

November 4, 2015

Dear Lori,

I read your recent article, “Modern Hebrew in Personal Identity Development,” with great enthusiasm and interest. While it’s true that “language is far more than a system to be explained.... It is our most important link to the world around us. Language is culture in motion. It is people interacting with people,” (Savignon, 1983) we Jews have a special relationship to Modern Hebrew, especially when we view it in the context of our dramatic history.

The failure of Modern Hebrew language instruction in supplementary school to produce students with even minimal functional proficiency is an example of the shortcomings of World Language instruction generally in the United States. Why can’t our kids engage in basic face-to-face conversations, or read and comprehend simple texts after so much seat time? More importantly, what can we as language educators do to improve both the learning experience and the Hebrew proficiency outcomes for our kids?

In this, my impassioned response to your impassioned plea, I hope to explain some of the underpinnings of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory that inform best-practice language instruction, as well as pose key question for us as teachers, committed to improving and transforming modern Hebrew education. I hope to advance our thinking about how we deliver Hebrew instruction so that we can bring effective, enjoyable pedagogy and proficiency to our community and beyond.

1. What are our constraints and what are our realistic goals?

Temple Beth Israel Hebrew School (as well as many others nationwide) meets twice a week from August to May, beginning in 3rd grade. I counted roughly 60 sessions of Bet Midrash on this year’s TBI academic calendar. If our kids get on average 60 minutes of dedicated Hebrew instruction per session, that yields 60 annual hours of Hebrew instruction, punctuated by an annual 3-month summer hiatus. That’s if the kids attend every session, and the Hebrew component is respected and executed with best-practice instruction, requiring high-quality and copious amounts (90%+) of comprehensible, contextualized and compelling Hebrew listening and reading input. After 5 years in the TBI program (3rd – 7th grade), kids get roughly 300 hours of Modern Hebrew language instruction. When contrasted with the thousands of hours of high-quality comprehensible exposure children get in their native English, 300 seat hours of Hebrew is a miniscule quantity, indeed. We must remember: Our students remain Hebrew ‘babies’ even in 7th grade. Still, we can optimize our Hebrew teaching time, insuring that we practice those strategies that lead to acquisition, and eliminating those that do not. We must also acknowledge the challenge of engaging our children on Wednesday afternoons, after they’ve sat in regular school for roughly 7 hours...and rethink our offering to broaden the language invitation to all our students, not only those with superhero-like attention endurance and the fastest language processors.

As for goals, we must be familiar with the tenets of SLA research and implement best-practice strategies that are consistent with it. Our instructors must be both knowledgeable in Hebrew language *and* effective pedagogy, as well as developmentally appropriate strategies for the groups they teach. Knowing some Hebrew is simply not enough, in the same way that knowing the muscles and bones isn't enough to be a physical therapist or doctor. If we want to change the Modern Hebrew instruction landscape, then our teachers must both observe quality instruction, and be trained/coached/and continually mentored in effective World Language facilitation.

We must also, of course, decide exactly what we want from our Hebrew program, before we go about imagining and planning how to get it. This sounds simple, but often times, and with the best intentions, administrators, teachers and language programs just don't get it right!

It's sad but true that most World Language teachers know little about Second Language Acquisition, the bread and butter of our work. When we say we want basic or functional Hebrew proficiency, some think we mean all four skills with equal emphasis: listening, speaking, reading and writing. This is a common and damning misconception. The receptive skills of listening and reading **MUST** come first, as they lay the foundation for all subsequent acquisition!

Furthermore, modern Hebrew language teachers often feel obligated to focus on holiday or theme-related vocabulary, such as *shank bone* (Pesach) or *repentance* (Yom Kippur), at the expense of more practical, flexible and high-frequency building blocks essential for everyday Hebrew communication. With the limited class time allotted, the following target survival verb structures, for example, would definitely afford more spoken and written coverage: *There is, wants, has, goes and likes*.

Our students need to get the 'biggest bang for the buck,' and learn high-frequency Hebrew language, in multiple contexts, in order to develop an ear and eye (through reading) for Modern Hebrew. In English, for example, a vocabulary size of only 3,000 words yields 84% written or spoken text coverage. (Nation and Waring, <http://www.fltr.ucl.ac.be/fltr/germ/etan/bibs/vocab/cup.html> See also: http://www.lexutor.ca/research/nation_waring_97.html).

Therefore, we must expose our students to the building blocks of everyday conversational and written Hebrew, if they are to "communicate...and connect in the language of the land" (from your article). Key verbs (examples above), plus connecting and transition words such as: *The, of, and, that, in/on, to/from, before/after*, as well as the personal pronouns, are foundational, and will allow for Hebrew communication on a wide range of engaging topics, especially when combined with easily recognizable English/Hebrew cognates (i.e., avocado, robot, chocolate. For more cognates, see:

<http://www.hebrewvirtually.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Hebrew-English-Cognates.pdf>).

By combining words related to personal interest (i.e., family, friends, pets, foods, toys/games, sports/hobbies), compelling sentences and stories can be spun at an early age and novice level.

2. Curriculum: What content should we teach in Modern Hebrew class?

The most interesting topic for people (especially children) to talk about is...themselves! The students *are* the curriculum! Rather than focus on Israel, Jewish history and traditions, the modern Hebrew classroom is a place where students learn about one another using basic, hi-frequency and flexible words that can be reconfigured (for much needed novel repetition) to tell stories and later read them; describe objects, view art, read books, watch movie clips with teacher narration, (see Movie Talk by Ashley Hastings, or for an excellent overview, see: <http://www.ijflt.org/images/ijflt/jun2014-articles/Movie-Talk.pdf>), sing songs, chants and finger plays; draw, write, dictate and more. Israeli and Jewish details can be incorporated into such class activity, though it is paramount that the conversations belong to the class community, encouraging students to contribute key details for engagement and ownership. So conceptual content *is not the focus of the modern Hebrew class*; rather, the students' lives and ideas are the foundation upon which communication is built, using natural speech through questions and answers between teacher and students. The Jewish/Israeli content is (already) covered in religious school using English, because the language and concepts are too difficult to transmit to beginning Hebrew learners. Moreover, when language class content is directed solely by the teacher, (as in, "Today in Hebrew class we will talk about Tu Bishvat, planting trees and different fruits eaten in Israel,") we run the risk of both cognitive overload (too many hard/low-frequency Hebrew words all at once), and worse, disinterest and boredom.

In the Comprehensible Input framework, teacher and students collaborate on scenes and stories through scaffolded questioning in Hebrew. Techniques such as circling, pause & point, teaching to the eyes, and staying in bounds are employed to keep the session comprehensible and lively, so that it's "...so interesting that you forget you are listening to or reading another language" (Krashen). Only through this constant and repeated exposure to the sounds and cadence of Hebrew, and of course through the understanding of meaningful and compelling messages, will our students begin to acquire and retain the language. As mentioned above, the teacher weaves narratives with the students before her, built on details that the students provide. The Q&A is really nothing more than cloaked and novel repetitions of the hi-frequency language chunks. The questions and statements can be funny, ridiculous, or true, but only listening /comprehending will reveal their meaning. Such banter is then mined, and the target language chunks are repeated in other storytelling contexts, both invented and existing (picture books, video clips, story boards, etc.) Once the students have experienced dozens if not hundreds of exposures to the indispensable language chunks within narrow and controlled teacher talk (think developmentally appropriate Mother-ese), and dramatic play with student actors, only then will the teacher present the language in written form, so that the students are completely familiar with the sound and meaning of the text before they ever begin to read it. Sitting down to a text in a new language, in a non-Roman alphabet, and encountering multiple unknown words, is a recipe for frustration and failure, so

instead we guarantee success by insuring that our students recognize and understand the parts before they view and read a carefully planned block of text. Appropriate texts can be backwards-planned – teachers first identify hi-frequency targets, pre-teach/front-load these ‘targets’ in their classroom story spinning, insure a sufficient quantity of repetitions, then read related versions of the text with their students, engaging in multiple scaffolded literacy activities. Otherwise, existing texts (stories, songs, plays, etc.) can be adapted to student levels, or original texts created specifically for novice Hebrew learners.

To summarize:

The 3 steps in Comprehensible Input instruction, generally, are:*

(<http://www.susangrosstprs.com/articles/THREESTEPS.pdf>)

- A. Establish meaning: through English translation and gestures/actions where possible. This often includes TPR (Total Physical Response) gesturing.
- B. Story: Co-create a story or scene by collaborating with the students. Fish for details and weave them in. This creates engagement, contribution and buy-in. There are so many ways to ‘tell’ the story – with student actors, puppets, props, video clips, picture books, storyboards, etc.
- C. Literacy: A plethora of reading and writing activities are possible even with 3rd grade novices – from cloze to dictations, to paired or choral reading, Reader’s Theater, Textivate® games, Self-selected reading (SSR)...the possibilities are endless. The idea is that our students will be very familiar with the words of the text –both decoding and understanding - before they come to read it, insuring success and a sense of accomplishment, while reinforcing and extending language. The power of extensive reading is underestimated – it boosts language acquisition considerably (see Krashen on reading: <http://www.sdkrashen.com/>)– and there’s definitely room to beef it up at TBI.

(*See original author/developer of TPRS, Blaine Ray: Fluency through TPR Storytelling - <http://www.blaineraytprs.com>)

3. Pacing and Outcomes:

What can we expect students to acquire in each grade, and what will they be able to do with Hebrew by the end of 7th grade?

With a loose curricula based on a corpus of Hebrew hi-frequency words in hand,** we’d be poised to first purposefully introduce several hi-frequency words and structures before formal Hebrew instruction commences in 3rd grade. That way, our new learners come in with some fundamental building blocks. We would create our curricular materials based on comprehensibility (and we can make anything comprehensible by keeping it narrow, hi-frequency, flexible) and student interest. (Any existing/published materials would probably have to be modified to meet our students’ needs.) However, after training competent, interested teachers in the essential strategies, they would be able to create their own high-interest stories with the children before them and read them, and

these could become curricular enrichment and reading materials for subsequent grades and years. Once we create a skeleton master target structure list for grades 3-7 (I'm working on it), teachers can check off what a particular grade has acquired that year, (the order is not important!!!) and other structures can be selected to layer on in subsequent years, while constantly recycling all language (recursive curriculum). We usually aim to teach no more than 3 verb-containing chunks per week. (Often fewer, especially at the beginning of the Hebrew journey, and then we can pick up some speed as the language processor speeds up, but slow is best, with lots of recycling). See my sample Winnetka target structures grades 1-6,

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BcUa9MdluTUctxo1Dq_j_IxW8bFjHRZtmXx5ocjjhnl/edit).

** Sample Hebrew Hi-Frequency Word List:

<http://www.teachmehebrew.com/hebrew-frequency-list.html>

By the end of 7th grade, we could realistically hope to turn out students with a strong ear for Hebrew, a great Hebrew accent resulting from copious auditory input, excellent listening, decoding and reading comprehension within the limited high-frequency Hebrew corpus in which they've been immersed and, in the upper grades, some writing skill beyond simple sentences. We call this early but impressive skill set, 'micro-fluency.' (Terry Waltz)

There is more to discuss, but I believe we must reflect on and redefine our goals, immerse ourselves in best-practice SLA-aligned strategies, and commit to breaking the cycle of woefully ineffective modern Hebrew instruction. By insuring we have a corps of well-trained teachers and supportive families who value our program, *TBI can be a lighthouse in modern Hebrew education.*

If TBI wishes to adopt the only effective language acquisition pedagogy I have seen in my 24 years of World Language instruction, I offer my knowledge, experience and expertise in developing materials for Teaching with Comprehensible Input (T/CI) at the elementary level. As a Hebrew speaker and veteran elementary World Language teacher, well versed in CI strategies, I have every confidence that we can transform our program, and enjoy sharing the gift of communication in modern Hebrew with our kids. My daytime classroom door is open, and I invite you to observe my elementary grades 1-4 Spanish class in Winnetka at your convenience, and those of my superb Spanish and French colleagues in the upper grades, to get a better idea of how the T/CI pieces fit together. By observing instruction in a language you do not speak, you will, as a student, gain a greater appreciation for the power and efficacy of these strategies.

I have already presented some of these concepts to Rabbi Weinberg (this summer), and he was excited about the strategies and their implications for instruction at TBI as well as for the *Chalutzim* Hebrew immersion summer program at OSRUI summer camp. One personal observation: If students are to confidently transition from *Chlutzim* to high school Hebrew (and sustain our area public high school Hebrew programs), then they need much more comprehensible listening and reading input, and *better Hebrew literacy skills* than they currently get from either TBI or *Chalutzim*.

Please know that with this document, I hope to stimulate honest discussion and consideration, for the purpose of improving language instruction so we can, at last, commit, connect and communicate in Hebrew.

I look forward to hearing back from you, and would be happy to come in and show you the presentation and mini-lesson demonstration I did for Rabbi Weinberg, at your convenience.

Thanks so much for your interest in and exploration of this topic – it is so near and dear to both of us!

Respectfully,

Alisa Shapiro-Rosenberg