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Impacting the Academic Writing Culture of Israel

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Note: This paper was presented at the symposium, 'History of Writing – National and Disciplinary Traditions', at the 2009 EATAW Conference. We are dedicating it to the memory of our dear friend and colleague, Hadara Perpignan, who participated in the original writing and research for the article, and who passed away after a difficult illness, on December 25, 2010.

Abstract

Amos Oz writes that in pre-State Israel, 'All Jerusalem [...] sat at home and wrote [...] everyone had a pencil and a notebook' (Oz 2004: 285). Later, when he moved to the kibbutz, farmers devoted to manual labor often wrote modest articles and sometimes even poetry (2004: 468). When students entered the university, there was no need to instruct them in academic writing. However, times have changed, technology pervades our lives, and the population of the country has also changed. Today, many students enter institutions of higher education with insufficient writing experience. Although there are a growing number of programs in academic writing throughout the country, even within the same institution instructors often know little of what is happening outside their own programs. Inspired by the symposium at the 2007 EATAW conference, 'Historical Roots of National Writing Cultures', we decided to tackle this problem by establishing an organization for people engaged in academic writing instruction. Its purpose was to share resources and insights, to involve policy makers in education in the writing needs of students, and ultimately to provide the best possible writing instruction for Israel's wide variety of students. In this paper we will trace the history of academic writing in Israel and describe the progress of IFAW, the Israel Forum for Academic Writing, in achieving these goals.

Writing Culture in Israel: A Changing Tradition

Professors throughout the ages, no doubt, have complained that many of their students do not know how to write academic papers. Nevertheless, there are some objective reasons why today's students may have a greater problem than those of an earlier day. Beginning with the introduction of television and the further development of the Internet, it seems that people are reading less and are also writing less or differently than they did in former times.

In pre-State Israel, Amos Oz wrote in his autobiography:

> All Jerusalem, in my childhood, in the last years of British rule, sat at home and wrote. Hardly anyone had a radio in those days, and there was no television or video or compact disc player or internet or e-mail, not even the telephone. But everyone had a pencil and a notebook (Oz 2004: 285).

David Ben Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel from 1948 until 1963, was opposed to the introduction of television in private homes as he believed it would distract people from their important work, and private telephones were a rarity. So until the 1960s, out of necessity, reading and writing

were a much more common pastime in the modern State of Israel than they are today. Until the War of Independence of 1948–49 ended, people were also confined to their homes in the evening because of the curfew. Even today, when people are confined to shelters and 'safe rooms' in times of war, many find writing a comfort. We have examples from student diaries during the latest Gaza War stating that writing relieved some of their tension.

Writing seemed to be a natural phenomenon, like sleeping or breathing. Even though most people did not attend university, whether they lived on a kibbutz[1] or in the city, many people wrote. No matter what their occupation at the time, many members of the first generation were products of the nineteenth century 'Haskalah' or 'Enlightenment' movement in which many promising young Jews of Eastern Europe at the time left the Talmudic academy and entered a Russian gymnasium and/or a European university. Others, who had not been exposed to European secular education were, nevertheless, often products of a literate tradition (the Bible, the Mishnah, etc.). The style was argumentative and sometimes poetic, not the traditional Western, academic writing we know today. Nevertheless, if these people entered the university, most were able to survive without a freshman composition course.

There were already three institutions of higher learning established in the country before the State of Israel was declared in 1948. The Technion (the Israeli Institute for Technology) opened its doors in 1914, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1925, and the Weizmann Institute of Science (first called the Daniel Sieff Research Institute) in 1934. Many young people had dreams of attending university even if they spent their lives in back-breaking agricultural work and nation-building.

What has happened since then to the culture of writing in Israel? As university instructors, we know that many of our students who enter institutions of higher education have difficulty writing, some because of insufficient writing experience or lack of proficiency, and some because of lack of confidence in their own writing ability. Is it because of the failure of the school system (large classes, discipline problems, matriculation exams, poor planning, too many subjects, poor teaching)? Is it the conditions of life today: technology, the Internet, TV, many more activities and distractions? Could it be that our young people today are not actually writing less, but are rather writing in different genres (e.g. Facebook, blogs, wikis)? (Chute 2009 and Lewin 2008). This needs to be researched.

We do know that higher education in Israel no longer belongs to the privileged few. More students come from non-academic backgrounds. In addition, as in many other places in the world, students with learning difficulties (dyslexia, dysgraphia, ADD, ADHD, etc.), are accepted into colleges and universities. Furthermore, in Israel, members of the Ethiopian and Bedouin communities come from oral-aural cultures where writing historically played no part (Schleifer 2003). The many Arab students who enter colleges and universities in Israel also have to cope with their experience with the style of Arabic prose which contains much repetition of form and content, and an argumentative presentation and elaboration. There are also cultural differences (Aburass 2009). For some students, Hebrew is a third or fourth language, and English (which is a requirement for the Bachelors' degree) may be a fourth or fifth. In today's multi-cultural and multi-linguistic world, which fosters mass education for all, these problems are not unique to Israel, but those of us involved in the teaching of academic writing in Israel face them on a daily basis.

What We Hope to Achieve

In consideration of today's changing world and the changing nature of our students, we believe it is more important than ever for students to learn the principles of respectful but critical response while communicating to a real audience. It is important to use reading and writing to expand students' views of their world and society and to work out their own values, perspectives, and purposes. Those of us involved in the teaching of academic writing would like to see more involvement on the part of the Ministry of Education and the Council of Higher Education in the writing needs of students. First of all, they need to encourage better secondary school preparation for tertiary writing. They should also fund projects, courses, and writing centres, for instance. We would like to convince university/college administrators that writing should be taught across the curriculum in Hebrew and

[1] A collective farm.

English with support from the rector of each institution, and academic writing in Arabic, an almost non-existent subject, should be encouraged as well. We hope to work toward creating a stronger organization which could possibly influence the policy makers/decision makers in education.
This paper will trace the history of academic writing in Israel and will describe the progress of IFAW in achieving its goals.

In What Language Did People Write?

In the early days of the State, people wrote in the many languages they had brought with them from the Diaspora. However, their children, the second generation, wrote only in Hebrew. Hebrew had been used throughout the ages for religious purposes – prayer and Bible study – especially by male Jews in Eastern Europe, North Africa, and Yemen. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were also a number of Hebrew periodicals in Europe, and a few people were beginning to write poetry, short stories, and essays in the ancient tongue. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the pioneer and prophet of the modern Hebrew language, was determined to make Hebrew a spoken, everyday language as well.

When Ben-Yehuda arrived in the country in 1881, he had already published his first article on the importance of reviving the Hebrew language (Fellman 1998)[2]. He immediately began work on his three-pronged plan of action: 'Hebrew in the Home; Hebrew in the School, and Hebrew for Adults'. It was not an easy plan to carry through. Members of the religious community objected to using the holy tongue for secular purposes, and the Turks, who ruled the country then, objected to the official use of any language except Turkish. In spite of many hardships, Ben-Yehuda and his supporters persisted and eventually succeeded in their goal.

In the Ben-Yehuda home, it was forbidden for children to hear any language other than Hebrew. Others followed his example. As a child, sixty years after Ben-Yehuda had arrived in the country, Amos Oz writes that his parents knew many different languages, but they taught him only Hebrew (Oz 2004). This was the general trend for many immigrant families.

Ben-Yehuda also realized the importance of having Hebrew become the language of instruction in all Jewish schools in the country. This was not an easy task, as there were vested interests in maintaining instruction in French, German, English, and Yiddish. Nevertheless, by 1898, there were six all-encompassing Hebrew schools in the country, and fourteen part time Hebrew schools, with a total enrollment of 2,500 pupils. In 1900, the first method book for teaching Hebrew was published, and in 1906, the first Hebrew high school was founded in Jaffa (Cooper-Weill 1998 and St. John 1952).

With the establishment of the Technion in 1913–14, the first major language war took place with Hebrew clearly the winner. The founders of the Technion from Germany insisted that it was logical for instruction to take place in German since the language of science at the time was German, and students needed to communicate with the scientific community throughout the world. Many scientific and technical terms did not even exist in Hebrew at the time. However, the students and instructors went on strike and refused to return to classes unless Hebrew became the language of instruction. They won the battle: the language of instruction in all universities in the country was to be Hebrew. So when students entered Israeli universities, any writing they had to do was in Hebrew (Bein 1971 and Lang 2008).

Ben-Yehuda and his followers succeeded in reviving the ancient Hebrew language into a vital, modern language in everyday use. There is no doubt that this is an impressive achievement. Unlike most countries, where monolingual policy originates and is enforced by powerful, political forces (Kibner 2008), the Hebrew-only initiative was a grassroots movement which, for many years, needed to struggle against the powers-that-be. Today, however, when the Hebrew language is clearly the *lingua franca* of most Israelis, the necessity of enforcing Hebrew-only policies is questionable. During the academic year 2009–10, for instance, which was designated by the Ministry of Education as the year for the Hebrew language, the Ministry announced it would instruct schools to begin playing only

[2] Other sources for the influence of Ben-Yehuda include Bein (1971), Lang (2008), St. John (1952), Weisgal (1944), and Weizmann (1949).

Hebrew songs during school recesses and in all school events and activities (*Etni Digest* 2009). Several months before, the President of the Hebrew Language Academy had expressed strong opposition and even horror concerning a proposed graduate course at the Technion to be conducted in English in order to attract foreign students (Hirsch 2009). How could this happen at the Technion, he wanted to know, where the first major battle in academia for the Hebrew language took place?

Are We a Literate Society Today?

Israel, by a large margin, produces more scientific papers *per capita* than any other nation in the world. In addition, it publishes more books *per capita* than any other country and has the most independent and free Arabic press in the Middle East (Ben Gedalyahu 2010). Since 1963, during National Book Week, book fairs all over the country, including publishers' selections and special prices as well as book-related activities for children, are held. The Jewish National and University Library publicizes statistics about Israel's literary output every year.

In the year 2008, the library registered 6,384 new books, about 85–90% of the books actually published. Some 88% of the new books are in Hebrew, 27% translated from other languages. Other languages represented are English, Russian, Arabic, and Yiddish (Fendel 2009). Today, there are about 200 scientific journals written in Hebrew and a number of Arabic scientific journals as well, some published by the Arab colleges or the Arab sections of the colleges. Many institutes throughout Israel encourage academic and scientific research. One example is MOFET, the Institute of Research, Curriculum and Program Development for Teacher Education, which, among other activities, encourages research and the exchange of scholarly writing, especially in Hebrew.

In spite of all this literary production, we ask ourselves: Are we a literate culture? Certainly, we are a 'verbal' culture. Discussion is encouraged everywhere, in the streets and in the classrooms, but professors and instructors in the universities and colleges complain that many students today have great difficulty with any kind of academic writing and in fact do not know how to write at all. Will the younger generations continue to produce the literary output still evident in Israel today?

The Teaching of Academic Writing in Israel

Since the 'language war' at the Technion in 1913, all university courses have been taught in Hebrew except in the English Literature departments. But Israeli universities, not unlike many universities in other parts of the world, never developed a tradition of 'freshman composition'. Students entering Israeli universities were expected to know how to write without being trained and without getting feedback on their writing. It was simply assumed that if you were accepted to a university, then you knew how to write academic papers.

The realization that some students needed additional support in order to succeed in higher education came from our first prime-minister, David Ben Gurion in the 1950s. One of his dreams was to integrate the non-Western immigrants into Israeli society as equal citizens. They, too, should have a chance in higher education, he believed. In order to achieve this, these students, who did not have the advantages of a European education nor the educational background of their peers, needed extra preparation and support before they could enter the university. For this purpose, the first preparatory program was established at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1964. Among the required courses during this preparatory year, all students in the program were required to take a course called 'Scientific Writing'. It was probably the first place in Israel where academic writing in Hebrew was taught. The Saltiel Center for Pre-Academic Studies continues to flourish to this day, as do many other preparatory programs throughout the country.

Many colleges in Israel offer academic degrees today, and in so doing have attempted to develop academic writing programs in both Hebrew and English. Students preparing to become teachers are expected to do both conventional, academic writing, and reflective writing, both within the framework of the academy. In addition to these two different aspects of academic writing, future teachers must prepare themselves to teach their own pupils how to write. Even native speakers of a language may find these requirements formidable. For teachers' college students who may be writing in a language

that is not their mother tongue, the task is many times more difficult. In order to meet the needs of these students, a varied number of programs have been developed in the teachers' colleges. Some are skill-based; others, like the David Yellin College in Jerusalem, have developed experimental programs where students in each department of the college are required to take an introductory course in their discipline during their first year of studies. This course includes a unit on academic writing in that discipline, a kind of combination of WAC and WID (Burstein 2008).

In another institution, the Kibbutzim College, a writing centre has been successfully established in place of the Hebrew academic writing courses. As far as we know, this is the only fully-developed writing centre in Israel in spite of many attempts to establish such a centre in the universities. It is one section of the three-tier complex of the alternative learning centres at Kibbutzim College. These are all housed together in one building. SAL'OR and the other two centres in the building are part of the trend towards 'alternative learning' or mentoring systems for academic activities (Wolffensperger 2008).

Colleges other than teachers' colleges have also developed writing programs in recent years. In some cases, it has been difficult to obtain administrative support for these programs. In other cases, administrators have come to realize the importance of helping students professionally in their writing tasks and those they will face after leaving the academy.

At the Ruppin Academic Center, Business English is a compulsory, semester (28 hour) course for undergraduate students of Business Administration in their third year of studies and an optional course for second- and third-year students of Economics. The course was designed following consultation with the heads of the Departments of Business Administration and Economics. Emphasis is placed on writing skills in general, and on written commercial correspondence in particular.

In the universities, until recently, the picture was very different. Whereas many instructors helped their students step-by-step in producing a paper or a project, no freshman composition was required in the universities. Then, in 2007, the first compulsory composition course in Hebrew was introduced in the humanities division of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and the following year, academic writing was introduced in the masters' degree program of the Nursing School.

There is greater recognition of the need for writing courses in Hebrew throughout Israel. However, there are still some negative attitudes toward writing courses in Hebrew, as exemplified by one of the deans of Ben-Gurion University. When one of our researchers, a faculty member of the University, approached the Dean in an attempt to find out what writing courses are given and in what languages, he answered, 'Of course only in English. We do want to encourage our students to do research and to publish internationally. Why would they need to write in Hebrew?' (Beck 2008).

Composition courses for Arabic speakers writing in Arabic also seem to be at a minimum. The attitude of administrators, even those in Arab colleges where students are taught in Arabic, seems to be that students will need to write in Hebrew in order to get along in Israeli society, and in English in order to publish internationally; so why waste precious resources on teaching composition in Arabic?[3] It will probably take a few more years to convince the powers-that-be that writing in the mother tongue is a necessary prerequisite to writing in other languages (Zuckermann 2008).

Academic Writing in English

The development of English academic writing courses in the universities is a different story. In the early days of the State, students had to write seminar papers and theses, but mostly in Hebrew. As more students were being asked to publish during their graduate studies, in many cases, especially in the sciences, the need for writing in English for international journals became apparent. The students, however, wrote only in Hebrew. As there were no courses in academic writing, PhD advisors were

[3] This information was obtained by personal communication between the author and the headmasters of three Arab teachers' colleges and with the former head of the Bedouin Sector of Achva Academic College of Education in Be'er Tuvia, Israel.

expected to teach their students how to write in English, how to publish, and how to enter the international scientific community. Often, Israelis hired Anglo immigrants to translate and/or edit their work, a painstaking but profitable task for the fortunate British, Americans, or South Africans.

In 1986, the Wolfson Family Charitable Trust, a trust that had previously given financial support in the sciences to institutions of higher education in Israel, offered to sponsor a pilot project to teach Israeli PhD students to improve their writing in English. It seemed to the sponsors that Israeli academics were losing ground in the international scientific community. The courses were originally designed for PhD and post-doctoral students only, since undergraduate courses in Israel are taught only in Hebrew. This was the beginning of the development of English academic writing courses in Israel. By the early 1990s, academic writing courses in English were becoming well established in the six major universities in Israel. Today's practices, based on the original Wolfson Project, reflect the development of academic writing research in the twenty-first century (Rubin 2007).

Currently there are many different programs throughout the country. There are MA writing programs, PhD programs in various disciplines, and the addition of a writing component to reading comprehension courses, which are required at the undergraduate level. However, it seems that the teaching of writing is sporadic and diverse. There are no real standards, no common goals. Most writing instructors come from other fields and have had little training in the teaching of academic writing.

IFAW – Israel Forum for Academic Writing: What We Have Accomplished and What We Hope to Achieve

When we began doing research for the symposium organized by Professor Otto Kruse at the 2007 EATAW conference, 'Historical Roots of National Writing Cultures', we were surprised to find how many different programs in academic writing in both Hebrew and English existed in Israel. We decided it was time to establish an organization for people engaged in academic writing instruction. Our first goal was to locate the existing programs in this field. We began our own 'mapping' project.

We were encouraged that at our first meeting at Tel Aviv University in November, 2007, about forty people from colleges and universities throughout Israel involved in both English and Hebrew academic writing attended. It was decided at that meeting to meet several times a year face-to-face and to communicate by email as well. Since then, our organization has grown – we now have over 150 members on our mailing list and a website of our own (MOFET n.d.). We have succeeded in establishing a communication network and made connections among people in the field of academic writing.

We have had four or five face-to-face meetings during each of the first four years of the organization. At our meetings, we have had workshops, visiting lecturers, research presentations, practical applications, and discussions, addressing such issues as responding to and assessing student writing, the use of technology in the teaching of writing, and how to gain administrative support for our programs. Members from all over the country, from colleges and universities, from Hebrew, English, and German departments have attended. We have found a home for our organization, MOFET, the Institute of Research, Curriculum and Program Development for Teacher Education, an already existing and respected institution.

There is greater recognition today that supporting student writers in higher education and beyond is a necessity. However, because of the present budgetary situation confronting all institutions of higher education in Israel, many official writing programs have been curtailed. Not willing to give up, we have learned that there are other possibilities besides the paradigm we have fostered for years: either a full-fledged course or nothing; either a writing center or nothing. Some of our members have taken steps in a new direction: probing new possibilities**.** In view of the continuing needs of the students, the former head of the EAP department of Hebrew University, for instance, has initiated some voluntary activities. She has decided to train all the instructors in the department to become writing instructors. She has developed a mini library in the staff room with relevant journal articles and books, etc. She has initiated a series of workshops on teaching writing given by people with varied experience in the field. She has started a journal club in which teachers of the department, even

those with no prior experience in the teaching of writing, are asked to present material from current journals on teaching writing. In addition, in order to get a feel for the needs of the students, teachers of the department give tutorials on a voluntary basis to PhD students in the social sciences. Besides the individual tutorials, workshops in writing are available for interested students, during which both faculty members and peers have helped the students revise their work. Based on the success of this voluntary project, the department has presented a proposal to the administration of the University to establish a formal writing centre.[4] It is our hope that the department will succeed in this innovative, alternative solution.

When we made our presentation in Coventry at the 2009 EATAW Conference, we spoke vaguely of a plan in the future to have a full-day conference. This plan turned into Israel's first international conference in academic writing held in July, 2010. In keeping with the intercultural and multi-linguistic nature of today's societies, invited speakers addressed current issues in L1, L2 and FL writing. We received and accepted abstract submissions from people in many parts of the world, and were witness to many excellent presentations. We are now planning a second international conference and are looking forward to another dynamic event.

Current Issues

We hope that our conferences and other activities will help advance the goals of our organization to develop relationships among policy makers, administrators, teachers, and writers throughout the world, in order to provide the best possible writing instruction for our wide variety of students. We invite you, our readers, to help us grapple with the issues in our field. With the limited resources we have, what should we advocate and where should we place our energies? In what languages should academic writing be taught? In the mother tongue, in a heritage language, in a foreign language that is the *lingua franca* in the international world of research? Should we incorporate non-academic genres in our writing courses? Setting standards in the teaching of academic writing in the various languages we teach is important, but how can we guard against standardization? Each group of students is different, and each institution should develop its own program

Academic writing has not yet become a fully-fledged discipline in Israel. We realize that the needs of our students in the twenty-first century are different from those in the days of Amos Oz's childhood, when to many people writing seemed almost a natural process like sleeping or breathing. It is our hope that IFAW will provide a framework for continued discussion and dialogue among scholars, instructors, and policy-makers throughout the world, in order to foster the goal of providing the best academic writing instruction possible for all our students.

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[4] No doubt similar volunteer efforts have occurred in other institutions throughout the world before formal writing centers have been established. However, through personal communication with Sharon Hirsch, the former department head who initiated the project at Hebrew University, the authors learned that the project began with local initiative only. The department head and the staff were not aware of any other programs of this nature at the time.

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