



MAPPING THE MAHARAH KALAM COMPETENCIES OF ARABIC LANGUAGE EDUCATION STUDENTS BASED ON CEFR DESCRIPTORS

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Abstract

Speaking skills are one of the core competencies that Arabic Language Education students are expected to master. However, its achievement has so far been evaluated through local assessment practices and has not yet been positioned within an internationally recognized reference framework. This study aims to map the maharah kalam competence of students in the Arabic Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, UIN Mataram, based on the descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This study employed a descriptive quantitative approach using total sampling involving 117 second-semester students of the Arabic Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, UIN Mataram, in the 2025/2026 academic year. Data was obtained from the students' final examination results for the Maharah al-Kalam li al-Mutaqoddimin course, covering five assessment aspects: pronunciation and intonation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension and content. The students' scores were converted to a 0–100 scale and then mapped onto the six CEFR levels (A1–C2). The results showed that, of the 112 students assessed, none were classified at level A1, 21.4% at A2, 23.2% at B1, 9.8% at B2, 14.3% at C1, and 31.2% at C2. This distribution formed a bimodal pattern, indicating a substantial proficiency gap among students. Pronunciation and intonation obtained the highest mean score (2.73), while comprehension and content had the lowest mean score (2.46). These findings indicate the need for a more differentiated instructional approach and greater emphasis on functional communication rather than merely the mechanical aspects of pronunciation.

Keywords *Maharah Kalam, CEFR, Arabic Language Education*

INTRODUCTION

Arabic occupies a strategic position as both an international language and the language of Islamic scholarship; therefore, proficiency in Arabic—particularly maharah kalam (speaking skills)—is a crucial competency for students in the Arabic Language Education Program. Maharah kalam is the skill of conveying messages or ideas orally in Arabic while adhering to linguistic rules so that the message is easily understood by the listener (Maskuri et al., 2023). However, various studies indicate that these skills remain a major challenge in contemporary Arabic language learning, characterized by limited mastery of modern vocabulary, dialectal differences, and a lack of speaking practice outside the classroom (Fuady S. et al., 2026)

Various efforts have been made to improve students' writing skills, ranging from the implementation of communicative methods (Yunita & Pebrian, 2020), the creation of a “bi'ah lughawiyah” or language environment (Nurlaila, 2021a); (Setiyadi et al., 2023), the use of technology-based media such as QR codes (Annisa Fitri & Aisa, 2023), including the flipped classroom model (Azisi & Nurfaiza, 2024) and the practice of using Arabic in daily activities (Gani et al., 2024); Arisandi & Cemerlang, 2024). Although various teaching

strategies have been implemented, it has been found that students still frequently make mistakes in their use of Arabic dialects (Maskuri et al., 2023), which indicates that an increase in the intensity of speaking practice does not necessarily correlate directly with the achievement of measurable and standardized competencies.

A fundamental issue that subsequently arises is the lack of clear, internationally standardized benchmarks for assessing students' speaking proficiency. Until now, the evaluation of speaking skills at many Arabic language education institutions has tended to be localized, subjective, and not comparable across institutions or countries. In fact, this standardization is crucial so that Indonesia—as the country with the largest population of Arabic language learners—can stand on equal footing with globally recognized standards for foreign language assessment (Musthofa, 2022)

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) serves as a reference framework that provides clear “can-do statements” for each language skill across six levels, from A1 to C2 (CEFR and Arabic Online, 2025). The CEFR emphasizes language as a functional tool for communication, rather than merely the mastery of grammatical rules (*nahwu-sharaf*), so that learners are viewed as social agents who use language in real-world contexts (Nurdianto et al., 2021a). The application of the CEFR in Arabic language instruction in Indonesia has begun to attract attention, particularly in the development of teaching materials (Habibur Rohman & Faiq Ilham Rosyadi, 2021), textbook analysis (Saputra & Musthofa, 2022), as well as an assessment of the alignment of a specific institution's curriculum with the CEFR descriptors (Salman & Septiawati, 2023)

Nevertheless, research that specifically maps the speaking competencies of ALE students based on CEFR descriptors remains relatively limited. Most previous studies have focused on learning strategies, media, or language environments to improve speaking skills (Fitriyah et al., 2024). However, few have systematically assessed the current speaking proficiency levels of ALE students within the CEFR framework. Yet such an assessment is crucial as baseline data for designing a curriculum, instructional materials, and assessment tools that are more targeted and measurable (Musling et al., 2026)

This gap is becoming increasingly relevant given that institutions offering Arabic language education in various countries, including those in Asia and the Middle East, are beginning to integrate the CEFR into their teaching policies (Boulares, 2025). Without clear competency mapping, educational institutions risk a mismatch between the learning outcomes they produce and internationally recognized speaking competency standards, which could ultimately hinder the competitiveness of Arabic Language Education (ALE) graduates in the global arena and in the workforce, where standardized language proficiency certification is required.

Based on this description, this study aims to map the speaking competencies of Arabic Language Education students based on CEFR descriptors, in order to provide an objective picture of students' current speaking proficiency levels and to serve as a basis for recommendations regarding the development of a curriculum and Arabic language learning strategies that are more oriented toward international standards.

METHODS

This study employs a quantitative approach using descriptive methods (descriptive quantitative research), which aims to describe a phenomenon or condition as it is based on measurable numerical data, without applying any treatment or intervention to the research subjects (Sugiyono, 2017). This approach was chosen because the study aims to map the speaking competencies of Arabic Language Education (ALE) students as they are, and then classify them into six levels of speaking proficiency based on the descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), namely A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2 (CEFR and Arabic Online, 2025).

The population of this study consisted of all second-semester students in the Arabic Language Education Program, divided into four parallel classes: 2A, 2B, 2C, and 2D. The sampling technique used was total sampling (saturated sampling), in which all members of the population were included as research subjects (Sugiyono, 2017). The total number of students in the population was 117. Of this number, 112 students (95.7%) took the final exam in maharah kalam and received complete grades, while 5 students (4.3%) were absent during the exam; their data were therefore excluded from the mapping analysis.

Research data were collected through a documentation technique by reviewing and analyzing the final exam assessment documents for the “Maharah Kalam” course, which had been conducted by the instructors in charge of the course in each class (Suharsimi, 2016). Assessment was conducted through direct testing in the form of oral performance, which covered five aspects of speaking skills: (1) pronunciation and intonation, (2) grammar, (3) vocabulary, (4) fluency, and (5) comprehension and content. The research instrument consisted of a speaking skills assessment rubric with a 1–4 scale for each aspect, where 1 = poor, 2 = adequate, 3 = good, and 4 = very good. Thus, the maximum total score that each student can achieve is 20, which is then converted to a 0–100 scale using the formula: $\text{Score} = (\text{Total Score} / \text{Maximum Score of 20}) \times 100$. The use of this oral assessment rubric allows for a more objective, systematic, and structured evaluation of speaking proficiency compared to a purely holistic assessment, as used in previous studies (Fitriyah et al., 2024; Setiyadi et al., 2023). Next, the scores obtained by the students were analyzed to map their speaking proficiency levels based on the six CEFR levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2.

Techniques for Converting Scores to CEFR Levels

To map students’ competencies to CEFR levels, final scores (on a scale of 0–100) are converted using intervals that are proportionally divided into six levels (Nurdianto et al., 2021b), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Conversion Intervals for Scores to CEFR Levels

CEFR Level	Score Range (0–100)	Competency Description
A1	0-16	Beginner
A2	17-33	Basic
B1	34-50	Intermediate
B2	51-67	Upper-intermediate
C1	68-84	Proficient
C2	85-100	Very proficient

This interval division follows the principle of equal-interval mapping, which is commonly used when an institution does not yet have a standardized conversion table for standard settings—that is, the calibration of local assessment instruments against the CEFR—as recommended in a study on the application of the CEFR in the context of Arabic language learning (Musthofa, 2022)

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including: (1) frequency distributions and percentages of students at each CEFR level, both overall and by class; (2) the mean score for each aspect of speaking assessment to identify students' specific strengths and weaknesses; and (3) a comparative analysis across classes to examine variations in speaking proficiency across each learning group. Data processing was conducted using a spreadsheet program to ensure the accuracy of calculations and the consistency of score conversions to CEFR levels.

RESULTS

Results of the Maharah Kalam Competency Mapping

This study involved 117 Arabic Language Education students divided into four classes (2A, 2B, 2C, and 2D). Of this number, 112 students (95.7%) took the end-of-semester exam (UAS) in spoken Arabic and were graded, while 5 students (4.3%) were absent and were therefore excluded from the mapping analysis. Assessment was conducted across five aspects of speaking skills: pronunciation and intonation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and coherence, and comprehension and content, with scores ranging from 1 to 4 for each aspect.

The students' total scores were then converted to a scale of 0–100 and mapped into six proficiency levels based on CEFR descriptors. The mapping results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of Students' Speaking Proficiency Levels According to the CEFR (n = 112)

Level CEFR	Number of Students	Percentage	General Description
A1	0	0,0%	Beginner – very simple, halting sentences
A2	24	21,4%	Basic – simple communication, limited vocabulary
B1	26	23,2%	Intermediate – able to express everyday ideas
B2	11	9,8%	Upper Intermediate – fairly fluent and clear communication
C1	16	14,3%	Proficient – fluent, spontaneous, good grammar
C2	35	31,2%	Very Proficient – fluent, accurate, with almost no errors

The first notable finding was the absence of students at the A1 level, indicating that all students had passed the most basic stage of Arabic speaking—a reasonable achievement given that the students were in their second semester of the Arabic Language Education program.

The second, and more substantive, finding is that the distribution pattern tends to be bimodal (two peaks) rather than a normal distribution clustered around the center. The largest proportions were actually found at the two distant extremes: level C2 (31.2%) as the highest group and levels B1 (23.2%) and A2 (21.4%) as the lower-middle groups, while level B2—which serves as a bridge between the two—had the fewest students (9.8%). This pattern indicates a fairly sharp competence gap among students in a single cohort—the majority of students are already highly proficient in speaking Arabic, while an almost equally large proportion remains at the basic to intermediate levels, with few students at the transitional level (B2).

Variation Across Classes

The breakdown by class (Table 3) shows fairly significant variations in achievement among the different learning groups.

Table 3. Distribution of CEFR Levels by Class

Class	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2	Absent	n
2A	7	8	4	5	5	0	29
2B	4	9	0	2	15	0	30
2C	4	7	4	6	8	1	30
2D	9	2	3	3	7	4	28

Class 2B showed the most notable achievement, with 15 of its 30 students (50%) at the C2 level, and none at the B2 level—indicating that students in this class tend to “jump” directly from the intermediate level (B1) to the proficient level (C1/C2). In contrast, Class 2D showed the most varied and relatively lower achievement, with the largest proportion (9 out of 28 students, 32%) still at the A2 level, as well as the highest absenteeism rate (4 students). Classes 2A and 2C showed a relatively more even distribution across all levels compared to the other two classes.

These variations among classes indicate that factors such as the class or instructor, student composition, and the intensity of speaking practice in each class contribute to students’ speaking proficiency, consistent with findings that the language environment (*bi’ah lughawiyyah*) and daily speaking practice play a crucial role in improving students’ speaking skills (Nurlaila, 2021) (Setiyadi et al., 2023) (Gani et al., 2024)

Analysis of Assessment Aspects

To gain a deeper understanding of the students’ strengths and weaknesses, an analysis of the mean scores for each assessment aspect (on a scale of 1–4) was conducted, as presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Mean Scores by Assessment Aspect

Aspects	Mean Score
Pronunciation & Intonation	2,73
Vocabulary	2,49
Grammar	2,48
Fluency & Fluency	2,47
Comprehension & Content	2,46

The aspects of pronunciation and intonation showed the highest mean (2.73), while the aspects of comprehension and content showed the lowest mean (2.46). These findings suggest that students are relatively more skilled in the mechanics of speaking (pronunciation, intonation) than in conveying substantive and coherent ideas. This pattern is consistent with previous findings indicating that limited vocabulary and a lack of authentic communication practice outside the classroom are major obstacles to learning speaking skills (Maskuri et al., 2023). In other words, students tend to be able to “sound” like native Arabic speakers, but still face challenges in constructing and conveying meaningful, context-appropriate content—a dimension that is, in fact, at the core of communicative competence within the CEFR framework (Nurdianto et al., 2021b)

DISCUSSION

The results of this mapping provide an empirical picture that is consistent with previous studies on the application of the CEFR in Arabic language learning. In line with Musthofa’s (2022) view that the application of the CEFR in Arabic language learning requires clear competency mapping as a basis for curriculum development, the findings of

this study indicate that the majority of students (54.5%) are already at level B1 or above, which, according to the CEFR descriptors, indicates that they are able to communicate independently in various situations. However, 21.4% of students remain at the A2 level and require more intensive attention and instructional intervention to prevent them from falling behind their peers.

The bimodal pattern found further confirms the importance of a more differentiated instructional approach, given that the wide competency gap among students within a single cohort cannot be addressed with a one-size-fits-all teaching method. These findings reinforce the urgency highlighted by (Salman & Septiawati, 2023) regarding the need for a more structured alignment of curriculum learning outcomes with CEFR levels, as well as recommendations (Habibur Rohman & Faiq Ilham Rosyadi, 2021) on the importance of developing CEFR-based instructional materials that can accommodate variations in students' proficiency levels.

Meanwhile, weaknesses in comprehension and content compared to pronunciation indicate that Arabic language instruction at this research site still needs to be strengthened in the dimensions of functional and pragmatic communication—a key emphasis in the CEFR philosophy (CEFR and Arabic Online, 2025)—rather than focusing solely on the mechanical aspects of pronunciation. This is in line with the idea (Gani et al., 2024) which emphasizes the importance of integrating a functional approach (*nahu wazifi*) into advanced Arabic speaking instruction, in order to encourage students not only to be verbally fluent but also to be able to convey ideas coherently and contextually.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings and discussion, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, the spoken Arabic proficiency of Arabic Language Education students, as mapped based on CEFR descriptors, shows that no students are at the A1 level, with a distribution of 21.4% at A2, 23.2% at B1, 9.8% at B2, 14.3% at C1, and 31.2% at C2. This distribution forms a bimodal pattern, indicating a fairly sharp competency gap between the group of students who are already proficient (C1–C2) and the group that is still at the basic to intermediate levels (A2–B1). Second, there is significant variation in achievement across classes, with Class 2B showing the highest achievement and Class 2D showing the most varied achievement as well as the highest absenteeism rate. Third, of the five assessed aspects, pronunciation and intonation were the students' main strengths (mean 2.73), while comprehension and content were the weakest aspects (mean 2.46), indicating that instructional reinforcement should be directed toward the dimensions of functional communication and the expression of ideas, rather than merely the mechanical aspects of pronunciation.

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