HOW TO TEACH HEBREW TO SPEAKERS OF EUROPEAN LANGUAGES: PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE, LEARNING PSYCHOLOGY, AND MODERN TEACHING METHODS

Željko Stanojević
Institute for Hebrew Language and Literature, Belgrade
Independent Researcher in Hebrew Linguistics and Biblical Philology
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0717-6184
Belgrade, 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a practical and methodological overview of contemporary Hebrew language teaching for speakers of European languages, with special emphasis on learning psychology, communicative methodology, phonetic difficulties, student motivation, and the integration of Modern and Biblical Hebrew. The study is primarily based on the author's long-term practical teaching experience with students from different European linguistic backgrounds, combined with contemporary methodological research in the field of Hebrew as a foreign language.

Special attention is devoted to reducing psychological barriers among beginners, the use of pantomime, imitation, humor, and theatrical communication in language teaching, as well as the development of direct thinking in Hebrew without excessive reliance on transliteration and constant translation. The paper analyzes common phonetic and graphemic difficulties encountered by Slavic, Romance, Germanic, and other European language speakers, together with practical strategies for overcoming them.

A significant part of the study focuses on presenting Hebrew binyanim as logical formulas, the early introduction of conversation, the gradual transition to unvocalized texts, and the motivational role of Biblical expressions, religious formulas, and Biblical names in Hebrew language instruction. The author argues that modern Hebrew teaching should be dynamic, communicative, psychologically relaxed, and adapted to the cognitive patterns of European learners.

Keywords

Hebrew language, language teaching methodology, Biblical Hebrew, Modern Hebrew, learning psychology, binyanim, niqqud, phonetics, communicative teaching, European languages

INTRODUCTION

Teaching Hebrew to speakers of European languages is a specific methodological challenge because of the major differences between the Semitic and Indo-European language systems.[1] These differences are not present only at the level of the alphabet and pronunciation, but also involve the inner logic of the language itself, the way words are formed, the organization of the verbal system, the relationship between written and spoken language, and the psychological approach to learning and developing a feeling for the language.

Unlike most European languages, Hebrew is based on a root system in which a large number of words are built from a limited number of consonantal roots. At first, this structure often creates a feeling of insecurity among European students, but later this same system proves to be one of the most logical and efficient aspects of the Hebrew language. After some time, many students begin to experience Hebrew as almost “mathematical,” because they realize that many verbs and nouns can be intuitively understood through familiar roots and patterns.[2]

Practical experience shows that students who encounter Hebrew for the first time very often develop a psychological barrier already when they first see the script. Writing from right to left, the presence of niqqud, guttural sounds, and many unfamiliar letters make many students feel that Hebrew is an extremely difficult and “unreachable” language. Because of this, the teacher’s first task is not grammar but removing fear.[3]

The psychological factor often determines the speed of progress more than the grammatical complexity of the language itself. A student who is not afraid of making mistakes and who starts using the language in conversation very early usually progresses much faster than a student who first tries to “perfectly” understand grammar in theory. Modern foreign language teaching methodology has emphasized for decades that active use of the language is one of the key factors in successful second-language acquisition.[4]

Modern Hebrew teaching methodology increasingly emphasizes the communicative approach and the early involvement of students in active language use. Edna Amir Coffin and Shmuel Bolozky point out that students must very early develop the feeling that Hebrew is a functional and living language, and not only an object of philological study.[5] A similar approach can also be found in the work of Vardit Ringvald, who emphasizes the importance of emotional relaxation, spontaneous speech, and constant activation of the language during lessons.[6]

In practical teaching, combining the following elements has proven very useful:

- Modern Hebrew,
- elements of Biblical Hebrew,
- conversation,
- pantomime,

- humor,
- and the gradual introduction of grammar.

Such an approach gives students the feeling that Hebrew is at the same time:

- modern and functional,
- but also deeply connected with history, religion, and civilization.

Especially good results are achieved through a model in which beginner-level teaching is based approximately on:

- 80% Modern Hebrew,
- and around 20% Biblical examples.

In this way, students very early begin to feel that they can understand simpler parts of the Bible in the original language, which creates strong emotional and intellectual motivation in many learners. Religious students often feel direct contact with the original text, while non-religious students also develop the feeling that they are entering one of the great classical languages of world civilization.[7]

Another very important aspect of teaching Hebrew is motivation through the etymology of familiar expressions and names. Practical experience shows that students react very positively when they begin to understand the meaning of well-known religious expressions such as:

- Amen,
- Hallelujah,
- Abracadabra,
- as well as the meaning of Biblical names such as David, Daniel, or Sarah.

Such examples create the feeling that Hebrew is not only a foreign language, but also a key for understanding a large part of European and Middle Eastern cultural tradition. In this sense, studies connecting Hebrew philology, etymology, and cultural history can be very useful.[8]

Phonetic methods also play a very important role in teaching. European students often have problems distinguishing:

- alef and ayin,
- het and khaf,
- samekh and sin,
- kaf and qof.

In modern Israeli Hebrew, many of these historical differences are no longer clearly present in everyday speech, which is why students often do not understand why there are “two identical letters.” Because of this, it is useful to occasionally use a partially Biblical or more strongly articulated pronunciation so that students can develop an auditory connection between the sound and the letter.[9]

Experience shows that students learn Hebrew much more easily when:

- they begin speaking very early,
- they do not use transliteration,
- they actively participate in conversation,
- and they develop the feeling that they can intuitively “feel” the language.

For this reason, the goal of teaching should not be only memorizing grammatical rules, but developing a feeling for Hebrew as a living communicative system.[10]

Footnotes

[1] Sáenz-Badillos, A. (1993) *A History of the Hebrew Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[2] Berman, R. (1978) *Modern Hebrew Structure*. University Publishing Projects.

[3] Krashen, S. (1982) *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon.

[4] Richards, J. and Rodgers, T. (2014) *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[5] Amir Coffin, E. and Bolozky, S. (2005) *A Reference Grammar of Modern Hebrew*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[6] Ringvald, V. (2013) *Hebrew for All*. Behrman House.

[7] Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *Gramatika biblijskog hebrejskog jezika*. Beograd: Institut za hebrejski jezik i književnost.

[8] Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *WHAT DOES THE WORD “AMEN” REALLY MEAN? (A Historical-Linguistic, Phonetic, Philological, Cultural, and Theological Study with a Brief Overview of Slavic Languages)*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19463680

[9] Khan, G. (2020) *The Tiberian Pronunciation Tradition of Biblical Hebrew*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

[10] Stanojević, Ž. (2025) *ETIMOLOGY, DISCOURSE FUNCTION, AND LITURGICAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE EXPRESSION הַלְלוּ־יָהּ (HALLELUJAH): FROM BIBLICAL HEBREW TO GLOBAL RELIGIOUS TRADITION*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.17613/zcvcf-6g024

CLASS STRUCTURE AND CONVERSATION

One of the most important elements of successful Hebrew language teaching is the proper organization of the lesson. Practical experience shows that students progress much faster when the lesson is not based only on grammar and memorizing words, but when speaking, listening, reading, comprehension, and a feeling for the language are developed at the same time.[1]

For beginners, it is especially important that the lesson be dynamic and psychologically relaxed. Students who, during the first lessons, get the impression that the class is “difficult,” slow, and too theoretical quickly lose motivation. On the other hand, students who begin actively using Hebrew already in the first lesson overcome their initial fear much more easily and develop the feeling that they are able to progress.[2]

A 90-minute lesson divided into three parts has proven to be very effective: conversation, work on the script and niqqud, and interesting cultural content. Such a structure allows the student to activate different psychological and linguistic processes during a single lesson, which helps avoid fatigue and monotony.

In the beginner stage, around 30 minutes of the lesson are used for conversation through pantomime, imitation, physical demonstration, humor, and theatrical presentation of meaning. This approach allows students to begin connecting words with meaning very early, without constant translation into their native language. In this way, students do not learn the language through mechanical memorization of translations, but through direct connection between situation, movement, sound, and meaning.[3]

Practical teaching experience shows that students remember words much faster when they can see them, imagine them, or physically connect them with a certain action. Because of this, pantomime and physical demonstration are especially effective for verbs, everyday nouns, adjectives, spatial relationships, and basic communicative expressions.

For example, the teacher uses hand gestures, imitates actions, moves around the classroom, acts out situations, or exaggerates pronunciation. This approach works especially well with adult students because the lesson gains dynamism, spontaneity, and an emotional component.[4]

Unlike traditional foreign language schools, where students often remain passive for a long time, this teaching model forces students to participate actively in communication from the very first lessons.

A particularly important element is that students are allowed to speak even when they do not know all the words. The goal is not perfect grammatical accuracy, but language activation, freedom from fear, and the development of spontaneity.

In practice, it has proven very useful to constantly remind students that the conversation must continue and that one unknown word must not stop communication. If a student does not know a certain word, they should use another familiar word, a description, a synonym, or an approximate meaning. Such an approach develops improvisation, flexibility, and communicative confidence. Modern foreign language methodology has long emphasized that communicative spontaneity is one of the key elements of successful language acquisition.[5]

After the conversation part of the lesson comes work on letters, writing, niqqud, and reading. Practical experience shows that students learn the Hebrew script much more easily when reading and speaking are combined immediately, instead of spending a long time only on theoretical study of the letters.

It is especially important that students become accustomed from the very beginning to writing exclusively in Hebrew script, without transliteration into Latin or Cyrillic letters. Transliteration very often slows down the development of a direct connection between the grapheme, the sound, and the meaning.[6]

Because of this, one rule has proven especially useful in practical teaching: Hebrew words should be written only in Hebrew letters, while the meaning may optionally be written in the student's native language. In this way, students much more quickly develop a feeling for the script, direct reading ability, and the habit of thinking in Hebrew.

The third part of the lesson is used for interesting topics, etymological comments, religious expressions, the meaning of names, and short cultural discussions. This part of the lesson has enormous motivational value. Students react very positively when they understand the meaning of familiar expressions such as Amen, Hallelujah, Abracadabra, or names such as David, Daniel, Sarah, or Michael. Such topics create the feeling that Hebrew is not only a foreign language, but also a key for understanding a large part of religious and cultural history.[7]

In this sense, studies connecting Hebrew philology, etymology, religious tradition, and the history of language can be very useful. Topics that students already intuitively know from religion, culture, films, or everyday life have a particularly strong motivational effect.

Later, the lesson structure gradually changes: around 20 minutes are used for conversation and revision, around 45 minutes for new vocabulary, texts, and grammar, and around 25 minutes for conversation exclusively in Hebrew. This model provides continuity, constant repetition, and gradual increase of linguistic complexity.

A particularly important part of the lesson is the final conversation, during which the teacher behaves as if they do not know any language other than Hebrew. Such a method forces students to improvise, activate existing vocabulary, use descriptions, and begin thinking directly in Hebrew.

At this stage, students begin connecting words without translation, intuitively feeling the language, and spontaneously producing simple sentences. Practical experience shows that around

the tenth lesson students begin partially thinking in Hebrew, while spontaneous thinking without inner translation usually develops around the fortieth lesson.[8]

Especially good results come from humor, imitation, theatricality, and an emotionally relaxed atmosphere. A student who is not afraid, not embarrassed, and actively participates almost always progresses faster than a student who first tries to analyze everything theoretically.

Because of this, Hebrew language teaching should not be based primarily on memorizing grammatical rules, but on constant language activation, the development of a feeling for speech, and the creation of psychological confidence among students.[9]

Footnotes

[1] Richards, J. and Rodgers, T. (2014) *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[2] Krashen, S. (1982) *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon.

[3] Nation, I.S.P. (2001) *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[4] Ringvald, V. (2013) *Hebrew for All*. Behrman House.

[5] Brown, H.D. (2007) *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. Pearson Education.

[6] Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *Gramatika biblijskog hebrejskog jezika*. Beograd: Institut za hebrejski jezik i književnost.

[7] Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *WHAT DOES THE WORD "AMEN" REALLY MEAN?* Available at: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19463680

[8] Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *THE NAMES DANIEL, DANILO, AND DANIELA: A STRATIFIED MODEL OF ONOMASTIC TRANSMISSION FROM HEBREW TO EUROPEAN LANGUAGES*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.17613/k86e1-skh54

[9] Amir Coffin, E. and Bolozky, S. (2005) *A Reference Grammar of Modern Hebrew*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

GRAPHEMIC AND PHONETIC DIFFICULTIES

One of the biggest problems for beginners learning Hebrew is distinguishing similar graphemes. For speakers of European languages, this problem is not only technical but also psychological. A student who is accustomed to the Latin, Cyrillic, or Greek alphabet suddenly encounters square Hebrew script, right-to-left writing, and letters that differ only in very small graphic details. Because of this, beginners often make mistakes not because they "did not learn the letter," but because their visual system has not yet developed a reliable ability to distinguish similar shapes.[1]

The most common mistakes appear with the following pairs:

ד / ר
ו / ן
ב / כ
ג / נ
ה / ח
ד / ך
ו / ז

These pairs should receive special attention already in the first lessons. It is not enough for the teacher simply to tell students that the letters are "similar." The exact graphic detail that distinguishes them must be shown many times. In the case of ד and ר, the small angle on the upper right side is decisive. With ו and ן, the problem lies in the length and position of the letter. With ב and כ, beginners often do not clearly notice the difference between the closed and open form of the grapheme. With ה and ח, the problem is especially common because both letters visually appear "square," but in ה the internal opening is crucial for recognition.

Modern studies of Hebrew literacy show that Hebrew script presents a special challenge because it is an abjad system, meaning a writing system in which consonants are primary, while vowels are often marked with additional signs or omitted in standard writing.[2] Ravid especially emphasizes that Hebrew orthography contains a complex relationship between phonology, morphology, and writing, so reading is based not only on recognizing individual letters but also on understanding words, roots, and grammatical patterns.[3]

Because of this, it is very useful in teaching to first develop confidence in the written form of the letters. Practical experience shows that for beginners it is best to first learn handwritten letters together with niqqud, and only later introduce printed letters. The reason is simple: handwritten letters are learned actively, through the hand, movement, and repetition. A student who writes a letter dozens of times remembers it much better than a student who only looks at it visually in a chart. Once the form of the letter has been learned through writing, the printed form is more easily accepted as another graphic variation of the same sign.

A special problem appears when moving from handwritten to printed letters. Students often feel as if they are "learning the alphabet all over again." Because of this, the transition should be organized carefully from a psychological perspective. The teacher can first show letters that are very similar in both handwritten and printed form, such as ר ,ק ,ס ,נ ,כ ,י ,ט ,ח ,ו ,ה, and ת, and immediately tell students: "Look, you already know almost half of the letters." This sentence is

not only encouragement, but also a very useful pedagogical strategy. It reduces fear and shows students that new material is connected to what they already know.

Phonetic problems vary depending on the student's native language. Speakers of Romance languages generally have the fewest problems with Hebrew pronunciation, although French speakers often have difficulties with ח and כ. Problems are more pronounced among speakers of Slavic languages, especially Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians. They often soften נ ,ד, and ל, pronouncing them approximately as dy, ny, and ly. For English speakers, guttural sounds also present a major challenge, while speakers of Albanian generally have no major problems with such sounds.

In practical teaching, it is important that the teacher does not treat all students in the same way. The phonetic mistake made by a Russian speaker is not the same as the phonetic mistake made by a French or English speaker. Because of this, the teacher must listen to the student's native language and explain Hebrew pronunciation through sounds and habits already familiar to the student. This is where the contrastive approach becomes especially useful: the Hebrew sound is not explained in isolation, but in relation to the student's existing phonetic habits.[4]

Footnotes

[1] Ravid, D. (2004) 'Hebrew Orthography and Literacy', in Joshi, R.M. and Aaron, P.G. (eds.) *Handbook of Orthography and Literacy*. Lawrence Erlbaum.

[2] Chan, M.L. (2024) 'Learning to Read in Hebrew and Arabic: Challenges and Pedagogical Approaches', *Education Sciences*, 14(7), p. 765.

[3] Ravid, D. (2001) 'Learning to Spell in Hebrew: Phonological and Morphological Factors', *Reading and Writing*.

[4] Walker, C. (2017) *Learning Hebrew as a Second or Foreign Language: Literature Review*. CASJE.

[5] Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *Gramatika biblijskog hebrejskog jezika*. Beograd: Institut za hebrejski jezik i književnost.

ALEF, AYIN, AND THE METHOD OF PHONETIC DIFFERENTIATION

One of the most difficult problems in teaching Hebrew is distinguishing letters that in modern Israeli pronunciation are often pronounced the same way or very similarly. This especially applies to the following pairs: שׂ / ס ,כ / ק ,ח / כ ,ע / א, and ת / ט.

Beginner students very quickly ask a logical question: “If these two letters are pronounced the same or almost the same, how do I know which one to write?” If the teacher answers only with the sentence “You must memorize it,” the student loses the feeling that Hebrew is a logical language. It is much better to explain that these letters did not appear without reason. In older stages of Hebrew and the Semitic language system, they did not represent the same sounds, but different phonemes. Modern Israeli pronunciation no longer clearly preserves many of these differences, but the writing system still preserves them.[1]

The most important pair for beginners is ע / א. Alef should be explained as a letter that often functions as a carrier of a vowel or as a short pause within a word. Ayin, on the other hand, should be presented as an older guttural sound that influenced the vowel following it. Among most modern speakers of Israeli Hebrew, the difference between א and ע is no longer clearly audible, but in the Biblical and Semitic context this distinction remains very important. Khan’s research on the Tiberian tradition shows that the Masoretic system was not only a graphic device, but also an attempt to precisely preserve a developed tradition of Biblical reading.[2]

Because of this, it is very useful in teaching for the instructor to occasionally use phonetic differentiation during dictation and reading exercises. The goal is not for the student to learn a complete historical reconstruction of Biblical pronunciation. The goal is practical: the student should hear the difference, connect it with the letter, and gradually develop an inner feeling for correct spelling. In other words, the student should not only memorize that one word is written with ע and another with א; the student should hear the teacher pronounce these sounds differently many times, so that the distinction gradually becomes fixed in auditory memory.

The same principle applies to ח and כ. In modern Israeli pronunciation these sounds are often very similar, but in teaching Biblical Hebrew they should be distinguished. ח can be explained as a deeper guttural sound, approximately like the final stage of yawning, while כ can be presented as the rough modern Israeli sound. This kind of practical explanation is much more useful than abstract phonetic terminology, especially for beginners.

With ק and כ, it is useful to explain that ק is not simply “another K,” but a deeper, more guttural K pronounced farther back in the throat. With ט and ת, students should understand that ט is not an ordinary European t, but a harder and deeper T sound. With ס and שׂ, it is useful to explain that students are not learning “two identical S sounds,” but two historically different signs that became closer in modern pronunciation. Such an approach restores the student’s sense that the system has meaning.

This method works especially well when comparisons with other languages are used. For Slavic students, it is very useful to compare this phenomenon with the difference between sounds such as đ and dž, or with situations in which two sounds in certain dialects become very similar or almost identical, while the standard language still preserves the distinction. In this way, students more easily understand that phonetic similarity does not mean that historical and orthographic distinctions are meaningless.

Modern research on reading Hebrew and Arabic shows that abjad systems create special difficulties for foreign language learners because reading depends on the relationship between

consonants, morphological patterns, and expected meaning.[3] Because of this, phonetic differentiation can be a very useful teaching tool. It does not solve all spelling problems, but it gives the student an auditory support system. Instead of dry memorization, students begin connecting sound, letter, root, and meaning.

In this sense, Stanojević's *Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* can serve as a useful teaching foundation because it insists on clear differentiation between script, niqqud, graphemes, and phonetic phenomena in beginner instruction.[4] On the other hand, etymological studies dealing with expressions such as Amen, Hallelujah, and Abracadabra can serve as motivational material. Through familiar expressions, students realize that phonetics, writing, and meaning are not abstract questions, but keys to understanding religious and cultural tradition.[5]

Footnotes

[1] Amir Coffin, E. and Bolozky, S. (2005) *A Reference Grammar of Modern Hebrew*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[2] Khan, G. (2020) *The Tiberian Pronunciation Tradition of Biblical Hebrew*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

[3] Chan, M.L. (2024) 'Learning to Read in Hebrew and Arabic: Challenges and Pedagogical Approaches', *Education Sciences*, 14(7), p. 765.

[4] Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *Gramatika biblijskog hebrejskog jezika*. Beograd: Institut za hebrejski jezik i književnost.

[5] Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *WHAT DOES THE WORD "AMEN" REALLY MEAN?* Available at: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19463680; Stanojević, Ž. (2025) *ETIMOLOGY, DISCOURSE FUNCTION, AND LITURGICAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE EXPRESSION הַלְלוּ־יָהּ (HALLELUJAH)*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.17613/zcvcf-6g024

NIQQUD, READING, AND THE BAN ON TRANSLITERATION

One of the first major challenges in teaching Hebrew is the relationship between niqqud, reading, and standard Hebrew writing without vowels. For most European students, niqqud creates strong interest at the beginning. Students very often want to immediately understand the difference between short and long vowels, the function of individual signs, the historical development of vocalization, and the detailed rules of the Masoretic system.

Such interest is natural, especially among students who enjoy languages, philology, or religious texts. However, practical experience shows that insisting too early on complicated niqqud rules

often produces the opposite effect. Beginners begin focusing on small technical details while they still lack basic vocabulary, a feeling for sentence structure, and confidence in speaking.[1]

Because of this, at the beginner level it is much more important for students to learn how to read, speak, and understand basic structures than to immediately distinguish every type of vowel precisely.

It has proven very useful to openly tell students: “At this moment, it is not most important to know which sign gives a long A and which gives a short A. It is more important to know how to ask what time it is or how to say what you want.”

Such an approach psychologically relaxes students and prevents them from getting lost in excessive theoretical information at the beginning. Modern research on second-language acquisition shows that too much formal grammatical and phonetic information in the early stages often slows the development of spontaneous communication.[2]

Because of this, niqqud should be introduced gradually, functionally, and always connected with concrete reading and speaking practice. Practical experience shows that students very quickly develop the ability to read intuitively. Texts without niqqud can be introduced very early, already from the second lesson, of course through simple words and short constructions. Around the tenth lesson, students are usually already able to read simple texts without major problems.

At first, this approach often surprises students because they expect Hebrew without vowels to be almost impossible to read. However, when they begin reading their first sentences without niqqud, students gradually realize something very important: in other languages as well, reading is not completely “letter by letter.” A large part of understanding is based on context, expectation, grammatical pattern, and the reader’s experience.[3]

Because of this, it is very useful to explain to students that Hebrew is not a “chaotic language without vowels,” but a language that strongly relies on the root system, morphological patterns, and context. Once students understand this, a large part of their psychological fear of reading without niqqud disappears.

One of the most important rules in teaching Hebrew is the prohibition of transliteration. Words must be written exclusively in Hebrew script. Students may write the meaning beside the word in their native language, but the Hebrew word itself should never be written in Latin or Cyrillic letters.

The reason for this is not formalism, but the psycholinguistics of language learning. Transliteration slows the development of direct connections between grapheme, phoneme, and meaning. A student who constantly writes Hebrew words in Latin letters is not really reading Hebrew, but mentally translating Hebrew into a European script and only then trying to understand the meaning. Such a process slows reading, makes spontaneous thinking more difficult, and creates poor phonetic habits.[4]

Practical experience shows that students who use only Hebrew script from the very beginning start reading much faster, connect sound and letter more easily, and develop a stronger feeling for the language.

It is especially interesting that students often accept the ban on transliteration much faster than they themselves expect. After only several lessons, many begin intuitively recognizing word patterns, familiar roots, and typical graphic structures. At that point, students no longer read every letter separately, but begin recognizing entire word patterns, in much the same way they read in their native language.

Frequent reading, dictation exercises, loud repetition, and early use of simple texts without niqqud all play an important role in this process. Such an approach gradually leads students toward a very important goal: to begin experiencing Hebrew as a natural writing system, and not as a collection of unfamiliar signs that must be mechanically deciphered.[5]

Footnotes

[1] Khan, G. (2020) *The Tiberian Pronunciation Tradition of Biblical Hebrew*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

[2] Krashen, S. (1982) *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon.

[3] Sáenz-Badillos, A. (1993) *A History of the Hebrew Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[4] Stanojević, Ž. (2001) *Hebrejsko-srpski rečnik*. Beograd: Rad; Alfa i Omega.

[5] Stanojević, Ž. (2012) *Srpsko-hebrejski, hebrejsko-srpski rečnik*. Beograd: Institut za hebrejski jezik i književnost. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19174395

BINYANIM AS FORMULAS

One of the most important moments in learning Hebrew comes when students realize that the Hebrew verbal system is not a chaotic collection of individual forms, but a highly organized and logical system of patterns. Because of this, one of the most effective methods of teaching verbs is presenting binyanim as formulas.[1]

For many European students, Hebrew verbs initially create fear because they try to learn them the same way they learn verbs in European languages — individually, through memorization, and without understanding the internal connection between forms. Hebrew, however, functions differently. Most verbs are organized through roots, binyanim, and repeating patterns. Once students understand this, an important psychological change occurs. Hebrew stops appearing as a “too different language” and begins to seem systematic, logical, and almost mathematical.

Because of this, binyanim should not be presented as complicated grammatical categories full of terminology, but as practical formulas through which students can independently produce a large number of new words. It is much more important for students to feel how the system works than to immediately know the complete linguistic classification of every pattern.

For example, the teacher gives students the paal model in the present tense together with familiar roots such as חשב ,כתב ,למד, or קרא. Students then do not learn only individual words such as "to study," "to write," "to think," or "to read," but begin understanding how Hebrew organizes meaning through the combination of root and pattern. Very quickly, students realize that by changing the root inside a familiar formula they can independently produce many new forms.

At this stage, one of the most psychologically important moments in learning Hebrew appears. For the first time, students feel that they can "create words" themselves. When students understand the paal pattern in the present tense, one root immediately produces several forms: masculine singular, feminine singular, masculine plural, and feminine plural.

For example, with the root למד, students quickly learn:

לומד
לומדת
לומדים
לומדות

At that moment, students are not learning only four forms of one verb. They are actually learning the mechanism of the language itself. When they then receive another root, for example כתב, they can independently produce:

כותב
כותבת
כותבים
כותבות

After several such examples, students intuitively begin feeling the structure of the language. They no longer memorize each form separately, but recognize the pattern itself. This is the essence of successful Hebrew language learning.

Practical experience shows that students especially enjoy the moment when the teacher gives them new roots and they independently produce new words. At that point, students develop a feeling of creativity and active participation in the language. Instead of passively memorizing lists of verbs, they actively construct forms and very quickly begin feeling the logic of the system.

Such an approach gives students a strong sense of progress. Instead of feeling that they must memorize thousands of unrelated verbs, they begin to feel that they understand the principle according to which the entire language functions. Modern foreign-language teaching research

shows that active construction of forms significantly accelerates long-term acquisition of grammatical structures.[2]

It is especially useful that through one root students can simultaneously learn verbs, nouns, adjectives, and even basic vocabulary connected with the same idea. For example, from the root כתב students do not learn only "to write," but also naturally connect:

כתב — he wrote,
כותב — writing/writes,
מכתב — letter,
כתיבה — writing.

In this way, students gradually begin understanding how Hebrew functions as an organic system of interconnected meanings. This is one of the greatest advantages of the root system.

Practical teaching experience also shows that it is very useful to immediately use verbs in simple conversation. Students are not given isolated charts, but short and lively sentences such as: "Sarah is writing a letter now," "He thinks the computer is good," or "We are learning Hebrew."

Such sentences allow students to speak, listen, read, and grammatically analyze the pattern at the same time.

It is especially important not to overload beginners with theory. For beginner students, practical use of the pattern is much more important than complete knowledge of all binyan terminology. Because of this, binyanim should be introduced gradually and functionally.

Nifal and hofal create the greatest problems for students because they are less common, passive, and psychologically less intuitive. Students learn active and concrete structures much more easily than passive patterns. Because of this, these binyanim should not be introduced too early or too theoretically. Much better results come from gradual introduction through already familiar roots and simple sentences.

Modern Hebrew researchers, especially Ruth Berman, emphasize that morphological organization is one of the central characteristics of the Hebrew language system.[3] Hebrew gradually develops in students the feeling that root, pattern, and meaning are interconnected.

In this sense, Željko Stanojević's *Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* can also be very useful because it emphasizes the formula-based logic of binyanim, the clarity of patterns, and the practical connection between verbal systems, teaching, and conversation.[4]

Once students develop a feeling for binyanim, a very important psychological moment occurs: Hebrew is no longer experienced as a collection of disconnected words, but as an organized system in which a small number of roots can produce and explain a very large number of forms. At that point, students often begin describing Hebrew as logical, systematic, and "mathematical."[5]

Footnotes

[1] Berman, R. (1978) *Modern Hebrew Structure*. University Publishing Projects.

[2] Nation, I.S.P. (2001) *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[3] Berman, R. (1985) ‘The Acquisition of Hebrew’, in Slobin, D. (ed.) *The Crosslinguistic Study of Language Acquisition*. Lawrence Erlbaum.

[4] Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *Gramatika biblijskog hebrejskog jezika*. Beograd: Institut za hebrejski jezik i književnost.

[5] Amir Coffin, E. and Bolozky, S. (2005) *A Reference Grammar of Modern Hebrew*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MODERN AND BIBLICAL HEBREW

One of the most important methodological questions in teaching Hebrew is the relationship between Modern and Biblical Hebrew. In practice, two extreme approaches often appear. One approach tries to present Hebrew only as a modern spoken language, almost completely separated from the Biblical tradition, while the other turns Hebrew teaching almost entirely into philological study of Biblical texts and complicated grammatical systems. Practical experience shows that neither approach produces optimal results for most European students.

The most effective approach has proven to be a combination of approximately eighty percent Modern Hebrew and twenty percent Biblical Hebrew. Such a balance allows students to quickly develop practical communication skills and a feeling for the living language while still remaining connected to the historical and cultural layers of Hebrew.[1]

Modern Hebrew allows students to quickly begin speaking, understanding conversation, using everyday vocabulary, and developing a sense of functional language. On the other hand, elements of Biblical Hebrew provide additional motivation because students feel that they are entering one of the most important textual and cultural systems in world history.

It is very important that students understand from the beginning that Modern Hebrew is not a completely new language, but a revived language deeply based on Biblical and post-Biblical heritage. When students understand that there was a very long historical interruption between the active everyday use of Biblical Hebrew and the modern revival of the language, they more easily understand why Modern Hebrew has simplified phonetic distinctions and certain grammatical changes while still preserving the basic structure of the older language.[2]

Practical experience shows that students develop motivation very quickly when they realize that they are able to read simpler parts of the Bible in the original language. Even non-religious

students often experience strong intellectual satisfaction when they independently read a simple Biblical sentence for the first time. Religious students very often develop an additional feeling of connection with the text and experience reading the original language as something special.

Because of this, Biblical examples should not be completely separated from beginner instruction. It has proven very useful to gradually introduce short Biblical expressions, simple verses, well-known religious formulas, and basic Biblical constructions. In this way, students do not feel that they are learning "two different languages," but instead develop an awareness that there is continuity between Modern and Biblical Hebrew.

The meanings of names, religious expressions, and etymological topics also play a particularly important role in motivation. Students react very positively when they begin understanding the meaning of expressions they previously knew only superficially. Expressions such as Amen, Hallelujah, and Abracadabra have a very strong motivational effect because students suddenly realize that behind these familiar words there is a concrete Hebrew structure and meaning.[3]

Biblical names have a similar effect. When students learn that the name Daniel means "God is my judge," or that the name David has a Semitic root connected with love and affection, Hebrew stops feeling like an abstract school subject. Students begin feeling that they are understanding deeper layers of European and Middle Eastern cultural tradition.[4]

Such topics have strong psychological value because students begin to understand that Hebrew is not an isolated and exotic system, but a language that deeply influenced European culture, religion, literature, and everyday vocabulary.

Verb systems also play an important role in connecting Modern and Biblical Hebrew. It is useful to show students that certain structures that are no longer productive in Modern Hebrew still have great importance in Biblical texts. A particularly interesting example is the wayyiqtol construction, which at first appears unusual to students because it combines narration, tense structure, and the conjunction waw in a way that does not exist in most European languages.[5]

However, when students understand that wayyiqtol is not simply the conjunction "and," but a special narrative construction organizing the flow of the Biblical story, they begin to understand the logic of Biblical Hebrew much more easily. Such explanations should not be introduced in an excessively theoretical way, but practically, through simple texts and examples.

It is important to emphasize that the goal of beginner instruction is not deep academic analysis of every difference between Modern and Biblical Hebrew. It is much more important for students to develop a sense of continuity, emotional motivation, and awareness that understanding Hebrew opens access to an enormous cultural and historical world. Because of this, combining modern spoken Hebrew with carefully selected elements of Biblical Hebrew represents one of the most effective teaching models for speakers of European languages.[6]

Footnotes

[1] Amir Coffin, E. and Bolozky, S. (2005) *A Reference Grammar of Modern Hebrew*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[2] Zuckermann, G. (2020) *Revivalistics: From the Genesis of Israeli to Language Reclamation in Australia and Beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[3] Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *WHAT DOES THE WORD "AMEN" REALLY MEAN? (A Historical-Linguistic, Phonetic, Philological, Cultural, and Theological Study with a Brief Overview of Slavic Languages).* Available at: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19463680

[4] Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *THE NAMES DANIEL, DANILO, AND DANIELA: A STRATIFIED MODEL OF ONOMASTIC TRANSMISSION FROM HEBREW TO EUROPEAN LANGUAGES.* Available at: https://doi.org/10.17613/k86e1-skh54

[5] Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *THE FUNCTION OF WAYYIQTOL IN BIBLICAL HEBREW: A DISCOURSE-ORIENTED REASSESSMENT OF THE WAW-CONSECUTIVE CONSTRUCTION.* Available at: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19352968

[6] Sáenz-Badillos, A. (1993) *A History of the Hebrew Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LEARNING HEBREW AMONG SPEAKERS OF EUROPEAN LANGUAGES

The psychological factor is one of the most important elements in teaching Hebrew. Practical experience shows that the speed of progress very often depends not mainly on a student's intelligence or formal education, but on their attitude toward mistakes, level of relaxation, motivation, emotional connection with the language, and ability to accept the initial stage of uncertainty.[1]

For most speakers of European languages, Hebrew initially creates the feeling that it is an "impossible language." This feeling appears not only because of the unfamiliar script, but because of the combination of several factors: right-to-left writing, the presence of niqqud, guttural sounds, the root system, and a language structure completely different from European models. Many students already in the first lesson feel that they are encountering a system completely foreign to their previous linguistic experience. Because of this, the teacher's first task is not grammar but removing the psychological barrier. Modern foreign-language teaching research has confirmed for decades that fear and emotional tension directly slow down language acquisition.[2]

Krashen's theory of the "affective filter" is especially important for Hebrew teaching. A student who feels fear, shame, excessive pressure, or a constant feeling of failure acquires the language

much more slowly. On the other hand, emotionally relaxed students begin speaking, improvising, connecting meanings, and intuitively feeling the structure of the language much more quickly.[3]

Practical experience shows that Hebrew students very often fear making mistakes. This problem is especially common among highly educated students, perfectionists, and people accustomed to constantly controlling their own expression. Such students often try to “perfectly understand” grammar before beginning to speak. However, this approach very often slows the development of active language ability. Because of this, it is important from the beginning to explain that mistakes are not failure, but a natural part of the learning process.

It has proven very useful to constantly remind students that in the first years a foreign language primarily serves communication, not the demonstration of education or eloquence. Once students understand that the goal is communication rather than perfection, psychological tension decreases dramatically.

Especially good results come from an approach in which the teacher corrects mistakes immediately, but without criticism or a negative tone. Students should clearly understand that correction is not punishment, but assistance and training. Such a model creates a feeling of safety because students know they are allowed to speak, allowed to make mistakes, and that through repetition they will gradually acquire correct forms.

Practical teaching experience shows that students progress much faster when constant activity is expected from them. Because of this, it can be very useful to establish the rule that conversation must continue even when students do not know a certain word. If a student does not know how to say “in the morning,” they may say “at night” or “in the evening,” as long as communication continues. Such an approach develops spontaneity, improvisation, and communicative confidence while freeing students from the paralysis caused by one unknown word. Modern communicative teaching research confirms that continuity of communication is one of the key factors in developing active speech.[4]

A particularly interesting psychological moment appears when students first understand the logic of the root system. At first, most European students experience Hebrew roots as something complicated and abstract. However, once they begin recognizing the relationship between verbs, nouns, adjectives, and a common root, confidence suddenly increases. Students begin feeling that Hebrew is not a chaotic system, but an organized language with internal logic. Many students at this moment begin describing Hebrew as “mathematical,” “logical,” or “systematic.”[5]

Binyanim create an especially strong psychological effect. When students realize that from one root they can independently produce many forms, they gain the feeling that they actively control the language. This feeling of control has enormous motivational value. Instead of feeling that they must memorize thousands of unrelated words, students begin feeling that they understand the mechanism of the language itself.

Emotional connection with the material also plays a very important role. Practical experience shows that students remember concrete, rhythmic, and emotionally colored words much more easily. Because of this, students quickly remember words such as איש, יפה, בקבוק, לילה, and אשה.

Religious students often already know expressions such as Amen or Hallelujah, as well as Biblical names such as David, Daniel, or Sarah, which gives them a feeling of closeness to the language already at the beginning of instruction.[6]

Modern research on language-learning motivation shows that emotional and identity-based connection with the language significantly accelerates acquisition.[7] Because of this, religious students often progress very quickly, since they do not experience Hebrew only as a foreign language, but as part of their spiritual or cultural identity.

Practical experience also shows that especially fast progress is made by religious students, musical people, multilingual speakers, and students with a strong sense for systems and patterns. Musical students very easily acquire the rhythm of the language, stress, and phonetic patterns. Students who already speak several languages much more easily accept the fact that it is normal to make mistakes, improvise, and gradually build a feeling for the language.

A particularly interesting psychological effect appears during reading of Biblical texts. Even simple sentences create a strong feeling of intellectual success. Religious students often feel direct contact with the original text, while non-religious students develop the feeling that they are entering one of the great classical languages of world civilization.[8]

Another important psychological moment appears when students begin reading texts without niqqud. At first, most believe this is almost impossible. However, once they understand that they can comprehend the text through context, roots, grammatical patterns, and expected meaning, fear quickly disappears. At this point, an important change occurs: students no longer try to mechanically “decode” every word, but begin intuitively feeling the language.

Practical experience shows that around the tenth lesson students begin partially connecting Hebrew words directly with meaning without internal translation. Around the fortieth lesson many students begin experiencing their first moments of spontaneous thinking in Hebrew. This moment represents one of the greatest psychological turning points in language learning.

Humor, theatricality, imitation, and physical movement by the teacher play a very important role in this process. Such an approach reduces the psychological distance between the student and the language. The lesson stops being an abstract analysis of grammar and becomes living communication. Because of this, students remember, speak, and emotionally accept the language much more easily.

Modern Israeli methodology increasingly confirms that successful Hebrew teaching cannot be based only on grammar and memorization of rules. Hebrew is acquired most quickly when students lose fear, develop confidence, and begin experiencing the language as a living communicative system.[9]

Footnotes

[1] Brown, H.D. (2007) *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. Pearson Education.

[2] Krashen, S. (1982) *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon.

[3] Krashen, S. (1985) *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. London: Longman.

[4] Richards, J. and Rodgers, T. (2014) *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[5] Berman, R. (1978) *Modern Hebrew Structure*. University Publishing Projects.

[6] Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *WHAT DOES THE WORD "AMEN" REALLY MEAN?* Available at: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19463680

[7] Dörnyei, Z. (2009) *The Psychology of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[8] Myers, J. (2022) *Hebrew, the Living Breath of Jewish Existence: The Teaching and Learning of Biblical and Modern Hebrew*.

[9] Ringvald, V. (2013) *Hebrew for All*. Behrman House.

[10] Kuburić, Z. (2008/2022) *Religija, porodica i mladi*. Novi Sad: CEIR.

CONCLUSION – HOW TO TEACH HEBREW IN A MODERN WAY: THE AUTHOR'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

In my experience, the biggest mistake in teaching Hebrew is when teachers try at the very beginning to impress students with complicated grammar, terminology, and rules. Students then quickly develop the feeling that Hebrew is something extremely difficult and unreachable. In reality, the situation is completely different. Hebrew can be learned very quickly if students relax from the first lesson and develop the feeling that they are allowed to make mistakes, speak, improvise, and think at their own pace.

At the beginning, I immediately tell students that their native language reflects education, eloquence, and social level, while a foreign language in the beginning serves only communication. This relaxes them greatly. People are often afraid of sounding "stupid" while speaking a foreign language. Because of this, I constantly repeat that mistakes are completely normal and part of the process. I always explain that my corrections are not criticism, but help and training. Students must feel safety, not fear.

In my opinion, students must speak from the very first lesson. It does not matter whether they know ten words or one hundred. What matters is that the brain begins functioning in Hebrew.

Because of this, I very often use pantomime, acting, imitation, hand movements, and humor. I often literally act out situations during class. I exaggerate pronunciation, change my voice, imitate people, and demonstrate meanings through movement. When students see an action and hear the word at the same time, they remember it much more easily than when they only hear a theoretical explanation.

Very often I behave as if I know no language except Hebrew. Then students are forced to improvise. If they do not know a word, I tell them to use another one. If they do not know how to say "in the morning," they can say "at night," "in the evening," or anything else they know, as long as the conversation continues. This is extremely important. The conversation must continue. When students stop because of one word, the brain leaves Hebrew and returns to the native language.

I have also noticed that students remember concrete and rhythmic words much better than abstract concepts. Words such as איש, בחורה, יפה, קנקן, בקבוק, לילה, and אשה remain in memory very easily because they have rhythm and sound. Religious students especially enjoy expressions such as Amen, Hallelujah, and Abracadabra, as well as the meanings of names such as David, Daniel, and Sarah. At that moment, Hebrew stops being only a foreign language and becomes something alive, connected with history, religion, and culture.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Amir Coffin, E. & Bolozky, S. (2005). *A Reference Grammar of Modern Hebrew*. Cambridge University Press.
2. Berman, R. (1978). *Modern Hebrew Structure*. University Publishing Projects.
3. Berman, R. (1985). "The acquisition of Hebrew." U: Slobin, D. (ed.), *The Crosslinguistic Study of Language Acquisition*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
4. Brown, H.D. (2007). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. Pearson Education.
5. Chan, M. L. (2024). "Learning to Read in Hebrew and Arabic: Challenges and Pedagogical Approaches." *Education Sciences*, 14(7), 765.
6. Dörnyei, Z. (2009). *The Psychology of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
7. Khan, G. (2020). *The Tiberian Pronunciation Tradition of Biblical Hebrew*. Open Book Publishers.
8. Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Pergamon.
9. Krashen, S. (1985). *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. Longman.
10. Kuburić, Z. (2008/2022). *Religija, porodica i mladi*. CEIR, Novi Sad.
11. Myers, J. (2022). *Hebrew, the Living Breath of Jewish Existence: The Teaching and Learning of Biblical and Modern Hebrew*.
12. Nation, I.S.P. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge University Press.
13. Ravid, D. (2001). "Learning to spell in Hebrew: Phonological and morphological factors." *Reading and Writing*.
14. Ravid, D. (2004). "Hebrew orthography and literacy." U: Joshi, R.M. & Aaron, P.G. (eds.), *Handbook of Orthography and Literacy*. Lawrence Erlbaum.

15. Richards, J. & Rodgers, T. (2014). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
16. Ringvald, V. (2013). *Hebrew for All*. Behrman House.
17. Sáenz-Badillos, A. (1993). *A History of the Hebrew Language*. Cambridge University Press.
18. Stanojević, Ž. (2001). *Hebrejsko-srpski rečnik*. Alfa i Omega.
19. Stanojević, Ž. (2012). *SRPSKO-HEBREJSKI, HEBREJSKO SRPSKI REČNIK* (str. 980). Institut za hebrejski jezik i književnost. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19174395
20. Stanojević, Ž. (2025). *ETIMOLOGY, DISCOURSE FUNCTION, AND LITURGICAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE EXPRESSION הַלְלוּ־יָהּ (HALLELUJAH): FROM BIBLICAL HEBREW TO GLOBAL RELIGIOUS TRADITION*. https://doi.org/10.17613/zcvcf-6g024
21. Stanojević, Ž. (2026). *ABRACADABRA: A SEMITIC-RITUAL FORMULA OF SPEECH, CREATION, AND TEXTUAL ENTROPY*. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20124641
22. Stanojević, Ž. (2026). *Gramatika biblijskog hebrejskog jezika*. Institut za hebrejski jezik i književnost, Beograd.
23. Stanojević, Ž. (2026). *Onomastikon biblijskih imena. Tom I: Starozavetna imena (Preview edition).* https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18796670
24. Stanojević, Ž. (2026). *THE FUNCTION OF WAYYIQTOL IN BIBLICAL HEBREW: A DISCOURSE-ORIENTED REASSESSMENT OF THE WAW-CONSECUTIVE CONSTRUCTION*. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19352968
25. Stanojević, Ž. (2026). *THE NAMES DANIEL, DANILO, AND DANIELA: A STRATIFIED MODEL OF ONOMASTIC TRANSMISSION FROM HEBREW TO EUROPEAN LANGUAGES*. https://doi.org/10.17613/k86e1-skh54
26. Stanojević, Ž. (2026). *WHAT DOES THE WORD "AMEN" REALLY MEAN? (A Historical-Linguistic, Phonetic, Philological, Cultural, and Theological Study with a Brief Overview of Slavic Languages).* https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19463680
27. Walker, C. (2017). *Learning Hebrew as a Second or Foreign Language: Literature Review*. CASJE.
28. Zuckermann, G. (2020). *Revivalistics: From the Genesis of Israeli to Language Reclamation in Australia and Beyond*. Oxford University Press.