

Challenges in the Teaching and Learning of Modern Hebrew as an Additional Language

1.1 Introduction

The teaching and learning of Modern Hebrew as an additional language, which is also referred to as ‘second’, ‘foreign’, and/or ‘heritage’ language, (henceforth L2)¹ has traditionally been a practice-driven discipline rather than a scholarly and research-focused field of instruction. The majority of educators involved in the teaching of Hebrew as an additional language (henceforth THAL²) are focused on teaching the language rather than researching issues related to L2 instruction. Some teachers also lack formal training in L2 pedagogy, so they have come in as practitioners and not formal educators. As a result, there is sparse theoretical basis underpinning the teaching and learning of L2 Modern Hebrew,³ including lack of research-based knowledge of THAL and scarcity of research projects in the field.

However, THAL has reached a phase in which pedagogy and classroom practice are receiving increased academic attention, especially outside Israel where there is pressure for a more scholarly orientation for the discipline above and beyond the teaching and learning of the language.

These changes, which are relevant to the worldwide locations in which Modern Hebrew is taught, are also pertinent to the situation in Australia, where the language has been taught over the past 70 years. Yet to date, almost no research into THAL, either at school or at university level, has been carried out.

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- 1 Current literature includes all languages (whether second, third, fourth, etc.) people learn following their acquisition of their first language/s, under the broad term ‘second language’, or ‘L2’. Thus, in this book the terms ‘L2’/‘additional language’ are used interchangeably making no distinction between second/foreign/heritage language education. Likewise the terms ‘learning’ and ‘acquisition’ are used interchangeably (for example, De Bot, Lowie & Verspoor 2005; Mitchell & Myles 2004; Saviile-Troike 2006; van Lier 2000).
 - 2 There is no currently accepted acronym for this area: for the sake of brevity, I have ventured to coin the term THAL, ‘Teaching Hebrew as an Additional Language’, to include language teaching and learning of Modern Hebrew.
 - 3 Henceforward in this book, ‘Hebrew’ refers to ‘Modern Hebrew’ unless otherwise stated.

The overarching purpose of this book is to present a ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973) of one successful beginners-level Modern Hebrew program set within a leading Australian university, and to provide analysis and theorization of the local program’s classroom-based instructional environment and its teaching and learning dynamic interactions. Thus, to bring into focus

[C]lassroom behaviours that are [sic] so commonplace that they are assumed to be unimportant, or so fleeting and ephemeral that they sometimes operate below the threshold of teacher consciousness.

SENIOR (1999, p. 3)

By investigating and illuminating this beginner-level Modern Hebrew classroom-based program, this book seeks to raise awareness of the instructional environment and strategies that contribute to effective language teaching, learning and development of Modern Hebrew as an additional language (THAL).

The local Australian Modern Hebrew Program (which, respectively, includes the beginners, intermediate and advanced programs) is based on the curricula framework and pedagogical practices developed at the Hebrew University’s Rothberg International School for Overseas Students (henceforth RIS). RIS’ programs are used widely in university, college and school settings outside of Israel, but to date they have been largely praxis driven (see Gilead 2016c). Thus, one of the major purposes of this book is to provide a conceptualization of the theory, or theories, of language teaching and learning that inform RIS’ praxis-based programs and materials. The book’s second concomitant purpose is to contribute to establishing a stronger research-based agenda for THAL and thus position L2 Modern Hebrew within the broader field of L2 research and scholarship—in Australia, but with international applications as well. For these reasons, extensive elucidations of L2 theory and detailed information of this study’s design are provided in Chapters 2 and 3 (respectively). Finally, this book contributes to the wider field of L2 teaching, learning and research by theorizing both classroom practice and students’ experience.

1.2 Need for Theorization of THAL

Over time, THAL has developed largely as a praxis-based discipline. Consistent efforts have gone into devising and publishing teaching and learning materials, both in and outside of Israel, for both school (primary and secondary) and tertiary (college/university) levels. This scholarly effort has focused on writing textbooks, accompanied at times by the production of teaching manuals, both