Social and cognitive factors influencing the reading comprehension of Arab students learning Hebrew as a second language in Israel

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship of the attitudes and cultural background of Arab students in Israel to their reading comprehension of stories from Jewish and Arab culture. Participants were 74 eighth-grade Arab students (age 14–15 years) from Israel, learning Hebrew as a second language (L2). An attitude questionnaire, stories from Arab and Jewish culture and multiple-choice questions about each story were used. Results indicated that students scored higher on tasks of reading comprehension with texts from their own cultural setting than with texts from a culturally unfamiliar setting. Furthermore, results of the attitude questionnaire showed that motivation of Arab students to learning Hebrew was primarily instrumental rather than integrative. A conclusion of this study is that problematic social contexts negatively affect L2 learning of minority students. In order to facilitate Hebrew L2 learning, L2 curricula should include Hebrew language texts with content culturally familiar and relevant to the life of Arab learners.

RESUMÉ

Les facteurs sociaux et cognitifs influençant la compréhension en lecture des élèves arabes apprenant l’hébreu langue seconde en Israël.

Cette étude étudie la relation entre les attitudes et les antécédents culturels des étudiants arabes en Israël et leur compréhension d’histoires des cultures juives et arabes. En tant que minorité, la population israëlo-arabe en Israël apprend l’hébreu comme langue seconde (L2) et comme langue du groupe dominant. Le contexte social en Israël et les problèmes socio-politiques ne permettent pas facilement
l’interaction sociale entre les Arabes et les Juifs en Israël. Les Israëlo-arabes apprennent l’hébreu en utilisant des histoires écrites juives. Dans cette étude il est supposé que la combinaison de textes non familiers et d’attitudes d’apprentissage envers l’hébreu peut gêner le processus d’apprentissage en L2.

Les participants sont 74 élèves arabes âgés de 14–15 ans. Un questionnaire sur les attitudes, des histoires écrites issues des cultures arabes et juives, et des questionnaires à choix multiples correspondants à chacune de ces histoires ont été utilisés. Les résultats indiquent que les étudiants réussissent mieux dans les tâches de compréhension de lecture dont le contenu renvoie à leur propre culture comparativement à ceux dont la teneur réfère à un contexte culturel non familier.

Une conclusion de cette étude est que le contexte de la problématique sociale influence négativement l’apprentissage d’une langue seconde (L2) des élèves minoritaires. Dans l’ordre, pour faciliter l’apprentissage de l’hébreu langue seconde, les programmes devraient comprendre des textes en hébreu avec des contenus culturels familiers et issus de la vie des apprenants arabes.

INTRODUCTION

Bilingualism is a reality in the education of children in many areas of the world. As a result of immigration or ethnic background, many children grow up in the first few years of life learning to speak one language and then attend school and learn another language: the language of the dominant cultural group; the majority language of the country or province. Learning a new language is a social phenomenon like any other in human life and is affected by social practice and social context. These affect the learning environment of the second-language (L2) learner, rendering it supportive or unsupportive. This study was designed to test the bilingual situation of Israeli Arabs as a minority group learning the language of the dominant group, Hebrew, in a ‘melting-pot’ social context. The Israeli–Arab social/educational context is problematic (Abu Saad, 1991; Al-Haj, 1987, 1995). As a minority group, Arab students are required to learn Hebrew, the language of the majority group. The social and political problems between Arabs and Jews in and outside Israel influence the learning atmosphere of the minority Arabs learning Hebrew.

This study sought to assess the effects of cultural content and language of texts by examining both these variables in the processes of reading comprehension. The attitudes of the L2 learner are also assessed. In considering the results, it is suggested that a possible link exists between schema theory and attitudes toward L2 learning, which could provide the foundation for a successful pedagogical approach in teaching/learning L2, especially in a melting-pot social context, such as that of the Israeli Arabs (Abu-Rabia, 1993; Abu-Saad, 1991; Al-Haj, 1987, 1995; Mari, 1985).

Prior knowledge and reading comprehension

Research on reading comprehension among L2 learners has shown that one component of the ability to comprehend stories is the readers’ general knowledge of the world and the extent to which that knowledge is activated during the mental
process of reading. Bartlett (1932) and Rumelhart (1981, 1984) have shown that the prior experience of the reader influences which background structures, or schemata, s/he activates when interpreting a story. Rumelhart proposed that knowledge is stored in schematic units in human memory, and strategies of utilising this knowledge are also stored. He added that the schema is a prototype for understanding and use of concepts. Many studies have been conducted to test Rumelhart’s schematic theory, most of which confirm it (Abu-Rabia, 1993; Gayle, 1987; Lipson, 1983; Zegarra and Singer, 1981; Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). Serious attention has also been given to schema theory in studies concerning L2 learning/teaching (Carrell, 1981, 1983, 1987; Floyd and Carrell, 1987). These studies illustrate that teaching/learning the L2 with familiar and comprehensible texts is more successful than without them.

Anderson and Gipe (1983) and Adams and Collins (1977) investigated the effects of cultural background on reading comprehension of cultural content, using texts that were either related or unrelated to participants’ cultural background. The results indicated significant correlations between cultural background and reading comprehension. Other investigators have supported the important role of schemata in comprehending stories (Johnson, 1980; Kintsch and Green, 1978; Lipson, 1983; Mandler, 1978). A series of studies was conducted by Carrell (1981, 1983, 1987) investigating the effect of cultural familiarity of texts on reading comprehension and recall. Carrell (1981) conducted a study comparing Japanese and Chinese participants learning English as a second language on recall of folktales from three different cultural orientations: native culture, second culture, and totally unfamiliar culture (American Apache Indian). The cultural origin of the text and the participants’ prior familiarity, or lack of familiarity, with that culture were found to affect the L2 students’ judgments of the level of text difficulty and their recall of text information. A study by Floyd and Carrell (1987) addressed the question: Can we improve students’ reading by helping them to build background knowledge on the topic prior to reading? After an intervention programme of building the students’ background knowledge, the results indicated an affirmative answer. In short, schemata of L2 learners can facilitate their reading comprehension if they learn the L2 through familiar cultural stories.

Attitudes toward L2 learning

The role of social attitudes in the L2 learning process has been investigated in different social situations. Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1972) conducted empirical studies showing the effect of integrative and instrumental motivation on L2 learning. These authors define integrative motivation as the readiness of the L2 learner to integrate with the other culture and language; instrumental motivation reflects the fact that the L2 learner learns the language for mobility purposes. It was found that attitudes of the L2 learner toward speakers of the target language (TL) played an important role in the process of L2 acquisition. Students who demonstrated integrative motivation toward the TL speakers and their culture were found to be successful in acquiring an L2.

Gardner (1983, 1985) suggested in his socio-educational model of L2 learning that ability and motivation are major components at the basis of L2 learning. The motivational component is influenced to some extent by factors that affect an
individual’s willingness to accept ‘foreign’ behavior patterns. Language, according to Gardner, is an important part of one’s identity, and the extent to which one can incorporate another language successfully is related to a variety of attitudinal variables involving ethnic relations as well as ability to analyse linguistic factors. The major operative construct in the socio-educational model is motivation, and it is possible that the cultural milieu in which language learning takes place will influence which attitudinal variables serve as basic supports for this motivation.

Gardner and Lysynchuk (1990) and Brittain (1992) reported studies supporting Gardner’s (1985) model: the first on a French immersion program, and the second on a group of native English speakers. Both studies investigated the learners’ attitudes toward L2 learning and their relationship to L2 proficiency. They found that students with high integrative motivation were more proficient in L2. Gardner and Lysynchuk (1990) explained the students’ integrative motivation in the French program as enabling students to find opportunities to interact with the TL speakers. Students with low integrative motivation never bothered to interact or use their L2, and this hindered the development of their L2 proficiency skills.

Fillmore (1991) presented a social model consisting of three major components. First, learners who realise that they must learn the TL and are motivated to do so (i.e. in Gardner and Lambert’s terminology, integrative and instrumental motivation). Second, speakers of the TL who provide the learners with access to the language (cultural openness). Third, the social setting which brings L2 learners into contact with TL speakers frequently enough to make language development possible (social openness, interaction between learners and TL speakers). In L2 learning, these three components are intricately connected in the social, linguistic, and cognitive processes of the L2 learner (Fillmore, 1991). Variations of the above model may affect the outcome: if the learners maintain negative attitudes to the L2 or to the TL group, the learning process will be impeded. Social inaccessibility of the TL speakers to the learners can negatively affect the latter’s learning processes. Fillmore (1991) clearly characterized L2 learning in social contexts: ‘Language learning is possible when learners are in frequent contact with speakers of the target language, and the groups are motivated and able to interact with each other in some fashion’ (p. 60).

Landry, Allard and Théberge (1991) examined the relative contributions of the school and the family to the bilingual development of Francophone minority students in Western Canada. They found that French ambience scores were positively related to the strength of personal beliefs of the students in the vitality of their language, and also to strength of their ethnolinguistic identity. Landry et al (1991) argue that their results suit the additive and subtractive bilingual model; empowerment of Francophone children with their culture and the awareness of the vitality of their first language (L1) develops a positive bilingual case ‘additive’ (for a thorough review of the additive/subtractive model, see Landry, 1987). In other words, their results showed that students were dominant in their L2, English, and not in their L1, French. French scores were significantly higher in groups that came from high French ambience schools and high French ambience homes.

Clément (1980) also suggested a social model that emphasizes motivation of the L2 learner, the cultural milieu, and the relative group vitalities of the speakers as important factors in L2 learning. In Clément’s model, the primary motivational process is defined as the net result of two opposing forces: integrativeness minus fear
of assimilation. Integrativeness refers to the desire to become an accepted member of the TL group; fear of assimilation refers to the fear of becoming completely like the ‘other’ culture, losing one’s native language and culture.

Schumann (1986), in his model of L2 learning, listed variables relating to L2 acquisition: social, affective, personality, cognitive, biological, aptitude, personal, input, and instructional factors. He argued that of these, the social and affective factors cluster as a single variable, which he labelled ‘acculturation’. Acculturation involves the integration of the social and psychological characteristics of learners with the TL speakers. Another L2 learning model was suggested by Spolsky (1989), which is similar to Gardner’s model. Spolsky also argued that the social context leads to the elaboration of various attitudes that affect motivation toward L2 learning. He used some of the variables listed by Gardner (1983), Fillmore (1991) and Schumann (1986), and tried to develop a clearer model explaining social context and its relation to L2 learning.

The empirical studies and models discussed above emphasise the importance of social context in L2 learning. Gardner’s (1983) model emphasises cultural beliefs and social milieu as possible determinants of type of motivation toward L2 learning. Fillmore (1991) follows Gardner’s model and highlights the ‘need’ of the L2 learner to learn the L2, and the willingness of the TL group to interact with the L2 learner (cultural openness). Further, Landry et al (1991) suggest strengthening personal beliefs and ethnolinguistic identity of L2 learners in order to improve their L2 proficiency. Clément (1980) also focuses on the fear of assimilation of the L2 learner in the ‘other culture’. Culture, then, is a dominant factor in almost all the above social models. Clearly, there are a number of common features in the models proposed (Gardner, 1988). They include social context, culture, social interaction, need for L2 learning, etc. In fact, they all employ the same variables in almost the same sense; however, Schumann (1986) and Gardner (1983, 1985) both use the terms ‘social integration’ and ‘psychological openness’.

Regarding the texts used for language learning, researchers usually have examined these from an organisational or structural point of view Armbruster, (1984). Scant attention has been paid to the ways in which attitudes of the L2 learners operate when they read texts concerning their own culture in the L2 (Landry, Allard and Theberge, 1991), particularly when the learners are a minority group (e.g. the minority Arab group in the present study) learning the language of the dominant culture in a problematic socio-political situation. A positive attitude towards L2 learning situations may occur with the use of ‘culture-based texts’ when the cultural content of the text is familiar and when the textual material is comprehensible. Similarly, the reader’s reaction is of particular interest when the cultural content of the text is separated from the language of the text by translation of foreign textual content to the reader’s L1. Accordingly, since the focus of this study was the relationship of attitudes and the effect of cultural background of Arab students in Israel on their reading comprehension in Hebrew as a L2, it compared Arab students’ understanding of material containing Jewish and/or Arab content written in Arabic or Hebrew.

The Israeli–Arab L2 curricula, however, use material incorporating Jewish content, which according to schema theory (Rumelhart, 1981, 1984) hinders the process of reading comprehension (Carrell, 1981, 1983, 1987; Floyd and Carrell, 1987). Thus, negative attitudes (low instrumental and/or integrative motivation)
toward Hebrew combined with unfamiliar text content may cause serious problems for Israeli–Arab learners reading in Hebrew as their L2.

This study examines the cultural background of Arab learners and their attitudes as potential factors affecting reading comprehension in Hebrew as a L2 in a problematic social context. The principal questions which this research addresses are:
1) What type of attitudes do Arab students possess toward learning Hebrew in Israel?
2) What is the effect of the familiar/foreign stories on the Arab students’ reading comprehension in L1 and L2 in the Israeli–Arab social context?

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 74 eighth-grade Arab students (30 females and 44 males, age range 14–15 years), from an intermediate school in an Arab village in southern Israel. The participants were randomly sampled from all eighth-grade classes in the school. The majority of the students came from a low socio-economic background. The students learned Hebrew starting from fourth grade, studying five hours per week. They spoke Arabic at home and their language of instruction at school was also Arabic.

Materials

An questionnaire was constructed to examine Arab students’ attitudes toward learning Hebrew. It contained items about two types of motivation; instrumental ($\alpha = 0.78$) and integrative ($\alpha = 0.85$). Five items expressing the importance of learning Hebrew for instrumental reasons were presented, e.g. ‘I am learning Hebrew in order to find a good job in the future’; ‘I am learning the Hebrew language in order to continue my academic studies in the Israeli universities’. Three other items expressing the importance of learning Hebrew for integrative reasons were also presented, e.g. ‘I am learning the Hebrew language in order to meet new Jewish friends”; ‘I am learning the Hebrew language in order to think and be like Jews’. Participants had to answer on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Cloze tests in L1 (Arabic) and L2 (Hebrew) were administered to test language proficiency. The Arabic cloze tests was about the Bedouins in the desert, and the Hebrew cloze test was about the peace process in the Middle East.

Six stories were selected from the writings of the Jewish writer Buber (1957), who documented Jewish behavioural patterns, and from the Arab writer Jobran (1964), who documented Arab behavioural patterns. Three stories were originally written in Hebrew and have Jewish content: Heavy Punishment, Rabbi Zosiea and the Birds, and Charity (Buber, 1957). Similarly, three stories were written originally in Arabic and have Arab content: The Wise King, Sheikh Abass, and Ambition (Jobran, 1964). The Arab stories were translated into Hebrew and the Jewish stories were translated into Arabic, the translations being carried out by a group of ten Hebrew and Arabic teachers at intermediate and high schools in southern Israel. They had at least ten years’ experience, were all university graduates, and were qualified to teach Hebrew and Arabic at high-school level. They also judged the academic difficulty and length of the stories and the questions asked about them.
Ten multiple-choice comprehension questions were asked about each story. Five questions dealt with comprehension at the level of identifying information from the story (explicit information), e.g. a question about the Wise King cultural Arab story was: Why do the people drink from this well? (The answer, clearly stated in the text, is because it is the only well in town.) The other five questions dealt with comprehension at the level of inference from the stories (implicit information), e.g. a question about the Wise King story was: What is the message of the story? All the questions were presented in the students’ L1. These questions were also judged by the teachers’ group for clarity and academic difficulty.

Procedure
Data were collected in the following sequence. First, the attitudes questionnaire was administered, students being given ten minutes to complete it. Then the L1 and L2 cloze tests were administered. Two days later the reading tests began.

For the reading tests, the participants were assigned randomly to one of four experimental groups in order to avoid a learning effect. Each group received three stories, one on each of three consecutive days. Students were given 60 minutes to read each story and answer 10 multiple-choice comprehension questions. Students were allowed to refer to the text while answering the questions. Each group received only one version of each story, as follows:

- Group 1. Jewish stories in Hebrew.
- Group 2. Jewish stories in Arabic.
- Group 3. Arab stories in Arabic.
- Group 4. Arab stories in Hebrew.

RESULTS

Attitudes
Results of the attitude questionnaire showed that the motivation of the Arab students in learning Hebrew was primarily instrumental rather than integrative (Instrumental mean score = 4.1, SD = 0.64; Integrative mean score = 1.4, SD = 0.34; t(73)=30.0, p<0.001).

The Pearson intercorrelation matrix of all variables (see Table 1) also shows positive significant correlations for instrumental motivation with reading scores of all question types, but not for integrative motivation. In addition, there were positive intercorrelations among the dependent variables (identifying information tasks, inference tasks, and total score) and between L1 and L2 proficiency (r = 0.33, p<0.01).

Reading
As can be seen in Table 2, column A, at the level of identifying information, Arab students achieved higher scores on stories with Arab cultural content than on stories with Jewish cultural content, regardless of the text language (Arabic or Hebrew). A two-way ANOVA was used for each task level. These data produced a significant
main effect for content variable $F(1,73) = 14.4$, $p < 0.001$. There was also a significant language main effect $F(1,73) = 4.7$, $p < 0.04$. The interaction of language and content was not significant. Furthermore, at the level of inference, the students also performed better on cultural Arab stories than on Jewish stories, regardless of language (Table 2, column B). A two-way ANOVA also showed a significant effect for the content variable on the inference tasks $F(1,105) = 26.9$, $p < 0.001$, and a significant language effect $F(1,105) = 7.8$, $p < 0.006$. There was no significant interaction between language and content.

A stepwise regression analysis was conducted to test the importance of the independent variables in predicting the dependent variables, i.e. the students’ performance on the identifying information task and inference task for the different

Table 1. Intercorrelation matrix of all dependent variables ($n = 74$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Identifying questions</th>
<th>Inference questions</th>
<th>Total score</th>
<th>L1 proficiency</th>
<th>L2 proficiency</th>
<th>Integrative motivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inference questions</td>
<td>0.71***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total score</td>
<td>0.86***</td>
<td>0.97***</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1 proficiency</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
<td>0.33**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2 proficiency</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrative motivation</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.65**</td>
<td>0.68**</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental motivation</td>
<td>0.65**</td>
<td>0.63**</td>
<td>0.68**</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Means (M) and standard deviations (SD) of the reading scores on (A) identifying information level and (B) inference level as a function of language and content of text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A. Identifying information level</th>
<th>B. Inference tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LANGUAGE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hebrew</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>19</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
cultural stories. The independent variables entered were Instrumental motivation, Integrative motivation, Content of text, Language of text, L1 proficiency, and L2 proficiency. The results are summarised in Table 3.

With regard to the identifying information tasks, instrumental motivation of Arab students in Israel toward learning Hebrew was the strongest predictor, accounting for 42.7% of the variance. The second predictor was the content of text, which accounted for an additional 12.4% of the variance. The third predictor was the language of the text, accounting for a further 6% of the variance.

With regard to performance on the inference tasks, instrumental motivation was a strong predictor of performance, accounting for 39% of the variance. The second predictor was the content variable, which accounted for a further 32% of the variance. The third predictor was language of text, which accounted for 2% of the variance. The fourth predictor was integrative motivation, accounting for an additional 1.6% of the total variance.

It is interesting to note that the first two predictors for performance on both tasks were instrumental motivation and cultural content of texts. Other predictors which were third and fourth in order did not account for significant portions of the total variance on inference and identifying information subtests.

The stepwise regression analysis of the total reading score (correct answers) across the two task types also showed results similar to those of the separate stepwise analysis regarding the role of instrumental motivation and cultural content of texts. In addition, this revealed that an additional 2% of the variance was accounted for by L2 proficiency, which was the same value as in the analysis of the inference tasks. Integrative motivation and language of text were not significant predictors of total reading score.

Table 3. Results of stepwise regression analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>r</th>
<th>r^2 change</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of identifying information</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental motivation</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content of text</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language of text</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of inference</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental motivation</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content of text</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>80.2</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language of text</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrative motivation</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total reading scores</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental motivation</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content of text</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>79.4</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2 proficiency</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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DISCUSSION

Israeli educational policy encourages a ‘melting-pot’ approach where the goal is for all citizens to become ‘Israelis’ regardless of their home culture and language. Even Jews who come from different countries in the world are not encouraged to maintain their cultural heritage or their language.

Textual content and learners’ attitudes are powerful variables in determining students’ understanding in cultural stories regardless of the text language. This finding supports the idea of ‘cultural milieu’ and cultural beliefs reported in Gardner (1983) and Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1972) as social context barriers; it also supports schematic theory in general (Lipson, 1983; Rumelhart, 1981, 1984) and research on schema theory in L2 learning/teaching (Carrell, 1981, 1983, 1987; Floyd and Carrell, 1987). These findings, the primacy of instrumental motivation and the greater comprehensibility of culturally familiar Arab content, seem to match the findings of the socio-psychological models and the findings of schema theory: Arab students in Israel learn the L2, Hebrew, more because they need it than because they sympathise or identify with the language and its culture (Fillmore, 1991; Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Spolsky, 1989). By contrast, the students performed significantly higher on culturally Arab stories than on culturally Jewish stories, regardless of the presentation language of the stories. This finding enhances the important role played by cultural background of L2 learners on their reading comprehension of cultural stories.

However, instrumental motivation toward learning Hebrew was related to understanding Jewish content, regardless of the language in which it was presented. On the other hand, Arab students with low instrumental motivation did not perform well in Jewish stories, regardless of the language of presentation of the stories. This result also supports the social-psychological models of Gardner (1983), Spolsky (1989) and Fillmore (1991) inasmuch as these authors focused on the ‘learner’s need for the L2’, instrumental motivation, cultural openness to the ‘other culture’, L2 learning settings and the general social context. The Arab high-school Hebrew curriculum is potentially problematic for L2 learning in the Israeli–Arab social context in that almost all the stories presented are culturally Jewish (Abu-Rabia, 1991, 1993; Abu-Saad, 1991; Al-Haj, 1987, 1995). In addition, the Israeli–Arab conflict, the social-ethnic tension between Arabs and Jews in Israel, and the social problems that may be reflected in the daily life of the Arab society may well influence the Arab schools in Israel and the Hebrew-learning process of their students.

In other words, the students’ motivation toward L2 learning is not integrative, but instrumental for utilitarian purposes. The problematic social context – two different ethnic groups living in conflict – underlies the type of motivation toward the L2 learning. These results among Arab students learning Hebrew in Israel (instrumental motivation rather than integrative) follow previous results obtained by Spolsky (1989), Lukmani (1972), and some of the studies cited in Gardner and Lambert (1972), e.g. the Connecticut study, the Louisiana study and the Maine study.

In conclusion, considering the Israeli–Arab social context and the findings of this study, it would be more helpful to design a Hebrew L2 curriculum for Arab students that includes Hebrew language texts with culturally familiar Arab content. The notion of ‘culture-based curriculum’ may improve the motivation of L2 learners because of their familiarity with the material and their positive attitudes toward their
own culture. Positive attitudes toward learning situations may arise as learners read about their own culture (Cummins, 1989; Landry, 1987). Familiar cultural content can provide both: a motivational and a cognitive basis for language learning (Cummins, 1989; Cummins and Danesi, 1990; Landry, Allard and Theberge, 1991; Snow, Met and Genesee, 1988). Note that Landry et al (1991) suggested teaching French to Francophone learners by developing a French curriculum focusing on the 'ethnolinguistic identity' of the Francophone learners and the 'value of the L2'. The findings of this study suggest an alternative pedagogical method, namely teaching/learning L2 through culturally familiar texts, especially when the social learning context does not foster sympathy and social interaction between ethnic groups.

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