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HEBREW IN AMERICA





STATE OF THE FIELD: HEBREW TEACHING AND LEARNING

by ARNEE R. WINSHALL

Is the state of Hebrew teaching and learning in the United States where it should be? Are student outcomes meeting our expectations? Many educators and consumers of Jewish education believe we have a long way to go. Professionalizing Hebrew-language educators is crucial if we are to succeed at raising the bar and improving outcomes.

In education, the growth of a field depends on a dynamic interaction between the experiences of researchers and practitioners. This interaction is key to defining and pushing the boundaries of the profession. In fact, each element that characterizes a field is dependent on such interaction:

- Standards for professionals, including certification protocols and academic degrees, are promulgated. This results when institutions of higher education foster research and, in the case of education, develop teacher-education programs based not only on theories but also on knowledge gained from research into teacher practice, learner outcomes and the relationship between the two.
- At least one active and recognized professional organization exists to serve the interests of a significant percentage of professionals in the field. Such an organization provides the context for the interaction between researchers and practitioners in which research and field experience are shared, challenges and successes are discussed and an agenda is set to move the field forward.
- Conferences are convened regularly to share expertise, research and issues facing the field. The regularity of these conferences is important as it sets the pace at which the field develops and helps to keep the field dynamic.
- A range of publications and materials on the research and best practices in the discipline are published and disseminated.
- Standards are established for student

achievement that are agreed upon by a professionally recognized body, are based on research and the collection and analysis of large data samples and are widely used.

These, too, are the result of the interchange between researchers and practitioners as to what student outcomes are possible.

So how does the field of Hebrew-language acquisition, teaching and learning in the United States measure up?

There are very few degree-granting graduate programs in the teaching of Hebrew in North America, and the enrollment in these programs is minimal (e.g. Brandeis University, the University of Maryland). The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL) offers certification in student assessment for proficiency in most languages, including Hebrew. At The Shoolman Graduate School of Jewish Education at Hebrew College, there are Certification Programs for teachers of NETA (for grades 7-12). There are other programs such as the Masters in Jewish Education at Gratz College, where a few courses focus on teaching Hebrew but no track exists for becoming a Hebrew-language teacher in particular. This is indicative of the state of the field: teaching Judaic subjects is lumped together with teaching Hebrew, and the teachers are expected to do both whether or not they have received adequate training.

There are few experts and little to no research focused on advancing the field of Hebrew teaching and learning, promoting an understanding of the discipline and assisting in the professional growth needs of practitioners.

Currently, the only professional organization in existence is the National Association of Professors of Hebrew (NAPH). NAPH is comprised of professors and instructors who specialize primarily in the grammar and literature of ancient, medieval and modern Hebrew. Unfortunately, the expertise required for the teaching of literature is not distinguished from that which is necessary for teaching a language. As a result, very few of the members focus on the area of Hebrew teaching and learning, and, in any case, their work does not focus on professionals working in pre-kindergarten through high school education.

In addition, dialogue among and between practitioners and academics is largely absent. There is no forum in which the creators of current curricula can share their insights and interact with researchers and others working in professional development. Instead, a competi-

tive, non-collaborative spirit infuses their work.

Assessment, where it even exists in the ready-made Hebrew curricula, currently measures whether students have learned items specific to the given curriculum, but does not necessarily measure a student's proficiency. Very few of our Hebrew-language educators are equipped with reliable, standardized and benchmarked student-assessment tools. Less than two dozen educators in the United States have been certified in Hebrew-language proficiency by the ACTFL, and less than half a dozen are certified as trainers.

We must move away from our reliance on a curriculum-based approach, which assumes that the teacher is not a professional but an agent in the classroom who is incapable or ill-equipped to take responsibility for Hebrew teaching. Instead, we must develop programs that prepare Hebrew-language teachers who are well-versed in and familiar with learning resources and who have the expertise and authority to make teaching and learning decisions for their students and their schools.

While some of these criteria are partially satisfied within the world of academia and institutions of higher learning, there is virtually no professional field when applied to Hebrew teaching and learning in early childhood through grade 12. Outside of the work associated with Dr. Vardit Ringvald and *Hebrew at the Center* in professional development and assessment and professional development and certification associated with specific curricula, there is little evidence that the above criteria are being satisfied for Hebrew teaching and learning.

The funding community has reinforced this situation by investing millions of dollars in the development of ready-made curricula without requiring and funding significant assessment and research into what works and why. Some commitment of funders to Hebrew has been demonstrated, albeit not enough.

The challenge is to leverage such investment and interest in order to realize the goal of creating, advancing and perpetuating a professional field that will, in turn, promote mastery among teachers and spur the highest levels of student performance. The professionalization of Hebrew-language teaching and learning should be characterized by experts convening to question the current status of the discipline; discuss issues of concern; collaborate to advance teacher performance, recruitment and retention; and ensure the highest levels of student proficiency in the Hebrew language. ■

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Webster's *New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* defines pedagogy as "the function or work of a teacher, the art or science of teaching, and instructional method." (Barnes and Noble, 1996) This popular source weighs its definition of pedagogy toward the more mechanical aspects of teaching.

The field of second language education views pedagogy in similar ways. In their *Teacher's Handbook*, Judith Shrun and Eileen Gilson refer to pedagogy as "teaching methods" or "classroom activities" (Heinle, 2009), and Helena Curtain and Carol Ann Dahlberg call it "classroom applications" (*Languages and Children*, Pearson, 2010). Others, such as Timothy Regan and Terry Osborn, label a teacher's actions within the classroom "classroom strategies" (*The Foreign Language Educator in Society*, LEA, 2002).

Common to the above definitions are references to the mechanical aspects of the profession, about which teachers tend to be principally concerned. Language teachers are apt to view their lessons through the lens of their classroom activities, becoming anxious and insecure when their list of activities is insufficiently rich. In my experience as a teacher trainer, I have witnessed time and again how teachers become impatient in professional development sessions when they are not presented with enough ideas for activities that they can immediately apply in upcoming lessons.

This concern has translated itself into an enormous market for educational companies that sell readymade materials for classroom activities, in addition to the myriad of books and websites serving a similar function. The field is literally flooded with resources available to all language teachers in every area, including second-language acquisition.

Resources for second-language pedagogy include two types of teaching activities. The first emerged as a result of research derived from disciplines such as psychology, linguistics, education and neurology. The famous Audio Lingual Method (ALM), for example, is based on research into the behaviorist model that explains learning as the relationship between stimuli and response; the Grammar Translation method relies on Noam Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar; James J. Asher's Total Physical Response method (TPR) uses studies about the brain; and the Krashen Monitor Theory has inspired practitioners to find ways of creating an anxiety-free learning environment which provides comprehensible input to its learners, teaches the language in a specific order and encourages students to monitor their language development. The second type of resources are those created by experienced, successful practitioners, using their intuition and creativity.

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THE ROLE OF SECOND LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

by VARDIT RINGVALD

The best learning pedagogy can emerge only when the language educator is adequately equipped.

While the challenge of finding sources for activities is now easily met, it remains for us to empower our teachers with the expertise to identify the best and most suitable activities and to use them wisely in their classrooms. Well-chosen and aptly executed classroom activities will maximize the learner's efforts to achieve language goals faster and better. If we further enhance our teachers' abilities, coaching them to develop their own tools and pedagogy, they will succeed in catering their activities specifically to their learners' needs.

What we have learned, however, is that language educators can develop the above skills only when they are functioning within the appropriate professional environment. Donald Freeman articulated three different models for the language-teaching profession (D. Freeman, in R. Ellis, "SLA and Language Pedagogy," Cambridge University Press, 1997).

The first and most commonly adopted model in Jewish education today is called "teaching as doing." This approach reflects the behavioral view, which requires teachers to master a prescribed set of behaviors along with a set of actions. In this context, the underlying assumption is that a teacher's learned behavior can lead to the desired student outcome. This behavioral approach fits when teachers are viewed as the operators who implement a readymade curriculum in which the materials and classroom activities have been dictated by the creators of the curriculum. This is the approach preferred by teachers and institutions that do not want to undertake the responsibility of investing in designing a curriculum or teaching a pedagogy of their own. Adopting this stance, however, will not lead to results in which language learning is maximized. Language acquisition is a dynamic process influenced by the many variables of learners and learning contexts that result in learners progressing in the language at different rates. Teachers need to constantly modify learning materials and classroom actions in order to meet the different needs of their learners. In the behavioral view of the profession, allowance is not made for such accommodation.

In order to make use of the right pedagogies,

the field needs to embrace the other two ideal framework models defined by Freeman for fostering the growth of second-language educators. The second model outlined by Freeman perceives language teaching as a "cognition." This approach requires teachers not only to become experts in the available canon of teaching activities but also to be knowledgeable about the research that supports them. This research relates to both second-language development and to learner variables, such as learner's age, motivation, learning style, strategy, other language learning experiences and so on. Such knowledge can help teachers select the most appropriate classroom activities for their learners and also transform the teachers so that they consider themselves able to access infinite resources to create their own classroom activities. When a teacher understands these theories, he/she can also understand the rationales behind methodologies and thus make educated decisions about which methodology to use and when, all the while accommodating learners with the process that will be most effective in helping them to make progress and to retain the target language. Such a teacher would use this understanding of the research to create original activities that reflect language-acquisition processes.

Freeman's third model, which should also be adopted by the profession, views teaching as "interpretive." This model recognizes the fact that not all learning environments are similar. Because each educational setting has its own characteristics and demands, teachers need to rely not only on their knowledge about the needs of their learners, but also on how the particular conditions of the learning environment can impact learning. These conditions may include the school's mission, the number of contact hours, the number of students in the classroom and many other aspects of a given environment, which must be interpreted in order to make expert adjustments to the language curriculum and to the classroom activities.

The best classroom activity:

1. is language level appropriate
2. is age appropriate
3. is research based
4. is relatively easy to implement
5. has a measurable outcome
6. fits the appropriate part of the lesson
7. fits the language skill that it aims to reinforce
8. can serve students with diverse learning styles.

As we contemplate the best ways to teach Hebrew in our schools, we should note that the best learning pedagogy can emerge only when the language educator is adequately equipped. When teachers are knowledgeable about the theories of second-language acquisition, aware of learner variables and responsive to learning conditions and environments, they will be able to reflect on their practices and modify their activities, either during or after the lesson, in order to make the right decisions as they choose or create the most effective pedagogies in support of the language acquisition process. ■