

# JEWISH EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

because educators think before they teach

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## ASSESSMENT

HOW DO WE KNOW THAT THE STUDENTS ARE LEARNING  
WHAT WE THINK WE ARE TEACHING?



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Perspective on Jewish Education

Jan Morrison



Bar-Ilan University



# Why assessment?

## Decision-making for effective Hebrew language curriculum

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*Vardit Ringvald investigates the learning process involved in language acquisition and how assessment aids learning.*

Because language acquisition is a dynamic process, assessment is a vital tool. Critical Hebrew curriculum decisions should be made based on assessment data that encompasses language production and learner processes and variables. These tools need to be “owned” by all the constituents of Hebrew education.

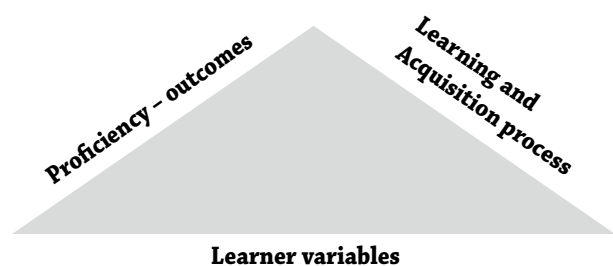
The goal of language educators is to be able to maximize the learning process for their learners, enabling them to quickly internalize the language and retain it. Such maximization can take place only when a language program uses an assessment-based approach that constantly implements summative and formative assessment tools for collecting necessary data about the learning and teaching process. Summative assessment refers to the collection of data at the end of a learning period such as a lesson, a unit, a semester, mid-year, end-of-year or upon graduation. Formative assessment refers to the collection of data during the teaching and learning process, in which the learners’ responses to activities from both the teaching and the learning point of view are documented and used as data. This information allows language educators to evaluate the learning and teaching processes and make educated decisions about what, how and how much to teach as well as about what the short and long term learning goals should be for all learners. An assessment-based curriculum requires that language educators be equipped with a variety of assessment tools and that they use them constantly in order to be continuously making adjustments to the curriculum based on their students’ immediate needs. In order to be accurate in their evaluation, however, language educators need to be carrying out such assessments concurrently on a number of different aspects related to the learning process. The more data available to them, the better the decisions they will be able to make.

### What needs to be assessed?

There are three core areas that should be assessed on a regular basis:

1. Outcomes – how well learners function in all language skills (speaking, listening, writing and reading).
2. Learning and Acquisition process – where the learners are with regard to language development.
3. Learner variables – how each learner approaches learning and the target language.

### Outcomes – how well learners function in all language skills



The ultimate purpose of language teaching is to help learners become “true users” of the language in all four language skills, which means internalization of the target language and developing useful strategies to use it independently in real life settings. A manifestation of this ability is when learners can transmit and understand meaningful messages when negotiating with native speakers of the target language and when using authentic texts,

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oral or written, that were produced and used by native speakers. This ability is developed gradually. Learners usually start with a limited ability to use language in real life settings and slowly increase this ability. In order to assist their learners in advancing in the target language, teachers need to first identify where their learners' abilities are and then decide what their target level should be.

The scale used for measuring the performance level of language learners is called a "proficiency guideline." In 1982, The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), with the help of practitioners and researchers in the field, developed the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* to identify four main phases traversed by language learners during the acquiring process before they achieve native speaker abilities: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced and Superior. The first three phases are further divided into sub-levels. In this way, the evaluation of a learner's ability in the target language can be described explicitly. Specification of the development process helps us identify strengths and weaknesses in a learner's performance. We can define specific levels such as Novice-Low, Novice-Mid, Novice-High, or Intermediate-Low, Intermediate-Mid, Intermediate-High and so on. The evaluation uses four interrelated criteria. Each of the four language skills is evaluated for each level and sub-level in terms of *content/context*, *task*, *text type*, and *accuracy*. For example, learners who can function at the advanced level in terms of *content/context* can relate to topics that are connected to issues outside their immediate surroundings,

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such as society and politics. In terms of *task*, these learners can actively describe, narrate, and compare, as well as understand materials that include these language functions. In terms of *text type*, learners can deal with the language in a text several paragraphs in length, as well as express a thought in writing and speaking that is several paragraphs long. In terms of *accuracy*, in spite of some patterned mistakes in their writing and speaking performance, learners at this stage can be understood by native speakers who are not used to dealing with language learners. They are also able to understand most of the details described in authentic materials used in the country in which the target language is in use.

As explicit as these descriptions are, the 1982 *ACTFL Guidelines* were nonetheless generic and mainly suited to the most commonly taught languages such as French, Spanish, and German. An ACTFL and federally sponsored initiative followed, which 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

(Ringvald, 2009). The tools for gathering data pertaining to how well learners perform in relation to this scale are the OPI (Oral Proficiency Interview) for measuring speaking skills and the WPT (Writing Proficiency Test) for measuring writing skills. Hebrew language educators must go through a training program and an OPI and WPT tester certification process in order to evaluate their learners in these skills. For Reading and Listening, tests in Hebrew primarily applicable to adult learners have already been developed by the National Middle East Language Resource Center at Brigham Young University. At this time, although there is no formal training available for measuring these skills, the description of the levels and sub-levels in the Proficiency Guidelines for Reading and Listening allow language educators to create their own testing based on the principles set forth in the guidelines. Data collected by conducting such Proficiency tests allows language educators to establish a baseline assessment, which then empowers them to make realistic decisions about language learning goals.

### **Learning and acquisition process**

This process refers to ascertaining where learners are with regard to the process of language development they are undergoing. The ACTFL Guidelines scale describes a gradual ability to perform in the target language with evolving outcomes that are the result of the gradual process of learning and acquisition that learners go through in their language studies. The process of gradual development of language skills is explained in a variety of ways. Since all of these explanations contribute to an understanding of how language is developed within a learner, language educators need to be familiar with them. This foundation is crucial to an educator's ability to measure at what phase of the development process a learner may be at any given moment of the process. Krashen (1981) views learners' language development through the lens of the movement by the learner between Learning and Acquisition. In his "Monitor Theory," Krashen explains the difference between *learning* and *acquiring* a new language. While *learning* is a conscious act, *acquiring* is not. Learning supports a learner's knowledge and understanding related to the language's structure. According to Krashen, learners at the learning stage activate their knowledge about the language when using it in order to monitor their language intake and the quality of their language production. Acquisition, on the other hand, refers to internalizing knowledge and using it automatically, without noticing. Krashen further explains that children first acquire and then learn, while adults first learn and then acquire. This distinction between learning and acquisition can support language educators in making curricular decisions. They can use assessment tools in formative and summative modes to identify at which stage each learner is in "owning" a specific language component: Is the component only learned and not acquired or has it already been acquired and internalized and entered sub-conscious use.

Usually, when learners move along the continuum from learning to acquisition they go through the following cycle:

- a. learned materials
- b. learned materials are used in a semi-authentic setting
- c. learned materials can be applied in unfamiliar real-life contexts.

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The above categories reflect a repeated cycle through which second language education normally accrues. Language educators use materials such as written and oral texts to teach about a language and to model for learners how the language behaves in different contexts and genres. At the next stage, the learned language concepts and elements are used in a contexts other than those in which they were learned, but mostly in what we call “semi-authentic” contexts where the new concepts and elements are presented in “authentic look alike” frameworks. This provides learners with opportunities to practice the new language outside the learned contexts, in contexts that are similar to real life. The final phase in this cycle occurs when learners are required to use the learned materials in an authentic real-life situation they have never before encountered. Underlying this cycle is the belief that acquisition of a language in an academic setting in which the new language is learned as a subject develops gradually, from internalizing concrete presented materials to internalizing concepts and applying them beyond the learned materials. Maximization of this process takes place only when learners are truly ready to move from one stage to another. Skipping a stage or moving too fast can cause confusion and interfere with a learner’s ability to internalize the target language. For this reason, language educators need to be constantly assessing in order to check how well learners have internalized the learned materials we expect them to know and when a young learner has moved from acquisition to learning. In one sense, with this approach language educators have an easier job of it because all they have to do is check how well learners understand and what they know about the target language.

Van Patten’s (2002) approach, however, looks at the notion of gradual development by describing four phases of language development:

- a. The first phase is the “input” stage. In his opinion, learners first tend to make sense of what they hear and observe while being embedded in the target language. In other words – they first make the effort to understand the meaning that is being transferred to them in the new language.
- b. In the second phase, the “intake” stage, learners internalize language elements such as phrases and vocabulary without fully understanding their structure and to which linguistic category they belong.
- c. The third phase, which Van Patten named “the developing system,” is the phase in which learners recognize the language structure and can place the learned elements according to their pattern in the linguistic system.
- d. The last phase is the output stage, in which learners start to retrieve information from where they store their learned language in order to use it to transmit their own meaningful message to the people with whom they are interacting.

According to Van Patten, acquisition occurs only when the learners go through these four phases. When teaching the target language, it is important for language educators to fully understand where each element is situated within each learner. By understanding at what stage of the acquisition process the learners are with regard to the learned elements, educators may maximize and optimize the process by making better choices about which activities to choose for their learners to fit their particular acquisition process.

#### Learner variables - How does each learner in the classroom learn?

Language educators need to have information about learner variables. There are 10 core variables that impact a learner’s way of learning, such as motivation, learning style and strategies, attitude, aptitude, age, affect, as well as variables concerning the learner’s beliefs about language learning. For example, Cohen

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(1996) and Oxford (1990) differentiate between learning style and learning strategies. Learning style refers to the natural tendencies that learners have and use when learning a new language, such as whether a learner is a visual, auditory or kinesthetic learner. Learning strategies refer to how learners translate their learning tendencies into actions. Oxford further differentiates between direct strategies and indirect strategies – with the latter referring to those actions that relate directly to language learning and the former referring to those strategies unrelated to language learning but characterizing how learners learn in general (i.e., in groups, alone and so on).

It is also important to note whether learners are motivated by what Gardner and Lambert (1972) call “integrative motives” or “instrumental motives.” If a learner’s motivation is *integrative*,

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the learner is studying the target language in order to participate in the culture of the people who use the target language as their native tongue. Learners whose motivation is *instrumental* are learning the language in order to fulfill a goal, such as a job or school requirement. Being familiar with the motivations of their learners can help language educators find the appropriate approach to holding their hands and guiding each one toward fulfilling their learning goals. A school that has integrative language goals for its learners while its learners are aspiring to instrumental goals will know how to negotiate the choice of materials and classrooms activities in order to help learners move from one type of motivation to the other. In my experience, Jewish educational frameworks are geared to establishing both types of motivation within their learners. Usually, *instrumental* motivations will help students decode texts and perform rituals in the language while *integrative* motivations help these same learners to internalize the language and make it part of their Jewish identity.

Like motivation, learning style and strategies variables, the aptitude variable can inform language educators about learners’ strengths and weaknesses: whether they have the ability to use their analytical skill or their senses to differentiate between and pronounce sounds, for example, and whether their memories enable them to retain the learned vocabulary and grammar rules for longer periods of time.

In order to effectively teach, Hebrew language educators need to identify these elements within each of their learners and adjust their teaching style and their classroom’s activities to answer the needs of each. Such knowledge allows language educators to give their learners suggestions about how to improve their learning

strategies. Informed with data about these variables, educators can assist learners in understanding how to use their strengths to better activate their language acquisition process. Educators equipped with this information set up realistic goals and structure effective lessons.

### The habit of assessment

Obtaining learner data related to the areas of *outcomes*, *language development* and *learner variables* will undoubtedly empower language educators and the entire educational framework where the target language is taught. This type of information allows teachers to make educated decisions in real-time about how to best utilize class time for the improvement learners’ language development process. Knowing learners’ baselines and strengths and weaknesses makes possible the setting of realistic goals and the choice of effective learning activities for all learners in a program.

Data also allow for transparency. When it is shared by school constituents, including learners, language educators, parents and policy makers, all tend to agree on what is possible to achieve in the target language in their particular educational framework.

The main challenge when relying on assessment data to guide a language program curriculum is the need to create and use tools to assess all the above mentioned areas. While there are many assessment techniques language educators may use, expertise will have to be gained to assure that an assessment technique can be called upon by the educator at any given moment to evaluate learners. Most important is the creation of an assessment-based curriculum, in which assessment data is used to evaluate and to make curriculum adjustments. At first, the dynamic nature of this teaching approach may create anxiety among Hebrew language educators used to teaching according to a *canned* or set curriculum. Most will need to go through an unlearning process in order to internalize the assessment tools and make them part of their teaching routine. Only when assessment becomes a habit and second nature in their teaching practices will they be able to maximize the language development process for their Hebrew learners and make them “true users” of the target language.

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