Investigation of the Reference Level Description for Arabic Proficiency Tests in Indonesia

Hikmah Maulani¹*, Nur Muthmainah², Shofa Musthofa Khalid¹, Nalahuddin Saleh⁴, Ijlal Hazief Taufik⁵

¹²³⁴ Arabic Education Study Program Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia
⁵ German Education Study Islamic University of Madinah, Saudi Arabia

Article Information:
Received : February 18, 2024
Revised : April 12, 2024
Accepted : May 16, 2024

Keywords:
Arabic Test; CEFR; Reference Level Description; Test Proficiency

Abstract: This article aimed to map the reference level description of the Arabic Language Proficiency Test in Indonesia with an adaptation based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In this context, the article focused on developing reference level descriptions to assess Arabic language proficiency in Indonesia. A qualitative approach was used through document analysis. Evaluation questions on the Ikhtibarat Maharah Lughah Arabiyah (Imalah) test were carried out as the data source as well as the CEFR guiding concept issued by Council of Europe. This research was carried out according to the design, namely starting with collecting data in the form of documents related to the CEFR and Arabic language tests, then the data collected was reduced and presented in the form of tables, diagrams or narratives and at the end there were conclusions drawn. The findings of this study reinforced the research objectives by demonstrating that the test includes reference level descriptions that are international standards. This assisted in assessing and understanding the extent to which an individual has mastered the Arabic language. In other words, these findings confirmed that the implementation of international reference level descriptions in the test supports the achievement of the established research objectives, which was to assist in assessing the language proficiency of individuals in Arabic. By adopting the CEFR, this not only helped to measure language proficiency easier, but also facilitated a better understanding of the level of Arabic competency required for educational, employment or general communication purposes.

How to cite:

Introduction

The development of language proficiency tests was carried out by the United States in the 1950s by performed a series of measurement initiatives by the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the U.S. Department of State to Diplomats and Foreign Service officers. As things progressed, in a 1963 study of teacher education in America, President
Conant found that only a handful of states used tests for certification. Then, the universities were recommended to conduct language proficiency tests as teacher certification qualifications. Nowadays, the use of tests has grown not only for teachers but also for business, health and other aspects.

As with other foreign languages, Arabic in Indonesia has a role apart from being a religious language (the majority are Muslim). Arabic is experiencing development, namely as the language of education and also the language of industry, including tourism. Based on observations in 3 universities (UM-UNS-UNHAS) in 2022-2023, it was concluded that a person's competence in Arabic requires accurate certification, for various reasons: first, proficiency tests help higher education institutions in selecting students who have reliable Arabic language skills. Second, several jobs or careers may require Arabic language skills, such as diplomacy, international trade, and work in Arabic-speaking countries. Third, Arabic proficiency tests are an effective tool in assessing an individual's ability to speak Arabic, helping to create internationally recognized standards and supporting the development of relevant linguistic competencies in various sectors.

The research background for the Arabic Language Proficiency Test in Indonesia with an adaptation based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is to fulfill the need for a standard and comprehensive assessment tool regarding Arabic language skills in Indonesia. As interest in learning Arabic and the need for competence in this language in various contexts increase, the development of reliable and relevant proficiency tests becomes increasingly important. By adopting the CEFR framework, this research was responsive to international standards for assessing language proficiency levels. CEFR provides a clear and measurable description of reference levels, enabling a more objective assessment of listening, speaking, reading and

---

writing skills in Arabic. This provides clarity and consistency in assessing participants' level of Arabic language skills, both in educational settings and professional needs.  

The adaptation of the Arabic Language Proficiency Test also encourages the integration of sustainability principles contained in the 4th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), namely Quality Education. By designing tests that support the achievement of SDG 4, this research contributed to improving the quality of education in Indonesia, especially in the context of Arabic language learning. It was expected that this test could be an effective instrument for measuring the achievement of Arabic language competency in accordance with international standards, creating the basis for better quality education and in line with future demands, starting with mapping the Reference Level Description.

A previous research concluded that it was necessary to have indicators of Arabic language proficiency based on CEFR standards. Another study was conducted and found that the CEFR had not sparked significant changes in curriculum development or the complete overhaul of language tests. Other research was reviewed that the emphasis of CEFR on assessment had drawn criticism regarding its suitability for learning models and concerned about its use as a tool for centralization and standardization; and affirms that proficiency tests directly influence foreign language learning. Thus, other studies bridge findings to learning curricula showed that CEFR is more widely used at the macro level, namely for curriculum development and proficiency testing and textbook design, compared to the micro level, namely to support the teaching and learning process. The field of teaching Arabic as a foreign language is still lagging behind at both levels.

The gap analysis in this study involves exploring the reference level descriptions for Arabic proficiency tests in Indonesia, focusing on their status as international standards and their impact on language competence assessment. The uniqueness of this research lies in its specific approach to the Indonesian context and the implementation of international reference level descriptions in Arabic proficiency testing. This underscores

---


the difference of this study from others that may not specifically highlight these aspects in the same context.

Thus, this test can support improving the quality of education in Indonesia, especially in learning and developing Arabic language skills. This Arabic Language Proficiency Test is an important instrument for assessing the achievement of SDG 4, ensuring that education provided in Indonesia can create a generation capable of communicating effectively in Arabic, in accordance with international standards as measured by CEFR. Document analysis may have been conducted to achieve the main objectives of the study. This involves reviewing official documents, literature, and other relevant materials related to the reference level descriptions for Arabic proficiency tests in Indonesia. The process aimed to deeply understand the international standards applied in the context of Arabic language testing in Indonesia and how these reference level descriptions have been interpreted and implemented in testing practices at universities.

Methods

A qualitative approach was used with document analysis methods. Qualitative research was highly interpretative and encompassed various methodologies developed within different academic fields that were affiliated with various epistemological frameworks, such as focus groups (emancipatory), intrinsic and instrumental case studies, theory, ethnography, autoethnography, and phenomenological approaches.

Document analysis is one of the methods used in research to examine and interpret data contained in written documents. In a research on the application of the CEFR standard Arabic Language Proficiency Test in higher education in Indonesia, document analysis can be carried out by: Firstly, analyzing policy documents and official guidelines issued by higher education institutions and the government. Secondly, gathering and analyzing relevant literature that has been published regarding the teaching and learning of Arabic language at the higher education level, as well as about the implementation of CEFR standardized tests in the context of higher education in Indonesia. Thirdly, reviewing administrative documents such as study programs, syllabi,
or course materials related to the teaching of Arabic language in universities. This
document analysis can provide information on the extent to which the curriculum and
teaching have integrated CEFR standardized tests.

The data sources include the *Ikhtibarat Maharah Lughah Arabiyah* (Imalah),\(^1\) which is a proficiency test for the Arabic language developed by the evaluation team of the Arabic Language Education Study Program at the Indonesian University of Education, with levels ranging from A1 to A2. Additionally, other data sources include documents from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) from Europe, and the curriculum of Indonesian higher education institutions, which have different but relevant characteristics as research data sources in the context of implementing CEFR standardized Arabic language proficiency tests in Indonesia.

The design of document analysis research to examine\(^1\) the characteristics of CEFR documents from Europe and the Indonesian higher education curriculum can involve the following steps: first, identification of source documents; second, document classification; third, data collection (using systematic recording techniques); fourth, data analysis; fifth, data interpretation.

**Results and Discussion**

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a framework used to assess and describe a person's language proficiency in foreign languages, including Arabic.\(^1\) CEFR is designed to be used in various language teaching and learning contexts, as well as in various types of proficiency tests.\(^1\) This makes

CEFR a flexible tool\textsuperscript{16} that can be adapted to meet the specific needs of various language teaching programs and objectives.

The specific needs mentioned, such as programs or language teaching objectives oriented towards professional goals, may require proficiency tests that emphasize specific language skills related to particular fields of work. For example, in Arabic language education programs, proficiency tests may emphasize vocabulary and communicative situations. Academic-oriented programs, such as social sciences or humanities, may require proficiency tests that assess students' abilities to read, understand, and analyze complex academic texts in Arabic. The concept map of the CEFR test in the context of learning can be seen in the following figure:

\begin{center}
\textbf{Figure 1.} The Representation of The CEFR Language Use and Learning Model
\end{center}

From the figure 1, the analysis found understanding the specific needs of various study programs and language teaching objectives, a proficiency test\textsuperscript{17} can be designed and adjusted to reflect language skills relevant to their usage context. This helps to ensure that the test can provide an accurate portrayal of students' language abilities in meeting their needs in academic, professional, or other contexts. Although CEFR is not

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Jesus Garcia Laborda and Miguel Fernandez Alvarez, “Multilevel Language Tests: Walking into the Land of the Unexplored,” \textit{Language Learning and Technology} 25, no. 2 (2021): 1–25.
\end{itemize}
directly a test, it provides a framework\textsuperscript{18} that can be used to develop proficiency tests that align with CEFR.\textsuperscript{19}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. CEFR Characteristic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indicator</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test instrument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rating scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility in Contexts of Use</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 is showing the table describes indicators and descriptions of CEFR aspects in a proficiency test. It provides a standardized framework for assessing language proficiency across different languages and contexts. Adjusting the Arabic Language Proficiency Test to the Indonesian National Work Competency Standards (SKKNI) is an important step to ensure relevance and accuracy in assessing Arabic language proficiency in the Indonesian context. By adjusting the Arabic language proficiency test to the Indonesian National Work Competency Standards (SKKNI), we can ensure that the test provides an accurate portrayal of an individual's Arabic language skills according to the needs of the job market and specific professions in Indonesia. The Indonesian National Work Competency Standards (SKKNI) for Arabic Language Education serve as


7 Jurnal Al Bayan: Jurnal Jurusan Pendidikan Bahasa Arab, 16 (1): 1-15 (2024)
guidelines that depict the competencies expected from individuals involved in the field of Arabic language education. Below is the concept map of adjusting SKKNI and the Arabic language proficiency test.

**Table 2. SKKNI Indicator**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Test Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify the competencies, skills, and knowledge expected of an Arabic language educator.</td>
<td>High mastery of the Arabic language, including vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and appropriate linguistic conventions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic Communication Skills</td>
<td>Arabic language educators are expected to have good communication skills in Arabic, both orally and in writing, so that they can teach and interact with students smoothly and effectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Arabic Culture</td>
<td>An Arabic language educator is expected to have a good understanding of Arab culture, including the values, traditions, social norms and customs that influence the use of Arabic in a cultural context.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 describes the Indonesian National Work Competency Standards (SKKNI) in Arabic language education covering various concepts and competencies expected from teaching staff and students in this field. The Description of Reference Level Descriptor (RLD) in a test refers to guidelines that determine an individual's language proficiency level based on internationally recognized standards, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This description provides an overview of what is expected from individuals at each language proficiency level.

A Reference Level Descriptor (RLD) typically includes descriptions for each proficiency level, ranging from basic to advanced. These descriptions may encompass the following aspects: Speaking Skills: Description of an individual's ability to speak in various communicative contexts, including the ability to articulate thoughts, participate in conversations, deliver presentations, and interact with others orally. Listening Skills: Description of an individual's ability to comprehend language spoken by others in

---


various contexts, including the ability to identify important information, understand the direction of conversations, and interpret the meaning of oral texts.

Reading Skills: Description of an individual's ability to comprehend written texts in various contexts, including the ability to identify main information, understand main ideas, interpret meaning, and connect information from different parts of the text.

Writing Skills: Description of an individual's ability to express thoughts and ideas in writing in various contexts, including the ability to organize thoughts, compose clear and coherent sentences, and convey messages accurately.

Sociocultural Competence: Description of an individual's ability to understand and appreciate cultural aspects and social contexts related to the language being studied, including social norms, cultural values, and communicative practices prevalent in the community of speakers.

In the context of Arabic language proficiency tests, at least the RDL formulations are mapped as follows (Tables 3, 4, 5), adapted accordingly Goethe-Institut-Gemeinsamer europäischer Referenzrahmen für Sprachen.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. CEFR Global Scale RLD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

areas. Able to express things easily and in harmony with familiar topics and areas of personal interest. Able to relate experiences and events, describe dreams, hopes and goals and provide reasons or brief explanations of plans and views.

Basic level  A2  Able to understand frequently used sentences and expressions related to very important areas (e.g., personal and family information, shopping, work, surrounding environment). Able to communicate in simple situations and daily routines involving simple and direct exchange of information about familiar and common things. Able to simply describe one's own background and education, the surrounding environment and matters related to urgent needs.

A1  Able to understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very simple sentences aimed at meeting important needs. Being able to introduce themselves and others as well as asking others questions about themselves - such as where they live, what kind of people they know or things they own - and being able to answer these kinds of questions. Able to communicate in a simple way if the other person speaks slowly and clearly and wants to help.

Based on table 3, it is explained that RDL (Reference Level Descriptions) formulations in the context of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) refer to reference level descriptions that provide an overview of the language skills expected at each level of language proficiency (for example, A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2). This RDL formulation helps in evaluating and understanding an individual's level of language competency.

Table 4. Coherence Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coherence</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>Able to make coherent sermons; using a variety of instruments of different structures and a wide spectrum of interfaces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Able to speak clearly, very fluently and well structure and shows that he has mastered structural and connecting instruments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Able to use a limited number of connectors to link his/her speech into a clear and cohesive article; Longer articles can be a bit erratic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>Able to connect a series of short, simple single elements into a cohesive linear expression. Using the number of <em>ismiyah</em> and <em>fi’liyah</em> in the context of written texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>Able to connect tarkib via simple connectors in a more complex number.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>Able to connect sentences and texts using simple connectors such as ‘and’ or ‘then’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on table 4, in the coherence test, learners are evaluated based on their ability to demonstrate a smooth transition between language levels, showing an understanding of increasingly complex language structures, vocabulary, and communicative tasks. Test items may include reading passages, listening exercises,
speaking tasks, and writing prompts that require learners to apply their language skills in a coherent and cohesive manner.

Table 5. Spectrum of CEFR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spectrum</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>Showing a lot of flexibility to formulate thoughts with a wide variety of linguistic material, to understand meaning more clearly or to highlight, differentiate or eliminate ambiguity. As well as having good knowledge in the use of idioms and lingua franca.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Having a wide spectrum of verbal expressions, from this spectrum he is able to choose the right series of sentences, so that he is able to express clearly and precisely about general, scientific, professional or holiday topics, without having to limit himself to what he wants to say.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Having a wide spectrum of verbal expressions so that he is able to speak using clear explanations or reports on themes that are mostly general in nature and is able to express his own point of view, not being obvious when looking for words and using several complex sentence structures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>Having enough language material to get along; sufficient vocabulary to be able to talk about topics such as family, hobbies and interests, work, travel and current events although sometimes hesitant and requiring help with paraphrasing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>Using basic sentence structures with memorized phrases, groups of words and short phrases and expressions so that you can exchange information in simple situations in everyday life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>Having a repertoire limited to words and phrases that refer to information about concrete people and situations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on table 5, the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) defines a spectrum of language proficiency levels, ranging from A1 to C2. Each level represents a different stage of language competence, with A1 being the lowest and C2 being the highest. Spectrum mapping in tests allows for a clear understanding of the various levels of proficiency within a language. This aids educators and assessors in identifying students' strengths and weaknesses and planning instruction accordingly to their proficiency levels. With spectrum mapping, we can effectively measure students' learning progress from the initial level to advanced levels. It is important to ensure that students continue to develop their language skills and achieve the targets that have been set.

Spectrum mapping assists in the development of coherent and structured learning materials. This allows instructors to design learning materials suitable for students' proficiency levels and gradually introduce more complex concepts according to their progress. Spectrum mapping and test coherence are also crucial in determining individuals' eligibility for various purposes, such as university admission, professional

---


---

certification, or participation in international exchange programs. A good test should effectively measure an individual's abilities and provide an accurate portrayal of their proficiency.  

Based on the explanation provided, the mapping of Reference Level Description (RLD) in Arabic language proficiency tests has important practical and empirical implications in the context of Arabic language teaching, learning, and assessment. The mapping of RLD helps test developers in designing more effective Arabic language proficiency tests. By better understanding the expected competencies at each language proficiency level, test developers can create more relevant and representative questions for each skill level. Additionally, mapping RLD enables Arabic language instructors to more accurately determine learning objectives and plan instruction according to students' proficiency levels. With a better understanding of what is expected at each skill level, instructors can develop curriculum and teaching materials that are adjusted to students' needs.

**Conclusion**

The Reference Level Descriptor (RLD) description serves as a vital tool in establishing precise and uniform benchmarks for individual language proficiency across various skill levels. Through RLDs, there is a clearer comprehension of the expected abilities at each language proficiency tier, spanning from fundamental to advanced levels. RLDs contribute to maintaining uniform expectations, offering educators, evaluators, and individuals themselves a comprehensive understanding of the objectives at each proficiency stage. This aids in crafting curricula, formulating teaching materials, and tailoring instruction to address students' requirements. Furthermore, RLDs facilitate impartial and consistent evaluation of language proficiency. By outlining specific skill expectations at each level, evaluators can utilize RLDs as a framework for more consistent language proficiency assessments. This enhances the accuracy of determinations regarding an individual's language proficiency level, whether for academic, professional, or other purposes. Thus, RLDs play a pivotal role in facilitating effective language teaching, learning, and assessment, fostering transparency and fairness.

in language learning and usage across diverse contexts.

Acknowledgment

This research was supported by the Research and Community Service Institute (LPPM) of Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia in 2024 for the research scheme of young lecturer coaching and affirmation.

Author Contributions Statement

HM and NM conducted a contrastive and comparative study between Arabic and European foreign languages taught in Indonesia. SF, NS and IH conducted a study on the Indonesian National Work Competency Standards (SKKNI) with a curriculum, followed by document analysis to generate conclusions mapping the Reference Level Descriptor (RLD) in Arabic language proficiency tests conducted at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia.

References


