



Dr. Vardit Ringvald

Strengthening Schools in Hebrew Teaching and Learning

In the past two years, there has been a steady increase in inquiries from Jewish schools across the continent expressing interest in having their Hebrew language programs reviewed. The two main reasons given are:

They want to see if they are indeed fulfilling their institutional goals with regard to Hebrew teaching and learning.

There is dissatisfaction with the results of their current Hebrew language programs and they are seeking ways to identify and address the underlying issues.

As a result of the growing influence of organizations such as RAVSAK, PEJE, Torah U'Mesorah, and JESNA, schools have become more aware of the impact of having clearly articulated vision, mission and goals and of assessing their activities to ensure there is alignment between the stated goals, the activities and the outcomes. The work I have been doing for the past 20 years in adapting the Proficiency Approach to Hebrew language teaching and learning is particularly suited to assisting schools in examining these issues and providing them with the tools to proceed systematically to achieve sustainable results.

What is the Proficiency Approach?

Proficiency is an approach used in teaching a foreign language developed to enable learners to perform in the target language in four skill areas – reading, writing, listening and speaking. This approach was developed in the United States during the early 1980s and is still in use today.

The American Council on the Teach-

ing of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), with the help of practitioners and researchers in the field, developed the ACTFL Provisional Guidelines in 1982. These guidelines serve as the directing principles of the Proficiency Approach (PA). The approach recognizes the fact that the learner's ability to perform in the target language develops gradually. Accordingly, it identifies four main phases through which language learners progress during the acquisition process before they achieve native speaker abilities: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced and Superior. The first three phases are further divided into sub-levels. The students' progress can be characterized according to specifically defined levels such as Novice-Low, Novice-Mid, Novice-High, or Intermediate-Low, Intermediate-Mid, Intermediate-High which are associated with specific and measurable skill development and demonstrated mastery. Therefore the evaluation of the learners' ability in the target language can be explicitly described.

The 1982 ACTFL Guidelines were generic, and suited mainly to the more frequently taught languages such as French, Spanish, and German. Subsequently, an ACTFL and federally sponsored initiative tried to create specific guidelines for additional languages. In 1989, the Hebrew Proficiency Guidelines were created by a team of Hebrew language experts at the Hebrew Program at Brandeis University.

Why the Proficiency Approach?

The following are some of the specific ways in which a proficiency approach (PA) enables an institution to succeed in its Hebrew language goals:

PA Helps Articulate Learning Goals:

By describing the nature of each level of performance in each language skill the guidelines provide the tools to create a path for our learners to move from one stage to the next. The criteria used in the guidelines help language educators create and articulate clearly specific performance goals for learners of all language skills.

PA Supports Language Acquisition:

By adopting the notion of performance as the core principle, the Proficiency Approach focuses on the learners' abilities in the target language by concentrating simply on what the learners know about the language. Consequentially, the approach supports the teaching and the learning of the pragmatics of the language which, according to Van Patten, help learners internalize the language.

PA Creates a Learner-Centered Environment:

Language educators must know how to identify the variables that affect their students' ability to learn, and take them into consideration while developing their classroom/school program. These variables include motivation, appropriate language learning style and learning strategies, level of anxiety, predisposition toward the language and level of aptitude to acquire it.

PA Allows For a Flexible Approach to Curriculum:

The goal of the Proficiency Approach is to promote the learners' functional abilities according to a fixed set of criteria. It does not dictate specific teaching materials or teaching methods. Therefore, it allows each teacher and institution to select the most suitable material or teaching method that will maximize their learners' language acquisition process. The approach also allows the teachers to use the curriculum as a vehicle to reinforce the values that the school

chooses to emphasize.

PA Has Tools to Assess Learners' Performance:

Because the guidelines are developed according to specific criteria it is easier to assess learners' language abilities in all four skills for the purpose of making decisions on placing learners into their appropriate learning groups as well as for making decisions relating to the articulation of learning goals. Standardized assessment tools are an inherent part of the Proficiency Approach.

Developing the Field of Hebrew Language and a cadre of Hebrew Language Professionals

The success of this approach is highly dependent on our understanding the importance of developing the field and professionalizing our Hebrew language educators.

In order to execute the proficiency approach goals, educators need to develop a mastery of certain aspects of the language-teaching profession, such as second language acquisition theories, teaching methodologies, principles for identifying appropriate teaching materials. It is also necessary to develop appropriate materials, assessment methods as well as some principles that are related to formulating lesson-plans and in-

corporate the use of technology in the classroom. Training through PA develops independent professionals who can serve as Hebrew language experts and resources in their institutions and for the community.

At the present time, several educational institutions have implemented the approach as a framework for creating their Hebrew curriculum. While this approach was initially launched at the Hebrew Program at Brandeis University, generous grants from the Covenant Foundation and the investment of several schools have funded the development of PA for supplementary schools and day schools as well. These schools include Keshet (an afternoon Hebrew school in Cambridge, Massachusetts), Gann Academy, The New Jewish High School in Waltham, MA, and JCDS, Boston's Jewish Community Day School. In addition, other schools, including The Epstein Middle School in Atlanta, Georgia and the Solomon Schechter Day School in Newton, Massachusetts, have begun to introduce and use this framework for their programs.

The approach is helping these schools to professionalize their Hebrew faculty through an investment in and strong commitment to professional development and to map and design their own particular curriculum tailored to serve the needs of their learners and to align their visions and results. In the article, Hebrew, Comes to Life through Meaningful Learning, in the April 7, 2006 issue

of Backpack, the weekly newsletter of The Epstein School, Liat Kadosh, Hebrew Language Coordinator, reported, "The [middle school] students really loved learning Hebrew in these workshops because they were driven by student interest."

A graduating middle school student at JCDS shared with me her experience of how her Hebrew language learning experience has changed. She said since the Proficiency Approach was introduced at the school it has allowed her to fully invest in the learning process. The clarity of the expectations and the goals associated with the PA have made it easier for her to push herself to maximize the improvement of her language skills, and with each new milestone, she experiences an increased connection to Hebrew and Israel.

The Proficiency Approach has provided a framework within which the institution, the educator and the learner are all partners in a clearly defined journey and, on the way, they are all winners as the school's vision is strengthened, the staff is empowered and the students are enabled and Hebrew, the language of our heritage, continues to thrive and be passed to another generation.

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SUMMARY HIGHLIGHTS

ACTFL PROFICIENCY GUIDELINES - SPEAKING (REVISED 1999)

SUPERIOR	ADVANCED	INTERMEDIATE	NOVICE
<p>Supirior-level speakers are characterized by the ability to:</p> <p>Participate fully and effectively in conversations in formal and informal settings on topics related to practical needs and areas of professional and / or scholarly interests</p> <p>Provide a structured argument to explain and defend opinions and develop effective hypotheses within extended discourse</p> <p>Discuss topics concretely and abstractly</p> <p>Deal with a linguistically unfamiliar situation</p> <p>Maintain a high degree of linguistic accuracy</p> <p>Satisfy the linguistic demands of professional and / or scholarly life</p>	<p>Advanced-level speakers are characterized by the ability to:</p> <p>Participate actively in conversations in most informal and some formal settings on topics of personal and public interest</p> <p>Narrate and describe in major time frames with good control of aspect</p> <p>Deal effectively with unanticipated complications through a variety of communicative devices</p> <p>Sustain communication by using, with suitable accuracy and confidence, connected discourse of paragraph length and substance</p> <p>Satisfy the demands of work and / or school situations</p>	<p>Intermediate-level speakers are characterized by the ability to:</p> <p>Participate in simple, direct conversations on generally predictable topics related to daily activities and personal environment</p> <p>Create with the language and communicate personal meaning to sympathetic interlocutors by combining language elements in discrete sentences</p> <p>Obtain and give information by asking and answering questions</p> <p>Sustain and bring to a close a number of basic, uncomplicated communicative exchanges, often in reactive mode</p> <p>Satisfy simple personal needs and social demands to survive in the target language culture</p>	<p>Novice-level speakers are characterized by the ability to:</p> <p>Respond to simple questions on the most common features of daily life</p> <p>Convey minimal meaning to interlocutors experienced with dealing with foreigners by using isolated words, lists of words, memorized phrases and some personalized recombinations of words and phrases</p> <p>Satisfy a very limited number of immediate needs</p>