

# Turkish language acquisition of bilingual Syrian students in Turkey from the parents' perspective: experiences and challenges

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**Abstract.** This research examines the language learning processes of bilingual Syrian students under temporary protection living in Turkey and the difficulties they encounter in this process from the perspective of their parents. Syrians, who were forced to leave their country due to war, are faced with a new education system and language in Turkey. Language acquisition plays a critical role in the adaptation processes of bilingual refugee students. It creates positive effects on both individual and social levels in terms of increasing success in education, ensuring social harmony, providing employment opportunities, ensuring cultural integration, and increasing students' self-confidence. The data of the research, which was prepared with the content analysis technique, one of the qualitative research methods, was collected with a structured interview form. The data obtained from the participants through the interviews were analyzed in the Maxqda program. The research showed that the vast majority of Syrian parents living in Turkey prefer to speak their mother tongue with their children, want their children to learn Arabic both because it is their mother tongue and so that they do not stay away from the Arab culture, but they also attach importance to learning Turkish. Participants stated that they use Turkish mass media at home because they think it will contribute to their children's academic success and social adaptation, that they attach importance to reading Turkish books, and that they make an effort to speak Turkish in daily life. They stated that their children experienced various problems in learning Turkish, especially the problems arising from their children's lack of Turkish vocabulary and the Turkish-Arabic alphabet difference. They also expressed their views on conducting studies to teach Turkish in preschool, opening adaptation classes starting from the first grade, opening support courses during the education process, and supporting the adaptation process with various social activities.

## 1 Introduction

This research examines the language learning processes of bilingual Syrian students under temporary protection living in Turkey and the difficulties they encounter in this process from the perspective of their parents.

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A person growing up bilingual is especially seen in children of parents from different nations and whose mother tongues are different; it also occurs in those who have lived in close relations with the people of that country for a long time in foreign countries, in the language of minorities in any place, in countries with the same official language, in short, in cases where more than one language is learned and used [1].

Bilingual education aims to ensure that the individual develops in the second language without regressing in the mother tongue. This concept, called additive bilingualism, points to the importance of harmonious progress of linguistic development. "If the individual is forced to use only the second language from childhood due to social and political pressure created by the environment, subtractive bilingualism is encountered. In this environment, the individual's mother tongue is neglected and his/her development is delayed. At the same time, the desired level of development cannot be achieved in the second language" [20].

[9] states that those who use their mother tongue together with the dominant language in the society they live in cannot develop at the same level in both languages due to the limited input provided by their home language environments, and this creates a detrimental situation regarding their mother tongue.

Definitions and explanations in the literature show that the most profitable situation is for bilinguals to be competent in both their mother tongue and their second language. People who can use both languages with different people, subjects and language skills in daily life are bilingual [8]. This situation is also expressed as balanced bilingualism. Balanced bilingualism is "the situation in which an individual can distinguish the contexts of use of two languages and use both languages with equal competence and success without mixing the languages" [18]. When the opposite happens, the concept of limited bilingualism is encountered. Limited bilingualism is when an individual has not been able to develop their skills in both languages to a certain level of development.

Syrians who were forced to leave their country due to war are faced with a new education system and language in Turkey. Language acquisition plays a critical role in the adaptation processes of bilingual refugee students. It creates positive effects on both the individual and social levels in terms of increasing success in education, ensuring social harmony, providing employment opportunities, ensuring cultural integration, and increasing students' self-confidence.

Examining the Turkish and Arabic learning status of bilingual Syrian children living in Turkey can provide important clues about their education, social integration, and long-term success. Since language is a fundamental tool in education, how and in what time these children learn Turkish directly affects their adaptation to school, academic success, and self-confidence. In addition, their level of learning Turkish and Arabic provides critical data about how they communicate with society, how they build their social relationships, and their potential to establish a permanent life in Turkey. This research is important in terms of contributing to the development of more effective educational policies that meet the needs of Syrian children.

### Purpose of the Study

This study aims to examine the Turkish learning status of bilingual Syrian children living in Turkey according to parents' views.

Within the framework of this general purpose, the following questions were sought:

1. What are the families' purposes in wanting their children to learn Arabic?
2. What are the families' purposes in wanting their children to learn Turkish?
3. What activities do families carry out to help their children learn Turkish?
4. How do children use Turkish in their daily lives?

5. What kinds of problems do children encounter while learning and using Turkish?
6. What can be done to help Syrian children living in Turkey learn Turkish better?

## 2 Method

### 2.1. Study Group

The study group of this study consists of 20 parents of Syrian students living in Turkey in the 2023-2024 academic year. The selection of the study group was carried out using criterion sampling, one of the purposeful sampling methods. Criterion sampling, one of the purposeful sampling methods, enables the situation to be examined in depth by selecting its types within the scope of predetermined criteria [19]. Information on the characteristics of the participants is given below:

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the Study Group

Category	Variable	f	%
Gender of participants	Woman	19	95
	Man	1	5
Participants' place of birth	Syria	20	100
	Türkiye	0	0
The language that participants speak and understand best	Turkish	0	0
	Arabic	20	100
The language that the participants' children speak best	Turkish	1	5
	Arabic	19	95

When Table 1 is examined, it is seen that 19 of the participants are female and 1 is male, all of them were born in Syria, the language they all speak and understand best is Arabic, and the language that 19 of the participants' children speak best is Arabic and only 1 speaks Turkish.

### 2.2. Research Model

The research was designed in the phenomenology pattern, one of the qualitative research methods, to reveal the difficulties experienced by Syrian students in acquiring the Turkish language and to determine the perceptions of the parents of these students. [14], explained phenomenology as focusing on the in-depth investigation of how individuals perceive and describe phenomena, how they create and interpret phenomena in their minds, and how they convey them to other individuals. This study focused on the experiences and difficulties experienced by Syrian students in the Turkish language acquisition process.

### 2.3. Data Collection Tools

A structured interview form was used as a data collection tool. The interview form developed by the researchers was prepared by taking into account the purpose of the study and literature research. In order to ensure the content validity of the prepared interview form, the opinions of two field experts were obtained and it was made ready for implementation. The interview form was prepared in a 6-question structure that included personal information about the

participants, Arabic-Turkish learning purposes, learning activities, Turkish usage status, problems encountered by children, and suggestions for learning Turkish better. “In structured interviews, the researcher has questions prepared in advance in a certain order. This method allows for rapid coding and analysis of the data, ease of measurement, and then comparison with the scope of the study” [4]. The interviews were conducted face-to-face. The interviews were recorded by the researcher through an interpreter. The shortest interview duration was 40 minutes, while the longest interview duration was 70 minutes.

## 2.4. Data Analysis

After reaching a sufficient number of participants during the research process, a single data file consisting of 16 pages and 2136 words was created. The content analysis technique was used in the analysis of the data. “Content analysis consists of determining the objectives, defining the concepts, determining the units of analysis, determining the location of the data related to the subject, developing a logical structure, determining the coding categories, counting, interpreting and writing the results” [4].

## 3 Findings

This section includes the findings obtained from the data and the comments made on the findings.

### Findings Regarding the Purposes of Families Wanting Their Children to Learn Arabic

All participants answered the questions in the interview form and codes were created and analyzed according to the answers given. The participants were first asked the question “What are your purposes in wanting your child to learn Arabic?”

Table 2. Purposes of Families Wanting Their Children to Learn Arabic

Codes	f	%
Desire to preserve their cultural identity	8	40
Family communication	7	35
Continuity of religious education	4	20
Possibility of returning to Syria in the future	1	5
TOTAL	20	100

When Table 2 is examined, it is understood that the most important reason why Syrian families living in Turkey want their children to learn Arabic is the desire to preserve their cultural identity. It is also seen that they encourage them to learn Arabic in order to maintain family communication, to continue their religious education in Arabic, the language of the Quran, and to consider the possibility of returning to Syria in the future.

Sample Sentences Regarding the Purposes of Families Wanting Their Children to Learn Arabic

*SP7: For example, if he goes somewhere, he doesn't know Arabic, it shouldn't be difficult, so that his uncles can understand him when he sits down. He shouldn't ask what this means, that means. Let him have two languages and learn Arabic as well.*

*SP12: For example, it would be easy for him to learn the Quran from our Arabic. “Kul euzu bi rabbin nas” I don't have a hard time pronouncing it, Betül (my daughter) has a hard time pronouncing it.*

*SP13: Since I am Arab, I also need Arabic for the Quran. They speak Arabic with their mother and me at home, but they know Turkish very well.*

### Findings Regarding Families’ Purposes for Wanting Their Children to Learn Turkish

Participants were asked the question “What are your purposes for wanting your child to learn Turkish?”

Table 3. Families’ Purposes for Wanting Their Children to Learn Turkish

Codes	f	%
Desire to adapt to education	6	30
Desire for social adaptation	5	25
Benefit from job and career opportunities	4	20
Request to facilitate legal and official transactions	4	20
Future uncertainties	1	5
TOTAL	20	100

When Table 3 is examined, the primary reason why children of Syrian families living in Turkey want to learn Turkish is their desire to adapt to the education system. Following this goal, the desire to integrate into social life is also an important source of motivation. In addition, families who realize the necessity of learning Turkish so that their children can better benefit from job and career opportunities and evaluate future opportunities encourage language learning to facilitate official and legal procedures. However, the idea of being prepared for future uncertainties is also among the reasons for learning the language, even if at a low level.

### Example Sentences Regarding the Reasons Families Want Their Children to Learn Turkish

*SP5: It is now mandatory for them to learn Turkish. You say to yourself, this is now the homeland (it has become)*

*SP9: I want them to work, I want them to study, I need good Turkish. For example, they go somewhere and get lost. They got lost in kindergarten, the principal brought them to the door of the classroom. If they did not know the language, they could not bring them.*

### Works done by families for their children to learn Turkish

Participants were asked, “What are the works you do for your child to learn Turkish?” The question was asked.

Table 4. Activities Families Do to Help Their Children Learn Turkish

Codes	f	%
Using Turkish mass media	7	35
Speaking Turkish in the family	6	30
Providing educational materials in Turkish	3	15
Participating in Turkish courses	2	10
Creating Turkish friends	2	5
TOTAL	20	100

When Table 4 is examined, it is seen that Syrian families living in Turkey use various methods for their children to learn Turkish. The most important of these efforts is watching Turkish-content television programs and actively using Turkish communication tools in their daily lives. Families also try to develop their children's language skills by practicing speaking Turkish at home. In addition, they provide their children with Turkish educational materials, enroll them in language courses, and benefit from professional education opportunities to

support their language development. Efforts to make Turkish friends in order to expand their social circle are also considered to be an important step for families, albeit a small one.

Example sentences regarding the efforts families make for their children to learn Turkish

*SP2: She memorized it as her aunt and father talked in the family. She is high and never forgets. They watch Turkish channels at home. TRT Çocuk in particular. I watch TRT1, Now, Show. I bought Turkish storybooks.*

*SP10: My child only had difficulty for the first 2 or 3 months. My daughter is doing very well now. She learned Turkish at school. We watch both Turkish and Arabic on TV at home. I show them TRT, Show TV, Syria Channel, Halep TV, EBA TV so that they can learn Turkish. It was useful for them to get used to school in kindergarten. Since there were many Syrians in their class, it was not difficult.*

### Children's use of Turkish in daily life

The question "What is your child's use of Turkish in daily life?" was asked to the participants.

Table 5. Children's use of Turkish in daily life

Codes	f	%
School	13	65
Social environment	4	20
Family	3	15
TOTAL	20	100

When Table 5 is examined, it is revealed that children of Syrian families living in Turkey use Turkish the most in the school environment. It is striking that the rate of using Turkish outside of school, in the social environment, and within the family is quite low.

Sample sentences regarding children's use of Turkish in daily life

*SP5: I speak Arabic at home, his father speaks Turkish. He speaks Arabic with his friends at school. He loves his Syrian friends.*

*SP1: Children speak Turkish at school because there are many Turkish friends in the classroom. But he speaks Arabic with his Syrian friends during breaks. We always speak Arabic at home. Sometimes we talk on the phone with relatives in Syria, then the children have to speak Arabic. Because they do not know Turkish there.*

### Problems children encounter while learning and using Turkish

The participants were asked, "What are the problems your child encounters while learning and using Turkish?"

Table 6. Problems children encounter while learning Turkish

Codes	f	%
Language differences and language barriers	6	30
Adapting to the education system	5	20
Psychosocial problems	3	15
Lack of supportive language education programs	2	10
Limited family support	2	10
Mixed languages and bilingualism	2	10
TOTAL	20	100

When Table 6 is examined, the main problems encountered by children of Syrian families living in Turkey in the process of learning Turkish are the language difference and the

language barrier. These obstacles cause children to experience serious difficulties while learning a new language. The problem of children adapting to the education system in Turkey is another important problem that is widely expressed. It is also noteworthy that children face psychosocial problems during this process, that programs supporting their language development are lacking, and that families cannot support the language learning process due to their lack of knowledge of Turkish. Bilingualism and mixed languages also negatively affect both the academic success and social integration of students.

Sample sentences regarding the problems encountered by children while learning Turkish:

*SP20: Adaptation class is required for the first grade. Children should take a 2-lesson course after school, why don't they? My child does not like me because I could not help my children because I do not know Turkish. They learn Turkish in kindergarten and get used to it. Let kindergarten be 2 years.*

*SP6: I took Level A1, A2. I took the book from the course. KAYMEK opened a course, my neighbor informed me. But the course was only 1 month and then they closed it. It was only 2 days, Saturday and Sunday, 3 hours, 3 hours. The teacher was Turkish, we helped each other in the course. I can't help because I don't know much.*

### Recommendations for Syrian children living in Turkey to learn Turkish better

The participants were asked the question "What are your recommendations for your child to learn Turkish better?"

Table 7. Recommendations for Syrian children living in Turkey to learn Turkish better

Codes	f	%
Language courses	11	55
School support	3	15
Social interaction with Turkish peers	3	15
Family support programs	2	10
Teacher support	1	5
TOTAL	20	100

When Table 7 is examined, it is seen that Syrian families living in Turkey mostly demand language classes to be opened so that students can learn Turkish better. In addition, they stated that they want more support work in schools and that children's social interaction with their Turkish peers contributes to their language development. Families think that family support programs should be expanded in order to accelerate their development and overcome the failures they encounter, and that teacher support will also be effective.

Sample sentences regarding suggestions for Syrian children living in Turkey to learn Turkish better:

*SV18: I think the most useful course right now. In fact, it would be better if the teacher knew a little Turkish and a little Arabic. The teacher wrote seasons, I told them ELFUSUL, they understood better. God, they don't know what autumn means, I said ELHARİF, they all understood. They both understood and loved it. 60-70 percent do not understand.*

*V15: PIKTES The orientation class was not useful. There are only Syrians in the class, which is a bad thing. They all speak Arabic anyway. It would be better if there were 2 lessons of Turkish at the exit.*

## 4 Conclusion and Discussion

In the study, it was determined that the majority of the participants wanted their children to learn Arabic both because it is their mother tongue and so that they would not be alienated from the Arab culture. When the reasons why Syrian families wanted their children to learn Arabic were examined, it was understood that they mostly wanted their children to learn Arabic because it was a part of their cultural heritage. It was understood that families supported their children to learn Arabic in order to ensure that they did not stray from their own cultural roots and did not lose their Arab identity. Language is an important part of identity and learning Arabic helps children maintain their ties with their own roots. Similarly, [2] determined that Turkish children living in Norway had the following goals regarding learning Turkish: to master their mother tongue, to be able to communicate well and to be successful in acquiring the language of the society they live in. Families' awareness of the strong relationship between language and culture is an important situation that will keep Syrians' ties to their homeland strong for a long time. Because "by learning their language, future generations not only learn their own language, but also learn the characteristic lifestyles inherited from their ancestors and the unique characteristics of the society they live in" [7].

As a result of the interviews, it was understood that in some Syrian families, Arabic is spoken at home because the parents do not know enough Turkish. It is seen as important for children to learn Arabic in order to strengthen communication within the family and prevent gaps between generations. Arabic is considered the holy language of Islam, and for many Syrian families, it is of great importance for their children to be able to read and understand religious texts (the Quran, hadiths, etc.). For this reason, it was understood that learning Arabic is also encouraged by Syrian parents because it is a part of religious education. Some Syrian families also want their children to learn Arabic because they think they may return to Syria one day. It was understood that they think that learning Arabic will make it easier for their children to re-adapt to education and social life if they return to Syria. [6] stated in his study that the concept of religion is effective on the identity needs of refugee children and that the religious characteristics of children and their parents are similar to Turkey in the reasons for their migration to Turkey. In the study of [14], which examined the views of children, it was observed that they watch Arabic TV programs in order not to forget their own language as much as they attach importance to their lessons.

According to the answers given by Syrian parents, the main reason why their children want to learn Turkish is the "desire to adapt to education". The vast majority of parents think that Syrian children need to learn Turkish in order to integrate into the Turkish education system, overcome the language barrier and receive a better education. Parents think that learning Turkish will allow Syrian children to adapt better to social life. From the answers given by parents, it is understood that learning Turkish is important for Syrian children to communicate with their Turkish friends, integrate with their environment and integrate into society. Syrian parents think that their children need to learn Turkish in order to facilitate various areas of life in Turkey, especially in legal and official transactions and to be able to easily handle their work. According to the interviews conducted with parents, it was understood that some Syrian parents benefit from educational applications and online resources for their children to learn Turkish and try to speak Turkish at home. They stated that they support their children with activities such as watching Turkish television programs, reading books and speaking Turkish with their friends. Families stated that they tried to contribute to the language learning process by providing their children with Turkish storybooks, resource textbooks, dictionaries and other educational materials. Many Syrian families stated that they directed their children to Turkish language courses. It was understood that they attended courses organized for learning Turkish at the Migration Administration, municipalities, non-governmental organizations and mosques. One of the most effective methods for children to learn the language is to use the language in daily life.



It was understood that Syrian families tried to help their children learn Turkish more quickly and naturally by encouraging them to make Turkish friends.

In general, it was understood that Syrian children have the opportunity to use Turkish actively in their school and social environments, but they prefer Arabic at home and in family communication. The majority of Syrian children attend state schools in Turkey. Since the language of education in these schools is Turkish, children are required to use Turkish actively in the classroom and during lessons. They usually use Turkish when communicating with their schoolmates. This process greatly contributes to the development of Turkish language skills.

The rate at which Syrian children use Turkish varies according to their social environment. If children make Turkish friends and communicate frequently with Turkish neighbors or tradesmen, it has been understood that their Turkish language skills develop rapidly, whereas if they live in a more closed environment within the Syrian community, communication is predominantly in Arabic and Turkish is used less. Since children continue to speak Arabic at home, they use Turkish more at school and in social environments outside. In this context, family-child-home oriented Turkish language and education programs should be developed, taking into account the family factor [11] in supporting the education process of Syrian children. It has been understood that even if they speak Turkish during class at school, they come together with their Syrian friends and speak Arabic during breaks. It is obvious that those who do not know the language at a sufficient level will have difficulties both in social life and in business life outside of school. Syrians who have language problems will continue to live among themselves, which may lead to a lack of communication and integration problems with other segments of society. For these reasons, language education that will neither make children forget their own language nor make them fall behind in education when they go to school should be targeted [16]. Language problems prevent students from developing social relationships and integration with their peers and cause students to play and spend more time with their friends from their own country [5]. Refugee children cannot express themselves fully at school due to not knowing Turkish well enough and cannot establish healthy dialogue with their teachers, peers and school administrators [5-10].

It has been observed that the problems experienced by Syrian bilingual children living in Turkey in acquiring the Turkish language are language differences and language barriers, adaptation to the education system, psychosocial problems, lack of supportive language teaching programs, limited family support, language mixing and bilingualism.

Turkish has a very different language structure from Arabic. There are great differences between the two languages in terms of both grammatical rules and phonetics. Especially the fact that Turkish is an agglutinative language and Arabic is an inflected language makes it difficult for Arabic-speaking children. For example; eye-glasses-optician is an example of an agglutinative language structure, and book-library-library is an example of an inflected language structure. Since the language structure of English and Arabic is the same, Syrian parents have also stated that their children learn English more easily than Turkish. Syrian children may have difficulty understanding and expressing themselves while learning Turkish at the beginning. This situation may also negatively affect children's participation in classroom activities and their ability to follow lessons.

Children who lack Turkish language proficiency may have difficulty understanding lessons such as mathematics and science. This situation reduces children's overall academic success and may cause them to fall behind in the education process. The fact that all textbooks and materials are in Turkish creates an additional obstacle for children with inadequate language skills. These materials can be difficult to understand and can slow down the learning process. In their study evaluating teachers' opinions on textbooks used in teaching Turkish to Syrian students, [3] determined that the textbooks were not appropriate for the students'

levels and that the same book was used regardless of age and grade. Language problems prevent the acquisition of a large part of the curriculum gains in the education process and limit students' participation in lessons and group work [17]. Children who do not know Turkish completely may feel insecure when communicating with their friends and teachers. This situation may also negatively affect their motivation to learn the language. The language barrier may make it difficult for some children to adapt to the social environment. Children who do not speak Turkish well enough may have difficulty communicating with Turkish students and may feel excluded. The language problem creates a communication problem not only for refugee students but also for Turkish students. Turkish students cannot understand their foreign peers and their foreign friends are reluctant to communicate [15].

Although some schools in Turkey provide Turkish language support for Syrian children, these programs are not always sufficient. Language support may be limited, especially in rural areas or in schools with fewer opportunities. The fact that teachers who teach Turkish to Syrian children have not received special training in language education can also make the process more difficult. In addition, teachers' lack of cultural awareness can further complicate children's language learning processes. It has been understood that teachers who teach Turkish do not have sufficient training in teaching Turkish to foreigners [16].

Since families of Syrian children generally do not know Turkish, they cannot contribute to the language learning process at home. The language problem also negatively affects family support in the education and training processes of foreign students, and it is observed that the language barrier is a factor that prevents families from helping their children with their homework [12]. Children do not have the opportunity to practice language outside of school, which slows down their language development. Many Syrian families cannot provide their children with extra support in language education because they are financially struggling.

Opportunities such as attending language courses or taking private lessons are limited. When two languages are learned together, confusion may occur in children's minds. Applying Arabic language rules or experiencing word confusion while learning Turkish is a common problem. This situation can make it difficult to learn both Turkish and Arabic correctly. Children who speak Arabic at home and Turkish at school may have difficulty using both languages at the same time and may experience language confusion during transitions.

The following suggestions were developed based on interviews with parents.

- Participating in Turkish language courses, especially for children, can accelerate language learning. Municipalities, civil society organizations or state institutions can organize free language education programs. Rather than grammar knowledge, it is sufficient for them to learn enough Turkish to sustain their daily lives in the first place.

- Language learning can be provided in pre-school education. Pre-school education can be two years for the purpose of learning the language.

- Syrian children can be provided with Turkish language support in schools. This can be possible with private Turkish lessons, guidance teachers and additional in-class support.

- PIKTES Adaptation Classes, which are attended in the third grade, can be started from the first grade.

- Children can accelerate their language development by socializing with Turkish-speaking peers and practicing the language by playing games.

- Families can also be included in the process of children learning Turkish. Supporting parents in the language learning process can increase Turkish practice at home.

- Teachers can receive training to support the language development of Syrian children. Bilingual teaching strategies can be especially effective in this process.

- Teachers who know both Arabic and Turkish can be assigned in the language acquisition process.

- Mobile applications, video lessons and games, especially for language learning, can make children's language learning fun.

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