

TEACHING LANGUAGES IN A CULTURALLY DIVERSE ENVIRONMENT: THE CASE OF ISRAEL.

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*"Every text is more than language
because every language is more than
a language."*

Abstract - *The basis for the present paper is the perception that (a) the importance of teaching languages derives from an image of language as the most striking indicator of culture; and (b) in this context the word 'environment' is a synonym for a political entity, probably a 'state'. Every state has a unique historical and cultural configuration which justifies the ways in which language teaching is inserted into the educational system. In this paper, I discuss the backdrop for aspects of language-teaching in Israeli schooling. The data that I present relate to a specific problem: the difficulties that beset members of groups with different cultural origins when they communicate in the 'same' language. The obstacles place a particular interpretation on proficiency and place politics at the center of the problematic of language teaching and learning.*

Introductory remarks

The topic of this paper, 'Teaching languages in a culturally diverse environment', sounds deceptively innocuous, although it has theoretical, political, and moral implications. Language teaching can be viewed theoretically, as an emblem of the post-modern condition, and empirically, as the spearhead of politics in education. Morally, language-teaching has to confront all the ambiguities of the Tower of Babel.

Were there space to deal with the issues at length, I would like to explain my understanding of every word in the title, and position each concept in an appropriate theoretical framework. In the scope of the present paper, however, it will suffice to establish that (a) the importance of teaching languages derives from a widely-held conception of language as the most significant indicator of culture; (b) in this context the word 'environment' is a synonym for a political entity, probably a 'state', each of which evidences a unique historical configuration; and (c) neither the political frame nor the efficiency of the teaching assures a thoroughly gratifying outcome. The title of the paper then turns into one that is rather forbidding: 'The difficulty of teaching languages successfully in educational organisations to all the groups born into distinct (language)-cultures who participate in the same (territorial) state'. Specifically, I will be dealing with the case of the State of Israel.

First, I will point out some of the general questions that touch on language teaching. Then I will describe briefly how language-teaching is carried out in Israeli

schools. Finally, I will cite evidence of how difficult it is for members of different cultural groups in Israel to share a language.

The topic of language teaching is embedded theoretically in some salient general sociological questions.

A state educational system and the organisation of teaching, above all the organisation of language teaching, bridges the macro-micro chasm that sociologists agonise over. On the macro-level, broad political questions of power have an impact on all aspects of language-teaching. The selection of the languages taught reflects levels of domination and group-empowerment in a state's social structure. On the intermediate (meso) level, the ways in which a group uses its language, or languages, reflect the reach of ethnicity in the state, and the level of a sub-group's self-sufficiency. The conceptions that infuse this level of social functioning relate to demands for language performance and thus to the degree to which languages contribute to pluralism or integration/assimilation. On the micro-level, the teaching of languages is connected to the provision of life-chances, the opening of avenues of opportunity for individuals.

The practice of language teaching reflects processes in the polity and the economy which enter into dimensions of daily living through the mechanisms of personality formation. Thus organisational factors affect the essentials of group and personal identity. Language teaching and learning link up with the realistic capacity for self actualisation that individuals develop, and, with people's awareness of how to realise one's full potential. Since language on different levels is the key to human development, systemic, even systematic, failures in language-teaching are a measure of effective deprivation.

There are also issues germane to the field of education. When we look specifically at systems of schooling, we realize that the political considerations regarding language-teaching mark the entire project. Language-teaching is implicated in details of organisation, administration, pedagogy, instruction, and human relations that are at the heart of imparting and acquiring an education.

There are roots in the organisation of schooling: the distribution of pupils among the schools (levels, numbers of classes, educational goals of particular schools). Fundamental, too, is the conception of what facilities are necessary, how teacher preparation is defined, and consequently, how many teachers are available for a given language. Reaching a consensus on the rationale for allocating time to language teaching in the curriculum and in the daily schedule is a complex task. In this connection it is interesting to note what school subjects 'compete' with language-teaching, which languages are considered, and how the competition is played out.

In different areas of the world there are diverse types of solutions (Reid & Reich 1995). In the United States, debate has for long raged over the institutionalisation of bilingualism. In some countries of Europe - Holland and Scandinavia, for example - and in the Melanesian and Polynesian states of the South Pacific, the languages of distinct ethnic groups are supported by the national school system. In others, as, for

example, in Britain, there may at best be minimal attention to the languages of minority groups, and a knowledge of what are defined as ethnic languages is palpably ignored, left to the initiative of home and family (Reid & Reich 1995).

I have mentioned issues that are likely to be raised in every educational system; but each society deserves attention as a historically unique phenomenon. I will continue by focusing on my own country, Israel, where language is perennially an item on the national agenda.

The centrality of language in the state of Israel

In Israel, the educational system is organised so as to support a number of languages in accordance with official policy. There are laws which establish three official languages in the State. Moreover, the educational policy regarding the teaching of languages voices a consensus on the political significance of language use.

As in the nation-states heralded in 19th century Europe (Hobsbawm 1993), the foundations of the modern state of Israel have historically been identified with the revival and modernization of the Biblical tongue. It is especially suitable today, fifty years after the liberation of the German concentration camps, to remind ourselves that the revival of the language was not only an excuse for state-building. It was conceptualised as a condition for national physical survival. In the official ideology, there is a recognition that the language is crucial for well-being, influencing psychic balance or imbalance in the individual. Because of the onomatopoeia between the terms, people have frequently been exhorted to 'speak Hebrew' and 'be healthy'! Enhancing the applicability of Hebrew to different areas of living is an on-going State enterprise and there is an Academy of the Hebrew Language which has a mandate to extend vocabulary as needs arise, and to ratify (or condemn) prevailing usage.

The effort has in fact been crowned with outstanding success. In Israel, Hebrew has evolved as the *lingua franca*. For Jewish citizens and immigrants from over one hundred countries round the world, gaining a command of Hebrew has the aura of moral duty (Lo Bianco 1995). For Israel's non-Jewish citizens, it is a highly practical skill. Government policy has turned Hebrew into the language of instruction of most institutions of higher learning - universities, technical colleges, teachers colleges. It is the tongue of most institutions for vocational training; it is the language of government bureaucracy. If only to be assured of realising one's rights in regard, for example, to tax assessments and legal process, every citizen does well to be able to communicate in Hebrew.

Among the non-Jewish Israelis, Arabic is spoken in the home and cultivated as a national tongue. Because in the Arab world there are many different dialects of spoken Arabic, some of which are mutually incomprehensible, gaining mastery of literary Arabic is essential. Expertise in literary Arabic is the measure of a group's (and of a person's) 'high culture', for this written version serves as a medium of communication between Israeli Arabs and the rest of the Arab world.

But neither Arabic nor Hebrew guarantees that Israelis of whichever ethnic origin will be able to make useful connections with the first world! There is no doubt in people's minds or in the regulations of the Ministry of Education, that English, the 'international language' *par excellence*, is the key to entrance into the political, economic and academic worlds, the trans-national communities that count.

For a combination of sociological, political, and practical reasons, therefore, the teaching and learning of Hebrew, Arabic, and English are a central consideration in the Israeli state school system. Their distribution and teaching is regulated via the centralised administration of schooling.

The practice of language teaching in the school system

Since the first laws for compulsory free education were passed (1949, 1953), the performance of all aspects of education has been provided for and monitored by the 'centre', i.e., by officials of the Ministry of Education and Culture in Jerusalem. Administrative arrangements are similar for all the state schools, and the overwhelming majority (ca. 93%) of the schools in the educational system are indeed state-schools. The Ministry laid down the guidelines for the bureaucratic structure. School teachers and principals are employed by the Ministry; the Ministry has a decisive voice in determining the conditions of teachers' work. They allocate funds for teaching hours, and settle - or strongly recommend - how those funds are to be distributed among the school subjects. Syllabi have regularly been prepared by Ministry-appointed inspectors whose opinions are defined as authoritative. Textbooks are approved by committees composed of inspectors and their appointees. Communication with local schools is carried out by means of the monthly circular letter of the Ministry's Director-General. All of these are derived from particular conceptions of the places of the three most important languages. Most of the arrangements - with minor variations - are still in place today (Israel 1994).

Organisation

Languages are the basis for organising schooling. The state school system comprises schools for Jewish children in which Hebrew is the language of instruction and schools for children who come from Arab homes, where Arabic is the language of instruction. There is no legal exclusion from either of these streams on the basis of language of origin, but constraints of geography and religion as well as mother tongue effectively lead to segregation. In both sections of the system, a kindergarten education is obligatory at the age of five; elementary school comprises the next six or eight years of the pupil's career, and this is followed by six or four years of secondary school, (depending on decisions in the locality) for a total of 13 years of formal schooling.

Curriculum

Continuing the tradition established by the British mandatory government (1918-1947), the ministry-approved curriculum allows for the teaching of the three official languages: Hebrew, Arabic, and English, with different allocation of hours to each of the languages according to sector. There is salient asymmetry between the chief languages of the country - Hebrew and Arabic. All the children in schools where Arabic is the language of instruction begin their study of Hebrew in the third grade. They are exposed to Hebrew in ancient and modern literature and get a thorough grounding in the 'mechanics' of the Hebrew language. Children in the schools where Hebrew is the language of instruction are now required to study Arabic for two years beginning in the seventh grade. The Arabic they study, however, is the (spoken) Palestinian dialect. The advanced study of literary Arabic, the language of intellectual life and high culture, is still an elective.

The English language, however, is a required subject for all. In the schools where Hebrew is the language of instruction students begin the study of English in the fourth grade, i.e. at the age of nine or ten. English is studied for 4 or 5 hours per week, until the last year of secondary school (year 12). In the schools where Arabic is the language of instruction, pupils begin their study of English in the sixth grade (age 11-12) and continue, as in the Hebrew-speaking schools, until the last year of secondary school.

In sum, for the Hebrew-speaking sector, the required-language instruction during the years of primary and secondary schooling is 12 years of studying the Hebrew language, nine years of studying the English language, and two years of studying the Palestinian dialect of spoken Arabic. For the Arabic-speaking sector, the corresponding requirements are 12 years of studying Arabic, 6 years of studying English, and 10 years of studying Hebrew. As noted above, studies in the overwhelming majority of institutions of tertiary education is conducted in Hebrew.

Pedagogical issues

What with the built-in division between Hebrew and Arabic on the one hand, and the ways in which diversity is evidenced in the language/languages of each group on the other, language teaching in Israel is a weighty challenge. Each of the languages taxes learners in a different way, and hence presents different problems to the teachers. First of all, the teaching of the mother tongues is problematic. In the case of Arabic, the problem derives from the gaps between the spoken and written languages. Despite the many spoken dialects, Arabic is still called 'one' language. Linguists recognise that these dialects are as different from one another as the acknowledged separate languages of Scandinavia (Ornan 1995). The very different approach to the subdivisions of Arabic apparently stems from the on-going politics for a pan-Arabist

identity. There is a practical price to pay in terms of learning achievements. For Arab children in the first grade of elementary school, learning to read is also in effect learning a new language.

In the case of the Hebrew language, the problems are posed by the diversity of the school population. Although most of the school children are native-born, many of them come from immigrant households. The family origins affect the nature of children's language proficiency. Furthermore, when there are waves of immigration - the Russian Jews after the fall of the Soviet Union, for example, and the Ethiopian Jews in the wake of the famine in Africa - the new immigrant children have to adjust to a strange language in their schooling while coping at the same time with a bizarre new world. Responsibility for the curricula of the mother tongues is entirely in the hands of the Ministry of Education and developments are for the most part left to the teachers, who receive minimal guidance and supervision.

For students in Hebrew-speaking and Arabic-speaking schools alike, the study of English is problematic. The sounds are peculiar for a palate accustomed to gutturals. Reading presents serious problems. The letters are stylised strangely, vowels are conveyed through full-fledged letters, and words are formed in the wrong direction (left to right instead of the familiar right to left of both mother tongues). But the question of whether English should be taught and learned is never raised. Like mathematics and Bible study (sic!), English is one of the few school subjects immune to opposition. This is demonstrated by the Establishment investment in person-hours, salary and research and development.

The largest, most active staff of inspectors and counsellors in the Ministry of Education work with teachers of English. Specialist teachers in the field of TEFL can command excellent salaries and there is a lively market of teachers interested in moonlighting. There is a great deal of zealous research about topics related to language teaching. Numerous courses for inservice teachers convey the findings of local and foreign research with the aim of making the language classroom the locus of up-to-date knowledge and honed skills. There are intensive debates about methods and techniques. Issues of how to ensure that pupils learn English are reviewed untiringly in different forums. Pedagogical approaches are perseveringly based on comprehensive information. By a strange turn, the advances in the teaching of English are often a source of counsel for teachers of the mother tongues (see *ELT Journal; Trends*).

When all is said and done, however, the investment in personnel and in research and development does not deal with all the important questions. First of all, the extraordinary emphasis on the educational preeminence of three languages, namely Hebrew, English and Arabic, obscures the fact that the Israeli school system ignores scores of languages which are second nature to many in the population. Except for a smattering of schools associated with the *Alliance Israelite Française* in which French is taught, no other languages are studied systematically in primary or secondary schools. Thus, the home languages of immigrants have, to date, been completely ignored by the educational establishment.¹

Second, despite the great effort put into the exploration of more and better modes of imparting a knowledge of languages, the life-blood of the matter is ignored. Supervisors and teachers weight their pedagogy to consider the structure and mechanics of language rather than on the sense of the materials. The emphasis is almost exclusively on 'ways and means' rather than on content in context. One example is the perpetual battle for promoting and improving reading in the various languages. There is widespread interest among educationists in the *process* of reading; effort is invested in understanding underlying mechanisms of cognition (Feitelson 1988; Gibson 1975). Although teachers recognise that what they are talking about includes a tacit knowledge of cultural forms and their meanings, they ignore what presents itself as a logical conclusion.

On the surface, this is justified by studies which show that what is reckoned as success in language-learning is often high when the content of the reading passages is related to the pupils' own culture, and failure is far more common when content relates to another culture. In his field experiments with Arab students studying English, for example, Abu-Rabiya (1993) found that the kind of content (rather than the level of the language) determined not a little the degree to which pupils were willing to read in a second language (English). The kind of content also correlated with the degree to which their reading could be described as successful. His findings agree with research on the achievements of Jewish students studying Arabic.

The studies referred to seem to show that children learn linguistic technicalities better when 'content' is kept close to home. From a socio-linguistic point of view, however, the findings noted are an anomaly. There are, after all, many things in a language that extend beyond lists of words and sets of phrases for dictation, memorising, and restating content. I am making the far-ranging claim that the varieties of registers in a language; its peculiarities of idiom; its embeddedness in socially constructed acts and activities, all lead to the conclusion that language and culture are inseparable. Cultural factors have to be a central concern when language 'skills' are imparted, therefore, and disregarding culture must be considered a failure.

This is the heart of the matter. It is difficult to accept the common-sensical notion that a language can indeed be learned in depth when it is delivered as a bundle of forms and structures tied to a cultural ground in which the particular language is alien. There is, therefore, a question whether or not English can be taught effectively to Israeli children with the help of materials that are all related to the Israeli experience. This implies that we must at least raise serious doubts as to whether Arab children can achieve complete command of their second language when they are taught Hebrew through descriptions of cultural patterns that they can relate to easily in Arabic. It is to this point that the data below will relate.

The technically oriented language curriculum may be a useful means for smoothing the way toward computerised translation. But such a conception of language presupposes a catalogue of human experience homogenised beyond recognition. Apart from its probable pedagogical inadequacy, it constitutes a giant

step toward the erosion of what is unique and interesting in every language and in all the diverse cultures of the world.

Finally, it is important to recognise that the cultural orientation is ideologised and embedded in political relations. This, too, affects the possibility of achieving success in the language classroom. While the language teacher concentrates on techniques and technicalities, under the uniform surface of the classroom, children's motivation and cognitive processes are in fact related to ideology. This set of overall ideas and values is rarely formulated explicitly, but is nonetheless a part of the school curriculum, inherent to the deployment of symbolic force, and to the way children learn (D'Andrade 1987; Goldstein & Rayner 1994). Throughout the 47 years since the founding of Israel, Jewish children have been taught to know that we are a country surrounded by enemies. The Arabic language is the tongue of hostile neighbours, and studying Arabic was often interpreted as an insidious partisan trap. For Arab children - an educationally segregated minority in what is defined as a Jewish (albeit democratic) state - the Hebrew language is the tongue of the not always friendly majority of the population and its representatives in the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament). In short, there is, in my mind, no question but that it is a mistake to assume that difficulties in language learning can be isolated from socio-cultural factors, or from the way learners and their parents construe and live their lives.²

Interaction as 'tests' of language competence

I would like to go on to illustrate the weakness of examination scores as indicators of the degree to which language teaching is marked by success by describing interaction between students whose mother tongues differ (Kalekin-Fishman 1992; Zaretsky, Ismir & Kalekin-Fishman 1994). These instances are striking because they show bluntly how, despite the many years of devoted and skilled teaching sanctioned by research, and despite the fact that the proficiency of all the students involved was officially beyond reproach, the difficulties of finding a common tongue refuse to go away.

The illustrations are all taken from protocols of weekend meetings in which Arab and Jewish students preparing themselves for teaching took part in a program designed to heighten their awareness of how instruction can serve education for democracy. Minutes of all the group's meetings were recorded by two experienced researchers (an Arab and a Jew), and the examples I will mention were culled from their notes. The weekends supplemented weekly workshops at the University and activities in which mixed teams of Arab and Jewish students observed classes in schools, drew up plans for lessons dealing with democracy and pluralism, and taught as a team in either Hebrew-speaking or Arabic-speaking post-primary schools.

At the University of Haifa where the project was carried out, Jews and Arabs study in the same classrooms, eat in the same cafeterias, and undergo the same kinds of initiation rituals into the academe. Rarely, however, do they form close friendships.

The project that we conducted was actually an uncommon opportunity to work with one another and to talk about things that were personally meaningful. At the time of the project, all the participants (including the Arab students) were in the third year of their studies at the University where all the studies are conducted in Hebrew. There was no reason not to assume that in informal meetings Jews and Arabs would understand one another easily. When we look at the protocols, however, we find that quite often this was not the case.

There are many examples. The cases I will cite relate to the grasp people from the different groups had of important concepts, the differential approaches to friendly exchanges (phatic communication), as well as to the differentiated evaluation of oral history. Each case illustrates a different dimension of what it means to know a language.

Two concepts - 'higher education'; 'identity': An interesting difference was the diverse grasp of the meaning of higher education. For the Jewish students, studying at the University meant self-actualisation, realising one's personal potential; while for the Arab students a higher education had social and political significance. To them it meant primarily 'a chance to serve my people'.

A similar bias led the members of each ethnic group to understand the term 'identity' differently. At a workshop session where the group leaders asked participants to describe their 'identities,' the Jews described themselves in terms of personality traits. They attributed to themselves qualities such as kindness, consideration, helpfulness, friendliness, curiosity, intelligence, and so on. The Arab students, on the other hand, described themselves in terms of affiliations: kinship, religion, ethnicity, and politics. This divergence led to mutual reproach. The Jews were accused of arrogance and snobbishness; they in turn charged the Arabs with stereotypical thinking.

Everyday communication: Misunderstandings grew out of superficially slight circumstances as well. After a night spent in a kibbutz guest house, an Arab woman greeted her Jewish colleague with a smiling and energetic 'Good morning' in Hebrew. In response, the Jewish student nodded. The Arab student interpreted this as an insulting evasion, while the Jewish woman insisted that she just 'couldn't' converse before her coffee and had meant the response to be very friendly. The bitterness did not disappear immediately, showing that the 'same' words and non-verbal responses have different meanings to people who grow up in different cultures.

Evaluating oral history: A most distressing event was caused by the differential evaluations of oral history according to language. This was a misunderstanding in which language and politics interpenetrated. The incident exploded during an evening of 'showing something from our way of life that I love'. By chance, both a Jewish student and an Arab student chose to play recordings of folk songs. The Jewish student explained that she loved the song she wanted to play because her grandmother sang it to her often when she reminisced about the family's life in Europe before the holocaust. The Arab student played the song she had brought and told the class that

this was a song her mother often sang. It was a song that she had sung in her childhood 'before we were cast out of our village by the Jews'. The statement caused a furore among the Jewish students. They argued that they had never 'read about people being banished from their villages in history textbooks at school', and therefore it just was not true. Hurt, the Arab student said, 'you believe your grandmother, why shouldn't I believe my mother?' There was no countermending this simple statement, but each group remained isolated in their sadness.

Summing up

In their discussions of *Minority Languages and Dominant Culture*, Kalantzis, Cope and Slade (1989) consider at length different modes of instituting language teaching in different countries, analysing the promise and the risks that attend bilingualism. They recommend exploring the uses of home languages and majority languages for communication 'to the extent that they are needed'. To this end, they outline suggestions for teaching languages that will help children of immigrants and children of minority groups develop a balanced proficiency in both the languages required in their daily lives. Their recommendations, progressive as they are, seem to take it for granted that the dominant culture and the language of the majority can indeed be learned thoroughly if only the correct didactic manipulations are undertaken, and matched with suitable modes of assessment.

The case of Israel leads to a further conclusion. Even though the Arab students who were accepted to the University had certainly proved their proficiency in Hebrew, there are significant and often painful misunderstandings when they interact with Jewish peers for whom Hebrew is the native tongue.

The difficulties that arise in ordinary interaction support the claim that the topic of proficiency is far beyond the issue of testing for proficiency because, as a recent journal article put it, 'language is always more than a language'. We may adapt our teaching of every language to the culture of the learners; but in the final analysis success in learning a language is tested in *intergroup* interaction and depends on the structures of intergroup relations.

The examples of differential understandings I have chronicled here, among many others, can all be connected with the stressed political and economic context of the middle East. As this context changes, people will meet in more varied situations and develop the mutuality that comes of actually sharing meaningful experiences, creating cultures related to many areas of living. The necessary collaboration will provide opportunities for change in how members of each ethnic group construe meanings, conceptualise what it means to chat amicably, and empathise memory.

I have pointed to these misunderstandings as evidence that success in language-learning depends only partially on teachers' professionalism and expertise. It is intimately related to the degree to which social structures enable and facilitate mutualities based on respect and honour. As the year 2000 approaches, it is perhaps not wildly

illogical to claim that peace in the Middle East is a necessary condition for ensuring success in teaching Hebrew to Arabs, and Arabic to Jews.

Notes

Revised version of a paper read at the Global Cultural Diversity Conference, 26-28 April 1995, Sydney, Australia.

¹ The Director-General of the Ministry of Education has published a notice that in the school year 1995-96, there will be an opportunity for secondary school students to choose Russian as a subject for matriculation. As an afterthought, the children who have immigrated from Ethiopia will be enabled to matriculate in Amharic. If carried out, these steps will mark a revolution in the conception that has guided educational policy. They have been suggested because of pressure by immigrants from the former USSR. Since the large immigration of Jews from Ethiopia took place in parallel, Amharic has also 'sneaked in' as an accepted subject. The announcement is now contested by the Inspector responsible for the teaching of Arabic as a second language and it is not clear whether the plan will, after all, be implemented (*Ha'aretz*, June 15, 1995).

² Gellner (1983) expresses the dim view that the globalisation of the economy may have the effect of homogenising languages in the sense that the varieties of 'thought styles' would give way to narrow technical differences in vocabulary and morphology.

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