Correction and encouragement in a Hebrew language class

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Contents

Background

The research was done during my internship in JCDSRI in Providence. The data collection took place mainly during third grade Judaic studies/Hebrew lessons, and also during first grade Judaic studies/Hebrew lessons. There are eleven students in third grade, five girls and six boys. There are eleven students in the first grade class, two girls and nine boys.

Research question

How do I respond to students' mispronunciations of Hebrew and how does it affect my students?

I started my research with a deep interest with how to encourage my third grade students to speak Hebrew.

Literature review

When coming to collect literature for my research, I started searching for literature that will explore the area of teaching Hebrew as a second language in elementary Jewish day schools in North America. It was important for me to find literature that deals with questions like: what are some recommended ways to provide feedbacks to Hebrew language learners? How could we correct students' errors but at the same time provide them with a safe environment to acquire the Hebrew language. I wanted to find literature that will not only support my data and my findings, but will also have similar variables to the one I researched (for example: the frame work for the research, the environment, the students' age, the language characteristics etc). Soon enough I realized that I will have to be much less specific in my search in order to find materials that will allow me to look at similar practices that relate to my research. I realized that there are some basic elements in the process of teaching and learning a second language (or even the same language but in a different dialect) and that looking at work that has been done in the

area of second language in general and different forms of teacher feedback will allow me to find interactions with my research.

Characterization of the literature

- Lyster and Mori (2006) *Interactional feedback and instructional counterbalance.* The article analyzes teacher-student interaction in teaching second languages in elementary schools. The authors investigate the effects of different forms of feedback from the teacher on students' ability to identify their mistakes and repair their pronunciation. According to Lyster and Mori (2006) interaction plays a key role in driving second language development. I found that relevant to my research because after reviewing the data that I have collected I started to ask myself questions about the feedback I provided to my students and compared that to different types of feedbacks that other teachers provided. I noticed that students reacted differently to my teaching style, and I related that to different things, among them the way I corrected their pronunciation. The article explores different ways of providing feedback; some of them are more direct (like explicit corrections) while others are implicit (like recasts). From watching the videos that I taped throughout my data collection, I noticed that I used what the authors would call "explicit corrections" much more often that the other Hebrew teachers that I observed. The hypothesis presented in the article predicted that recasts will be more effective, because it provides the students positive feedback as well, in a way that does not only draw attention to the form but also acknowledges the correct part of the student's expression.

- VanPatten and Williams (2006) *Theories in Second Language Acquisition, An Introduction*. The book focuses on different theories in second language acquisition and was written for the audience of novice readers who does not have much background in linguistics. I concentrated on the chapter which discusses inputs, interaction and outputs in second language acquisition. VanPatten and Williams (2006) raise important questions regarding how different types of interactions facilitate the process of acquiring second language, which I found relevant to my research. When I started my data collection I was interested in videotaping Hebrew lessons because I knew that interaction is important part of the Hebrew language learning, and that we

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try to encourage Hebrew communication in the classroom in different ways. When I looked at the data I noticed that most of that communication happened between the teacher and the students, and I realized that my interaction and other teachers' interaction with the student have a strong effect on the students' learning. According to VanPatten and Williams (2006) interaction are important, even if it a negative feedback, because interactions show the students that the teacher is attentive.

- Delpit (2006) *Other People's Children, Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. The author analyzed American classrooms with students of color, and suggests that many of the academic problems that those students are struggling with have to do with miscommunication between the teachers and the students. The author offers some thoughts and direction for future educators to deal with problems related to multicultural education. I will mainly concentrate on the part that discusses language diversity and learning. The author researched the role of language diversity in the classroom. Although the book does not directly deal with a second language acquisition, I found it extremely useful for my research because it also deals with different types of correction related to spoken language interactions between students and teachers. Delpit (2006) found that frequent correction from the teacher can affect the students' attitude towards the teacher. The students that she interviewed complained about a teacher that corrected them a lot. When thinking back and reflecting on my teaching style compared to other teachers in the school I would not be surprised if the students would complain about my frequent corrections.

Methods

For the purposes of my research I collected different types of data:

Videos

When I started my data collection, I was encouraged to record other Hebrew teachers in the school. I planned to observe them in order to find out what the other teachers (my mentor, the third grade Judaic studies/Hebrew teacher and the first grade Judaic studies/Hebrew teacher) are doing differently than me. I looked for similarities and differences in our teaching style. I tried to keep track of the questions that other teachers asked, how were they formulated and what were students' reactions. I video-recorded three Hebrew lessons, one was taught by me, one by my mentor (third grade Judaic/Hebrew teacher) and one by the first grade Judaic/Hebrew teacher.

The three different videos that I used allowed me to do self-reflection, reflect on other teachers' teaching styles, and to compare between them.

1. Judaic studies/Hebrew lesson that I taught in the third grade classroom, in late February 2010. The topic of the lesson was introduction to the holiday of Purim. The first part of the lesson was a whole class discussion. The students were sitting on the rug when I presented the "memory box" (ritual that they are familiar with from other holidays) with different items related to the holiday. The second part of the lesson is homework introduction.

2. A Judaic studies/Hebrew lesson that my mentor teacher taught in the third grade classroom in late March 2010. The topic of the lesson was an introduction to the holiday of Passover, and the first part of the lesson was a whole class discussion about the ten pledges. The second part of the lesson is a read a loud and a whole class discussion about the reading.

3. Hebrew lesson that the first grade Hebrew/Judaic studies teacher taught in February 2010. The topic of the lesson was reading a story in Hebrew and working independently in their books to answer questions about it.

Field notes/research journals, January -May 2010

I decided to write notes on a weekly basic when I started my research because I realized that when I was in the classroom, even if I wasn't the primary teacher, there were only some things I could notice and fewer things I could remember afterwards. Added to that was the intense schedule of my program. I wanted to make sure that I will collect valuable data. I used my notes to add to my findings from the videos and to gain general impression about students' reactions during Hebrew/Judaic studies lessons.

It was interesting to read the development of my thoughts about students' interactions in Hebrew throughout the school year. I read through all my notes and tried to isolate some patterns or things that I noticed were helpful for students when they interact in Hebrew.

Questionnaire

The third grade students answered my questions about communicating in Hebrew, right before the end of school year, on June 2010. I decided to give the questionnaire to the students when I started to feel that, when coming to research students' reactions to communication in Hebrew I have an important piece missing: **What do the students think?** It was important for me to find out more about the situations when students feel comfortable to interact in Hebrew and to try and recognize the barriers they have experienced when trying to interact in Hebrew.

I arranged the students' answers in a graphic way that will allow me to keep track on their answers. I have found this approach useful for me because many of the students' answers were similar, so I could arrange them in a way that will be easy to visually understand.

According to students' answers to the questionnaire, they do not have any particular objection to speaking in Hebrew. I noticed during the research that they enjoy participating in rituals and patterns and it does show that most of them feel comfortable to communicate in Hebrew when it is something that is part of rituals ("at morning meetings"). The students also benefit from the use of visuals, and I tried to provide them often when I taught. The students feel proud to be able to communicate in Hebrew, although some of them feel that it is boring and few of them commented that they feel that "there is nothing special about it" (speaking Hebrew).

What helps you most to speak Hebrew?
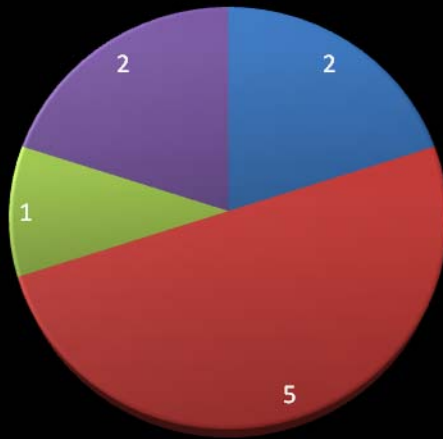
- when I answer a question that the teacher asks about a picture
- at morning meeting when I answer the question about how I am feeling
- when I see vocabulary words in the classroom
- when I have to describe a picture

I am glad I did that questionnaire because it gave my research a new direction. One students' comment got me thinking about challenges that students might face when trying to communicate in Hebrew:

When and with whom do you feel most comfortable speaking Hebrew?

- with a teacher at school
- with friends
- to myself silently
- to anyone
- with my family because they won't correct me in a harsh way

As an answer to the question: "*When and with whom do you feel most comfortable speaking Hebrew*?" one of the students wrote: "*with my family because they won't correct me in a harsh way*". When I read through the questionnaires the word *harsh* startled to me. I didn't even know the meaning of it, so I went to my dictionary to find out. This prompt made me think for the first time: maybe I did correct my students in what seems to be a harsh way? I went back and look at my data to focus on how I corrected the students' mispronunciations.

At this point, my attention shifted and I began to focus more on what does it mean to have a comfortable environment for students to communicate in Hebrew? I realized it is a complicated question to deal with.

My findings and the hunches I have about their meanings

When I analyzed the data that I collected and researched the literature, I realized that I have a lot to work with and I discovered meaningful findings.

I looked carefully at one lesson that I taught and compared it to one lesson that was taught by my mentor (third grade teacher) and one that the first grade teacher taught. I defined five different categories to compare my findings: Immediate Corrections; Positive Feedback; Response to Students' Use of English; Recasts; Asking Questions.

1. **Immediate Corrections** - I corrected students immediately in two different ways:

   a) I corrected a few students' pronunciation when they were reading homework sentences before they even finished reading the whole sentence (I corrected each word separately). The other two teachers that I observed corrected the students' pronunciation after they completed a whole sentence, and did not correct each word separately. Also, I did not give them explanations of why they mispronounced but I observed the other two teachers doing that. For example: when the first grade teacher corrected one of the students she explained to him why the word pronounced like that (she referred students to "look at the vowels").

   b) Completed words - When students answered in English to a question that I asked in Hebrew, I pronounced the first part of the Hebrew word/two words for them and expected that they will complete the word (example: when 1 of them said Hamman Tash" I said: "OZNEI….." and she completed "Hamman").Also, when students were reading and could not complete the last part of a word I did it for them. When watching the other teachers I did not notice that they gave students beginning/ending of words,

but instead I noticed that the third grade teacher responded differently to a student

that answered in English. She waited for him to finish his sentence in English and then

told him: בבקשה להגיד בעברית (please say it in Hebrew now).

According to Delpit (2006), in order to develop an accurate use of language within young

children, the conditions should be optimal. If the conditions are not optimal, and the author

suggests that frequent correction could lead to that, it can cause a mental block within students.

She also suggests that coercions can make talking hard for the students, and can directly affect

fluency. I am not sure if I literally observed mental blocks in my students that I can directly relate

to correction, but I must say that many times I noticed that the students responded in English

and not in Hebrew, even when I knew the students had already mastered sufficient vocabulary

to allow them to respond in Hebrew to a specific question. That might be related to the fact that

when I corrected them repeatedly it caused some kind of reaction similar to the mental block

that the author mentions in her book. Lyster and Mory (2006) suggest that the way second

language teachers correct students' expressions in classrooms should be derived from the

teacher acquaintance with the students that I observed had not only more experience than me,

but also had longer acquaintance with their students. Both taught the specific group of students

the previous year.

According to Lyster and Mory (2006) teachers should try correct their students by using

methods of implicit correction and should prefer that on explicit correction. If I would have read

that research at the beginning of my student teaching, I would probably have tried harder to use

more recasts and prompts and fewer direct explicit corrections, which the authors found to be

less effective and which I now find to be a possible cause of my students' lower level of

confidence in their communication in Hebrew.

2. **Positive feedback** - When I analyzed my data I realized that the other teachers gave positive feedback even in times when the pronunciation was not accurate, while I sometimes did not provide feedback at all. I gave less positive feedback in general, and did not provide any positive feedback when their pronunciation was not accurate. For example: each of the first grade students read a line from the book, and the teacher gave each one of them positive feedback right after the reading ("good!") regardless if it was accurate or not. The first grade teacher also encourages the students in other ways. For example when she asked one of the students to read to her he said: "I can't". She encouraged him by saying "yes you can!" According to VanPatten and Williams (2006), evidence suggests it is proved that there is a vigorous connection between interaction and learning. They claim that interactions are very important in the process of learning because in many cases this is the main context within students receive information about their input. Also, according to Lyster and Mori, (2006) interaction plays a key role in driving second language development. Interacting with students is important even when students mispronounce words. Mistakes cannot be ignored, but correction needs to be done in a positive way that provides the students feedback on their expressions in a way that does not only draw attention to the form but also acknowledges the correct part of the their expression.

3. **Response to students' use of English** - When one of the students started to answer a question in English, I stopped him and started the answer for him in Hebrew. He tried to continue in Hebrew, but he went back to English. I also noticed that the other teachers did it, but I did it more frequently. I phrased my statements about not using English in the class in a different manner from the other teachers, for example: I said to them that from now on we will use the Hebrew term to say Hamman Tash and that I expect them not to use the English term again ("In Israel we don't say Hamman Tash.....I personally don't know what that means".....). I noticed that

the first grade teacher also tried to encourage them to respond in Hebrew rather than English but in a more personal manner. She didn't say to the student: "we don't say…." But instead she used her name and told them: "MORAH RIVKA doesn't know what elephant is. I only know the Hebrew word for that". The third grade teachers phrase it in a way that suggests a community of Hebrew speakers. In one point when students were speaking English, she commented: "we are all doing our best to communicate in Hebrew".

4. Recasts – When the first graders were practicing reading in Hebrew, one of the students read his sentence with few errors, specifically at the last part of the sentence. He read: "SABA YOSI OMER SOD ZE SOD". The first grade teacher repeated the last part of the sentence and said: "good! SOD ZE SOD. Can you do it one more time?"

The third grade teacher also used recasts often. Sometimes she used most of the words that a student's said and repeated it in a new sentence with more accurate pronunciation. When she did that, she always waited for the student to complete the sentence before she repeated it. In explicit correction, unlike recast, the teacher supplies the correct form and clearly indicates that what the student said was incorrect. In recast the teacher repeats the input in context, and does not directly indicate the wrong part of it, instead "(…) the teacher implicitly reformulates all or part of the student's utterance" (R. Lyster, and H. Mori, ibid, p.3).I realized that I did not use this form of correction, while I observed the first grade teacher doing that, for example she repeated sentences that students read with a different intonation sometimes. Lyster and Mori suggest that recasting is a good strategy to reinforce language learning. According to VanPatten and Williams (2006) recasts is an implicit form of feedback, which has a significant role in second language acquisition. It is a negotiation strategy that involves strong interaction back and forth between the student and teacher, and can promote language development by helping students

to focus on their comprehension, and not just on the accuracy of their pronunciation. When I observed my own teaching moves, I noticed that when I corrected the students I did not negotiate with them back and forth in order to help themt to come up with better answer. I corrected them and did not expect to get a response back, and this is a pedagogical approach that the authors think can delay language development.

5. Asking questions - The way I phrased my questions was different then the way the other teachers did it: they were longer and more complicated with a lot of vocabulary in Hebrew that students were not familiar with. I think it might affect the students' willingness to respond. The third grade teacher often asked simple questions in Hebrew that the answers for them were one-two words answers, and the students responded in Hebrew. When the first grade teacher was reading from a book in Hebrew, she asked questions that combines Hebrew and English. The students responded sometimes in Hebrew and sometimes in English. Also, when she asked a question in Hebrew and no one raised his hand to answer, she simplified the question using some English words, for example: MA ZE GAN HAIOT? GAN with all the HAYOT). Also, when I looked back at my questions I realized that many times they were general. The questions that I constructed were more directed to the subject matter, and I did not provide many opportunities for students to share personal interests in their responds. Delpit (2006) suggests that the style and types of questions that we ask can affect students' willingness to respond. She found that when teachers construct questions in a way that promotes students' personal sharing and not just direct answering, the students seemed more willing to respond to those questions. Analyzing the results from the graphs, it shows that most of the students think that questions that are asked during morning meeting times are most helpful for them to interact in Hebrew. When answering to the question in morning meeting "how do you feel today?" they are

encouraged to share personal interests or feeling, and that was proven to by Delpit (2006) to positively affect students' willingness to respond.

My triangulation of the data that informs my findings

I did a member interview with my mentor, Rhonda Mills, a Judaic studies/Hebrew teacher for 3rd grade in JCDSRI. Rhonda has many years of experience in Hebrew instruction. I asked Rhonda some questions that seemed relevant to my research: what does she think about the way I corrected students' pronunciation; how she encourages students to communicate in Hebrew; did I provide enough encouragement and positive feedback to my students; what was my tone of voice when I corrected the students; Did she feel that sometimes I corrected students in a way that could have seemed condescending?

According to Rhonda's philosophy for teaching Hebrew we should correct the Hebrew learner students in elementary school like we would correct babies who are just starting to speak their first language: using a nice tone of voice that will model the way you pronounce a word correctly without pointing out their mistakes. According to this philosophy, when we correct students we must make sure that we do it in a way that will not put them down. This is why it is better to come up with different ways, which are not explicit corrections, to model the right pronunciation (for example: what the literature defines as interaction that based on recasts, see findings). The goal in elementary school instruction of Hebrew is to build comprehension, so it is important to let the students express themselves as much as possible and small errors can be ignored.

Rhonda also suggested that maybe the students answered less to my questions and showed less confidence in interactions with me because they knew I am from Israel and that Hebrew is my first language.

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Also, she mentioned that the Hebrew level of this specific third grade classroom is relatively low. She thought that I was not harsh when I corrected students, and she thinks that it might be related to cultural issues, because she worked with other Israelis teachers before and she noticed the differences in the teaching styles.

The significance of my findings

When I started my research, I asked myself what are the things I need to do in order to encourage my students to communicate in Hebrew but I did not ask myself what are the things that I **should not do** if I want to create a supporting environment for communication in Hebrew.

After analyzing all the data I collected and studying different literature in this area of research, I can now see the connection between correcting students' pronunciation and the level of their confidence to communicate in Hebrew. When thinking about that, I am finding it hard to deal with the question of how to correct students? Should we correct them at all? And if we won't, how would they know that they mispronouncing words?

I think that this research will inform my practice in the future and I would like to use what I learned in order to build confidence and comprehension at students' second language acquisition.

Self reflection was never an easy thing for me to do, but with that being said, I now understand the benefit of it and the tremendous meaning it has for my evolving practice as a teacher. When I looked into the data I asked myself how much of it related to cultural issues. How do my personality, the way I grew up and my personal teaching style are all affect my approach to correct students' mispronunciation? I believe that the cultural issue and the fact that I do not have a personal experience of elementary education in the US affect my teaching style and my approach to mispronunciations.

For me the process of learning a second language was not easy. At the very first day of school when Betty, our new English teacher, walked into the classroom she said: "Here you will only speak English. I will not take any questions in Hebrew, I will not respond in Hebrew, and I expect you to do the same!" I remember the puzzled looks on my classmates' faces. I asked myself how I could possibly do that. I just started to learn English and I felt that I could not make it in class without using some Hebrew, but Betty

provide a safe space to communicate in English and I knew that I needed to be accountable for the way I pronounced words. I expected to be corrected by my teacher/classmates whenever needed. With time, we all got used to that approach, and indeed we only spoke English during Bettie's lessons. My teacher's approach did not make it easier, but it made it possible for me to develop in learning the language and to always want to know more and more. I believe that Bettie's approach worked well for me because I felt that I was expected to communicate in English. Betty knew, off course, that neither I nor my other classmates were fluent in English, but still she made it possible to study solely in English. At the beginning I did not spoke Hebrew during her class time because I knew that those are the class rules, but later it become natural until Hebrew was not needed anymore to communicate.

Ideas for further research

I am now aware that there is a connection between correcting students' pronunciation and the level of their confidence to communicate in Hebrew.

Although I am still dealing with questions of when and how is the best way to correct students, I am quite clear that I need to correct the students, but I want to make sure that I am doing that in the right way, that will not diminish their confidence level.

When I went back to look at my 5 categories, I realized that I would really like to consider each one of them when I teach. I would like to take more time to think about positive feedback, try waiting a while before correcting, use more recasts and phrase my questions differently.

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