss the challenges they faced with the sudden shift to virtual education.



All ethical issues were considered, for example, the attached cover letter to the questionnaire explained the purpose of the study and confirmed the anonymity and confidentiality of the identity of the participants. In addition, the freedom to withdraw at any point of their participation was given to all participants in this study.

The analysis and discussion of the data in this study are meant to provide insights for educators and practitioners of foreign language teaching with regard to the possible application of virtual education tools when in-person learning is once again feasible.

### Data Analysis

This section examines the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire and elaborates upon them with the help of the interview data, in order to provide a more in-depth discussion of the participants' insights on and experiences with virtual education and its effectiveness at reducing foreign language classroom anxiety.

The students were first asked about their reasons for learning Chinese, as shown in Table 1:

**Table 1. Participants' reasons for learning Chinese language**

Statement	Strongly disagree	agree	neutral	disagree	Strongly disagree
I like learning foreign languages.	17.9	14.3	14.3	32.1	21.4
I am interested in learning Chinese.	57.1	17.9	14.3	3.6	7.1
I am fascinated by Chinese culture.	42.9	28.6	17.9	7.1	3.6
It is a new major in the university.	71.4	10.7	14.3	0	3.6
It is the future for job opportunities.	85.7	10.7	3.6	0	0

As mentioned above, the participants were familiar with learning English as a foreign language. However, the participants' answers in table 1 demonstrate that only a few were interested in learning foreign languages in general. When investigating this point during the interviews, I found out that many of the students did not have good experiences with English and would feel pressure in English classrooms. Accordingly, their experiences with foreign language anxiety became a main interest of this study. Most of the students shared interesting and related stories; for instance, RQ reported that "I used to feel afraid of making mistakes in my English class or even say my opinion about something. My low marks made me decide to stay silent because I thought I would be safe. I used to get anxious and insecure especially in oral presentations." RZ similarly reported that, when giving a presentation in front of others, "I get scared to a point that I forget what I want to say even when I am well prepared. My first presentation was the worst as it did not go well because of my anxiety. I heard comments that shook my confidence." These examples point to other factors that provoke foreign classroom anxiety, such as excessive self-evaluation and concern about evaluation by others (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991), and the fear of negative feedback (Yahya, 2013). MA also had negative feelings, especially when communicating with Arab people in English, because she thinks that they anticipate



others' mistakes to show that they are better than those others. She added, "I used to fear giving a presentation because I am concerned of how they would evaluate me." The fear of negative feedback is provoked by the widespread presence of English speakers in Saudi Arabia, which leads to the fear of negative evaluation by others.

Other social factors may also lead to foreign language classroom anxiety. For example, SS considered her social environment unsupportive because her family used to enjoy making jokes about her when she speaks English. Similarly, SH said:

Once I had a wrong answer in my English class, and everyone laughed at me. Even the teacher thought I was doing that on purpose and punished me and reported that to my mother. Then I decided to be silent, but when I had to participate, I got nervous and started to sweat.

Incidents such as these may contribute to students' low performance, which may be further misinterpreted by teachers as a lack of interest in the subject.

Other participants talked about the symptoms they feel when they are anxious, such as blushing, going blank, and being unable to recall information. RH said, "While doing my presentation, I became so conscious about the facial expressions of other students and the teacher. I have no control over my face blushing if anything went wrong." AB experienced a similar feeling when she said:

I used to prepare and practice in advance when I had a presentation, but when presenting in front of the class, I forgot many points, and I pronounced a lot of words incorrectly although I know the correct pronunciation. In the classroom I used to hear a lot of sarcasm if I mispronounced any word.

These symptoms are confirmed by Tanveer (2007), as noted earlier. Such negative feelings can also affect the cognitive resources needed for processing information and thereby slow down the learning process (Dewaele, 2007).

On the other hand, Table 1 shows that most of the participants have high motivations for learning Chinese. They are fascinated by the Chinese culture due to their high interest in watching Chinese shows and movies, as many of them revealed in the interviews. Others believe that learning Chinese can lead to future job opportunities due to the huge budget allocated for important deals with China, which prompted the inclusion of Chinese as a foreign language in selected schools and universities in Saudi Arabia in 2020. The University of Jeddah was one such university to offer a bachelor's degree in Chinese, a new major desired by most of the participants, as shown in Table 1. Other reasons were added by the participants. For example, SS wants to be the Saudi Ambassador to China and the official speaker of the country, and RQ wants to be an interpreter in the ministry of foreign affairs. The participants perceived the Chinese language as a gateway to top unique opportunities because it is a rarely spoken language in Saudi Arabia. Self-satisfaction was another reason given for learning Chinese, as expressed by AB, who said, "I feel proud of myself that I am learning one of the most difficult languages. It is a challenge for me, but I am going to succeed. This feeling makes me determined to learn more languages in the future." Their instructor regarded the learners' high performance as a sign of their interest in the subject matter and their motivation to learn.





The participants were then asked to rate their emotional state in the virtual Chinese classroom, especially in the oral production of the language, to find out if they experience the same feelings in their physical English classroom (Table 2).

**Table 2. Emotional state of the learners in the virtual Chinese classroom**

Statement	Strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	Strongly disagree
I feel anxious when the teacher asks a question that I have not prepared for.	7.1	7.1	17.9	35.7	32.1
I fear asking the teacher in my Chinese language virtual classroom.	7.1	7.1	25	28.6	32.1
I feel anxious when I see classmates better than me in class.	17.9	21.4	7.1	21.4	32.2
I feel anxious about speaking Chinese in front of other students.	7.1	17.9	21.4	25	28.6
I fear pronouncing words incorrectly in my virtual class.	25	28.6	17.9	10.7	17.9
I feel anxious when I want to volunteer to say something but cannot find the proper words to say in my Chinese virtual class.	17.9	46.4	14.3	10.7	7.1
I feel anxious when I do not understand what the teacher is saying.	25	32.1	14.3	10.7	17.9
I feel nervous when giving a presentation in front of my classmates.	17.9	46.4	14.3	10.7	10.7

Table 2 shows that, unlike in physical English classrooms, the participants feel more comfortable in the virtual classes as most of them do not experience feelings of worry, nervousness, and stress when communicating in their virtual Chinese classroom. 67.8% of the participants do not feel anxious when the teacher asks a question for which they have not prepared. 60.7% of them reported that they do not fear asking questions in their Chinese language virtual classroom, which indicates that virtual classrooms can be considered a safe environment in which shy students can express their opinions easily and ask questions without hesitation. AH, a shy student, said, "I feel comfortable when talking online, and I can participate more effectively." SS shared a similar opinion about being more engaged and productive when engaging in discussions with her classmates on the discussion boards. GM, another shy student, said, "I feel relaxed in virtual classes which increased my participation in class, unlike actual classrooms where I used to hear my heartbeat when the teacher asks questions in class." When the instructor was asked about the effects of virtual education on foreign classroom anxiety, she said:

people in general behind the screen are more talkative and courageous, unlike their behaviour in real life. The students, even the shy ones, are more engaged with the virtual class through their participation or simply with their comments in the chat box, which I believe enables them to ask questions and creates a more friendly atmosphere



through sending emojis and comments. In actual classrooms, shy students usually feel reluctant and embarrassed to produce different sounds, especially sounds they perceive as funny or unusual.

She added that the instructor has a role in promoting a safe and less threatening atmosphere in class, by providing positive reinforcement and constructive feedback without making fun of students' mistakes and not letting students make fun of each other's mistakes.

Table 2 also shows that the majority of the participants do not care about being evaluated by other students in class, as they do not feel anxious speaking Chinese in front of other students because they are almost of the same level; therefore, "there are no classmates better than others but there are some fast learners and hard workers than others," as RZ expressed. The instructor agrees that the relatively low number of Chinese speakers in Saudi Arabia and the similarity of students' performance levels encourage learners' participation and engagement without hesitation. Accordingly, the students do not consider social factors particularly anxiety-provoking. What does provoke their anxiety is the difficulty of the language itself, especially the production and memorization of lexical tones that are used to distinguish meanings, unlike the use of tones in Arabic. Almost all of the participants, who put in much time and effort trying to memorize tones and characters, pointed this out in the interviews. Accordingly, Table 2 shows that most of the participants feel anxious when they do not understand what the teacher is saying, or when they are trying to volunteer to say something but cannot find the proper words. They fear pronouncing the words incorrectly because "it is difficult for them to distinguish between different tones," according to MR. Most of the participants reported that they feel nervous when giving a presentation in front of their classmates. TH further explained that this is because "they do not feel fully confident about mastering the language itself."

Table 3 shows the general perceptions of the participants about virtual education and their experience with the sudden use of technology:

**Table 3. General perceptions of the participants about virtual education**

Statement	Strongly disagree	agree	neutral	disagree	Strongly disagree
Virtual education reduces foreign language classroom anxiety.	25	39.3	21.4	7.1	7.1
I get worried about being disconnected during virtual classes.	17.9	35.7	17.9	14.3	14.3
I feel isolated during virtual classes.	25	32.1	14.3	17.9	10.7

Most of the participants reflected a positive attitude about the ability of virtual education to reduce foreign language classroom anxiety (see Table 3). Three of the participants said that in virtual classrooms they focused only on what they are saying in the absence of the actual classrooms' anxiety-provoking factors such as direct eye contact, being concerned about physical appearance, or listening to sarcasm or jokes. RH pointed out that "talking behind the screen makes me feel that I am wearing a mask, which makes me feel comfortable." Four of the participants appreciated the



opportunities provided by virtual education to practice speaking skills in different situations, whether in synchronous or asynchronous online communication. For instance, AH said, “we find it very interesting to participate in discussion boards and blogs, or when we work as a group in producing video clips in different events, for example, the Saudi National Day, Teachers’ Day, and the International Day for Breast Cancer.” Thus, virtual education promotes collaborative learning and objective thinking. Nearly ten learners expressed that they prefer virtual education as they can manage their time more effectively and they do not have to worry about transportation. In terms of the effectiveness of virtual education, the instructor reported:

virtual classrooms defeat the feeling of anxiety as students feel safe behind the screen; students get equal opportunities in terms of distance unlike actual classrooms where attention only given to those who sit in front rows; the instructor can share her screen with the learners and all of them can follow equally, recorded lectures makes it easy for the students to catch up if they miss the class or if they did not understand; students get immediate feedback on their participation, and it forces the instructors to be more creative in delivering the lessons by uploading videos, creating discussion boards, assigning group tasks... and so on.

One of the challenges that learners face in virtual classes is being disconnected, as more than 50% of the participants indicated. However, almost all the participants were happy about the idea of having all lectures recorded and available for them in case they missed classes or were disconnected, and they recommended having their lectures recorded in the future when in-person learning is feasible again. Despite the advantages of virtual education, most of the participants felt isolated by the absence of face-to-face communication and direct contact with their classmates and instructors. RD admitted that although she feels secured and confident when communicating online, she would eventually need to communicate face-to-face, so she would rather practice facing an audience. MR said that “going to the university and attending classes makes [her] feel more energetic and productive.” For RD, “home is distracting when you do not have a private space for taking your virtual classes, especially if you are distracted by your little brother or sister.”

Most of the participants valued the experience of online learning, and expressed that it can be used in the future as a supplement to other learning tools but not as a replacement for traditional in-class teaching. The instructor also reported that the students perceive the university as a place in which they can socialize, and actual classes have advantages that virtual classrooms do not. She added that educators and practitioners should consider blended learning an option for future courses.

## Discussion and conclusion

The themes that have been observed throughout the data analysis can be classified as physical, psychological, and social sources of foreign language classroom anxiety. Physical sources are those that are caused by the context itself, the actual classrooms, where the learner faces the instructor and other learners. These sources of classroom anxiety are especially prominent in the oral production of the language, and lead some



learners to experience physical symptoms such as blushing, shivering, hesitancy, or inability to produce the correct pronunciation. Most of the learners in this study experienced this feeling in physical English classrooms when they were in schools. Psychological sources are those that are caused by excessive self-evaluation and the fear of being evaluated by others, which may lead the learner to avoid participating due to frustration. Unfortunately, family, friends, and classmates can be social sources of learners' anxiety if they laugh at or otherwise comment on learners' mistakes when they communicate in the foreign language.

In the case of virtual classrooms that lack the typical features of physical classrooms, foreign language anxiety may be provoked by technical issues or by learner sensitivity to the degree of distance or difference between their first language and the one being learned. The fear of disconnection and the experience of bad Internet connections can interfere with effective participation and evaluation in virtual sessions. However, this problem is not a major one, since all lectures are recorded and available for all learners. The most anxiety-provoking factor for the Saudi learners of Chinese interviewed for this study is the uniqueness of the foreign language, which requires certain cognitive demands to process semantic, phonological, orthographic, and grammatical information. In virtual classrooms, the learners use most of their cognitive resources on language production rather than on other language-anxiety-provoking factors.

Accordingly, the term "anxiety" in this study can be replaced with the term "tension" in its positive sense, because this level of stress pushed learners to put in more effort and spend more time coping with the challenges of learning Chinese, a finding that ties neatly with the results of Spielmann and Radnofsky's (2001) study. The data of this study indicate that learners' high performance contributes to their motivation to learn this language, as does their belief that it is a gateway to unique job opportunities because of the Saudi government's budget allocations for deals with China in various sectors. In addition, the relatively low number of Mandarin Chinese speakers in Saudi Arabia gives learners communicative confidence, "which is shaped by two variables: how relaxed L2 learners are and how competent (or incompetent) they feel about their L2 ability" (Clement, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003; cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 86). In this case, virtual classrooms provide learners with a relaxing atmosphere, and the similarity of all learners' performance levels at this stage promotes their communicative confidence.

In conclusion, virtual classes have unique characteristics that help to provide students with a safe and less threatening environment, which in turn increases their motivation towards participation and interaction. Virtual education, with its synchronous and asynchronous modes, allows learners to practice speaking skills in different situations more easily. It encourages collaborative learning through technology integration. It also improves the instructors' teaching methods, as they have to be more creative in providing more interactive activities and different forums of discussion, and it provides learners with positive reinforcement through immediate feedback. The incorporation of technology in the education systems has become necessary, and cannot be neglected in the future. Blended learning and teaching of foreign languages



should be promoted by using virtual education as a complement to traditional in-class teaching, so that students and teachers have the benefits of both methods of communication.

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