**Language and Conflict in East Jerusalem: Arab Teachers Learning Hebrew**

# Abstract

The present article examines an aspect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the context of Hebrew language acquisition among Arab teachers in East Jerusalem who are either employed or striving toward employment in the Israeli education system. Among other things, the Israeli Ministry of Education requires teachers working in the Israeli public education system to complete Hebrew studies at an Israeli academic institution. Our research takes the form of a qualitative study conducted among 19 Arab teachers from East Jerusalem who had studied Hebrew at an Israeli academic institution. The study aims to examine the willingness of these teachers to learn Hebrew and to use it as a second language within the Israeli education system. The study’s findings show that Hebrew language acquisition among Arab teachers in East Jerusalem is driven by instrumental-utilitarian considerations and accompanied by a sense of jeopardizing their national identity as Palestinian citizens under Israeli rule.

**Keywords:** education, language acquisition, Hebrew, East Jerusalem, identity, politics

# 1. Introduction

Jerusalem has always been a city of great diversity and a breeding ground for clashes between cultures, religions, and identities. The education system in East Jerusalem is divided between institutions under the supervision of the Israeli Ministry of Education and those under the supervision of the Palestinian Ministry of Education. Among other things, the Israeli Ministry of Education requires teachers in the public school system to complete Hebrew studies at an Israeli academic institution.

Following the Six Day War in 1967, the State of Israel unilaterally annexed East Jerusalem and its surrounding area. Over the next decade the city underwent drastic changes as architects and city planners began to design the unified Jerusalem and expand the city limits (Kollek 1979). In reality, the city remains divided and the Jewish and Arab populations are physically separated by such obstacles as barbwire fences, concrete walls, ring roads, bridges, and tunnels (Nitzan-Shiftan and Hasson 2020).

The Arabs of East Jerusalem are a unique segment of the Arab population in Israel. The Arab denizens of the city have permanent Israeli resident status (Ghanim 2017: 161). They possess an Israeli *teudat zehut* (ID card) and can vote in the mayoral elections in Jerusalem, but not in the parliamentary elections (Cheshin 1998; Margalit 2001). As permanent residents, they are entitled to all the social and health benefits enjoyed by Israeli residents and are permitted to work in Israel. They can also apply for Israeli citizenship in accordance with the Citizenship Law provided they meet certain conditions, including signing a loyalty oath, having no other foreign citizenship, and proving a basic knowledge of Hebrew.[[1]](#endnote-1) In practice, however, for political and nationalist reasons, most residents refrain from applying for Israeli citizenship as a way of maintaining their Palestinian identity.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Jerusalem is a place of universal import and a religious center for the three world’s major monotheistic religions. The abundance of religious structures and iconography makes it a place where religion and nationality are almost inseparably mixed (Shragai 1995). The tension and conflict in Jerusalem are exemplified in the struggle between Jews and Muslims for control and jurisdiction over the Al-Aqsa mosque (Reiter 2001).

Contemporary research points to the complexity of the economic and political reality in Jerusalem. A’anam (2017) shows that the Arab residents of the city suffer from poverty,[[3]](#endnote-3) continuous neglect, limited career scope, weak standard and continued education systems, and the lack of physical and economic infrastructures. There are enormous inequalities between residents of the two halves of the city in terms of quality of life and the services they receive in different fields (Lavi, Hadad and Elran 2018). This state of affairs has led to a heightened sense of separate identity and has fed the Arabs’ active resistance, as evidenced in their heightened nationalist struggle over recent years (Koren and Abrahami 2017).

The counselors on Eastern Quarter matters at the Jerusalem Municipality, David Koren and Ben Abrahami (2017), maintain that the reality of life for Jerusalem’s Arab-Palestinian residents fluctuates between two main imperatives: the desire to integrate into the Israeli economy versus the feeling of hostility and lack of belonging. These two contradictory tendencies are embodied in the paradox between these residents’ symbolic, national, and religious identities, and their involvement in Israeli society, both inside and outside Jerusalem. The incompatibility between the two leads them to deal with multiple internal conflicts: maintaining Palestinian nationality as opposed to applying for Israeli citizenship, opposing any manifestation of “normalization” of relations with Israel as opposed to getting an Israeli *bagrut* (high school matriculation certificate), and the constant rise in the number of Arab workers in West Jerusalem (Shtern 2015).

In a survey conducted at the end of 2010 (Pechter Middle East Polls 2011), roughly 69% of respondents attributed high importance to their Arab, Jerusalemite, and Palestinian identity, yet almost the same percentage of respondents also attributed high importance to their possession of a blue *teudat zehut* (the ID card granted to Israeli citizens). At the same time, approximately 39% said they would prefer to be Israeli citizens, given the choice, as opposed to 31% who would prefer to be citizens of a Palestinian state. These findings show that, on the one hand, Arab residents of Jerusalem identify with the Palestinian struggle and feel neglected and discriminated against by Israel, as attested to by the lack of investment in infrastructures and services in their neighborhood, but on the other hand, they enjoy their permanent residency status, including the right to social security and benefits.

The present study examines the willingness of Arab teachers from East Jerusalem to learn Hebrew and communicate in it as a second/foreign language. These teachers are required to acquire the Hebrew language if they wish to integrate into the Israeli education system under the supervision of the Israeli Ministry of Education. To complete the picture, one must take into account the unique status of the Arab community in East Jerusalem and the complexities of the Arab education system in Jerusalem, which is divided between Israeli and Palestinian elements and is the subject of struggles for control between the two. These components differentiate this study from other research on the acquisition of Hebrew as a second language for the general Arab population in the State of Israel (Mar’i and Buchweitz 2021).

# 2. Hebrew in the public sphere in East Jerusalem: sociolinguistic aspects

Public life in Jerusalem at large is conducted mainly in Hebrew. The main avenues of life in public service, government institutions, employment, health, higher education, and recreation are mostly accessible to Hebrew speakers only. As a rule, the level of Hebrew among the adult population of East Jerusalem is low. Their use of the language is limited to communication via official channels, in particular contact with government offices and city hall. Their lack of Hebrew fluency is a major obstacle in their job market integration, and likewise makes it difficult for them to take full advantage of their social rights (Bassul 2016). Among other things, the letters they receive from various authorities are in Hebrew. The residents view knowledge of Hebrew as an existential requirement that can help them study or find employment in the Western quarter, and thus, their motivation to learn Hebrew is high (Hasson 2015; Shtern 2015).

Arab youths in Jerusalem are more exposed to Hebrew in their daily lives than adults and come in frequent contact with Hebrew speakers in the public and commercial arenas. Pragmatically speaking, Hebrew is a tool that serves them well. They have a better level of Hebrew than the adults and are more likely to have learned it via expedited courses at private institutions and Hebrew *ulpanim* (dedicated Hebrew language schools).[[4]](#endnote-4) In recent years, dozens of *ulpanim* have opened in Palestinian neighborhoods and the number of attendees in Jerusalem has grown significantly.[[5]](#endnote-5) The challenge facing the students is the excessive prices they are forced to pay for the courses. In this context, the Jerusalem reporter Riham Jaber noted the following:

The quality and pace of the Hebrew instruction at the *ulpanim* is at a less than satisfactory level. Some of them are charlatans and there is no oversight or price comparison. Some students get excellent service, and some pay an excessive price up-front for a year-long course, quit after a month because the course is subpar, and don’t get their money back.

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Elements in the government and city hall have identified the demand and the government’s program for empowering East Jerusalem includes a large budget for encouraging Hebrew learning. In May 2018, government resolution number 3790 was passed with the aim of reducing socioeconomic disparities and boosting economic development in East Jerusalem. A large part of the budget for the resolution has been allotted to Hebrew instruction (Lavi, Hadad and Elran 2018). It should be noted that while Hebrew fluency is common mainly among young men, women and older adults find it hard to communicate in Hebrew, let alone read or write.

A language survey conducted in Jerusalem in August 2012 by the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research revealed the following statistics regarding Hebrew fluency among Jerusalem’s Arab population: 31% understand Hebrew at a good or very good level, 39% at a medium-to-low level, and 30% don’t understand Hebrew at all. Among the respondents, 37% reported speaking Hebrew at their place of work, while 64% attested to having difficulties filling out forms or writing official letters in Hebrew. Nevertheless, 83% expressed that they wished for their children to know Hebrew at native-tongue level (Lehrs 2012).

Another survey held in 2016 by the Research and Economy division of the Ministry of Economy, titled “*seker ma’asikim*” (“Employers’ Survey”), examined the level of Hebrew among Arab employees residing in East Jerusalem and working in either East or West Jerusalem. It showed that most of the employees had a basic knowledge of Hebrew that enabled them to communicate passably well with clients and suppliers (Hendels 2016).

## 2.1 Hebrew in the Arab Education System in East Jerusalem

The Ministry of Education and the Education Board (“*Manhi*”) for the Arab sector at Jerusalem Municipality are the bodies responsible for the educational infrastructure in East Jerusalem. This infrastructure is based on three tracks, each representing a different type of school, and the state of Hebrew education in them changes in accordance with the stream to which the school belongs. The first is schools recognized by the Ministry of Education and under the supervision of the Jerusalem Municipality, which teach the Israeli curriculum. Such schools are in the minority. They prepare students for the Israeli matriculation exam and teach Hebrew from third grade on, at the rate of three-four weekly lessons. Most of the teachers, administrators, and supervisors at these schools are Israeli Arabs. In comparison to the Palestinian curriculum, this program the Israeli higher education system and job market more accessible to its graduates.

The second track consists of recognized but unofficial institutions—schools that teach the Palestinian curriculum and operate outside of the Ministry of Education’s supervision. These schools teach only part of the Israeli curriculum and are mostly operated by Arab non-profits under the supervision of the Palestinian Authority. At the end of their studies, students take the *tawjihi—*the Jordanian-Palestinian matriculation exam—as is the norm in the West Bank and the Gaza strip (Yair and Alayan 2009). Over the last decade, the number of student at these schools has multiplied by a factor of almost fourteen.[[6]](#endnote-6) Importantly, for 92% of those studying in Palestinian-curriculum schools, the volume of Hebrew language instruction is low (State Comptroller 2019).

The third track consists of private schools run by churches, *waqf* (Muslim charity organizations), and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and funded by a variety of external bodies. These provide education to approximately 20,000 students, which accounts for about a quarter of all Palestinian students. Such schools teach very little Hebrew (Hassona 1998). Only two of them teach the Hebrew curriculum in preparation for the Israeli matriculation exam; the rest prepare students for the *tawjihi*.

The majority of students in East Jerusalem study the curriculum mandated by the Palestinian Authority. The main reason for this is related to the political conflict and the fear that students will acquire knowledge that might distort their Palestinian identity and perception of the political reality. From the point of view of the decision-makers in the Ministry of Education and the Jerusalem Municipality, on the other hand, this constitutes a violation of Israeli sovereignty. Nevertheless, there is a percentage of the population that studies the Israeli curriculum, despite receiving threats from political elements in the community (Ronen 2018). According to a survey conducted by the Jerusalem Municipality in 2017, 48% of parents of students in East Jerusalem would prefer for their children to study the Israeli curriculum. However, the Israeli curriculum is considered a political threat: following the survey, a Muslim ruling was issued stating that “the Israeli curriculum must not be taught in East Jerusalem” (Yelon 2017).

Masry-Harzallah, Razin and Choshen (2011: 92) point out that students in East Jerusalem learn Hebrew as a third language, after Arabic and English, sometimes even as a fourth language, after French or German. It is not surprising then that the overall proficiency in Hebrew in East Jerusalem is at a level that does not allow East-Jerusalemites to work in the Western part of the city or even hold a basic conversation, for most (Spolsky and Shohamy 1999). The biggest problem in the field of language instruction is the shortage of quality teachers (State Comptroller 2018), as well as the lack of textbooks suitable for this particular populace. Many Hebrew teachers in East Jerusalem schools have not been trained for Hebrew language instruction and do not practice it as their profession. The few Hebrew acquisition textbooks that are available were designed for Jewish immigrants and contain overt political messages that are hard to swallow for Palestinian students.

High school graduates prefer to pursue further studies at the Al-Quds University, universities in the West Bank, or academic institutions in other Arab countries because they find it difficult to get accepted into Israeli universities, even with an Israeli matriculation certificate. Following their studies they still find it hard to integrate into the Israeli job market because that necessitates further courses or testing to have their credentials officially recognized in Israel. Therefore, many graduates invest significant financial resources and spend a year or more learning Hebrew and completing their *bagrut* requirements at the Hebrew University preparatory program or other similar privately-run programs in East Jerusalem in order to get into Israeli academic institutions (Hasson 2015).

## 2.2 Factors Affecting Second/Foreign Language Acquisition

Second language acquisition is distinguished from foreign language acquisition in that a native speaker of one language (child or adult) learns another language spoken in their vicinity, often an additional language used in their home country (Dubiner 2012: 4). The first and foremost factor affecting second language acquisition is motivation (Assor 2001; Dubiner 2012). In the realm of language acquisition, motivation is expressed in terms of the effort the learner is willing to invest in learning and in their attitude toward it (Gardner 1985). There are two kinds of motivations according to Gardner (1985): instrumental motivation, which stems from external considerations—systemic, practical, and utilitarian (economic prosperity), as well as social commodities and environmental impulses (Abu-Rabia 1999). The second type of motivation is integrative motivation, which involves a high degree of self-generated intention and wherein the language being learned is perceived by the learner as integral to their identity and important relative to other activities (Kaplan 2014). Other factors that may affect language acquisition are age (Prior 2007), gender differences (Payne and Lynn 2001), and the level of exposure to the target language (Dubiner 2012).

From a sociolinguistic angle, two additional significant factors play a role in language acquisition. The first of which is the social-cultural factor, which influences the general approach and willingness to learn the second language when it is perceived as a threat to the learners’ existence as an identity group. Spolsky (1989) found that social context plays a dominant role in second language acquisition and often dictates one’s rate of progress in the language learning process. The cultural and political distance between minority groups and the target language-speaking population influences language learning: the greater the cultural divide between the two groups, the lesser success rate there will be in the acquisition of the target language (Bechor 1992). The second factor is the identity factor. According to Taylor (1994), our identity is determined by historical circumstances into which we are born and by which we are shaped. His research shows that natives living under a foreign regime will wish to preserve their mother tongue because it is the infrastructure underlying their identity. Therefore, in-depth learning of the language of the regime is perceived as something that might impact the natives’ identity. Obeidat (2005), too, determines that the acquisition of a new language is affected by the learners’ perception of this language as threatening to their existence as an identity group.

Language is not simply a means of communication; it has many important functions such as transmitting beliefs, opinions, values, and ideologies (Rahman 2002). Language is an important pillar in the construction and coalescence of group identity. It is not only a channel for disseminating ideology, but a tool for leveraging ideology and planting it firmly in the collective consciousness, which is why its power is more prominent in centers of conflict (Suleiman 2004). Therefore, by imposing the Israeli curriculum and deepening the knowledge of Hebrew, the state wants to encourage Israelization among East Jerusalem Arabs, that is, to build a Palestinian identity with added Israeli elements.

# 3. Attitudes of Arabic speakers toward Hebrew language acquisition: prior research

Since the State of Israel’s establishment, there has been an Arabic-speaking education system in Israel, wherein instruction is conducted in Arabic, as a mother tongue, and Hebrew is taught as a second language, in both primary and secondary schools. Following the Six Day War of 1967, two more Arab-speaking groups were added to the Israeli education system: the Druze population in the Golan Heights and the Palestinians in East Jerusalem.

The teaching of Hebrew as a second language among the Arab population in Israel began with the establishment of the state in 1948, and is an integral part of the curriculum in Arab educational institutions from elementary school through high school (Mar’i 2013). Arabic speakers in Israel attribute great importance to proficiency in Hebrew because it serves them in all areas of life throughout their lives. Multiple studies (Abu-Asbah, Jayusi and Sabar-Ben Yehoshua 2011; Amara and Mar’I 2002; Atily 2004: 342; Ministry of Education 2015) have shown that Arab students expressed a desire to learn the Hebrew language, showed no objection to learning it, and did not view it as the language of the enemy. Arab students displayed positive attitudes toward Hebrew acquisition because they recognized the importance of knowing Hebrew and noted that a good level of proficiency in the language can be described as a basic need and an important means of integrating into the country and managing their daily lives.

As regards the Druze population in the Golan Heights, Hebrew language classes are mandatory in schools and Hebrew in general widely serves these residents as an important communication tool (Alayan and Araida 2008). The Druze students showed willingness to communicate in Hebrew outside of the classroom. These findings can be accounted for by the mandated Hebrew classes at school and the dependency of the Druze community on the Israeli economy.

Ilaiyan and Abu Hussain’s 2012 study examining the attitudes of Arab students in East Jerusalem toward the Hebrew language found positive attitudes both toward the study of Hebrew as a second or foreign language, and in terms of the students’ willingness to communicate in this language outside of the classroom. Some of the parents also supported their children’s Hebrew language studies, mainly in light of the instrumental-pragmatic advantages the language could give their children in the future (Ilaiyan 2012). It is important to note that this positive attitude related to the Hebrew language itself and to the study of Hebrew as part of the school curriculum, as opposed to its Jewish speakers.

# 4. The present study

The abovementioned studies all focus on the attitudes and perceptions of students, whereas the present research is the first to examine this issue from the point of view of teachers. The role of teachers, their status and constant contact with students and parents grants them authority and allows them to influence the community’s youth, for better or for worse. It is crucial to understand the teachers’ attitudes toward this subject in light of the prevalent assumption in recent decades that pedagogues have not only experience but significant knowledge that is valuable and important to extract if one wishes to learn about the situation on the ground (Levy-Gazenfrantz and Shapira-Lischinsky 2017: 232). Getting to know teachers’ viewpoints about Hebrew acquisition may give us an idea about the present or future attitudes on this subject among the general population of East Jerusalem.

 For the sake of focusing attention on the particularity of the circumstances surrounding the acquisition of the Hebrew language in East Jerusalem, we have restricted the influencing factors analyzed to identity and instrumental considerations. First, since most of the participants in the research are women and all of them are adults, these factors are rendered irrelevant. Second, since the learners are Palestinians living under Israeli rule, the motivation for learning Hebrew does not stem from an exigence to acquire a new language and become bilingual. Finally, since the political situation in which the learners are immersed is complex and volatile, the teaching and learning conditions are not natural in essence.

The present research can be categorized among studies that have dealt with the acquisition of the hegemonic language, that of a majority group dominating the minority group. In places around the world where there are national, ethnic, and indigenous minorities and majorities, educational rights in general and language in particular, as determined by government institutions in legislative arrangements, are mostly tailored to the majority group (Dunbar 2001; May 2017). Minority group members have a burden placed on them by the majority language speakers, and are required to learn the language of the majority and its culture and be identified with it to some degree (Ben-David 2017). The situation in Jerusalem, however, is even more complex, because the education system in Arab neighborhoods are a focal point for the Israeli government’s attempts to implement the Israeli curriculum and impose Hebrew language instruction. This process is hindered by the resistance of the parents and threats from external political elements driven by fear of educational materials that imperil the residents’ Palestinian identity and self-perception. The Israeli curriculum and the Hebrew language in particular are a sensitive subject that touches upon the East Jerusalem Arabs’ ethos, the national identity, and other issues related to the political situation in the city.

The subjects of this research come from a very volatile political arena, a city that finds itself at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The research assumes that there are different considerations affecting these teachers’ perceptions of the Hebrew language. These considerations are divided into the instrumental-practical kind—the desire to integrate into the Israeli job market, to facilitate contacts with Israeli authorities, and to work in the Israeli education system which gives them access to significantly higher salaries and better pension benefits in comparison to teachers employed by the Palestinian Authority (Macro 2017: 6); and the identity-driven kind—their national identification as Palestinian and the ambition to establish a Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem, opposition to Israeli control over the Eastern part of the city, and protest against the Jerusalem Municipality’s neglect of Arab neighborhoods, as well as the lack of investment in the education system there.

## 4.1 Research Objectives

The purpose of the present study was to examine the attitudes of teachers from East Jerusalem toward the acquisition of Hebrew as a second/foreign language and its use in communicating with Jewish society in Israel. These teachers take basic courses in “Hebrew language and expression” and undergo a professional retraining in order to work in the Israeli education system.

# 5. Methodology

The present study is based on the qualitative research paradigm. Qualitative-interpretative research is an analytical rather than statistical process. The analysis performed by the researchers is partially intuitive and its goal is to obtain insights that may lead to a wider understanding of the studied phenomena (Corbin and Strauss 1990). This type of research encourages creativity within the analytical process, while recognizing its limitations. Namely, it imposes a sober outlook regarding one person’s ability to understand others (MacDonald and Schriber 2001). The analysis is inherently limited by the context in which it is performed. The choice to focus on the interpretative approach (Spector-Mersel 2011) stems from our focus on elements that are politically and socially charged and which include a narrative aspect.

## 5.1 Participants

The study was conducted among 29 teachers, all residents of East Jerusalem, who were recruited using the convenience sampling method, having participated in a “Hebrew language and expression” course at one of the Arab colleges in Israel’s central region. The participants teach various subjects at East Jerusalem schools, from primary school up to high school.[[7]](#endnote-7) Among these teachers 4% (1 teacher) was employed by the Israeli Ministry of Education, 23% (4 teachers) were employed by the Jerusalem Municipality, 14% (3 teachers) were employed by the Palestinian Authority; and 59% (11 teachers) were employed by private institutions. Their teaching experience ranged between 4 and 25 years. The overwhelming majority of respondents were women (91%). The average age of the participants was 31.78 (SD = 5.86).

The participants proficiency in Hebrew was very basic, consisting of letter recognition and familiarity with a few words. They found it difficult to construct a simple sentence or conduct a short conversation in Hebrew. The contexts in which they had previously learned Hebrew were: public education institutions—schools under the supervision of the Jerusalem Municipality and the Israeli Ministry of Education, where there are few hours dedicated to Hebrew learning and the instruction is done on the most basic level; private centers/institutes in East Jerusalem, at the “first steps toward Hebrew acquisition” level; academic courses as part of the general electives curriculum at Palestinian universities and colleges; and via informal channels, as a result of work or contact with Jews in West Jerusalem.

All of the teachers had completed their academic education at Al-Quds University. There is a particular problem concerning Al-Quds University graduates in that, despite the university’s relatively high standards, Israel does not recognize the certificates it grants to its graduates, and they therefore cannot integrate into the Israeli labor market (Ramon and Lehrs 2014: 23). The Israeli Ministry of Education only recognizes the certification of Israeli academic institutions. Therefore, most Al-Quds teaching degree holders undergo academic retraining at the Arab colleges in Israel so that they can work in schools under Israeli supervision.

## 5.2 Tools

The study used an open-ended question survey developed especially for the present research. The survey was composed in Arabic by Ab’d El-Rahman Mar’i and distributed at the end of the 2018–2019 school year (summer of 2019) after the teachers had completed the “Hebrew language and expression” course.

Participants were asked to answer 10 open-ended questions (see Appendix) that encompassed key aspects of the teachers’ willingness to acquire the Hebrew language and revealed their perceptions and the factors that influenced them in their studies.

## 5.3 Procedure

The Arabic-language survey questionnaire was distributed to graduates of the “Hebrew Language and Expression” course. The essence of the research, its goals, and the commitment to protect their privacy and anonymity, as well as their right to opt out of the questionnaire at any point, was explained. The respondents were given an hour to fill in the survey. There was no word limit, everyone was encouraged to write down their thoughts freely. Out of the 33 distributed questionnaires, 29 were filled out. Our analysis of the answers produced four themes that served us in the data processing stage: the contexts in which Hebrew language acquisition occurred (Q1, Q2, Q6); the involvement of the Israeli Ministry of Education in the Hebrew instruction process (Q3, Q8); the benefit of learning Hebrew based on instrumental considerations (Q4, Q5); the political and identity aspects of Hebrew acquisition (Q7, Q9, Q10).

# 6. Findings

## 6.1 Hebrew acquisition contexts

Only half of the teachers in the study had studies Hebrew before enrolling at the college. When asked about the role of language centers/institutes in Hebrew acquisition (Q6), a common answer was that their contribution was minimal: “Most of the centers/institutes are for commercial and economic goals”; “What matters is the money, not the teaching”; “They don’t focus on the teaching and stay at the basic level of learning the alphabet.” A significant portion of the instruction remained on the theoretical level. As one respondent put it: “I can read a text in Hebrew, but I cannot conduct a short conversation.” A few mentioned that they are exposed to and acquire Hebrew through work and contact with Jews, and therefore there is no need for these centers/institutes. They either learn Hebrew at the *ulpans* for immigrants in West Jerusalem in order to get accepted into academic institutions, or volunteer for civil-national service where they learn Hebrew at an *ulpan* established specifically to help young people in East Jerusalem integrate into academic and professional arenas (Piotrkowski 2013).

Few participants referred to the positive contribution of the institutes: “They teach very well and it depends on the degree of willingness and motivation of the learner to invest in acquiring the language”; “The instruction is very high level and they help the applicants get into Israeli colleges and universities and work in the Israeli job market”; “There are a few reputable institutes in the city that have Jewish teachers.” They also mentioned that even though the centers are good, they are expensive, and it would be fitting for the state to provide free Hebrew courses.

When it came to participants who had not studied Hebrew previously (Q1), common statements among their answers included: “I went to a private school where there were no Hebrew lessons”; “I haven’t got the time to learn Hebrew at a private institute”; “My parents don’t care about learning the language.” One teacher remarked that she “does not like learning Hebrew.”

## 6.2 The involvement of the Israeli Ministry of Education in Hebrew instruction

The Ministry of Education bears the responsibility for Hebrew instruction in schools. Among the survey answers, prominent reasons given for why the Ministry is interested in teaching the language (Q3) included: “To strengthen Hebrew education and weaken the status of the Arabic language in the city”; “To create contact between the two peoples”; “To give Hebrew the status of exclusive official language in institutions run by the Ministry of Education and make it a given”; “To prepare learners for integration in the Israeli job market.” It was also a common understanding among learners that Hebrew is a basic condition for obtaining a job in public service.

A significant portion of the respondents maintained that, on the face of it, the Ministry claims to be interested in Hebrew acquisition, but in practice, it does not do much toward this aim since there are not enough regimented hours or qualified Hebrew teachers. In their explanations for why this may be the case, the following reasons stood out: “So that the residents of East Jerusalem don’t know their social rights”; “To deepen the discrimination between Jews and Arabs in the city”; “So that the Jerusalem Arabs can’t face the enemy”; “To implement the policy of marginalizing Arab schools.”

Concerning the professional level of Hebrew teachers in East Jerusalem schools and their nationality (Q8), only a few said they were happy with the teachers. The overwhelming majority were unequivocally dissatisfied in this regard. Among their answers, there were widespread claims that East Jerusalem teachers “are not proficient in Hebrew,” “can hardly read or write,” and “spend most of their time teaching the alphabet.” On the other hand, Arab Israeli teachers, most of whom are students at academic institutions in Jerusalem were seen as “having proficiency in Hebrew, but lacking pedagogical knowledge” or “having a hard time controlling the students and teaching the course material.” The following statements also caught our attention: “The passing grade in Hebrew is 50”; “The tests focus on knowledge of the alphabet and a few vocabulary words”; “They pass everyone so they don’t have a fail on their grade card.” Likewise, the majority of participants who had studied Hebrew at school claimed that the lesson content was repetitive, mostly focused on the alphabet, and that it did not help them learn the language.

## 6.3 The instrumental benefits of learning Hebrew

Most respondents maintained that Hebrew use had been imposed on residents of East Jerusalem (Q4) following the seizure of control by the Israeli authorities and the transfer of municipal services under the responsibility of the Jerusalem Municipality, and in light of their dependence on the Israeli economy. Participants emphasized the importance of Hebrew in day-to-day life, for example: “Knowing Hebrew gives me more opportunities to work in government facilities in Israel as well as private institutions”; “Knowing Hebrew makes it easier for Arabs in East Jerusalem to know their rights and obligations”; “Hebrew gives me the ability to fill out forms”; “Hebrew helps me manage my personal affairs—read letters, talk to Hebrew-speaking officials, etc.”; “Knowing Hebrew helps me get service at the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Health, Social Security, etc.”; “Hebrew helps me communicate with Jews in the public sphere.” A few outlying participants presented different reasons for learning Hebrew: “According to Islam you must learn the language of your enemy”; “Knowing Hebrew arms me with tools that make it possible for me to deal with the enemy and understand him.” One teacher claimed that “under the current conditions, they can’t force their curriculum on us. The Israelis want to integrate East Jerusalem into Israeli society, but discrimination in terms of services prevents this from happening.”

The fragile security situation in East Jerusalem, the Israeli West Bank barrier, and the checkpoints contribute to the feeling of constant fear and affect the residents’ self-confidence (Q5). A large part of respondents gave serious weight to the link between the language and the security situation, as evidenced by the following examples: “Knowing Hebrew boosts your confidence when you’re at a checkpoint or you see soldiers walking around the Old City alleys”; “Proficiency in Hebrew gives me the strength and the courage to defend myself, so I won’t find myself mute, embarrassed, and tense when facing a Jew”; “Knowing Hebrew breaks down the barrier of fear toward the other”; “The checkpoint is a big problem for young people, so I am studying Hebrew because of the security situation in order to communicate with the military or the border police at checkpoints”; “Knowing Hebrew gives me inner confidence for when I go to the Jewish neighborhood to take care of personal matters.” Only a few respondents saw the matter in a different light: “Fear and confidence are psychological matters, but it’s important to learn the language”; “We live in Jerusalem together, the fear is created by security incidents”; “The kids are scared of the soldiers anyway.”

## 6.4 Political and identity aspects of Hebrew acquisition

We wished to examine the influence language had on the learners’ sense of identity, both directly and indirectly. First we honed in on the participants’ perceptions by having them compare themselves to Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank (Q7). Most respondents stated that there is a fundamental difference in the perception of Hebrew between the two groups, for example: “In the West Bank they disregard the language due to their nationalist outlook, because they are under the occupation, and we, the Jerusalemites, are less so”; “Some of the young people in East Jerusalem are proficient in Hebrew and proud of it, whereas in the West Bank being proficient in Hebrew is seen as collaborationism and giving up your Palestinian nationality”; “In East Jerusalem Hebrew is a necessary part of reality, and in the West Bank it’s considered the language of the enemy that is unrequired”; “In East Jerusalem people know more Hebrew than the West Bank due to the economic and political reality”; “In East Jerusalem knowing Hebrew is necessary to know your social rights, while in the West Bank, Hebrew helps them get work in Israel.” A small minority of teachers claimed there was no difference between the two populations. One teacher emphasized that “the two groups are equally interested in learning Hebrew so they can know the enemy from up close.”

The participants were also asked to assess how being offered full Israeli citizenship, like the Israeli Arabs, might affect their attitude toward the Hebrew language (Q9). The majority of respondents answered that they were willing to learn Hebrew regardless of citizenship, for reasons including: “Knowing the enemy’s language”; “We are under occupation and want to know what the enemy thinks of us”; “To broaden my education;” “To communicate with the other, like people do in English”; “It’s an important local language and you can’t communicate with the Jews without it.” A few participants disclosed willingness to learn Hebrew for the sake of citizenship, citing the following reasons: “It makes it easier for me to integrate into life in the State of Israel”; “I am willing to invest in learning the language and make contact with the Jews, which contributes to proficiency”; “It’s an opportunity to be proficient in the language and to meet Jews.” On the other hand, about a quarter of the participants noted that they would refuse Israeli citizenship at any rate for the following reasons: “I am unwilling to give up my Palestinian identity”; “Hebrew is the language of occupation, and acquiring it is for the sake of resistance”; “If I had citizenship it would have a negative effect on me.”

The participants were also asked to state their opinion about whether learning Hebrew impairs their national identity (Q10). Most participants determined that it did not weaken or impair their Palestinian identity, as evidenced by the following examples: “Hebrew is the colonial language designated for conducting the lives of citizens and distancing them from the Palestinian people”; “We are under exploitation and oppression because of the Israeli occupation and the language is part of that system”; “Better proficiency in Hebrew is not an indication of giving up Palestinian nationality”; “Proficiency in Hebrew was designed to hurt the city of Al-Quds and weaken the Arabic language from the start, and I am aware of it.” Only a few teachers determined that it could harm their identity, as evidenced in the following examples: “Knowing Hebrew at a higher level may bolster Israelization”; “It might affect young people more, in that they’ll worry about their own personal welfare and will drift away from the Palestinian people.”

# 7. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to understand the perceptions of Arab teachers in East Jerusalem regarding Hebrew language acquisition in light of the growing interest in learning Hebrew in this part of the city. Yet, while the Ministry of Education has set itself the goal of strengthening the education system in East Jerusalem and encouraging students to obtain an Israeli rather than Palestinian matriculation certificate, it has not invested adequately in this endeavor. Hebrew instruction, under its supervision, is substandard and has a negative image among learners. Some even suspect that the Ministry is neglecting this field intentionally to prevent Arabs from knowing their rights.

Based on the respondents’ answers, it is possible to assert that an improvement in the level of instruction would boost the motivation for Hebrew acquisition among students. It is worth noting that the Ministry of Education and the Jerusalem Municipality give students in Palestinian school programs only partial Hebrew tuition or none at all.[[8]](#endnote-8) As a result, East Jerusalm Arabs are forced to deal with a language barrier. They do not speak Hebrew with those around them; some of them view it as the language of the enemy and prefer to study English instead.

Instrumental considerations bear a lot of weight in acquiring the language of the other, especially for a minority (Ben-David 2017; Dubiner 2012). The majority of study participants agreed that Hebrew is important for getting by in a space where it is the dominant language. They are motivated to learn Hebrew for pragmatic goals, such as communicating with authorities, obtaining government services, integrating into the Israeli job market, and studying at academic institutions in Israel. It is common for people with degrees, work experience, and talent to work as waiters or cleaners only because their Hebrew is not good enough (Jaber 2020).

However, whether driven by instrumental or integrative motivation, language acquisition has social impacts: it is the first step toward integration in a society and its culture (Gardner 1980; Macintyre et al. 2003). One of the teachers noted that Hebrew is a social motivator, i.e., a cultural bridge toward better familiarity with Jewish culture, and emphasized that learning a new language and exposure to the culture of the other expand the learner’s personal knowledge. Others, however, refrained from addressing the cultural aspect due to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which prevents the learners from accepting the other and assimilating into their culture (Bechor 1992). Likewise, Israeli culture is more Western compared to that of Jerusalem’s Arab community, which is more traditional and Palestinian.

Some of the teachers saw Hebrew acquisition as a religious duty, since Islam obliges worshippers to know the language of those with whom they come into contact. There is a well-known saying in Arabic— “He who learns the language of the others will be saved from woe”—and Arabic tradition even tells of Zayd ibn Thabit, the prophet Muhammad’s personal scribe, who was ordered to learn Hebrew in order to communicate with the Jews and managed to learn it in three months.

In terms of the link between language and national identity, a significant percentage of participants said that, while Hebrew serves them in communicating with Jews, they still consider it the language of the enemy, forced upon them by the occupation. The teachers in East Jerusalem therefore prefer not to go too far in their Hebrew studies since proficiency in Hebrew is viewed as damaging to their Palestinian nationalist stance and a step toward Israeli citizenship. The complex political reality around them—their ambiguous political status, the split between Palestinian and Israeli institutions in the education system, discrimination against citizens of East Jerusalem—all these strengthen their Palestinian identity. They see themselves as part of West Bank Palestinian society and are committed to the Palestinian nationalist ambition (Yair and Alayan 2009). Hebrew is perceived by them as part of the occupation mechanism. The nationalist issue, the Israeli control over East Jerusalem, and the hostile power relations between the parties do not allow for a real building of trust, closeness, or connection. Therefore, they are not interested in reaching a situation similar to that of Israeli Arabs, who had undergone a process of Israelization, which included increased Hebrew learning and the adoption of Israeli culture (Amara and Mar’I 2002; Mar’I 2013). The Arabs in East Jerusalem view Hebrew as a purely functional necessity of their everyday lives, the same as English used to be in Palestine under the British Mandate (Badir 1990).

# 8. Conclusion

The main contribution of our study consists of our examination of the socio-political aspect of language acquisition and the relationship between the dominant group and the dominated groups. The Arab population in Jerusalem is in a position of political, social, and economic weakness, and at the center of a struggle against the Israeli government for national identity and autonomy. This discussion shows the tension between the national-identity conflict and the daily lives of those at its center, with their aspirations for social and economic mobility.

Aside from the effort, motivation, and curiosity required for second language acquisition (Grander 1985), the learner’s emotional, national and social outlook on the language play a significant role. Learners have an easier time acquiring languages toward which they have a positive attitude, because they are driven by positive motivation learning willingly (Dubiner 2012). One of the study’s most important findings is that, while there is a willingness among Arabs in East Jerusalem to learn Hebrew, this willingness stems from instrumental considerations, for practical communication purposes. On the other hand, there is a nationalist resistance in this community to normalization of relations with Israel, thus, even though there is no opposition to learning the Hebrew language, identification with the Palestinian nationalist cause certainly serves as an obstacle to its acquisition. Nevertheless, language acquisition is an opening for contact, understanding, and acceptance of the other (Dubiner 2012). The study likewise shows that knowledge of Hebrew facilitates unmediated communication with institutions and individuals in Israel, which, hopefully, may eventually lead to a change of attitude toward Hebrew speakers as a whole.

As this is a preliminary study, we would recommend conducting follow-up studies using systematic sampling of all the Palestinian teachers in East Jerusalem. Such a broad-sample study would confirm the representation of the true values of the population and allows conclusions to be drawn from additional factors.

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# Appendix: Survey Questions

Question 1: Why have you not studied Hebrew until now? (If you have please skip to the next question).

Question 2: Have you studied Hebrew before? In what context and at what level?

Question 3: In your opinion, is the Israeli Ministry of Education interested in teaching the Arabs in East Jerusalem Hebrew? And why?

Question 4: What do you think about the following statement: “Hebrew has been imposed on the Arabs in East Jerusalem as a means of handling routine practical matters.”

Question 5: Do you agree with the claim that teaching Hebrew to children in East Jerusalem bolsters their confidence and makes them less afraid when they see Jews or encounter them?

Question 6: There are private Hebrew language schools in East Jerusalem. Do these institutions contribute to Hebrew language acquisition and fluency?

Question 7: In your opinion, are there differences in perceptions and attitudes toward the Hebrew language among Arabs in East Jerusalem and Arabs in the West Bank? Why?

Question 8: Are you happy with the level of Hebrew teachers at the schools in East Jerusalem? What is these teacher’s nationality? Who funds them?

Question 9: If you were given full citizenship, like the Israeli Arabs, would you change your mind about the Hebrew language? Why?

Question 10: How has Hebrew acquisition affected your national identity?

1. # Endnotes

 At the close of 2018, the number of residents in Jerusalem totaled approximately 927,000, of whom 574,740 were Jewish or other (62%) and 352,260 were Arabs (38%) (Central Bureau of Statistics 2018). Roughly 96% of the Arab residents of Jerusalem reside in the Eastern part of the city. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This is compounded by the fact that citizenship applications from East Jerusalem residents are not answered immediately. According to the State Comptroller's report (2019) an East Jerusalem residents who applies for citizenship has to wait two and a half years for the application to be processed. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The poverty rate in East Jerusalem is extremely high. 77% of Arab families and 88% of Arab children live under the poverty line. Ramon and Lehrs (2014) note that all of the Arab neighborhoods in the Eastern part of the city fall into the 2–5 socio-economic categories (the bottom quarter of the scale). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ha’aretz, October 1, 2013 [NOT IN REFERENCE LIST] [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Among the newly established institutions, a language *ulpan* has opened in Sheikh Jarrah; a government initiative in collaboration with the Joint for occupational guidance has opened in Beit Hanina, which includes Hebrew lessons; Hebrew classes for women have opened in community centers; the number of Hebrew language students at the Hebrew University’s school for foreign students has doubled over the last two years; almost every neighborhood has seen the establishment of private colleges or preparatory institutes that include Hebrew studies (data published in *Ha’aretz*, 22.02.2016: 6)[DOES NT APPEAR IN REFERENCE LIST] [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The huge increase in recognized non-formal schools in Jerusalem is due to the massive shortage of classrooms in formal education, the financial funding paid to the non-profits that run these schools (by the Ministry of Education, Jerusalem Municipality and parents), and the dissatisfaction of parents with the official education system or their lack of willingness to integrate into it (Alyan et al. 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. It is not possible to determine the percentage of questionnaire respondents relative to the total number of teachers in East Jerusalem. One reason for this is that there are many structures of Palestinian education in Jerusalem and no data could be obtained from them. A second reason is that many of the teachers are employed in East Jerusalem are Israeli Arabs. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For example, in the 2018–2019 school year, the Ministry of Education cut the number of Hebrew lessons it allocates to the 36,000 students studying in official schools under the Palestinian program, which ostensibly contradicts the government's goal of promoting Hebrew proficiency (State Comptroller 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)