

Turkish Heritage Language Schools in the United States

By Dr. Ahmet Uludag
Accord Institute for Education Research
Westminster, CA



Turkish is spoken by 75 million people in Turkey (Boeschoten, 1998). In addition, it is spoken by 3 million Turkish minorities in Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Greece; 3 million in the Middle East including Northern Cyprus, Northern Iraq, North West Iran, and Southern Russia; 3 million Turkish immigrants in Germany (Gogolin & Reich, 2001; Yavuzer, 2009); and 1 million in other European countries (Boeschoten, 1998; Rudin & Eminov, 1990).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 83,850 people living in the United States in 1990 and 117,575 in 2000 reported their ancestry as Turkish, an increase of 40% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). It is believed that half a million Turkish immigrants live primarily in New Jersey, New York, the northeastern United States, Texas, Florida, and Southern California (Yavuzer, 2009). Turkish immigrants are inclined to protect their identity and pass it to the next generation.

Turkish as a heritage language in the United States is largely the language of the children of Turkish immigrants. Turkish heritage language education is conducted in Turkish heritage language schools, which are often run by Turkish expatriates. This brief discusses Turkish language learners and Turkish heritage language schools in the United States.

Turkish Heritage Language Speakers

Opportunities for Turkish heritage language learners to use the language in the United States are limited to conversations with parents. Many parents enact a “home language policy” (Spolsky, 2008) in the form of a no-English zone at home. In this English-free zone, the Turkish language is expected to be the dominant social interaction for their children. However, Turkish parents fear that their children will be pushed into the English language learner (ELL) category in schools and will not receive effective instruction. As a result, many parents abandon a Turkish-only home language policy when their children start school, and English becomes children’s dominant language.



For Turkish heritage language speakers, the foremost domain to acquire Turkish is in the family. Parents serve as language teachers and models at home, and family friends, satellite TV broadcasts, and summer trips to Turkey help to revive and enhance Turkish skills. Seeing the potential loss of Turkish language and culture, parents feel obliged to establish and support community schools on the weekends to help their children maintain their language and cultural heritage.

Turkish Heritage Language Schools

The oldest known Turkish heritage language school is Ataturk School in New York under the umbrella of the American Turkish Women's League (Ozcilingir, 2009). The school was founded in 1971 by the Turkish community. It continued for 40 years with the support of the Turkish diplomatic delegation in New York. In the 1980s and 1990s, educated Turkish immigrants, who came to the U.S. mainly for graduate studies at American universities, brought a new dynamic. In the 2000s, the number of schools doubled. In many cases, Turkish Cultural Centers offered hosting places for these schools.

Although there are no statistics on the number of Turkish heritage language schools in the U.S., there are a number of schools. For example, in Arizona, there are three Turkish community schools; two in Tempe and one in Tucson. One of the schools in Tempe is located on the Arizona State University campus and typically has about 25 students. The school is run by the Turkish Americans Association of Arizona, a non-profit organization founded to maintain the Turkish culture. The second school is run by the Sema Foundation, a non-profit organization founded by Turkish Americans to build bridges between Turkish Americans and American mainstream society to establish cultural understanding and friendship. The school has 50 students. In California, there are over eight Turkish community schools. The school facility depends on community resources. Some families open up their homes as community schools. Parent volunteers organize, schedule, and teach at Turkish community schools. There is usually a small fee for materials.

These schools play an important role in maintaining Turkish, although lack of qualified teaching staff, curriculum, and resources remain to be addressed. Their existence is a testimony to the commitment of the Turkish community to maintaining heritage.

Institutions That Maintain Turkish Heritage

There are 17 different institutions run by Turkish expatriates in the U.S. based on the list of the American Embassy in Turkey. The [Assembly of Turkish American Associations](#) (ATAA) and the [Federation of Turkish American Associations](#) (FTAA) are the largest organizations. ATAA, based in Washington DC, is a parent organization of the Turkish American associations across the U.S., whose mission is to promote the interests of Turkish Americans.



Some states have several sub-organizations while others, where the Turkish population is sparse, have only one organization representing the Turkish community. Some organizations are special interest groups formed by individuals who migrated from a specific location such as the Solidarity of Balkan Turk of America. Some are religious and cultural centers such as the Karacay Turks Mosque and the Cultural Association in Patterson, New Jersey. Typically, each organization has a community school to teach Turkish on weekends. ATAA organizes different activities including educational seminars on grassroots advocacy and civic leadership; conferences on political, economic, and social issues that affect Turkish Americans; and cultural events to maintain the Turkish heritage (Evinch, 2010).

FTAA, founded in 1956 and based in New York, is the parent organization of 35 local organizations of Turkish Americans in the United States. FTAA works to advance the cultural and educational interests of Turkish Americans and runs the Turkish Cultural Center. FTAA observes Children's Day, April 23; Youth and Sports Day, May 19; the Turkish Day Parade, the 3rd Saturday of May; and Ataturk Commemoration Day, November 10. All are major national holidays in modern Turkish culture. FTAA broadcasts a Turkish radio program in New York City to support Turkish language maintenance (Boztepe, 2010).

The [American Association of Teachers of Turkic Languages](#) (AATT), focused on Turkish and other Central Asian languages spoken by Turkic nations, consists of instructors in U.S. universities and language schools. It promotes the study of and research on the field of Turkic languages, literature, and linguistics in the US. It also seeks to improve the teaching of modern and historical Turkic languages. It has developed guidelines and standards for proficiency-based teaching of Turkic languages, a bibliography of teaching materials, and workshops for Turkic language teachers (Schamiloglu, 2010).

Finally, the [Turkic American Alliance](#) (TAA) is an umbrella organization of the Council of Turkic American Associations, the Mid-Atlantic Federation of Turkic American Associations, the Turkish American Federation of Southeast, the Turkish American Federation of Midwest, the Turquoise Council of Americans and Eurasians, and the West America Turkic Council. TAA consists of 135 organizations, whose mission is to promote cultural understanding. TAA activities include Turkish Days in New York, Turkish Cultures and Children's Festival, Turkish Language Olympiads, Ramadan Dinners, Congressional Talks in Washington DC, and annual receptions open to political leaders across the country (Taban, 2010).

Turkish Cultural Centers opened by TAA in 40 states offer a permanent home to Turkish language speakers across the U.S. and represent the most organized effort to maintain Turkish heritage in the US.

All of these organizations have a common goal of protecting and preserving Turkish national interests in the U.S. and advancing Turkish national causes in direct and indirect ways. Teaching Turkish is not the primary goal of these organizations, but they provide a social context for Turkish heritage language education.

Conclusion

Turkish heritage language education in the U.S. is important to Turkish expatriates, but there is no unified and organized movement. Turkish heritage language schools are emerging and evolving, and effective teaching and learning is an issue to be addressed in order for the Turkish language and culture to thrive.

Search for [Turkish heritage language programs](#) in the Alliance Heritage Language Program Database.

References

- Boeschoten, H. (1998). The speakers of Turkic languages. In L. Johanson & E. A. Csato (Eds.), *The Turkic languages*. (pp. 1-15). New York: Routledge.
- Boztepe, K. (2010, December 29). [Federation of Turkish American Associations](#).
- Evinch, G. (2010, December 29). [About Us](#).
- Gogolin, I., & Reich, H. (2001). Immigrant languages in Germany. In G. Extra & D. Gorter (Eds.), *The other languages of Europe*. New York: *Multilingual Matters*.
- Ozcilingir, S. (2009). [Okulumuzun Amaci](#).
- Rudin, C., & Eminov, A. (1990). Bulgarian Turkish: The linguistic effects of recent nationality policy. *Anthropological Linguistics*, 32, 149-162.
- Schamiloglu, U. (2010, December 29). [About AATT](#).
- Spolksy, B. (2008). Language policy: First half century. In P. G. J. van Sterkenburg (Ed.), *Unity and diversity of languages* (pp. 137-153). Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.
- Taban, F. (2010, December 29). [Events](#).
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2004). [Ancestry: 2000](#).

U.S. Census Bureau. (2003). [Language Use and English-Speaking Ability: 2000](#).

Yavuzer, H. (2009). Turks and Turkish foundations established in America.
Journal of World Turks, 1(1), 171-198.

This Heritage Brief was prepared by Dr. Ahmet Uludag for the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages, Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), Washington DC, and was peer reviewed.

The Heritage Briefs Collection is designed to provide information on topics of interest. The information presented does not necessarily represent the views of the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages or the Center for Applied Linguistics.



Visit us online at www.cal.org/heritage