

## **Learning Turkmen in Turkmenistan for Research Purposes**

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My teacher, Begench Atayev, and I met three days each week for intensive two-hour lessons. The basis of the course was a series of workbooks and lesson-books published by Indiana University providing exercises, dialogues, role-play and translations to complete and then discuss. As the textbooks used the now outdated Cyrillic script, the first several lessons were spent becoming familiar with the alphabet and understanding the corresponding sounds in the new Turkmen Latin script.

As soon as I had some rudimentary phrases, we went to the nearby fresh produce market where I was able to practice purchasing goods, the polite forms of address, numbers and vocab. We repeated similar tasks periodically throughout the four weeks, practising different scenarios and interactions by visiting other locations. The immediacy required in such situations was useful, as it pushed me to quickly become confident in pronunciation. It also encouraged a focus on understanding the general sense of the conversation, as means of communication, rather than worrying over total comprehension.

Outside my linguistic learning, living with a family in Ashgabat meant I began to grasp how my status as a young, unmarried woman would have both positive and negative implications on my future research. The normative values proscribing certain forms of interactions between younger and older individuals, or between men and women are complex, demanding quiet observation of scenes before familiarity of the rules is possible. Although a degree of clumsiness is accepted from guests, it was satisfying when older men commented to each other around dinner that I was learning to be more like a Turkmen lady. And moreover that I could understand the conversation!

Though by no means fluent, I am able to hold a conversation and, as the expression goes, “to find my bread”. I went to Turkmenistan with a basic knowledge of the Turkish grammar system, on which basis I foresaw difficulties in comprehending the case system. Consequently, one of my main goals was to come away with solid competency in using cases, from which I could continue my Turkmen with greater success back in the UK.

A further important objective was to become confident in the pronunciation of the language, as I knew that improving my pronunciation would be near impossible outside of Turkmenistan. Though there are many dialects of Turkmen, my teacher was fortunately from the same region (Ahal) where I have further research planned. I was also keen to find audio resources I could take back with me to the UK, and my teacher proved excellent in suggesting and locating Turkmen language cartoons, films and other media.

The Turkmen language skills I currently possess are critical to any future research plans in Turkmenistan. I intend to return to Turkmenistan within the next couple months, this time living primarily in rural areas. The foundation in Turkmen grammar I now have will hopefully prove a solid base, allowing me to rapidly expand my vocabulary and verbal competency in situ.

Although this was only a short four-week visit, I was able to cement friendships and institutional connections with the Academy of Sciences. On several occasions I arranged formal meetings with the Vice Chairman of the Academy of Sciences, to discuss future plans for a cooperative project between the Academy and the University of Cambridge. I also visited the Hakimlek (Mayoral) Office in my intended study site of Gökdepe, to discuss plans for longer-term residence in the area.

The initial time spent learning the Cyrillic alphabet will be important when looking at texts published in the early years of independence. The chance to complete an in-depth ethnographic study in Turkmenistan would be huge asset to a career in the anthropology of Central Asia. A detailed ethnography would offer some small addition towards constructing a picture of contemporary rural Turkmen livelihoods, an area woefully under-researched. Ethnography is not a plausible methodology without language skills.

Therefore, the learning I have already received with the help of the CEELBAS fund is a critical step towards making future research possible.