

CHAPTER 5

POLICY AND TEACHING HEBREW AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

The education committee in the days immediately before the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948 made a far-reaching decision, as we have described in the last chapter, to maintain Arabic as the medium of instruction in schools where the majority of pupils were Arabs. It also decided that the Arab minority should learn Hebrew, a decision strengthened over time by the fact that Hebrew is the dominant language used in the wider society. This chapter will trace the development of Hebrew language teaching in the Arab schools, and describe and evaluate this teaching over the years. It will look again, as in the last chapter, at the tensions produced by the challenges of the Arab minority in an ideologically Jewish State and of speakers of Arabic under a Hebrew hegemony.

1. STAGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TEACHING OF HEBREW

1.1 First Stage: After the Establishment of the State (1948-1971)

The language of instruction in the Arab high schools during the Mandate period was English and Arabic for the most part. During this period the Arabs did not study Hebrew at all.¹ The members of the committee for educational problems

¹ Koplewitz (1992: 39) says that “in the period of the British Mandate (1918-1948) Hebrew was not studied at all in the Palestine Arab schools. An attempt was made in 1919 to teach Arab students Hebrew in one of the villages in the Galilee. But after four years

meeting in the pre-State period had many doubts about taking the decision to teach Hebrew to the Arab minority. Early discussion assumed bilingualism, but not necessarily in Arabic and Hebrew. A memorandum, referring to the period 1944-1945, drawn up by the department of education for the Jewish Agency and the National Council that included proposals for organizing the education for the two populations, Jewish and Arab in the Jewish State proposed that the language of instruction in the State elementary schools with Arab pupils should be Arabic, with an option to choose either Hebrew or English as an additional language. In Arab high schools and institutes for Arab teacher training, Arabic would continue as medium of instruction and students were to also learn both Hebrew and English. The Hebrew curriculum, the selection of teachers and the choice of textbooks were to be made by those appointed in charge of Arabic education (Labor Party Archives, 1948: 4).

Discussion of the issue continued at the committee session mentioned on Monday, 12.1.48 in Tel Aviv, at which meeting M. Avigal said (Page 12):

Concerning the study of Arabic and Hebrew among the two peoples, I believe that as time passes the requirement to study Arabic will be established among us. I do not know from what age, perhaps in the higher grades of elementary school, and obviously – also the requirement to know Hebrew as language of the State in the Arab sector, although I would not establish this now at the beginning.

At a meeting a week later, Batya Rosenstein suggested (Ibid.: 22) that Hebrew should be a requirement also in the elementary schools, beginning from grade 4 or 5. This was the basis for the decision taken in the summary session of the education committee in Tel Aviv on May 13, 1948: In Paragraph 6 (p. 34) it was established that “The mother tongue of the majority of the students in the school will be introduced as the language of instruction. As for the required study of the second language – learning Hebrew is a requirement for Arabs.” It should be noted that the requirement for teaching Arabic in Hebrew schools was not made until nearly 40 years, and has still not been implemented (Spolsky and Shohamy, 1999a, Chapter 6).

1.1.1 The Debate on the Subject of Imparting Hebrew to the Arabs

The teaching of Hebrew to Arab students began in the country immediately after the establishment of the State. It was required, for four to five hours a week, in all Arab elementary schools from 4th grade, in the high schools and also in the teacher training institutes. The policy was not easily accepted by either the

the national leadership of the Palestinian Arabs gave an order to put an end to the study of Hebrew; and to the best of my knowledge they did not repeat the attempt.”

Jewish or the Arab public, and debate continued in the newspapers. Four main positions emerged (Cohen, 1968: 663).

Opposition to the policy of teaching Hebrew to Arabs came from both Jews and Arabs. Right-wing Jews claimed that Arabs who knew Hebrew would constitute a danger to the security of the State, extreme left-wingers opposed the teaching for of its denial of bi-nationalism and some religious Jews opposed teaching the Holy Language to gentiles. Arabs who opposed the teaching of Hebrew were fearful for the fate of the Arabic language, a holy language to Muslims, the major symbol of the Arab nation and the most important factor uniting the Arab world. The study of Hebrew, they felt, would lead to assimilation of Arab youth in the Israeli society and its culture, and would distance it from traditional Arab culture and from the Arab nation.

Another group of Jews and Arabs took a more extreme position and supported the teaching of all courses in the school in Hebrew in order to solve the problem of the Arab minority in Israel. They saw assimilation as a fitting solution to the integration of the Arabs in the life of the State. Imparting the Hebrew language was the key to this assimilation process.

A third group favored teaching Hebrew for practical and pedagogical reasons. Arabic-medium education in Israel faced two serious problems at its start, the dearth of good teachers and the lack of suitable textbooks (Benor, 1951: 8). In the opinion of both Jewish and Arab educators it would be possible to overcome these two problems by training teachers in Hebrew and using the same textbooks for both sectors.

A fourth group believed that teaching of Hebrew in Arab educational institutions constituted a means of nurturing Israeli citizenship, permitting the active participation of the Arabs in the life of Israeli society and assuring loyalty to the laws of the land and its institutions (Cohen, 1968: 666).

The final decision may be seen as a pragmatic compromise: maintaining Arabic as medium of instruction, but requiring Hebrew as a second language.

1.1.2 Hebrew Teaching Goals

The teaching of Hebrew is an integral part of the curriculum in all Arab educational institutions in Israel (Cohen, *ibid.*: 667). Despite its importance the topic was pushed aside by other more urgent needs. Building the Arab educational sector began in 1948 from scratch. There were serious shortages of buildings and of trained educated teachers. At the same time, the number of pupils was growing rapidly as a result of the introduction of compulsory education for girls as well as boys, the demand for schooling which had not been satisfied during the British Mandate, and the opening of new schools (Koplewitz, 1973).

Between 1948 and 1958 three changes in the curriculum were made with the goal of providing knowledge of the Hebrew people and its culture, establishing a

means for direct contact with Hebrew speakers in writing and in speech, and nurturing Israeli citizenship (Shalmon, 1957: 95). These goals emphasize political aims, ignore pedagogical issues and show little sensitivity to the feelings of the learners. Those who designed the curriculum for teaching Hebrew emphasize the Jewish character of the State of Israel and wanted to foster Israelization among the Arab minority in order to strengthen loyalty to the State.

The 1959 curriculum for the Government elementary school set three weekly hours for teaching Hebrew. A high school curriculum was not published until ten years later. A curriculum for the Hebrew language and its literature in the high school for Arabs grades 9-12 (Ministry of Education, 1968: 17) included goals, teaching methods and division of the material according to grades.

The high school curriculum was intended:

- a. To develop in the Arab student a basic, precise and comprehensive knowledge of the Hebrew language, with the ability to understand written Hebrew and with effective control of the language in writing and in speech for practical and cultural needs.
- b. To allow the Arab student to recognize the culture of Israel and its values in the past and in the present, thus facilitating the understanding of the social life and culture of the Jewish population in the State of Israel.

The teaching of Hebrew thus was intended to serve first as a tool for social communication in order to integrate Arabs in Israel into the life of the State, and the second, "to open the gates to the culture of Israel." The goal was clearly weakening Arab national values and identity and instead the teachers of Hebrew "should implant the love for the State of Israel and the values of Israeli thinking" (State Archives, 145/1223/c; quoted in Al-Haj 1996: 107).

This policy is essentially a reflection of the policy set out by Yadlin in 1976 (Formulation of goals for Arab education). Sami Mar'i (1978: 53) commented:

It seems that the Yadlin document not only attempts to reduce and blur the national identity of the Arabs in Israel, but it also tries to erase their culture and to impose upon them the values and the moral principles accepted by the Jewish Israeli society, principally by means of the educational system which is subject to Government supervision. Nothing is left but to wonder what remains in the culture after one uproots from it the "social ethic", the values which determine personal relations, the "family values" and the bond between the individual and the society.

The inspector of Arab schools in the Ministry of Education in the 1960s, (Cohen, 1968: 665f.), reinforces this in his discussion of the content of the Hebrew textbooks for Arab schools:

From the practical point of view a language should not be taught just like that, but it should be taught with a particular content. Teaching Hebrew to Arab children in Israel requires imparting as an adjunct knowledge of the patterns and values of the Hebrew-Israeli culture. That is, Israeli

citizenship in the broad meaning of the term. Hebrew will then be a didactic-educational goal. The recommended supplementary studies of Hebrew will be mainly of two types: 1. Knowledge of the Jewish people, its past and its culture, the new Israeli society, its values, foundations, rules and problems. 2. Conventions of democratic behavior as training for active participation in the social and political life in Israel.

Knowledge of Jewish culture (Bible, rabbinical literature, selected paragraphs from *Ethics of Our Fathers* and selected legends) came to dominate the curriculum in the high school and play an important part in the junior high school.

The Arab student has two problems with this curricular emphasis. First, the material is written in an archaic language distant from the world of the student, with vocabulary not used in colloquial Hebrew. Second, the Arab student feels that he is learning more about Judaism than he is learning about his own religion. This imbalance increases the feeling of alienation among the students, who regularly ask their teachers why they must study the Bible. One Palestinian teacher reported:

There are students who openly declare that they do not want to study Hebrew from an ideological point of view in the light of the political milieu prevailing in the country. These students see Hebrew as the language of an enemy. The religious female students strongly oppose the male students using Hebrew in current speech because of nationalist reasons in order to prevent the assimilation of the Arabs into the Jewish society. There was a student who was absent from the Hebrew lessons throughout an entire year. When the teacher entered, he left the classroom. There are students who identify with him and respect his decision, but they do not have the courage to leave the classroom because of the matriculation examination (Interviewee #3).²

An elementary school teacher, on the other hand, when asked, "Have you ever run into a situation in which students expressed bitterness and objection to learning Hebrew?" answered, "I have never run into this issue. In my estimation the students in elementary school are not yet familiar with the study of the language, and they are not as mature as the students in high school. There the students can ask why they are learning Hebrew." (Interviewee #4)³

Criticism soon arose over the curriculum. In the 1970s, Koplewitz (1974: 328) pointed out that "the claim has been made that the program is biased disproportionately against knowing Arab culture because the children learn more Bible than Koran, more of the history of Israel than of Arab history, and there is no place in the Arab school for the poems of Bialik, the stories of Shalom

² The interview was carried out in April 1998 by Abd Al-Rahman Mar'i.

³ The interview was carried out in April 1998 by Abd Al-Rahman Mar'i

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