



Hebrew Language Literacy in the Arab Society: Standardizing Measurement and Assessment

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This is a short summary, for the full paper (in Hebrew) see

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Aaron Institute for Economic Policy

Dedicated to the memory of Aaron Dovrat

The vision of the Aaron Institute for Economic Policy in the Tiomkin School of Economics is to support sustainable economic growth and social resilience, along with poverty reduction. To achieve these goals, the institution strives to design a strategy based on measurable goals, which can be subjected to international comparison, and propose detailed plans for economic policies based on the most updated international knowledge. We focus primarily on reforms towards economic growth stemming from increasing employment and raising the GDP per hour worked (labor productivity) in Israel.

The key measure of sustainable economic growth – GDP per capita – is still low in Israel compared to leading developed countries, and so is labor productivity. Through its economic studies, the Aaron Institute presents goals, innovative policy tools, and reforms to promote growth, high-quality employment, and labor productivity.

The Institute's mission is to help shaping the socioeconomic policy in Israel through the development of long-term plans that address the full range of economic and social issues facing the Israeli economy. Our main focus is families with less than median income, who comprise significant parts of the Arab and Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) populations. In these groups specifically, increasing employment and productivity would greatly contribute to achieving the goals of growth, social resilience, and poverty reduction. In addition, our studies aim to influence the professional discourse, and to stimulate discussion based on reliable information and socioeconomic research that offers practical tools to achieve these goals.

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The Center for Economic Policy of the Israeli Arab Population

The Aaron Institute has established The Center for Economic Policy of the Israeli Arab Population with a vision of advancing the manufacturing and business economy in Israeli-Arab population, and enhancing its integration in the Israeli economy. The activity of this center is part of Aaron Institute's comprehensive economic strategy for the Israeli economy, which aims to achieve sustained growth in GDP and labor productivity, along with reduced poverty and inequality. The center's activity focuses on presenting government decision-makers with recommendations for implementation of long-term economic policies for Israel's Arab population, and promoting their enactment in practice.

In accordance with the center's vision, 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 and the Authority for Economic Development of the Minority Sectors. Policy recommendations include proposals for detailed programs which are based on up-to-date data regarding the Arab population in Israel, as well as economic knowledge acquired nationally and internationally, while taking 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, enables us to enhance the center's impact and to translate its proposals into government decisions with allocated funds, which engender the implementation of long-term policies in various fields.



The Authority for Economic Development of the Minority Sectors

The Authority for Economic Development of the Minority Sectors in the Ministry for Social Equality was established on the basis of Government Resolution 1204 from February 15, 2007. Its overarching objective is to promote social and economic development of the Israeli Arab society towards prosperity, the reduction of disparities, and its integration into the national economy. The Authority works to strengthen the economic and social foundations of the Arab society, and to create growth engines which would facilitate the narrowing of social and economic gaps. Its core activity is promoting, implementing and coordinating a range of government decisions and programs regarding the socio-economic development of the Arab society.

The Authority for Economic Development has taken upon itself the role of maintaining a comprehensive, up-to-date overview of the Arab society and of the social and economic challenges it faces. The Authority coordinates and advances government plans pertaining to socio-economic development. To achieve its mission and goals, it promotes an ongoing tri-sector discourse and acts as a key point of contact for government offices implementing targeted programs involving the Arab society, while also supporting and empowering Arab local authorities as well as all civil society organizations dedicated to the betterment of the Arab society.

Hebrew Language Literacy in the Arab Society: Standardizing Measurement and Assessment

Language literacy is one of the most important metrics of human capital, being essential for the successful integration of every individual in society and in the economy. The low level of Hebrew language proficiency is one of the major barriers to the integration of Arab society into tertiary and academic education, as well as the labor market.

In its current form, Hebrew language tuition in the education system is ineffective, and despite efforts to improve the quality and efficiency of Hebrew tuition in Arab education over the recent years, the level of Hebrew proficiency has been steadily declining among young adults in Arab society. Post high school frameworks – transition year programs, tertiary and academic education institutions, vocational training courses, and the labor market – have started developing their own solutions for the adult population, independently and without coordination with the Ministry of Education, and as a result, although some of these programs have begun to be adapted in line with the CEFR model,¹ there is still no unified standard for tuition, or for measurement and assessment, which are mostly carried out internally and without reciprocal recognition.

This document summarizes an interministerial consultation process led by The Authority for Economic Development of the Minority Sectors, as part of the implementation of Government Decision no. 550, with the aim of formulating an action plan which would bring together all relevant government actors to promote key measures for the improvement of Hebrew language tuition in Arab society, along with the creation of a standardized, unified evaluation method for Hebrew proficiency levels, so that the level of Hebrew literacy would not constitute a barrier in academia and in the labor market. We propose a series of measures aiming to improve Hebrew language proficiency, and to create continuity and coordination among all the relevant actors throughout the course of life. Key recommendations include adopting the CEFR standard for tuition and assessment of foreign languages, developing unified tools for the measurement and assessment of Hebrew language mastery levels across all government agencies, and ensuring continuous measurement of Hebrew mastery levels throughout all phases of life, through the different stages of the education system and up to integration into employment.

¹ CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) is a framework of reference for languages which is shared by European countries and defines the measurement of language proficiencies according to very clear criteria.

1. Summary and Conclusions

This document was created through the collaborative work of The Center for Economic Policy of the Israeli Arab Society at the Aaron Institute, The Authority for Economic Development of the Minority Sectors in the Ministry for Social Equality, and TASC Consulting Inc., and is the product of an interministerial consultation process led by The Authority for Economic Development of the Minority Sectors, as part of the implementation of Government Decision no. 550, with the aim of formulating strategy, coordination, and an action plan which would bring together all relevant government actors to improve literacy levels, promote key measures for the improvement of Hebrew language tuition in Arab society, and create a standardized, unified evaluation method for Hebrew proficiency levels.

At present, the low proficiency level in Hebrew language, particularly spoken Hebrew, is among the major barriers which hinder the integration of Arab society in tertiary and academic education, as well as the labor market. This low level of literacy stems from various causes, primarily lack of motivation to learn the language at younger ages which is due to insufficient exposure to Hebrew and the lack of need to use it in everyday life, an ideological barrier to learning the language, and low awareness of its importance for integration, later on in life, into tertiary and academic education as well as employment. To this day, Hebrew is not considered a core subject in schools; teachers, principals, and the system as a whole do not give it its due importance, and Hebrew tuition in its current form is ineffective and deficient in many respects, mainly low level of tuition stemming from inadequate teacher training, outdated pedagogic content and teaching methods, and a disproportionate emphasis on reading and writing rather than speaking and practical language use. Currently, the Hebrew matriculation scores of high school students do not accurately reflect their proficiency level in the Hebrew language, thus even students who achieve high scores at expanded matriculation (5 study units) have not mastered the language sufficiently to integrate successfully into post high schools frameworks. Despite efforts made in recent years by the education system and other parties to improve the quality of Hebrew language tuition at younger age groups, the data as well as the reports of those involved on the ground indicate a clear decline in the level of Hebrew language proficiency among young Arab adults.

Given the weakness of the Arab education system and the detrimental effect of the lack of language proficiency on the ability of young Arab adults to integrate into post high school frameworks, the agencies in charge of these frameworks – in particular, The Council for Higher Education (CHE), the relevant departments in the Ministry of Labor, and various transition year programs² – have developed their own schemes and solutions in order to tackle the problem, however these measures were undertaken without any coordination among the various parties. This has given rise to a situation where there is no continuity in the manner of learning and in the solutions provided for language acquisition throughout the life course of young people. There are no unified standards, and each organization employs a different form of measurement with some using internal measurement, so as of today there is no unified measurement tool to rank levels of Hebrew language knowledge and associate them with language skills/proficiencies, and the level measured by one organization is not recognized by other organizations at later stages. However, recognizing this problems, some of the main stakeholders have recently embarked on initial, uncoordinated processes towards adapting their learning and measurement methods to match the CEFR model.³

In light of the above, we propose a series of measures aiming to improve Hebrew language proficiency starting at a young age, and to create continuity and coordination among all the relevant actors throughout the course of life. These measures are meant to provide solutions in terms of both flow and stock: the long-term objective is to improve the quality of tuition in the education system, so that it would impart to its graduates the proficiency level required for integration in post high school frameworks, thereby enabling the parties in charge of these frameworks to reduce resource allocation towards tackling the Hebrew language barrier, and perhaps even rendering their programs redundant. Until this objective is realized, however, there is a need for solutions in the short to medium term which would address the needs of the existing stock of the over-18, adult population wishing to integrate into those frameworks. All the relevant parties should aspire for a significant improvement in Hebrew proficiency levels – up to native speaker level, if possible – so that it would not act as a barrier in the labor market and in academia. Listed below are our main recommendations and proposed policy measures for achieving these goals, in general for all parties across the board, as well as particular recommendations which are relevant for specific parties.

² Including transition year programs operated by civil society organizations.

³ See footnote 1.

Across-the-Board Recommendations

1. Adopting the CEFR standard for for tuition and assessment of foreign languages, and developing unified tools for the measurement and assessment of Hebrew language mastery levels, which would apply across all government agencies.
2. Establishing a coordination committee in charge of integrating Hebrew tuition and assessment among adults over the age of 18.

Key Recommendations for the Education System

1. Defining the required levels of Hebrew language proficiency throughout the stages of education, across all language modalities (speaking, listening, reading and writing), in line with the CEFR model; setting measurable targets and monitoring the attainment of these targets.
2. Adapting contents and teaching methods to the new standards throughout all stages of education.
3. Internal and external measurement and assessment throughout all stages of education within the education system.
4. Increasing exposure to native Hebrew speakers, along with opportunities to meet with them.

Recommendations for the Higher Education System

1. Adapting the Hebrew Proficiency (YAEL) test to meet the CEFR requirements, including the addition of an assessment component for spoken language.
2. Defining required levels, as per the CEFR model, for admission into and graduation from academic institutions, differentiated by specific institutions and fields of study.

Recommendations for the Various Departments in the Ministry of Labor

1. **Vocational training courses and schools:** mutual coordination with the Ministry of Education with regard to adapting proficiency levels according to the CEFR scale, and increasing exposure to Hebrew language as part of the internship phase of studies.
2. **Population Employment Administration:** enhancing cooperation and coordination with other parties, both within and without the Ministry of Labor, to expand the operation of the “Hebrew +” program, including a unified definition of Hebrew proficiency levels and evaluating the effectiveness of existing programs.
3. **The Government Institute for Technology and Science Training (MAHAT):** a mechanism which would enable requiring candidates to achieve the required level of Hebrew language proficiency by the time of their graduation or qualification, for high school graduates who had not taken their matriculation exams in Hebrew.

Standardization of Hebrew language tuition and measurement, along with coordination among all the aforementioned government agencies, will facilitate continuity in the various solutions provided by all government and private-sector actors, enable measuring the effectiveness of the various programs and funding them accordingly, and also encourage private-sector stakeholders to adapt to these standards and develop initiatives for innovative programs and learning methods which do not exist in government-run systems.