HOT TOPICS: Is Hebrew reading/decoding difficult for English speakers and does peer learning help?

PEERS HELPING PEERS
by Emily Rex

You only have to go to one or two Jewish education conferences to learn that everyone has a “hot topic,” whether they teach in a day school or supplemental school, or whether they work with young children or young adults. When I attended my first NewCAJE conference and began teaching fourth grade supplemental school in the fall, I didn’t yet have my own personal “hot topic.” As a new teacher who was also going to school full time for a master’s degree in special education, however, I saw a significant lack of research-based methods for teaching children to read Hebrew. I had a classroom of 21 students, some of whom also were coping with ADHD or a learning disability, and needed easy-to-implement teaching strategies that would help me provide effective instruction to diverse learners.

After fruitlessly searching for evidence-based practices for teaching at a supplemental school, I decided to use English reading strategies to teach Hebrew reading. I found several research studies to support the use of English reading strategies in foreign language classrooms, and found one particular method that was perfect for my large classroom: peer-assisted learning strategies for reading (PALS). PALS, created by Douglas Fuchs and Lynn S. Fuchs at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University, has been a research-based practice since 1989 and received “Best Practice” status from the U.S. Department of Education.

PALS is successful because (1) when students work in pairs, they are on-task more frequently than during whole-class instruction; (2) students receive thorough training in the peer-assisted method; (3) students engage in reciprocal tutoring, so each student receives peer-directed instruction; and (4) the PALS method provides students with specific activities and tasks to accomplish during an instructional session. PALS also aligns with the Jewish chevruta tradition of relying on a peer or friend to enhance learning; however, PALS is more appropriate than chevruta for young children learning Hebrew, because PALS incorporates a high level of structure and method for corrective feedback.

As I set out to research the effects of PALS in my classroom, I also expanded my knowledge of the orthography of the Hebrew language to identify exactly why Hebrew reading is difficult for English-speaking students. Hebrew is difficult for English-speakers for many reasons, including reading direction, sounds not present in the English language, different orthographic structures (letters, dots, and dashes), multiple functions of dots and letters, and the presence of final letters. Indeed, the challenges facing students learning to read Hebrew are many. When I
casually discussed these issues with other Jewish educators, they affirmed that these problems are important, but not new. They were interested and hopeful that finding teaching strategies for Hebrew reading that were grounded in research would lead to positive results. I, too, was hopeful that the results of a study in Hebrew reading strategies would not only lead to positive results, but also would help my large classroom of students enjoy reading Hebrew. After all, one of my motivations for becoming a supplemental school teacher was to provide students with a more positive and engaging experience than I had at their age.

After securing Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I conducted a pilot study this spring. The PALS method I chose to use with my class was adapted from an oral reading fluency model described by McMaster et al.4 To pair students appropriately, I assessed students using a simple one-minute reading test. Then, I paired high achieving students with lower achieving students and adjusted pairs to prevent behavior issues during reading sessions. Once in pairs, students spent about 20 minutes reading to each other. In the first 10 minutes, one student took on the role of the reader and the other took on the role of the tutor, stopping and correcting the student every time he or she made an error. After 10 minutes, the students switched roles.

After only a few PALS sessions, I saw improvement in almost all students in my classroom. I saw the most dramatic improvements among the lowest achieving readers. One student in my classroom improved her progress monitoring assessment score from zero to 15 words read correctly per minute. These hopeful findings led me to believe that PALS was successful in my classroom and has potential for success in many Hebrew reading settings, including both day schools and supplemental schools.

Following the pilot phase, I identified several areas for improvement. After seeing only a modest improvement among high achieving readers, I started teaching this fall with a plan to use PALS along with differentiated instruction. By providing all students with an appropriate challenge for their reading level, I encouraged them to make more significant strides in their reading progress. To provide students with an appropriate challenge, they were placed in one of three reading groups (low-, middle-, and high-achieving) and pairs were formed within these groups. Also, after successfully implementing several Positive Behavioral Support (PBS) strategies in my classroom throughout the pilot year, I have developed more concrete PBS strategies to encourage active participation in the peer reading program, including a token economy and behavior and attention games to play during PALS.5

The problem of teaching Hebrew reading to English-speaking students, whether in a day school or supplemental school, is indeed an age-old problem. Teaching these students to read Hebrew not only benefits their academic success, but also promotes synagogue skills and a deeper connection to the Jewish identity. As a 21st-century teacher, grounding Hebrew reading instruction in research-based practices and continuing to advance the science and art of
teaching Hebrew allow tremendous benefits for our students, teachers, and Jewish society as a whole.

Endnotes:

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References