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Direct instruction of grammatical structure to students of Hebrew as a foreign language

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Introduction

Most current approaches to the teaching of a foreign language maintain that grammatical structure should not be taught directly; it is assumed that the best way of bringing about mastery of grammar is by allowing its natural acquisition inductively from the authentic linguistic material itself.

The typical experience of the instructor of Hebrew as a foreign language shows that indeed there is little correlation between the structures taught or drills performed and what is actually acquired. Regardless of how many times one may teach and drill a particular structure, the average student's performance will not improve in direct relationship to the degree of instruction. Consequently, it is advisable not to restrict the texts we use to the structures we mean to teach; rather, we should select (simple) texts representing real-life situations, aimed at specific types of proficiency. Exercises should
also be varied and not limited to a particular structure if indeed it turns out that drilling a structure does not guarantee its acquisition.

On the other hand, one should not forget that the majority of students of Hebrew as a foreign language, i.e., outside of Israel, are exposed to the language for only limited stretches of time -- normally no longer than three 50-minute periods a week in the United States, for instance -- and in these short sessions, the instructor is expected to make progress in all four proficiency areas: oral and written expression, reading and listening. When the input is so limited, relying solely on natural acquisition of grammatical structure by induction may severely limit the progress of instruction. It appears, then, that we must use our judgement. There are certain cases in which direct instruction of grammatical structure may save time, and prove to be efficient as well as effective. It should be emphasized, though, that even in such cases, it is not suggested by the present writer that the Hebrew instructor necessarily follow these suggestions; rather, it is maintained that the decision whether to directly teach a particular structure or not be left open, and be determined based on specific needs and specific classes. In other words, flexibility is recommended, regardless of how desirable direct instruction of grammar may appear to be. On the other hand, instructors must be fully aware of grammatical rules so that they do not teach out of "structural ignorance," but be in a position to make intelligent choices, such as whether to (a) teach structures directly; (b) teach grammar indirectly by methodologically-feasible "rules of thumb;" (c) find the best texts that would finally lead to the acquisition of crucial structures; etc. In any case, it is argued below that when employed, direct instruction of grammar should be limited to a number of categories.

**Rule simplicity**

Direct instruction of grammar may be considered when the rule or structure concerned is simple and easy to present, and its direct instruction results in significant time-saving (see Bolozky 1989).

A basic case: nouns ending in *a* are feminine (exceptions: *layla tov* 'good night,' *sulya xaruc* 'diligent apprentice'). Another illustration: gender marking is always regular in adjectives, even when the noun itself is marked irregularly for gender (unless marked otherwise, stress is word-final throughout this article):

- **Haver+im**  
  friend+pl  
  'good friends'

- **tov+im**  
  good+pl

- **naš+im**  
  women  
  'little women'

- **ktan+ot**  
  little+pl

- **Halon+ot**  
  window+pl  
  'high windows'

- **gvoh+im**  
  high+pl
Adverbs, on the other hand, are not subject to any gender or number agreement (i.e., are invariable):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adverb</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>oved</td>
<td>m.s</td>
<td>I m./you m.s./he work(s) hard'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work, m.s</td>
<td>hard</td>
<td>I f./you f.s./she work(s) hard'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ovéd+et</td>
<td>kaše</td>
<td>We m./you m.pl./they m. work hard'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work, f.s</td>
<td>hard</td>
<td>We f./you f.pl./they f. work hard'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Wide application**

A grammatical rule may be taught when it applies widely. Even if such rule has exceptions, a wide scope of application will make up for the need to memorize deviations.

An illustration: in the pa`al verb pattern, the future stem vowel is a if the second or third radical of the root is "guttural":

- tiš(‘)al 'you will ask'
- tinhaq 'you will drive'
- /tišma/ > iišma 'you will hear'
- tišlaH 'you will send'

A limited number of a-verbs (including some 'stative' verbs that are too few to characterize as a separate group) will have to be memorized as such:

- tilmad 'you will learn' tiškav 'you will lie (down)'
- tirkaH 'you will ride' tiktan 'you will be/become small'
- tigdaH 'you will be/become big, you will grow'

Otherwise the future stem vowel is o -- which accounts for the majority of pa`al verbs.

**Teaching surface regularities**

Instruction of grammatical rules may be beneficial when regularities are formulated not in terms of underlying structure, but rather by means of transparent surface generalizations, even if such generalizations do not reflect natural linguistic phenomena. The argument here is based on the assumption that it is easy for the learner to acquire transparent generalizations, which have no -- or few -- contradictions on the surface.

For instance, the Spirantization ("beged kefat") rule, if it is to be taught, should be introduced on the basis of surface distribution rather than as a "pseudo-phonetic" process attempting to recreate the historical alternation. Originally, the stops p, t, k, b, d, g simply became fricative after a vowel (i.e. f, θ, x, v, δ, γ, respectively) -- an
assimilation of continuity from the vowel, that was blocked only by gemination (the doubling marked by a dageš forte). In Israeli Hebrew, however, the process has lost most of its productivity, owing to considerable opacity caused by phoneme merger and loss, loss of gemination, etc. All one can do -- if one chooses to do so -- is talk of frequency of fricatives in certain (surface) environments: at the end of the word:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sing.</th>
<th>Plural</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rav</td>
<td>rabim</td>
<td>much, numerous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kaf</td>
<td>kapot</td>
<td>tablespoon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rax</td>
<td>rakim</td>
<td>soft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arox</td>
<td>arukim</td>
<td>long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cahov</td>
<td>cehubim</td>
<td>yellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>écev</td>
<td>acabim</td>
<td>nerve</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

in the second segment of an initial consonant cluster:

švira 'breaking' sfira 'counting' šxuna 'neighborhood'

with some classes of exceptions (e.g. the future/imperative of nif'al -- yibane 'will be built,' etc.), after a prefix ending with a vowel:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>Future</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>baraH</td>
<td>flee</td>
<td>yivraH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pataH</td>
<td>open</td>
<td>yiftaH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bikeš</td>
<td>request</td>
<td>yevakeš</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>katav</td>
<td>write</td>
<td>yixtov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kibes</td>
<td>launder</td>
<td>yexabes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>piter</td>
<td>fire</td>
<td>yefater</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and in certain miškal configurations, e.g. the second consonant in CɪCCon+ot, the plural of CɪCaC+on, as in:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sing.</th>
<th>Plural</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>zikaron</td>
<td>zixronot</td>
<td>memory, mémoire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>&lt;&gt;</code> iparon</td>
<td><code>&lt;&gt;</code> efronot</td>
<td>pencil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even in these environments there are a good number of exceptions; most of them, however, are characteristic of the casual or substandard register.

One might also argue, that instead of teaching that a non-high vowel at the verb base is deleted (or reduced) in the syllable preceding a stressed suffix-initial vowel, e.g.

kotev 'write, m.s' ~ /kotev+/m/ 'write, m.pl' > kotvim
katav 'he wrote' ~ /katav+a/ 'she wrote' > karva

we should simply list alternating stem-patterns, as they appear on the surface:

kotev 'write, sing. stem' ~ kotv 'write, pl. stem'
katav 'wrote stem' ~ karv 'variant of wrote before a, u'
Another option to consider: for the typical American student, who has never been taught basic concepts such as 'definite,' or 'direct object,' one might introduce a generalization involving a simpler surface observation, something like: "insert et after a verb and before either a noun with #ha+ 'the' or a proper noun."

"Rule of thumb" generalizations based on linguistic principles

One may consider teaching an "invented" didactic tool that is based on some linguistic principle. It is not necessary to teach the rule itself -- only to use it as a means to achieve instructional purposes.

An illustration: in the initial stages of instruction, and at any later stage in the dictionary/glossary component, one can use partial vowel marking, in which an unmarked non-final consonant is interpreted as a transition to the vowel a, and a šva as the absence of a vowel — unless it is difficult to pronounce a resulting consonant cluster, in which case it will be realized as an e (see Bolozky 1990). The proposal is based on the observation that a is the unmarked vowel in Hebrew, and constitutes at least a third of all vowel realizations in Hebrew. The advantages for the student: (a) getting used to the idea that an orthographic non-final consonant usually consists of a consonant-plus-vowel, and that as such there is a good chance that it will be realized as a consonant-plus-a -- unless it is followed by yod or vav (the number of syllables with e is relatively small; syllables with segol or cere will still be marked, though). (b) the use of šva as the absence of a vowel, i.e. only as a zero, will not only inform the student where to close the syllable or pronounce a syllable-initial cluster, as in:

karva 'she wrote'  ktiva 'writing'  katavi 'you f.s wrote'

but will also -- and this is its main advantage -- provide us with the natural pronunciation of the šva mobile when required: in Israeli Hebrew one is naturally led to pronounce the šva as a vowel when a consonant cluster is formed that is hard to pronounce as such, and the vowel e, the modern counterpart of the šva mobile, splits such clusters:

yladim 'children' > yeladim  mtuka 'sweet, f.s' > metuka
lvanim 'white, m.pl' > levanim  nmalim 'ants' > nemalim
t'una 'accident' > te'una > teuna (Even though the historical aleph is not realized, it is useful to regard it as a "consonant slot")
tilmdu 'you pl. will learn' > tilmedu
metalfnim 'phone, m.pl.' > metalfenim

Note that the instruction to the students to "pronounce an unpronounceable zero šva as e" is linear, following the progress of reading. Thus, in the case of /tilmdul/, for instance, the first šva is read as zero, resulting in til; since the one under the mem is unpronounceable as zero, m is realized as me; just as y in /yladim/ becomes ye.

The only disadvantage of this efficient method is the "contradiction" the student will face when using some standard dictionaries, in which it is often the zero šva that is
not represented. The teacher should consider whether the benefits of the proposed system outweigh this shortcoming.

**Fighting carryover from the first language**

Grammatical rules may be useful when one needs to "break a bad habit" that lingers from the first language.

An illustration: English-speaking students often copy "subjunctive-type" embedded clauses from English, e.g. as in

\[ \text{*ani} \text{ roce} (\text{se}) \text{ata} \text{ la-léxet} \quad \text{I want you to go}\]

\[ \text{I want (that) you to go} \]

as well as in similar sentences with amar 'told, instructed,' bikeš 'asked, requested,' šixnèa 'convinced,' etc. To elicit the correct structure, i.e.

\[ \text{ani} \text{ roce} \text{ še-tele} \text{x} \quad \text{I want you to go}\]

\[ \text{I want that-you will go} \]

one might inform the students that in Hebrew, embedded clauses of this type are finite rather than infinitival, and that the verb form is in the future.

**Structural parallels in the first language**

The benefits of grammar instruction should also be considered when linguistic phenomena in the target language have parallels in the first language, and pointing to the similarity may help in acquiring and internalizing such phenomena (see Bolozky 1986).

For instance: the instructor may point out that the Hebrew word-order within a noun phrase, Noun-Adjective-Adverb, is equivalent to the organization of similar noun phrases in English, except that it constitutes its mirror image:

\[ \text{séfer} \text{ tov} \text{ me(')od} \quad \text{'(a) very good book}\]

\[ \text{book good very} \]

One could also consider the desirability of drawing a parallel between markers of causation and inchoativity in Hebrew and their English counterparts -- say, for instance, between causation through binyan membership (be it hif'il or pi'el) and English +ize# or +ify#:

\[ \text{muHaši 'concrete'} \sim \text{himHiš 'concretize'} \]

\[ \text{šama 'heard} \sim \text{hišmía 'vocalize'} \]

\[ \text{yaše 'beautiful'} \sim \text{yipa 'beautify'} \]

\[ \text{pašut 'simple'} \sim \text{pišet 'simplify'} \]

and on the other hand, show that there are also cases, as in English, in which causation and inchoativity ('becoming...') may be realized in the same surface form, regardless of whether an affix is involved or not:
It is also possible to facilitate the pronunciation of Hebrew clusters that do not occur in English by pointing out their existence in the casual/fast register of English. Thus, for instance, the clusters pt, tm or bn are normally not allowed as syllabic onsets in English, and some English-speaking students find it difficult to pronounce them in words such as:

\[ \text{ptuHim 'open, m.pl'} \quad \text{tmuna 'picture'} \quad \text{bney 'sons of'} \]

It might be helpful to point out to them that such clusters do exist in their own English casual/fast speech:

\[ \text{p[ar]ticular} \quad \text{p[o]tato} \quad \text{t[o]mato} \quad \text{b[i]noculars} \]

An insightful illustration in this category is the comparison between discontinuous patterns of root-plus-\( \text{miškal} \) and the so-called "strong" verb patterns in English. Students can be told that had English contained more patterns of this kind, with many more items realized in each, its morphology would have been closer to Hebrew word-formation. Below are most of the discontinuous word formation patterns of English (verb paradigms that conform only in part are bracketed):

**Discontinuous word formation patterns in the English verb system**

- drive-drove-driven
- write-wrote-written
- ride-rode-ridden
- rise-rose-risen
- arise-arose-arisen
- strive-strove-striven
- smite-smote-smitten
- bestride-bestrode-bestridden
- speak-spoke-spoken
- freeze-froze-frozen
- steal-stole-stolen
- weave-wove-woven
- grow-grew-grown
- blow-blew-blown
- know-knew-known
- throw-threw-thrown
- fly-flew-flown
- bear-bore-borne
- tear-tore-torn
- swear-swore-sworn
- tread-trod-trodden
- wear-wore-worn
- take-took-taken
- shake-shook-shaken
- forsake-forsook-forsaken
- show-showed-shown
- show-mowed-mown
- sing-sang-sung
- sink-sank-sunk
- swim-swam-swum
- drink-drank-drunk
- ring-rang-rung
- shrink-shrank-shrunken
- spring-sprang-sprung
- stink-stank-stunk
- (begin-began-begun)
- run-run-ran
- spin-spun-spun
- dig-dug-dug
- stick-stuck-stuck
- sting-stung-stung
- swing-swung-swung
- wring-wrung-wrung
- bite-bit-bitten
- hide-hid-hid
- chide-chid-chid
- light-lit-lit
- slide-slid-slid
- bend-bent-bent
- send-sent-sent
- lend-lent-lent
- rent-rent-rent
- spend-spent-spent

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bid-bade-bidden, give-gave-given (eat-ate-eaten)
bleed-bled-bled, breed-bred-bred, feed-fed-fed, lead-led-led, meet-met-met, read-read-read, speed-sped-sped (hold-held-held)
bind-bound-bound, find-found-found, grind-ground-ground, wind-wound-wound
hit-hit-hit, split-split-split, slit-slit-slit
let-let-let, set-set-set, shed-shed-shed
cut-cut-cut, shut-shut-shut
hurt-hurt-hurt, burst-burst-burst
sell-sold-sold, tell-told-told (shine-shone-shone)
lose-lost-lost, shoot-shot-shot
sit-sat-sat, spit-spat-spat
pay-paid-paid, lay-laid-laid (say-said-said)
teach-taught-taught, seek-sought-sought, beseech-besought-besought
bring-brought-brought, think-thought-thought (buy-bought-bought, fight-fought-fought, catch-caught-caught)

Thus, for instance, in the first group, the discontinuous related miškálím would be (C)(C)CaIC-(C)(C)C5C-(C)(C)CICn, and the roots drv, rt, rd, rz, strv, etc.

Some instructors of Hebrew have doubts regarding this category; they feel that instead of helping the student, pointing to structural similarity may in fact be detrimental — either in that it could confuse the learners, who are hardly aware of the structure of their own language, or in that it might legitimize additional, inappropriate dependence on structures from the native language, ending up in unwanted carryover of the wrong constructions (see above). Neither has happened in the experience of the author of this article, but proper testing — with control groups, in a number of colleges and over a number of years — is certainly called for.

Conclusion

To conclude, the question of whether to teach grammar directly or not does not have a simple yes-or-no answer; it depends on a variety of factors, including considerations such as complexity, scope of application, degree of surface transparency, methodological usefulness/efficiency, the existence of parallels in the native language, etc. And most importantly — it should be tailored to the specific audience and the instructional context in general.
References


I still didn't receive your renewal pep...(!)