

BAR ILAN UNIVERSITY

**The Influence of Diglossia in Hebrew on Reading
Ability, Linguistic Skill and Inhibition in First Grade
"Talmud-Tora" Frameworks**

Keren Weisbard

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master's
Degree in the School of Education, Bar Ilan University

Ramat Gan, Israel

2016

Abstract

The Hebrew language is a good example of a socio-linguistic situation called diglossia (Ferguson, 1959). This is due to the existence of two varieties of the language: the spoken Hebrew language and the biblical language which differs from the spoken language in a different system of linguistic rules in several fields of the language. Children who study in the state-religious Talmud Torah framework grow up within this dual linguistic context, where two varieties (or two languages) are used for different communication purposes. This context can also influence the development of linguistic abilities, due to its direct influence on the extent of exposure and experience in the biblical language. The present study examined the influence of diglossia in the Hebrew language on linguistic abilities: phonological knowledge and morphological knowledge; on the reading ability: accuracy, fluency and reading comprehension; and on the response inhibition ability among first graders who attend a state-religious Talmud Torah framework. Learning within this framework includes study and memorization of the biblical language in first grade, such that the students are exposed to Hebrew diglossia in parallel to the reading acquisition process.

Ninety boys studying in first grade participated in the study. The participants were sampled from three populations: the population that attends state-religious Talmud Torah schools, the population that attends state-religious schools and the population that attends state schools. Thirty boys from each population group participated in each group. Two control groups that are not exposed to the learning of biblical Hebrew, contrary to the research group, were chosen in order to test the influence of diglossia. The choice of these two control groups was intended to isolate cultural influences, where the group of students who attend state-religious schools may be exposed to biblical language orally as a result of cultural exposure to traditional contents such as prayer, and the group of students who attend state schools is not exposed to biblical language during the course of their studies in first grade.

The research findings indicate that achievements of first graders who are exposed to Hebrew diglossia within the study and memorization of the biblical language are significantly higher than the achievements of the participants in the two control groups in the fields of linguistic abilities: phonological knowledge and morphological knowledge; in the reading

ability: fluency and reading comprehension; and in the response inhibition ability. These findings are compatible with those of similar studies on diglossia in the Arabic language, where it was found that the linguistic distance between the two diglossic languages is a factor that supports linguistic development and is expressed in all fields of the language: phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon (Eviatar & Ibrahim, 2000; Saiegh-Haddad, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2012; Saiegh-Haddad et al., 2011). The findings of the present study are also in agreement with similar findings from the field of bilingualism, where it was found that the linguistic distance between two languages supports meta-linguistic understanding and linguist flexibility and improves the development of linguistic abilities and managerial abilities, such as the response inhibition ability (Barac & Bialystok , 2012; Bialystok & Martin, 2004).

The uniqueness of the present study is in a preliminary examination of expressions of diglossia in the Hebrew language and its influence on linguistic ability and response inhibition ability, as investigated in different languages and in the field of bilingualism. This has thus added a further stratum to the scientific literature in the field of diglossia. The research results have practical educational implications for advancing linguistic abilities and the response inhibition ability. Diglossic exposure to the biblical language, which comprises another level of the language, may help advance these abilities. In the education system, biblical studies in the lower grades focus on the biblical story. The research findings can be adopted in order to expand Bible lessons to the study and memorization of the biblical text.