

## **Language Policy and the Status of Arabic in Israel**

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### **Introduction:**

This paper's objective is to give a brief definition of the word "language"; the role language plays in the lives of nations in general and minorities in particular, and the way a language helps shape and formulate their identities. The paper will also define the term "language policy," trace the language policy adopted by the successive Israeli governments towards the Arabic language, and provide a brief account of some of the political as well as the historical reasons which have reflected themselves negatively on the status of Arabic in Israel. The paper will relate to the status of Arabic during the Ottoman period and the British mandate. It will also give a brief survey of the intra-Arab dialogue concerning the status of Arabic and the type of Arabic to be used in the Arab world. The paper will try to show the various factors which contributed to the marginalization of this language among Arabs in Israel, by relating more closely to what is known as the "New Curriculum" of the Arabic language, years 1985-1995. Analyzing some aspects of this curriculum will shed a clearer light on the gaps of the language policy regarding Arabic in Israel. Finally, the paper will describe some of the attempts made to define language policy, with some general recommendations on how to promote the status of Arabic in Israel.

### **Definition of the word language:**

Language is usually defined as a set of signs, symbols, means of communication, etc.... Henry Sweet, an English phonetician and language scholar, stated: "Language is the expression of ideas by means of speech-sounds combined into words. Words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts." One can infer that peoples' thoughts, ideas and aspirations are closely related. Attempting to

show this strong relationship between language and human beings, Raymond Williams claims that “A definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world.” Language is a vehicle or a medium which helps define human beings. Emphasizing this relationship, Edward Sapir adds that "Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. Noam Chomsky adds his own definition, saying that language is “A set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements.” Whereas R.A. Hall claims that language is a system or “The institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols,” David Crystal describes language as “The systematic, conventional use of sounds, signs, or written symbols in a human society for communication and self-expression.” The underlying theme of such definitions is the strong relationship between language and human beings. People’s language is a reflection of their identity, development and civilization. It is a vehicle by which they can communicate, convey messages and sustain their own societies. (Definitions are taken from: [www.askjeeves.com](http://www.askjeeves.com)).

### **The roles language plays in the lives of people:**

Languages have often been used to transmit and receive messages, which help promote understanding among people. Via language, people have also conveyed their aspirations, norms, emotions and values. Language has helped people maintain their own identity. National Language has been the medium through which one can be aware of one’s self and the other, a tool of civilization, progress and a mirror of one’s reality. Language is a tool for thought and expression, as well as an instrument to help portray one’s dreams and hopes for a better future. People’s cultural, social, economic and political advances through the ages have been highly dependent on their

mastery and development of their own language. A valuable part of their heritage and civilization is conveyed through language. Therefore, one can safely say that languages have been essential in the making of any civilization. Furthermore, languages seem to play a much more essential and crucial role in the lives of minorities.

### **Language impacts the status of minorities:**

Review of the literature in this field indicates that “Linguistic repertoire is essential and an asset to minorities” (Spolsky and Shohamy,1999). The knowledge of more languages allows people of the various minorities to have a better and stronger control over their SES factors and have stronger chances for a better social, economic and political mobility. Language has often been the medium which helps minorities convey their national aspirations, assert their identities, and preserve their heritage and traditions. Such importance attributed to language in the lives of minorities reflects itself on the issue of language policy making. Regarding the Arab minority in Israel, for example, there has been an ongoing debate on the status of Arabic and what language policy is to be adopted towards this minority. This debate has often been kept at an official level, because language policy is in the hands of Jewish officials. With the establishment of Israel, the issue of language policy and what language to teach in the Arab sector was of paramount importance to Jewish officials, who excluded Arabs from any legal debate regarding such policy. Realizing the power language can play in the status of the Arab minority in Israel, the successive Israeli governments have tried to use language as a medium to tame the Arab public and extinguish their national feelings. Therefore, a closer review of the literature indicates that those governments have adopted a policy of “no policy” as a language policy for the Arab minority. Turning people into “good citizens” entails that those in power allow the minority and the powerless to be proud of their language. To clarify this point, one needs to define language policy

and to show how such a policy can impact the status of a certain language and the lives of individuals involved in that process.

### **Definition of Language Policy:**

One may legitimately ask “What is language policy?” Literature defines language policy as a set of procedures, regulations, laws and decisions made by the empowered and powerful, aiming at affecting the status of a certain language and the linguistic behavior of the people who use that language. Such policy comes in different forms: official documents, constitutions, laws, administrative amendments, directives, etc... (Spolsky and Shohamy, 1999). Language policy is the effort to influence or change language practices, the status, structure, acquisition or the methods by which it is being studied in a certain country, as well as the curricula designed to teach that language. The literature also shows that language policy “evolves piecemeal” and can be highly affected by a combination of law, regulations, customs and practices.

The meaning and definition of language policy can differ from one country to another because “depending on their ideologies, countries are likely to develop different concerns for language education policy” (Spolsky and Shohamy, p.1). In some countries, constitutions may be forced to decide the role of the competing languages and their status. Policy makers within such communities are often empowered individuals who can issue rules to influence behavior and people. Israel, on the other hand, doesn't have a constitution, and there is no law to define language policy. Consequently, policy issues aren't clear. Since the beginning of the 1950s, the successive Israeli governments have been ambiguous regarding their policy towards Arabic as a second official language. According to Spolsky and Shohamy (1999, p.65) political reasons manifested themselves strongly when such governments tried to consider language policy for the Arab minority in

Israel. Due to political and historical reasons, it had been clearly stated that in the Arab sector the Israeli government is the only body entitled to implement the language policy. Therefore, one might claim that the Arabic language in Israel has been a victim of an ongoing political struggle which has inflicted a heavy toll on the language, its status and development. In order to have a better understanding of this claim, one should provide a historical background of the development of the Arabic language.

### **Ottoman Period: 1846 – 1917**

In 1846, the Ottomans issued the first rule covering elementary and secondary education (Yousif, p.956, 1993). At the elementary level, Turkish was the official language of the Moslem Arab students. Arabic would be an L2. This law practically meant that Arabic would become marginalized and slowly disappear as a language. Turkish became the language of instruction at school and the various governmental offices had no use of Arabic, which had a very low social status. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>-c, however, protests and demonstrations by Arab politicians and intellectuals forced the Turks to introduce some changes to the curricula in the elementary Moslem Arab schools. Arabic became an official language and the language of instruction at school, and Turkish became an L2 (Al-Haj, 1996, p.31). Before such steps had been taken, however, during their 400 years in Palestine, the Turks had reduced Arabic to a totally neglected and marginalized second language, with the purpose of forcing Arabs lose their heritage, identity and language. Such a strong negative impact on Arabic would affect the language years after the Turkish occupation of Palestine ended (Ayish et al, 1983, Gonzales, 1992).

### **Mandate: 1917-1948**

During the three decades of the British Mandate of Palestine, between 1917-1947, the status of Arabic began to improve a little. Arabic had become the language of instruction. English, unlike Turkish was not imposed on the Arab population of Palestine. While Turkish was introduced in Arab schools for social and political reasons and used as a means of control, the Mandate refrained from using education as a means for social and political manipulation. The British, however, had a different political agenda, and the policies of the Mandate aimed at maintaining the status quo (Al-Haj, 1996, p.38). According to Miller (p.93, 1985), the British helped Arabs acquire religious studies and universal values to ban them from national education. During the Mandate, Arabic was taught in Palestine the same way it was taught in other neighboring Arab countries. Acknowledging the difficulty of the Arabic language, the Mandate increased the number of teaching hours, and allowed for a variety of ways and means to help students study the language and acquire the various skills needed. During the Mandate, English, Arabic and Hebrew became the three official languages of Palestine, with an equally respected status. Moslem Arab schools, however, were not autonomous like their Jewish and Christian counterparts during the Mandate. The quantitative increase in the number of schools and books in the Moslem Arabic schools did not lead to a qualitative change in education. Also, the debate revolving around which Arabic language to use in the Arab world at that time has impacted the status of Arabic negatively.

### **Which language to use in the Arab world:**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>-c, Arabic suffered at the hands of its own people. The issue of “diglossia” or the “duality of the Arabic language,” (colloquial and literary), became a hotly debated subject in the Arab world: which language to use ? Some claimed that the

Spoken dialect is living while the Literary is dead , studied like any other subject without interest. For example, the Egyptian writer Salami Mussa, rejecting the idea of using Literary Arabic, claimed that learning such a language is as if one is learning a foreign language.” Educated Arabs faced serious dilemmas and questions: What language to use? How to cope with literary Arabic? At the 1931 the Laden conference, which included many Orientalists and Arab intellectuals, Mahmood Taimoor, a famous Egyptian poet at the time, suggested that spoken Arabic should be the official language of Egypt and that literary language should be common to all Arabs (Goiteen, 1961, p.14). Arab intellectuals who were present became outraged, and decided that Literary should be the official language of all Arab people, while Spoken should be for oral discussion only. At that crucial period in the history of modern Arabic and immediately after the end of four centuries of the Turkish occupation, the debate between the three trends; the conservative which advocated the use of classic Arabic, the reformists which supported the use of spoken Arabic, and the middle trend which was somewhere in between, had inflicted heavy damage on the status of the Arabic language as a whole. For the purpose of this brief paper, however, this issue will not be discussed; one can merely say that in the end, Literary Arabic won, and that it did so for religious considerations as the sacred language of the Qur’an, which preserves the Arab culture, religious heritage, and moral- religious obligations. It has also won for political reasons stemming from fear of disintegration of the Arab people, loss of social heritage, national identity, and lack of unification. Cultural factors such the ability of Arabic to preserve the Arab heritage throughout the centuries despite all hardships, besides being a powerful means for self-expression and a tool to express the national aspirations of the Arab people, have contributed to the triumph of classic Arabic. To be more relevant to our topic of discussion, one has to relate

more closely to factors within the Arab minority in Israel which lead to the inferior status of this language in Israel.

**Various factors which have helped marginalize the Arabic language in Israel:**

After this brief historical survey of Arabic language in the last one hundred years, one should relate more specifically to the status of Arabic in the state of Israel and describe some of the factors and challenges which affected the status of this language within the Israeli Arab community. Review of the literature points to many factors which have negatively impacted the status and development of Arabic in Israel. For example, the struggle and conflict between colloquial and literary Arabic within the Arab community in Israel have weakened the status of the language. Colloquial speech is totally different from the written language; yet it is commonly used by children, while teachers often use it in the classroom to explain literary texts. Literary language, on the other hand, is used to measure the progress of the Arabs in the literary field. A literary text requires a wide wealth of language, which neither most teachers nor their pupils seem to possess. Within a single lesson, one can experience three types of Arabic: classical, modern standard, and spoken. Teachers don't seem to have the patience, willingness or the pedagogical tools to deal with this "triad," making diglossia (or "triglossia,") an acute problem. Modern Arabic is highly influenced by classic grammar, morphology and syntax; it is quite sophisticated and complex. Spoken, on the other hand, doesn't rely on any grammatical rules; and exists only for the purpose of oral communication. Spoken Arabic varies from one place to another, with different words and term characterizing each dialect. Confusing the colloquial with the literary, Arab students in Israel are exposed to non-formal Arabic at home and on the street, and intermittently hear formal or classic Arabic in class. Even



teachers often switch between them both, making the issue more complicated and confusing.

The low SES of Arab people, as well as the frequent use of Hebrew among the speakers of Arabic, weakens the position of Arabic in Israel. According to "Panorama" newspaper, p.27 (2. 8. 96), Arab youth use Hebrew either to show off or because they lack equivalent terms in Arabic. In mixed towns, young Arabs are more fluent in Hebrew than in Arabic (Koplovitch, p.382, 1974). Since Hebrew is a Semitic language close to Arabic; Arabs can easily switch to Hebrew in their daily speech.

Arabic books used in Arab schools inculcate many Jewish values, while they are almost devoid of a national content which can express Arab students' national aspirations. The teaching methods in most Arab schools are still frontal and traditional; in Arab schools most teachers teach Arabic frontally, as if they have never heard of more up-to-date methods and techniques. Referring to the overwhelming use of frontal and old-fashioned methods in Arab schools, the inspector for Arabic, Abu Fanah (1995, p.5), speaks about introducing alternative methods to some schools. Alon (1986,p.1) says that a good teaching method may raise the intellectual inquisitiveness of students by asking questions and finding answers to linguistic issues which interest them. Furthermore, teachers of other subjects in the Arab schools don't seem willing to foster an atmosphere conducive to learning of Arabic. Although those teachers use Arabic to teach their subjects of specialization, most of them don't ascribe any importance to Arabic as an end in itself. Such teachers relate to Arabic as an instrument, ignoring its syntactic and grammatical features. This behavior, intentional or not, has affected the way Arab students view their language. Arab graduates who study Arabic in Jewish universities and in most teacher training colleges in Israel study Arabic as a foreign language, using Hebrew to study their mother tongue. Teachers do not seem to have sufficient in-service training to

be able to effectively apply new teaching methods. Universities and teacher training colleges in Israel have not developed training programs to help teachers of Arabic teach this language in a more authentic way.

In addition, in Israel there is no Academy for Arabic to deal with the modernization process and confirm new words. Unlike neighboring countries like Syria and Egypt, Israel has not made enough efforts to help create an academy for Arabic to help maintain the renewal and vitality of the Arabic language. Inspection, both general and professional, has contributed to the problem. Arabic, like other languages, has a part-time inspector who enjoys little assistance and is burdened with many tasks such as preparing curricula, Mashov, and Bagrut tests, and visiting schools and new teachers. They spread themselves thin but manage to cover nothing in-depth or truly impact policy issues related to their field of concern.

#### **Official status of Arabic:**

Historically speaking, as a Semitic language and the mother tongue of the whole Arab population in Israel, neighboring Arab countries, and some other Moslem countries, Classic Arabic has managed to maintain its unique qualities and distinguished characteristics throughout the ages despite all challenges and hardships. With the revelation of the Qura'an, the holy book of the Moslems, it has become sacred and spread quickly to the various parts of the world, managing to preserve Islamic and Arab culture and heritage.

According to Spolsky and Shohamy, however, this status has changed considerably under the successive Israeli governments. Those governments have practiced a policy of control which has allowed Hebrew to become the only dominant official language, excluding and marginalizing the Arabic language while offering it lip-service as a second "official language". In reality, "while Israel is historically and actually multi-lingual, the strength of the monolingual ideology used to effect the revitalization of Hebrew has

led to downplaying the claims of other languages, even the rights of the autochthonous second official language, Arabic” (Spolsky and Shohamy, 1999, p.1). This monolingual ideology advocated the use of one language by all Hebrew , and such an ideology would certainly exclude any other language, including Arabic.

By law Arabic is an official language. In practice, however, public and governmental offices relegate it to a secondary role. It is not even an L2. “Because of the accepted minority status of Israeli Arabs, their Language poses no threat to the hegemony of Hebrew in the society as a whole” Spolsky and Shohamy, p.11). Arabic, a minority language, is denied the legal status, which might be expected to result from its being the second official language, due to many political and ideological reasons.

As a second official language, Arabic suffers from disuse at the official level. Advertisements, landscaping, official bids, the media, the press and court procedures are almost exclusively in Hebrew. Most official Israeli TV channels and radio stations rarely broadcast programs in Arabic. Ben Rafael claims that Arabic today is marginalized and weak. He also adds that Israel is viewed as part of the western culture, in which Arabic has a minor position. It is moreover the language of the enemy, studied by the Jews for security reasons only. In the new land there is a place for one nation and one language. Shohamy claims that language policy in Israel is stirred by the ideology (1996, p.251 of one nation, one language).

This neglect of the Arabic Language at the official level does not come out of a void: rather, it is a historically rooted behavior. Review of the literature shows that towards the end of the British Mandate and the establishment of the Israeli state, there had been a serious debate among Jewish officials at that time regarding the policy to be adopted towards the Arabic language in Israel. In what is known as a transitional period, 1946-48,

a memorandum was delivered by the Education Committee to the Jewish Agency and the National Committee including issues related to Arab education in general and to the Arabic language in particular. These issues were discussed during the period between 1944-1948. In 1948, some major problems regarding language policy had surfaced. Those officials dealing with such issues had to answer questions like: What language of instruction should be used in elementary Arab schools? Should Arabic be used at all? Should it be replaced by Hebrew? This debate was settled by choosing Arabic as the language of instruction, with Hebrew or English as an optional language. Arabic would also be the language of instruction in high school, Arab seminaries and teacher training colleges, with Hebrew and English as obligatory languages. Another policy issue facing the Jewish officials at that time had to do with Arabic books which included anti-Jewish national content. Officials would certainly decide that any textbooks evincing an anti-Jewish spirit should be completely banned. After the establishment of the state and specifically between the years 1948-67, this decision had affected Arab education and the Arabic Language in Israel adversely. Arab students had to go through their schooling almost without any decent textbooks or curricula for teaching Arabic to Arab students. For two years, educators resorted to books from the mandatory period (Shlomo,1968 and Al-Haj, 1996). In January, 1949, the Ministry of Education And Culture formed a special committee to deal with curricula and textbooks for the Arabs. In 1952, first and second grade pupils were provided with textbooks using Arabic as the principle language. Other grade levels still used old textbooks. All those books, however, were void of any national content and were not really designed to meet the practical needs of Arab students or to help introduce Arabic as a mother tongue. The development of Arabic books for Arab students was a slow process. Textbooks for classes 1-4 were designed in 1957, while in 1959 textbooks were designed for classes 5-8 (Al-Haj,

p.101). In 1954, high schools used booklets with poetry and prose as obligatory for the Bagrut test. The curricula were completed in 1967 (Jiryis, 1976, p.206).

During the 1950s, teaching Arabic to Arab students in Israel faced serious pedagogical problems, such as the lack of textbooks and confusion between many different teaching methods. The old method inherited from the two previous periods, the Ottoman and the British, relied more on repetition and rote learning, while the new one introduced by the Israeli system placed more emphasis on comprehension and self-expression. Relying on the textbook as the only source of learning was very different from including a wide range of supplementary materials to broaden one's education. Teaching phonics or starting from the letter to the word ("bottom up") is different from the whole language approach or the "top down" approach, which requires that the pupil read the sentence before he masters the discrete units, the letters. During the Mandate there used to be many hours devoted to teaching the Qur'aan, the holy book of the Moslems, hours which would be reduced to a minimum in the 1950s. These are only few of the many challenges which faced Arab pupils and Arab teachers between the years 1948-1967 in Israel.

During the years 1968-80, the years of the "old curriculum", not much had changed regarding the teaching of Arabic in Arab schools in Israel. These years merely strengthened what had come before. The confusion and the lack of clarity regarding the policy adopted towards the Arabic language either remained the same or actually worsened.

The years between 1981-95 produced what is known today as the "new curriculum", which itself is in the process of being changed. Based on previous complaints and the challenges of the past years, the Ministry of Education and Culture together with the Arab inspectors set up a committee

to create a curriculum for Arabic from grade 1-12. The committee was divided into sub-committees: the High school sub-committee, Junior-High school sub-committee, Elementary School sub-committee, and a Sub-committee for general literature in high school

The committee included the following members: Arabic inspectors, experts in the fields of Arabic language, education and curricula, and teacher representatives and guides. Each sub-committee dealt with its own subjects: objectives, preparing a curriculum, and text books with teacher guides.

Despite the good intentions and the serious efforts on the part of all those who helped produce the “new curriculum”, a closer look at this curriculum can point to many gaps and problems.

#### **Main Characteristics of the New Curriculum:**

Talking to teachers in the field confirms what the literature says about this curriculum. Without doubt, it is described as an innovative curriculum which allows creativity and more flexibility for both teachers and students. It also gives more room for the introduction of new and more sophisticated teaching methods. The teaching methods it recommends are different, offering freedom to use methods besides the traditional frontal one in order to create a more inviting and participatory atmosphere in class. The student becomes the center of learning; he/she should be active and dynamic, and enjoy his learning

The ratio of modern texts has doubled compared to that of classic texts, 2/3-1/3. More emphasis has been put on literary texts and their significance in the teaching process. They help introduce students to various literary trends, enabling them to acquire critical thinking writing skills. The new curriculum has also included a variety of literary genres and learning subjects. A deeper knowledge of various genres helps pupils trace the

development of these genres and the way the various genres and writers have influenced one another. Materials studied in class, according to this curriculum, are more conducive to independent learning, by which a student can learn the required material in addition to getting to know authentic texts which widen his horizons and enrich his education. The structure of the learning unit in this curriculum, offering a range of tasks from the easiest to the most difficult, has helped cater to the needs of all students within the same class regardless of their educational level.

The new curriculum has not been entirely beneficial, however: it certainly has many deficiencies and weaknesses.

#### **Deficiency of the New Curriculum:**

Despite the above-mentioned positive qualities of the new curriculum, and many others, one can easily point to its shortcomings and weaknesses. A closer look at the curriculum reveals a huge gap between what is prescribed and what is practiced. Is it “a source of pride” for Arab students? What does that mean in practice? How would a reduction in the number of hours from six to four, or not granting a bonus for the four- and five-point units in the Arabic Bagrut make an Arab student learn Arabic better or become more proud of his own language? Why are only a few Arab students taking the five-unit Bagrut in Arabic, while more and more students are taking the three-unit Bagrut? How can poorly-stocked libraries, which suffer from a lack of good, reliable sources: periodicals, magazines, stories, encyclopedias, and modern Arabic literary texts, help produce better students in Arabic? How can this new curriculum be implemented when the backbone of the teaching process, the teacher him/herself, does not get the proper training? How can this curriculum be implemented successfully when the universities and teacher training colleges in Israel don't provide sufficient training programs for teaching of Arabic as a mother tongue? Can teaching more

*about* the language rather than teaching the language itself be helpful in this regard? Where can motivated Arab teachers get access to truly worthwhile in-service training programs? Why don't Arab teachers trust the available in-service programs and consider them only as a means for improving their salaries? Talking to Arab teachers in the field, one can claim with certainty that these questions and many others are still unanswered.

The literature seems also to corroborate these problems. Benjamen and Mansoor, for example, raise some serious questions regarding the declared intentions of the new curriculum. One of their questions is "Do the materials taught in the curriculum help students achieve such objectives?" They also claim that Arabic in Arab schools is almost detached from its historical context; Arabic texts are almost totally void of any national, historical content. The declared objectives of Arabic language and literature are for pragmatic purposes only. Language is transmitted in a superficial way to express the needs of daily life, which reflects a serious contradiction between declared objectives and real practice (Benjamen and Mansoor p.152-3). Al-Haj adds that, although the new curriculum speaks about Arab students being proud of their culture, national identity, and heritage with the emphasis on Arabic as an effective medium to help mould the character of the Arab student, in practice it seems to shift away from those objectives (Al-Haj, p.120, 1996). Texts studies don't reflect the national spirit declared in the objectives (Al-Haj, 1991, p.920-21). Amara, on his part, claims that Arab teachers do not master their mother tongue, and are not even aware of some of the new literary programs available (Amara. et al). He also adds that teachers aren't qualified to teach students oral and written proficiency, skills which require teachers to master them before trying to impart them to others. HabeebAllah writes that reading and writing in Arabic doesn't necessarily mean that students understand what they read. How would a student who doesn't understand a text in his own language become proficient in other



related subjects? This problem appears at all levels of schooling, particularly with regard to the psychometric test (HabeebAllah 1984). Arabic is neglected by its own people; most Arab teachers who graduate from foreign or Jewish universities do not seem to make any effort to improve their Arabic language proficiency.

Research on the status of the Arabic language in Israel reveals painful results, and begs special attention and a more enlightened plan to help deal with this acute problem. The Arab minority in Israel faces a two-dimensional problem regarding its national language. First, there is the problem of curricula and teaching methods in all Arab K-12 schools and teacher training colleges, which requires a whole new approach. Second, in the Arab society itself Arabic is a low-priority language: few Arab students choose to study Arabic in institutes of higher learning, with fewer Arabs pursuing advanced degrees in this subject. This problem has reflected itself most negatively on the study of Arabic, both academically and pedagogically.

Bolus seems to complain against both the insufficiency of texts by Palestinian poets and the number of hours allocated to teaching the new curriculum, which is 1/3 of what is actually needed (Bolus, 1989.) Abu Hanna (1988) claims that the committee which set up the new curriculum approved of a number of poems and plays with the good will to achieve its noble objectives , but HabeebAllah, agreeing with Hanna, adds that the censorship didn't allow them to pass. (Habeeb Allah, 1991, p.153).

#### **Assessment and Evaluation:**

Two external tests are used to assess and evaluate how well Arab students do in Arabic. Both tests are external ones with specific formats and purposes. However, a closer reading of both tests makes one question their validity and reliability. For the purpose of this paper, I will relate briefly to

both tests and try to show how they affect the status of the Arabic language in the Arab society in particular and in Israel in general.

The literature shows that Arab school children suffer a particular weakness in dealing with the language of knowledge, namely literary Arabic. Their knowledge, acquisition, achievement and self-expression are affected in the process. Language acquisition happens best as a result of exposure to the target language at an early age; Focusing on grammar at a late age is a waste of time. To illustrate, Abu Fanah, the inspector of Arabic, claims that the results of the “Mashov” are unsatisfactory, although this is a test whose questions are prepared by an expert committee specialized in test building. (The Mashov is a national test given to students in elementary and middle school to check their achievement in languages and Math against national normative standards, and to compare the results with other achievement tests to detect gaps and mistakes). Abu Fanah adds that the attitudes towards the language itself aren't satisfactory. From his point of view, students' mastery of reading does not necessarily mean comprehending reading comprehension passages at all levels. On the contrary, Arab students display a particular weakness in reading comprehension and lack the motivation to read books and stories outside the school (Abu Fanah, 1995, p.4.). Talking to teachers at the school level, one becomes aware that even the achieved results do not truly reflect the reality of the level of Arab students in reading comprehension passages.

The second and most important external test is the Bagrut, a national test given to students towards the end of high school. Starting at 1991, the Arabic Bagrut includes a minimum of three units and a maximum of five units. Year after year it seems to have a constant pattern, posing the same questions with a slight difference in content. The three-unit Bagrut is obligatory, with the following components: composition 30%, grammar 30%, and literature 40%. Arab students seem to do badly in both composition and grammar. They are

considered factors for failure, constituting an obstacle to success in the overall exam. The fourth and fifth units of the Arabic Bagrut include more literature; they include what is known as literature b and literature c, literary texts or literary criticism, short story, Romance play, and history of literature. One then wonders about the reason for requiring grammar and composition at the three-unit test level, and not at the more advanced four and five unit levels.

The annual statistics (1984-94) analyzing the results of the Bagrut indicate the following:

- 1- 10% of Arab students finish their studies unqualified to take the Bagrut in Arabic;
- 2- 40% of those who take the Arabic Bagrut fail it;
- 3- 27% take the three- unit exam only;
- 4- Less than 14% take the five-unit level exam.

This dismal picture is particularly worrying because the achievement of Arab students in the rest of the Bagrut- exam subjects is highly influenced by their achievement in their mother tongue.

### **Struggle to improve the status of Arabic in Israel:**

Lately, however, the openness on the part of some Israeli officials, together with the ongoing struggle of Arab Knesset members, lawyers and officials, and the Arab follow-up committee, has effected a degree of change in the status of Arabic in some areas of the Israeli life. For example, the Haifa Town Council has introduced landscaping in both Arabic and Hebrew. Some ministries have even decided that bids should be translated into Arabic. Arab Knesset members can deliver their speeches in Arabic. A special division for Arab curricula within the Division of Curricula Development in the Ministry of Education has been created to develop and

promote curricula and learning material for Arab students. Such positive moves have also been accompanied by clearer language policy principles. The special directive of the Ministry of Education (14. 3. 1996) has also stated some clearer principles about language policy, among them: that students should reach a high degree of proficiency in reading and writing in their mother tongue, both written and spoken; that emphasis should be placed on the use of the language and its application in writing styles and methods; that the mother tongue should be taught at an early age to guarantee proficiency; that the “Oranoot” should be rolled out to Arab schools; that mass communication programs such as TV programs should be developed to help Arab students enrich their information, help them develop critical thinking skills, be introduced to other cultures and societies, etc....

#### **Recommendations:**

Based on what has been said one can recommend the following:

- a- A strong faith and belief in the final goal. Arabic is essential for existence and survival. It is a powerful tool of communication and a vehicle to preserve the national identity and the heritage of the Arab minority.
- b- Literary Arabic should be introduced at an early age. All parties involved in child education in the Arab society both at home and at school should make sure that Arab children are exposed extensively to literary Arabic.
- c- Reading programs at all levels should be institutionalized, particularly at early ages.
- d- Materials should be carefully selected and tailored to fit the level of the particular learner.

- e- The Ministry of Education should make sure that the curricula are designed to accommodate students' reading needs.
- f- Teachers themselves should begin reading to set a good example to the students and help introduce the desired change in our society.
- g- There should be an academy, association or other body to help work with Arab local councils and municipalities to help advance the level of the Arabic language.
- h- Successive Israeli governments, the teacher training colleges and universities should make sure that better, updated and more sophisticated training programs are available for teachers of Arabic.

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