

The Kohelet Prize – Awarding Excellence in Progressive Jewish Education
Learning Environment – Ivrit B'Ivrit
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Introduction

The learning environment in my Hebrew Language classroom enhances the academic, social, emotional, and spiritual learning of all of my elementary students (in Grades 3 through 5). Within the physical confines of my classroom, only Hebrew may be spoken. I instruct *Ivrit B'Ivrit*, which is Hebrew immersion. Language is about communication, and my goal is for students to leave my class fully able to express their ideas, ask questions, and gain information from their environment in Hebrew. This philosophy is consistent with Douglass Crouse's October, 2012 article in *The Language Educator*, "Going for 90% Plus: How to Stay in the Target Language." As you will see in the following sections, the intensive planning, reinforcement policies, classroom environment and structure, and strong relationships formed between myself and the students, and the students with each other, ensures students gain conversational independence.

Building Relationships

At the foundation of most solid learning experiences, one will find the essential qualities of mutual respect and trust, which exist between students and teacher, and among the students as well. To establish and maintain these relationships, I focus on the following:

- *Teacher/Student Relationships*
 - Maintaining clear and high expectations for myself and others. I am always honest and fair in interactions.
 - Being curious about others; their experiences, wants and needs. Genuine interest in each child allows for personal and meaningful connections. I know what is going on for them inside and outside of the classroom and frequently "check-in" with them throughout the day.
 - Model and reinforce the value of taking language risks by praising conversational efforts and refraining from interrupting or correcting students as they express themselves in Hebrew.
 - I set my students up for success by anticipating what they might need, and providing it, so that we can focus on learning. For example, in our school all boys must wear a kippah during Jewish studies, services,

and meals. Rather than waste time questioning students on the location of their kippah (as sometimes they are forgotten), I regularly keep a stash of kippot in my classroom for them to take/keep. In this way we don't waste time discussing a kippah; instead, we focus on the lesson at hand.

- Because the students understand that I have faith in them, and how much I value them, they are motivated to try their best and give their best effort.
- *Student/Student Relationships*
 - Students assigned to me are generally the strongest with respect to their Hebrew language skills. Hebrew language classes are grouped homogeneously at the upper elementary level at Perelman Jewish Day School.
 - Students sit in the classroom in small groups of 4-5 students. They are generally assigned to sit with other students with whom they will work well. With this in mind, seating is fluid and changes throughout the year.
 - I use a “pair/share” system for assigning group and long-term projects, wherein students draw random names on Popsicle sticks. I make sure that every student has the opportunity to work with every other student at some point or multiple points throughout the year. Nurturing the life skill of learning how to work collegially and cooperatively with one another within the Hebrew language classroom is a top goal of mine. Interpersonal skills developed among students in my classroom reflect what students can expect when working in the real world.
 - Students know that they may not complain about whom they are working with or ask for a change. I encourage my students to look for the finest qualities in one another—and *they all learn to do that!*
 - Students love helping one another, because they come to realize the true worth of cooperation and mutual support. The students know that we do not advance to FUN Friday games (see below) until all students have completed all the class work. This is a strong motivator for all to collaborate.
- *Teacher/Parent Relationships*
 - Please refer to Technology Section below.

- Parents look forward to our end of year presentations of long-term student projects. Here they see their children presenting a large body of work, solely in Hebrew, and are often amazed at how much their child has progressed.
 - Third grade long-term projects focus on a virtual *Trip to Israel*.
 - Fourth grade long-term projects focus on *Israel in a Historical Perspective*.
 - For the fifth grade long-term projects, students are asked to take their respective *B'nei Mitzvah Parashat Hashavua* and write a *D'var Torah* about what it means to them.
- **Special Needs Students** – It is imperative to tailor instruction to the unique needs and abilities of each student. This includes accounting for medical factors, managing challenging behaviors, supporting social-emotional growth (e.g., difficulties associated with Autism), and helping all students succeed regardless of their entering proficiency level in Hebrew (e.g., the same class can have Israeli students and students whose parents do not know any Hebrew). Examples of how I do this include:
 - Posting homework assignments regularly on a class website and having the children write their assignments in a homework book, which I always check.
 - Maintaining direct communication with parents via email and text regarding any missed or incomplete work.
 - Tailoring workloads to emphasize content over quantity based on the child's abilities.
 - Meeting with a child on an individual, regular basis during lunch and recess to pre-teach and post-teach content.
 - Utilizing an assistant to provide 1:1 support during direct instruction.

Special Characteristics of the Physical Space

Creating a space that children want to be in is integral to the teaching mission. An engaging space provides many more opportunities for conversation, vocabulary topics, and interaction. In my classroom I have:

- *Plants*

- Students learn all about Botany in my classroom. Of course, this is also in Hebrew, even though there is not a Botany section in our curriculum. One entire wall of the classroom, closest to the natural light, is filled with a large variety of plants. Students learn all about these plants and how to care for them. We discuss the plant life cycle and caring for their needs.
 - Students are given the responsibility to care for their classroom plants, which fosters teamwork, self-confidence, and personal responsibility and pride in our class.
 - In the process of caring for the plants in their classroom, students learn about herbs, which they also grow. When appropriate and linked with the curriculum, students use the herbs (especially rosemary) to enhance learning the blessings, like the one said over B'samim. Students also prepare special dishes with the herbs, such as lentil soup for Parashat Toldot.
 - Some of the plants, such as lulavim and etrogim, are directly linked to our holidays. Students collect their etrogim from year to year. Students also study the myrtle and its connection to Sukkot.
 - Throughout the school year, students directly study all plants related in any way to our Hebrew calendar.
- *Snakes*
 - Students have increased engagement in our classroom because we care for three snakes (chosen because these animals are hypoallergenic). Students learn to care for the snakes by feeding them, monitoring their behavior, and helping clean out their living space. Again, all conversation regarding animal care, a topic not inherently in our curriculum, occurs in Hebrew.
 - Sharing in snake care also helps build our classroom community. One example of this is when one of our snakes became ill and had to be treated at the Ryan Veterinary Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. The bill for the snake's care was \$600, and the school did not have that money in the budget. My students sponsored an ongoing bake sale after school for several weeks, until they were able to raise the full \$600. No words can adequately describe how proud the students felt about this experience.
 - Having snakes in the classroom has also helped multiple students overcome their fear of snakes. While at the beginning of the year

some students were hesitant when handling the animals, by the end of the year they all demonstrated ease and comfort with them.

- *Additional Key Elements of the Physical Classroom*

- The rest of the classroom is filled with a variety of information and learning tools.
 - Information about what the students are currently studying in Tal Am is always up and available to them.
 - Directions are always posted in written form, so that I can address both my visual and auditory learners.
 - Permanent Grammar Stations punctuate the classroom, so that students can learn and practice how to conjugate a variety of Hebrew verbs.
 - A large whiteboard contains rotating vocabulary words and related games. Students are given a brand new set of vocabulary words every 2-3 weeks.

- *Technology*

I value incorporating technology into the classroom. My background, including a M.A. Ed in Computer Education and previous position as the Head of the Technology Department at Perelman Jewish Day School, enables me to incorporate a variety of technological tools into the classroom.

- My students and I use the classroom interactive Smart Board regularly.
- My students use their laptops and iPads daily, as an essential resource (same as their textbooks and workbooks).
- All Tal Am materials are digitally available.
 - We project individual student workbooks and creative writing onto our whiteboard so that we can correct and edit the pieces together.
 - Texts from specific books are projected onto our whiteboard to highlight whatever the focus is of the lesson or the day.
- I have an interactive camera in my classroom, which students learn how to operate in order to document life within the classroom. These

recorded lessons can then be shared with students who were absent when the lessons were taught.

- As mentioned in other sections of this grant document, games are a vital part of my curriculum. We often work on the same website together to play competitive games, such as Quizlet and Dah Bear.
- I am able to share student work with individual students, groups of students, and/or parents via Google Classroom and Seesaw.
 - Seesaw is an excellent application for student driven digital portfolios and parent communication. Using the application Seesaw, I am able to upload files or sections of files to share with students and/or parents. These files may also include photographs, videos, and digital books the children create. Parents are also able to comment on these projects and are aware of their child's progress in "real time".
 - Google Classroom is a tool in Google Apps for Education that helps teachers create and organize assignments quickly, provide feedback efficiently, and easily communicate with their classes. This application enables me to post announcements, assignments, photographs, etc. that are *not* on Seesaw. I create interactive social Linoit Boards, so that students can watch videos, post questions to me and/or to one another, post answers to me and/or to one another, etc. Our books are linked to Google Classroom and can be posted, as necessary, along with accompanying videos.
- *Hallway*
 - The hallway is an extension of the physical classroom. The hallway is the only place where my students may speak English.
 - Students go to the hallway with me when they have a question written on their index cards (please see below).
 - Sometimes, class meetings are held in the hallway, because certain English words need to be spoken and understood by the students at these meetings.

General Classroom Policy

From the very first day of school, both students and parents are informed about the *Ivrit B'Ivrit* program. More detailed information is shared in the days that follow, as well as at *Back to School Night*, usually early in the school year. General classroom policy is as follows.

- *Grade 3*
 - Each student receives 10 coins/week.
 - Should a student speak in English within the classroom, he/she loses a coin.
 - On the other hand, if a child needs to speak or ask a question in English, he/she always has an index card where he/she may quickly write the comment or question down in English. The student will show the card to me and then step into the hallway briefly, in order to speak in English, with the ultimate purpose of enhancing his/her Hebrew language skills.
 - At the end of the week, on FUN Fridays, students may exchange their coins for stickers.
 - Each student adds these stickers to his/her individual sticker chart. Sticker charts are kept in students' bins.
 - Students know from the first day of school that they may acquire extra coins in other ways as well during the course of any given week. For example, students may earn additional coins by: completing awesome work; helping out in the classroom in a myriad of ways (watering the plants, feeding the snakes, assisting with cleanup, etc.); helping a classmate; exhibiting outstanding integrity and character; making an extra effort to be a supportive teammate within the classroom; etc.
 - Once a student has completed his/her sticker chart, he/she may exchange that chart for special privileges, which vary and change throughout the year. Privileges might include: having lunch with me; playing with, handling, and taking care of the snakes; watering and taking care of the plants; receiving a Homework Exemption Slip; etc.
- *Grade 4*
 - The majority of third grade students that have had me for upper level Hebrew usually have me in fourth grade as well, so that students are

well familiar with classroom policy. For those students new to my classroom, I take the time to carefully explain everything to them and their respective families.

- The classroom policy is similar to the above, with the following exceptions.
 - Students start with five coins/week rather than 10.
 - Students have *many* opportunities to earn extra coins, primarily through exhibiting motivation and resilience, and conversing as much as possible in Hebrew.
- *Grade 5*
 - The majority of fourth grade students that have had me for upper level Hebrew usually have me in fifth grade as well, so that students are well familiar with classroom policy. For those students new to my classroom, I take the time to carefully explain everything to them and their respective families.
 - The classroom policy is similar to the above; however, students do not receive any coins. Students have multiple opportunities to earn stickers.
 - I work hard to create the kind of very positive atmosphere, where students genuinely root for and support one another. Once every child has a complete sticker chart, the entire class is treated to a very special group celebration.

Additional Elements of Classroom Policy/Program that Enhance Positivity and Build Positive Self Esteem

- *Academic Expectations*
 - Academic expectations are very clear, high, and positive. They are set and explained on the first day of school.
 - A written version of classroom expectations is sent home to parents on the first day of school and explained/reinforced in detail at Back to School Night.
- *September – First Week of School*

- Classroom procedures are carefully reviewed, again and again.
- Students become familiar with how the week works, including: start time of class on given days; lunchtime; dismissal; how to place and organize desks; how to care for student cubbies/lockers; how to line up, how to walk from place to place within the building; etc.
- *Special Corners of the Classroom*
 - Students learn how to configure themselves for quiet work and where they can sit to complete it.
 - Students learn how to configure themselves for group work and where they can comfortably sit/stand/gather to work in a group.
 - Most students come to appreciate the fact that the floor is a very useful place for learning.
- *Spoken Language*

In order to encourage students to feel comfortable speaking Hebrew, no corrections are made when they make errors. After 30 years in education, I believe that if I correct a student's spoken language on the spot, the child might feel embarrassed. Instead, I let the child express himself/herself, to the best of his/her ability, helping the child gain confidence from speaking among his/her peers. My primary expectation at this time is that the child's spoken *idea* must be clear. I will then carefully note all the errors (to myself) and focus on teaching the correct spoken language at another time

- *Testing Policy*
 - Because the goal is always for students to succeed and feel proud of their efforts, and because my students are still in elementary school, they have the opportunity to retake formal tests 1-3 times. *Again, mastery is the goal.* My experience is that, as time goes by, very few students need to retake any tests.
 - When grading tests, I use the technique of *focused correction areas*, gleaned from the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. I tell my students in advance specifically what will be graded on a given assessment. This technique lessens the pressure and enables students to do their best. For example, if I am giving a test on the content of Chumash, I will check for content accuracy, but will not correct spelling errors.

- Occasionally I administer an open book test, for students need to master this skill as well.
- For test preparation, I regularly use *Quizlet* and *Dah Bear*, which my students *love*. Students complete the practice exercises/activities online and then share their results with me.
- *Homework Policy*
 - I give minimal nightly homework of approximately 10 minutes. I prefer to focus on long-term projects. I assign at least two long-term projects/month.
 - I give students the opportunity to work together in class, as many of these projects are completed in groups, and learning to collaborate is a major life skill.
 - My expectation is that students will tell me in advance when they have not completed a given homework assignment. They are encouraged to text or email me when such a situation arises. This is part of *building mutual trust with one another*. I do not want to “catch them” without their homework, since class time is then wasted on a conversation about homework completion, which could be embarrassing for the student.
 - Students who take personal responsibility for letting me know that they have not completed an assignment may use a Homework Exemption Slip for that assignment.
- Oral Presentations
 - The ability to speak in front of others, starting with one’s peers, is a major life skill. Therefore, students are given numerous opportunities to present in front of their classmates.
 - Students in my class have opportunities to teach 1st – 4th graders Hebrew, enriching both the learners and the “teachers”.
 - Students who are uncomfortable speaking in front of their peers at the start of the year may pass when called on. I give these students the opportunity to prep with me privately, as many times as needed, until both the student and I feel that he/she is ready to speak in front of his/her peers.
 - I am with the students every day at recess and also have lunch with my students quite often. They only address me in Hebrew during

these informal times, increasing their opportunities for conversational Hebrew.

- *Games*

- Games can serve as a powerful learning, practice, and review tool. Students play a minimum of one major, sophisticated game/day. Examples include the following:

- *Toss the Ball* - Starting while standing up in various corners of the classroom, using a soft ball, students toss the ball between friends, while saying different words on a select topic. The topic might include a holiday, vocabulary from a story recently read, Chumash words, etc. If a student repeats a word that was already said, or if a student cannot add a new word, then he/she is out of the game and has to sit down. The last three remaining students receive stickers for having the richest vocabulary bank at that point in time. The third place student gets one sticker, the second place student gets two stickers, and the first place winner receives three stickers.
- *Card Race* - I create cards with newly acquired vocabulary words. I then toss the pile of cards onto the hallway floor. My students then race to collect (i.e., pick up) the cards containing the words that they know how to explain or use correctly in a sentence. Students then sit down in a circle. For every word that is correctly explained or used properly in a sentence, a student gains a coin; however, if he/she “grabbed” a card with a word that he/she does not know how to use correctly, he/she loses two coins. This consequence is imposed in order to prevent the race from going out of control and to ensure that students choose cards with words that they truly know.
- *Pre-Teaching Game* - In a limited period of time, most often three minutes, students are asked to list as many words as they can remember from previous years on the topic we are about to study (especially during holiday time), to see who can create the longest list. The students then start reading aloud one word from their respective list. If other students also wrote down this word, then those students say in Hebrew, “I have it.” Every child who has that word on his/her list then eliminates that word from his/her list. If a student has a word listed that no one else in the class has listed, he/she circles that word. At the end of the game students

are rewarded one coin for each totally unique word on their list.

- *Grammar Practice* - Students sit on the floor in a circle, holding hands. They then “pass a *squeeze*”. When squeezed once, the student has to say a verb from the selected root, in the present tense. When squeezed twice, the student has to say a verb from the selected root, in the past tense. When squeezed three times, the student has to say a verb from the selected root, in the future tense. All the words need to be from the same family root, and students may not repeat a pronoun or verb, which was used previously. This game requires a high level of concentration and mastery of grammar. The last three students remaining in the circle each receive three coins.
- Students design fabulous, creative games as well, which are also used regularly as part of the Hebrew language program.
- Game “rewards” usually consist of coins, which are used as described above (i.e., to fill up sticker charts in order to earn rewards and privileges).
- To maximize every learning opportunity, we even play games such as “Whispering Down the Lane” (in Hebrew) when students are standing in line.
- *Cooking*
 - To create another opportunity for students to converse, we cook in our classroom and in the school kitchen.
 - We cook recipes that are found in our Tal Am curriculum, including latkes, hamantaschen and sofganiyot.
 - All the cooking directions and casual discussion are carried out in Hebrew. Such activities greatly improve students’ facility in using the Hebrew language, as well as mathematical and social skills.
- *FUN Fridays*
 - Fridays, always-shorter days, are special days in my class.

- Students study the weekly *Parashat Hashavua*, as they watch age-appropriate videos, read online summaries, and discuss the *midot* the parasha represents.
- Special interactive games are reserved to play on FUN Fridays only. FUN Friday games include interactive memory games where the students have to match key words from the parasha to discover the hidden picture that tells the story, answering Video Quizzes, as well as completing puzzles and word searches. (See example of Parashat Vayera games at <http://tinyurl.com/havpo97>.) At other times, we will play act the story line and will enjoy a game of *Guess Who?*, depicting characters from the story and answering *yes/no* questions in order to guess the mystery person/object/place that was *hidden*.
- Students are asked to wear white shirts, in honor of Kabbalat Shabbat. Students remembering to wear white on Fridays earn an extra coin (please see above).

Conclusion

As written at the start of this document, I have endeavored to create a positive, thriving, dynamic, ever-changing learning environment for students in my Upper Elementary Hebrew Language Immersion Program (*Ivrit b'Ivrit*) at Perelman Jewish Day School. Children are encouraged to take risks to converse exclusively in Hebrew. The learning environment in my Jewish Studies classroom superbly enhances the academic, social, emotional, and spiritual learning of all of my elementary students (in Grades 3 through 5).

Spiritual learning is most significant in a Jewish day school. My entire program enhances spiritual growth. Being a Jew is at the core of everything I do with my students. Values emphasized in class are based on Jewish tradition. Emphasis is placed upon building relationships with God, with members of our community, and with our people, as we all engage in Tikkun Olam.