Textbook Analysis: *The New Hebrew from Scratch, Part II*

My teaching context is a 2nd year (3rd semester) intensive Modern Hebrew class at the university level. There are typically 13-15 students per section, mostly undergraduates with a range of majors, with one or two graduate students in Hebrew Studies or Middle Eastern Studies. They are all native speakers of English (though one near-native speaker of Hebrew seems to have made it into the class somehow). The class meets five times a week for 1 to 1 1/2 hours per day. Most of the students are taking the class to fulfill the language requirement, but some are taking it out of personal, academic, or religious interest. The end goal of the course is proficiency-based, with the students expected to reach Intermediate-Low proficiency (according to ACTFL guidelines) by the end of the semester.

At this level of Hebrew, a formal textbook is typically only used at the beginning of the semester. As the term progresses, the class moves out of the textbook and begins other types of activities. This often takes the form of reading short stories or novels in somewhat simplified Hebrew, finding, summarizing, and reporting on newspaper articles from the Israeli press, and other activities that are more unique to the particular instructor and the desired learning outcomes. For this context, I have selected the text *The New Hebrew from Scratch: Part II* (2001), created and published by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I first used this text when I was a student myself in an intensive summer program at the Hebrew University; my level was slightly below that of my current teaching context.

My initial reasons for choosing to analyze this textbook relate to my personal experience. Having used this text as a college student in an intensive context, I know that the level and tone of the units and activities are appropriate for my similar teaching context. Looking at the text now as a teacher rather than as a student, I am better able to recognize and appreciate the variety of types of input and material used in the book. As is true for many language texts, certain exercises are accompanied by audio recordings. Unlike other textbooks, though, the audio does not provide any material or information that is not also directly in the book (i.e., there is no “teacher’s edition” or something like it).

The authors also make it a point to include authentic Hebrew materials from various periods and of various genres and lengths, with the explicit aim of stimulating student motivation and engagement with the language. In their words, “In our opinion, contact with authentic materials, to the right extent...encourages [learners] to continue and to learn” (*Hebrew from Scratch*, 2001, Introduction). In
addition to the authentic materials, the book also includes text selections adapted to be level-appropriate. Toward the beginning of the book, the authentic texts are quite short, often just a line or two or a short, simple poem, while the adapted texts are slightly longer, usually around paragraph length. As the book progresses, each type increases in both length and complexity.

In my opinion, the inclusion of both authentic and adapted Hebrew texts is one of the strongest elements of *Hebrew from Scratch*. Through these texts, the students are able to acquire not only reading skills, but also cultural knowledge of Hebrew and the Land of Israel at various stages of development and in various forms. Most of the selections are clearly geared toward adult learners in their subject matter and level of seriousness, a fact which fits perfectly with my college-level teaching context. The inclusion of a variety of cultural materials is also consistent with my desire to focus on cultural awareness in the classroom and to enable my students to become more well-rounded and open to other cultural experiences, in addition to the basics of learning the language. Though the selections do not typically deal with more hot-button issues of politics or religion, these issues can easily be added to the curriculum through other means.

One aspect of the book that plays to my own strengths as a language learner is the consistent focus on form. In every unit there are at least a few conjugation or declension tables showing the general form of the particular verb pattern or preposition that is the focus of that activity. This explicit instruction is typically followed by exercises meant to activate this new knowledge. Our sample unit, for example, begins with a small table showing the forms of the future tense for simple verbs of a particular verb pattern, along with an example. This is followed by a mechanical exercise in which the student is given sentences in the present tense, which must first be changed to the future tense and then changed to a different subject in the future tense. Next are two brief paragraphs introducing a topic that will be discussed throughout the chapter, followed by both basic comprehension questions and another mechanical drill like the previous one. This sequence repeats twice more to introduce relate future tense forms.

Despite this clear focus on mechanical drills, there are also activities that can be used to focus on more communicative tasks. I have worded my statement this way deliberately, that they *can* be used in this way, because, despite the authors’ stated goal of “gradually building communicative abilities orally and in writing” (*Hebrew from Scratch*, 2001, Introduction), relatively few of the exercises seem explicitly
geared towards working in pairs or small groups on oral communication. Only a few of the activities have the words so characteristic of language texts, “Ask your partner,” or “In groups, do X, Y, Z.” It seems, rather, that this book is designed so that individual learners can, to a certain extent, do the activities on their own. This places more of the burden on individual instructors to create opportunities for real communication in the classroom.

Were I able to use this book in my current context, I think that this is the main issue that I would have to deal with in each unit. In many cases, I think it need only be a matter of taking prompts from the unit and having the students discuss them together, rather than (or in addition to) writing about them. For example, in one prompt from the sample unit, students are asked to write about the following questions: “What do parents need to do for their children, and what do children need to do for their parents?” (Hebrew from Scratch, 2001, p. 124). In this case, I would have the students discuss the question together in pairs and then as a class, and only then perhaps give them the written task as homework.

The other possible shortcoming that I see in the book is in the design of the audio recordings as a primarily supplemental resource, rather than an integral part of each unit. This obstacle can be overcome by having the teacher use them occasionally as a listening exercise, rather than a supplement to the written texts in the unit. For example, the students can be instructed to close their books, to listen and take notes, to focus on certain elements of the recorded text, and to answer questions based on the material they are listening to. The primary redeeming quality of the audio recordings, as they are, is the great variety of actors used to read and act out the texts and dialogues. The voice actors appear to be of various ages, genders, and accents, and do well to breathe some life into the written text; this increase in the variety of oral input that the students receive is no doubt beneficial.

Aside from these adjustments, I would take a fairly straightforward approach to teaching the material in this book. I would have the students prepare much of the material, especially the mechanical drills and initial readings of the text selections, at home, allowing more time in class to discuss the technicalities and nuances of new forms or words, the subject matter of the reading selections, and to answer questions they might have. Most in-class time would be spent working in pairs or groups on communicative tasks. One good thing about all of the prompts for writing assignments mentioned above is that they can for the most part be repurposed as prompts for group discussions.
If the students were having particular difficulties with the forms being taught, or if I wanted to draw attention to certain forms, I could also have the students work in pairs on close readings of one or two of the text selections in the unit. For example, for the paragraphs in the sample unit dealing with the future tense, I could have the students work together to identify the future tense verbs used in them, identifying the subject of the verb based on its grammatical gender and number.

In some ways, this textbook reflects the current teaching philosophy of some Hebrew professors at the University of Texas at Austin, with its focus on grammatical forms, reading comprehension, and its applicability to an intensive instruction format. Its relative weakness in the areas of oral proficiency and communicative competence, however, does not fit well with the Hebrew program’s shifting focus to these aspects of language learning. It would not be difficult, as discussed above, to adapt the book’s focus on the skills of reading and writing to be more inclusive of the necessary skills of speaking and listening as well.

With regards to the physical format of the book itself, it seems to me relevant to note that I have encountered relatively few textbooks for Modern Hebrew that have clearly been professionally and rigorously formatted and edited to facilitate the ease of use. It includes what I would consider to be an appropriate amount of relevant illustrations, which serve to break up the monotony of what would otherwise be blocks of text while nevertheless allowing adult students to take it seriously as a helpful tool in language learning. The table of contents, headings, and judicious use of vowel markings all contribute to Hebrew from Scratch being quite user-friendly. One of the most useful aspects of the formatting is, in my opinion, the final page or two of each unit, which lay out the relevant vocabulary learned in the lesson according to their part of speech, as well as briefly summarizing the grammatical points learned.

Bibliography