

THE "ROSE AND CAMEL" METHOD: TEACHING HEBREW TO YOUNG CHILDREN IN ISRAEL

Marianna Gelfand

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

Mofet Association: A Group for the Advancement of Education, Jerusalem, Israel

Abstract

The article describes a new approach to teaching Hebrew to young children. The pupils are children aged 5-7 from different cultures (Jews, Arabs, immigrants) who are studying as part of extra-mural studies at the "Mofet" Centre in Jerusalem.

From the beginning, the children learn to read and write in Hebrew. In the first stage of instruction in reading Hebrew nikud diacritical marks (vowel marks), the children learned to associate the vowel sound in the language, which is usually marked by a diacritical mark under the written letter, with a physical gesture. This gesture was invented as a parallel sign to the diacritical mark. In Hebrew, there are several diacritical marks for the same sound. For this reason, the emphasis in learning is placed on a mark that is repeated as a part of a diacritical mark within the different diacritics to signify the same vowel sound. The children were asked to identify and display the repeated diacritical mark and to know how to relate it to a vowel sound that exists in the spoken language.

Instruction was carried out by accelerating the learning of the Hebrew alphabet through learning the letter R (resh) outside its alphabetical order, to give children a larger vocabulary during the early stages of instruction, and to teach the writing of several letters whose written form is based on the written form of that letter. Next, the children learned several consonants by creating words that do not exist in the living language. The letters were joined into words according to their original sequence and these sequences were given an invented meaning. The children knew the word and only then learnt the letters that it is built from. The acceleration was done so that the children could switch to reading expressions and short sentences as quickly as possible. By the end of the first school year, the children were able to read the printed letters and write in written Hebrew letters, not only single words but also expressions and short sentences.

Keywords: Hebrew language, reading, writing, study and teaching (elementary), study and teaching (preschool), methodology.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges in Hebrew for young children is understanding the separation between letters (consonants) and nikud diacritical marks (vowels), in future referred to as 'diacritical marks' or 'diacritics'. In modern Hebrew there are 22 letters and 5 vowel sounds.

There are two forms of spelling in the language, full spelling, with diacritical marks (vowel marks) and without diacritical marks (spelling lacking nikud). The diacritical marks of the language are used when words are written with the full spelling and are intended for the less skilled reader. The novice reader is expected to understand the differences between the letters and diacritical marks, and to be able to connect them into complete words.

In schools in Israel, it is customary to teach children from the 1st grade all the letters from A (alef) to T (tav) (A to Z) including one vowel sound [a] from the 5 existing vowel sounds. One of the reasons, is that each vowel sound also has several diacritical marks, and this complicates reading for the beginners.

During my experience in a regular school, I felt a desire to help the children and to teach them all the letters and all the diacritics together. Both to enable them to develop a richer vocabulary and also to help them make faster progress both in reading and in writing. I wanted them to be able to move easily and

quickly from syllables and single words to expressions and sentences. The opportunity to do so took place this year at the Mofet (the acronym for Mathematics, Physics and Culture in Hebrew) Centre in Jerusalem, which was managed for many years by Svetlana Stoin. The Mofet offers extra-mural studies for children who speak Hebrew as their mother tongue, as well as for Arabic-speaking children and new immigrants from different countries. Classrooms are multicultural. At the Centre, classes take place twice a week in the evenings and are intended for children educated in the exact sciences. At the same time, there are classrooms for younger children, pre-first and first grade. It was in these classes that I had the opportunity to develop my new method.

2. TEACHING READING

In my program, I divided the teaching of the alphabet into two stages. In the first half of the school year, I taught the children half of the letters, which are graphic symbols for consonants, and most of the diacritics, which are symbols for vowel sounds. Some of the diacritics, such as hatafim, which are diacritical marks for very short vowels, I did not teach at this stage. The subject of hatafim is complex and their signs are also complicated. The children learnt to recognize and differentiate between all the vowel sounds, as well as versions of 3 Hebrew letters (B (bet), K (kaf), P (peh)). Each of these letters has two sound forms: b/v, k/kh, p/f. One of them is referred to as 'stop' or 'plosive' (blockage of airflow in the vocal tract) and the second as 'fricative' (does not actually block the airflow). These 3 letters behave differently according to their position within a word. For example, the second letter of the alphabet, letter B (bet), in some positions sounds like [B] and in other positions like [V]. The children also learned 5 final letters that are parallel to the existing letters but are written differently, because they are at the end of the word.

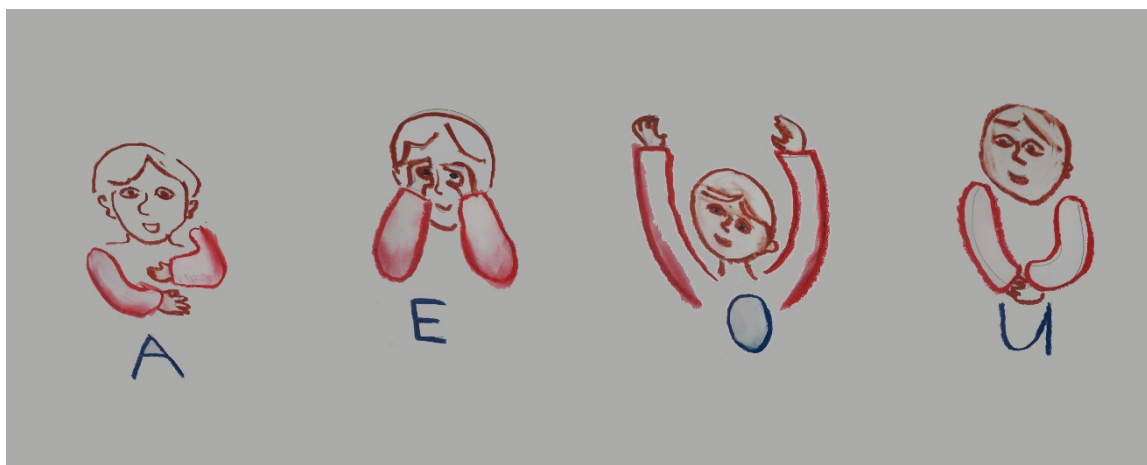
Today, in the world of teaching reading, there is growing awareness of the connection that exists between success in reading and the phonetic teaching of the language, not only when teaching Hebrew (Mervosh 2023). My method of paying close attention to phonemes confirms the relevance of word analysis at the phonemic level along with the general development of language skills.

In Hebrew there is an excess of diacritics compared to vowels used (Nir 1974, p. 58). One explanation is that the vowel system, called the Tiberian, has existed in Hebrew since the 7th century and since then the language has changed and some vowels are no longer expressed in pronunciation. In the past, the different diacritical marks signified different sounds, but today, in our modern language, these sounds are no longer different, but their diacritics remain. For example, in diacritics, there are three marks for the notation of vowel sound [a], three marks for the representation of [e], etc. (Nir 1974, p. 56). However, in spoken language, the separation between different types of the same sound, for example short and long, no longer exists. Of course, this situation is challenging for the young learner.

Already in the first half of the year, the children became familiar with the differences between all the vowel sounds. To help children easily recognize the same vowels marked by several diacritical marks, I incorporated **gestures into the study of diacritical marks**. Gestures were a form of imitation of the graphic form of a specific diacritical mark. Since a vowel sound is marked by several diacritical marks, I noticed **a common diacritical sign in the entire set of diacritics for the same vowel sound**, and I chose this as the primary mark to identify the phonetic sound. I taught the children to recognize this primary mark and imitate it through a gesture.

Thus, for example, as the primary mark that graphically marks the vowel sound [a], a horizontal line, (patach – a diacritical mark) is chosen. Two horizontally aligned dots (tzere – a diacritical mark), are chosen as a repeated diacritical mark for the set of diacritics that sign the sound [e]; a dot above the upper left corner of the letter (holam – a diacritic), is chosen for the pair of diacritics that signs the sound [o] (except the diacritic kamatz katan, which graphically, is identical to one of the symbols of the sound [a]). A single dot (hirik – a diacritical mark) below the letter is used to indicate, as a primary mark, two diacritics for the sound [i]. Only in the diacritical group that marks the sound [u], were separate explanations given. These explanations are already used by teachers, and I simply applied them. Thus, for example, the diacritical mark *shuruk*, (letter V (vav) with a dot in the middle on the left), was compared to a pupik (belly button) in the human body, and diacritical mark *kubutz* (three dots on a

diagonal line underneath a letter), was compared to a sulam (ladder), because its graphic shape resembles a ladder. I explained to the children that they needed to pay attention to a diacritical mark that is common (repeats itself) in each group, and then identify it when it appears with other additions. In this way, it is easy to understand what sound should be pronounced, even though it is marked in different ways. The children realized that the repetitive primary diacritical mark unites the set of written diacritical marks that express the same sound in speech. Of course, this explanation was built to explain the diacritical marks for young children and does not cover all cases.



Vowel sound [A] was shown by hands, one on top of the other across the chest Vowel sound [E] using hands to imitate eyeglasses Vowel sound [O] with hands raised upwards and rounded Vowel sound [U] using the hands, one on the other, resting on the belly button

The vowel sound [i] was learned last and the children were able to learn it without associating it with any specific gesture. In addition, this vowel sound appears in the word 'ima' (mother) that the children have long wanted to associate with the word 'aba' (father) that they had already known from the first lessons.

I wrote each set of diacritical marks for the same sound in a different color and was careful to be consistent.

Usually, learning a new letter occurs through repeated stages. In the first stage, the children are asked to identify a letter and associate it with its sound, then read syllables with different diacritical marks (vowels) connected to the same letter. Then they are asked to read one-syllable words with the same letter. For example, when they learn the letter D (dalet), they are asked to read the following words: dov (bear), bad (fabric), dag (fish). The new letter, D (dalet) can be used in any position in the word, although usually at the beginning or the end. In the later stages they begin to read longer words.

Next, the children are asked to read a short text and copy it from the board. The text includes familiar words plus a word with a new letter or diacritical mark.

3. TEACHING WRITING

In teaching how to write the letters, I implemented Chaya Kushner's method (Kushnir 1995). I used her innovation of using the letter R as the basis for writing some of the letters. Five more letters are written based on the form of this letter according to the Kushnir method. I also **taught the letter R, but not in its alphabetical order**. The letter has been defined as "a letter that jumps forward." I will elaborate on this later in the article.

The children learnt each letter in its printed and written form. They were asked to read printed letters and to write in written letters from the start. The children also practiced making connections between the two forms of the letters. I made a colorful letter ruler-chart for the children in which each letter is presented in its printed and written form, one below the other. This colorful ruler-chart helped identify the letters and link their two shapes. Such a tool helps to cope with writing in the initial stages (Habib 2021, p. 90). The children were then asked to write the letters in the written form. When the children wrote a letter in print within the exercise of written letters, I helped them to correct their work. The correction process followed the children having written on the board after my explanation of how to form the letters. This was something which the children loved to do. The children copied what they had written on the board into their notebooks. I relied on the recommendations of Dafna Yalon, who mentions in her book "The Child at the End of the Pencil" a study that compares writing in printed letters and written letters and shows that writing in written letters is rounded, flexible and dynamic and does not require a great deal of energy from the child. On the other hand, writing in printed letter form is more like drawing letters, it is not fast and interrupts movement and requires extreme precision (Yalon 2019, pp. 70-71).

I composed short texts for children that served as good practice for reading and writing. At the same time, the texts aroused curiosity in the children because there was something in them from the here and now, something that was taking place in the lesson. I often composed the texts while talking to the children. The conversations we held were about things the children loved, about their favorite activities, about their family members, of situations in the classroom, and about the characters and the events in the stories I read in class. The children were asked to copy the texts in written letters. The words that children could not yet write, they were asked to draw.

Here are the two examples of the texts:

This is the first pyramid-shaped text. Pyramid texts are sentences written directly one below the other, with each subsequent sentence repeating the exact same words, written one below the other, but with the addition of one word at the end of each sentence. The children read the text below when they knew only the two letters A (alef), B (bet) and one vowel [a]. These two letters are the first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and the vowel [a] is represented here by two diacritical marks: patach (a horizontal line under a letter) and kamatz (two perpendicular lines under the letter). The children also copied these words into their notebooks.

Aba (father)

Aba (father)  [at home]

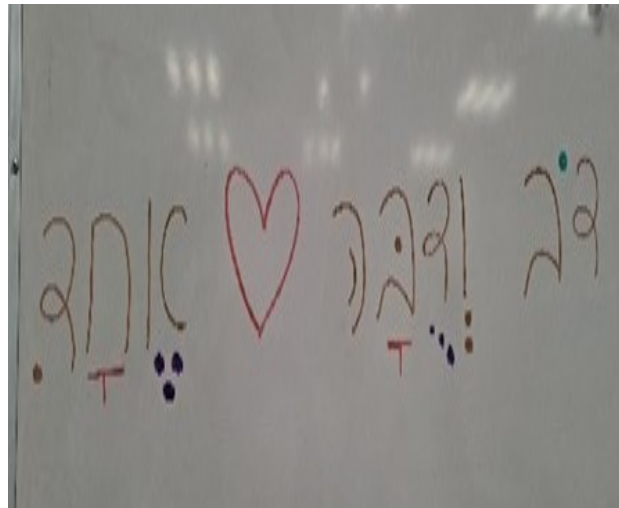
The square brackets explain the meaning expressed through the drawing.

Here is another pyramid-shaped text the children read and copied when they learned the vowel [e] which is represented by the diacritical mark segol (three dots forming an equilateral triangle). At the same time, the children repeated the diacritic shva (two vertical dots under the letter) which in this case also indicates the sound vowel [e] (shva na). In other cases, the diacritic shva (shva nach) indicates the complete absence of a vowel sound. The children are not taught the names of the diacritics at this stage but how to recognize their sound and graphic form.

Dov (bear)

Dov (bear) ve-duba (bear and mother bear)

Dov (bear) ve-duba (bear and mother bear)  [lev=heart] ehad (one)



In the picture a version of the same text written in one line on the blackboard

Usually, a new letter or diacritical mark in the texts I wrote, appears in the first or last word of the text for emphasis.

Below is another example of a text containing the diacritical marks segol and shva (shva na) which in this text represent the same sound [e]. This was done to strengthen or confirm the understanding of two different diacritical marks both expressing the sound [e]. This text was created during a conversation I had in class. The topic of conversation was about discovering good things around us. The conversation took place after reading the book "Good People" by Naomi Shemer.

In the early stages, I gave titles to the texts, as I also did here. The title contains a statement of awareness of the theme and focus of the story. It is advisable to teach children to give a title to the text in the initial stages (Habib 2021, p. 104).

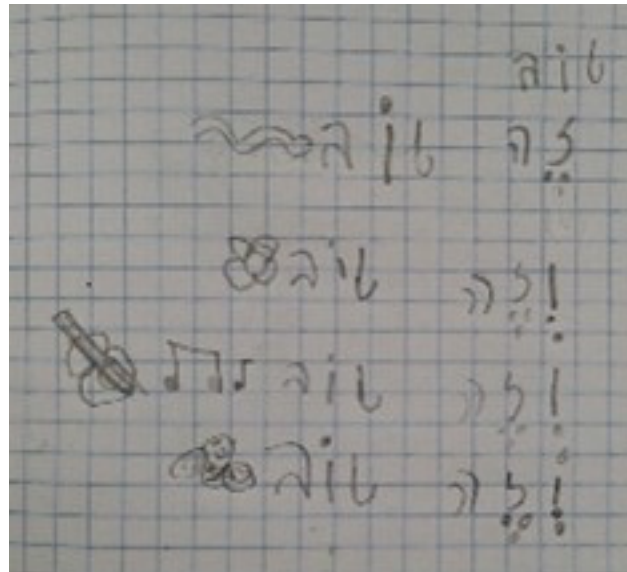
Tov (good)

Ze tov (that's good)  [sea]

Ve-ze tov (and that's good)  [flower]

Ve-ze tov (and that's good)  [music]

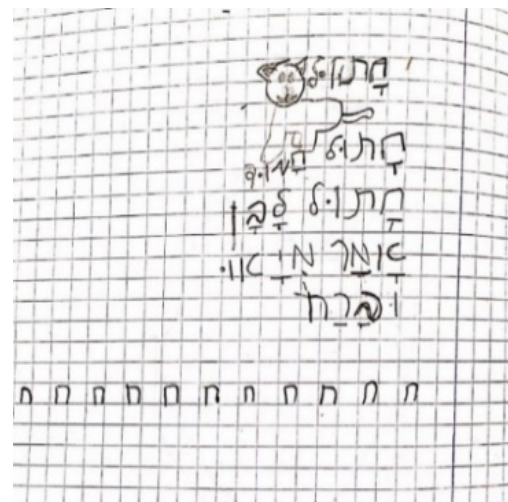
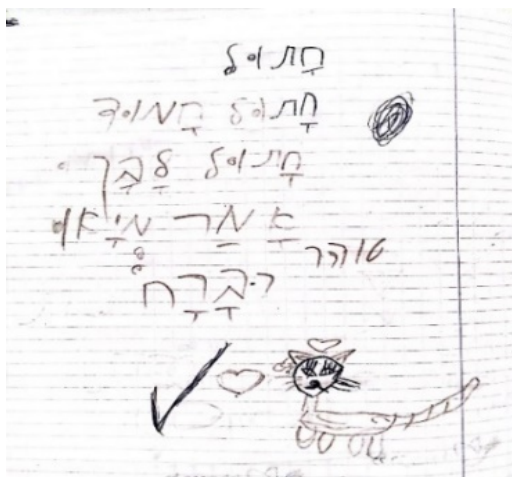
Ve-ze tov (and that's good)  [smile]



Other examples of a text about a cat based on learning the letter Ch (chet). The text title is "Cat". Text content: *Cute cat. A white cat said meow and ran away.*

Here are examples from the notebooks of two pupils who copied the text from the board and added the drawings.

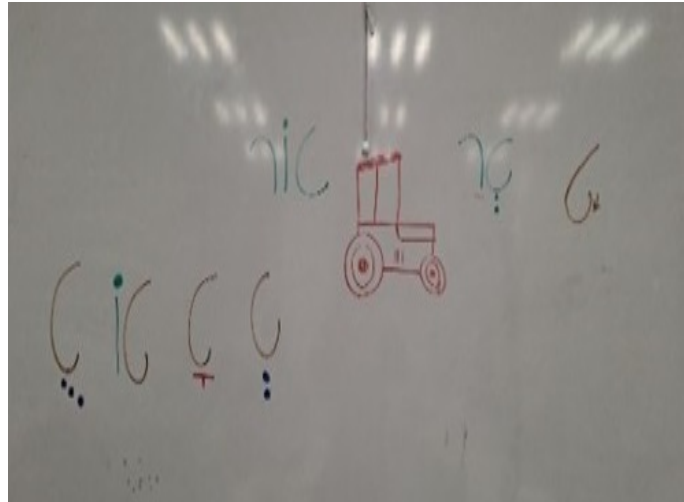
Gefen, 7 years old



The texts were always accompanied by drawings. The drawings had both a didactic and an aesthetic function (Nevo 2007, p. 143). At the beginning of the year, I asked a high school student, Bella Klaim, who helped the children in the classroom, create drawings on the blackboard, which she did successfully. Later, I asked the children to first draw on the blackboard in front of the whole class, and then in their notebooks. They happily did so.

Sometimes, it is possible to write a word without a letter that has not yet been learned. If the children are given a chance to fill in the missing letter through the drawing, they will manage to do this successfully.

For example, the word “tractor” (traQtor – the transliteration) was written with a drawing in the middle of the word to represent the letter Q (kof) which the children had not yet learnt. The drawing, which conveys the meaning of the word, is located where the letter C (Q) was supposed to be.



In the photograph, the drawing completes the letter C (Q) that is missing

These short texts are designed to practice reading and also writing through copying from the board. These texts are my own compositions, often in the form of pyramid sentences. In this way, the children can repeat the same words in their reading and their writing.

The children learned letters at the rate of one letter or one diacritical mark per week. After about sixteen weeks, the children were already able to recognize almost all the diacritical marks and half of the letters of the alphabet, and how to connect them.

In the initial stages, children were asked to write in a squared notebook to help them learn to keep spaces between words and to write the letters in the same size. I did this on the recommendation of Dr. Orna Davidi Bareli from Levinsky College. I would like to mention, with gratitude, Dr. Davidi Bareli, who taught me so many important things.

4. THE PLACE OF THE STORY

The story reading phase took place at the end of the process of learning a new letter or diacritical mark (vowel). Many of the stories were from the "Pajama Library" series which has been designed to encourage reading. The series also includes recommendations for activities after the story is read. When choosing a story, I also considered the words that appear in the title of the story. I searched for books in the series which had titles containing a word beginning with a letter that I had just taught the children. I also chose stories from outside the series. To teach the letter T (tet), I chose the story "The Tractor in the Sandbox" by Meir Shalev. After reading the story, I had a conversation in class about the story, with the children's feelings and thoughts at the center. For example, after reading the story, the children were asked to say where they would like to go on the tractor. Who would they like to visit on this tractor journey? The children were invited to stand up and make themselves into the shape of the tractor. During the "ride" we made stops according to the imaginary destinations that the children chose for themselves.

Reading a story provides children with linguistic tools as well as aesthetic pleasure. It gives them a structured world that they can imitate in their speech.

5. ACCELERATION PROCESSES WITHIN THE NEW “ROSE AND CAMEL” APPROACH



This image was created by AI Canva

To speed up the learning rate and to begin reading and writing expressions and sentences as soon as possible, I chose to do two things.

First of all, I teach the letter R (resh) before its alphabetical order to enable a much greater variety of words for use in reading and writing, and to teach the writing of several letters whose written form is based on the written form of the letter R, according to Chaya Kushner's method.

I explain to the children that the letter R has a special character. It is a letter that ‘jumps ahead’. I use an image from ‘The Donkey Song’ as a metaphor for an Israeli pioneer – always moving forward, which is performed by the group known as ‘The Roosters’.

I tell the children that the letter R always tries to be at the beginning, as opposed to its correct alphabetical place, which is towards the end.

The children are impressed by the special nature of the letter R. They quickly learn this letter followed by another five letters, the writing of which is based on the form of the letter R (resh): B (bet), H (he), Ch (chet), Q (qof), T (tav). These letters are learnt in their alphabetical order. Kushnir calls this group of letters ‘**rainbow letters**’, because the Hebrew written letter R resembles the shape of a rainbow.

In addition, I chose to **construct words using the letters with meanings that I invented**. So, for example, the next four letters of the alphabet, Z (zayin), Ch (chet), T (tet), Y (yod), were connected to create the name of a bird. I brought a bird puppet to the class and the children were introduced to it as Zachety. The children listened to a story I made up about the bird, Zachety, who came to us from India and brought with it the culture of its country.

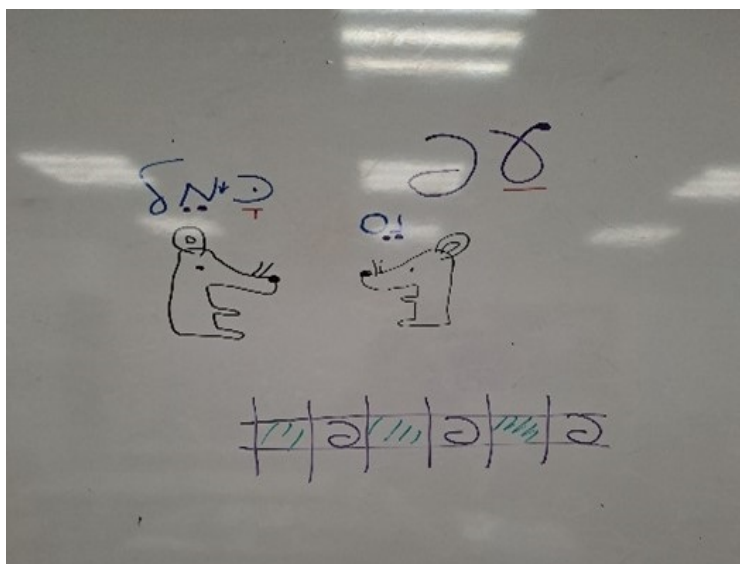
I showed a video clip of Indian music and dancing to the children, and they were invited to dance like the women dancers in the video. I burned Indian incense made from natural ingredients, to reinforce the feeling of another culture being brought into the classroom.

The bird named Zachety accompanied us throughout the following lessons and encouraged the children to learn the letters that made up its name. At the end of the lesson, the bird gave compliments to each child, individually. In this way they learnt four new letters.

To learn the remaining letters, I used two mice puppets (the idea of using mouse figures I borrowed from the well-known Aesop's fable). The city mouse was given the name Kalem and the village mouse was given the name Nes. This gave us the next five letters, K (kaf) L (lamed), M (mem), N (nun), S (samekh), which were then learned in their alphabetical order.

After the children learned the letters that make up the names of the mice, I taught them to say "Hello friend" in the 'language of mice'. These words were composed from the last letters of the alphabet, Ayin

(a silent letter), P (peh), Tz (tsadi), Q (qof), R (resh), Sh (shin), T (tav). For these invented words, I chose the vowel sounds that are identical in sound to words that exist in the Hebrew language and have the same meaning. I introduced the puppets through games in class so that the children felt that they were learning from the mice. The two mice puppets talked to each other and had conversations with the children in the classroom.



A drawing on the blackboard of the two mice with their names written above them

I call my method **‘The Rose and Camel method’** because the letter R (resh) was learned out of its alphabetical order and was introduced to children for the first time as part of the word "vered" (**rose**). In addition, the children made at least two ‘leaps’ forward in learning the alphabet. Once in the sequence of letters that make up the name of the bird, and the second time in the sequence of letters that make up the names of the mice and their speech. These ‘leaps forward’ I imagine as the two humps on a camel's back.

6. RESULTS

Due to the different starting levels of the children in the classroom, learning to read and write was challenging for everyone. Even the children who already knew letters in print still did not know how to connect them to syllables and words, nor did they know how to write the letters.

By the end of the first school year, all the children were able to read printed letters and to write the written Hebrew letters. More than this, they knew how to read fluently short, simple stories.

7. SUMMARY

Teaching the Hebrew alphabet to young children using this new approach is effective because it allows children to achieve significant results comparatively quickly. The "Rose and Camel" approach shows that it is possible to try new ways of effectively teaching children to both read and write, and to move on to more advanced and challenging stages rapidly.

Classroom learning took place based on the principle of "the child in the center". The children were invited to express themselves on various topics and the teacher created texts based on conversations with the children, short texts that were used to teach first reading and then writing. The older (6-7 years

old) children became involved in writing the texts towards the end of the year. All the children read the texts, copied them from the blackboard and decorated their work with their drawings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Ms. Susan Torfstein for proof-reading the article and the encouragement I received from her during the writing of the article.

To my friend, Vera Novitsky, for reading the article and her valuable comments, and for the drawings that she created at my request.

To Daniel Novitsky, Vera's son, for editing the photographs of the children's work, and, with the help of Canva, created the Camel and Rose picture.

And last, but by no means the least, a big 'thank you' to my dear mother who always encourages me to take on new challenges.

REFERENCES

Habib, T 2021, 'Stories and Stimulation of Writing', in A. Guberman, T. Habib, R. Yifat, *Writing in Early Childhood*, The MOFET Institute, Tel Aviv, pp. 89-124 (Hebrew).

Kushnir, Ch 1995, *Guide to Evaluation and Treatment of Handwriting Disorders*, Achai Publishers, Jerusalem (Hebrew).

Mervosh, S 2023, 'Kids Can't Read: The Revolt That Is Taking on the Education Establishment', *The New York Times*, 16 April, p. 18, viewed 31 May 2023, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/16/us/science-of-reading-literacy-parents.html>>.

Nevo, N 2007, 'The Teaching of Hebrew as an Additional Language in Early Childhood in the Diaspora: Examples from the "Nizanim" Program', in N. Nevo and E. Olshtain (eds.), *The Hebrew Language in the Era of Globalization*, The Hebrew University Magnes Press and the Melton Centre for Jewish Education, Jerusalem, *Studies in Jewish Education*, vol. 12, pp. קל"ה–קמ"ו=135-146 (Hebrew).

Nir, R 1974, *The Instruction of Hebrew as Mother-Tongue at High-Schools*, Amichay, Tel Aviv (Hebrew).

Yalon, D 2019, *The Child at the End of the Pencil: Handwriting as a Multidisciplinary Challenge*, The MOFET Institute, Tel Aviv (Hebrew).