



HOW DO HEBREW LANGUAGE BARRIERS AFFECT THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES AND SUCCESS OF ARAB STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN ISRAEL?

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Abstract:

This study examines the complex consequences of Hebrew language barriers on Arab students' academic activities and achievements in Israeli higher education. The study seeks to pinpoint how limited levels of Hebrew – which are the result of late exposure to the language, sociocultural distance, and institutional neglect – impacted the students' academic engagement, learning, and well-being. Using a qualitative approach, with semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups with 40 Arab students (Muslim, Christian and Druze), this study found that for the most part, Hebrew language barriers limited the students' opportunities to participate, contributed to lower comprehension and negatively impacted their academic identity, especially among the Muslim students. Furthermore, the study discovered that while there were very few formal institutional supports to help them develop their language, students developed peer support networks and also used online sessions as ways to adapt to their studies in Hebrew. The main study conclusion was that language barriers are much broader than just linguistic barriers; these barriers are structural, cultural and social too. Therefore, there must be a trilingual model that organizes the language of instruction with some culturally relevant pedagogy if universities want the success of this type of student in higher education. A good number of recommendations were made based on the findings from this study, such as teaching and learning Hebrew earlier, emphasis on culturally relevant curriculum, and taking institutional responsibility for inclusive language policies. The findings also have theoretical implications to understand and investigate the language of inclusion/exclusion, and in practice, they offer pedagogical and policy recommendations for the pursuit of inclusivity and equity in education from a multilingual society context.

Keywords: Hebrew language barriers, Arab students, higher education in Israel, academic success, language proficiency, sociolinguistic inequality, institutional support, cultural identity, qualitative research, bilingual education

1. Introduction

This research will examine how Hebrew language barriers shape the academic experiences and success of Arab students in higher education institutions in Israel. The primary objective of this research is to examine the challenges that Arab students deal with as they navigate a Hebrew language-oriented academic environment, and how those challenges shape their engagement, involvement and educational outcomes in higher education. The specific research question is: How do Hebrew language barriers affect the academic experiences and success of Arab students in higher education in Israel? This research uses semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 40 Arab students studying at a number of different Israeli schools of higher education who came from a range of ethnic and academic backgrounds, and offers original qualitative insights into sociolinguistic issues within structurally unequal contexts. The findings indicate that a lack of Hebrew language competency stemming from a lack of early exposure to the language, the socio-cultural distance from the more dominant Jewish- Israeli population in academic institutions, and the lack of institutional language support systems largely contribute to the inability of Arab learners to integrate academically. However, students demonstrate a strong capacity for resilience through informal support structures and self-initiated coping strategies.

Language barrier is defined by an individual's limitations in communicating and understanding others when they do not share language-competency levels. This limitation can result in lower academic performance, psychological stress, and marginalization within institutions (Al-Yateem *et al.*, 2023; Kulaeva & Khasueva, 2024). The language barrier of interest to this study is that Arab students are not proficient in Hebrew, the main teaching language in Israel; many students only learn Hebrew in the 4th grade, and they do not have regular opportunities to use the language outside of formal education (Manor & Watad, 2024). This study explores Muslim, Christian, and Druze Arab students in higher education from the linguistic, cultural, emotional, and structural factors shaping their academic experience. Previous research has already indicated that students with low language competency experience a greater level of academic exclusion from participation in classroom communication and a reduced ability to access academic resources (Zakarneh *et al.*, 2021; Sriram & Anburaj, 2024), while competency in the dominant language is reflected in academic self-image and academic motivation (Tarabia, 2023). However, the low language competency is only examined from the unique sociopolitical and cultural understanding of Arab students in Israel.

The significance of this study is that it provides a more sophisticated way of viewing language barriers. Language barriers are not just deficits of the language; they are structural and cultural problems that are informed by historical, educational, and political contexts. The qualitative approach is valuable in that it illustrates lived experiences through the thematic analysis of students' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2023) and is particularly well-suited. Given that the results demonstrate the need for institutions to take responsibility for accountability and reflect on language-

sensitive educational frameworks, for example, of trilingual instructional frameworks (Hauptman *et al.*, 2008) and culturally responsive Hebrew curricula (Or & Shohamy, 2016). Whilst this research makes significant contributions by addressing systemic inequities, it also provides a number of applied recommendations, such as learning Hebrew early on, developing systems of support with the Hebrew language, Arabic and English support mechanisms, or building a climate of inclusive pedagogical practices. The implications of this research are likewise critical. It demonstrates, above all else, the importance of interventions that address Hebrew language barriers to enable access, equity and ultimately academic success for Arab students' educational experiences in Israel.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Barriers

Language barrier refers to a communication difficulty that arises when people do not speak the same language, or do not share proficiency in the same language (Al-Yateem *et al.*, 2023). To some degree, a language barrier is always an obstacle to effective communication and comprehension, exchanges of ideas or sharing of information, especially in contexts such as healthcare, education, and workplace settings (Buarqoub, 2019). Language barriers can cause misunderstanding, tension, stress, social or professional isolation and the need on the part of individuals to avoid, disengage, or conform to others' ways of communicating (Kulaeva & Khasueva, 2024). Kulaeva and Khasueva (2024) also indicate that language barriers generally result from a lack of vocabulary, knowledge of grammar, or confidence using the language. Language barriers may also include individual psychological components, such as fear of failure and self-esteem.

Language barriers have consistently mediated how people interact and societies evolve. In previous ages, language differences and language styles most often meant disagreement and confusion, particularly between tribes and nations. In today's interconnected global environment, people of a diversity of languages are communicating more than they ever have before (Al-Mutairi, 2024).

Global trade, more migration, and multicultural societies have made language challenges more significant. Hofstede (2001) explains that as companies do business in other countries, it becomes important that companies "*understand each other*". The prevalence of international travel and the increase in conversations occurring over the internet contribute to the number of multilingual conversations, which means that we will need to deal with these language hurdles (Aljarelah, 2024).

Language barriers have also influenced the manner in which scientific and technological knowledge has been exchanged across time (Tenzer *et al.*, 2021). The translation of Arabic scientific texts into Latin during the Middle Ages put significant knowledge into circulation across Europe; the translation of Greek texts into Arabic, and into Latin subsequently, preserved some of the most important ideas from antiquity.

Removing language barriers has always been about forging human progress and gaining learning opportunities (Al-Mutairi, 2024).

Numerous empirical studies have analyzed the effects of language barriers in various areas. First, language barriers can greatly affect the quality of health care services. Research suggests that when patients are not proficient in English and their provider's language, the potential for miscommunication increases, which can lead to incorrect diagnosis and treatment and poor health outcomes (Al Shamsi *et al.*, 2020; Flores, 2006). When people do not speak or are limited in their ability to speak the dominant language, issues often arise in accurately understanding medical directions and procedures (Ellahham, 2021). This issue can impede informed consent or completing treatment regimens correctly, ultimately resulting in lower confidence in the healthcare system (Karliner *et al.*, 2007). The implementation of professional interpreters and culture-sensitive communication to improve the quality of care and the satisfaction of patients is critical (Brooks *et al.*, 2019).

Language barriers in a business environment may negatively impact communication, efficiency, and collaboration in the multinational workplace (Suaa *et al.*, 2024). Gamage (2022) asserts that language misunderstandings may lead to incorrect business dealings, unsuccessful negotiations, negative relationships between partners, and negative relationships between departments in multinational organizations. Employees in global organizations may refrain from or limit communication with their fellow employees, which may lead to employee isolation or low morale, thereby reducing productivity and teamwork (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013). Despite the barriers related to varying languages, effective language policies can support cross-cultural cooperation and enhance overall performance. For example, a company supported employees' learning languages via training programs and encouraged multilingual environments (Feely & Harzing, 2002).

In education, Students who are not proficient in the language of instruction in educational contexts often suffer from negative academic and social impacts (Ork *et al.*, 2024). Language skills constraints can have a direct impact on a student's ability to undertake lessons, contribute to classroom discussions or write assignments, where reduced academic achievement and lower confidence levels may result (Baker, 2011). Language can form a major barrier with respect to social integration. This may be particularly relevant for non-native students as they may find it difficult to interact socially with peers and to present themselves for extra-curricular activities, which impacts their emotional health (Zakarneh *et al.*, 2021). Addressing these concerns, schools offering bilingual education and support with language offer more inclusive practices in terms of earning and support for integration for all students (Sriram & Anburaj, 2024).

2.2 Hebrew Proficiency and Arab Students in Israel

A high level of competence in the Hebrew language is a major factor affecting Arab students' academic performance and social integration in Israeli higher education. Research shows a clear relationship between a high level of Hebrew competence and

positive academic outcomes, increased motivation and self-image. (Tarabia, 2023). Knowing Hebrew well helps Arab students become more involved in academic life and better prepared for the Israeli job market. It also allows them to overcome challenges such as limited access to learning materials and job opportunities (Abbas & Mendel, 2022; Manor & Binhas, 2023). Despite this, many Arab students struggle because their Hebrew vocabulary is small—often only about 1,000 words—which makes it harder for them to express themselves clearly and succeed in their studies (Manor & Watad, 2024).

The unavailability of Arabic language courses from an Israeli university's institutions of higher education would impact Arab students' academic achievement and belonging in the academy (Halabi, 2022). In order to assist students in overcoming any language issues, a teaching model that consists of three languages — Arabic, Hebrew, and English — has been found to enhance the development of academic literacy skills (Hauptman *et al.*, 2008). This approach enhances learning outcomes by enhancing language skills while also supporting cognitive development. Furthermore, when learning tasks use materials from students' own culture, comprehension improves, and they are more likely to perform at levels of proficiency higher than normal in reading tasks (Li & Pei, 2024). This demonstrates that culturally relevant materials can fuel students' agency and will to engage with learning English.

Nevertheless, the Hebrew language curriculum currently taught in Arab schools frequently does not connect to the cultural identity of Arab students, which diminishes their motivation and engagement in learning the language (Or & Shohamy, 2016). Most Arab students learn Hebrew for instrumental reasons (academic or job-related), and not for integrative reasons, because they do not have a desire to join the majority culture. In fact, it is important to create Hebrew language programs that are culturally relevant and better reflect the cultural background of Arab students (Manor & Watad, 2024).

Arab students studying in Hebrew-speaking academic institutions in Israel encounter significant language difficulties, as Hebrew is their second language. These challenges are even more pronounced for students with learning disabilities (Olenik-Shemesh *et al.*, 2020). In addition to language barriers, cultural differences, and limited academic preparation, make it harder for Arab students to adjust to the academic environment (Cohen-Azaria & Zamir, 2021). Many of them also experience feelings of isolation and exclusion (Halabi, 2016). Despite these difficulties, support systems— such as academic assistance centers and understanding lecturers—can improve their academic success (Cohen-Azaria & Zamir, 2021).

Attitudes towards bilingualism reported by Arab students in Arabic and Hebrew frequently correspond to their identity as members of a culture accompanied by its respective language. In addition, resiliency factors such as strong family support and a desire to provoke social change, especially among female students, are often instrumental in continuing their academic careers (Cohen-Azaria & Zamir, 2021).

In addition, Arab children in Israel have difficulty learning Hebrew; however, a curriculum with Arab cultural content may help them learn Hebrew more engagingly and well. Among Arab students, spoken Hebrew is an important aspect of academic

success and future employment, yet many Arab students fail. At the same time, they may feel conflicted about identifying with Jewish-Israeli cultural values (Manor & Binhas, 2023). Parents of Palestinian-Arab students recognize the importance of learning Hebrew for integration, but are also concerned that it could weaken their children's cultural identity (Amara, 2023). Furthermore, the dominance of Hebrew in educational settings often creates additional tension and makes language learning more complicated for Palestinian students (Amara, 2007).

Arab students often face difficulties when it comes to expressing themselves orally in literary Arabic, even though they usually perform better in written Arabic compared to Hebrew (Abu-Gweder, 2023). Studies show that Arab students who rate their Hebrew skills as higher tend to have a more positive academic and social self-image, greater motivation, and better academic performance (Tarabia, 2023). Nevertheless, their written Hebrew still shows frequent language interference from Arabic, which can lead to common errors (Henkin, 2020; Abu-Rabiah *et al.*, 2023). These findings point to the complex relationship between language proficiency, cultural identity, and academic achievement among Arab students in Hebrew-speaking universities.

There is limited research specifically addressing the Hebrew language proficiency of Arab students, even though this topic is highly important. Most existing studies on Arabic-speaking populations in Israel tend to focus on broader sociolinguistic issues, language use, and education policies (Abu-Rabiah, 2020), rather than the unique linguistic challenges faced by this particular group. The existing literature typically concentrates on the typical language errors in the Hebrew language vocabulary, syntax, phonology, spelling, grammar, and meaning--that are usually due to the setback of L1 transfer, second language learning obstacles, and not enough vocabulary development of L2 (Abu-Rabiah, 2024).

Studies of interest include Henkin's (2020) exploration of language errors across different age groups of Negev speakers and the work of Abu-Rabiah *et al.* (2023), which examines interference and syntactic errors on behalf of Arab high school students writing in Hebrew. However, both studies have predominantly focused on written Hebrew, which is only a part of language proficiency.

Language competence comprises four skills, reading, listening, speaking, and writing, each involving its own challenges and requiring development of sub-skills (Darancik, 2018). Since speaking and listening receive less attention and practice in different contexts, rather than reading and writing, these skills are often the most difficult for learners. Historically, these four skills were taught in a fixed order, sometimes referred to as either active (speaking and writing) or passive (reading and listening). Moreover, the whole emphasis in modern language education is taking place on integrating the four skills into the classroom discursive space and acknowledging the active role each skill plays in the communication process (Piniel & Albert, 2018).

3. Material and Methods

This research study used a qualitative approach to investigate the multifaceted influence of Hebrew language barriers on Arab students' academic experiences and success in the higher education institutions of Israel. A qualitative approach was necessary to hear about participants' personal stories, understand their perceptions and coping actions framed within sociocultural and institutional contexts (Anas & Ishaq, 2022). Cleland (2017) stated that qualitative research allows the researcher to take a closer look at lived experiences while developing meaningful accounts about societal phenomena that cannot be understood by quantitative data alone. In this case, potential flexibility provided by qualitative methods was necessary to analyze how students construed and enacted their academic challenges related to language, how that influenced a sense of belonging and motivation, and how institutional language support, or lack of support, shaped their educational experiences.

The primary data collection methods used in this study were semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used as they would capture a depth of data (Tümen-Akyıldız & Ahmed, 2021). Semi-structured interviews provided the participant with room to express their personal experience, while still enabling the researcher to steer the conversation focused on themes important to the research aims. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) claimed that semi-structured interviews provide an element of structure to conversations and also allow for flexibility when engaging with participants; therefore, semi-structured interviews provided the researcher the opportunity to gather both new, emergent ideas from the participants and commonalities across the participants' stories. Conversely, focus groups facilitated interaction among students and afforded the researcher the ability to explore common patterns, express shared concerns, or discover oppositional stances that may not be disclosed in individual semi-structured interviews (Shabina *et al.*, 2024). This use of methodological triangulation increased the depth of data and, therefore, the dependability/credibility of the data.

This study population consisted of Arab students studying at higher education institutions in Israel, representing students from a variety of linguistic, cultural and academic backgrounds. The sample consisted of 40 students and was purposefully sampled to represent variation in academic year, geographic location, field of study, and ethnic sub-group (Muslim, Christian and Druze). Examples of purposive sampling and snowball sampling were utilized to ensure representation of underrepresented voices, and to be able to access students from different institutions and disciplines. The snowball sampling was very effective in this case because it capitalized on the trust networks between Arab students as the study surveyed students' willingness to participate in a discussion about their language use in an academic context (Naderifar, Goli & Ghaljaie, 2017). The great diversity allowed us to find similarity in patterns across distinctive demographic and institutional settings, thus fulfilling the goal of the study, which was to enrich the understanding of the issue.

All participants provided informed consent. The interviews and focus groups were conducted in Arabic to allow participants to feel comfortable and express themselves fluently, and Hebrew was used for some specific academic terms or experiences when the students chose to use it. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Thematic analysis permitted the researcher to identify, organize, and make sense of repeated patterns or recurring themes about language barriers, academic engagement, and institutional support (Naeem *et al.*, 2023). Manual thematic coding occurred, and the themes were iteratively refined to facilitate discussion of not only shared experiences across students but also highlight differences to allow for talent development utility (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thematic analysis was chosen for the current study because the approach allowed for capturing subjective meaning and capturing variability across participants, while also keeping with the goals of the current study, which is to examine in detail the perspectives of students (Zhang *et al.*, 2023).

4. Results

The findings of this study indicate that Hebrew language barriers are multifaceted and deeply entrenched for Arab learners in Israeli higher education. Using qualitative data from interviews and focus groups, five interconnected themes emerged, which demonstrate that:

- 1) an overall delay in Hebrew language instruction,
- 2) socio-cultural relatedness to Hebrew,
- 3) limited Hebrew language exposure at home, and
- 4) university environments do not sufficiently address language barrier supports, negatively affecting students' academic performance, ability to participate in classroom activities, and emotional well-being;
- 5) inequalities in accessing academic resources and not feeling welcome, especially Muslim students, compounded the challenges of Hebrew language barriers.

- **Theme 1: Linguistic, Educational, and Socio-Cultural Roots of Language Barriers**

For many Arab students, Hebrew poses a significant obstacle in post-secondary education in Israel; this was further attributed to slow learning and socio-cultural segregation. Most Arab students learn Hebrew in the 4th grade, at which time important tunnels for a critical phase of language acquisition have already been passed. As one student suggested, *"When we started to learn Hebrew, it was when we turned 10, and it was just one subject. It never occurred to us to teach it naturally."* Psychological barriers further inhibit this. In the Arab socio-political context, most Arab students - indeed, mostly Muslim Arab students - are culturally Arab, and they have (extended) family in the West Bank and Gaza, which necessarily distances them emotionally from Hebrew. One participant stated, *"Hebrew is the language of the state, but not my home or culture. At times,*

it feels like the more I learn Hebrew, the more I lose part of myself." Another participant said, *"We never used Hebrew outside of school and therefore stayed academically and foreign."* Research already confirms this ambivalence (ill feelings) or distrust of Hebrew as a language, by Arab communities, partially due to strangleholds on Hebrew and the identity politics surrounding it (Tataonko *et al.*, 2020). This psychological push back and very little Hebrew in use in everyday surroundings limit fluency and have long-term educational damages (Tataonko & Kalisher, 2023). Notions of this separation (linguistic, culturally) creating structural disadvantage is not new, only that, students are asked to succeed in a language that also, they seldom, and to which, they normally do not, relate (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2017).

- **Theme 2: Family and Early Language Exposure as Influential Foundations**

Participants stressed that family language practices and early exposure are crucial aspects that impact Hebrew language proficiency. These experiences differed by ethnic background. Druze participants reported being the earliest exposed to Hebrew due to residing in a bilingual home and having intimate, everyday contact with Hebrew-speaking entities. As one Druze participant explained, *"We always had Hebrew TV at home, and my parents speak Hebrew like they learned it at school...I was comfortable before I even went to school."* Christian participants also displayed relatively strong Hebrew language development, presumably due to positive interfaces with the Jewish majority population and parties, and inclusive resource access like mixed schools and bilingual homework assignments. Muslim participants, on the other hand, described their limited or minimal exposure to Hebrew at home, or as one participant shared, *"We just spoke Arabic," foolishly, "and my mother still doesn't know any Hebrew, so we never used it before school."* Another participant shared, *"My Hebrew really started at school, and even then, it was for exams not the actual living."* This supports the findings of Shomron (2024). indicating that Druze and Christian groups tended to acquire more mundane relationships with Hebrew media, activities, services, and aspects, whereas Muslim communities remained severely isolated from other forms of useful interaction. The disproportionate experience of proximity to the Hebrew language and the parental experience with the Hebrew language are all factors which have had an impactful role upon each group's preparation for a Hebrew medium academic environment in the Arab sector.

- **Theme 3: Institutional Barriers and Inadequate Language Support in Higher Education**

Many students feel that their institutions lack language support to help bridge the gap in Hebrew. One student recalls, *"They expect us to act like native speakers, but there is no real support---no workshops, no translated material."* Another student commented, *"Even when I receive tutoring, it is only in Hebrew, so how is it going to help?"* Abu-Rabiah (2025) highlights the larger trend in Israeli universities, providing examples of failure to provide adequate bilingual accommodations and culturally relevant pedagogy for Arab students,

which leaves students to negotiate complex academic material in a second language with minimal support, hindering their academic pursuit.

- **Theme 4: Academic Challenges in Comprehension, Participation, and Resource Access**

Students often said that limited Hebrew proficiency makes it difficult to follow lectures, take part in class, and utilize academic resources. One participant said, *"Sometimes I sit in class and do not ask anything, and I am afraid I will say it wrong."* Another said, *"Most of the textbooks and articles are in Hebrew, and it takes me twice as long to read and understand."* As Manor and Watad (2024) found, Arab students frequently found themselves at a disadvantage academically due to their limited command of the Hebrew language, especially when encountering written and digital resources. This made them feel less engaged and with lower academic achievement, and increased distancing in the classroom.

- **Theme 5: Emotional Impact and Coping Strategies in the Face of Language Barriers**

Arab students reported an emotional cost when engaging in their higher education in Hebrew. Many reported that their limited language proficiency led to negative views of self and a reduced sense of belonging. One student indicated, *"Sometimes I feel stupid, even though I know the content, it is just the Hebrew that prohibits me from articulating it"*. Another student expressed feelings surrounding academic worry: *"I do not interact in the lectures because I am scared to sound bad or pronounce a word wrong."* Such experiences further identified heightened anxiety, fear of judgement, as well as social withdrawal, the documented effects of language barriers affecting minority student populations (Brance *et al.*, 2023; Rabahi & Makhlouf, 2025).

Despite the challenges faced, many students showed they had strong coping strategies to adapt and persist. Participants reported that peer support was a resource they relied upon. One participant stated, *"I was ready to quit after the first year, and then I got together with a group of Arab students who supported me with translating and studying."* Another said, *"I started using translation apps and YouTube in Arabic to support me in understanding the Hebrew lectures."* So, their coping strategies were a mix of digital resourcefulness and social collaboration. Such strategies are not unique to Arab students in Israel. Students from minority backgrounds frequently forge informal support systems to address gaps related to language and institutional invisibility that are not met by the mainstream university context. These students often utilize peer-supported learning, informal translation circles, and spaces where they can be more culturally comfortable to address gaps left by formal academic support (Tavares, 2021). As Wenger (2022) highlights, minority students are more likely than other students to develop peer networks or relationships that become critical academic and psychosocial support, especially when working through contextually marginalizing linguistically or culturally alienating spaces.

5. Discussion

This study explored how Hebrew language barriers shape the academic experiences and success of Arab students in higher education in Israel. Utilizing qualitative data, the analysis identified five key areas where barriers to language emerge: early education and sociocultural barriers, family language exposure variation, the lack of institutional barriers, barriers to academic involvement and participation, and emotional context stressors with adaptive coping strategies. The research described how language is not just a technical medium of communication but also a cultural and psychological filter that limits integration, identity, and achievement.

First, there was the significant structural (roots) evidence of language barriers that Arab students experience as a result of having Hebrew delayed until the school system deems it is appropriate for Arab students to learn Hebrew (typically only introduced in the 4th grade, after the time-sensitive window for language acquisition) and the socio-political separation between the dominant Hebrew-speaking population as well. This separation means that, through policy, when students start to learn Hebrew, they will be (long-term disadvantage) educationally separated from (at times) native Hebrew speakers, introducing language as the medium for education. In support of these findings, Bekerman and Zembylas (2017) found that institutionalized linguistic segregation in Israel leads to cultural alienation and reduces Arab students' chances to have equal opportunity in higher education. Further, Tataonko and Kalisher (2023) explained that the sociocultural distance shaped by Muslim Arab communities with family in the West Bank or Gaza often creates psychological resistance to Hebrew as a language of identity that adds a further layer of complexity to academic engagement. In many cases, for these students, Hebrew is not simply another language of education but indicative of cultural and political obstacles that result in motivation, and emotional preparedness barriers to succeed.

The second finding reveals the powerful impact of early-language exposure within the family and home environment, which also varies considerably by ethnic subgroup. Druze and Christian students reported more comfort with Hebrew and more familiarity in their social lives with Hebrew because they grew up in a bilingual home or had some experience with predominantly Hebrew-speaking community experiences. Muslim students, per report, had little-to-no exposure to Hebrew in the home. Shomron (2024) provides additional support that the Druze and Christian minorities have benefited from increased language integration out of necessity, by their practical affiliations with Hebrew-linguistic life roles, in particular military service, diverse schooling, and vocational. In contrast, Muslim students, especially those from more linguistically homogenous coastal communities, lacked exposure and family-based Hebrew literacy, preparing them for Hebrew-medium community-based academic cognitive-support tasks. This intra-group variation demonstrates that Arabic-speaking students in Israel are not a singular population, and targeted language functions and intervention will need to

be designed with regard to the diversity of depth of exposure and general readiness in terms of literacy competence levels.

An additional clear finding is the absence of institutional attentiveness to a language-sensitive environment for academic support. Students noted that universities routinely stated they would be "*bilingual, however*", when it comes to university mechanisms for implementing pedagogies that respond to student language acquisition. While students were expected to perform at a native-level Hebrew native level, proficient speakers, students hardly received any assistance in knowing complex academic content at all. Abu-Rabiah (2025) has documented similar institutional failures, noting that universities in Israel tend to rely on assimilationist models of instruction, assuming Hebrew proficiency without offering structural support for second-language learners. This absence of institutional accountability forces Arab students to over-reliance on personal effort and peer support. Halabi (2022) sounded similar alarms that no Arabic-language course options and Hebrew course material, and their inadequate support leads to structural exclusion that results in substantial inequities in their educational environments. The findings suggest that the burden of adaptation lies far more on the student than the university, and that this adaptive process is also commonly seen in other communities linguistically marginalized by institutions.

Academic connection and resource access were also acutely impacted by language barriers. Students articulated struggles in reading academic texts in Hebrew; developing thoughts in Hebrew; asking questions in Hebrew; and participating in group discussions in Hebrew, while simultaneously trying to understand course content and expectations. In other words, the cognitive processing involved in the delivery of academic materials in a non-native language takes time, and many students were not able to engage in deep, sustained learning or a level of engagement with a classroom learning community as a result. Manor and Watad (2024) also confirmed that Arabic students of low Hebrew proficiency continually failed to achieve in their academic program and subsequently diminished their level of comfort and confidence in terms of academic achievement. Likewise, Henkin (2020) and Abu-Rabiah and colleagues (2023) showed that the complete predominance of the Hebrew language in academic resources has a tendency to create misinterpretation and readings were limited to surface-level understanding, particularly in tasks focused on reading and writing. Furthermore, as reading was often the only focus of language learning, the simultaneous language acquisition of oral and auditory development means that many students are struggling quietly, often without the tools to ask questions to clarify their thinking or articulate confusion. These language barriers represent a synchrony of underachievement and psychological disconnection in terms of classroom learning dynamics.

Moreover, at the last layer of barriers, the emotional impact of language barriers was generally cogenerate, and was identified as a significant dimension of the students' experiences. Many of the participants reported feeling anxious, lacking confidence, and a sense of disconnection in their academic program because of their language limitations. Brance *et al.* (2023) also confirm these findings through their reporting of academic

stressors with respect to language loss resulting in mental health issues and a decline in academic perseverance among minority students. It is interesting to note that there was a robustness among the student participants in terms of peer-based coping strategies. As noted, the students stated they often developed supportive study groups; relied on translation tools; and provided voice and emotional peer support to one another (both in academic and emotional aspects). In addition, some supporting resources are presently available to minority language students in higher education; Tavares (2021) argues that minority students often create parallel academic networks as social support for institutional neglect. Wenger (2022) concludes that peer learning networks serve as powerful venues for resilience, identity and community problem solving. Therefore, while all of these self-focused interventions are highly commendable, they are not a substitute for a more official, inclusive, and culturally relevant system for language support from institutions.

6. Conclusion

This research presents an in-depth investigation of the implications of Hebrew language barriers on the academic achievement and experience of Arab higher education students in the context of higher education in Israel. The research findings highlight that a low command of Hebrew, Israel's primary language of academic instruction, creates students' challenges for students to fully engage with their subjects of study, course material, participate in academic discussions, and access institution-recommended academic support services. That is, these challenges are associated with early education policies, socio-political context, the language environment at home and language identity conflict. Specifically, students who identified as Muslim had the highest Hebrew-language barrier challenges because they had very little exposure to Hebrew at home and thus had a greater psychological distance from Hebrew. The study findings are consistent with prior studies highlighting how sociolinguistic segregation and language domination, as experienced by many minorities, created meaningful challenges for these students (e.g., Tataonko & Kalisher, 2023; Bekerman & Zembylas, 2017; Manor & Watad, 2024).

The data synthesized shows that the Hebrew language barriers are a contributor to the difficulties in performance and, along with isolation, have an impact on the mental health of Arab students, but that the language barriers equally showed how resilient the students are. The informal peer support groups and the translation tools were evidence of the student adaptations resulting from the neglect of the University and institutional support, ultimately developed structurally from the neglectful relationships with dominant languages in the study. The previous studies (Abu-Rabiah, 2025; Tavares, 2021; Wenger, 2022) showed how students from minority backgrounds are often required to navigate the systemic gaps themselves through community responses, especially when positioned in relationships that are inequitable. The differences internequine between Druze, Christian and Muslim students further illustrate the significance of understanding

the within-group diversification of linguistic readiness, justifying the need for alternative and culturally responsive practices.

However, a host of unanswered questions remain for exploration. Most importantly, how can institutions create more inclusive academic settings that facilitate linguistic diversity without erasing the cultural identities of minority students? What role will policy reforms play in facilitating earlier and deeper experiences with Hebrew, without the pressures of cultural assimilation? Future research should examine the long-term academic and career trajectories of Arab students enrolled in Hebrew-language universities with different levels of Hebrew proficiency, and the effectiveness of multilingual and culturally relevant designs (Halabi, 2022; Hauptman *et al.*, 2008). The study ultimately highlights that the challenge of language barriers is not just one for students to navigate; it is a systemic problem that requires reform. Equity of access to the academic experience for all students requires universities to not only recognize the linguistic and cultural diversity of their learners, but also to support it through policy, in pedagogy, and practice.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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