Anna Brashear

Turkish Experience at UNC

I never thought I would have the opportunity to learn Turkish seriously until I was told about the Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) scholarship available at UNC Chapel Hill. I had just been accepted to the TransAtlantic Masters Program at UNC, in which I planned to continue my research about the Turkish immigrant population in Germany. A barrier I had run into in my earlier research about the Turkish community in Berlin was my complete lack of Turkish language skills, which limited my ability to more deeply contextualize the research questions I had about Turkish immigrants’ political participation and sense of belonging in Berlin. I couldn’t believe my luck when I was told that a new Turkish program was starting at UNC and the FLAS would fund several new Turkish learners!

There is something so exciting about learning a “less commonly learned” language in the United States. Most people are accustomed to hearing that you might be learning Spanish, French or German, but when you are learning Turkish, people are very curious. When I’ve been asked why I learn Turkish, it’s always given me an opportunity to talk about my research, and many people have no idea about the expansive Turkish diaspora throughout the world, or that Turks make up an important immigrant community in Germany and across Europe. My newfound Turkish language skills allowed me to do my own original research about Turkish migrant organizations in Berlin for my Masters thesis, which was fantastic. Learning Turkish has also showed me how important it is to step outside of my comfort zone and make a serious effort to learn more deeply about the languages and cultures of places where Americans often have less cross-cultural engagement, like Turkey. The Turkish language is the key to getting to know Turkish culture, and I think it is so important for young Americans to show a willingness and effort to engage with all kinds of cultures and regions around the world, not just European countries.

Turkish is an incredibly complex and interesting language. The syntax, usage of suffix, and methods of expression have showed me how, oftentimes, a different language can reveal a different approach to thinking about some ideas. I had such fun learning Turkish at UNC in a welcoming and open environment. The Turkish culture is one of sharing, and I definitely felt that in all my different Turkish courses, both at UNC with Didem and with private and university instructors in Berlin. I can only recommend this wonderful experience to incoming students and emphasize that learning a less commonly learned language will open doors you never imagined for both academics and work. Especially for political work in Germany, Turkish language skills are considered a huge asset! I am thankful for the wonderful people I have met through my journey learning Türkçe; thank you Didem, UNC and the FLAS!