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The impact of xenophobia on foreign language learning anxiety among Turkish University students: The case of Arabic

Mohammad Issa Alhourani, Muhammet Abazoglu², Mohammed A. Abou Adel^{*3}, Ahmad M. Al Mahamed⁴
Moustafa Mohamed Abouelnour⁵

College of Education, Arabic Language and Literature Program, Al Ain University, Abu Dhabi, UAE

Department of Eastern Languages and Literatures, Kilis 7 Aralık University Kilis, Türkiye

College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Arabic Language and Literature UAE University, Al
Ain, UAEDepartment of Languages, College of Arts, Education and Social Sciences, Abu Dhabi University Abu Dhabi,
UAECollege of Arts, Science and Information Technology, Department of Arabic, University of Khorfakkan, Sharjah,
UAE

Correspondence: drabouadel@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between xenophobia and foreign language classroom anxiety among Turkish university students studying Arabic. Using a correlational survey design, data were collected from 655 participants from Arabic Language and Literature, Arabic Translation and Interpreting, and Theology/Preparatory programs. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale and Xenophobia Scale were used with a demographic questionnaire. Results showed that female students experienced higher levels of speaking and classroom anxiety than males. Younger students (20–25) reported greater anxiety and xenophobic attitudes, while those aged 31–40 showed more interest in Arabic. Native Turkish speakers had higher anxiety and xenophobia than Kurdish and Arabic speakers. Students in Theology and Preparatory programs reported greater anxiety and xenophobia than Arabic-focused departments. Overall, xenophobia emerged as a psychological and sociocultural barrier to language learning, highlighting the need for inclusive and culturally responsive approaches that foster engagement and reduce anxiety in Arabic education.

KEYWORDS: Foreign language anxiety, xenophobia, Arabic language education, language attitudes, sociopolitical influences

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Introduction

Anxiety is a key factor influencing the language learning process and a significant psychological barrier to foreign language acquisition. According to the American Psychiatric Association, anxiety is characterized by the anticipation of potential threats or negative outcomes, accompanied by emotional and physical distress. In the context of language acquisition, Horwitz et al. (1986) characterized language anxiety as a distinct psychological phenomenon encompassing self-perceptions, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors specific to the learning process. MacIntyre (1999) defined foreign language anxiety as an emotional response characterized by stress, tension, and discomfort inherent in the challenges of learning a new language. Horwitz (2009) emphasized that language learners often struggle to express their true selves due to their limited linguistic proficiency, likening this experience to wearing clothes that do not fit well. Similarly, Horwitz (2000) suggested that increased self-awareness can lead learners to perceive others negatively, thereby increasing their anxiety levels. MacIntyre and Gardner (1993) added that repeated negative experiences during language learning can strengthen emotional responses and exacerbate feelings of anxiety. Therefore, foreign language anxiety is a multifaceted phenomenon that includes emotional and cognitive dimensions, which can significantly hinder students' desire to participate in the language learning process (Jackson, 2002), communicate effectively (MacIntyre et al., 1997), or demonstrate proficiency (Sevinc & Backus, 2017).

The importance of foreign language acquisition has increased significantly due to global connectivity and socioeconomic development. While languages like English are prominent due to their perceived benefits in areas such as economics, education, and technology, the status and public perception of other languages are often shaped by sociocultural factors. These perceptions can have negative connotations that hinder language learning. Language, as the primary means of communication, serves as a means of expressing xenophobic sentiments. Man (2016) exemplifies a broader xenophobic discourse that attributes social problems to Syrian immigrants by highlighting how Syrians are exploited in Türkiye. These narratives can negatively impact individuals' motivation to learn languages such as Arabic by reinforcing societal prejudices against cultural diversity. In this context, xenophobia contributes to the stigmatization of certain languages, ultimately creating psychological barriers to language acquisition and intercultural interaction.

The social status of a foreign language is another important factor that can influence students' motivation. While English is universally considered a critical language due to its global dominance in various fields, languages such as Arabic are often perceived as less valuable or even stigmatized. This disparity highlights the symbolic role of language in shaping xenophobic attitudes in some societies. Languages from dominant cultures tend to be readily accepted, whereas those associated with marginalized groups often face rejection. Pob (2019) has argued that xenophobic reactions to foreign languages are deeply intertwined with social, cultural, and political dynamics. For example, the rise in English acquisition among Japanese workers has been driven by neoliberal ideologies, while the priority given to Chinese and Korean has diminished due to historical hostilities (Kubota, 2016). Native English-speaking students in South Africa have reported xenophobic discrimination (Gopal, 2013). This illustrates how language intersects with national identity and social and political exclusion (Jennings, 2020). These examples demonstrate that language learning is not only an educational endeavor but also a social and political act shaped by prevalent attitudes toward nationality, culture and identity.

The socio-political dimension of language is based on its symbolic structure (Suleiman, 2013). The symbolism of language refers to the ways in which languages represent social realities and function as markers of group identity and social dynamics (Lian, 2020). This symbolic process occurs in two stages: first, signification, in which language expresses socio-political meanings in ways that seem natural or intuitive (Eckert, 2008; Johnstone, 2010; Adel, 2019); and second, approach, in which language becomes representative of broader ideologies and political positions (Suleiman, 2013). In this context, language is not only a means of communication but also a symbolic mechanism through which xenophobic attitudes are expressed and perpetuated. In the context of contemporary global migration trends, migration has emerged as a significant factor influencing attitudes toward language learning in the literature. Immigrants are often stigmatized based on religion, ethnicity, language, and culture, and host communities may perceive newcomers as threats, subjecting them to prejudicial labels often expressed through language (Wei et al., 2019). Consequently, language becomes a site where xenophobia is reflected and reproduced in the media.

Anxiety about learning Arabic is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon shaped by various cultural,

social, and psychological factors. Empirical studies have shown that students often experience heightened anxiety due to linguistic discrimination, feeling excluded, or being judged based on their Arabic proficiency. This anxiety negatively impacts students' willingness to participate in the learning process (Salhab, 2025). Furthermore, students from diverse backgrounds, such as Bosnian and Arab students, face additional pressure to achieve near-native fluency, which can reduce their motivation (Salhab 2025). Cultural expectations surrounding the Arabic language, particularly in contexts where the language is linked to complex social and political narratives, as in countries such as China, add another layer of anxiety, contributing to feelings of inadequacy and identity conflict (Lian, 2022). Psychologically, fear of making mistakes and negative self-perception are significant barriers to effective language acquisition, reducing both participation and learning outcomes (Abror & Djamilah, 2024). Research has also revealed an inverse relationship between ALLA and students' desire to communicate, with higher anxiety levels associated with decreased interaction (Zaharuddin et al., 2023). However, some researchers suggest that ALLA may also act as a motivating force, encouraging students to develop their skills and adapt to new language environments, thus highlighting the paradoxical nature of anxiety in language learning.

Despite extensive research on Arabic, few empirical studies have specifically addressed the interaction between Arabic learning anxiety and xenophobia in the Turkish context, where sociopolitical tensions and rising anti-immigrant sentiment can significantly influence student attitudes. To address this gap, this study investigated how xenophobia shapes Arabic learning anxiety and whether sociodemographic variables moderate this relationship.

Turkey, which is home to a large number of Arabic-speaking Syrian refugees, continues to experience a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment. This necessitates an investigation into whether rising anti-immigrant attitudes among university students influence levels of Arabic learning anxiety. This study explored the relationship between xenophobia and foreign language classroom anxiety among university students studying Arabic. The primary objective was to assess overall foreign language classroom anxiety, including subdimensions such as speaking anxiety in class, interest in language lessons, and anxiety when speaking with native speakers. The secondary objective was to examine how these anxiety components correlate with xenophobia across various sociodemographic variables.

1) Do university students' levels of foreign language classroom anxiety and xenophobia differ according to sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, native language, and academic department)?

2) Is there a relationship between university students' xenophobic attitudes and their Arabic language learning anxiety levels?

Methodology

Research Approach

This study employed a correlational research design within a quantitative research framework. The correlational approach allows researchers to examine relationships between two or more variables without manipulating them, aiming to identify patterns, trends, or associations rather than causal effects. This approach was deemed appropriate for exploring how foreign language learning anxiety and xenophobic attitudes interact among Turkish university students learning Arabic. The correlational design provides a practical and ethically sound way to analyze naturally occurring phenomena in educational settings.

Research Method

Given that the total population of interest was unknown, a purposive sampling technique was employed. Purposive sampling enables researchers to select participants most relevant to the research objectives, ensuring that the data collected are rich and meaningful (Şimşek, 2012). An online questionnaire was distributed to students enrolled in university departments offering Arabic as a foreign language in Turkey. A total of 655 students volunteered to participate. Participants were drawn from diverse programs, including Arabic Language and Literature, Arabic Translation and Interpreting, and Theology/Preparatory programs, to capture a broad representation of the student population.

Instruments

1. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS): Developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) and adapted into Turkish by Gürsu (2011), this scale contains 33 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Subscales measure speaking anxiety, interaction with native speakers, and overall classroom anxiety.
2. Xenophobia Scale: Developed by Van Der Veer et al. (2011) and adapted into Turkish by Özmete et al. (2018), this 11-item scale uses a 6-point Likert scoring system. Higher scores indicate stronger xenophobic attitudes.
3. Socio-Demographic Information Form: Collected background data including age, gender, native language, and academic department.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS Version 22. Normality of the data was assessed with the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test and examination of skewness and kurtosis coefficients. Based on the distribution characteristics, appropriate parametric statistical tests were employed:

- Independent samples t-tests for comparisons between two groups (e.g., gender)
- One-way ANOVA with Bonferroni post-hoc tests for multiple group comparisons (e.g., age, academic department, native language)
- Pearson correlation coefficients to evaluate relationships between continuous variables

Interpretation of correlation coefficients followed Gürbüz & Şahin (2018): $|r| = 0.30\text{--}0.70$ indicates a moderate relationship, $|r| > 0.70$ indicates a strong relationship. The significance level was set at $p < .05$. These analyses allowed for robust examination of the associations between anxiety levels, xenophobic attitudes, and sociodemographic variables.

Ethical Consideration

Ethics approval was obtained from the Kilis 7 Aralık University Human Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and data confidentiality was strictly maintained.

Reliability of Instruments

Internal consistency of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951). Interpretation criteria were: $\alpha < 0.40$ = not reliable; $0.40 \leq \alpha < 0.60$ = low reliability; $0.60 \leq \alpha < 0.80$ = acceptable reliability; $0.80 \leq \alpha \leq 1.00$ = high reliability (İslamoğlu & Alınçık, 2009).

Table.1 Reliability Analysis of Scale Scores

These results indicate that the instruments were statistically reliable and suitable for measuring the intended constructs in this study sample.

Result

The demographic profile of the participants is summarized in **Table 2**. Among the 655 students, 69.6% ($n = 456$) were female and 30.4% ($n = 199$) were male. Most participants were aged 20–25 years (83.2%, $n = 545$), with smaller groups in the 26–30 (6.7%), 31–35 (3.5%), 36–40 (3.2%), and 41 and above (3.4%) categories. Regarding native language, 74.0% ($n = 485$) spoke Turkish, 14.0% ($n = 92$) Kurdish, and 11.9% ($n = 78$) Arabic. Academic programs included Theology/Preparatory (53.6%), Arabic Language and Literature (38.0%), and Arabic Translation and Interpreting (8.4%).

Table 2. Distributions of Demographic Characteristics

Normality was assessed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test and skewness/kurtosis values. Although the K–S test was significant ($p < .05$), skewness and kurtosis values were within ± 2.0 (George & Mallery, 2010), justifying the use of parametric tests.

As shown in **Table 3**, mean values for speaking anxiety ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.96$), interaction anxiety with native speakers ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 0.99$), and general classroom anxiety ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.75$) indicate moderate levels.

Interest in Arabic classes was slightly higher ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.04$), while xenophobia scores averaged 3.14 ($SD = 1.07$).

Table.3 Findings Regarding Normality Assumption

Independent-samples t tests revealed several significant gender differences (Table 4). Female students scored significantly higher than males in classroom speaking anxiety ($M = 3.09$ vs. 2.62 , $p < .01$), interaction anxiety with native speakers ($M = 3.04$ vs. 2.63 , $p < .01$), and overall classroom anxiety ($M = 3.07$ vs. 2.67 , $p < .01$). These differences indicate that women reported greater anxiety across multiple dimensions of foreign language learning.

By contrast, gender differences were not statistically significant for either interest in foreign language classes ($M = 3.48$ vs. 3.55 , $p > .05$) or xenophobia ($M = 3.18$ vs. 3.06 , $p > .05$). Thus, gender appeared to influence language-related anxiety more strongly than motivational interest or attitudes toward out-groups.

Table 4. Findings Regarding Comparison of Scale Scores According to Gender

Note. Group comparisons were conducted using independent samples t-tests.

ANOVA results showed that younger learners scored higher on anxiety measures, while older learners reported more interest in Arabic learning (Table 5). Specifically, students aged 20–25 scored higher in speaking anxiety and general classroom anxiety than those aged 26–35 ($p < .05$). Interest in Arabic classes was greater among students aged 31–40 compared with the youngest group. Xenophobia scores also differed significantly, with 20–25-year-olds scoring higher than all older groups.

Table 5. Findings Regarding Comparison of Scale Scores According to Age

Note. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to compare age groups. Post-hoc comparisons were performed using Bonferroni tests. FL = Foreign Language.

The results of the analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed significant differences based on the native language background (Table 6). Turkish speakers reported the highest levels of classroom speaking anxiety ($m = 3.09$), interaction anxiety ($m = 3.04$), general classroom anxiety ($m = 3.06$), and xenophobic anxiety ($m = 3.32$). Kurdish speakers also showed high levels of anxiety and xenophobia, although lower than those of Turkish speakers. Native Arabic speakers consistently scored the lowest on the anxiety and xenophobia scales, suggesting that they faced fewer challenges in learning Arabic.

Regarding interest in foreign language classes, Arabic speakers reported significantly higher levels ($m = 3.96$) than Turkish ($m = 3.42$) and Kurdish ($m = 3.54$) participants, reinforcing the influence of language background on both emotional responses and motivation.

Table 6. Findings Regarding Comparison of Scale Scores According to Mother Tongue

Note: One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to compare groups based on native language. Post-hoc comparisons were performed using Bonferroni tests. FL = Foreign Language.

Academic specialization also influenced the results (Table 7). Theology/preparatory program students reported higher anxiety and xenophobia levels than Arabic language and literature or translation and interpreting students. Conversely, translation and interpreting students scored highest for interest in Arabic courses, while theology/preparatory program students scored the lowest.

Table 7. Findings Regarding Comparison of Scale Scores According to Departments

Note: One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed to compare groups by academic departments. Post hoc comparisons were conducted using Bonferroni tests. FL = Foreign Language.

Pearson's correlation analyses were performed to examine the relationship between the dimensions of xenophobia and anxiety about learning a foreign language (Table 8). The results showed a moderate positive correlation between xenophobia and anxiety about speaking in the classroom ($r = .42$, $p < .01$), anxiety about interacting with native speakers ($r = .31$, $p < .01$), and general classroom-related anxiety ($r = .40$, $p < .01$). A moderate negative correlation was also found between xenophobia and interest in foreign language classes ($r = -.44$, $p < .01$). These results suggest that higher xenophobic attitudes are associated with increased anxiety and decreased

motivation to learn Arabic.

Table 8. Findings Regarding the Relationship Between Scale Scores

Note: Pearson correlation coefficients (r) were calculated to assess the relationship between the foreign language learning anxiety scale and foreign language hostility. FL = Foreign Language.

A positive and moderately significant correlation was found between speaking anxiety in foreign language classes ($r = .42, p < .05$), anxiety about interacting with native speakers ($r = .31, p < .05$), and general anxiety in foreign language classes ($r = .40, p < .05$). Conversely, a negative correlation was found between interest in foreign language classes and foreign language hostility ($r = -.44, p < .05$).

Discussion

These studies are increasingly common among students interested in foreign languages (FLCA) and among the growing number of Arabic-speaking students in Turkey. Based on data from 655 students, significant associations were found between phobias, stress, and various anxiety patterns, as well as substantial differences based on gender, age, language background, and academic specialization. These findings contribute to broader research on foreign language learning anxiety by highlighting the role of phobias as a psychosocial factor influencing student experiences.

Gender Differences

Consistent with Elkhafaifi's (2005) findings, our data showed that female students had significantly higher levels of speech anxiety, interaction anxiety with native speakers, and overall FLCA than males. This aligns with studies reporting greater anxiety among female learners of Arabic and other foreign languages (Teh et al., 2009; Yeşilçınar and Erdemir, 2023). However, this finding contradicts research indicating no gender differences (Batumlu & Erden, 2007; Taghinezhad et al., 2016; Oflaz, 2019). These discrepancies may stem from cultural and contextual differences and the unique social dynamics of Arabic language learning in Türkiye.

Interestingly, gender did not influence xenophobia or interest in foreign language classes, suggesting that gender differences in anxiety may reflect communication and performance concerns rather than broader social or political attitudes. This subtle distinction highlights the need to consider gender stereotypes in anxiety management strategies while acknowledging that xenophobia operates through different mechanisms.

Age Differences

The study also revealed strong age effects, a relatively new finding in Arabic FLCA literature. Younger students (20–25) consistently reported higher classroom anxiety and xenophobia than older students. These findings contrast with those of previous studies that reported either greater anxiety among older students (Donovan & MacIntyre, 2005; Dewaele, 2007) or minimal age effects (Tosun, 2018). In our study, students aged 31–40 years reported greater interest in learning Arabic while also reporting less anxiety.

This pattern suggests that younger students may be more susceptible to social and academic pressures that exacerbate anxiety and xenophobic attitudes than older students. In contrast, older students may approach language learning with clearer goals and stronger intrinsic motivation, thereby mitigating negative emotional responses. This interpretation aligns with Marinova-Todd et al.'s (2000) emphasis on contextual and motivational factors rather than age.

Native Language Differences

Another key finding was the difference in the linguistic backgrounds. Turkish and Kurdish students reported higher levels of speech anxiety, interaction anxiety, general classroom anxiety, and xenophobia than native Arabic speakers did. This supports previous observations that minority language backgrounds can reduce anxiety and increase motivation when the target language intersects with students' cultural heritage.

Arabic speakers reported the lowest anxiety and xenophobia levels and the highest interest in language classes. Their linguistic and cultural knowledge of Arabic likely facilitated their learning and enhanced their sense of competence and belongingness. This finding is consistent with Argaman and Abu Rabia's (2002) conclusion that language learners' self-perceptions and fears of expressing language are shaped by their linguistic identity.

This contrast between native and non-native Arabic speakers further highlights the role of cultural familiarity in shaping emotional and behavioral outcomes of music.

Departmental Differences

Departmental affiliation was another significant factor. Students in the Theology/Preparatory Program exhibited higher levels of anxiety and xenophobia than students in the Arabic Language and Literature or Translation and Interpreting Programs. Conversely, Translation and Interpreting students demonstrated the highest interest in learning Arabic, followed by Arabic Language and Literature students.

These findings suggest that the curriculum context significantly influences language learning's psychological, social, and cultural dimensions. Students in the Theology/Preparatory Program may face higher risks and stricter expectations in learning Arabic, potentially increasing their anxiety levels and fostering defensiveness toward outsiders. In contrast, Translation and Interpreting students may engage more directly with the practical and cultural aspects of Arabic, increasing their motivation and openness. These program-based differences highlight the need for specialized and interdisciplinary pedagogical approaches.

Correlation Between Xenophobia and Anxiety

Most importantly, this study found positive, moderate, and statistically significant correlations between various measures of foreign language speaking anxiety and foreign language speaking anxiety, both in the classroom and during interactions with native speakers. In contrast, interest in foreign language classes was moderately and negatively correlated with foreign language speaking anxiety.

Correlation analyses indicated that foreign language hostility is closely related to foreign language anxiety. Xenophobic attitudes were moderately correlated with increased classroom speaking anxiety, increased anxiety during interactions with native speakers, and increased foreign language speaking anxiety. Conversely, xenophobia showed a moderately negative correlation with interest in foreign language learning, suggesting that students with xenophobic attitudes tend to be less motivated and engaged in learning Arabic. This highlights xenophobia not only as a sociocultural problem but also as a psychological barrier that directly undermines the language-learning process.

These findings are consistent with previous research, including a meta-analysis by Tang et al. (2023), who reported that increased anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted university students' academic performance. Similarly, Zeng (2021) demonstrated that increased anxiety negatively impacted foreign language learning in China. Furthermore, Piniel and Albert (2018) found that enjoying foreign language classes increased engagement and interest in learning, which is consistent with the inverse relationship between anxiety and interest that was observed in this study. Furthermore, Liu and Wu's (2021) study, which linked teacher anxiety to demographic and professional factors, supports the idea that individual and contextual variables contribute to students' anxiety about foreign languages and may be linked to xenophobic tendencies.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Taken together, these findings underscore the central role of anxiety in foreign language learning and its intersection with xenophobia. They also highlight the urgent need to develop learning environments that reduce anxiety and promote intercultural openness (Adel, 2022). Pedagogical strategies such as mindfulness and empathy-based approaches (Shapiro et al., 2016; Ahmadi-Azad et al., 2020) can reduce anxiety and mitigate xenophobic tendencies, thereby improving both engagement and performance.

This study also emphasizes the importance of investigating how demographic and contextual variables, such as age, gender, native language, and specialization, influence the relationship between anxiety and xenophobia. In practice, language educators should consider these factors when designing curricula and intervention programs. Programs that explicitly address intercultural understanding and provide supportive communication environments may be particularly effective in reducing anxiety and xenophobia.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has some limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design precludes drawing causal conclusions about the relationship between xenophobia and anxiety. Longitudinal or experimental

studies are needed to investigate the directionality and causality of these associations. Second, reliance on self-reported measures may introduce bias, including social desirability effects. Third, the study was conducted in a single cultural and institutional context, which limited the generalizability of the findings. Finally, focusing solely on Arabic limits the applicability of the results to other languages in general.

Future research should address these limitations by using mixed-method designs, larger and more diverse samples, and cross-cultural comparisons. Investigating additional psychosocial factors, such as identity negotiation, intercultural sensitivity, and resilience, would enhance our understanding of the interaction between xenophobia and foreign language learning anxiety.

Conclusion

This study offers new insights into the relationship between foreign language anxiety and xenophobia among university students studying Arabic in Turkey. The findings indicate that younger students (20-25 years old) experience higher levels of classroom anxiety, particularly in speaking and interacting with native Arabic speakers. Furthermore, linguistic background emerged as a determining factor, with Turkish and Kurdish students reporting higher anxiety and xenophobia levels than their Arabic-speaking peers. In particular, native Arabic students exhibited the lowest anxiety levels and the highest motivation levels, highlighting the role of linguistic and cultural familiarity.

The main contribution of this study is the demonstration of a significant positive relationship between xenophobia and the various dimensions of foreign language anxiety. Students with xenophobic attitudes not only experienced greater speaking and classroom anxiety but also reported less interest in Arabic classes. This finding expands the scope of foreign language anxiety research beyond individual emotional factors, classifying xenophobia as a psychological barrier and sociocultural determinant of language learning. From an educational perspective, these findings highlight the need for inclusive, culturally responsive, and anxiety-reducing teaching strategies. Practices such as mindfulness activities, empathetic classroom interactions, and integrating intercultural content can help reduce anxiety and xenophobia, creating more positive learning environments.

Finally, the study acknowledges its limitations, including its reliance on self-report measures, focus on a single cultural context, and limitation to Arabic as the target language. Future research should adopt multidisciplinary approaches, incorporate longitudinal designs, and examine other linguistic and cultural contexts to enhance the generalizability of the findings. By addressing these dimensions, future studies can contribute to a deeper understanding of how xenophobia and anxiety impact language learning outcomes.

Ethics Statement

This study was approved by the Kilis 7 Aralık University Human Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants before data collection.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are publicly available on Zenodo at DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.17242928.

Declaration of Interest / Conflict of Interest

The authors confirm that they have no financial or personal relationships that could influence the work described in this article.

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