



# Examination of the Post-Graduation Turkish Proficiency Levels of Secondary Education Students Learning Turkish as a Foreign Language: The Case of Iraq<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This study aimed to evaluate the post-graduation language status of secondary school students learning Turkish as a foreign language in Iraq and to determine the factors affecting the progress or deterioration in their language levels, if any. For this purpose, the desired language status of these people; they were evaluated according to gender, age groups and professions. Factors affecting the progress and decline in language levels were determined and listed according to the degree of impact. The research was conducted with the quantitative research method and the design of the study is a case study. Information was collected by semi-structured survey method, and descriptive scanning and relational scanning models were preferred among general scanning models in the study. The sample of the study consists of graduates who learned Turkish as a foreign language in schools in the city of Sulaymaniyah in Iraq between 1997 and 2022. A total of 414 people, 196 women and 218 men, participated in the research. The current language status of the participants and the factors that caused the improvement and deterioration of their Turkish language skills were determined according to the determined variables and the obtained values are; it was tried to be

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analyzed with the help of figures, tables and graphs. As a result, it has been observed that students who learned Turkish as a foreign language in Iraq reached a successful language level after graduation and improved their language skills at a significant rate after graduation. There are almost no studies on the language status of students who have completed their foreign language education, graduated and started business life. This makes this study very important and it will be one of the first important studies and resources in this field. More research needs to be done on the language status of students after graduation.

**Keywords:** Foreign language Turkish, language after graduation, foreign language levels, language attrition, language development.

## **Introduction**

Today, with the globalizing world, language learning has become a very important issue. Language learning is an effective tool in the social, cultural and economic development of both individuals and countries. Therefore, foreign language teaching has an important place in education systems. Turkish is a language spoken by more than 200 million people in an area of approximately 12 million km<sup>2</sup> around the world (Akalin, 2003). Turkish has an important place especially in Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans and the Middle East.

In addition, there are very strong historical and cultural ties between Iraq and Türkiye. Turkish was used as an official and widespread language in Iraq for a while. There are still schools where education is provided entirely in Turkish and Turkoman. The fact that Turkish is taught as a native language in some regions in Iraq also increases the ability to learn Turkish as a foreign language (Deniz, 2011).

Economic and commercial relations between Türkiye and Iraq are very developed. Trade of Iraqi companies with Turkey, Turkish companies operating in Iraq, and the formation of collaborations encourage the use of Turkish in business and trade in Iraq (Uçak, 2017).

Another factor influencing the development of Turkish learning in Iraq is education. Some schools and universities offer Turkish language courses, Turkish language classes, or even Turkish language departments. In cities such as Baghdad, Basra, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Kirkuk, Duhok, and Halabja, Turkish is taught as a foreign language in primary, middle, and high schools. Turkish is also taught as an elective foreign language in many departments of various universities.

Throughout almost all cities and districts of Iraq, private language centers organize Turkish language courses. Moreover, the desire to study in Turkey or participate in postgraduate programs at Turkish universities is another motivating factor for learning Turkish in Iraq. The demand for learning Turkish by students contributes to the popularity of the language (Kul, 2022; Uçak, 2017).

Furthermore, the visits of Iraqi tourists to Turkey contribute to language interaction. Tourism activities enhance the motivation of individuals to learn Turkish. The prevalence and use of Turkish may vary in different regions and social groups within Iraq. In conclusion, learning Turkish as a foreign language is significant for students in these regions (Uçak, 2017). The teaching of Turkish in Iraq has a history of over a thousand years (Dmeral, 2014).

Looking at the recent history of Turkish language education as a foreign language in Iraq, the first private school opened by Turkish entrepreneurs started in Erbil in 1994. Subsequently, in 1997 in Sulaymaniyah, 2006 in Kirkuk, 2009 in Baghdad and Duhok, 2010 in Halabja, and 2015 in Basra, these schools provide education in English while also teaching Turkish as a foreign language. As of 2023, these schools, providing primary and secondary education, have approximately 8,500 graduates who have learned Turkish at different proficiency levels ([www.stirlingschools.co.uk](http://www.stirlingschools.co.uk), 2023).

## **Method**

In the study, the case study method was used within the scope of quantitative research methods. After the semi-structured survey prepared by consulting expert opinions was applied to the sample group, descriptive scanning and relational scanning models, which are general scanning models, were preferred in interpreting the data obtained.

The population of the research consists of students who learned Turkish as a foreign language during their secondary education years in Iraq and graduated from high school. The sample of the study consists of 414 high school graduate students who learned Turkish as a foreign language in secondary education between 1997 and 2022 in schools in the city of Sulaymaniyah in Iraq.

A half structured *Post-Graduation Turkish Knowledge Survey* was prepared in order to determine the post-graduation Turkish levels of secondary school students in Iraq who learn Turkish as a

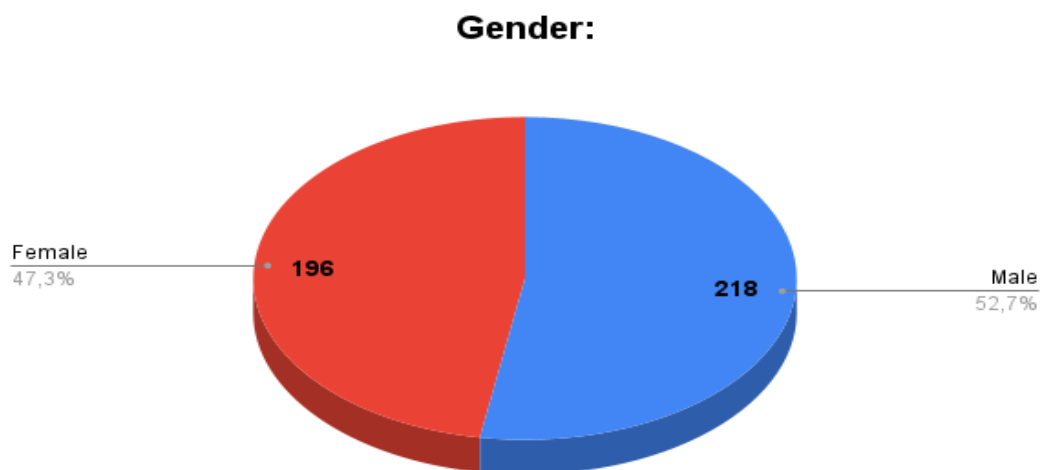
foreign language in the context of gender, specified year intervals, profession and social life relations. This survey was applied to the sample group via *Google forms*. The language attrition that will be examined in this study is Language2 (L2) attrition in a Language1 (L1) environment. Based on the information provided by the graduates who participated in the survey, their Turkish language skills at the time of graduation and their current Turkish level were tried to be determined; evaluations were made depending on variables such as gender, age and occupational group. In the first part of the survey, the demographic structure of the participants was determined, and in the second part, information about language skills was collected using a five-point Likert scale.

### **Findings and Comments**

In this section, the information obtained from the survey conducted via *Google forms* was analyzed and interpreted in line with the aims and questions of the research.

#### **Chart 1**

*Gender Ratios of Students Participating in the Research*

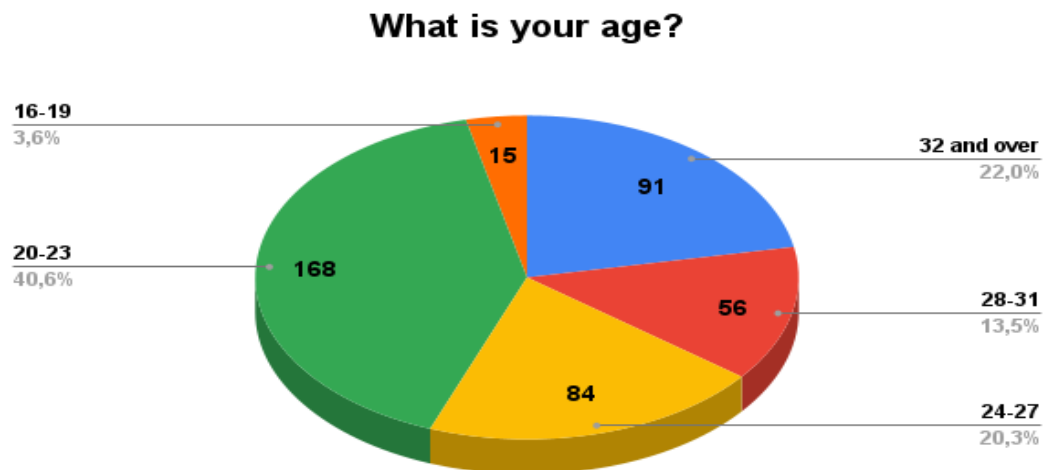


A total of 414 graduates, 196 (47.3%) women and 218 (52.7%) men, participated in the research (Chart 1). The male-female ratio of graduates that make up the sample and the male-female ratio of graduates that make up the population are approximately the same. In the selection of the sample, an attempt was made to reach all students who graduated from schools in the city of

Sulaymaniyah, without discrimination of gender, profession or age.

## Chart 2

*Age group distribution of students participating in the research;*



The distribution of the survey participants according to age ranges is given in chart 3. The most participants are between the ages of 20-23 with 40.6%. It can be said that the highest participation is in the 20-23 age group, which is a natural result of the high number of graduates in this age group. Another reason is that students in this age range are more in touch on social media networks than other age groups. The least number of participants are graduates between the ages of 16-19, with 3.6%. The reason for the lack of participation in this age group can be attributed to the fact that people in this age group are busy with university preparation and university entrance exams at the time of the survey. Another reason is that there are many people in this group who do not speak Turkish well during their school years. Students whose Turkish is not good have much less contact with the their former school and teachers than those whose Turkish is good.

***3.1. What is the current level of Turkish language skills of students who learned Turkish as a foreign language during their secondary and high school years in Iraq after graduation, according to their gender?***

### Chart 3

*How is Your Knowledge of Turkish at Present (General)?*



An average of 77% of graduates think that they know Turkish well or very well. This rate shows that Turkish is taught very well during the secondary education years and that graduate students are diligent in maintaining their Turkish language skills after graduation. In general, the percentage of those who say their Turkish is at a moderate level is 16.9% (70 people), those who say their Turkish is weak are 5.8% (24 people), and those who say it is very weak are 0.5% (2 people).

Additionally; 48.5% of the female graduates chose the option 'very good', 32.7% 'good', 16.8% 'intermediate' and 2% 'weak'. No one chooses the very weak option. Of the male graduates, 42.7% chose very good, 30.3% chose good, 17% chose average, 9.2% chose weak, and 0.9% chose very weak.

An average of 81% of female graduates and an average of 73% of male graduates think that they know Turkish well or very well. 58% (113) of women and 54% (118) of men stated that they improved their Turkish after graduation. Accordingly, it can be said that the Turkish of female graduates is slightly better than that of male graduates.

One of the general results of scientific research is that women are more successful than men in language skills (Ay, 2014, p. 9). In addition, how do you maintain/improve your Turkish language skills in the survey? 57% (146) of the 258 graduates who answered the question *I follow Turkish films and media* are female; 43% (112) are male graduates. Since women follow movies and media

better, it can be said that their Turkish skills are better

### 3.2. What is the current level of Turkish language skills of students who learned Turkish as a foreign language during their secondary and high school years in Iraq after graduation, according to the determined year intervals?

**Table 1**

*How is Your Knowledge of Turkish? (By age groups)*

| Turkish status<br>according to age groups | F Total | % Total | F "Very good" | % "Very good" | F "Good" | % "Good" | F "Intermediate" | % "Intermediate" | F "Weak" | % "Weak" | F "Very weak" | % "Very weak" |
|-------------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------------|---------------|----------|----------|------------------|------------------|----------|----------|---------------|---------------|
| age 32 and over                           | 91      | 22,0    | 44            | 48,4          | 27       | 29,7     | 16               | 17,6             | 3        | 3,3      | 1             | 1,1           |
| 28-31 years old                           | 56      | 13,5    | 32            | 57,1          | 13       | 23,2     | 10               | 17,9             | 1        | 1,8      | 0             | 0,0           |
| 24-27 years old                           | 84      | 20,3    | 46            | 54,8          | 26       | 31,0     | 6                | 7,1              | 6        | 7,1      | 0             | 0,0           |
| 20-23 years old                           | 168     | 40,6    | 63            | 37,5          | 59       | 35,1     | 32               | 19,0             | 13       | 7,7      | 1             | 0,6           |
| 16-19 years old                           | 15      | 3,6     | 3             | 20,0          | 5        | 33,3     | 6                | 40,0             | 1        | 6,7      | 0             | 0,0           |
| Total                                     | 414     | 100,0   | 188           | 43,6          | 130      | 30,5     | 70               | 20,3             | 24       | 5,3      | 2             | 0,3           |

An average of 78% of the graduates aged 32 and over who participated in the survey stated that they knew Turkish well or very well. This shows that they maintain or improve their foreign language Turkish level even though 15 years or more have passed since their high school education. An average of 80.3% of the graduates in the age group of 28-31 stated that they knew Turkish well or very well. It is understood that the participants in this age group, as in the group aged 32 and above, maintain and/or improve their level of foreign language Turkish at a very high rate. Again, 85.8% of those who participated in the survey and were in the age group of 24-27 stated that they knew Turkish well or very well. An average of 72.6% of the graduates who participated in the survey and who are in the age group of 20-23, and 53.3% of those who are in the age group of 16-19 think that they know Turkish well or very well.

Turkish proficiency in the 24-27 (85.8%) and 28-31 (80.3%) age groups is higher than other age groups. The reason for this is from the graduates who participated in the survey in this group; 82 participants I follow Turkish movies and media, 51 participants I continue to talk to my former teachers in Turkish, 38 participants I need to use Turkish because I work with Turkish companies,

30 participants I read in Turkish or I read books, 25 participants I love Turkey and Turkish culture, for this reason I continue my contact with Turkish, 20 participants I visit Turkey frequently, so I speak Turkish very well, 18 participants I stayed in Turkey to study / work for a while, which improved my Turkish, and 6 participants I continued Turkish courses and lessons It is necessary to look for it in the answers they give.

When we look at the age groups, the lowest score in terms of language skills belongs to the 16-19 age group. The reason for this was that 7 of the participants said I did not have the opportunity and environment to practice Turkish, 6 said I did not have time to maintain and improve my Turkish language skills, 6 said I have never had anything to do with Turks and Turkish, 6 said I forgot because I did not use it for a long time, 2 said After graduation, I had no contact with the school and my teachers, 2 of them stated that I could not learn it during school time and 2 of them stated that there was no reason to maintain and improve my Turkish. In the emergence of these results, it can be said that the Covid-19 epidemic has also negatively affected the language learning of graduates in this age range (Eraslan and Yücel, 2021; Balçı, 2020). In addition, the low level of participation in this age group compared to other age groups (3.6%- 15 people) does not allow a healthy comment to be made about this age group, but it does not result in an opinion.

### **3.3. What is the current level of Turkish language skills of students who learned Turkish as a foreign language during their secondary and high school years in Iraq, according to the professions they pursue after graduation?**

**Table 2**

*How is Your Knowledge of Turkish? (By professions)*

| <b>Turkish language status according to professional groups</b> | <b>F Total</b> | <b>% Total</b> | <b>F "Very good"</b> | <b>% "Very good"</b> | <b>F "Good"</b> | <b>% "Good"</b> | <b>F "Intermediate"</b> | <b>% "Intermediate"</b> | <b>F "Weak"</b> | <b>% "Weak"</b> | <b>F "Very weak"</b> | <b>% "Very weak"</b> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| University Student                                              | 158            | 38,2           | 50                   | 31,6                 | 56              | 35,4            | 39                      | 24,7                    | 12              | 7,6             | 1                    | 0,6                  |
| Doctor (Pharmacist, Dentist, etc...)                            | 60             | 14,5           | 30                   | 50,0                 | 17              | 28,3            | 12                      | 20,0                    | 1               | 1,7             | 0                    | 0,0                  |
| Teacher                                                         | 40             | 9,7            | 26                   | 65,0                 | 7               | 17,5            | 5                       | 12,5                    | 2               | 5,0             | 0                    | 0,0                  |
| Business man                                                    | 46             | 11,1           | 28                   | 60,9                 | 13              | 28,3            | 3                       | 6,5                     | 2               | 4,3             | 0                    | 0,0                  |
| Engineer                                                        | 35             | 8,5            | 20                   | 57,1                 | 8               | 22,9            | 4                       | 11,4                    | 3               | 8,6             | 0                    | 0,0                  |
| Computer Scientist                                              | 20             | 4,8            | 5                    | 25,0                 | 10              | 50,0            | 2                       | 10,0                    | 2               | 10,0            | 1                    | 5,0                  |
| Other                                                           | 55             | 13,3           | 29                   | 52,7                 | 19              | 34,5            | 5                       | 9,1                     | 2               | 3,6             | 0                    | 0,0                  |
| <b>Total</b>                                                    | <b>414</b>     | <b>100,0</b>   | <b>188</b>           | <b>45,4</b>          | <b>130</b>      | <b>31,4</b>     | <b>70</b>               | <b>16,9</b>             | <b>24</b>       | <b>5,8</b>      | <b>2</b>             | <b>0,5</b>           |

The total number of graduates who participated in our survey and are currently university students is 158. Among university students, 67% claim to be proficient in Turkish, ranging from good to very good. When compared with other professional groups, university students have the lowest proficiency in Turkish, and 33.3% (52 people) of university students believe that their Turkish has declined after graduation.

Various factors contribute to these results. One factor is the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the language learning of graduates in this age group. Additionally, not being exposed to Turkish in the university environment, being busy with university courses most of the time, and not feeling the need for Turkish in their current environments are other contributing factors. Participants in this group expressed reasons such as not having time to maintain and improve Turkish language skills, not having the opportunity and environment to practice Turkish, having no interaction with Turks and the Turkish language, and their Turkish regressing due to the lack of use in the university environment.

Among participants who continue their post-graduation careers in computer-related fields, 20 people participated in our survey. The number of those who are very proficient in Turkish is the least in this group. This may be due to their limited social interactions with Turkish speakers due to work environments. Nevertheless, the percentage of those who are proficient in Turkish is 75%. This percentage is higher than that of university students.

Among graduates who completed university and continued their careers as teachers, 40 participated in our survey. 82.5% of teacher graduates claim to be proficient in Turkish. For the

46 graduates who are currently businesspeople, 89.2% claim to be proficient in Turkish, with a very low percentage (10.8%) considering themselves to be at a medium or weak level. The fact that none of the businessperson graduates consider their Turkish to be very weak is a positive outcome. Graduates who continue their careers in engineering and architecture, with 35 participants in our survey, have 80% claiming proficiency in Turkish. Among the 60 participants working in the medical field, including doctors, pharmacists, dentists, and veterinarians, 78.3% claim to be proficient in Turkish.

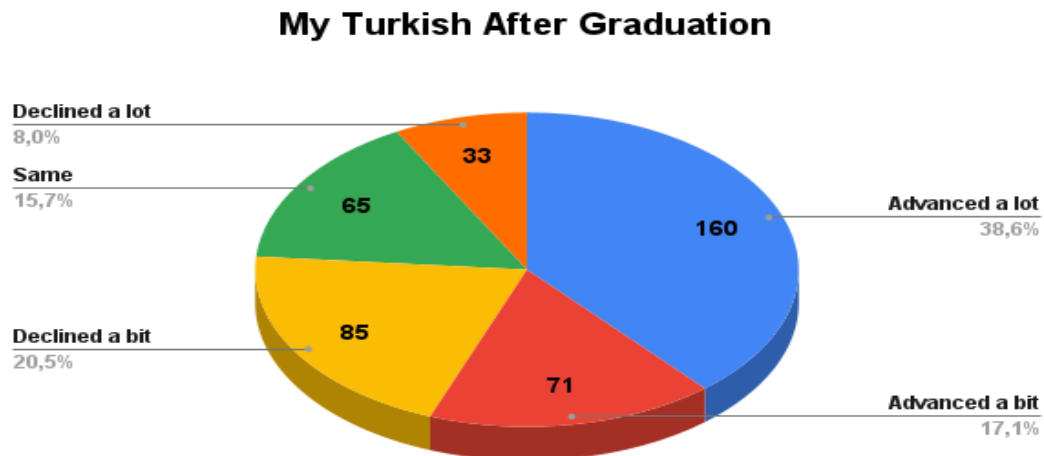
The number of graduates outside the six professional groups mentioned above is 54. In this *other* group, which includes farmers, workers, police officers, journalists, accountants, etc., no one considers their Turkish to be very weak. 87.2% of graduates from various professional groups in this group claim to be proficient in Turkish.

The current Turkish language proficiency levels in the groups of doctors, teachers, businesspeople, engineers, and other professions are quite high. The most influential factor is their exposure to Turkish speakers in their work environments. Participants in these professions emphasized the impact of social and work environments on language development in their responses, such as working with Turkish companies, frequent visits to Turkey, following Turkish movies and media, continuing to converse in Turkish with former teachers, and enjoying Turkish culture. Additionally, teachers generally have strong language skills, and their competence in language is high. The majority of teachers work in the schools where they graduated, providing sufficient opportunities for Turkish language practice. Successful communication skills are crucial for success in the business world, and due to the geographical proximity to Turkey, business graduates need to be proficient in Turkish. The survey results indicate that their language skills are very strong, and they can effectively use Turkish.

### **3.4. What factors have influenced the progress of Turkish language skills after graduation for students who learned Turkish as a foreign language in middle and high school in Iraq, and to what extent have they affected them?**

#### **Graph 4**

*My Turkish after Graduation (Overall)*



Out of the 414 participants who took the survey regarding their Turkish language status after graduation, 38.6% (160 individuals) stated that it has progressed a lot, while 17.1% (71 individuals) mentioned it has progressed a little. Continuing to use or improve language skills is referred to as language progression. It is crucial for individuals to have access to social environments and networks where the language is spoken to use and enhance the language they have learned beyond formal language education. Communication with speakers of that language in family, friends, or other social circles is essential. Sometimes, individuals may not have access to this social communication environment due to various reasons. In such cases, planned and regular reading activities or media follow-up in the target language can prevent language deterioration and promote improvement.

Participants were allowed to select as many options as they wished from the factors influencing the progression of their Turkish language skills in the post-graduation period. Out of those who believed their Turkish had progressed after graduation, the most selected option was *I follow Turkish movies and media*, chosen by 185 out of 231 individuals.

Secondly, 110 individuals preferred the option *I continue to communicate with my former Turkish teachers*. Additionally, 75 participants stated, *I love Turkey and Turkish culture, so my connection with Turkish continues*. Following closely, 72 individuals, nearly the same amount, mentioned, *I use Turkish because I work with Turkish companies and I read Turkish materials or books*. 73 individuals stated, *I stayed in Turkey for a while for study/work, and I frequently visit Turkey, which improved my Turkish*. Furthermore, 18 individuals indicated that they continued their

Turkish by attending Turkish courses and classes, and 4 individuals mentioned, *to keep and improve my Turkish, I speak Turkish with friends I graduated with.*

Here, the most crucial factor influencing the progression of Turkish language skills after graduation is the follow-up of films and media in Turkish. Secondly, the noticeable impact of maintaining contact with Turkish teachers who previously taught the participants is highlighted. The third most significant factor affecting the progression of Turkish language skills is the statement, *I love Turkey and Turkish culture, so my connection with Turkish continues.*

***3.5. What factors have caused the deterioration of Turkish language skills after graduation for students who learned Turkish as a foreign language in middle and high school in Iraq, and to what extent have they affected them?***

Out of the 414 participants, 20.5% (85 individuals) stated that their Turkish had deteriorated slightly, while 8% (33 individuals) mentioned a significant deterioration (Graph 4). The gradual decrease or loss of acquired linguistic knowledge and skills in a non-pathological manner is referred to as language deterioration (Köpke and Schmid, 2004, p. 3). Several factors contribute to the deterioration of Turkish language skills after graduation. Participants were asked about the factors contributing to the deterioration of their Turkish language skills, and multiple factors could be selected simultaneously. Out of the 414 participants, 28.5% (118 individuals) believed that their Turkish language skills had deteriorated (worn out). The factors contributing to language deterioration, as expressed by those who believed their Turkish had deteriorated, are as follows: Out of 118 individuals who believed their Turkish had deteriorated, 63.6% (75 individuals) mentioned, *I had no opportunity or environment to practice Turkish*, which was the most commonly chosen factor contributing to language deterioration. Additionally, 55.1% (65 individuals) stated, *I did not have time to maintain and improve my Turkish language skills*. 60 individuals mentioned, *I had no dealings with Turks and the Turkish language*, while 25 individuals stated, *I forgot because I did not use it for a long time*. 6 individuals mentioned, *I had no contact with school and teachers after graduation*, and 27 individuals expressed, *there was no reason for me to preserve and improve my Turkish*. Another interesting finding from the survey is that participants who started their education with preparatory classes had much better language skills than those who did not.

## **Conclusion and Discussions**

As a result, the study showed that participants who learned Turkish as a foreign language at the secondary education level in Iraq continued to have a high level of proficiency in Turkish after graduation. This outcome can be attributed to effective methods during the learning process and the efforts of students. Furthermore, the study found that students continued to improve their Turkish language skills significantly after graduation.

According to the research results, after secondary education in Iraq, students who learned Turkish as a foreign language continued to improve their Turkish through activities such as following Turkish movies and media, working in Turkish companies, developing commercial relations with Turkey, maintaining contact with their schools and teachers, and participating in Turkish universities or working in Turkey.

Factors contributing to the deterioration of Turkish language skills after graduation in Iraq include the lack of opportunities for Turkish language practice, the absence of efforts to maintain and improve language skills, not working with Turkish companies, not using the language, having no contact with school and teachers after graduation, and having no reason to preserve and improve Turkish.

The study highlights the importance of cultural interaction in language learning processes. Additionally, it was observed that Iraqi students' liking for Turkish culture and Turkey, as well as their visits to Turkey, contributed to the improvement of their language skills.

To address the deterioration of language skills after graduation, efforts should be made to develop more effective teaching methods and language education policies that respond better to students' language needs in social life. The importance of language preparation classes for effective language education is emphasized, and systems and programs should be created to ensure that each student obtains the achievements in the language preparation system.

Future research can explore the effects of language learning processes on language progression and deterioration after graduation. More comprehensive studies with samples from different cities and countries should be conducted to gain a broader perspective.

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