

Return on Knowledge of Hebrew in

Arab Society: Barriers to Language

Learning and How to Remove Them

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This is a short summary, for the full paper (in Hebrew) see
<https://www.idc.ac.il/he/research/aiep/pages/policy-papers.aspx>.

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The Aaron Institute's Program for Economic Policy of the Israeli Arab Society

The Aaron Institute has founded a study program focusing on economic policy for the Israeli Arab society. The institute's vision for this program is to advance the manufacturing and business economy in Israel's Arab society, and to enhance its integration in the national economy. The program's advisory committee is headed by former Supreme Court Justice Salim Joubran and comprises several key figures from various fields in the Arab society. Every year, the advisory committee assembles to discuss the program's research topics, based on outcomes and accumulated knowledge.

This program is part of Aaron Institute's comprehensive economic strategy for the Israeli economy, which aims to achieve sustained growth in GDP and productivity along with reduced poverty and inequality. The focus of the program's activity is promoting government decisions on implementation of long-term economic policies for Israel's Arab society. To promote the program's vision, its activity revolves around designing strategies and devising policies in the fields of education, employment, and infrastructure, through collaboration with various government offices and particularly the Ministry of Finance. Policy recommendations include proposals for detailed plans based on up-to-date data regarding the Arab population in Israel, as well as proven economic knowledge acquired nationally and internationally, which takes into consideration existing customs and cultural norms in Israel, including political limitations. Research findings and recommendations are presented at public roundtable discussions held in Arab localities, with participants including Arab and Jewish professionals such as researchers, decision-makers, and senior figures from the business and public sectors.

Our collaboration with government offices, especially the Ministry of Finance, makes it possible to increase the program's impact and to translate its proposals into government decisions with allocated funds, which engender the implementation of long-term policies in various fields.

Return on Knowledge of Hebrew in Arab Society: Barriers to Language Learning and How to Remove Them

This policy paper is part of a series of papers issued by the Program for Economic Policy of the Israeli Arab Society, written in collaboration with the Chief Economist Division in the Israeli Ministry of Finance,¹ which discuss the barriers obstructing access to human capital acquisition in Israel's Arab society and the most effective ways to remove them. The current study focuses on proficiency in the Hebrew language which is one of the most basic skills, and yet one that is critically important for integration in the labor market and academic success in Israel, as shown in a previous study which examined the effect of the Hebrew proficiency level of Muslim women at the time of finishing high school on their employment and earnings during prime working ages.²

The study presented in this paper focuses on the labor-market return on knowledge of Hebrew among Arab men and women in Israel, as well as the barriers to Hebrew language acquisition in the Israeli-Arab education system. Analysis of the data collected shows that Hebrew proficiency is very low among a large percentage of Arab population. There is also a significant gender gap in favor of men, which decreases as education levels rise. Proficiency level in Hebrew was found to be positively correlated with the likelihood of academic integration and success among high-school graduates, and also with the likelihood of employment and the income level of both men and women in primary working ages, the correlation being stronger with the likelihood of employment among women and with the income among men. Improving Hebrew proficiency to its highest level is correlated with a GDP increase of over NIS one billion per year.

A close examination of Hebrew tuition in the Arab education system shows significant barriers impairing Arab students' ability as well as motivation to learn this language. Therefore, we propose a series of measures intended to improve Hebrew language proficiency, starting at a young age and throughout school years, with an underlying vision of substantial improvement in Hebrew proficiency levels, to the extent where it no longer constitutes a barrier in the labor market and in academia. Our primary recommendation is to split Hebrew tuition into two levels – Obligatory and Expanded – starting at the beginning of high school, as is currently done with English and math studies, and to adapt the pedagogic content accordingly:

¹ The views presented in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of the Chief Economist and/or Ministry of Finance.

² Tehawkho, Marian & Osnat Lifshitz (in press), "Language as a Barrier to Integration of Muslim Women in the Israeli Labor Market".

- **Obligatory (3 study units)** – the required level for entering the labor market and conducting an everyday conversation.
- **Expanded (5 units)** – the required level for academic studies and professional discourse.

Our proposed objectives for graduation rates in each study level are to have at least 90% of graduates from Israel's Arab education system taking Obligatory level exams, with half of them expanding their studies to 5 units. These objectives should be incorporated into a comprehensive Hebrew study program encompassing the entire period of studies within the education system. Other recommendations include adapting pedagogic content to suit the Arab society, to create a sense of identification and foster willingness to learn the language; developing digital tools and contents to support language learning; and increasing exposure to the Hebrew language through the integration of teachers who are native-level Hebrew speakers into the Arab education system, inclusion of Hebrew-speaking guest speakers and volunteers in the regular curriculum, and informal education activities involving students from the Hebrew-speaking education system, led by facilitators who are native-level Hebrew speakers.

Alongside our recommendations for the education system, we recommend investing resources in the improvement of Hebrew language proficiency among adults in the Arab society, through courses and schemes for Hebrew tuition which are adapted to meet labor market needs.

1. Summary and Conclusions

This study continues a series of studies aiming to identify the barriers obstructing access to human capital acquisition in Israel's Arab society and to find the most effective means for removal of these barriers. In a previous study³ we showed that 50-70 percent of the gap in average monthly income between Arab and Jewish households stems from gaps in human capital levels between these two population groups, i.e. number of years of study and quality of education.⁴

A substantial part of this human capital gap between the Arab and Jewish populations is created at school age.⁵ Lower academic achievement, and the human capital gaps created prior to finishing high school, subsequently affect the ability of high school graduates to proceed to higher education, as well as their ability to enter the labor market and the quality of their employment. In the current study we focused on one of the most basic skills, which is nevertheless critically important for integration in the labor market and academic success in Israel: Hebrew language proficiency, which can be addressed from a young age through the education system. We assessed the impact of proficiency in Hebrew on integration and success in academia and the labor market, and examined the factors which hinder language acquisition during school years.

These are our main findings:

1. A large percentage of Israel's Arab population is insufficiently proficient in Hebrew, and there are significant gender gaps in favor of men. These gaps decrease as education levels rise.
2. There is a significant positive correlation between the Hebrew proficiency level of Israeli Arabs at the time of finishing high school and the likelihood of their integration and success in academia, as well as their chances (particularly those of women) to be employed at a later age. The probability that an Arab student who had taken expanded matriculation in Hebrew will drop out of undergraduate studies is lower by 7 percentage points compared to a fellow Arab student who had taken minimum matriculation units. Furthermore, the likelihood of an Arab woman with expanded matriculation in Hebrew to be employed at age 26-36 is 9 percentage points higher compared to a woman who had taken minimum matriculation units.

³ Tehawkho, Marian (2019), "Arab Society as an Engine of Growth in Israeli Economy", Aaron Institute for Economic Policy.

⁴ The comparison throughout refers to the non-Haredi Jewish population.

⁵ These gaps were adjusted, of course, to account for the gaps in socio-economic backgrounds between the two population groups.

3. Chances of employment for Arab men and women in primary working ages are higher by 15.6 and 27.2 percentage points, respectively, among those with high proficiency level in Hebrew, and their salary is higher by 19.7% and 20.2%, respectively, compared to those whose Hebrew proficiency level is low.
4. Improving the spoken Hebrew proficiency of Israel's Arab population in primary work ages is correlated with a GDP increase of NIS 1.27 billion per year.
5. Thorough examination of teaching methods used to teach Hebrew in Israel's Arab education system reveals significant barriers which impair Arab students' ability as well as motivation to learn this language: complete segregation between Arab and Jewish populations in the education system as well as daily life, which lead to a lack of language exposure; low quality of Hebrew teaching; unsuitable pedagogic content; the existing method of ability grouping and the current structure of matriculation exams; and finally, the admission requirements of academic institutions which disregard Hebrew matriculation grades in favor of internal admission exams.

In light of these findings, we propose a series of measures intended to improve Hebrew language proficiency, especially among the younger population. For a significant change to occur, intervention must begin at an early age, during school years within the education system. All involved parties should aspire to a vision of significant improvement in Hebrew proficiency levels – conceivably up to native-speaker level upon high-school graduation – so that it would cease to act as a barrier in academia and the labor market.

These are our proposals for the measures and adjustments required to realize this vision:

- The goal for the Arab education system in terms of Hebrew acquisition should be a situation where the Hebrew matriculation grade reflects the level of knowledge required in academia and the labor market.
- Separation of Hebrew tuition into two levels – Obligatory and Expanded – starting at the beginning of high school, as is currently done with English and math studies, and modification of the pedagogic content accordingly:
 - **Obligatory (3 study units)** – the required level for entering the labor market and conducting an everyday conversation.
 - **Expanded (5 units)** – the required level for academic studies and professional discourse.
- An oral section as part of the spoken Hebrew matriculation exam, conducted by an external examiner, similarly to English exams.

- The main objective to be attained by 2030 should be a rate of at least 90% of graduates from Israel's Arab education system taking Obligatory level exams, with at least half of them expanding their studies to 5 units. To ensure this objective is realized, measurable goals of Hebrew level should be set for each stage of learning in the framework of the education system from elementary school onwards, provided the pedagogic content would be modified to properly reflect the level of Hebrew proficiency.
- Adapting the cultural, historical and national contents of Hebrew studies and highlighting similarities to Arabic, to create a sense of identification and increase motivation to learn Hebrew.
- Increasing exposure to Hebrew through informal education activities, led by facilitators who are native-level Hebrew speakers and involving students from the Hebrew-speaking education system, in a continuous manner throughout the school year.
- Inclusion of Hebrew-speaking guest speakers and volunteers in the Arab education system.
- Recruiting teachers who are native-level Hebrew speakers while conducting targeted seminars for existing Hebrew teachers, and establishing a unique academic track, in the framework of teacher certification training, which is dedicated to Hebrew teaching in the Arab society. Also, increasing exposure to Hebrew among Arab-speaking Hebrew teachers by accommodating Arab teachers in Jewish schools.
- Developing digital contents and tools which are suitable to the different stages of learning, to support language learning through access to additional contents and creative learning aids incorporating modern teaching methods, which would also help to reduce costs in the long run.

Along with the necessary modifications and investments within the education system, we recommend to invest resources in the creation of courses and training opportunities for Hebrew learning which target high school graduates, and to adapt the level and the contents of these courses according to labor market needs, in order to raise employment rates (particularly among women) and increase the quality of employment among men and women alike.