

As Valuable as a Dead Sea Scroll – A Story About Teaching English in Israel



Gate of House in Ein Kerem, Jerusalem-photo by Geoffrey Clarfield

by Geoffrey Clarfield

Some Israelis read, write, and speak English with greater clarity and less hesitation than native born citizens of the Anglo Sphere. This is because they learnt it as a second or even third language and exercised it in college or university (and often enough during graduate study in an English-speaking country) as so much of modern academic writing is done in English, the Latin of the 21st century. And so they have avoided many of the bad habits and negative psychological associations to certain words or phrases that one encounters

when you grow up speaking English.

Then there are those Israelis who have traveled the world, lived, and worked in English speaking countries. Most of them are conversational and many of them can watch an English-speaking film or TV show and understand all of it, or most of it.

Then there are those Israelis in the service sector; hotels, car rentals, restaurants and the tour guides who must be fluent in English to deal with what used to be over one to two million foreign visitors a year. May they return during more peaceful times.

And so one must conclude that English is doing well in this country. It is also supported by at least two hundred thousand Israelis who were born in the Anglosphere and who have two full time newspapers and numerous printed and online magazines that keep their language alive in a country where most people are native Hebrew or Arabic speakers. Indeed in many areas in Israel's big cities one need not speak Hebrew at all to manage daily life. This is quite an accomplishment.

It is even more admirable given that modern Hebrew is a reengineered language. It never died out among the Jewish people but by the late 19th century it had become a written language and at best one of correspondence among Rabbis and religious experts. Eliezer ben Yehuda almost single handedly revived it during the 20th century and it is now as vibrant as French is in France or Italian is in Italy.

The Irish, who gained their independence almost three decades before Israel, have singularly failed to revive their native Gaelic and are now a nation of gifted but ambivalent speakers of English which they speak and write in a way that expresses their own national genius. It is a bit sad to contemplate.

In Israel, a foreign visitor would conclude that the primary

and secondary educational system of Israel must be fantastic for causing or facilitating such multilingual proficiency and widespread mastery of English. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Speak to any informed Israeli about the declining standards in Israel's state schools and the first thing they will say is that there is no discipline. The second thing that they will say are that standards are variable. The third thing they will point out is that far too many parents blame teachers for the poor performance of their children. And then there are the realists who admit that without hundreds of hours of parental or private tutoring, their children would not have finished high school before doing their national service. There are exceptional Israeli teachers of English (like my niece!) and schools that support them, but they are few and far between.

This explains why when after three years of risking your life for your country so many Israelis come back to civilian life with a desire to learn. The first thing they do is finish high school at night school. It is clear then that higher education, travel and tourism have done much to create a vibrant home for English in Israel, amplified by the Internet and the fact that its dominant language is English. But it was not always so. I spent some years in Israel during the late seventies and early eighties when English was not so widespread, and one had to learn Hebrew quickly to manage daily life. Things were different then.

I arrived in Israel in the late seventies with my BA in my suitcase and a Certificate for Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). After a two-month intensive "Ulpan" (language course) where I became conversational in modern Hebrew, I began to teach the first semester at a Junior High School in Jerusalem with scores of rambunctious and disrespectful preteenagers in Grades 8 and 9.

I managed to finish the semester while my students ran around

the class doing everything they could, not to learn, all the while making fun of my less than perfect Hebrew, knowing full well that they were rejecting my near perfect English which I shared with them through the latest techniques that were coming out of ESL in North America. One of my favorites was to teach students to tap out the rhythm of English sentences before asking students to imitate my delivery. This is a winning technique with language learners from eight to eighty.

When I finally realized I needed thicker skin to thrive in a declining system of public education and the fact that the salary was not enough to live on, I submitted my resignation. To my surprise, my superiors told me that I had not done badly as a start and that with help and experience I could eventually master the situation. I was surprised at this backhanded compliment, but I had had enough. I was unemployed after five months in Israel and the cold winter winds were blowing.

These were the days before the Internet and so either one of my friends pointed it out to me or I just walked in off the street and asked to speak to the director of the school that was called The American Ulpan, meaning an English language school that taught American English to Israelis. I met the director, an American a bit younger than my father who looked like the American Jewish actor Phil Silvers who was famous for among other things his role in the early 1960s American comedy *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad Mad Mad World*.

Robert Goldfarb and I hit it off immediately. It was like having discovered a long lost American Jewish uncle. He had come to Israel fifteen years earlier and had noted that few Israelis spoke English, the schools did a terrible job teaching it and at that time he inferred that the Israeli elites who were bilingual felt comfortable with the fact that this gave them privileged access to work opportunities both in and outside Israel that were closed to Hebrew only speaking citizens. He wanted to change that in a good American style

and so he spearheaded an “English for everyone” approach to teaching.

Teaching English at the Ulpan Ha Americayit (The American Ulpan in English) was a bit like working for a good franchise in the USA. Robert and his staff had developed a series of graded textbooks designed precisely for Israelis. There were lots of drills and according to innovative language learning techniques at the time, he rightly insisted that the students must do most of the talking.

We were trained in the method and new teachers started with the students who knew no English and then rose through the ranks until they could teach advanced speaking and reading techniques. I rose through the ranks quickly and although the pay was not great, it helped me break even, which was a triumph for a newcomer in those days.

I had found an institutional home and teaching culture that recognized and affirmed my teaching abilities and the exceptionally wide amount of general reading that I had done by that time. Robert watched me carefully and before I left, offered me the management of one of the franchises. I turned him down as I wanted to do field work among Sinai Bedouin and my wife, and I were soon to relocate in southern Israel for a year of research and desert adventure. There were no hard feelings, and he was an honored guest at our wedding in Israel before we moved to the Negev desert.

The thing I loved most about Robert and his staff is that they believed that learning how to speak, read and write good English was not rocket science or the privilege of the elite with their high IQs and family connections. Anyone could master the language if they stuck to the method and so many did. I imagine that thousands of Israelis learnt how to master English before the Internet came here in force after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Robert's secret was simple. He used his "Yankee ingenuity." He based his methods on how Israelis learn and do not learn. Part of our training was learning to understand and apply a typed handbook of every kind of culturally specific disruption, complaint, or excuse for not doing the work at hand or in between classes that is and was common among Israeli learners and which always had a bit of Zorba the Greek style self-dramatization.

When I applied its recommendations, the students were stunned. These were mostly adult men and women who had finished their military service, had university degrees or were out in the working world, many with spouses and kids. But we also instructed teenagers and pre-teens and applied the same methods. They could not figure out how I and every other teacher were calm and carried our authority as teachers with dignity, as we outflanked and deescalated their oh so predictable Mediterranean dramas.

I have very fond memories of my time teaching at the Ulpan. In a short time I had gone from a concrete jungle to a linguistic garden. I had the support of my supervisors and the affirmation of the head of the school. I quickly learnt how to firmly discipline Israeli learners and just as quickly gain their respect as I had so much to offer them.

One final memory. I am facilitating a discussion about a novel, busily writing words and phrases on a blackboard as they come up from my students, a very user-friendly way of affirming their efforts to speak expressively while correcting grammar and spelling. One newly arrived Russian immigrant gave a short presentation on why the Soviet Union was a wonderful place. Another Russian of the same age gave a short presentation on why Russia was a horrible place to live and that Israel, with all its challenges, was a far better bet for an adult with children. I merely corrected grammar and spelling and enjoyed the encounter enormously.

Robert Goldfarb eventually passed away and I do not know what happened to the American Ulpan as a private language school. I suspect the Internet killed it. But if there is one thing, I would do to fulfill his legacy it is this. I would willingly hand over to the Israeli Ministry of Education that handbook that he created on disciplining Israeli students.

It is as valuable as one of the Dead Sea Scrolls. I will do everything possible to find a copy.

First published in the [Times of Israel](#).