

# Through Israel Connect, Tutors Bridge Language Gap For Teens

By Matt Silver (<https://www.jewishexponent.com/author/msilver/>) - October 22, 2019

Want to make a difference in an Israeli child's life? All it takes is a computer, an internet connection and the ability to speak English.

Founded in 2011 by Sarah Gordon, a Canadian schoolteacher, Israel Connect (<http://www.israelconnect.today/>) has grown from a grassroots network of mostly Canadian English-speaking teachers, tutoring Israeli students in English during free periods and days off, to an international organization with volunteers worldwide.

"It's been quite the ride," said Gordon, who left teaching about five years ago to commit herself full time to Israel Connect, now a global nonprofit that makes higher education more accessible to Israeli students from traditionally underserved communities by improving their English language skills.

"In Israel, English proficiency and access to English is a very strong economic indicator," Gordon explained. "And there's a very heavy emphasis placed on English proficiency in order to enter university."

Not surprisingly, wealthier kids have a significant leg up when it comes to getting into competitive Israeli universities. Israel Connect tries to bridge the gap for less wealthy students through English language immersion.



*On a recent trip to Israel, Stuart Bogom, right, met an Israel Connect student, left, and that student's virtual tutor. (Courtesy of Stuart Bogom)*

What that requires, however, is a legion of English-speaking mentors — there are 500 of them right now — each willing to conduct a weekly 45-minute web-based tutoring session during which student and teacher converse in English. The teachers follow a specialized curriculum that Israel Connect developed with guidance from Israel’s Ministry of Education. For example, the ministry releases a list of 400 to 500 English words that they expect students to know for the Bagrut exams, which are the prerequisite for higher education in Israel. Israel Connect has incorporated these words into their curriculum.

But it’s not about creating a memorization-heavy burden for the Israeli students.

“We’re not here to take a stick and hammer the students over the head with grammar,” Gordon said.

The Israel Connect curriculum, instead of being prescriptive, is designed to engage students, instill confidence and provide the context for a meaningful cross-cultural relationship to develop between mentor and protégé.

Philadelphian Stuart Bogom can speak to the gratifying nature of such a relationship. Bogom, who lives in Mt. Airy, was looking for a way to connect — no pun intended, he insisted — with Israel and found that tutoring with Israel Connect was a way to do that with almost no barriers to entry.

Bogom, who’s traveled to Israel several times, does speak a little Hebrew, although he said his student’s English was a good deal better than his Hebrew is.

“It was very clear that my job was not to learn Hebrew,” Bogom added. “My job was to help with English.”

And while you might not think that conversation between a 64-year-old IT professional and an Israeli teenager would necessarily zoom along, the pair found that they had plenty to talk about.

"He would come up with these slang expressions. ... It always shocked me that he would know them," said Bogom of his student, Omer, who'd picked up a fair amount of English from watching TV.

Omer, Bogom suggested, was a textbook case of a student who didn't need to be beaten over the head with drills or constantly tested; he just needed to gain some more confidence with the language.

"It wasn't that I was really teaching so much grammar," Bogom said. "I would correct him when he made mistakes, and I would give him some vocabulary when he was searching for the word, but mostly it was an opportunity for him to stretch the muscle."

The experience was so pleasant for Bogom that he decided to pop in on some of Israel Connect's students when he recently visited Israel. But this time Bogom was on the other side of the screen, as he'd caught them in the middle of their English lessons.

"They were talking to their mentors; they'd bring their laptops over and introduce me to their mentors," Bogom recalled. "It was really very sweet, and it was fun for me to get more of a sense of them, in a somewhat different way."

Still, a good time is one thing. What about results?

Gordon, an avowed data-wonk with an advanced degree in finance and data, is compelled to curb her enthusiasm, since survey data will not be available until later this year. However, "anecdotal feedback" has been encouraging.

"Ninety-five percent of students have received over 90% on their English proficiency exams," she reported. "So we've really moved the needle for these kids."

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