

Transformation of Arabic Language Education: Aligning Cefr with the Needs of Holistic Islamic Literacy

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ABSTRAK: Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi potensi transformasi pendidikan Bahasa Arab melalui penyelarasan dengan Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), dengan fokus pada peningkatan literasi holistik—mencakup aspek linguistik, intelektual, dan spiritual—dalam kalangan komunitas Muslim. Meskipun CEFR telah menjadi tolok ukur global dalam pendidikan bahasa, penerapannya dalam pedagogi Bahasa Arab, terutama di institusi pendidikan Islam, masih terbatas dan tidak konsisten. Beberapa isu utama yang diidentifikasi meliputi pertentangan antara pendekatan komunikatif CEFR dan metode tradisional berbasis tata bahasa, kurangnya bahan ajar kontekstual, serta pengabaian terhadap dimensi spiritual dalam kurikulum. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui analisis dokumen terhadap jurnal akademik, laporan kebijakan pendidikan, dan studi pelaksanaan CEFR di kawasan Nusantara. Tujuannya adalah untuk menilai sejauh mana CEFR sesuai dengan kebutuhan linguistik dan pedagogis dalam pengajaran Bahasa Arab yang berbasis nilai dan budaya Islam. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan empat tema utama: (1) keselarasan CEFR dengan struktur linguistik Bahasa Arab; (2) pertentangan antara tujuan komunikatif dan pendekatan tradisional; (3) kurangnya bahan ajar kontekstual yang selaras dengan CEFR; dan (4) pengabaian dimensi literasi intelektual dan spiritual dalam desain kurikulum. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa efektivitas CEFR sangat bergantung pada sejauh mana ia dapat dikontekstualisasikan sesuai dengan epistemologi dan nilai-nilai pendidikan Islam. Rekomendasi mencakup pengembangan bahan ajar yang responsif secara budaya, modul pelatihan guru yang relevan, dan adaptasi kurikulum yang dapat mengintegrasikan CEFR dengan realitas pelajar Muslim. Penelitian ini berkontribusi dalam membangun pedagogi Bahasa Arab yang lebih menyeluruh dan berdampak.

Kata kunci: Pendidikan Bahasa Arab, Kerangka Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), Literasi, Pedagogi Islam.

ABSTRACT: This study explores the transformative potential of aligning Arabic language education with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), focusing on enhancing holistic literacy—comprising linguistic, intellectual, and spiritual aspects—among Muslim communities. While CEFR has become a dominant global benchmark in language education, its implementation within Arabic language pedagogy, especially in Islamic institutions, remains limited and inconsistent. Key issues identified include the tension between CEFR's communicative approach and grammar-based traditional instruction, a lack of contextualised teaching materials, and the neglect of spiritual dimensions in curriculum design. This qualitative study adopts document analysis as its method, drawing upon academic journals, education policy reports, and CEFR implementation studies in the Malay Archipelago. The aim is to assess the extent to which CEFR aligns with the linguistic and pedagogical needs of Arabic instruction in contexts shaped by Islamic values and culture. The findings reveal four major themes: (1) the compatibility of CEFR with the linguistic structure of Arabic; (2) the conflict between communicative goals and traditional teaching methods; (3) the lack of CEFR-aligned, contextualised teaching materials; and (4) the neglect of intellectual and spiritual literacy within curriculum design. The study concludes that CEFR's effectiveness depends largely on how well it is contextualised to align with Islamic epistemology and educational values. It recommends the development of culturally responsive teaching materials, relevant teacher training modules, and curriculum adaptations that meaningfully integrate CEFR with the realities of Muslim learners. This research contributes to building a more holistic and impactful Arabic language pedagogy.

Keywords: *Arabic Language Education, Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), Literacy, Islamic Pedagogy.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a dynamic and flexible entity that can be acquired through various approaches in line with current developments in linguistics and pedagogy. In recent decades, language education has undergone significant global transformation, particularly in its shift towards the adoption of standardized frameworks to ensure quality, transparency, and comparability in teaching and learning outcomes. Among the frameworks that have been developed are the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), which is widely used in the United States (ACTFL, 2012); the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB), applied in Canada to assess English language proficiency (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB), 2012); and the Global Scale of English (GSE) by Pearson Education (Mayor, n.d.). However, the most dominant and influential framework at the international level is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). CEFR has had a significant impact on language policy and curriculum design beyond its original European context (Council of Europe, 2020). Although it was initially developed for European languages, its flexibility and adaptability have enabled its widespread application across diverse linguistic settings, including the teaching of Arabic as a second or foreign language.

Arabic is not a foreign entity in the Malay Archipelago; rather, it has been deeply rooted in the region since the 7th century CE, playing a vital role in the religious, cultural, and geopolitical development of Muslim societies in the region. Traditionally, the teaching of Arabic in this context has been grounded in classical approaches inspired by the *ulama turāth* (scholarly heritage), with a strong emphasis on grammar and the comprehension of religious texts (Nurdianto & Azizi Ismail, 2020). However, in the contemporary era, the mastery of Arabic necessitates a more holistic pedagogical framework. Such a framework not only ensures communicative language competence but also fosters intellectual and spiritual literacy among learners.

In efforts to enhance the quality of Arabic language teaching and learning, international frameworks such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) have been identified as promising instruments for standardising and strengthening Arabic language instruction across diverse educational contexts (Musthofa, 2022). However, the implementation of CEFR in Arabic language education within majority-Muslim societies has received limited scholarly attention and is often carried out inconsistently. Several key challenges have been identified, including the phenomenon of diglossia—namely, the coexistence of spoken dialects and the formal standard variety of Arabic—which poses significant difficulties in applying CEFR comprehensively (Omar & Aldawsari, 2022; Saiegh-Haddad & Schiff, 2025). Moreover, tensions persist between the communicative goals of CEFR and the grammar-based traditional approach that dominates religious education settings (Mohammed et al., 2021). The shortage of instructional materials that align with CEFR and are culturally relevant to the needs of Muslim learners has also been highlighted (Mohammed et al., 2021). As a result, CEFR implementation frequently focuses exclusively on linguistic competencies, often overlooking broader aspects of literacy—particularly learners' abilities to engage meaningfully in religious life, academic discourse, and community participation. These identified challenges underscore the critical need to re-evaluate the transformation of Arabic language education through the CEFR framework, particularly in assessing its true potential to enhance the holistic literacy of the Muslim ummah—encompassing linguistic, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions

Accordingly, this study aims to explore the transformative potential of Arabic language education through its alignment with the CEFR framework, with a particular focus on enhancing the literacy level of the Muslim ummah. It critically examines the extent to which CEFR can be adapted to meet the linguistic, cultural, and spiritual needs of Arabic language learners, while addressing pedagogical gaps in curriculum design, assessment systems, and teacher training. By analysing current practices and identifying key implementation challenges, this study seeks to establish a conceptual and practical foundation for a more holistic, contextualised, and impactful Arabic language pedagogy. Ultimately, it contends that the CEFR, when contextually localised, offers considerable potential to strengthen identity formation and advance holistic literacy development across the Islamic world.

1.1 CEFR REFERENCE OF LANGUAGES

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is an international standard developed by the Council of Europe to provide a comprehensive framework for learning, teaching, and assessing language proficiency. First published in 2001, the CEFR defines six levels of language competence—A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2—ranging from beginner to proficient user (Council of Europe, 2020). It serves as a descriptive tool to outline what language learners can do at each level across four core skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The framework is not language-specific, making it adaptable to any language, including Arabic. CEFR has been widely adopted not only in Europe but also globally, influencing language curriculum design, teaching methodologies, assessment practices, and teacher training. Its focus on communicative competence, learner autonomy, and learning outcomes makes it a valuable reference point in contemporary language education. Importantly, the CEFR is designed to be flexible and culturally neutral, which allows it to be contextualised according to local needs and values (Council of Europe, 2020). This adaptability has led to its implementation in diverse educational contexts, including non-European and Islamic educational systems.

Table 1. CEFR level of proficiency (MOE, 2015)

Level	User Category	Main Features (Can Do Summary)
C2	Proficient User	Understands virtually everything; expresses precisely and differentiates finer meanings.
C1	Proficient User	Understands complex texts; uses language fluently and effectively for academic/professional purposes.
B2	Independent User	Understands main ideas of complex texts; interacts with native speakers with ease.
B1	Independent User	Understands main points of standard input; manages everyday situations and discusses personal topics.
A2	Basic User	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment).
A1	Basic User	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design using document analysis as the primary method. The purpose of this approach is to explore how the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) can be adapted and aligned with the needs of Arabic language education, particularly in enhancing holistic literacy; linguistic, intellectual, and spiritual within Muslim-majority contexts.

2.1 Data Sources

The sources analysed included peer-reviewed academic journals related to CEFR implementation, Arabic pedagogy, and Islamic education; official policy reports from ministries and educational bodies in countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia; CEFR implementation guidelines; and empirical studies conducted in Islamic educational institutions. These documents were purposively selected based on their relevance to the core focus of the study: CEFR's compatibility with Arabic, pedagogical conflicts, contextualisation of teaching materials, and the integration of intellectual and spiritual literacy in Arabic language education.

2.2 Data Analysis Procedure

The data were analysed thematically using a structured six-phase process: initial familiarisation with the data, familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of patterns and themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the analytical narrative. Four dominant themes emerged from the analysis, directly reflecting the study's objectives: (1) the linguistic compatibility of CEFR with Arabic; (2) the conflict between communicative goals and traditional approaches; (3) the lack of contextualised and CEFR-aligned teaching materials; and (4) the neglect of intellectual and spiritual literacy.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A document analysis involving academic journals, language education policies, and CEFR implementation reports has revealed four key themes that illustrate the potential and challenges in aligning Arabic language education with the CEFR framework, particularly within the context of Muslim-majority societies. The findings of this analysis address the research objectives by assessing the extent to which the CEFR is appropriate and effective in strengthening the three core dimensions of literacy: linguistic, intellectual, and spiritual.

1.1 The Compatibility of the CEFR with the Linguistic Needs of the Arabic Language

Although the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was developed within the context of European languages, it is inherently flexible and allows for adaptation to various other languages based on local contexts, including Arabic. The CEFR has been widely used as a benchmark for second and foreign language learning (Council of Europe, 2020). Musthofa (2022) emphasizes that the CEFR holds potential as a universal framework, provided it is implemented contextually and considers local realities.

However, the phenomenon of diglossia in the Arabic language—namely, the coexistence of two main varieties: fusha (standard Arabic) and amiyah (dialectal Arabic)—poses unique challenges to the comprehensive implementation of the CEFR (Saiegh-Haddad & Schiff (2025)). Research indicates that the significant gap between the language of daily communication and that of academic or religious discourse complicates

the formulation of realistic learning objectives and the execution of comprehensive assessments. Furthermore, the diglossic divide does not only hinder pedagogical alignment but also obstructs learners' capacity to access religious and intellectual discourses—traditionally conveyed in classical Arabic. In the absence of explicit scaffolding between these linguistic registers, learners may struggle to engage meaningfully with spiritual readings, sermons, and scholarly texts that form the core of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

In the Malaysian context, Rosni Samah & Aishah Isahak (2024) highlight that Arabic language teaching still lacks a well-established national standard. Consequently, the CEFR is seen as a potentially viable framework to standardize syllabi and learning objectives in a more systematic manner. Their study also found that both teachers and students generally support the adoption of the CEFR to strengthen language and communication skills. Nevertheless, as noted by Uri & Aziz (2018), the majority of teachers do not fully understand the principles and applications of the CEFR. A lack of professional training and the absence of suitable teaching materials are among the main challenges. Furthermore, teachers expressed the need for clearer guidelines to effectively integrate the CEFR into actual classroom practice.

A similar situation is observed in Indonesia. According to Uri & Aziz (2018), although 67% of 200 trainee Arabic language teachers in various pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) reported awareness of the CEFR, only a small fraction understood its practical application in teaching. This indicates that comprehension of the communicative goals embedded within the CEFR remains limited, underscoring the need for more focused, contextualized, and sustained training.

Hence, the call to integrate the CEFR with communicative approaches and the development of an active language environment (*bi'ah lughawiyyah*) reflects the necessity for compatibility not only at the conceptual or structural level, but also in pedagogical practices that are holistic and responsive to the sociocultural needs of Muslim learners. The potential for transforming Arabic language education through CEFR alignment must therefore go beyond the linguistic dimension, encompassing pedagogical strategies and values that foster identity and competence in the context of contemporary Muslim societies.

1.2 The Conflict between Communicative Goals and Traditional Approaches

The CEFR framework emphasizes functional communicative competence, whereas traditional approaches to Arabic language instruction focus heavily on grammar and the memorization of classical texts. This conflict becomes particularly evident in madrasahs and Islamic-oriented institutions (Nur Athirah et al., 2021; Mohammed et al., 2021), where pedagogical practices rooted in classical traditions—such as rote memorization, literal text interpretation, and classical grammar—do not align with the communicative competencies emphasized by CEFR. Addressing this conflict requires a reorientation in teacher training, instructional materials, and curriculum design to effectively balance the demands of modern linguistic competence with the intellectual legacy of *turāth*. Similar challenges are also observed beyond the Malay world; for example Rabaab Elmahady Musa et al. (2022) & O. Alharbi (2022) reported that students in Saudi Arabia displayed stronger grammatical skills than communicative abilities, due to teaching approaches that de-emphasize oral interaction.

1.3 The Lack of Contextualized and CEFR-Aligned Teaching Materials

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) emphasizes the alignment of teaching materials with level descriptors and the appropriateness of contextual application. However, most CEFR-based language teaching resources used in the Muslim world are directly adapted from Western sources without adequate contextualization in terms of values, spiritual needs, and the

sociocultural realities of learners (Mohammed et al., 2021). This results in content misalignment, which ultimately undermines the effectiveness of language learning.

Mohammed et al. (2021) argue that language teaching materials must reflect the cognitive frameworks, religious aspirations, and everyday experiences of Muslim learners. Neglecting these elements renders language instruction less relevant and weakens its role in shaping students' cultural and religious identity. Therefore, integrating themes such as communication in religious practices, Islamic scholarly discourse, and Muslim social interaction into teaching content can enhance learner engagement and instructional effectiveness.

Findings from UNESCO (2025) further affirm that the lack of contextualized teaching materials is one of the primary reasons for the misalignment of CEFR-based curricula with local cultures in OIC countries. UNESCO's recommendations include developing micro-curricula grounded in the context of Islamic communities and incorporating global Islamic themes into language syllabi.

Several empirical studies have also shown that the use of decontextualized teaching materials negatively impacts student motivation and achievement. For instance, Afif (2024) in Indonesia found that the use of contextualized materials within the Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) model significantly improved students' motivation in Arabic reading and writing. Motivation scores in the experimental group increased from 62.5 to 80.3, compared to only a marginal increase in the control group. Regionally, Ngoc Diep et al. (2022) reported that culturally relevant reading materials improved attitudes and performance among second-language learners in Asia. These findings underscore the critical need to develop CEFR-aligned teaching materials that are culturally and spiritually relevant to Muslim learners. Such adaptation is essential to ensure the effectiveness of language instruction and to strengthen Arabic language literacy in ways that are intellectually, linguistically, and spiritually meaningful.

1.4 The Neglect of Intellectual and Spiritual Literacy Dimensions

The function of language as a medium for fostering intellectual and spiritual literacy is highly significant within the Islamic community. Literacy, in this context, does not merely refer to the technical ability to read and write but encompasses the individual's capacity to understand, express, and actively participate in religious and intellectual discourse that forms the foundation of identity and knowledge in Islamic scholarly tradition. The CEFR, being a neutral and secular framework, tends to overlook the expressive and spiritual functions of language. Studies by Omar & Aldawsari (2022) as well as Saiegh-Haddad and Schiff (2023) indicate that this dimension is largely neglected in CEFR-based curricula.

The absence of modules or approaches that integrate values and deeper meaning has made it difficult for students to connect language learning with the Islamic intellectual tradition. Similarly, Ritonga et al. (2021) observed that Arabic language teaching, when narrowly focused on linguistic competence without integrating value-based and character education, risks neglecting essential dimensions such as learners' Islamic identity and ethical development. Moreover, Amrulloh (2024) highlighted various challenges in CEFR implementation within Islamic boarding schools, particularly the lack of teacher readiness and insufficient integration of religious values into CEFR-based instruction.

In the Malaysian context, Uri and Abd Aziz (2018) observed that teachers encountered difficulties in aligning CEFR descriptors with religious themes such as worship (*'ibādah*), ethics, and *da'wah* discourse. Their findings further revealed that most teachers lacked a deep understanding of how to merge moral and spiritual values with the linguistic objectives of CEFR, thus compromising the effectiveness of an integrated instructional approach.

Overall, the failure to integrate intellectual and spiritual literacy into CEFR implementation has led to a disconnect between Arabic language education and the epistemological foundations and objectives of Islamic education. Consequently, curriculum planning and reform must reconceptualize the role of language—not merely as a communicative tool, but as a vital medium for knowledge transmission and ethical cultivation. To this end, a reimagined CEFR-aligned curriculum must incorporate descriptors and content that meaningfully reflect spiritual expression and religious epistemology.

4. CONCLUSION

The alignment of Arabic language education with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) holds significant potential in strengthening the holistic literacy of Muslim learners, encompassing linguistic, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. Although CEFR provides a flexible and systematic framework for language learning, its effectiveness in the context of Arabic language pedagogy largely depends on the extent to which it is contextualised in line with the epistemological, cultural, and spiritual realities of Islamic societies.

Four major challenges have been identified: the phenomenon of diglossia in the Arabic language, the conflict between communicative approaches and traditional methods, the lack of culturally relevant teaching materials, and the neglect of intellectual and spiritual literacy within CEFR-based curricula. These challenges highlight the need for educational reform that goes beyond mere technical alignment, extending instead to curriculum philosophy, material development, and in-depth teacher training.

Accordingly, this study concludes that the transformation of Arabic language education requires more than the adoption of CEFR. It calls for a critically localised approach that integrates Islamic values, nurtures learner identity, and supports meaningful engagement in both religious and academic discourse. The development of culturally responsive teaching materials, the provision of relevant professional teacher training, and the design of curricula that reflect the lived realities of Muslim learners are essential steps towards realising this vision. With a wise and contextual implementation, CEFR can function not only as a European standard, but also as a universal tool for empowering the Muslim ummah holistically through language education.

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