

The effect of teaching the alphabet with onomatopoeia on writing skills in Turkish lessons for foreigners[#]

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Accepted 15 May, 2024

ABSTRACT

One of the difficulties in teaching Turkish, which is a phonetically rich language, to foreigners, is that similar sounds are often confused with each other. Since even a single punctuation mark is crucial for writing and reading Turkish letters (ı-i, o-ö, u-ü, c-ç, g-ğ, s-ş, etc.), students who use the Arabic alphabet have great difficulty writing and pronouncing Turkish words correctly. The difficulties that foreigners have in spelling vowels (ı-i, o-ö, u-ü) and consonants (c-ç, g-ğ, m-n, s-ş) when learning Turkish also have a negative impact on their writing and speaking skills. Especially in essay writing classes, students often misspell words, which makes it necessary to determine and implement more effective strategies in alphabet lessons. When teaching the Turkish alphabet, it is of great importance that the teacher uses “onomatopoeia,” which is considered an important feature of Turkish, to overcome this problem. In this study, the effect of onomatopoeia, the word corresponding to sounds in nature, on writing skills in Turkish classes for foreigners was investigated. This study, taken from a class of nine students at the Afyon Kocatepe University Turkish Language Teaching Centre at A1 level in the semesters of 2013–2014, was based on the analysis of three essays written by the students before and after studying onomatopoeia. The analysis of the data revealed that teaching the alphabet with onomatopoeic words was effective for the students in terms of the letters whose spellings were confused with each other and made a significant contribution to the writing skills of foreigners.

Keywords: Teaching Turkish as a foreign language, alphabet, onomatopoeia, writing.

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[#] This study is an improved version of the paper presented at the 7th International Turkish Language Teaching and Learning Congress at Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University on June 19–21, 2014.

Research ethics committee approval: The research data were collected before 2020.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is a time when Turkish is of great interest to foreigners, and learning the language has accelerated considerably. Turkey’s geopolitical position as a link between Asia and Europe and its perception by the peoples of the Middle East as a pioneering and competent player in Islamic civilization played an important role in this acceleration. According to Şimşek and Erdem (2021, p. 268), interest in Turkey and Turkish is influenced by population-related movements in the Middle East, especially after the 2000s, and Turkey’s pro-people approach. The increasing orientation of foreigners toward the Turkish language is also influenced by “the recent orientation of universities toward the international education market, which has gained further momentum after the establishment of the Yunus Emre Institute in 2009 and the opening of a Turkish language teaching center at almost every university after 2010, as well as the fact that Turkey has

become one of the destination countries for refugees” (Memiş, 2021, p. 2). According to Bayyurt and Yaylı (2019, p. 9), the recent importance of teaching Turkish as a foreign language is a result of the increasing interest in the Turkish language, especially in Europe and the Turkish republics. According to Uzun (2013, p. 7), the number of people who want to learn Turkish is increasing significantly, either due to globalization or Turkey’s growing importance in the world, and Turkish language teaching is now considered a serious market in the education sector. In the context of all these assessments, it is evident that the first quarter of the 21st century is a critical and important period for Turkey in the field of teaching Turkish to foreigners.

The fact that the Turkish language and culture are followed with interest in many countries and continents makes it necessary to use new, up-to-date teaching methods and techniques to facilitate and popularize the teaching of Turkish to foreigners. At such an important

time, different teaching methods and techniques, as well as written, visual, and auditory materials, are needed to teach Turkish to foreigners more quickly and easily. Although there has been significant progress and development in the teaching of Turkish to foreigners in recent years, there are still many problems in this area that need to be solved. These problems can be listed as follows: “the problem of making teaching Turkish to foreigners a state policy, the problem of the program, the problem of the subject teachers, the insufficient resources to be used, the deficiencies in the learning environment, the problems arising from the students, the problems arising from the target language, the problems arising from the first language, and the problems arising from the alphabet” (Açık, 2008; Alyılmaz, 2010; Er, Biçer and Bozkırlı, 2012; Karababa, 2009; Subaşı, 2010; Yıldız and Tunçel, 2012, cited in Şengül, 2014, p. 326).

Learning the alphabet occupies an important place among the problems that arise when teaching Turkish to foreigners. The alphabet, which is defined as “a collection of letters used to transcribe a language” (Topaloğlu, 1989), “a group of letters corresponding to the sounds of a language in a particular order” (Ergin, 2009, p. 39), “the set of letters of a language arranged in a particular order” (TDK, 2012, p. 3), and “the form of all the letters and signs used to write down the sounds of a language in a certain order” (Karaağaç, 2013), is “one of the most serious problems to be overcome when learning a language. Learning a foreign language is not just about mastering the grammatical structure and vocabulary of that language. This will ensure that this language is only used in correspondence; it will be inadequate in the use of basic language skills such as reading, listening, speaking, and writing.” (Şengül, 2014, pp. 329–330). The basis of Turkish lessons for foreigners is alphabet instruction. This teaching is based on “letters,” the written equivalent of “sounds,” which Ergin (2009) defines as the smallest and simplest linguistic element in the structure of all the forms that make up language, from the smallest grammatical units to the largest unit, the sentence (p. 29). “The Turkish alphabet was introduced on the basis of Latin letters with the ‘Law on the Adoption and Use of Turkish Letters’ dated 1.XI.1928 and numbered 1353. According to this law, there are 29 letters in the Turkish alphabet.” (TDK, 2012, p. 3). The tonal richness of Turkish, which has 29 letters in the alphabet, becomes clear in the following words, especially in the vowels: “Turkish is a very rich language in terms of vowels. While there are usually 3–5 vowels in the major languages, there are at least 8 vowels in Turkish. We say the lowest because in Turkish, especially in the spoken language, a closed e is pronounced between e and i in addition to the open e” (Ergin, 2009, p. 39). The large number of vowels in the Turkish alphabet and the similarity in the spelling and pronunciation of some letters create difficulty for foreign language learners: letter confusion. For foreign students, the wealth of Turkish sounds, spellings, and pronunciations proves to be a disadvantage, as they often confuse similar consonants (b-p, c-ç...) and vowels (i-i, o-ö...). Considering that the eight vowels in our written language increase in number and reach up to

twenty-one because of the diversity of sounds in spoken language (Coşkun, 1999, pp. 41–50), the difficulty with the pronunciation of Turkish for foreigners can be easily understood.

Teaching the Turkish alphabet correctly, quickly, and permanently to different alphabet users is a prerequisite for teaching vocabulary and gaining speaking, reading, and writing skills. However, teaching the alphabet has emerged as an important challenge in teaching Turkish to foreigners. Students who use the Arabic alphabet in particular have difficulty learning the Turkish alphabet, which consists of eight vowels and twenty-one consonants. The following observation on this subject is quite remarkable:

Arabic students make the most errors in spelling (54.58%) when learning Turkish written expressions, and 62.2% of these errors are due to negative transfer. Lessons should include activities that reinforce the learning of vowel letters, and students should be made to practice dictations to check that they have fully learned the Turkish alphabet first. Students’ problems with spelling and punctuation should be solved at the basic Turkish level; otherwise, these errors may become permanent at the intermediate and advanced levels (Bölükbaş, 2011, p. 1365).

The main difficulty that foreigners face when learning Turkish is the spelling of the vowel and consonant letters (i-i, o-ö, u-ü, b-p, c-ç, s-ş, etc.), which are separated by a period. Confusing letters with subtle differences in spelling and pronunciation leads to foreign students making many errors. Şengül (2014, p. 337) states that foreign students who use the Arabic alphabet sometimes use vowels interchangeably, sometimes not at all, do not understand the sounds ö, ü, ş, ç, ı, ğ in the Turkish alphabet, and have difficulty using them. According to Subaşı (2010, p. 14), although there are eight vowel letters in Turkish, the fact that there are only the sounds “a, e, i and u” in Arabic means that Arabic students make many spelling errors when writing letters such as “o, ö, ü” Aktaş (2021, p. 130) notes that the fact that the phonological structure of Turkish differs from that of other languages causes students to make many spelling errors when writing, that Arabic only has the vowels elif (إ), vav (و), and ye (ي) [â, û, î], but not the vowels o-ö-ü, and they constantly confuse the letters “ı” and “i” in their essays. According to Karababa (2009, p. 273), the problems that foreign students have with the pronunciation of words when learning Turkish are mostly due to the differences in the sounds and alphabet of their first language. Okatan (2012, p. 97) also emphasizes that learners of Turkish as a foreign language often do not use the vowels because the Arabic alphabet replaces the vowels with gestures. According to Çelik (2019, p. 25), Arabic students often confuse the letters “e-i, o-u, ö-ü, ı-i” with each other. All these difficulties that students have in using the Arabic alphabet make it clear that they have not fully learned the Turkish alphabet and cannot use the letters correctly. It is not possible to explain the problem by limiting it to the difference

between the Turkish and Arabic alphabets. Başoğul and Can (2014, p. 110) state that Balkan students generally have problems spelling vowel and consonant letters such as “c, ç, i, ö, s, ş, ü, y” and cite the fact that these letters occur in Turkish but not in other Balkan languages as the reason for their errors.

When teaching Turkish to foreigners, it is mainly in the students’ writing activities that one encounters letter errors. Açık (2008, p. 3) points out that the biggest difficulty that foreigners have in learning Turkish in terms of basic language skills is writing skills at 40% (p. 3). Süğümlü and Akdemir (2023, p. 90) also mention the inability to write vowels correctly and the differences in the alphabet as the problems encountered in teaching Turkish to foreigners in terms of writing skills from the teachers’ point of view. Writing skills are of great importance in teaching Turkish to foreigners. Erol (2016, p. 181) emphasizes that the ability to write, together with reading, forms the basis of foreign language learning and that for this ability, it is necessary to learn the target language well and to go through a serious cognitive process. “Writing is the expression of feelings, thoughts, wishes, and events with certain symbols and according to certain rules. Writing is a behavior with which humans naturally express themselves. It is not enough to express feelings, thoughts, opinions, and dreams verbally. Writing is also crucial for language development.” (Özbay, 2011, p. 115). The language learner learns words from sounds, constructs sentences from words, and, in this way, begins to express his feelings and thoughts in the target language. Bağcı and Başar (2013, p. 309) state that people with developed writing skills have a good command of the foreign language they are trying to learn. Therefore, writing skills play a key role in teaching Turkish to foreigners. Effective and accurate teaching of Turkish is only possible through the development of this skill. “The aim of developing writing skills in teaching Turkish as a foreign language is to enable individuals to transfer their feelings and thoughts into written form in a planned manner in accordance with the linguistic features of Turkish.” (Tiryaki, 2013, p. 38). The alphabet, which is the first step in developing the writing skills of foreign students, must be taught completely and effectively. This is where “onomatopoeia,” one of the important phonetic features of Turkish, comes into play when teaching the Turkish alphabet to foreigners.

Onomatopoeia are “words that reproduce the sounds and noises produced by non-human animate and inanimate beings in nature through imitation” (Korkmaz, 2007). According to Karahan (2011, p. 264), onomatopoeia, which is one of the disciplines referred to as sound semantics or sound symbolism in linguistics, is an important testimony to the existence of the relationship between sound and meaning” in language and provides rich material to users for this relationship. Karaağaç (2013) defines onomatopoeia as “a word that reflects the sounds and noises produced by non-human animate and inanimate beings in nature through imitation. Onomatopoeic words are linguistic indicators in which the signifier and signified are identical: çat, çatır, çatırda-, havla-, şırıltı, gür gür, çat pat, pat pat, küt küt,

hır hır, gürül gürül, hav hav, civ civ, ciyak ciyak, mışıl mışıl, zırlı zırlı, pa[r]ılda-, patırda-, hırıldı-, etc.” There are many onomatopoeic words in Turkish, and onomatopoeic words are common, especially in doublets. Zülfikar (1995, p. 6) explains the emergence and formal characteristics of onomatopoeia as follows: “Attempts have been made to name the sounds and noises produced by the rich activity in nature or by its members, humans and animals, in a way that approximates their characteristics. Words that are the approximate onomatopoeia of a particular sound or noise in the language have emerged as the simplest forms, mostly monosyllabic, in a style that corresponds to the structural character of Turkish.”

When teaching Turkish to foreigners, the acquisition of the alphabet with reflected words is of great importance in order to prevent the confusion of sounds with similar spelling or pronunciation. Learning the alphabet can be made more practical and effective by using onomatopoeic words. By using onomatopoeic words when teaching the Turkish alphabet to foreigners, the distinction between sounds can be emphasized, and the sounds that are confused in use can be made more memorable.

Aim of the research

In this study, an attempt was made to show the effects of teaching the alphabet with “onomatopoeia” on writing activities in Turkish as a foreign language class. This study aims to determine the place and importance of onomatopoeia in teaching Turkish letters. We investigated whether onomatopoeia affects effective and lasting learning by teaching the Turkish alphabet to foreigners and whether it is useful in distinguishing sounds with similar spelling.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The data for this qualitative study was obtained through document analysis. Document analysis involves analyzing written materials that contain information about the phenomenon or phenomena under investigation (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2013, p. 217). The essays that formed the sample of the study were analyzed using the scanning technique, and statistical information was obtained by identifying the spelling errors that stood out in the texts in question.

Study group

The study group for the research consisted of 9 students who were studying at the Turkish Language Teaching Centre of Afyon Kocatepe University (TÖMER) in 2013-2014 in a basic level A1 class. The students, 7 of whom were male and 2 were female, completed free writing activities with onomatopoeia before and after the alphabet lesson.

Table 1. Descriptive information about students.

Country	f	Language	Alphabet	Number of languages	Gender
Syria	2	Arabic	Arabic	1	M + M
Palestine	1	Arabic	Arabic	1	M
Kenya	2	Swahili + English	Latin	2	F + F
Cameroon	1	English + French	Latin	2	M
Turkmenistan	3	Turkmen	Latin	1	M + M + M
Total	9				

Implementation of the study

At the Turkish Language Teaching Center of Afyon Kocatepe College (TÖMER), nine elementary A1 students were asked to do free writing exercises on topics such as “My Dearest Relative,” “My Dearest Teacher,” “My Happiest Moment,” etc. in the 2013–2014 semester to determine which letters they misspelled in

their writing activities. Many spelling errors were found in the essays of the students who were assumed to have learned the Turkish alphabet. In particular, it was observed that students who used the Arabic alphabet either did not use vowels at all or used them incorrectly in their essays. Expert opinion was sought on this problem, and the following mirror words were selected to teach the Turkish alphabet more effectively.

Table 2. Onomatopoeic words.

Vowel	Onomatopoeic word	Vowel	Onomatopoeic word
a	pat, çat, tak	o	of, hoş, pof
e	me, keh, eh	ö	öp, of, pöf
ı	tık, zır, çıt	u	uf, puf, bum
i	çık, kış, piş	ü	püf, üf, güm

The foreign students were asked to read the mirror words on the table together and aloud. In this study, in which the rhythm was maintained and the tempo increased with each vocalization, the following words were sung by the students in melodic form:

“Pat pat pat pat, çat çat çat çat, tak tak tak tak “A”,
 “me me me me”, “keh keh keh keh”, “eh eh eh eh” “E”,
 “tık tık tık tık”, “zır zır zır zır”, “çıt çıt çıt çıt” “I”,
 “çık çık çık çık”, “kih kih kih kih”, “piş piş piş piş” “İ”,
 “of of of of”, “hoş hoş hoş hoş”, “pof pof pof pof” “O”,
 “öp öp öp öp”, “öf öf öf öf”, “pöf pöf pöf pöf” “Ö”,
 “uf uf uf uf”, “puf puf puf puf”, “bum bum bum bum” “U”,
 “püf püf püf püf”, “üf üf üf üf”, “güm güm güm güm” “Ü”.

This amazing activity, which took place for one lesson over three days, taught students to recognize the difference between “thick-thin” for vowels and “soft-hard” for consonants. In the week following the implementation, students were asked to write a new essay using the free writing technique.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before class activity

Before the introduction of alphabet teaching with onomatopoeia, it was observed that the Arabic students had the greatest difficulties in writing the letters, both in observations during lessons and in writing activities. The

difficulties of these students are particularly evident in the spelling of the letters “a-e” and the letters “ı-i, o-ö, u-ü”, which are separated by a dot. Before the alphabet lessons with onomatopoeia, it was found that 38 out of 100 words were misspelled in the written work of the Arabic students. This rate is 38%.

Text sample

“Ben çocukken bir gün güneşli bir gün Dayım bizim eve gelmiş, son bahar da Hazirende bana bir sürpriz aldı. Ben o zaman sınavlar var Hem çok ders çalışıyordum çok sıkılıyordum. Dayım Bizim eve gelmiş çok mutlu almış bana o bağrmak Muhammed gel seni istiyorum ben geldim. Beni sordum Muhammed Derslerin Nasıl geçiyor. Dedim iyi allah şükür ders çalışıyorum yazı yazıyorum oku okuyorum. Dedi Aferin Muhammed Bir hediye sana için aldım al Muhammed Buyur Ben çok mutlu oldum ve Bu hadise Gerçikten hiç unutmeyorum ben Dayım çok seviyorum.”

“Ben çocukken bir gün güneşli bir gündü. Dayım bizim eve gelmiş, yazın, haziranda bana bir sürpriz yaptı. Benim o zamanlar sınavlarım var. Hem çok ders çalışıyorum hem de çok sıkılıyorum. Dayım bizim eve gelmiş, çok mutlu olmuş. Bana o bağırdı: ‘Muhammed gel, seni istiyorum!’. Ben geldim. Bana sordu: ‘Muhammed, derslerin nasıl geçiyor?’ Dedim ‘İyi, Allah’a şükür, ders çalışıyorum, yazıyorum, okuyorum’. Dedi ‘Aferin Muhammed! Bir hediye senin için aldım, al

Muhammet, buyur'. Ben çok mutlu oldum ve bu hadiseyi gerçekten hiç unutmuyorum. Ben dayımı çok seviyorum.”

Ben çok mutlu oldum
 Bir gün güneşli bir gün Dayım bizim eve geldi
 son bahar da Hazirende bana bir sürpriz
 aldı. Ben o zaman sınavlar var hem çok
 ders çalışıyordum çok sıkılıyordum. Dayım
 Bizimeve gelmiş çok mutlu almış bana
 bağırarak Muhammed gel seni istiyorum
 ben geldim. Beni sordum Muhammed
 derslerin nasıl geçiyor. Dedim iyi Allah
 sükrü ders çalışıyorum yazı yazıyorum
 oku okuyorum. Dedi Aferin Muhammed
 Bir hediye sana işin aldım al Muhammed

Bu bahar Ben çok mutlu oldum ve bu hadiseyi
 Gerçekten hiç unutmuyorum ben Dayım
 çok seviyorum.

Table 3. Examples of students' spelling errors.

ablamlam = ablamla	gerçekten = gerçekten	okuyoram = okuyorum
afarin = aferin	gidip = gidip	oylace = öylece
afcı = avcı	gidmişti = gitmişti	oynadık = oynadık
alib = alıp	gitik = gittik	sıkılıyordum = sıkılıyordum
bağrmak = bağırarak	gizdik = gezdik	sınav = sınav
baskılet = bisiklet	görüb = görüp	suryordım = sürüyordum
benim = benim	guzel = güzel	sükrü = şükür
bisikit = bisiklet	hediye = hediye	sürpris = sürpriz
biskuvi = bisküvi	hazirende = haziranda	unutmuyorum = unutmuyorum
bo gün = bugün	ırsan = arslan	uynuyorlar = oynuyorlar
çalışıyordum = çalışıyordum	kiyafet = kıyafet	uzgundum = üzgündüm
çaliskan = çalışkan	köcüküm = küçüktüm	vırdı = vardı
çogukkan = çocukken	kufetli = kuvvetli	yabıp = yapıp
çuçuk = çocuk	mektub = mektup	yaptık = yaptık
dolaştırdı = dolaştırdı	mukamel = mükemmel	yazışıyorduk = yazışıyorduk
furmuş = vurmuş	müsik = müzik	yillardır = yıllardır

It was observed that foreign students often mixed up the vowels “a-e, e-i, i-i, u-ü, o-ö” and used them interchangeably (afarin=aferin, gildi=geldi, ayakkabi=ayakkabı, bogün=bugün, oylace=öylece) and sometimes did not use the letter “i” before the present tense suffix (yazışıyorduk=yazışıyorduk). When writing consonants, it was found that they often used letters such as “b-p, c-ç, f-v, s-ş, s-z, d-t” interchangeably

(alib=alıp, çucuk=çocuk, sınav=sınav, çaliskan=çalışkan, sengin=zengin, gidmişti=gitmişti).

After class activity

After the alphabet lessons with onomatopoeia, in the days following the activity, the students were asked to

write an essay titled “My Favorite Sport,” “My Favorite City,” and “My Favorite Actor and Actress” by dictation method. It was found that 17 out of 100 words in the written work of the Arabic students were misspelled. This rate of 17% shows that teaching the alphabet through onomatopoeia is beneficial for students. Thanks to the onomatopoeic activity, the students stated that they could distinguish the letters “a” and “e” more easily when writing if they remembered the examples “pat pat pat” and “keh keh keh” reproduced them onomatopoeically. When writing the letters “ı” and “i,” which are often confused with each other, the students were also able to distinguish more easily between thin and thick after the onomatopoeic activity. Teaching the alphabet through onomatopoeia improves foreign students’ writing skills. Although the students’ letter errors decreased after performing the spelling activities, they did not disappear completely. These students’ spelling errors at the elementary level can only be eliminated over time as they read and write and as their level increases.

Text sample

“Bir gün ben çocukken ben çok mutlu oldum çünkü bu gün benim doğum günü. Bu gün babam bana yeni kıyafet aldı ve yeni ayakkabı. Babam büyük pastayı meyve suyu, crisps, bisküvi ve kola aldı. Hep benim arkadaşım eve geldi. Biz bir büyük parti yaptık. Güzel oyna ve müzik dinledik. Sonra pastayı kestim, yedim. Benim arkadaşım çok hediye bana verdik. Bu gün benim en mutluym gün.”

“Bir gün ben çocukken çok mutlu oldum çünkü bugün benim doğum günüm. Bugün babam bana yeni kıyafet ve yeni ayakkabı aldı. Babam büyük pasta, meyve suyu, çips, bisküvi ve kola aldı. Benim tüm arkadaşlarım eve geldi. Biz büyük bir parti yaptık. Güzel oynadık ve müzik dinledik. Sonra pastayı kestim, yedim. Benim arkadaşlarım bana çok hediye verdiler. Bugün benim en mutlu günüm.”

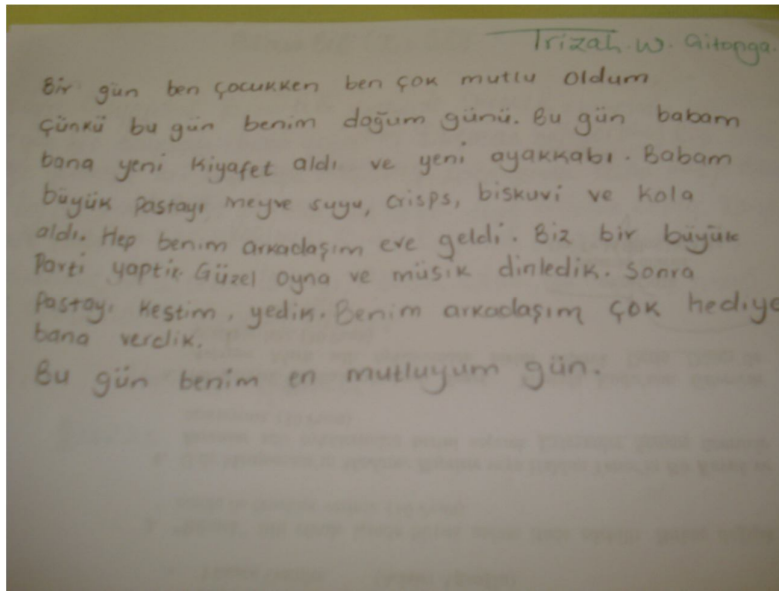


Table 4. Frequency of spelling errors made by students.

Pre-activity		Post-activity	
Errors with vowels (%)	Errors with consonants (%)	Errors with vowels (%)	Errors with consonants (%)
24	14	9	8
Total: 38		17	

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study, which was conducted at the Turkish Language Teaching Centre of Afyon Kocatepe University (TÖMER) with 9 elementary A1 students and in which the effect of onomatopoeia on alphabet

teaching was investigated, it was found that the use of sounds in nature is a great facilitator when it comes to teaching Turkish sounds to foreigners. When teaching the Turkish alphabet to foreigners, mirror words are extremely useful in distinguishing sounds that are similar in spelling or pronunciation, thus learning the alphabet

effectively and completely. Reflexive words, which are considered an important richness of Turkish, occupy an important place in alphabet lessons. Foreign students, especially those who use the Arabic alphabet, have difficulties understanding the Turkish alphabet. Although the large number of sounds in our alphabet may seem like a problem for foreigners, the solution to this problem lies in Turkish itself, in its vocabulary.

In the 21st century, the need for varied, entertaining, and creative activities for teaching Turkish as a foreign language is increasing day by day. At this point, it is necessary to pay special attention to the teaching of the alphabet, which is the basis of language teaching. Foreigners cannot be expected to understand and use Turkish letters correctly if they only include the table of the alphabet in their textbooks. With playful activities created by using onomatopoeic words, an important deficit of Turkish in teaching the alphabet to foreigners can be overcome. Reflexive words are very useful for the learner to distinguish sounds that are similar to the spelling or pronunciation in Turkish. Thanks to alphabet teaching with onomatopoeia, it is ensured that foreign students learn Turkish letters better, reduce spelling errors, and learn permanently. The positive effect of different methods and techniques on learning when teaching Turkish as a foreign language has been observed. At this point, it is the task of teachers to identify the problems in teaching Turkish to foreigners, work towards their elimination, and develop materials and activities. Permanent and effective learning cannot be realized by foreign students without using the vocabulary and meaning possibilities of Turkish.

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Citation: Akdağ, E. (2024). The effect of teaching the alphabet with onomatopoeia on writing skills in Turkish lessons for foreigners. *African Educational Research Journal*, 12(2): 94-100.
