

The Initiative for Applied Education Research
The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities

Document Abstract

Teaching Arabic: Where Do We Go From Here?

Workshop Report

**held by the
Expert Team on Arabic Instruction in the Israeli Hebrew-Language
School System**

**Edited by
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The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities was founded in 1959. Its membership currently comprises 96 top Israeli scientists and scholars. The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities Law, 1961, declares that its principal objectives and tasks are to foster and promote scientific activity; to advise the Government on research activities and scientific planning of national importance; to maintain ties with foreign academies of science; to represent Israeli Science at international institutes and conferences; and to publish articles that can further science.

The Initiative for Applied Education Research (the Initiative) places up-to-date, scientific, critically-appraised knowledge and information at the disposal of decision-makers in the field of education. This kind of information is crucial for the intelligent formulation of policy and for optimal planning of interventions to improve educational achievements in Israel.

The Initiative's vision: Research knowledge is an essential component for planning public policy or comprehensive interventions. In the planning phase, critically-appraised research knowledge supports the formulation of policy whose chance of success is greater, and at a later point, enables rational public discourse to take place. The Initiative implements this vision in the field of education.

The Initiative's method of operation: The issues the Initiative addresses are those raised by decision-makers and it consults with senior Ministry of Education officials and other stakeholders. The Initiative's steering committee, appointed by the president of the Israel Academy, is responsible for the Initiative's work program and the peer-review processes of documents it creates.

The Initiative operates by means of expert committees and by convening joint symposia for researchers, professionals in the field and decision-makers. It publishes a variety of reports and makes them available to the public. Members of expert committees carry out their work on a voluntary basis.

History of the Initiative: The Initiative was established in late 2003 as a joint venture of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, the Ministry of Education, and the Rothschild Foundation (Yad Hanadiv). Yad Hanadiv, which conceived the idea of the Initiative, provided much of the funding during the initial years of its operation. Since the beginning of 2010, the Initiative has been operating as a unit of the Israel Academy.

In the summer of 2010, the Israeli Knesset amended the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities Law, regulating the Israel Academy's advisory role vis-à-vis government ministries seeking its consulting services. The Initiative directs the consulting activities on education-related issues which the Israel Academy provides to the government and various authorities.

The Expert Team on Arabic Instruction in the Hebrew-Language Israeli School System chaired by Prof. Ella Landau-Tasseron of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem was established in response to a request by the Ministry of Education in 2010. Its objective is to examine possible changes to the structure of Arabic studies in the Hebrew-language school system.

Expert Team Members

Prof. Ella Landau-Tasseron, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Chair

Prof. Menahem Milson, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Prof. Elite Olshtain, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Prof. Nasser Basal, Tel Aviv University, served on the expert team until August 2011

Mr. Ofer Efrati, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Ms. Irit Dosh-Weinberg, Ministry of Education advisor

Mr. Guy Ron-Gilboa, Expert team coordinator

Mr. Itay Pollak, Language and Literacy Committee coordinator

Acknowledgements

Throughout its work, the expert team has enjoyed the assistance and support of a number of people, and for this we are grateful.

First, we would like to thank the Ministry of Education which commissioned this activity and funded the venture. We would especially like to thank Dr. Tzvi Tzameret, former chair of the pedagogic secretariat, Dr. Shlomo Alon, former chief inspector for Arabic instruction in the Hebrew-language education sector, Ms. Sigalit Shushan, current chief inspector for Arabic instruction in the Hebrew-language education sector and Ms. Irit Dosh-Weinberg, coordinating advisor for Arabic instruction in the Tel Aviv District.

We extend our appreciation to all the speakers and participants – from the field and from academia – who took part in the workshops.

Special appreciation to Prof. Yohanan Friedmann, a member of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, for this help in establishing the expert team and following the activities throughout its work.

We thank the staff of the Initiative for Applied Education Research for its good will and aid throughout – to Dr. Avital Darmon, director of the Initiative, who supported and encouraged the expert team's work from the start through to the close of its work, to Ada Paldor, Riki Fishel, Ziva Dekel and Avia Shemesh for their professional assistance and logistical support. Special thanks to Itay Pollak, the Language and Literacy Committee's coordinator, who helped at every step along the way.

This report was subject to the customary process of independent peer review. The report's editors are appreciative of the review which helped to ensure its lucidity, quality and independence. Responsibility for the document's contents lies entirely with the expert team.

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Introduction

General background

Arabic is an official language in the State of Israel under mandatory law (King's Council, clause 82) and its study constitutes part of the education system's core curriculum as defined in the State Education Law of 1953, section 2(11), which states that among the goals of state education is: "To become familiar with the language, culture, history, heritage and unique traditions of the Arab population and other population groups in the State of Israel, and to recognize the equal rights of all Israeli citizens."¹ The Ministry of Education director general circular of June 1995 (Director General Circular, 55/10, 1 June 1995) determines that beginning in September 1996, every student in the state and state-religious education systems is required to learn a second foreign language from grades 7 through 9. This policy made it possible for students to choose a second foreign language – Arabic or French (in addition to English). The circular states, "it is possible to choose another foreign language if the school has a sufficient number of interested students, certified teachers and an approved curriculum (languages are generally Russian and Amharic). In the clarification of the circular provided to the State Comptroller's Office, the director-general noted his intention in the circular was for Arabic to be the second foreign language and only in certain instances (whose parameters were not cited in the circular) could French be exchanged for Arabic instruction (State Comptroller, 1995: 369)." (Lustigman, 2007:10)

Section 9.7 of Ministry of Education (MOE) director-general circular of 2007 9/A determines that the requirement for studying Arabic applies to grades 7 through 10.² The requirement to study Arabic derives from Arabic being an official language in the State of Israel. It is the language of one-fifth of the country's citizens and the language of most Middle Eastern countries. At the same time, many goals were attached to Arabic instruction. It appears that the set of priorities has not been determined and it is unclear if the goal is acquiring the ability to communicate with Arab citizens, access to their world, familiarity with spoken Arabic, familiarity with the written culture whether ancient or modern, access to Arab media, and so forth. The goals of the new Arabic curriculum taught in Arab sector schools (the School Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2009) do not help to clarify Arabic study's 'top-level goals'.³

To formulate an improved policy on this topic, in 2010, Dr. Tzvi Tzameret, chair of the pedagogic secretariat at the time, and Dr. Shlomo Alon, chief inspector for Arabic in the Hebrew-language school sector at the time, approached the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, as an independent entity capable of objectively summarizing knowledge from a variety of sources, and willing to convene the best researchers from diverse fields for focused discussion with professionals and stakeholders.

¹ It should be noted that this amendment to the law was made in 2000. See Lustigman, 2007:7.

² According to this circular, the only approved alternative to Arabic study is French.

³ See the discussion below.

In response to this request, the Israel Academy established a voluntary expert team through the offices of the Initiative for Applied Education Research that would gather to clarify issues and make useful knowledge in the field available. A decision was made to associate the expert team's operations with the Initiative's Language and Literacy Expert Committee, chaired by Prof. Elite Olshtain. It should be noted that the team's activities are a continuation of other related Initiative activities in the field on the topics of diglossia, reading acquisition in Arabic (Neugarten, 2008; Darmon & Pollak, 2012) and the teacher shortage (Even and Leslau, 2010). With the full agreement of Dr. Shlomo Alon, chief inspector for Arabic instruction in the Hebrew-language school sector, Ms. Irit Dosh-Weinberg, MOE advisor, participated in the expert team's discussions.

In coordination with Dr. Shlomo Alon, the expert team decided to focus on the following topics: (1) training teachers of Arabic; (2) study materials for Arabic instruction and their adaptation to the new curriculum; (3) teaching literary Arabic vs. teaching spoken Arabic; (4) teaching Arabic as a second foreign language.

The expert team commissioned scientific reviews for use in its deliberations. The abstracts of two reviews are included in Appendix 1: (1) Mr. Iair Or's review on study materials for Arabic instruction in Israel and abroad; (2) Dr. Dvora Dubiner's review on foreign language instruction in Israel and abroad, with emphasis on Arabic instruction. The expert team coordinator prepared abstracts of four articles that address the following topics: (1) "communicative" Arabic – between spoken and literary Arabic; (2) teaching spoken Arabic in parallel to literary Arabic; (3) professional standards for teachers of Arabic; (4) methodology for training teachers of Arabic. The article abstracts are included in Appendix 1.

At a later point, two double workshops were held for experts and for stakeholders, to clarify questions and to attempt to address issues in the field. Appendix 2 contains the workshop agendas while Appendix 3 contains notes from the workshop lectures. Senior MOE officials were active in developing the questions and preparing the list of workshop participants. Former chief inspector for Arabic instruction in the Hebrew-language school system, Dr. Shlomo Alon and incoming chief inspector for Arabic, Ms. Sigalit Shushan, readily responded to our request to provide information regarding the Ministry's achievements and the challenges it faces.

This report summarizes all the activities that took place on this topic and brings to the public's attention the main insights reached as a result of the activities.

It is important to stress that the discussion and conclusions herein are based only on partial information with respect to the issues it discusses and the methods for coping with the various problems.

The report is based on the scientific reviews commissioned by the expert team, on opinions and ideas that arose during the workshops and on insights the expert team reached – insights that emerged from all the activities in which it took part combined with their experience in the field.

The first section of the report provides an update on the state of affairs in Arabic instruction in the Hebrew-language school system as was discovered during the expert team's work, based mainly on information received from Dr. Shlomo Alon, the outgoing chief inspector for Arabic instruction and on a lecture by the current chief inspector for Arabic instruction, Ms. Sigalit Shushan. The report's second section addresses various issues in Arabic instruction that were raised during the team's work, especially during the discussions at the workshops. Discussion of each one of the issues thus includes research material, matters that arose during the discussion together with suggestions, opinions and ideas. The third and closing section of the document turns the reader's attention to the expert team members' joint insights resulting from all the diverse activities. Additional opinions expressed in the workshops appear in the workshop reports.

Issues in the Instruction of Arabic in the Hebrew-Language Education Sector

Arabic is a hard language

According to the U.S. Foreign Service's rankings, Arabic is classed alongside Chinese, Korean and Japanese, in the fourth category of languages, those difficult for English speakers to learn. That is, Arabic is included in the class of the most difficult languages for English speakers to learn (Stevens, 2006) due to the profound linguistic differences between the two languages.⁴ A similar picture also emerged from the expert team's activity when it was repeatedly argued that Arabic is a difficult language to learn. The difficulty is due to several reasons, including:

1. Diglossia in Arabic – the unique sociolinguistic status of Arabic in which one register is used for routine, daily communication (spoken Arabic) and another register is used in more formal contexts (MSA – Modern Standard Arabic) with each possessing its own different linguistic characteristics (morphology, lexicon and syntax) gives rise to the question of how to teach this language and to which register should priority be given? Various speakers stressed that even native Arabic speakers have trouble with literary Arabic while there were those who maintained that striving for the ability to speak a given dialect of Arabic represents an investment of great effort to achieve a limited outcome considering the relatively narrow range of situations in which a selected dialect can be used.
2. Arabic's morphology, phonology and syntax are foreign to many speakers of European languages and to a certain degree to Hebrew speakers as well.
3. During the workshop discussions, time and again speakers wondered why more time was devoted to learning Arabic writing than to learning Latin writing (compare Landau and Somekh, 2006). A recent study showed that deciphering Arabic writing is more difficult and involves more areas of the brain than deciphering other types of writing, and this is the case even among native speakers of Arabic (Darmon and Pollak, 2012).

⁴ It should be emphasized that these classifications apply only to English speakers; for Hebrew speakers, Arabic's morphology is probably not that unusual. Still, it can be argued that the syntactical, phonological and stylistic differences between Hebrew and Arabic make it difficult to learn the language.

Main Questions, Knowledge and Insights Emerging during the Expert Team's Work

Arabic instruction goals and objectives

With respect to this issue, the expert team found no clear expression of the goals for teaching Arabic in the Hebrew-language school system: Is the goal of learning to connect with Arabs in Israel by teaching conversational skills? To provide direct access to events in the Middle East (through understanding of the Arabic-language media?) To open a window to Islam and its culture? The expert team believes that setting goals is important since the objectives of study will be derived from each one of the four language skills. Moreover, the team believes that at this point it is not clear what is required of students with respect to each one of the four language skills at each stage of study: in primary school, in middle school and in secondary school. Likewise, the team's impression was that a gap between the curriculum and the actual studies exists.

It is advisable that the students' level of Arabic be examined at the various stages of study to determine whether the curriculum is being implemented properly and if its objectives are being attained, or whether they can be attained within the framework of hours allotted to language instruction and within the framework of existing teaching methods.

In summary: On the basis of what was presented to the expert team, and in light of the new curriculum, the position of the team is that the goals of Arabic instruction must be access to the Middle Eastern world and Islam by teaching text comprehension. Comprehension of literary Arabic should be set as a top-level goal of Arabic studies in the Hebrew-language education sector due to the wide range of situations in which this language is used and in view of the fact that it is a single language common to the entire Arabic-speaking world.

The expert team welcomes Arabic instruction in primary school and would be pleased to see the curriculum for young students applied as a compulsory program throughout the Hebrew-language education system.

The team believes that the goal of Arabic studies in primary school should be a constructive encounter with the new language and its basic forms. The statements presented at the workshops showed that the integrated method apparently leads to a positive attitude and motivation among students and the team is of the opinion that at this stage, the foundation for interpersonal communication must be laid through spoken Arabic, familiarity with Arabic letters and a basic familiarity with Arab culture carried out through experiential learning of Arabic.

In middle school and secondary school, the expert team recommends it be clearly determined that the language learned is literary Arabic. The team also recommends that the various language skills themselves be prioritized (see also, Landau & Somekh, 2006). The team's position is that the most important skills students require are reading comprehension of literary Arabic followed by, in descending order, listening comprehension of Modern Standard Arabic, ability for written expression through simple sentences, and capacity for oral expression in simple

conversation using Modern Standard Arabic. Therefore, in middle school, Arabic writing and basic Modern Standard Arabic grammar should be learned alongside experiential study of Arab nations' culture and history.

The expert team is of the opinion that the ability to read and to understand texts in literary Arabic should be set as a goal for secondary school Arabic studies. In this context, the team believes that it would be advisable to reexamine the structure and content of the oral matriculation exam in secondary school. In a similar vein, the team believes that there is no place for the customary choice, currently made available to students, between the literary Arabic matriculation track and the spoken or 'communicative' Arabic track. The latter track focuses on conversational skills, communication and conducting oneself in Arabic. The expert team believes this is an inequitable alternative to the literary Arabic track where important cultural subject matter is learned through imparting tools for understanding texts.

Appendix 6: Short Bios of Expert Team Members

Prof. Ella Landau-Tasser (Expert team chair), Professor and former chairperson of the Dept. of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where she has been teaching since 1970. For a number of years, she taught in the Dept. of Arabic Language and Literature at Tel Aviv University. Her areas of research interest include: Medieval Islam, Muslim historiography, Muslim law, Arab tribal society, Jihad and Islamic political thought. Prof. Landau-Tasser holds a Ph.D. from the Dept. of Arabic Language and Literature, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, received in 1982.

Prof. Menahem Milson, Professor (Emeritus) of Arabic literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem where he has taught since 1963. Chair of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI). Editor of the online edition of the Arabic-Hebrew dictionary by David Ayalon and Pesach Shinar. Served as the head of the Institute of Asian and African Studies and as dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the Hebrew University. His areas of research interest include: Sufi literature, modern Egyptian literature and Arabic lexicography. Prof. Milson holds a Ph.D. in Arabic literature from Harvard University (U.S.), received in 1964.

Prof. Elite Olshtain, Professor (Emerita) of language education in the School of Education at the Hebrew University; was formerly the Louis and Ann Wolens Professor of Educational Research at the University. She taught at Tel Aviv University for decades and was the Dean of the School of Education from 1990 to 1992. Her main research interests are second language acquisition, bilingualism, language attrition, and reading instruction. Prof. Olshtain earned her Ph.D. in applied linguistics from the University of California in 1979.

Prof. Nasser Basal, Professor in the Dept. of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Tel Aviv University; also teaches at the Levinsky College of Education. Studied for his B.A. in Arabic language and literature and in Hebrew language at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His main areas of research interest are: Judaeo-Arabic culture in the Middle Ages, Hebrew linguistics and grammar in the Middle Ages, Karaite grammatical traditions, and Judaeo-Arabic biblical exegesis. Prof. Basal holds a Ph.D. in Arabic language from Bar Ilan University, received in 1992.

Ofer Efrati, Division for Arabic Instruction coordinator in the Dept. of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Arabic language instruction coordinator for the M.A. program in Middle Eastern Studies at the Rothberg International School for overseas students at the Hebrew University. He has been teaching at the university since 1992 and since 2000, is a didactic mentor and lecturer at the David Yellin College of Education. He is a member of the Ministry of Education's professional committee for Arabic and Islamic instruction and serves as the coordinator of the Arabic major at the Hebrew University High School.

Mr. Efrati is studying toward a Ph.D. degree in the Dept. of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His field of research is scholars and centers of learning in Tiberia, capital of the *Al-Urdunn* district during the early Islamic period (634-1099).

Irit Dosh-Weinberg, (Ministry of Education advisor), teacher of Arabic, coordinator of the Arabic major at the Blich High School in Ramat Gan. She has been teaching Arabic since 1982. She serves as the Ministry of Education's district advisor for Arabic and edits the Journal for Teachers of Arabic and Islam.

Ms. Dosh-Weinberg holds an M.A. in Islamic art and Arabic from Tel Aviv University, received in 1997.

Guy Ron-Gilboa (Expert team coordinator) graduate of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Dept. of Arabic Language and Literature and the Assyriology Faculty. Studying for his Ph.D. in the Dept. of Arabic Language and Literature at Hebrew University. Translates Arabic literature.