IU Develops Turkmen Language Program

Turkmen teacher involved in creating unique language course

Wrapped in a floor-length embroidered dress of blue-green crushed velour, with exotic silver earrings and a bold, spiky pendant hanging from her neck, the tall willowy figure of Ejegyz Saparova commands attention as she tries to impress upon her enthusiastic group of four students the nuances of vowel harmony in Turkmen, the language of her native Turkmenistan.

In the summer of 1994 Ejegyz taught the first Turkmen course ever offered in the United States—to the man who was to become the deputy ambassador to Turkmenistan—and continued through that fall. She returned again in the summer of 1995 to teach Turkmen in an eight-week course intensive course offered through Indiana University’s Summer Workshop in Slavic and East European Languages.

“Turkmen is one of the Turkic languages,” Ejegyz explained. “The closest language is Azeri, and then Turkish. But Turkmen is one of the purest. Turkmens live in the desert, they didn’t change their language.” Ejegyz cites vowel harmony—a system in which the vowels of the various suffixes change to harmonize with the vowel in the root word—as an example of the purity of the Turkmen language. Vowel harmony is present to some degree in all Turkic languages, but is most pervasive in Turkmen.

Although vowel harmony creates some difficulties for her students, Ejegyz said that Turkic word order, which is virtually the inverse of English, and the complicated but regular system of suffixes characteristic of all Turkic languages, are the most difficult aspects of the language for her students.

With her black hair pulled back and gold teeth gleaming, Ejegyz has been the most striking face of the Turkmen Project, a two-year project to develop a course in the Turkmen language. But a lot of other faces are at work behind the scenes, putting together the materials that Ejegyz brought to life in the classroom. Project Director Larry Clark, a professor in IU’s Central Eurasian Studies Department (CEUS), also has brought a number of other Turkmen scholars to Bloomington as principle linguists or consultants. “They’re our Turkmen linguists,” says Clark. “They add a certain academic correctness, and in Ejegyz’s case, she made it lively because of her teaching experience.” The project also has employed a number of IU graduate students either full or part time. David Tyson, a doctoral candidate in Central Eurasian Studies, has played a pivotal role in the project. He lived for years in Turkmenistan and other Central Asian republics, and brings a deep knowledge of Turkmen language and culture to the project. Other students of the CEUS and Linguistics departments include: Suzan Oezel, William Dirks, Andrea Word, Shahyar Daneshgar, Hande Birkalan, and Sarah Sherry.

The $450,000 project is funded by the Center for the Advancement of Language and Learning, the coordinative agency for meeting instructional needs in the U.S. The Center has been funding major projects for the development of language materials for “critical languages” for three years now, Clark said. “Turkmen is a critical language for several reasons,” Clark explained. “Turkmenistan is in an area of Eurasia that may be sensitive for geopolitical and economic reasons, including border disputes with Iran and Afghanistan and the exploitation of its very large reserves of gas and oil.”

IU won the contract to develop the language course after presentation of a pilot study, which included the course design and a sample lesson, Clark said. The contract was awarded on the basis of design, theoretical approach, and practical application.

“They loved our design,” Clark says with some pride. The course was designed by Nancy Clair, consultant for language curriculum development at University of Massachusetts, Boston, and Erika Gilson, a professor of Turkish at Princeton University. Tyson gathered, processed, and transcribed most of the authentic materials on which the course is based. “Our methodology, our theoretical approach are cutting edge,” said Clark. He says the Center already uses the design for all their language courses.

The “cutting edge” is the “communicative approach,” a theoretical and methodological approach to language teaching that emphasizes communication skills, as opposed to the more traditional methods, which emphasize vocabulary memorization, grammar and translation. “This is a major theoretical and methodological advance in the teaching of Turkic languages,” Clark said.

Clark noted that with the exception of Turkish, there has been little success in teaching other Turkic languages. “One of the problems previously was that we had no access to these countries, so that no one could ever get any kind of cultural or communicative experience,” he explained. “In addition, they were being taught according to traditional
grammar-based models or audio-lingual models, which is the kiss of death.”
Clark’s insistence on the communicative approach is motivated in part by his own language training, which he felt was inadequate. “I vowed to change this because I also suffered from this,” he recalls.

Ejegyz explained that the communicative method teaches people to speak from the very beginning. “You may know for example only 20 words and the structure of the sentence, and you may try to speak to communicate,” she said.

“On the other hand, you may know thousands and thousands of words and you may know grammar, but if you can’t use it in your speech, then it’s difficult to communicate with any speaker of the language. I myself, it’s much better for me to go and lecture on English grammar than to speak simple sentences.”

The communicative approach is not only a more natural way to learn languages, it is also a more nurturing, confidence-inspiring approach. Ejegyz has used role plays and other realistic situations to get her students to speak Turkmen, and makes a point of not interrupting them to make corrections. “I make sure we understand each other, but later I may say, ‘Okay,’ now it’s much better of course to say it is this way or that way,” she said. “But I only explain grammar rules when the student asks ‘Why?’, because if they want to know why, then it’s much easier to remember.”

Clark notes that another indispensable aspect of the communicative approach is the emphasis on integrating cultural training with the language training. “There’s two aspects to being communicative,” he said. “You have to know the language, but you also have to know the culture.” The Turkmen Project achieves that goal by relying exclusively on authentic materials. “We choose these materials so that they teach the culture at the same time that students are learning the language—it’s effortless.” The materials include newspapers, TV and radio broadcasts, journals, literature and videotapes made in Turkmenistan, some of them natural, and some made specifically as teaching aids. “This is the only way to teach these languages,” Clark said.

In Ejegyz, Clark found not only a talented and experienced language teacher, but an enthusiastic cultural ambassador as well. “I’m very happy to be able to teach Turkmen here at Indiana,” she said. “First of all, during the Soviet period everybody thought that we were Russian, and nobody knew about the Central Asian cultures and peoples. So I want to show that in the Soviet Union there were other nationalities, and they have their own cultures. This is a good opportunity for me to teach more people about Turkmenistan.” Indeed, at a picnic for students of Central Asian languages, Ejegyz staged an impromptu fashion show of sorts by grabbing an unsuspecting student and dressing her up as a Turkmen bride.

Ejegyz Saparova finished her contract with the project in August and has since returned to her country. The Turkmen Project will wrap up at the end of October. The complete language course will consist of eight volumes totaling 4,000 pages, plus 30 hours of video and audio taped materials. “It’s all written, but the revising and correcting has been a monumental task,” Clark said. “The real problem that I perceive in our final product is that we will never have had the leisure to take our revised copy and look at it as a whole and see how it works. We’ve had to work right up to the end just to submit the final product.”

Clark will not be at a loss for things to do once the Turkmen project is out of his hands. “I have in the works an important proposal to write an English language textbook for Turkmen higher educational institutions, written in Turkmen,” he explained. “Everything now is written in Russian.” Clark is also hoping to gather all the instructors of Turkic languages together for a teaching workshop. If he’s lucky, he may find another Ejegyz Saparova among them.

Brian Donahoe for OIP