Hebrew and Multiculturalism in the International Arena

Irena Blanky-Karlin

Doctor of Philosophy, Senior Lecturer,
The Department of Hebrew Language,
Kaye Academic College of Education
and the Academic College Levinsky-Wingate,
8400100, Israel, Beer Sheba-Tel-Aviv,
e-mail: irenab16@gmail.com

For a version of the article in Hebrew, see Blanky-Karlin (2023).

Abstract

Between 2021-2022, as part of the "Learning and Teaching – Teaching Hebrew as a Second Language in an Online Environment" course with a specialization in Hebrew language at Kaye Academic College in Israel, the author managed two international online projects: "Beer Sheba-Moscow" and "Beer Sheba-Kyiv". The article aimed to describe two innovative and unique international online ventures for four sectors from three countries. Their main contribution was linguistic-pedagogical and technological-digital, in other words, to improve Hebrew instruction and improve mastery among all participants while introducing them to new and diverse teaching methods in a synchronous (in Zoom) and asynchronous (on the module site) online environment. Participating in the first project were Jewish and Bedouin undergraduate students at Kaye Academic College, as well as graduate students earning their master's degree at The Kosygin State University of Russia in Moscow. Participating in the second project were Jewish and Bedouin undergraduate students at Kaye Academic College, as well as undergraduate students in the Faculty of Eastern Languages at Vernadsky Taurida National University in Kyiv. All of the students were divided into teams as part of a collaborative learning sample. Teaching in the online projects integrated asynchronous teaching in the module's interface in which all course participants from Israel and abroad are registered, and synchronous teaching on Zoom, which facilitated face-to-face multicultural language sessions among all students. The course focused on fostering both written and spoken discourse.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic unquestionably affected education around the world. The pandemic pushed students and lecturers towards distance education. At the onset of the pandemic (Spring 2020), most universities and colleges quickly abandoned in person teaching and transitioned towards online conference technologies, such as Zoom. This experience in higher education that incorporated various styles of teaching and alternate assessments was unprecedented [Galagher, Luttrel, 2022]. This opportunity to rethink education should be maximized, particularly so that education will become more inclusive and accessible to all students while using effective teaching methods in an online environment that were recognized even before the pandemic should be maximized [Hargis, 2020].

Even if full frontal education is reinstated, it will change. The new reality for most lecturers is the hybrid model that balances frontal teaching on campus with distance teaching [Ben-Yehuda Adler, 2022a]. During the pandemic, the lecturers gained experience in teaching Hebrew as a second or additional language using diverse techniques that have stayed in place after the end of the pandemics; these include methods for preparing the teacher for distance teaching [Ben-Yehuda Adler, 2022b], efficacy of use in the Zoom rooms to reinforce speech [Tishler, 2022], use of digital games during teaching [Angriset, 2022], etc.

As part of the annual "Learning and Teaching – Teaching Hebrew as a Second Language in an Online Environment" course with a specialization in Hebrew language at Kaye Academic College, I initiated and developed two unique projects: "Beersheba-Moscow" (in conjunction with Dr. Yulia Kondrkova of Moscow) and "Beer Sheba-Kyiv" (in conjunction with Ms. Olga Yaakovleva of Kyiv). Participating in the first project were Jewish and Bedouin undergraduate students at Kaye Academic College, as well as graduate students earning their Masters' Degree in Philology and Linguistics – Culture in the "Hebrew in a Cultural Context" program at The Kosygin State University of Russia in Moscow. Participating in the second project were the other Jewish and Bedouin undergraduate students at Kaye Academic College, as well as undergraduate students in the Faculty of Eastern Languages at Vernadsky Taurida National University in Kyiv.

The online international projects were conducted under extremely complicated circumstances: not only were they conducted during the pandemic, which significantly impacted all areas of our lives, they were also conducted as war erupted in Europe between Russia and Ukraine. In this article, I want to present these projects and single out their uniqueness.

Nature, objectives and pedagogical approaches of the course

The "Learning and Teaching" course was divided in 2021-2022 into two international online projects. Participating in Semester A was a total of 54 students, who were divided into fifteen teams as part of the collaborative learning sample (Blanky-Karlin, 2018): 33 students studied in the "Beer Sheba-Moscow" project and 21 in the "Beer Sheba-Kyiv" project. 35 of the students in Semester A continued their studies in Semester B, and were joined in May 2022 by three students auditing the class from various cities in Ukraine (not Kyiv). Since the total number of students in Semester B was fewer (38 students), participants were divided into eight teams.

Teaching in the online projects in both semesters was integrated: asynchronous teaching in the model's interface in which all course participants from Israel and abroad are registered, and synchronous teaching on Zoom, which facilitated face-to-face multicultural language sessions among all students. The course focused on fostering both written and spoken discourse. The international "Beersheba-Moscow" project began in 2020-2021 as part of a professional cooperation agreement

between Kaye Academic College in Israel and The Kosygin State University of Russia in Moscow that was signed in October 2020 at the height of the pandemic [Blanky-Karlin, 2022]. The international "Beersheba-Kyiv" project only began in 2021-2022. These two projects occurred as a result of the "Learning and Teaching – Teaching Hebrew as a Second Language in an Online Environment" semester course for both Jewish and Bedouin students, which I initiated, created and taught, specializing in Hebrew language at Kaye Academic College between 2018-2020 [Blanky-Karlin, 2020].

Between 2021-2022, the Israeli students from the Jewish sector assumed the role of teachers and the Israeli students from the Bedouin sector and students from Russia and Ukraine – were the students. The teachers, thus, the Jewish students, gained experience in teaching Hebrew as an additional language, and the students broadened their knowledge of written and spoken Hebrew, their second or additional language. During the course, the teachers and students switched roles, and all learning took place in both a synchronous and asynchronous online environment under my instruction.

The course objectives centered around developing knowledge of Hebrew, exposure of students from the three countries to new methods of language instruction, creation of a written and spoken academic and multicultural discourse among all, development of student independence, fostering critical writing, promotion of peer learning and collaborative learning as well as emphasis on the communicative function of language [Blanky-Karlin, 2022]. Learning was collaborative [Vygotsky, 1978; Gokhale, 1995; Hertz-Lazerovitch and Shadel, 2003; Maza and Ram 2006; Blanky and Margolin, 2014; Blanky-Karlin, 2018 and 2020; Vaughn et al,, 2011; O'Connor & Vadasy, 2011], teaching was culturally responsive [Gay, 2010; Roth-Gabison, 2019; Blanky-Karlin, 2022]; and the assessment was formative [Duran, 2010; Blanky-Karlin, 2020].

It should be noted that four main changes were made in the course between 2021-2022 in comparison with 2018-2020: (1) the total number of students in the course significantly increased, and the course became international (even from 2020-2021, when only the Beersheba-Moscow project was being conducted). (2) The course in 2021-2022 was divided into two parallel international projects since Ukraine was added. (3) The first course (by 2020) was conducted asynchronously only, while in 2021-2022 (and 2020-2021), the model was integrated: remote asynchronous learning and synchronous learning through Zoom sessions as well as WhatsApp chats. (4) Due to the different level of students' knowledge, who were in the role of students, course learning was differential for most of the year. Details of the teaching methods and course activities will be provided in the next section.

Teaching activities and methods in the course

Below we will present the main activities in the course, focusing on the teaching methods that were adopted:

At the start of the course, all students introduced themselves in the course forum on the module interface, and were divided into teams: the teacher teams and the student teams.

Students read academic articles on new methods in teaching Hebrew as another language and compared them. Those who were playing the role of students (the Bedouin and foreign students) were asked to answer questions about the articles that were formulated by myself (reading comprehension questions), and those in the role of teachers (the Jewish students) reviewed their students' assignments while providing verbal feedback on language and content. By virtue of my position as moderator, I did not make any direct comments to the students and I did not correct their work. I addressed the teacher corrections only, and it was open to everyone – both teachers and students [Blanky-Karlin, 2020].

Zoom sessions were conducted separately for participants in every project. In the Moscow (Russia)

session, 33 students participated: the Jewish and Bedouin students at Kaye Academic College, as well as graduate students earning their Masters' Degree in Philology and Linguistics – Culture in the "Hebrew in a Cultural Context" program at The Kosygin State University of Russia in Moscow. In the Kyiv (Ukraine) session, 21 students participated: other Jewish and Bedouin undergraduate students at Kaye Academic College, as well as students in the Faculty of Eastern Languages at Vernadsky Taurida National University in Kyiv (Ukraine). The atmosphere in the sessions was extremely friendly and warm. The learning that took place during the sessions was meaningful, i.e. learning created for students, learning in which they felt that they were an extremely active part of the lesson, and learning that developed their internal motivation. The responses received were enthusiastic (see reflection quotes below). The international sessions as part of the Beersheba-Moscow and Beersheba-Kyiv projects opened with a free face-to-face discussion with the entire class. The participants were then divided into several rooms: present in each room was one student-teacher team (from the Jewish sector at Kaye Academic College) along with one student-student team (from the Bedouin sector at Kaye Academic College and the university in Moscow [in the first session] and from the Bedouin sector from Kaye Academic College and from the university in Kyiv [in the second session]). Interesting discussions on a range of academic and social topics took place in the rooms these were prepared by the students in advance: "Online Learning – Advantages and Disadvantages", "Vendettas in the Bedouin Sector", "Collaborative Learning between the Various Sectors", etc. At the end of every session all participants gathered in the virtual main room, summarized the session, and completed a survey regarding the continuation of the project on the interactive platform Mentimeter, which allows results to be shared on screen in real time: https://www.mentimeter.com

Figure 1 - Summarized the session, and completed a survey regarding the continuation of the project on the interactive platform Mentimeter, which allows results to be shared on screen in real time

To promote the independence of all students, particularly in spoken discourse, and to allow them to switch roles, the teacher teams met with their student teams over Zoom also without my presence. These sessions were devoted not only to gaining a more in-depth familiarity among all team members but to reciprocal teaching: every team of students taught their teachers and every team of teachers – their students. Lesson topics focused on language, society and culture, and were selected and adapted by students in advance based on the needs of the student and teacher teams: "Israeli Holidays", "Similarities and Differences between Judaism and Islam"; "Customs in Jewish Society", "Customs in Bedouin Society" "Multiple Wives in the Bedouin Sector", The Month of Ramadan", "Russian

Culture", "Ukrainian Culture", "Similarities and Differences in Compositional Structures and Vocabulary between Hebrew and Russian", "Numbers in Hebrew", "Prefix Letters of Hebrew Verbal Forms", "Slang in Hebrew", "Idioms and Proverbs in Hebrew", "Idioms and Proverbs in Russian", etc. It should be noted that regarding sociocultural issues, which may be stereotypes, the students presented their perspective by introducing personal anecdotes if necessary. During the Zoom sessions, the teachers asked their students and vice versa preliminary questions such as "what do you know about holidays in Judaism or Islam?" "What is slang?" etc; both the teachers and the students relied on presentations and exercises that they prepared in advance; they played interactive digital games at https://kahoot.it, https://wordwall.net or on Google Forms, which they also prepared in advance; they practiced the learned material; gained new knowledge; and conducted a free comparative language and multicultural discourse. All teacher staffs and their students uploaded the recordings of their collaborative sessions to the site forum, which was accessible for viewing to all, and received verbal feedback from me as part of the assessment from the course designer. In the feedback, I primarily addressed the relevancy of the topic to students, the level of language of the presenters (vocabulary, correct pronunciation, composition, etc.), the interaction that was established between the two populations, the digital tools used by the teachers and students when teaching the lessons and performing the ensuing exercises. I always discussed strengths, and suggested ways to improve. In the final grade that was assigned at the end of every semester, and that summarized the activity throughout, I assigned tremendous importance to the teaching of synchronous lessons on Zoom.

Peer learning and critical thinking were also reflected in the selection of internet video clips on teaching Hebrew as an additional language to the site forum. Every teaching team and student team was asked to perform this activity while emphasizing the main contribution of these clips teaching and learning while addressing the clips that were uploaded by their peers. Ultimately, the course site contained a database of various clips that are open to all users. Below are links to the uploaded clips:

https://youtu.be/tQFcjUktpRU
https://youtu.be/ANP4y5PUuB4
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyVK9BnFK4I
https://www.kan.org.il/Item/?itemId=97679
https://youtu.be/78FOYv-Z1tU
https://youtu.be/fS9mmH5pow8

Every teacher team and student team were asked to read academic articles on literacy and education [Blanky-Karlin, 2020], and to write their reasoned opinion about it through debating – for and against – on the course website. In this manner, a written discussion occurs that allows everyone to view the opinion of each team regarding the issue discussed in the article. Even students for whom Hebrew is an additional language, managed to express their opinion in a manner that was clear to readers.

The course also involved differential learning: for the teams of students from Kyiv, whose mastery of academic reading in Hebrew was less advanced than that of the other teams of students, the Israeli teachers prepared easier and shorter versions of the original article that they were requested to read (see Section 6 above). As moderator, I reviewed the teachers' results, improved them while introducing comments and making the necessary corrections. In addition, at the start of the course, the Israeli teachers chose a short text (up to two pages) that was relatively easy for the students from Kyiv, and prepared a reading comprehension assignment for them based on their level.

As part of the comparative review of the languages, all students were told to read the academic article I published on prepositions in Hebrew and Russian [Blanky, 2006]. In this assignment, all students were asked to summarize the article and to introduce additional examples of the selected

categories that were discussed therein. The knowledge that was acquired by the students as a result of this activity also helped them later on when they discussed the similarity and differences between Hebrew and Russian in verb use during the Zoom lessons without me (see Section 4 above).

Ahead of the holiday of Shavuot, I prepared for all course participants an interactive image on the Genially platform about the holiday. This activity included links to articles, to a riddle, to proverbs and to a clip; and broadened the knowledge of everyone about the holiday (holiday's names, times, Scroll of Esther, etc.), in terms of language, which are related, as well as the meanings of the expressions such as "כפה עליו הר כגיגית" (to force someone to obey without any option), (the two loaves) שתי לחם etc.). Every teaching team and every student team was asked to write three new items they learned about the holiday as a result of this interactive assignment.

With the outbreak of war in Europe between Russia and the Ukraine (Semester B), we continued the projects despite the difficulties. Every side was given a platform to share their feelings. The Zoom sessions were dedicated, inter alia, to co-existence in light of the situation in Ukraine, sanctions on Russia and in light of the terrorist attacks that have taken place in Israel. When communication through the course website weakened due to connectivity problems for students in Kyiv, communication between them and the Israeli students (teachers) was maintained through WhatsApp (sending clips of encouragement, summary of assignments, voice messages, etc.). At the beginning of May 2022, the Beersheba-Kyiv project added three students auditing the class from other cities in Ukraine.

During the annual course, the teams of teachers and teams of students wrote ongoing reflections on a padlet. Furthermore, every team uploaded the summary reflection at the end of the course.

Difficulties in the course

Lingual-pedagogical, technical and organizational difficulties were revealed during the project.

a. Lingual-pedagogical difficulties

Native speakers who speak too fast

During the Zoom lessons, the Israeli teachers who speak Hebrew as a mother tongue tend to speak too quickly with foreign students. They occasionally forget who is on the other side.

Use of social tools that are not always suitable for speakers of Hebrew as an additional language

The Israeli teachers were not aware that the technique of adding an adjective to a noun for the purpose of identifying the grammatical gender of the given noun ("big stone" feminine, "red pen" masculine) is mainly suitable for native speakers of the language. This syntactic principle, which the Israeli teachers used in teaching the numeral name to identify the grammatical gender of the count noun, will suit speakers of Hebrew as an additional language to a very limited extent because they do not know which adjective (masculine or feminine) should be added to a noun whose grammatical gender is unknown to them. They use the formal principle (checking whether or not the noun in question has a feminine suffix ["Talmid (student)" male, "Talmida (student)" female) and the lexical principle (checking the dictionary to determine the grammatical gender of the noun in question is "stone"/"needle"/" frog"/" road" feminine).

Varying levels of mastery of Hebrew as a second or additional language among the students

The level of mastery of three populations in Hebrew differed. The Bedouin students spoke more freely than the foreign students since they were born in Israel in a Hebrew-speaking environment. The students from the university in Moscow – their level was more advanced than the Ukrainian students since they learned ahead of the Masters Degree. The students from the Kyiv university all undergraduates but had varying levels of mastery of Hebrew, particularly in spoken discourse. Even

among those students auditing the class from the other cities in Ukraine, who joined the "Beer Sheva-Kyiv" project in May 2022, there were noticeable differences in mastery of the language.

b. Technical and organizational difficulties

The difficulty in connecting to the internet (through the computer or through WhatsApp) in Ukraine due to the war

Difficulties in connecting to the internet in the Bedouin areas due to poor infrastructure.

Difficulty in scheduling dates for Zoom sessions within the teams and among the teams (teachers + students) due to the heavy and different schedules of the members.

Reflections

The reflections were written in Hebrew by all course participants on padlet and on the forum on the course website in the module. In the reflections, the students from each country were asked to refer to the course and its content, to its educational and pedagogical aspects, to the process they experienced, to difficulties in the course, if any, and to any other aspect that seemed relevant to them both during the course and at its end. The writing was free, 2-3 paragraphs.

It may be concluded that all the students agree that learning in the course was enriching, challenging, and improved their linguistic and technological knowledge; the contents and teaching methods were varied, and they allowed the course participants freedom of action, creativity and the development of independence. They also state that the collaborative learning contributed a great deal, and they tremendously enjoyed exposure to other cultures and languages as well as the establishment of new social relationships.

Conclusion

The article aimed to describe two innovative and unique international online ventures for four sectors from three countries, which I managed in the Hebrew Language Department at Kaye Academic College in Israel. Their main contribution was linguistic-pedagogical and technological-digital, in other words, to improve Hebrew instruction and improve mastery among all participants while introducing them to new and diverse teaching methods in a synchronous (in Zoom) and asynchronous (on the module site) online environment. The teaching within the international projects was differential based on the level of the students who were acting in the capacity of students. Additionally, the course facilitated a fascinating meeting between the Jewish and Bedouin students from Israel and the students from Russia on the one hand, and between the Jewish and Bedouin students from Israel and the students from Ukraine on the other hand, resulting in cooperation between the teachers and their students as well as the cultivation of academic and multicultural written and spoken discourse between them all.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that our message in light of the complex situation in Europe is this: we are above politics, embrace all our students and understand their hearts. It should be noted that between 2022-2023 we continued the international collaborations, and expanded them to the "Beer Sheva-Moscow-Warsaw" project, which was conducted in a similar format.

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Иврит и мультикультурализм на международной арене

Бланки-Карлин Ирэна

Доктор философских наук, старший преподаватель,
Педагогический академический колледж Кей
и Академический колледж Левинский-Вингейт,
8400100, Израиль, Беэр-Шева-Тель-Авив,
e-mail: irenab16@gmail.com

Аннотация

В 2021–2022 годах в рамках курса «Студенты и преподаватели – преподавание иврита как второго языка в электронной среде» на кафедре иврита педагогического колледжа Кей в Израиле я руководила двумя международными онлайн-проектами: «Беэр-Шева-Москва» и «Беэр-Шева-Киев». В первом проекте приняли участие еврейские и бедуинские студенты, обучающиеся на бакалавриате педагогического колледжа Кей, а также студенты старших курсов, обучающиеся в магистратуре Российского государственного университета имени Косыгина в Москве. Во втором проекте приняли участие другие еврейские и бедуинские студенты, обучающиеся на бакалавриате педагогического колледжа Кей, а также студенты, обучающиеся на бакалавриате Таврического национального университета имени Верандского в Киеве. Все студенты были разделены на группы в рамках модели коллаборативного обучения. Преподавание в онлайн-проектах было комбинированным: асинхронное обучение в типовом интерфейсе, на котором были зарегистрированы все участники курса из Израиля и зарубежья, и синхронное обучение в Zoom, что также позволяло проводить лингвистические и мультикультурные встречи лицом к лицу между всеми студентами. Курс был ориентирован как на развитие письменного, так и устного дискурса.

Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

Ключевые слова

Преподавание иврита как дополнительного языка, электронное обучение, совместное обучение, мультикультурализм, устный и письменный дискурс.

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