

Teaching Adults a Foreign Language with Language Resources for Babies

BORAY ELLIOT Sibel (1)

Linguistic and Oriental Studies - Faculty of Philology, Complutense University of Madrid, Spain (1)

Abstract

My paper discusses the challenges of teaching Turkish to adult European students, the lack of innovative teaching resources together with a creative solution for motivating learners acquiring new vocabulary. Turkish is highly alien to the speakers of Germanic or Romance languages, partly due to the complex grammar and the different word order. However, the essential building block for learning any language is the vocabulary. Without words it is impossible to make conversation and so acquiring new vocabulary is a key to confidence and motivation. Existing Turkish language resources such as the Hitit course which is used as the standard teaching material at the Complutense University in Madrid tend to offer a highly traditional approach. Each unit covers a theme, introducing new grammar and vocabulary through basic dialogues which need to be set to memory. Furthermore, the descriptions used often include a level of vocabulary that is too advanced for the students concerned. The considerable time I spent seeking alternatives only confirmed that there really was a dearth of inspiring materials for Turkish teaching. Finally, I chanced upon the available resources for teaching vocabulary to babies and started to consider how natural language learning might assist European learners of Turkish. Flash cards are published for Turkish babies and infants. Each card displays a word together with a picture illustrating the vocabulary through everyday objects, pet names, images representing the different genders, etc. The paper describes how I applied these resources to adult students, the methodology used to engage them in group activities and the results achieved in terms of motivating students and making the learning of Turkish more enjoyable. I also explore more general conclusions of this experiment in terms of how natural language learning can be applied to the study of such an uncommon second language.

Keywords: *Turkish, new vocabulary, baby methods;*

In this paper I illustrate the new methods that I have adopted in my Turkish classes at the Philology Faculty of Madrid's Complutense University. My research is based on the specific requirements of the students as observed during my classes. Adult European students have considerable difficulty acquiring new Turkish vocabulary. As a professor I need to assist my students in attaining sufficient working knowledge of Turkish over the space of just two years; a considerable challenge given that the subject is taught only as a second language within a 4 year degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies. In Spain the Turkish language is not widely studied and is a relatively new component of academic syllabuses, partly due to the geographical distance separating the two countries and also due to scarce interest among students.

Over 10 years' experience teaching Turkish at the Complutense University's Foreign Languages Center (CSIM) and Faculty of Philology, where the language course, Hitit, published by the University of Ankara, is the standard teaching resource, led me to realise just how difficult it was to perform basic activities with the students. One of the reasons for this was that the vocabulary used in level A.1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Language Teaching (CEFR) was often more appropriate for a level B.1 since at Ankara University they use the Hitit book mostly for students from Uzbekistan, Kirguistan, Kazajistan and Tayikistan, who already have a basic knowledge of Turkish before they start their university degree in Turkey.

Ostensibly, given the complexity of Turkish for students familiar with Indo-European languages, it was going to be necessary to seek out creative solutions that would make the study of the language enjoyable. Nevertheless, the existing alternatives were not very promising, adopting a traditional systematic approach based on technical descriptions of grammar rules interspersed with dialogues in different everyday situations and lists for memorising basic vocabulary.

As I continued my exploration of different bookshops in Turkey, I finally chanced across resources for teaching vocabulary to babies. These new flash cards are published for Turkish infants and young children. Each card displays a word together with a picture illustrating the vocabulary through



everyday objects, pet names, images or symbols representing the different genders, etc. The pictures quickly aid babies in acquiring basic vocabulary.

It can be a considerable challenge for a professor to create new exercises for oral interaction especially for students with a very basic knowledge of the foreign language. Thanks to this method I have managed to speed up the process of learning new vocabulary at the same time as making it more interesting for the students.

The flash cards used in this experiment are principally designed for teaching Turkish as a mother tongue for infants. As I will describe here, I have found these cards also to be effective in teaching the initial classes of level A1 of the CEFR.

The following are examples illustrating how the cards are applied to Turkish classes at the Philology Faculty of Madrid's Complutense University.

When using these materials for adults, the cards are shuffled and then the students are invited to select their favourite drawings. It consists of a light hearted activity that runs for about 20-25 minutes and is an effective way of completing a 2 hour language class. This is a difficult moment for teachers since at this stage students' attention starts to diminish however the experiment proved to be a success as students visibly engaged with the activity in the last minutes of the class.

The students are divided into two equal numbered groups: A and B. All the students from group A stand side by side in a line. The students in group B then form a similar parallel line, facing the students in group A. Each student is given a selection of cards from a pack, each card displaying on one side a Turkish word corresponding to an everyday object and on the other side an image depicting the same object. The students then take it in turns to show the word on one of their cards to the student facing them in the opposing group. When group A are showing the cards, it is the task of the corresponding pairs from group B to ask them questions about the word in order to try to identify its meaning. In the case of beginner students, these could be simple set phrases such as "What is it?" or "Who is it?"

Once the first part of the exercise has been completed, the members of each group shuffle places so that they can then continue to role play with a different student. In order to make for a more dynamic exercise, each time the students switch places in the group, the teacher can suggest new questions relating to the pictures.

For a level A1 student after a couple of months the questions posed can be made more challenging. For example, the teacher can ask them to use the present continuous. In this case, the students will need to conjugate the verbs correctly when posing the question as well as to put the question words in the correct order.

The questions can be used in the following way:

What is this cat doing?

What is that kid eating?

Is the woman running?

Eventually the teacher can ask the students to refer to the size or the colour of the objects. The objective of this part of the exercise is to check if the students have learned the new vocabulary for the colours and other adjectives that have been covered in previous lessons.

These exercises provide the opportunity for students to acquire new vocabulary in a practical way in which each and every one of them is directly engaged in the language learning process.

It is essential that during the dialogues, the teacher does not directly intervene to correct the students but simply makes a written note of the errors that he or she hears.

Once the activity has been completed the teacher dedicates some time to discussing with the students if they felt comfortable using the new vocabulary or what they think they need to do in order to be able to express themselves more effectively in Turkish. He or she can also ask the class to try to identify by themselves the mistakes that have been made during the class, thus emphasizing the interactive nature of the activity. At this stage, the teacher can assist in helping the students to identify their errors however the focus should be on the students themselves engaging and thinking for themselves as much as possible.

Following completion of the exercise, the teacher gives a sheet of paper to each student and asks them to write the ten names of the objects that they have learned from the flash cards. Once they have written their lists, they can swap the pieces of paper with the other students. The teacher then asks the students to write or draw the meanings of the words that have been written down by their classmates.

They showed themselves to be capable of recalling more than 10 words with very correct spelling and of writing down each of the words' meaning in Spanish. Once they had set them down on paper they would then switch papers with their classmates who would in turn correct each other's papers. Once



this task was completed they would then be asked to compare the result with the original cards. The exercise proved to be highly effective in setting vocabulary to students' long term memory.

A second box of flash cards called, 'Objects around us', includes vocabulary relating to the home and allows children to match similar objects and separate them into different subgroups such as names of different rooms in the home. These cards are also used in Turkey for young native speakers and in Turkish classes for European adult students class have also proved effective in teaching new vocabulary through playing. In these exercises, students practice using prepositions and conjugating verbs.

This time we ask questions such as, "where in the home does this object belong?"

Other variations include one student showing another student a picture of a saucepan and asking him or her to describe what the object is used for.

Learning a very different language such as Turkish for European adult students can be a real challenge however these conversational activities for beginners are highly effective in making students feel confident that they are progressing in the language learning activity right from the start. This is vital for their self esteem and for their finding the strength to continue developing their knowledge of Turkish.

By using different types of baby flash cards in my teaching work, I could observe that my students managed to significantly speed up the acquisition of Turkish and to more clearly distinguish similar looking but differently sounding words, which can often be confusing due to the very different phonetics. For example, the words *çocuk* /tʃodʒuk/ (kid), *sucuk* /sudʒuk/ (spicy sausage), *soğuk* /soɣuk/ (cold) and *sokak* /sokak/ (street), which all look similar but are not pronounced as most European students would suspect.

Vocabulary is always the key building block when learning a new language and even more so in the case of Turkish, given its different logic as compared to Germanic or romance languages, and the lack of a common etymology in the majority of the words used. In these circumstances, given the difficulty of transmitting the language to new learners in a logical way, resorting to more natural forms of language learning provides an apparent alternative. In this paper I have shown through the examples of my own teaching experience how such a simple tool as baby flashcards in oral exercises can speed up the acquisition of new language skills while making language teaching classes more social and interactive.

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