About *Yours Truly: Hebrew from the Heart of Texas (בינינו)*

Yours Truly: Hebrew from the Heart of Texas (בינינו) is a set of listening-comprehension units, intended for use with students at the college level. Some units may be useful for high school students, but the set is certainly not intended for younger age groups. At the University of Texas at Austin these units are delivered over the course of two semesters, about thirty weeks total, at the end of which all students are expected to function at the intermediate-low level of proficiency as defined by ACTFL and some may function at higher levels. The set was loosely designed to supplement the local curriculum, with Esther Raizen's *Modern Hebrew for Beginners* and *Modern Hebrew for Intermediate Students* at its core. It can be used independently of that curriculum, with the understanding that it is not meant to function as a primary text.

All *Yours Truly* units are posted in PDF and MP3 formats as open-access materials. The texts, sound files and links to exercises and related vocabulary games (flashcards, matching, and concentration) are available at http://laits.utexas.edu/hebrew/yours-truly.

Yours Truly is structured in twenty units. Each unit offers an episode from the lives of two fictional University of Texas students: Ruth, who grew up in Israel and came to the US with her parents, and Yoni, an American who studied Hebrew in Israel and in the US. The recorded voices indeed belong to Alina Gitnik, who grew up in Israel, and to Philip Zhakevich, who grew up in the US.

All characters appearing in *Yours Truly* and the situations they describe are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, or situations, is purely coincidental.

Each unit begins with a pre-listening activity ("Before you start") which is mostly mechanical in nature: Students are exposed to ten or so keywords from the text, and are asked to interact with these words and with the text as a whole while working through two online drag-and-drop exercises in our Humpty-Dumpty portal. In these exercises students are presented with a sound file and a parallel written text that is scrambled at the word, sentence, or paragraph level: Their task is to reorganize the segments of the written text and reorder them to match the sound file (or, to use Humpty-Dumpty terms, "put it together again"). The keywords call attention to the gist of the text, and while it may take three weeks or so for students to get used to working with texts that are not available to them word-by-word, they eventually adjust to performing tasks that require some guesswork and reliance on the broad context of the text in addition to the keywords. A final glossary, organized alphabetically to correspond to the words included in the recorded texts, may help students who master sound-letter correspondences.

Following the initial interaction with the text through the portal, students are presented with eight to twelve exercises in which they are asked to respond to various problems based on the unit text. As they work through the exercises, they must listen to the text a number of times—at no point are they presented with the text as a whole in written form. Some students may, inevitably, try to piece together the full text in writing by going through the various exercises and comparing their components, or by utilizing the Humpty Dumpty portal. This ultimately proves to be more difficult than listening to the sound file, which is the core of the exercises. Our experience shows that students figure out very quickly that going through the exercises in a straight-forward manner is the best way to proceed, and that interacting with the same information in different ways and from different angles is the key to successful retention of vocabulary and internalization of sentence structures.

Having gone through a set of problems that require identification of individual words, phrases, and sentences, all while listening to the sound file, students are asked to rephrase some of the text elements, respond to questions about the text, identify its main ideas, and, finally, apply some of the situations present in the text to their own experiences and add an element to the story line—write about a character, a prop, or a situation, or add a drawing. With all this done outside of the classroom in preparation for a class discussion, students come to class ready to interact with each other based on the broad framework of the unit text and the developing saga of the main characters and their different family members and friends. The class discussion serves as the post-listening activity, and while the degree of preparation may naturally vary among students, every effort should be made to highlight the dependence of class activity on the work done in preparation. This, we find, is one of the greatest challenges of the intensive model that we have adopted in UT Austin, as students are more familiar with the model that assigns homework based on class activity, not the other way round.

Some of the topics included in the units may be sensitive—illness, depression, layoffs, dissatisfaction with school, struggling with religion, heritage, and politics—these are good conversation generators, but teachers should take great care to make sure that the discussion does not bring about distress or make students exceedingly uncomfortable. Activities most suitable for post-listening are class discussions, role-play in pairs or groups, staged monologs (individual students take the role of a character and speak as that character), "pro and con" debates on a topic, and discussions about the visuals of the unit itself and those created by the students as part of the class-preparation activity.

Below you will find references to the various exercise categories. Each entry provides the instructions given to the students as they engage with the exercise, and a note explaining the main purpose of the

exercises in this category and the logic behind their design. The headphones icon indicates exercises in which students are expected to listen to the sound file continuously as they fill out the blanks; for the other exercises they can listen to the sound file as a whole or in part before they start working, or work without the sound file altogether.

Exercise Categories

Fill in the missing words:

(instructions) As you listen to the sound file, identify the missing words, and fill in the blanks in the text below, following the example.

This exercise focuses students' attention on verbs, prepositions and other particles, time expressions, adjectives, adverbs and other words that can be organized conceptually based on their grammatical or lexical function. It draws attention to the words themselves, to their placement within the sentence, and also to some grammatical features (e.g., agreement). In some of the exercises we give more specific statements regarding what the student is listening for (e.g., you are listening for the personal pronouns הוא, היא, הם).

Fill in the missing words:

(instructions) As you listen to the sound file, identify the missing words and fill in the blanks in the text below following the example. The omissions have no particular focus—they are mechanical (every fifth word).

This exercise uses a cloze-like technique. Every fifth word is omitted from the text, and students are asked to listen to the sound file and fill in the missing words. The exercise focuses less on comprehension and more on close listening and adjusting to the flow of the spoken text.

Reorganization/Paraphrasing:

(Instructions) In this exercise you will be paraphrasing the text and reorganizing its information. First listen to the sound file. Then read the statements below, and fill in the blanks, drawing your information from the text.

In this exercise, students are asked to reorganize the content provided in the sound file, demonstrating comprehension of both the broad context and the text details. The information is re-stated in a different

way, and the student is asked to leave the comfort of the text as it is presented and process the information in an alternative manner.

Correct/Incorrect:

(instructions) Having listened to the sound file, read the following statements. For each one indicate whether it is correct (✓) or incorrect (✖) by circling the appropriate sign. In the set there is one (and only one) statement which may or may not be correct. We can make an educated guess, but we cannot tell for sure based on the information provided in the sound file—for this statement select the question mark. (**?**)

The exercise forces the student to engage in depth with the text and employ higher-order thinking skills. The possibility of one ambiguous statement (only one in each set) adds an extra challenge and forces a deeper comprehension level. Unit 5 introduces the exercise with correct or incorrect statements only, and the ambiguous statements are introduced as of unit 6.

What statement best describes the text as a whole?

(instructions) All these topics are present in our text. Circle the one that best describes the text as a whole.

This exercise forces the student to engage in depth with the text and identify the main issue presented, which depends on the comprehension of the manner in which various text components relate to one another. The exercise requires the analysis and synthesis of the information provided, and calls for the utilization of higher-order thinking skills.

This text is about all of these, except…

(instructions) Three of the statements below pertain to the text. The fourth does not, although it is very close and may look like it does. Identify the statement that DOES NOT pertain to the text.

This exercise forces the student to engage in depth with the text and isolate the different segments of content and the way they relate to one another. The students create a mental outline for the text, which is necessary for the exclusion of the non-relevant statement, again employing higher-order thinking skills.

In one word:

(instructions) Fill in the blanks: Provide **one** word that will complete the statements, relating them to the text.

This exercise focuses attention on the main points of the text, as students are asked to distill the information to its basics and be concise in their expression choices.

Identify parallel sentences:

(instructions) In this exercise you are given sentences that mimic sentences from the text. Listen to the sound file, and then identify the sentences in the text for which a parallel sentence is given below, following the example.

The student is given paraphrased statements, and is asked to go back to the text and identify the original statement, which cannot be done unless the student comprehends both the paraphrase and the original text and has a good portion of the sound file internalized.

Direct and indirect speech:

(instructions) In this exercise the statement are given in direct or indirect speech. Direct speech implies a quote (e.g., Yoni: "Ruth has difficulties with her professors."), and indirect speech implies a report (e.g., Yoni says that Ruth has difficulties with her professors.) Using verbs like *say, tell, think*, or *ask*, provide the parallel indirect עקיף or direct ישיר speech version for each of the given sentences, so that each sentence appears in two versions, the way it does in the example.

The paraphrasing mechanism allows for substitutions of personal pronouns and verb forms and reinforces the use of subordination mechanisms, forcing the students to form complex sentences.

Matching:

(instructions) Match a word or phrase in the right-hand column with its opposite (or a very different parallel) in the left-hand column.

This exercise targets vocabulary retention.

In one sentence:

(instructions) Responding to the clue and completing the phrase below to form a full sentence, give an indication that you understand the situations in which such a phrase can be used. Your sentence should relate to your own experience, not to the text of this unit.

This exercise allows the student to relate to idioms and expressions (e.g., בדרך כלל...), using them in a context that is independent of the story line and applicable to personal experiences.

Join the story line—make up a character!

(instruction) Join the story line—make up a character! Write a couple of words/ sentences about the following: [person/item listed, e.g., Ruth's scooter, Lilach's pet]

This exercise provides an opportunity to expand the set of characters and situations within the context of the story line, serving as an enrichment activity for the class and as an indication of the student's comprehension of the larger context of the unit. In some cases students are asked to enhance a minor character that is already present in the text. In the early units they should use single words or very short sentences, but in later units they should become bolder in their statements.

Students conclude the preparation work with a drawing that pertains to the character or to the story line in general. These drawings, like the visuals included in this revised version of *Yours Truly*, represent my expectation for students who are visually literate, owning a "set of abilities that enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media."[1] The *Yours Truly* illustrations present opportunities for discussing the cultural, aesthetic, ethical, and technical components of the images as stand-alone materials or as materials contextualized by the unit text. Such discussions may take place in English early in the course of training, but move into Hebrew already during the first semester.

Illustrations and Visuals

The illustrations are a combination of hand digital-drawn art and digital photo-collage. Characters and objects were drawn and colored using Adobe Illustrator; the background environments were created using copyright-free digital photos; character drawings, object drawings and photo-backgrounds were collaged for scenes using Adobe Photoshop.

Liberal Arts Instructional Technology Services (LAITS) Student Technology Assistants worked with me on the digital visualization of *Yours Truly* characters, objects and scenes. Over the span of a few semesters, our group of student artists rendered characters, objects, and story scenes by interpreting written descriptions and scenarios that I had provided. While the illustrations by-and-large represent interpretations generated by artists who are in the same age group as the intended users, I used some

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[1] ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education,
http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/visualliteracy

of their raw materials to create four additional scenarios (units 11, 16, 18, and 19)—I suspect that users will be quick to recognize the difference between the two sets of illustrations, which, I hope, will provide an additional opportunity for analysis and discussion.

Esther Raizen

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