

## An Ottoman lesson for the teaching of writing in additional languages: historical and personal perspectives<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Even from ancient times, one can infer second language teaching, but by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, an institution for the teaching of Turkish, Farsi and Arabic as second languages for the ruling class of the Ottoman Empire had formed. Nearly all the Empire's rulers learned those three languages as additional languages because none were Turk, Fars or Arab. The only few exceptions were members of the imperial Ottoman family. The ruling class called the *seyfiye*, as opposed to the learned class called the *ilmiye*, were drafted through the "devshirme", a levy of Christian boys. They were sent to Anatolian families to learn Turkish. Those who excelled were sent to the palace school where, among other subjects, they studied Ottoman Turkish, Farsi (i.e., Neo-Persian) and classical Arabic as additional languages. These three languages were used by the state bureaucracy. In one or all of the three languages, the sultans, viziers (ministers), pashas (military leaders), beys (governors) and secretaries in the bureaus in the capital and provinces not only read them, but they also wrote them in the course of their state duties. They also composed poetry and prose in the additional languages. *How they achieved such mastery in writing those additional languages is the object of this study. The method of learning good writing of additional languages was basically the reading and copying of good models.* That may well be a more appropriate method than the further, willy-nilly appropriation of the lingo of the smart phone for better and finer written communication.

**Key words:** Enderûn School, devshirme, additional language learning, learning by copying, Grammar-Translation Method.

## Ek (ikinci/yabancı) dillerde yazma öğretimi için Osmanlı örneđi: Tarihi ve kişisel bakış açıları

### Öz

Çok eski çağlardan beri bile, ikinci ve ek diller öğretimi hakkında bir yorum yapılabilir, on altıncı yüzyıla kadar Osmanlı İmparatorluğu yönetici sınıfının ek dilleri olan Türkçe, Farsça ve Arapça öğretimi için bir kurum vardı. Hemen hemen bütün İmparatorluk yöneticileri bu üç dili, ek dil olarak öğrenmekteydiler, çünkü bunların hiç biri ne Türk ne Fars nede Araptı. Birkaç istisna olarak Osmanlı İmparatorluğu ailesinden olanlar da vardı. Yönetici sınıfına *seyfiye*, bilimle uğraşan kesime *ilmiye*

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olarak ad verilir, bu sınıflar Hristiyan ailelerin çocuklarıydı ve *devşirme* olarak ailelerinden alınır. Bu çocuklar Anadolu'daki ailelere Türkçe öğrenmeleri için gönderilirlerdi. Başarılı olanlar saray okuluna gönderilir, diğer derslerin yanında Osmanlı Türkçesi, Farsça (Yeni Farsça), ve klasik Arapçayı ikinci diller olarak öğrenirlerdi. Bu üç dil devlet bürokrasisinde kullanılırdı. Sultanlar, vezirler, paşalar, beyler, başkent veya diğer bölgelerdeki üst düzey sekreterler, bu dillerin birinde veya her üçünüde, sadece okumakla kalmazlar aynı zamanda görevlerindeki yazışmalarda da kullanabilirlerdi. Ayrıca bu kişiler bu dillerde şiir ve düz yazı da yazabilirlerdi. *Bu dillerin nasıl bu kadar profesyonelce öğrenilebildiği bu çalışmanın konusudur. Herhangi ek bir dildeki iyi yazmanın metodu temel olarak okuma ve iyi modelleri kopya etmektir.* Bu gelecekteki akıllı telefondaki öylesine yapılan dilsel ve bazan da argo ya kaçan yazma uygulamalarından daha iyi bir yaklaşım olabilir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Enderûn Mektebi, devşirme, ek dil öğretimi, kopyalayarak öğrenmek, Dilbilgisi-Çeviri Yöntemi.

### Introduction

As a result of the recent emphasis on “quantitative” and “qualitative” research in the teaching of English or another language as a foreign language (TEFL), as a second language (TESL) or as an additional language (TEAL), articles published on language education and applied linguistics tend to concentrate on 21st century work and precedents from before the 20th century are rarely even mentioned. Working back from *Teaching English to Second Language Learners* (Newton et al., 2018) and *Teaching English as a Foreign Language* (Celce-Murcia & Brinton, 2014), one notes that there is no attention given to the early 20th century or before. One notable exception is “The History of Teaching English as a Foreign Language, from a British and European Perspective” (Howatt & Smith, 2014). Howatt observed the paucity of research into the history of language teaching in the West, mentioning some recent German and Japanese exceptions. However, he gives a synoptic overview of four stages, beginning with “Stage 1: Modern Language Teaching in Europe 1750-1920 and continuing in “Stage 2: English Language Teaching beyond and within Europe (1920-2000+). In one sentence, he dismisses the earlier periods by saying, “Modern foreign languages were learnt and, to a limited extent, taught in Western Europe for centuries before they appeared on the curricula of schools around the middle of the eighteenth century” (Howatt & Smith, 2014, p. 79).

Howatt’s focus on Britain and Western Europe was a reaction to what he called a “USA-centric perspective” (Howatt & Smith, 2014, p. 75). *New Ways to learn a Foreign Language* (Hall, 1966) was representative of “The new linguistics way that has revolutionized language learning.” Hall was talking about the revolution dominated by Charles Fries, e.g., *The Structure of English: An Introduction to the Construction of English Sentences* (1952), Robert Lado, e.g. *Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach* (1964) and other works of his own, e.g., *Linguistics and Your Language* (Hall, 1960). The revolution was against the Grammar-Translation method, very much dominant in the West until the 1960’s, and still used rather surreptitiously today. This method emerged from the study of the classical languages, Latin and Greek, at earliest from the time of the Reformation and the rise of European vernaculars.

However, additional language (AL) learning has had precedents for several centuries, if not millennia, before the Reformation. One could begin with the bilingual Rosetta Stone discovered in 1799 and dating from 196 BC. It is an early example of a document transliterated from Hieroglyphics to Egyptian Demotic and translated from Demotic Egyptian to Koine Greek. One can infer, if not deduce, that there must have been foreign language education in Egypt centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ to have resulted in

that amazing document in stone. Thus, from well before the time of Alexander's 4th century BC conquest of Egypt, one can only guess how Early Demotic and then Middle Demotic was learned and came to be used after Late Egyptian (1350 – 700 BC) to begin the period of Demotic (c. 700 BC – AD 400). Herodotus (c. 484 BC – c. 425 BC) mentioned Demotic Egyptian. The purpose of this article is to point out and remedy the fashionable absence of attention to early language learning and teaching from the Dark Ages to the 20th and 21st centuries.

## Method

This is neither a quantitative nor a qualitative study, the two most ubiquitous research methods in language teaching and learning in the 21st century. It is a study using history because TEAL and Applied Linguistics have ignored the earliest history of language learning and teaching. The study also draws on the combined personal experience of more than 90 years of language learning and teaching of English, Spanish, French, Turkish, Azerbaijani, Farsi, Arabic, Russian, Kirghiz and Kazakh in diverse areas of the USA, Turkey, Libya, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kirghizstan and Kazakhstan. The institutions where the authors' learning and teaching experiences have taken place include two middle schools, several high schools, three private language schools and eight higher educational institutions. Finally, two forms of logic, induction and deduction, have been utilized to weave together possibilities, probabilities, conclusions and lessons.

## The Relevance of the personal narrative

The personal narrative from the first author is mostly chronological, but it reveals the trends, fashions and realities of recent language learning and teaching. The first author was taught Spanish in the second grade for a few days in primary school in Berkeley, California, USA. The lesson consisted only of counting from one to ten and asking, "How are you?" Yet the little that was taught was firmly fixed in his memory by oral repetition and is retained to this day. That Spanish was supplemented daily by the ubiquitous Spanish of Californian geography and later by the Spanish of several phrases used in "cowboy" films and television series. In high school, he studied French for four years with grammar and some translation filling the class periods and homework assignments. It was not a skill-based approach. Reading, listening, speaking and writing were not taught as such. Finally, he studied French literature for two years at the university level. Reading was certainly necessary, and the classes were conducted in English and French, but with little need to speak or write French. The first author can still read French with ease and understand spoken French with difficulty. However, he cannot speak or write it without mental translation and the conscious application and manipulation of remembered grammatical rules.

It was in the summer of 1967 that the first author underwent an intensive training program in Turkish and the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language. The method of Turkish instruction at the University of Texas was basically the linguistically structural and psychologically behavioral audio-lingual method. It went on for six hours a day, six days a week for three months. It was admittedly supplemented by grammar lectures with English as the medium of instruction. That fall, he began instruction in the Ürgüp Middle School in the province of Nevşehir using E.V. Gatenby's textbook series called *A Direct Method English Course*, published from 1955 until at least 1969 in various editions (Gatenby, 1965). This author had been warned that, despite the prospect of using materials for the Direct Method in middle schools, the prevailing method of instruction was the Grammar-Translation method used since the European Dark Ages for Latin and continued in Western countries for centuries through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Modern Era to teach European languages. That was basically the method by which

the first author studied, not Latin, but French in his American high school. By the 1960's, the method was not considered successful either in America or Turkey. Indeed, the first author remembered a visit to his middle school by a Ministry of Education inspector who strongly promoted the Direct Method, not wanting him to use any Turkish in his classes of forty or so students for three hours a week. His effort was pointless as he was a devotee of the oral, dialogue-based, behavioral approach of substitution and transformation drills.

In Iran, where the first author was advising English teachers in high schools and teaching at Tabriz University, he found the Grammar-Translation method firmly entrenched in teaching practices, despite a top-down efforts to use more modern and fashionable approaches. Years later, over the first two decades of 21st century, in many conversations with his university students in Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the first author has learned that their primary- and secondary-level English teachers were still using that ancient method, with little success to judge by the level of competence that new university students generally showed upon enrollment.

The second author was a research assistant for four years (1994-1998) in Kirghizstan (a former member of the Soviet Union) and during that time he noted that textbooks and material to support students in learning English at the high schools and higher institutions of learning were out of date. The existing materials were based on old methods and did not usually correspond to the needs, interests or activities of the teenagers. In general, the Grammar-Translation method was used in teaching English, and even though the students had a good knowledge of grammar, they had difficulties in expressing their ideas in English either in written or spoken form.

### **Language learning**

It is surprising that with all the attention focused on the teaching of English and other languages as foreign or second languages that the Western and Eastern precedents and examples from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries have escaped attention and citation.

A brief account of language studies and learning in Europe and the Ottoman period has been provided in Y. Akyüz's *Türk Eğitim Tarihi* (1982). He inferred that the first foreign language learning was verbal, at least until the Sumerian era beginning in the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC when the first writing appeared. He further speculates that when the Akkadians conquered Sumeria in 2225 BC, they learned the superior civilization, including the language, from the Sumerians. While Akyüz deals with language studies, i.e., grammar and linguistics, in Europe from the ancient Indians and Greeks up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a mention of Ferdinand de Saussure, he had little to say about language learning as such. As for Islamic lands, Akyüz included only a short description of the Ottoman and Republican periods.

In Europe, beginning from the time of Constantine (d. 337 AD), Latin and Greek became the second languages of educated Christians. In the Catholic Church and European governments, until the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Latin ruled as the international language. Not many Catholic priests, monks or nuns could speak it. However, they were literate in Latin. That is, they could read and write Latin. The hierarchy of the Church also spoke Latin with each other. This was obligatory as they spoke many different and disparate mother tongues. This begs the question of how it came to pass that they all learned Latin well enough to read the Bible (i.e., the Old Testament including the Torah, and the New Testament, the Gospel). Ironically, the Bible in Latin was called the Vulgate, which was the popular language of educated people. That Latin language of the Bible was a translation of the Greek translation

of the Bible from Hebrew for the Old Testament and Aramaic for the New Testament. Except for a few fragments, the Gospel in Aramaic had been lost in writing and memory and has still not been found. How educated Catholics successfully learned to read and write Latin as a second language, which has now been dead as a mother tongue for more than 1,500 years is a question that professionals and scholars of language learning have neglected. It is a question requiring more attention from Westerners. Linguistics has gotten some attention. One can consult *Concise History of the Language Sciences: From the Sumerians to the Cognitivists* (Koerner & Asher, 1995). Although this work covers millennia as well as Europe, Asia, Australia, and the Americas, it focuses on the branches of linguistics. However, it does not delve into language learning and teaching as such.

In the Islamic East, there are the examples of Arabic, Farsi and Ottoman Turkish. The great Islamic scholar, Imam Bukhârî, and other famous scholars of the Qur'an and Qur'anic sciences learned Arabic from the 8<sup>th</sup> century on. They certainly were not Arabs. They were either Fars or Turk. How the Ghaznavids and the Seljuks learned Farsi in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries is a matter of deduction derived from methods that have continued till this day. In Turkey during the last few years, on the popular television series, millions have seen famous Turks like Suleyman Shah Ođlu Ertuđrul Ghazi read and write Farsi during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The use of Turkish in Anatolia did not really come until the time of the Sufi poet Yunus Emre. Perhaps the historical, very popular "Diriliř Ertuđrul" television series producers were wrong in depicting the leaders of the Oghuz Kayı tribe a being literate, but the Turkic Seljuk rulers in Konya were certainly literate in Farsi as it was the official language of all the governments and states of the Seljuks in Asia and Asia Minor.

While the traditional schools (madradas) from the 7<sup>th</sup> century on, continued to teach Arabic, the Qur'an, and Qur'anic sciences to Turks and other Muslim ethnic groups throughout Daru'l-Islam (the Muslim world of Asia and Africa), by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, an Ottoman imperial school for the future members of the *seyyfiye*, the military and administrative ruling class of the Ottoman Empire, had formed and matured. In the encyclopedia entitled *Osmanlı* (Eren, Çiçek, & Ođuz, 1999), one can find concise, scholarly articles on education in the Ottoman system. Several subjects were included in the curriculum. Beginning in a preparatory system, due to the large numbers of students, Turkish language and literature were taught along with the Farsi language and literature, mathematics and sciences. Students also studied Arabic grammar and composition as well as the Qur'an and Qur'anic sciences. They studied various fine arts including calligraphy and music, with some becoming quite proficient. Physical education, including martial arts and certain sports such as wrestling, was required or on offer (Akkutay, 1999).

The relevance and significance of Ottoman education for the modern era of language instruction is that Ottoman Turkish, Farsi and Arabic were taught as second languages. It is surprising that with all the attention that has come to focus on the teaching of English and other languages as foreign or second languages that the Western and Eastern precedents and examples from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries have escaped attention and citation. Nearly all the members of the ruling class of the Empire learned those three languages as additional languages because none of them were Turk, Fars or Arab, nor were they born as Muslims. They were born mostly in or around the Balkans to Christian families. Their mother tongues were mostly Greek, Albanian, a Balkan Slavic language like Serbian, and perhaps some form of what is now Romanian. Beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, young Christian boys were drafted in a levy called the "devshirme", a Turkic word meaning 'gathering' or 'collecting'. The early Ottoman sultans mostly relied on the Turkic tribes for their military forces, but from the time of Murad I, captured and enslaved young men and boys were taken into the sultan's service to counterbalance the tribal forces. Later, in a departure from the Sharia, healthy and bright boys and youths were collected from among Christian

families. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, however, Christian families were known to offer, even bribe Ottoman officials to take their sons as it provided a career path to the highest positions of the Empire. Once enrolled, the boys were circumcised and normally became Muslim early in their training and schooling in Constantiniye (Istanbul). At some point, most were sent to Anatolia to learn the Turkish of the time and develop into strong men. The vast majority of them became members of the janissaries (infantry) or *sipahiler* (cavalry), while the brightest, bravest and fittest of them entered the Enderun, with the *şehzadeler* (princes) (Taş, 1999). This was an extensive school and college inside the Palace complex where they were groomed for service as military and administrative officers of the highest rank or as bureaucrats to administer the offices of the entire Ottoman government.

The author/chronicler Selânikî Mustafa Efendi, who wrote the *Tarih-i Selaniki* (Peachy, 1984) was taken in the devshirme from the city of Thessalonica in what is now Greece. After learning Turkish, Farsi and Arabic languages and literature, he rose to become a *Sipahi Katibi*, the administrative officer of the Ottoman cavalry corps. He was a hafız, spoke and wrote Farsi and composed prose and poetry in Ottoman and Farsi.

The only exception was the *‘ilmiye*, the legal system staffed by educated Turks. Those headed for the *‘ilmiye*, were educated in madrasas, religious schools usually attached to mosques. They were normally Turks and always of Muslim background. They studied Classical Arabic and Farsi (i.e., Neo-Persian) as second languages. Those excelling in Arabic and Farsi and all the Qur’anic sciences became teachers, muftis and professors, often moving to more prestigious madrasas as their scholarship increased and became recognized. The top of the hierarchy were the *kazaskers* and the *Sheikhu’l-Islam* (Kazıcı, 1999; Çelebi, 1999; Hızlı, 1999).

The end products of the learning and training process of the *seyfiye* and the *‘ilmiye* were individuals educated in three languages: Ottoman, Farsi and Arabic. These three languages were used in and by the state bureaucracy. Arabic was the written language of the legal system staffed by the learned and could be used for oral communication especially in the Arab provinces after the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century conquests of Selim I, called the Grim, *Yavuz* in Turkish. Farsi was used for all records in the treasury/exchequer. Oral and written Ottoman Turkish was used by the military and the imperial administration, the executive branch of the empire. The Sultans, the viziers, the pashas, the beys and the secretaries in the bureaus in the capital and provinces not only read one or all of the three languages, but they also wrote in them. They did not just write in the course of their state duties. They also composed poetry and prose in the additional languages.

The Imperial Harem should also be mentioned. All the ladies of the Harem except the daughters of the sultans, were slaves captured in war or bought at slave markets. They came to the Harem as non-Muslims speaking non-Muslim languages of Europe and Africa. They, too, had an Enderun school in the Topkapı Palace where they learned Ottoman and perhaps Arabic and Farsi. In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the only exceptions were princesses with Turkic heritage belonging to the Imperial Ottoman family. Their mothers were not Turk either, only their Imperial fathers, who were neither their teachers nor their companions.

Long before the advent of the Grammar-Translation method for the teaching of English as a foreign or second language, the denizens of the harem, the *seyfiye* and the *‘ilmiye* learned to read and write between one and three additional languages. What method did they use enabling many of them to become literati, scholars, prose writers and even poets in their additional languages? Arabs and non-

Arabs learned to recite parts of the Qur'an by heart. Thousands and then tens of thousands even became hafizes, able to recite the entire Holy Book orally from memory. For learning the meaning, they studied Arabic grammar, and the scholars copied it, as well as hundreds and thousands of hadiths from the Messenger Muhammad ibn Abdullah. This was the way they learned the Qur'an and to write Arabic as scholars and administrators. They reached levels of skill that are only comparable to those of a few Westerners such as the Polish novelist Joseph Conrad and the French novelist Stendhal's fictional character Julien Sorel in *Le Rouge et le Noir*. Their method of learning was memorization and constant copying of models.

One night in the early 1970's, outside his rented house on a street in Tabriz, Iran, the first author noticed a young man reading aloud from a book as he walked back and forth under the street light. He continued to do this for about two hours for several nights. The first author asked his colleagues at Tabriz University what the student might have been doing. They replied that the youth must have been memorizing the entire book for an examination. A few hundred years earlier, he would also have been copying out the book because the printing press was little used until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Physical activities like walking and writing by hand indeed promote language learning and training by stimulating more blood circulation through the brain, thereby providing more oxygen and nutrients for better brain function.

Arabs do not speak the Classical Arabic of the Qur'an. They have been speaking widely divergent dialects that are often not mutually comprehensible. They learn literary Arabic, modeled on Classical Arabic, for written communication, and they learn it by models. In Saudi Arabia, when the first author was continuing his study of Classical Arabic at Imam Muhammad University in Riyadh, he studied models of good Arabic, and in the examinations, he was expected to write out a composition from memory. That is how he learned Classical Arabic to the extent that he felt competent enough to begin a *meal*, i.e., a new Qur'anic translation (Peachy, 2012).

A significant number of people in various countries including Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey, and even in cities like New York, are not confident in their competence in writing and in navigating bureaucracies, and still seek out professional petitioners (called 'expeditors' in English, *dilekçeciler* or *arzuhalcılar* in Turkish and *mu'akibuun* in Arabic) to write their communications with government officials. The first author worked as such an expeditor in New York City, and he often used *mu'akibuun* in Saudi Arabia.

### Conclusion

How the Ottomans achieved such mastery in writing additional languages well before the advent of the English "Grammar-Translation" method has been the object of this study, but the point of this article and its only original contribution is that it draws attention to the lesson, perhaps many lessons, to be learned from the teaching practices of the generations before us. This lesson from the Ottomans is a source which is relevant, especially to the teaching of writing to students in Turkey and in neighboring regions. The method of learning good writing in additional languages was basically the reading and copying of good models. That method may yet return and turn out to be a more appropriate method for better and finer written communication than further, willy-nilly and helter-skelter appropriation of the lingo of the smart phone.

The discovery of this Ottoman lesson suggests another need for scholars in the humanities. The tendency of studies in the humanities and the sciences is to focus on discrete points that are only researchable by

specialists. That does indeed lead to positive contributions to knowledge. On the negative side, however, valuable insights and theories may not be reached except through an inter-disciplinary approach. In the context of this study, this means the integration of knowledge from History, Education, Linguistics, Applied Linguistics and Language Education. It is also proposed that expanding this integration to include Neurology and Health Sciences would secure further vital knowledge.

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