

A LANGUAGE IN FOCUS

The complexity of teaching Hebrew in Israel's Arab school system

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Abstract

This paper discusses the complexities of teaching Hebrew to Israel's largest minority group, the Arabs, who must be fluent in the language if they are to succeed. While policy-making institutions in Israel today are aware of the importance of Hebrew for Arab students, the teaching of Hebrew faces serious challenges involving the status of Hebrew in Arab society, the inner-Arab state of diglossia, and the training and placement of Arab teachers of Hebrew. The distribution of the Arab population (in mixed Jewish–Arab towns, and in Arab towns and villages), as well as differing levels of exposure to Hebrew, also pose considerable challenges. The paper combines a historical-theoretical with a philosophical-theoretical approach. It analyzes findings of previous studies that examined Hebrew writings of Arabs studying to be teachers of Hebrew, and policy documents dealing with teacher training and placement in the schools. Our study found a profound gap between Arab Hebrew teachers' academic-pedagogical training and its implementation. Our main recommendations for reducing the gap are: (1) the curriculum should take Israeli Arabs' sociolinguistic situation into account; (2) the teacher placement system needs an overhaul; and (3) the teaching of Hebrew should begin in third grade.

1. Introduction

This paper addresses some of the many challenges faced by Arab teachers of Hebrew, the country's majority language in Arab schools in Israel.¹ It combines two approaches, historical-theoretical and philosophical-theoretical, to describe three interrelated aspects of these challenges: language, training, and policy. With respect to the linguistic aspect, we examine the term “Hebrew as a second language” as applied to speakers of Arabic and discuss the state of diglossia that exists in Arabic and its influence on the acquisition of Hebrew. Regarding teacher training and policy, we examine features of the training of Hebrew teachers and its effect on the placement process.

Note that in Israel, the school system consists of two separate educational systems, administered by a single ministry – the Ministry of Education. The language of teaching in the Arab system is Arabic and in the Jewish system it is Hebrew. Each system has its own supervisors, resource allocation and budgets, separate schools, teacher training institutions, and teacher placement systems. However, the Ministry of Education's pedagogical secretariat is common to both.

2. Two Semitic languages in contact: First and second language

Teaching a second language requires academic knowledge of three main kinds: (a) literacy-related knowledge – reading, writing, and associated skills; (b) linguistic knowledge – phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics; and (c) metalinguistic knowledge – reflective thinking

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about language as well as cognitive and academic qualifications and skills (Bialystok, 2001). Cummins (1986, 2008) argues that cognitive skills and knowledge, especially linguistic knowledge acquired in one's first language, may be transferred to a second language under three conditions: sufficient exposure to the second language, motivation to learn this language, and a threshold level of basic knowledge of the target language. Haim (2014, p. 140), in her study, found that academic skill in the mother tongue is important for predicting performance levels in a second or foreign language. Grabe and Kaplan (1989, quoted in Margolin & Ezar, 2014), note that linguistic and rhetorical conventions of the mother tongue affect texts produced by students in a second language. Learners of a second language find it difficult to internalize linguistic categories that they have not experienced directly in their first language, because such categories become fixed in speakers' infancy.

The case of Arabic, the mother tongue of the Arab minority in Israel, and its connection to Hebrew, the language of the majority and the second language for Arabs, is special because both Hebrew and Arabic are Semitic languages that share numerous features. Our case is unique since the Arabic language has two distinct forms, as will be explained below: Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and colloquial Arabic. The uniqueness is not due to MSA, which is similar to Hebrew, for example, in categories of semantic representation (Ibrahim & Aharon-Peretz, 2005), but due to colloquial Arabic, the Arabs' native language, which differs from Hebrew in its morpho-syntactic categories² (Holes, 1995; Ravid, 2020; Shatil, 2008; Shehadeh, 1998).

The difference between spoken Arabic, the everyday language of Arabs, and Hebrew is particularly clear in the adjectival agreement system. Arabic requires that adjectives describing plural nouns appear in the feminine singular form, and also in the frequent use of the broken plural, in contrast to Hebrew in which there is always full agreement in the plural. For example, in the Arabic phrase *qāla l-hukamā* ("the sages said"), the verb at the beginning is in the singular, despite the plural subject, while in Hebrew the verb would be in the plural. Another difference is the existence of a continuous past in Arabic, but not in Hebrew, so that even in cases where Arabic would choose to use the progressive ("I was standing"), Hebrew would use a simple past ("I stood") (Holes, 1995). Furthermore, in Hebrew, a subject pronoun may be omitted in the first and second person, while in Arabic it may also be omitted in the third person. In both languages, the third person masculine plural may be used to express an impersonal subject (*hargu oto* "they killed him"), but whereas Hebrew is mainly an analytic language, in which the verb and the object pronoun are distinct, Arabic is more synthetic and prefers to use suffixes (*qatalūni* "kill me") (Alfi-Shabtai, 2020b; Schwarzwald, 2001).

In the course of learning Hebrew, transfer takes place and speakers' meta-linguistic awareness may increase. Abu-Rabia and Kitany (2022) examined Arab students in a bilingual primary school who learned Hebrew and Arabic together with Jewish students. The students were given various assignments in Hebrew to test word recognition, pseudowords, phonological awareness, orthographic knowledge, morphology, syntax judgment, working memory, spelling, and reading comprehension. They found that bilingualism had a demonstrably positive influence on their cognitive abilities. Learning both languages enhances specific skills among Arabic speakers during the learning process and improves attention when performing tasks. It also enhances Arabic speakers' skills in a variety of domains: morphology, syntax, reading comprehension and the lexicon. Additionally, it improves students' control over attention in task performance – for example, working memory.

However, it is important to emphasize that the great majority of Arab students in Israel learn in single-language Arab schools. They receive Hebrew lessons several hours per week (two hours in first and second grade, four hours in third to ninth grade, and between three and five hours weekly in tenth to twelfth grade), and at the end of high school they are tested in Hebrew as part of the matriculation exams. We believe that the allocated hours are insufficient across all grades and should be increased, especially those devoted to spoken Hebrew.

According to Slobin (1996), native speakers evince a unique thinking pattern during linguistic performance, which he calls "communication-motivated thinking". When creating discourse, speakers tend to use the linguistic categories of their first and main language. Native speakers, who acquire

their language at a very early age, find it difficult to develop linguistic sensitivities at a later stage, when these are required for the purpose of acquiring a second language (Slobin, 1996).

Slobin's findings are supported by the observation of Arab students learning Hebrew in high school, who require many years to achieve a high level of fluency (Alfi-Shabtay, 2020a, 2020b, pp. 39, 53; Alfi-Shabtay & Ravid, 2012; RAMA, 2017). Some Arab high school graduates find it difficult to study in Israeli colleges and universities where Hebrew is the language of instruction because of their incomplete mastery of Hebrew. In Israeli institutions of higher learning, they are expected to be as fluent in Hebrew as native speakers, since lectures, exams, and oral and written assignments are all in Hebrew. According to Margolin and Ezar (2014), Arab students in teachers' colleges, whose fluency and writing skills in Hebrew are not up to academic standards, compose Hebrew texts using linguistic and social schemata that exist in Arabic but not in Hebrew. They describe the discourse between these schemata as parallel lines whose very flexible connections make the text unclear. Manor (2016), who focused on the syntactic complexity of subordinate clauses in academic texts written in Hebrew by Arab students at a teachers' college, found that their written texts were syntactically influenced by their Arabic dialect. It also showed that they used mainly relatively uncomplex CONTENT CLAUSES, rather than more complex DESCRIPTIVE CLAUSES, and made even less use of RELATIVE AND ADVERBIAL CLAUSES, which create great density and thus contribute to a very high degree of complexity. In addition, their written clauses were coded for relatively few logical connections, with little variety, and occasionally contained lexical errors or were used repetitively as a device for confirming the addresser's position. Some subordinate clauses consisted of numerous content units that contained the germs of ideas that, however, remained undeveloped, in a kind of brainstorming that the writers performed with themselves.

Thus, although Hebrew and Arabic both belong to the Semitic family of languages and share many features (Henkin, 2020), and despite our expectation that this would facilitate the acquisition of Hebrew, we found that differences between Hebrew and spoken Arabic can give rise to difficulties in learning Hebrew. This is due, as noted above, to the fact that structures and their meanings are acquired through the linguistic habits of one's mother tongue.

3. Majority language and minority language in Israel

In the State of Israel, there are two official languages: Hebrew and Arabic. Hebrew is the national language, while Arabic is a "special status" language. Hebrew is the language of the majority, the dominant and preferred language, and Arabic is the language of a minority, the Arabs, who constitute 21.1% of the population if the Arabs of East Jerusalem are included, and 17.2% without them. The Arab population of Israel is divided as follows: Northern Israel 51.6%, the Triangle 19.7%, the Negev 17.5%, mixed cities 8.3%, the Jerusalem Corridor (including West Jerusalem) 1.1%, and the rest of the country 1.8%. The division by religion is as follows: Muslims 85.4%, Christians 7.1%, and Druze 7.5% (CBS, 2022; Haj Yahya et al., 2021, pp. 20, 34–35).

Arabic as a national language (MSA) is taught from first through twelfth grade in the schools of all groups in Arab society (Muslim, Christian, Druze, Bedouin, Circassian), as well as in the Arabic departments of several teacher training colleges. In these schools, Hebrew has been taught officially as a compulsory subject since 1948, and is also acquired informally in daily life, at the workplace, in public institutions, and through exposure to the media.

Hebrew as taught in Arab schools has the characteristics of a SECOND LANGUAGE³ on the one hand, and of a FOREIGN LANGUAGE on the other. While both terms, second language and foreign language, are used to describe languages that are taught in addition to the student's native language, they are not identical. The status of Hebrew among Arabs in Israel can be characterized as BOTH a second and a foreign language, depending on a number of variables that result in a lack of uniformity in Arab speakers' degree of fluency in and knowledge of Hebrew.⁴

One major variable is GEOGRAPHICAL, namely the character of the towns and villages in which Israel's Arabs live. These can be divided into three major types: (a) mixed towns, where both Jews and Arabs

live, such as the city of Haifa, in which Hebrew is present next to Arabic and is considered a second language; (b) Arab towns in the periphery, such as Rahat; (c) Arab towns in the center of the country, close to Jewish towns, such as Umm al-Fahm (in these towns Hebrew, if heard at all in everyday speech, is used by native speakers of Arabic). In the latter two categories, the language that is present is Arabic, and Hebrew is basically a foreign language. We also note the existence of remote villages in the Negev region, some with no official recognition, as well as some villages in the center of the country, such as Marja,⁵ whose situation differs from that of the city of Tira, located near the city of Kfar Sava. What they all have in common is that Hebrew is perceived as essentially a foreign language there.

Another important variable is THE EXTENT OF ARAB STUDENTS' EXPOSURE TO HEBREW. Students in Arab schools may encounter Hebrew in their everyday lives, for example, when they travel from their hometown to a Jewish town, or when they learn Hebrew in class. However, when they leave school, they once again speak colloquial Arabic. At home, they may be exposed to Hebrew to a certain extent – for example, when watching television.

Yet another important variable is THE FREQUENCY OF USE OF HEBREW. A report by Israel's National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education (RAMA, 2022, p. 48) examined both exposure to Hebrew and frequency of use of Hebrew among Arab students from ninth grade onward and found that these are relatively low: only about half of the students (46%) reported great or very great exposure to Hebrew outside of school, and their use of Hebrew in speech outside the school was even lower – only about a third (37%) of the students reported such use. Considerable differences were also reported with respect to extracurricular activities. Almost three-quarters of the students (71%) frequent places in which Hebrew is spoken, but only one-fourth (27%) reported that they hear Hebrew where they reside. Only half (50%) of the students converse in Hebrew outside the home, and merely 15% reported that they read Hebrew books “to a great extent” or “to a very great extent”.

The report also notes that about a third of the students report little exposure to Hebrew (30%) and very little use of Hebrew (36%) outside the home. The Head of Hebrew studies for Arabic speakers in the Ministry of Education explains: “There exists an ideological barrier to learning Hebrew, little exposure to Hebrew in everyday life and little awareness that knowledge of Hebrew enhances the chances for well-remunerated employment. Acceptance to university is not contingent on matriculation in Hebrew” (H. Musa, personal communication, May 12, 2023).

Musa adds (2023) that another barrier to the acquisition of spoken Hebrew in school is PEDAGOGICAL. The Ministry of Education allocates four hours per week to every class in Arab primary schools but does not dictate how many hours should be devoted to teaching spoken Hebrew. In middle school (seventh through ninth grade), four hours per week are allocated, plus one hour specifically for spoken Hebrew. In high school, the number of hours depends on how many matriculation units the students take (between three and five). The matriculation exam has both a written and an oral part, but no specific number of hours is allocated to teaching spoken Hebrew. Every teacher can decide independently on the number of hours to be devoted to this subject. Spoken Hebrew constitutes 20% of the grade of the matriculation exam in Hebrew.

The number of hours devoted to lessons in spoken Hebrew is small and is not effective in large classes that may consist of up to 40 students, leaving little time for practice, work in small groups, and regular feedback. There is also a shortage of technological learning aids, including computer rooms, appropriate software for learning Hebrew, and accessible internet connections. There are considerable differences between schools in this respect. Thus, for example, Bedouin schools on a meager budget cannot be compared to Christian schools run by churches that receive contributions from abroad.

The facts presented above reflect a gradual worsening of the status of Hebrew and its importance as perceived by Arab youth in Israel (RAMA, 2022, p. 48). These changes contradict findings of previous studies in the last two decades, which showed that Arabs were positively motivated to learn Hebrew. The motivations were of several kinds: INSTRUMENTAL MOTIVATION – knowledge of Hebrew was perceived as a means to economic, educational, and social achievement (Ezer, 2004); TECHNOLOGICAL MOTIVATION – Hebrew was perceived as playing an essential role in connecting Arabs to the modern world, especially

among young Arabs, who considered Israel as a modern country with advanced technologies (Amara, 2001); SOCIAL MOTIVATION – young students considered Hebrew a vital means for social integration and professional and academic advancement, and therefore perceived knowledge of the language as a mark of prestige (Ezer & Sivan, 2000; Kalekin-Fishman, 1996) and expressed positive attitudes towards it (Manor et al., 2020).

Clearly, insufficient command of Hebrew is a major barrier to Israeli Arabs' integration into the labor market (Marom, 2014), academia, and society (Council for Higher Education, 2013; Keril & Omaria, 2019; Tehawkho & Kalisher, 2023). Many studies worldwide have shown a positive correlation between command of the majority language and academic, economic, and professional achievement, as well as mental welfare (Berry, 2001; Budría & Swedberg, 2012); Casale & Posel, 2011; Genesee et al., 2005; Tannenbaum, 2014).

Nasser-Abu Alhija and Israelashvili (2021) note that Arab society in Israel is changing, primarily due to the intensive exposure of young members to Jewish society in Israel and the Western world. Therefore, they propose that Arab leaders, adults in general, and especially children and youth, reformulate Arab society's cultural, social, and personal codes in a number of domains – including, for example, their future expectations from and motivation for learning another language. They point out that an attempt to preserve the old values, while simultaneously adding new values and behaviors, can generate complex behavioral dilemmas. They give the example of teachers in the Arab school system in Israel who must find judicious ways to design the curriculum and transmit educational messages that promote students' mental development and their identity.

In countries that have more than one official language, members of minority groups learn the dominant local language in school as a second language. Thus, in Canada, both French and English are official languages. Federal institutions in the various provinces are run using one of these languages, and the other language is learned at the same time (Ricento, 2013). Aborigines in Australia, Bretons in France, Kurds in Turkey, and others, also learn the local language as a second language, in addition to their respective native languages. Belgium, for example, is trilingual; Dutch, French and German are spoken there, and the relations among them and their status have a distinct political context. Brussels, as an example, was historically a Dutch-speaking region. However, following a massive increase in French speakers, including immigrants who preferred to speak French rather than Dutch, it is now a city with a majority of Francophones, many of whom believe that French is a more prestigious language (Leclerc, 2008). Cyprus is another example of a country with a political-cultural conflict that has a linguistic dimension. It has two official languages, Greek and Turkish, both of equal standing. However, following the island's division in 1974, each language became the language of instruction in separate school systems for distinct populations: Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot. In recent years, attempts have been made to bring the two populations closer together and have each group learn the other's language. Finally, we may mention the Hispanic communities around the world, which have numerous dialects but share the Spanish heritage, culture, and language. Their members continue to live in their countries of origin, whether in Spain or in Latin America, but they also immigrate to the United States, Canada, Europe, and elsewhere, and speak the local language. Sessarego and González-Rivera (2015) examined the contact of Spanish with other languages, such as languages of immigration and the languages of natives on the American continent and the Caribbean islands, and studied sociolinguistic factors related to the use of local languages and widespread grammatical phenomena. We thus see that the simultaneous existence of several spoken languages in a single country has cultural, social, and political implications (Bollen & Batan, 2010; Murchadha & Migge, 2017; Valdes, 2005). However, this is not the case with respect to the situation of teaching Hebrew and Arabic in Israel's Arab schools, where teachers face the additional challenge of diglossia.

4. Diglossia in Arabic and its effect on learning Hebrew

An important challenge facing Arab teachers of Hebrew in Arab schools is the state of Arabic diglossia experienced by both students and teachers. In 1959, Ferguson coined the term “diglossia” to describe a

linguistic environment consisting of a number of major dialects in addition to a linguistic variety intended for official, written, and literary use. The literary language is acquired through formal education and is used in formal contexts, but not in everyday life (Ferguson, 1959). Three decades later, Ferguson (1991, p. 221) discussed the great gap between spoken dialects and the written language and noted that great linguistic variety exists in both.

Diglossia in the Arabic-speaking world is of particular interest and differs in fundamental ways from diglossia in other languages (Ferguson, 1959; Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999). The number of native speakers of Arabic throughout the world exceeds 300 million. The language consists of two distinct layers: (1) the spoken language, which is generally considered inferior and lacking in prestige. This is the native, everyday language used in Arab society, consisting of numerous distinct dialects that developed in the wake of the increase in the number of speakers and their geographical dispersion over time (Rosenhouse, 2023). The differences between dialects of Arabic are such that some are mutually incomprehensible. Thus, for example, a speaker of the Moroccan colloquial language will not understand a speaker of the Iraqi, Syrian, or Israeli Palestinian dialect; (2) the “literary” level, a “high” register that is taught in school as a tool of formal expression. The literary level developed during the eighth to eleventh centuries, and again later, during the renaissance of Arab culture under European influences in the Middle East from the sixteenth century onward, especially during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Holes, 2004; Rosenhouse, 2023). The literary language, known today as Modern Standard Arabic, consists of various components, including the high classical Arabic of the Quran and the Arab Golden Age and “lower” varieties, such as the language of the media and scholarly writing.

Arabic diglossia in Israel consists of two languages: MSA, the Arab national language that is shared by all speakers of Arabic⁶ and is acquired in school, and the native language, a dialect that is acquired in childhood at home and serves as one’s natural and intuitive tool for thought and communication. In the 1960s, a number of linguists (for example, Blanc, 1964) discussed the connection between spoken and standard Arabic in Israel and argued that these are two distinct languages, with their own characteristic laws. Shehadeh (2019, p. 46) and Ibrahim (2010) noted that although the colloquial language and MSA have a shared lexicon, they are distinct languages, each with its own linguistic system.⁷ They concluded that the two have the status of native and second language, respectively.

Although Arab society in Israel lives in a geographically restricted area, it possesses three distinct spoken dialects: rural, urban, and Bedouin. Despite the proximity to each other, the differences between the dialects can make them mutually unintelligible. Furthermore, even within the dialect of a single town there may exist linguistic sub-varieties. Recently, a new variety of spoken Arabic has arisen, one that contains a considerable number of Hebrew loan words. This variety can be encountered in mixed towns, with both Jewish and Arab residents (Rosenhouse, 2023; Shehadeh, 2019, p. 46). The following examples illustrate the situation. In PHONETICS AND PHONOLOGY – MSA has a phoneme /q/ (voiceless uvular stop), which in the spoken language has a variety of allophones: [k], [g], [ʔ] and more, depending on the dialect; the MSA phoneme /k/ may be pronounced [k] or [č] in the colloquial language, even within the same dialect in different phonetic contexts (for example, the second person singular possessive pronoun may be pronounced [k] in the masculine and [č] in the feminine: [bētak] “your [m.s.] house” versus [bētič] “your [f.s.] house”, the latter under the influence of the preceding high vowel). In THE LEXICON – the meaning of “see” can be expressed in MSA with at least three different verbs (*raʿā*, *naẓara*, *shāhada*), while in the spoken language a different verb is used in each dialect, and there might sometimes be variations within the same town (for example, in the city of Tira in the Triangle region the verb used for “see” is *qashaʿ* while in neighboring towns one uses *shāf*).

The difference between MSA and the colloquial language also involves emotional and symbolic values (Amara, 2013, p. 19), as shown by the sociolinguistic approach according to which diglossia consists of the use of two different languages in different social contexts. For example, the use of MSA as the language of books has made it a status symbol in Arab society. According to Maamouri (1998), it is not anyone’s native language. It is not the language that an Arab child first

encounters and grows with in their natural environment; children only come into contact with it when they reach school age. Maamouri adds that the mingling of the two languages in school creates a severe pedagogical problem characterized by insecurity when speaking in MSA and attendant social difficulties. The pedagogical problem can also be detected from the direction of the sociolinguistic approach, which reveals the effect that diglossia has on children's low achievements in the acquisition of skills such as reading fluency, reading comprehension, and meta-linguistic awareness in MSA. This is mainly due to the problem of word-final vocalization (*i' rāb*), which exists in MSA but not in the colloquial language, as well as many lexical differences and phonological, phonetic, and morphological difficulties (Ibrahim, 2010; Saiegh-Haddad, 2003, 2004; Zuzovsky, 2019). According to Bani-Khaled (2018), diglossia has negative implications for the acquisition of reading and comprehension skills in any other language as well – for example, English and Hebrew. Gherwash (2017) also points to a lack of desire to read in MSA and the deterioration in the culture of reading in the Arab world.

To return to Arab schools in Israel, Arab students begin to learn MSA in first grade (at the age of six), both in Arabic lessons and in other subjects. In order to achieve acceptable reading and writing fluency, another four to five years of learning MSA are needed, during which time colloquial Arabic remains in everyday use. Only after the age of ten (Levin et al., 2003; Pliatsikas et al., 2015) will students be ripe for acquiring another language,⁸ Hebrew in our case. However, when studying Hebrew, Arab students copy patterns of their native language onto the target language – in this case, patterns of colloquial Arabic to Hebrew. The phonological, morphological, and syntactic patterns of colloquial Arabic, however, do not fit Hebrew, and therefore students do not attain an acceptable level of writing and speaking skills in the latter language. The lack of satisfaction is also connected to aspects of training and policy, as we shall see in the next section.

5. Training and placement of teachers of Hebrew

5.1 The training process of Hebrew teachers

The training of college students for a career in teaching Hebrew in Arab schools is unique because Hebrew as taught in Arab schools is unique, as will be explained below. The subject called “Hebrew” in Arab schools, in fact, combines three subjects: Hebrew language, Hebrew literature, and Hebrew culture (Bible, Mishna and Aggada) (Curriculum, 2011), which are separate in the schools of the Jewish sector.⁹ Hebrew teachers in Arab schools are required to teach all three components of the subject. Their training consists of two components: knowledge of the discipline and pedagogical-didactic knowledge (teaching certificate). These components are acquired either in turn (at universities) or simultaneously (in teachers' colleges).

University graduates of Hebrew studies are usually trained in either “Hebrew language” or “Hebrew literature”. Their training also includes lessons in pedagogy and didactics in advanced undergraduate years. In Hebrew colleges of education, pedagogy and didactics are taught from the freshman year, alongside the subject matter of the chosen discipline. Students in Arab colleges of education¹⁰ study “Hebrew language and literature” as one subject, in addition to lessons in pedagogy and didactics, from the freshman year. Another path of teacher training is “retraining academics for teaching”. This enables college graduates of any institution of higher learning to obtain a teaching certificate in “Hebrew language” or “Hebrew literature” from a Hebrew college of education, or a certificate in “Hebrew language and literature” from an Arab college.

5.2 Placement of Hebrew teachers

Graduates of teacher training programs in Arab schools can be placed either in Arab schools that are under the supervision of the Ministry of Education (pre-school, primary, and middle schools) (Ministry of Education, 2015–2023) or in schools that do not belong to the ministry (high schools, private schools, and kindergartens).¹¹ Here, we discuss only the placement of teachers of Hebrew.

Teachers who plan to work in a school supervised by the Ministry of Education fill out a placement form between the middle of February and the end of March of the previous school year. Placement takes place in accordance with a points system (Watah, 2021). Applicants are not required to attend an interview and can choose to take a fluency test in Hebrew that will help them accumulate more points and improve their chances for placement (Ministry of Education, 2015–2023).¹²

Graduates who plan to work in a school that does not belong to the Ministry of Education (“recognized but not official”) apply in person to the institution running the school (municipality, NGO or the like). In this case, too, applicants are not required to take a fluency test in Hebrew or undergo an interview.

In both cases, Hebrew teachers who have been accepted based on their grades are unfortunately not vetted according to personality traits or teaching skills, nor are they required to obtain approval from the Head of Hebrew studies for Arabic speakers at the Ministry of Education, the official expert on Hebrew teaching.

5.3 Professional development and the work of Hebrew teachers

A Hebrew teacher is required to refresh their knowledge regularly. The Hebrew Profession Administration in the Ministry of Education holds some 30 refresher days for teachers every year, which are attended by about 1200 teachers, nearly a fifth of all Hebrew teachers in the school system. According to the minutes of the Profession Committee (2021) and the official website of the Ministry of Education for Hebrew in Arab schools (the “Itstaba” website), Hebrew teachers have access to a variety of teaching and evaluation materials on various platforms, such as computerized teaching units, recorded lessons, models, and various digital tools, and yet the situation of Hebrew teaching is unsatisfactory because of the small number of teachers who participate in professional development. The Profession Committee’s minutes show a lack of quality content (learning materials, textbooks) for Hebrew studies in Arab society.¹³

In order to complete the picture, we present demographic and educational data on teachers of Hebrew in Arab schools today.

5.4 Hebrew teachers’ education

In Arab society, there are currently 5,160 teachers of Hebrew for students of all ages: 4,043 teachers are women (78%) and 1,117 are men (22%); 5,145 are Arabs (99.7) and 15 are Jews (0.3%) (Musa, 2023).

Table 1 shows the distribution of teachers according to the field of specialization in which they were trained. The situation it depicts is not encouraging: fully one-third of all teachers of Hebrew (36%) either possess a teaching certificate in another subject or do not possess one at all.

Table 2 shows how many years of teaching experience Hebrew teachers have. We see that about half (49%) of the teachers have 15 years or more of teaching experience and about 17% have more than five years of experience.

The two tables show that the training of Hebrew teachers is not uniform, either with respect to the subject matter they learn or with respect to their pedagogical-didactic education. Furthermore, a substantial number of teachers (about one-third) were not trained to teach Hebrew, and some do not participate regularly in professional development (Profession Committee minutes, 2021). About one-third have been teaching for more than 20 years. The latter fact has both positive and negative aspects, since such veteran teachers are very experienced, but some may also suffer from professional burnout.

6. Conclusions

The situation of Arabs as the largest minority group in Israel differs from that of other minorities around the world. This minority learns its own native and national languages in a state of internal diglossia. It is integrated into the majority society, but the Arabic language is not officially a national

Table 1. Distribution of teachers according to subject learned and possession of a teaching certificate

Subject in teacher certificate	No. of teachers	Percentage
Hebrew language	859	17
Hebrew literature	461	9
Hebrew language and literature	45	1
Hebrew language and literature (B.Ed.)	1,928	37
Certificate in another subject, or no certificate	1,876	36

Table 2. Hebrew teachers' years of teaching experience

Seniority of the teachers	No. of teachers	Percentage
First year of teaching	35	1
1–5 years	820	16
6–10 years	866	17
11–15 years	873	17
16–20 years	936	18
Over 20 years	1,630	31

language; rather it has a “special status”. In 2018, the status of Arabic was changed into a language with a “special status” as a result of the Jewish nation-state law, granting Hebrew higher formal status (Basic Law: Israel, 2018). Its situation is unusual, perhaps unique.

We argue that a considerable gap exists between Hebrew teachers’ academic and pedagogical training and professional development, and the teaching process in the schools. This gap is due to the existence of different academic and pedagogical training programs for Hebrew teachers in Arab schools. ACADEMICALLY, there are a variety of degrees, in “Hebrew language”, “Hebrew literature”, “Hebrew language and literature”, as well as other subjects; PEDAGOGICALLY, too, there are various programs: training to teach Hebrew as a native language, training to teach only Hebrew literature, training to teach Hebrew as a second language, and retraining from a different subject to the teaching of Hebrew. Usually, such training is inconsistent with the social and linguistic background of Arab students, who must cope with Arabic-internal diglossia.

In addition, the PLACEMENT PROCESS of Hebrew teachers in Arab schools in all age groups and their EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND, including the length of their service in the school system, contribute considerably to deepening the gap between their academic and pedagogical training and the process of teaching in the schools.

7. Recommendations

Our study identified a number of significant drawbacks in the training and placement of Hebrew teachers in the Arab school system. In order to address them, we recommend the following pedagogical and policy changes: Pedagogically, it is crucial to (1) prepare an updated curriculum of Hebrew studies in Arab schools that will take into account the socio-linguistic, geopolitical and geographic situation of the Arab society, as discussed in section 2. Following the curriculum, adapted learning materials must be prepared. Furthermore, (2) as section 4 illustrates, there are differences between the universities and the teacher training colleges and even between the Jewish colleges and the Arab colleges regarding

teacher training in terms of discipline and pedagogical-didactic knowledge. Therefore, we recommend that the heads of the relevant programs in the academic institutions cooperate with the Ministry of Education and re-examine their training programs and adapt to the socio-linguistic situation of Arab society. Additionally, (3) to avoid employing Hebrew teachers whose field of expertise is not Hebrew, as is currently the case (Table 1), we recommend that the academic institutions prepare a training program for teaching Hebrew for B.A and M.A graduates in various fields of knowledge.

In terms of policy, (1) following the findings presented in section 4, we recommend changing the teacher placement process that exists in the Ministry of Education. The Head of Hebrew studies for Arabic speakers, who is the professional authority, should be allowed to be involved in the selection of Hebrew teachers to ensure the quality of the teaching. Additionally, (2) the Ministry of Education should require all candidates to take a written and oral test in Hebrew, the purpose of which is to assess the knowledge of the languages taught in institutions of higher education, addressing the findings that indicate a lack of uniformity in teacher training. Finally, (3) the Ministry of Education must mandate that Hebrew studies in Arab schools begin in the third grade (age nine) rather than earlier, because up to this age, learners are at a critical stage in establishing their knowledge of the colloquial Arabic language (Modern Standard Arabic) alongside the Arabic they spoke in their childhood (native language). From this stage they are ready to acquire Hebrew which shares linguistic elements with colloquial Arabic, as discussed in sections 1 and 3 of the literature review.

Notes

¹ Our study includes schools in Muslim, Christian and Bedouin societies, but not those in Druze society.

² The initial, classical studies on the influence of Standard and colloquial Arabic on Hebrew writing are Doron (1970) and Shehadeh (1998).

³ The term “second language” refers to a language that is not the learners’ native language but is spoken in their surroundings and is usually taught in a formal framework. Thus, it is taught in schools as part of a curriculum aimed at promoting communication skills and fluency, from the basic level up to complete fluency, and at familiarizing learners with the culture of the speech community in the learners’ environment. A second language is usually learned for practical everyday purposes. In Israel, Hebrew is considered a second language for other groups as well, such as immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia (Stavans & Goldzweig, 2009), who wish to become integrated into Israeli society.

⁴ See what Shehadeh had to say about this situation almost 30 years ago: “The concept of *Hebrew speaker* is not very clear and deserves to be defined more accurately. After all, the Hebrew spoken by Tufiq Tubi, the former Member of Knesset, is not like the Hebrew of the fig seller who sells figs in the Krayot region by Haifa in the summer season. I do not know if there is a similar phenomenon among the nations of the world. I mean by this that a considerable part, almost a third of all the speakers of a certain language in a given country, not only do not belong to the majority that speaks this language from a religious or national aspect, but that this third belongs to a nation which is still in a state of a lack of true peace with that country” (Shehadeh, 1998, pp. 46–47; emphasis in the original).

⁵ A small village, one of four in the Zemer Regional Council in the north of the Central District. These towns are located next to the Green Line.

⁶ On the various levels of Arabic, see Shehadeh (2019, p. 55 and footnotes 37–38).

⁷ A widespread view among Arabs is that the spoken, less prestigious language “has no grammar”. This is, of course, not true; see, for example, Levin’s (1994) *A grammar of the Arabic dialect of Jerusalem*. Such views may be why there are so few studies of the colloquial language by Arab scholars (Shehadeh, 2019, footnote 16).

⁸ Bilingual students are able to begin to learn a second language at a younger age (Armon-Lotem, 2014).

⁹ This is the case at least in middle and high school in the Jewish sector. In primary school, the subject is called “linguistic education”.

¹⁰ In Israel, there are a number of colleges in which Arabic is the language of instruction, among them Haifa College, the Al Qasemi College in Baqa Al Gharbiyya, and the Arab Academic College of Education, part of Beit Berl College, Kfar Sava. These colleges have Hebrew departments that combine Hebrew language and Hebrew literature. In this they differ from Hebrew universities and colleges, in which these two disciplines are taught in separate departments.

¹¹ The terms commonly in use here are “official” placement, in schools run by the Ministry of Education, and “unofficial but recognized” placement in schools that do not belong to the Ministry.

¹² Recently, an optional evaluation test has been added. Success in this exam can also add points and improve applicants’ chances for placement.

¹³ See also the minutes of the meeting of the professional committee on 25 August 2021 (Supervision over Hebrew Studies in Arab Schools, Pedagogical Secretariat, 2021).

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