

**Muchnik, Malka, Niznik, Marina, Teferra, Anbessa, and Gluzman, Tania (2016). *Elective Language Study and Policy in Israel: A Sociolinguistic and Educational Study*. Palgrave Macmillan, ISBN 978-3-319-34035-7, ISBN 978-3-319-34036-4 (e-Book)**

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The authors of this book have set themselves an ambitious goal: to make a comparative analysis of the study of elective languages in Israeli schools putting it into a broad social and educational context. Since all of the four languages are also languages of big immigrant communities, teaching them at school emerges as a complex phenomenon closely related to attitudes of the majority to these groups, status of their languages and a degree of their integration. Moreover, it reflects changes in the attitudes to multilingualism, and the interaction of instrumental and symbolic approaches to language learning.

All of us have multiple identities and reading this book I caught myself that it was talking to my different selves: I read it as a university language instructor always in search of better ways to boost motivation of the students who are interested in science and technology much more than in the study of languages. I looked at it as a researcher exploring changing configurations and hybridity of immigrants' language and culture. I perceived it as an immigrant whose family members are dispersed and speak five different languages turning intergenerational communication as well as communication between younger peers into a real challenge; finally, this book talked to me as a citizen concerned about preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as about the future of my native language in the country that has become my home. And no wonder: this book is multifaceted, it has a wide scope of research questions, and is convincing in its conclusions since it is solidly grounded in linguistic, pedagogical and ethnographic theory; it applies both quantitative and qualitative methods; although the authors do not mention this surveys and interviews are complemented by many years of participant observation and it is based on a wealth of empirical data: 966 students filled out questionnaires, 100 semi-structured interviews were conducted with students and 80 with teachers.

This is also a very timely project because of the ambivalence experienced by language studies today. On the one hand, in the emerging era of the knowledge society many industries are based on text and require communication skills, so proficiency in several languages has become a valuable commodity. As a result, in many countries, and first of all in the European community, school curricula include compulsory and elective foreign languages; on the other hand, as a field of studies Humanities, including languages, are undergoing a crisis with the public esteem of the field dropping as low as ever. Administration of many educational institutions are encouraging students to concentrate their efforts on sciences and technology often at the expense of humanities and language studies. Moreover, with the spread and growing affordance of educational technologies we are witnessing a gradual demise of traditional textbooks and learning environments and an increasing pressure to shift the

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<sup>52</sup> The initial review is available here :

<http://cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/Units/AdultEducation/PirumeiAgaf/HedHaulpan/gilayon-106.htm>

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This book is valuable for international readers because it honestly shows the price that was paid by nurturing Hebrew while suppressing diaspora languages and it demonstrates how important it is for an immigrant-receiving country not to waste the cultural capital brought by newcomers. It is also elucidating for domestic readers. Take the second chapter containing excellent essays on the history and culture of the four language communities. We live side by side with each other but much of the culture of communities remains hidden from the rest of the society. A case in point is Russian-language literature that is discussed in the section devoted to the culture of the Russian-speaking community. Some of the immigrant authors have been translated into many languages but are still unfamiliar to the mainstream Israeli reader (pp. 23-25). Another example is movies about difficulties of integration that were made by immigrants from Argentina, the “invisible community” which as the book shows, has successfully assimilated culturally and linguistically but not always socially (p. 44). Still another example is performative arts of the Ethiopian community: songs in Amharic or theater shows performed either in Hebrew or Amharic, or presenting a bilingual collage (p. 39.)

The essays in the second chapter demonstrate the growing openness of Israeli society to the public use of languages other than Hebrew, Arabic and English. To mention just a few examples: the state radio channel broadcasts in immigrant languages almost round the clock, there are theater and movie festivals in which performances are in Russian and others in Amharic. Linguistic landscape reflects the presence of immigrant groups, primarily Russian speakers but also French speakers, in particular, in Netanya and Ashdod. I would add to these examples cited in the book, 24-hour interpreting services in 6 languages in Israeli hospitals and multilingual websites of most ministries and major commercial companies. All of these developments form a “virtuous circle” – they raise the social status of immigrant languages in the society, and with the rise of the status the motivation to study these languages should also go up. However, as the book shows there are many other factors influencing motivation of the learner, such as attitudes to the community on the part of the host society, political relations between Israel and the country of immigrants’ origin, and others.

One of the most innovative features of this book is that the comparison of educational policies and practices are made between two languages which are foreign for the learners and two that are their heritage languages. Heritage learners are not a new category of students and many a story can be found in the teachers’ folklore about the dilemmas they pose for their instructors and havoc they can create in a foreign-language class. Their number in Russian and Amharic classes is growing and taking into account growing immigration from France in the last several years, one can expect that such learners will also appear in French classes. The lack of experience in dealing with heritage speakers is obvious in many instances and sometimes creates situations bordering on the absurd. For example, the program of Russian studies is defined in the documents of the Ministry of Education as a foreign language program. Yet only students born in the FSU are allowed to be enrolled. At the same time the textbooks recommended for use were written for heritage speakers. Yet they target the virtually unattainable goal for the students to learn to use the language as competent native speakers.

The chapter presenting curriculum goals, methodologies, teaching materials and types of assessment makes a valuable contribution to the evaluation of current pedagogical practices in language teaching. The main conclusion one can make is that even very good textbooks

published in the countries where each language is spoken are not appropriate for the needs of Israeli students because they don't touch upon their life experience. Neither do they build students' competencies on the basis of contact languages, in our case Hebrew and English. This chapter also shows that teaching Amharic, French, Russian and Spanish gives an excellent opportunity to give students a better view of the culture and history of their families when they lived in the Diaspora. This is vitally important for intergenerational ties and this is clear not only to adults. According to the responses to the surveys and in the interviews with the students, one of the factors motivating them to choose their heritage language as an elective is the desire to better understand their roots and their family histories and become closer to their relatives. Although it may sound strange, but they have nostalgia for the country of their origin which is often based on the stories of their parents and grandparents. In young children's minds these nostalgic memories sometimes turn into phantasies, akin to fairy-tales. Since language teaching is inseparably linked to learning about geography, nature and other people's way of life these images take a more realistic shape after learning heritage languages at school. Importantly, interviews with adolescents show that they are also motivated to learn their heritage language to contribute to its continued use in Israel—a welcome sign that members of the one-and-a-half and second generation immigrants take pride in their heritage and are open to multilingualism in the society.

This book raises important questions about the role of language teaching in the maturing of adolescents. Probably more than any other school subject it enables children to compare their own experience with experience of their peers in other countries in different periods of time. If thoughtfully guided, children learn to appreciate and respect other cultures' values and way of life. And by learning about others we reflect more about ourselves and come to understand our own culture better.

Another theme that comes up in the book very strongly is the role and status of language teachers. We are constantly confronted with a misconception shared by laypeople and administrators that to be a language teacher it is enough to have a "perfect" command of the language. But we know it too well, and the book shows it very clearly that a good language teacher requires a wide repertoire of skills and has to be equipped with the knowledge of linguistics, pedagogical theory and methods. She should be resourceful in choosing activities suitable for learners, sensitive to changes in new generations' cognitive styles and constantly in search of new materials that can interest her students. One has to be techno-savvy and last, but not the least be able to inspire enthusiasm for the subject which doesn't have a high prestige. Talking about teachers I didn't use "she and her" to meet the rules of political correctness, but because the majority of teachers at school and in our profession in particular, are women. Unfortunately, the prestige of the profession of a school teacher in Israeli society is low. This is obvious from frequent strikes for better salaries and better work conditions. Few men who wish to be breadwinners choose to work at school. It is well known in sociology, that as soon as a profession loses prestige, men move out. Another indicator of the low prestige is that there are no university departments specializing in training teachers of Amharic, Russian and Spanish. This is alarming and that is why I think that as members of this profession we have to use every opportunity to draw attention of the public and of decision makers to the plight of the teachers who to a large extent, have to be auto-didacts, have to run from school to school because they are primarily part-timers, or worse still they have to moonlight supplementing their income by taking any job that pays. From the section on Amharic teachers we learn that all of them teach no more than a few hours a week and have to earn their living as factory workers, gas-station attendants, guards or cleaners. In order to teach well one has to learn continuously, but under such conditions professional

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improvement is hardly possible. Judging from the interviews with the teachers quoted in the book, some of them are extremely dedicated and enthusiastic about the languages they teach, but exploiting these qualities without adequate reward is unwise. A lack of investment in good teachers may have repercussions: already now young and able people are reluctant to choose language teaching as their vocation.

I hope this book will reach different audiences – scholars and teachers, parents and officials of the Ministry of Education and will achieve its ultimate goal - to benefit young generations of Israelis.