**Attitudes of Students at An-Najah University in Nablus   
toward Hebrew-Language Studies in the West Bank**

**Abstract**

The study described in this article breaks new ground by testing the attitudes of students at An-Najah University in Nablus, West Bank, toward Hebrew-language studies in the Palestinian education system from primary to university level. The participants are students who attend two classes and take a basic elective course in Hebrew-language skills. The reference is to the students’ attitudes toward studying Hebrew as a compulsory subject from primary school up to university.

Some 22,000 students attended Al-Najah University in the 2019/20 academic year. Of them, 667 took basic elective courses in Hebrew language and specialized Hebrew courses as part of their undergraduate minor. The sample population comprised sixty students from the two classes: thirty-six from Class 1 and twenty-four from Class 2. They were asked to answer whether they favored Hebrew-language studies from the primary level to university. They were also asked to explain at length why they favored or opposed Hebrew-language studies and what motives undergirded their position. The main hypothesis in the study is that a large majority of students in the sample will express a favorable attitude toward Hebrew-language studies. The main motives behind this attitude trace to communication, because the large majority of Palestinians are unfamiliar with Hebrew and suffer from faulty communication with the Israeli administration due to lack of basic proficiency in Hebrew. Palestinians who cross Israeli checkpoints, for example, struggle to understand what they are asked to do and what the Military Police personnel who stand at the entrance to the checkposts explain to them. In another example, Palestinian prisoners find it difficult to read and understand Hebrew-language documents in Israeli prisons. In addition, fluency in Hebrew would allow Palestinians to understand the Israeli administration’s intentions and “the schemes that it might cook up against the Palestinians.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

We checked for a connection between these students’ motives for taking a basic Hebrew-language course and support that they receive from some social element, or whether their motivation to take the course originates solely in their own awareness.

**1. Introduction**

In this article, we tested the attitudes of students at An-Najah University in Nablus, West Bank, toward Hebrew-language studies in the Palestinian education system from the primary level up to university. The sample population comprised sixty students in two classes who took an elective course in Hebrew for beginners. Hebrew, of course, is not a compulsory subject in the Palestinian education system; therefore, a large majority of Palestinians find it problematic to communicate with the Israeli administration. As a salient example of faulty communication between Palestinians and the Israeli administration, many students at An-Najah University in Nablus declare themselves unable to decipher letters that they receive from the Israeli administration and ask people who are proficient in Hebrew to help them.

The students were asked to answer whether they favor study of Hebrew from primary school up to university. They were asked to explain their attitude and elaborate on the motives behind it. The main assumption in this study, on which the study is based, is that the large majority of students in the sample will express a favorable attitude toward Hebrew-language studies and that their motives will relate mainly to communication. Namely, proficiency in Hebrew enables Palestinians to communicate with the Israeli administration more easily and thus allows them to understand the administration’s intentions and the schemes it might be cooking up against the Palestinians. [לטפל במשפט הזה כפי שטופל בתקציר]

The study tests four additional hypotheses. First, the students will take a favorable view toward Hebrew language studies for occupational and mercantile reasons, since knowing Hebrew improves one’s chances of finding work in Israeli territory and enhances quality of life. The second hypothesis has to do with religious motives: the Prophet Muhammad instructed Muslims to learn the enemy’s language in order to protect themselves from schemes that the enemy might concoct against them. The third relates to pedagogical matters: In our opinion, few if any students favor learning Hebrew because Hebrew and Arabic are the closest relatives in the family of Semitic languages, making Hebrew relatively easy to learn for native speakers of Arabic. The fourth hypothesis is connected with the students’ motivation to take a basic course in Hebrew at Al-Najah University in Nablus. In our research, we asked whether the students’ motivation to take this course and communicate in Hebrew were influenced by social players of any kind. The hypothesis in this context was that the students’ underlying motive to take an elective course in basic Hebrew and to communicate in this language may trace to support that they received from some social element.

The ability to merge words and rationales into responses is known to be a meaningful indicator of qualitative research. Qualitative research is attentive to the participants’ every word on the assumption that every word and rationale, as stated, reflects the participants’ opinions, worldviews, and emotions, and if these words and phrases are converted randomly into other words and phrases the participants’ intentions may be misrepresented. It is the qualitative researcher’s duty to help people tell their stories and explain their choices and assertions and to help them reveal, elucidate, and explain their stories and choices both to themselves and to the researcher. Quantitative research, in contrast, focuses on an amount of data, e.g., the number of participants in the sample, and not on explaining the participants’ responses and assessing their quality.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The current study has both quantitative and qualitative characteristics. It gathers data from a sample of sixty students. It also involves qualitative data because the participating students were asked to elaborate on their attitudes toward Hebrew-language studies in West Bank Palestinian schools from primary to university and to explain at length the motives that underlie their positions, i.e., communicative, political, occupational, mercantile, and so on.

This study is based on the collection and sorting of data: We collected the responses of the students participating in the sample, sorted them by types of motives for learning Hebrew as expressed in the responses, and drew conclusions from the sorting. The students were asked to emphasize their motives for encouraging Hebrew studies in the Palestinian education system and not to merely to declare themselves “for” or “against” without an adequate explanation. After gathering the data, we analyzed them with the help of statistical tools such as tables and pie charts. Relying on these tools, we tried to sort the motives behind the students’ attitudes and see which were more dominant than others. After analyzing the motives and reviewing the statistical data, we asked whether these motives fit the main assumption and the hypotheses of this study. Finally, we drew relevant conclusions in accordance with these assumptions and hypotheses.

**2. Theoretical Background**

Palestinians consider Hebrew a foreign language even though they encounter and are exposed to it. This exposure is limited to a few members of the Palestinian population, such as security prisoners in Israeli jails, Palestinian workers who enter Israel to make a living, members of the Palestinian security apparatus who work in coordination with the Israel Defense Forces, Palestinians who learn Hebrew in private schools, students at An-Najah University in Nablus who have been taking basic elective courses in Hebrew language for years, and also, recently, students at the University who “minor” in Hebrew.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Due to globalization and continual contact among peoples and cultures, people often have to speak more than one language. In many countries, proficiency in a second language, particularly English due to the special prestige attached to it, is a *sine qua non* for many occupations. If one prefers not to wait for a certain book in a foreign language to be translated, for example, one must be proficient in more than one tongue. Today, it is not exceptional for people to want to be bilingual or multilingual; accordingly, bilingualism and multilingualism are discussed at length and have attracted lavish research attention.[[4]](#footnote-4)

One of the most important aims in studying a second or a foreign language is to facilitate better communication, discourse, and understanding among people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.[[5]](#footnote-5) Language plays a definitive role in social interaction and in communicating cultural and social values. Notably, bilingual education can be a tool for the empowerment of a minority’s language and the creation of equality between majority and minority groups by means of cooperation, contact, and interaction. In this manner, it may help to attenuate conflicts among groups and encourage members of the groups to revise negative views.[[6]](#footnote-6)

When two peoples meet as the result of neighborship, business, or occupation, a state of linguistic influence comes about. In the case at hand, a reality has come about between Hebrew and Arabic in their encounters in the course of history. This state of encounter and partial mingling of two linguistic systems leads to an intereffect of linguistic categories. According to Weinreich, the languages are going through a process of blending in lexical, phonetic, and syntactic contact.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Heine and Kuteva studied the way grammatical forms and structures evolve when languages come into contact. Basing themselves on findings from multiple countries, they claim that the transfer of grammatical meanings and structures from one language to another is rather constant and is shaped by universal patterns of grammatization, i.e., universal processes of grammatical change. Such transfer is in fact consistent with the principles of grammar, which are identical irrespective of whether the contact is between two languages or along unilateral or multilateral lines. This claim clashes with previous arguments that such transfers are irregular (Heine and Kuteva, 2005, p. 1).

Few speech societies live in isolation from other societies. When societies that speak different languages encounter each other as the result of wars and occupations, trade relations, cultural relations, political relations, or willing or forced migration, strong covert or overt linguistic intereffects occur. This is attested in the lengthy history of the Middle East and among peoples on all continents.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**3. The Status of Hebrew in the Territories**

The Six-Day War created a new reality on the Middle East political map. Israel took control of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and continues to control part of these territories, leading to the presence of Hebrew there. It happened in two ways: directly, via the Israeli presence in the territories, and indirectly, via press and media coverage of goings-on in Israel by Arab journalists from Israel who are fluent in Hebrew.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip regard Hebrew as “the enemy’s language”[[10]](#footnote-10) because it is the language of the “enemy” who once controlled all of the West Bank and still controls part of it. They also hold Israeli rule directly responsible for their grueling poverty, particularly in the Gaza Strip, where shortages of basics such as water, food, and electricity are endemic in daily life.

Notably, unemployment in the Gaza Strip climbed to an unprecedented 52 percent on average in 2018, according to the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics. Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are convinced that the Israeli administration holds the key to solving many of their economic problems and is deliberately holding back; this encourages the Palestinians to consider Hebrew an enemy tongue.

The military presence in the territories has persisted for more than four decades, making the question of Hebrew part of the Palestinian discourse, namely: should Hebrew be taught under occupation? The debate over this question focuses on two aspects, military and civilian. From the military standpoint, under the Oslo accords the Palestinians undertook to maintain security coordination with IDF officers, bringing on an encounter between the sides with Hebrew as the language of communication. Therefore, Palestinian officers took a crash course in Hebrew.[[11]](#footnote-11) As for the civilian aspect, private schools in the West Bank have begun to teach Hebrew as a foreign language along with English. Some believe that public schools under Palestinian Authority auspices should also gradually introduce Hebrew-language studies in all grades. This issue stirs serious debate in the Palestinian street. Some favor the idea; others reject it categorically.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Palestinian proponents of teaching Hebrew claim that this instruction offers a way to get to know the “enemy” directly via encounters, the press, and the media; thus, it also serves as an instrument in the struggle against the “Zionist project.” Some express the need to broaden pupils’ knowledge and education. Opponents believe that such study helps to break down a psychological barrier, abets change in the attitude toward the Jews, and amounts to the acceptance of Jewish culture in the Middle Eastern sphere and the gradual justification of the Zionist narrative. According to some, Hebrew studies will induce amazement about the Israelis’ capabilities and thence to an attempt to internalize and imitate their actions (Marʿī, 2013, pp. 102–103).

As the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip show in multiple examples, the key to improving the Palestinian economy rests in the hands of the Israeli administration. The administration could revise its criteria in order to ease the movements of retailers, importers, and exporters just a little and, by so doing, stimulate the productive sectors. The administration could put together a program that would increase the number of Palestinians working in Israel. The administration could lift the restrictions on produce for sale in the West Bank and allow additional products to be sold in Israel. The administration could relax the fishing limits off the Gaza coast and refrain from the collective-punishment measures that are strangling the Palestinian economy and hindering its development.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The Civil Administration operates under the umbrella of the District Coordination and Liaison Office and interacts with the Palestinian Authority in matters of routine security and issuing medical authorizations and travel permits to leave the West Bank. Relations with the army as well as the paperwork and the documents are in Hebrew.[[14]](#footnote-14) Although the Palestinians in the West Bank consider Hebrew an “enemy language,” it may have a greater impact on them than English does. The main reason is that, practically speaking, the army manages and supervises all aspects of the Palestinians’ lives in terms of their economy, commerce, movement, and interurban travel.

Alongside the security aspect is a consumerist one. When Palestinians consume Israeli products, they have to them by their Hebrew names. Also, the Hebrew-language media have made inroads in Palestinians’ homes, prompting some Palestinians to take an interest in learning Hebrew from the media in order to follow developments in Israel first-hand, from the Israelis themselves.

Resource and employment constraints in the territories have channeled labor forces to Israel. Palestinians worked in Israel *en masse* for some twenty years, from 1968 until the First Intifada in 1988, and became dominant in construction and agriculture. This lengthy period gave them massive exposure to Hebrew as a vernacular and as the language of the press and of construction materials and tools. Many workers became fluent in Hebrew and were interviewed in the Israeli media.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Another nexus of encounter is associated with security prisoners. Israel holds tens of thousands of Palestinians in its prisons. The physical disengagement of Israel from the West Bank by means of the separation barrier has created a new situation: a whole generation of Palestinians, born during and after the Second Intifada, that is unfamiliar with Israel, has never visited it, and cannot speak Hebrew. Unlike the previous generation, which made most of its livelihood within the Green Line, Palestinians in the West Bank today have almost no way of learning Hebrew except by serving time in Israeli prisons.

These Palestinian prisoners come into contact with jailers and are exposed to Hebrew language and media. Thus, when released, they come out with considerable knowledge of Hebrew. Some become truly fluent in the language behind bars, attesting that those who do not know Hebrew in prison are lacking something. Some of these prisoners strive to master the language in prison. This proficiency makes their lives and daily communication with the Prisons Service people much easier. Therefore, it is no wonder that some security prisoners choose to work as Hebrew teachers in private schools in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the belief that it may greatly enhance communication between the Palestinians and the Israeli administration in all areas of life. Some discharged Palestinian prisoners have opened translation centers with the help of the Palestinian Ministry of Justice and some volunteer to teach Hebrew to beginners. It stands to reason that the Palestinian security apparatuses also use them for their needs. To substantiate the situation, we quote Fares Kadoura, Chair of the Palestinian Prisoners Club, who makes his point in the fluent Hebrew that he acquired in an Israeli prison:

There are prisoners who were released in the Schalit deal and opened centers for translation of official documents. The Palestinian Ministry of Justice even certified them as translators if they met the criteria. Every released prisoner is asked to give a Hebrew course for beginners on a volunteer basis in club facilities in the towns, villages, and refugee camps. People want to know at least a few words.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**4. Palestinian Authority Policy on Teaching Hebrew in Schools and Universities**

As noted above, the Palestinian Authority acknowledges the importance of learning Hebrew, encourages released security prisoners to give volunteer Hebrew courses to beginners, and certifies them as translators. It is even likely that the Palestinian security apparatuses use these translators for their needs. Thus, the Palestinian Authority sees Hebrew-language study as an agenda that should be advanced. This agenda, however, has not made inroads in the curricula of the public schools (primary, junior high, and senior high). Notably, however, at An-Najah University in Nablus Hebrew has been taught for many years as an elective for beginners who wish to acquire basic Hebrew skills, and two years ago the university introduced Hebrew as a minor with the approval of the Palestinian Council for Higher Education (CHE). Thus, students can earn an undergraduate degree in Hebrew as a minor while majoring in, say, English language and literature.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Notably, many university heads in Palestine have been following the lead of Al-Najah University by asking the Palestinian CHE to allow them to open official Hebrew departments. Several of them, such as Birzeit University and the Jerusalem Open University, both in Ramallah, have already presented the Palestinian CHE with detailed programs for its approval. These universities are progressing well toward obtaining the Palestinian CHE’s approval. This attests to a clear agenda of promoting study of Hebrew in Palestine and a meaningful change in the Palestinian administration’s attitude toward teaching Hebrew. This agenda, however, has not yet found its way to the curricula of public schools on the West Bank.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Surprisingly, the extremist Hamas authorities in Gaza promote official teaching of Hebrew language in both schools and universities, mostly in order to gather information about Israel. According to various sources in Gaza, the Hebrew classes in the Gaza Strip are packed to the gills. In the West Bank, in contrast, Hebrew is taught only in private schools and, for the time being, at Al-Najah University in Nablus, as noted above. Since the Palestinian administration approved the opening of the Hebrew studies department at Al-Najah University and is well along toward authorizing this move in other universities,[[19]](#footnote-19) we assume that ultimately Hebrew will be taught in West Bank public schools as well.

**5. Social Influences on Attitudes toward Mastering Another Language**

We use the term “attitude” to denote a positive or negative emotion directed at the other and at various social situations. A positive attitude has a favorable effect on the scholastic situation and vice versa. Namely, learners take positions on acquiring a language due to the conventional attitudes toward this matter among family members and those in their close surroundings. A positive attitude toward the language and its speakers leads to more abundant communication in this language.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Motivation to learn a language is important and meaningful in regard to a second or a foreign language and, in this context, even more meaningful than in acquiring a mother tongue. Those who are strongly motivated to learn a second or a foreign language and hold a positive attitude toward the language and its speakers are more willing to communicate in the second or foreign language.[[21]](#footnote-21) This willingness is a predictor of the frequency and amount of communication in the foreign language, whereas motivation to learn a second or a foreign language is a predictor of willingness to communicate in this language and the frequency of this communication.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Additional studies investigate the connection between attitudes toward and motivation to acquire a second or a foreign language. Taher (2005) finds a significant positive relation between the attitude toward a foreign language and willingness to use it for communication in class and elsewhere. Taher also finds substantial differences between Arab and Jewish students in willingness to communicate in the foreign language: Arab students are more willing to communicate in Hebrew in class and elsewhere than are Jewish students to communicate in Arabic.

**6. Analysis of the Findings**

Before beginning the analysis, we present the two questionnaires that the students received and the table that summarizes the results. In the first questionnaire, the students were asked to answer one item at length: “What is your attitude toward Hebrew-language studies in Palestinian education institutions on the West Bank? Explain the reasoning behind your attitude and describe it at length.” In the second questionnaire, too, the students were presented with one item: “Was your motive for taking a basic course in Hebrew-language skills at Al-Najah University, and to communicate in this language, influenced by social players of any kind? If ‘yes,’ specify the social players that influenced your motivation to take this course.”

Notably, both questions were couched in Arabic because the students are unable to explain their attitudes in Hebrew for the time being. After all, the Hebrew-language course they are taking is a basic one; their command of Hebrew does not yet suffice to answer the questionnaire items and explain their attitude. The questions that the participants were asked appear below.

As stated, one question was asked on each questionnaire and the students were instructed to answer it and explain their attitude at length. The responses were carefully scanned and themes for recurrent responses were determined. When a certain response or attitude on the part of one of the participating students was detected, we checked its frequency against the other students’ responses or attitudes. After the responses were scanned, we were able to sort recurrent responses and motives into categories. In this manner we successfully coded the repeated responses, counted them, calculated the exact percent of recurrent responses, and produced a profile of the students’ attitudes on the basis of their responses.

**Questionnaire 1**

ما رأيكم في تعلم اللغة العبرية في مؤسسات التعليم الفلسطينية في الضفة الغربية؟ هل تؤيدون تعليم اللغة العبرية في كل مؤسسات التعليم أو في قسم منها؟ اشرحوا إجابتكم ووضّحوا دوافعها.

What is your attitude toward Hebrew-language studies in Palestinian education institutions on the West Bank? Explain the reasoning behind your attitude and describe it at length.

**Questionnaire 2**

هل دافعيتكم في تعلم مساق أساسي في مهارات اللغة العبرية والتواصل بها تأثرت من عوامل اجتماعية معينة؟

Was your motive for taking a basic Hebrew-language course at Al-Najah University, and to communicate in this language, influenced by social players of any kind?

Table 1 presents the gist of the outcomes:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | N | Pct. |
| Students participating in the sample | 60 | 100% |
| Students favoring Hebrew-language studies from primary to university level | 56 | 93.3% |
| Students favoring Hebrew-language studies from junior high to university level but not at primary level | 4 | 6.6% |
| Students favoring Hebrew-language studies due to political and communication motives | 57 | 95% |
| Students favoring Hebrew-language studies due to occupational and mercantile motives | 15 | 25% |
| Students favoring Hebrew-language studies because Hebrew is relatively easy to learn | 11 | 18.3% |
| Students favoring Hebrew-language studies due to motives of more effective cooperation and competition with the Israeli administration | 3 | 5% |
| Students who received support and encouragement from parents to learn Hebrew at Al-Najah University in Nablus | 33 | 55% |
| Students who received support and encouragement from parents and also from fellow students to learn Hebrew at Al-Najah University in Nablus | 18 | 30% |
| Students who learn Hebrew at Al-Najah University in Nablus without encouragement or support from any social source | 9 | 15% |

The pie charts below illustrate the outcomes of the sample in Table 1.

**Number of students who favor Hebrew-language studies from junior-high to university but not in primary schools**

**Number of students who favor Hebrew-language studies from junior-high to university but not in primary schools [זה הועתק מלמעלה. האם הראשון שגוי? השני? ]**

**Number of students who favor Hebrew-language studies due to occupational and mercantile motives**

**Number of students who favor Hebrew-language studies because Hebrew is relatively easy to learn**

**Number of students who favor Hebrew-language studies due to cultural motives**

**Number of students who favor Hebrew-language studies due to motives of more effective cooperation and competition with the Israeli administration**

**Number of students who received support and encouragement from parents and also from fellow students to learn Hebrew at Al-Najah University in Nablus**

**Number of students who received support and encouragement from parents to learn Hebrew at Al-Najah University in Nablus**

**Students who learn Hebrew at Al-Najah University in Nablus without encouragement or support from any social source**

*6.1 Sweeping Support for Hebrew-Language Studies at Palestinian Education Institutions in the West Bank*

All students chosen for the sample favored Hebrew-language studies on the West Bank and almost all favored Hebrew-language studies at all ages from primary school to university. Fifty-six of the sixty students favored Hebrew-language studies in primary schools, junior high, senior high, and universities. Four preferred to begin Hebrew-language studies at junior high and continue through university, omitting primary schools. Their disapproval of Hebrew-language studies at the primary level originated in nationalistic and political motives: Hebrew-language studies in primary schools may impair children’s efforts to learn Arabic as a mother tongue because children are still forming their mother tongue at this time. In addition, learning Hebrew at this time may mislead pupils into thinking that the Israeli occupation is acceptable to the Palestinians.

*6.2 Favoring Hebrew-Language Studies due to Political and Communication Motives*

It is a known fact that the Palestinian people suffers from faulty communication with the Israeli administration due to lack of basic proficiency in Hebrew. Therefore, fifty-seven of the sixty students favored Hebrew-language studies for political and communication reasons—a finding that squares with the main assumption in this study. It is impossible to distinguish between communication motives and political motives because the Palestinian population has to know Hebrew in order to communicate with the Israeli administration, understand what it wants of them, and take political action accordingly. According to the students’ explanations, knowing Hebrew enables Palestinians to defend their rights vis-à-vis the Israeli administration; conduct a dialogue with Israeli soldiers, particularly at checkpoints; understand the contents of documents that security prisoners must sign; and understand the schemes that the Israeli administration cooks up and take political action accordingly, since the Prophet Muhammad ordered Muslims to know the enemy’s language in order to defend themselves against the enemy’s schemes. Knowing Hebrew, the students added, makes Palestinians better able to rise up against the Israeli occupation, just as Israelis’ proficiency in Arabic makes their administration more able to entrench the occupation of the Palestinians.

*6.3 Favoring Hebrew-Language Studies for Occupational and Mercantile Reasons*

Fifteen of the sixty students favored Hebrew-language studies due to occupational and mercantile motives. Knowing Hebrew definitely improves the likelihood of obtaining work in Israel and dialoguing with Israeli merchants. Constraints on resource and employment opportunities in the territories diverted labor forces to Israel. Masses of Palestinians worked in Israel for about twenty years, from 1968 until the First Intifada in 1988, and became dominant in construction and agriculture. During this lengthy period, they were massively exposed to the Hebrew language—the vernacular and the language of the press and of construction materials and tools. Many workers became fluent in Hebrew and were interviewed in the Israeli media. It goes without saying that Palestinian workers who know Hebrew have the first crack at jobs in Israel (Marʿī, 2015, p. 100).

*6.4 Favoring Hebrew-Language Studies because Hebrew Is Relatively Easy to Learn*

Eleven of the sixty students favored Hebrew-language studies because Hebrew is relatively easy to learn. It is considered one of the Semitic languages and the closest Semitic language to Arabic; therefore, it is relatively easy to acquire. The Hebrew verb system resembles that of Arabic in many respects, such as conjugations and tenses, the possibility of attaching an object pronoun to a verb, similarities between Hebrew verb stems and their Arabic equivalents, and more. The strong tonal similarity of many Hebrew words and their Arabic counterparts makes Hebrew easier to acquire. For example, the Hebrew תלמיד (student) corresponds to the Arabic *تِلميذ* , as does the Hebrew *shor* (bull) with its Arabic cognate, *ثور*. Additional similarities are not hard to find; identical verb stems are just one example.

*6.5 Favoring Hebrew-Language Studies due to Cultural Motives*

Only one student favored Hebrew-language studies in West Bank Palestinian schools and universities in order to get to know the Jews’ cultural codes, language being an integral part of the culture. The students’ scale of priorities is such that knowing Hebrew in order to communicate with the Israeli administration comes before curiosity and eagerness to get to know the Jewish people’s culture, despite the geographical proximity of the Palestinian and the Jewish peoples. Even though many Jewish settlements are within touching distance of Palestinian ones, the Palestinians displayed no desire to favor Hebrew-language studies for motives of getting to know the other’s culture.

*6.6 Supporting Hebrew-Language Studies due to Motives of More Effective Cooperation and Competition with the Israeli Administration*

Three of the sixty students in the sample favored Hebrew-language studies in West Bank Palestinian schools and universities due to motives of competing more effectively with the Israeli administration in fields such as the economy, industry, healthcare, and commerce, because knowing Hebrew allows Palestinians to utilize the Jews’ knowledge and skills in all areas of life and, in turn, to enable Palestinian society to progress.

Israeli and Palestinian civil-society organizations have been running joint projects in diverse fields. Obviously, Palestinians’ knowing Hebrew contributes meaningfully to the success of these projects. For example, 148 Israel-Palestinian joint projects in healthcare and medicine were launched between 1994 and 1998, mainly in training healthcare personnel, research, and development, among others. Plainly, Palestinians’ knowing Hebrew helps these projects to succeed (Blit-Cohen and Jaber [Check name], 2015, p. 221).

*6.7 Social Influence on Students’ Motivation to Learn Hebrew in University and to Use Hebrew for Communication*

The students’ responses show clearly that their attitude and their choice to take a basic Hebrew-language course and to use Hebrew for communication may be underpinned by support from parents and friends. Thirty-three of the sixty students in the sample noted that their parents had encouraged them, or pleaded with them, to take this course for several reasons. First, knowing Hebrew allows them to establish a basis for communication with the Israeli administration. Hebrew is the enemy’s language and the Prophet Muhammad instructed Muslims to master the language of their enemy in order to understand “the enemy’s scheming” and prepare accordingly. In addition, the students emphasized their parents’ view that knowing Hebrew builds bridges and offers new horizons in regard to employment in particular, because Palestinians who are more-or-less proficient in Hebrew are more likely to find work in Israel than those who know no Hebrew at all. Eighteen students mentioned having received support for Hebrew-language studies from friends who had already taken the basic Hebrew course at the same university. Notably, only nine students had received no social support whatsoever; they decided on their own to take the aforementioned course because they were aware of its importance. Several of the nine are studying media; naturally, they appreciate the importance of Hebrew proficiency for their success as media professionals.

**7. Conclusion**

It is noteworthy that no student expressed a sweepingly negative attitude toward Hebrew-language studies in schools in the West Bank in Palestine. The large majority of the sixty students in the sample expressed favorable attitudes on learning Hebrew in primary, junior-high, and senior-high schools as well as universities. Only four students expressed negative attitudes toward Hebrew-language studies in primary schools. They explained their disapproval of Hebrew-language studies in primary schools by stating that such studies in those settings might impair children’s study of Arabic as their mother tongue because their mother tongue has not yet crystallized at this time. In addition, Hebrew-language studies at that age might give the pupils the misapprehension that the Israeli occupation is a reality that the Palestinians accept.

Fifty-seven of the sixty members of the sample expressed positive attitudes toward Hebrew-language studies for political and communication reasons; this squares with the main research assumption. One may say that the communication motive is the most dominant one among the motives that influenced students to view Hebrew-language studies favorably. According to the students’ reasoning, faulty communication tracing to lack of proficiency in Hebrew raises a communication barrier between the Palestinians and the Israeli administration, to the detriment of the Palestinians and their rights, as explained in the article proper. The students’ awareness of the effectiveness and the vast importance of sound communication with the Israeli administration explains the choice of fifty-seven students to study Hebrew in Palestinian academic institutions, foremost for political reasons and in order to communicate.

The occupational and mercantile motive also looms large in the students’ attitudes on learning Hebrew. Thus, fifteen of the sixty students favored Hebrew-language studies for these reasons. Knowing Hebrew enhances a Palestinian’s likelihood of finding work in Israel. In addition, given the profusion of commercial relations between Palestinian and Jewish merchants, knowing Hebrew definitely improves these relations and makes them more transparent.

The most surprising data point is that only one of the sixty students in the sample favored Hebrew-language studies in Palestinian education institutions in order to get to know the other’s culture, despite the geographic proximity of the Palestinian and the Jewish peoples. Even though many Jewish settlements are within touching distance of Palestinian ones, no desire was sensed among the students to express a favorable view of learning Hebrew in order to get to know the Jewish culture and its typical codes. Although the large majority spoke favorably about learning Hebrew in order to communicate, there is no intention of communicating with the Jewish people for the purpose of getting know its culture.

One may trace the students’ attitudes and their choice to take an elective course in basic Hebrew and to use the language for communication to support from parents and fellow students, because the large majority noted having received support from these sources. This social support whet their motivation to study and communicate in Hebrew.

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1. The claim that the Israeli administration concocts plots agains thte Palestinians is widely expressed among the Palestinian population. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gibton, 2001, p. 195; Shkedi, 2003, p. 13; Dushnik, 2011, pp. 138–141. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Alyan and Abu Hussein, 2010, [2012?] pp. 100–101. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cardozo, 2011, p. 190; Marʿī, 2013, pp. 13–35; Marʿī, 2019, pp. 30–53; Marʿī, 2020, pp. 100–104; Meir, Walters & Armon-Lotem, 2016, pp. 421–452. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004, p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bekerman & Horenczyk, 2004, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Weinreich, 1968, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Schwarzwald, 2015, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Marʿī, 2013, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This is a common argument among the respondents and in Palestinian society at large. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Marʿī, 2013, p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Marʿī, 2013, p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Kaufmanm and Spiegel, 2016, pp. 24–31. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Marʿī, 2013, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. One sometimes encounters Hebrew words in Arabic script instead of their Arabic parallels. A salient example is תיאוריה, the Hebrew word for “theory,” in Arabic script (تيؤوريا) in the context of the theory part of the driving test. This word, in Arabic script, is festooned on signs of driving schools and on Palestinian web sites where young Palestinians are urged to learn how to drive. Anoterh example is the Hebrew word קיסוח (drill) in Arabic script (كيدوح) that appears on the drill (Marʿī, 2013, p. 102). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Levi, 2014, “The Understand-Your-Neighbor Procedure: Teaching Hebrew on the West Bank,” *Yedioth Ahronoth*, yediot.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4509011,00.html [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I teach in the Department of Hebrew at Al-Najah University in Nablus and particpated in writing the department’s curriculum until it was approved by the Palestinian Council for Higher Education. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The Palestinian Ministry of Education determines curricula in schools from K to 12. The Palestinian CHE determines curricula in Palestinian universities. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The term “department” carries the same meaning at West Bank universities as it it does at Israeli universities. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Abu-Rabia, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Alyan and Abu Hussein, [Check names] 2012, pp. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Alyan and Abu Hussein, [Check names] 2012, pp. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)