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Exploring Arabic Language Proficiency Measurement Standards Based on Interagency Language Roundtable Skill Levels

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ABSTRACT

The interest and motivation of Arabic language learners are not limited to academic achievement but also to a professional need in careers or involvement in international forums. Therefore, an Arabic language proficiency assessment scale using the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) standard is essential. This study aims to describe the Arabic language proficiency assessment scale based on ILR standards. This study used four databases, Sinta, Science Direct, and Taylor and Francis. The results of this research describe the assessment scale based on general and specific ILR standards according to Arabic language proficiency. The findings in this study are: (1) Application of the ILR Scale: The ILR scale is effective in measuring Arabic language proficiency, particularly in reading, from beginner to native-like proficiency and (2) Curriculum Implications: Integrating the ILR scale into curricula at Islamic boarding schools and universities enhances assessment accuracy and learning tailored to students' proficiency levels.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the modern era of globalisation, language has become a crucial tool for individuals seeking to navigate international spheres. As one of the official languages of the United Nations since 1973, Arabic plays an essential role in diplomacy, education, and humanitarian efforts. (Ismani et al., 2022). The United Arab Emirates, for example, utilises Arabic in its global humanitarian diplomacy and developmental programs, aiming to integrate transparency and international standards into its institutions (Ortega et al., 2023). This demonstrates that Arabic is not only a religious or cultural language but also one of global influence. Given its wide-ranging roles, proficiency in Arabic is increasingly essential for individuals involved in global governance, economic cooperation, and cross-cultural communication.

The motivation to learn Arabic is no longer confined to academic purposes. Research by Sa'diyah & Abdurahman (2021) reveals that learners desire to communicate with native speakers and become translators for Arab scholars. Additionally, Husna et al. (2022) highlight the proactive role of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren salaf*) in preparing students to engage in scientific discourse in both Arabic and English, reflecting the need for linguistic competence beyond the classroom. Similarly, Sujefri & Habibah (2023) find that digital learners of Arabic need to master all four skills: listening (*istima'*), speaking (*kalam*), reading (*qira'ah*), and writing (*kitabah*) to participate in online forums with native speakers effectively. These studies reflect that Arabic proficiency is increasingly tied to international professionalism and career development.

Such a trend reinforces the need for standardised frameworks to measure Arabic language proficiency in real-world, professional contexts. A lack of clear measurement standards can hinder learners' ability to evaluate their readiness to participate in global environments. Deygers (2021) notes the importance of consistent language assessment frameworks, especially for those involved in high-stakes communication. Among the most recognised standards are the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR). While ACTFL and CEFR are widely used in educational settings, such as the ACTFL's novice-to-superior scale and CEFR's A1 to C2 proficiency levels, ILR stands out for its focus on employment, Government use, and cross-cultural effectiveness. (Nurdianto & Azizi, 2020; Siregar et al., 2022)

The ILR framework, developed by U.S. Government agencies, evaluates language ability from level 0 (no proficiency) to level 5 (native-like proficiency), offering practical tools for assessing real-world communication tasks. According to Zaenuri et al. (2020), this structured assessment model allows institutions and learners to align their goals with professional linguistic demands. Moreover, evaluation of Arabic proficiency based on ILR criteria can include direct interaction with native speakers or simulations of real-life communication (Morkus, 2021). Aprianto et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of mastering grammar and pronunciation alongside the four core skills in achieving a high level

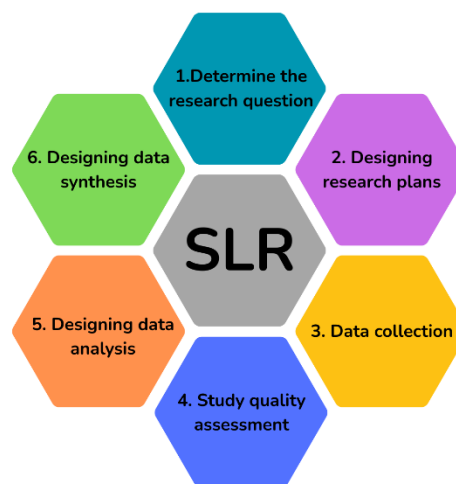
of proficiency. Thus, ILR provides a measurable academic scale and an applicable standard for learners aiming to operate in international contexts.

Therefore, this study aims to describe Arabic language proficiency standards based on the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) framework. The ILR model enables educators and stakeholders to assess and interpret learners' proficiency in Arabic for specific professional, academic, or diplomatic purposes. It also supports consistent communication across institutions and sectors by offering a shared understanding of what each level of proficiency entails. With increasing demand for Arabic in international careers, the ILR framework can guide curriculum development, learner evaluation, and instructional improvement. By adopting this standard, Arabic language teaching and assessment can be better tailored to global needs and opportunities.

2. METHODS

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) as its research method. SLR is beneficial for gathering and synthesising relevant studies to provide a more thorough and balanced understanding of a topic (Chandel & Lim, 2024). It allows researchers to address specific research questions in a clear, transparent, and replicable way, while also aiming to include all available published evidence related to the subject. Furthermore, it involves evaluating the quality of each study to ensure credible findings. The SLR process follows six structured stages, as illustrated below.

Figure 1. Stages of Systematic Literature Review



2.1 Determine the Research Question

The first step in a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is to formulate a clear and focused research question. This study's central question is: *"How are Arabic language proficiency measurement standards examined and applied based on the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) skill levels?"* This question explores the theoretical foundation and the practical implementation of ILR in assessing Arabic language proficiency. The

main question may be broken down into sub-questions, such as:

- a. How does ILR define Arabic proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing?
- b. What types of research or assessment practices apply ILR in the context of Arabic language learning or testing?
- c. What are the strengths and limitations of using ILR compared to other assessment frameworks?

These questions will guide the selection and review of relevant literature throughout the research process.

2.2 Designing the Research Plane

After determining the research question, the researcher adopted the Population, Interest, and Context (PICO) approach to help sharpen the research focus and ensure clarity throughout the process. PICO serves as a framework to specify the research scope, establish inclusion criteria, and eliminate irrelevant studies (Pollock & Berge, 2018). Several things must be considered in PICO, such as population (P), which refers to the subject or material under study and helps map the research landscape. After knowing the population or problem to be studied, the next step is determining interest (I), which defines the main topic or concern being explored. The next step is determining context (Co), which provides the situational setting, ensuring the research remains targeted and aligned with its objectives. The following table presents the PICO framework used in this study:

Table 1. PICO Framework

P (Population and Problem)	I (Interest)	Co (Context)
- Scientific articles discussing Arabic language proficiency standards. - Studies focusing on Arabic proficiency measurement using recognised frameworks.	- Application of the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale in Arabic language testing. - Comparative studies on the use of ILR in evaluating reading, speaking, listening, and writing skills in Arabic.	Assessment and evaluation of Arabic language proficiency based on ILR skill levels in formal and academic learning settings.

2.3 Data Collection

After formulating the research question, data collection is the next step in the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method. At this stage, the researcher executes a search strategy and systematically retrieves studies that meet the inclusion criteria. Selected articles are managed using reference management tools such as Zotero. This study uses four reputable databases, Scopus, Sciencedirect, Taylor and Francis, John Wiley

and Google Scholar, with additional sources obtained through *snowballing* from relevant article references. Search keywords were tailored to the research focus, including: “*Arabic language proficiency*,” “*ILR scale*,” “*language assessment*,” and “*proficiency measurement*.”

An initial search over the past five years (2021–2025) yielded more than 100 articles across the selected databases. These articles underwent a multi-step screening process, including title and abstract screening, duplicate removal, and full-text evaluation based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. In the final stage, the researcher identified 10 relevant articles for in-depth analysis, specifically focused on applying the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) framework in measuring Arabic language proficiency.

2.4 Study Quality Assessment

This stage assesses whether the retrieved data is suitable for inclusion in the SLR. After filtering based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, quality assessment is conducted to ensure methodological relevance and rigour. Articles that meet the requirements will be reviewed in depth. The quality assessment criteria are summarised in the table below:

Table 2. Quality Assessment	
QA	Questions
QA 1	Does the article discuss Arabic language proficiency in one or more ILR skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing)?
QA 2	Does the article apply or refer to the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) framework?
QA 3	Does the article address assessment or testing practices in Arabic language learning?

2.5 Designing Data Syntesis

At this stage, researchers begin to analyse the data from selected literature to construct Arabic language proficiency indicators aligned with the ILR (Interagency Language Roundtable) framework. The analysis does not merely involve summarising content. Still, it focuses on identifying linguistic competencies and consistent performance descriptors across various studies and can be mapped onto the ILR skill levels. This stage is crucial in translating generalised proficiency levels into specific, contextually relevant indicators for Arabic. The analysis consists of three main steps:

- a. Identifying language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, categorised according to ILR levels (0–5).
- b. Thematic coding: grouping findings based on linguistic complexity, vocabulary control, and communicative ability.
- c. Mapping to the ILR scale: to construct indicators that align with both Arabic linguistic characteristics based on the ILR scale.

2.6 Designing Data Synthesis

The researcher synthesises the data at this stage to produce a clear set of Arabic language proficiency indicators based on ILR levels. The process involves:

- a. Summarising key findings from each study in conclusions relevant to ILR-based proficiency levels.
- b. Comparing similarities and differences among studies to identify consistent linguistic features at each ILR level.
- c. Highlighting strengths, limitations, and research gaps, providing insights for further development in Arabic language assessment.

This synthesis provides a structured and contextual reference for applying ILR standards to Arabic language proficiency evaluation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the initial stage, 100 articles published between 2021 and 2025 were retrieved from three central databases (Sinta, ScienceDirect, and Taylor and Francis). These articles were screened based on predefined inclusion criteria. After a multi-stage selection process, 10 articles were identified as relevant to the research focus. These selected studies were then evaluated using three quality assessment criteria aligned with the objectives of this study.

Table 3. List of Reviewed Articles

No	Article's title and years	Quality Assessment			Decision
		QA 1	QA 2	QA 3	
1	A Review of Studies Related to Arabic Language Learning Based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) (2023)	√	√	√	Accepted
2	Narrative microstructure and macrostructure skills in Arabic diglossia: The case of Arab immigrant children in Canada (2023)	√	√	√	Accepted
3	Text classification and gradation in Arabic textbooks (2024)	√	√	√	Accepted
4	Negative pragmatic transfer and language proficiency: American learners of Arabic (2021)	√	√	√	Accepted
5	Cultivating Unity, Soft Skills, and Arabic Proficiency among Students: A Comprehensive Exploration of <i>Mukhayyam al-Lughah al-Arabiyah</i> Program (2024)	√	√	√	Accepted
6	Strategies of Arabic Students' Self-Regulated Learning Improvement in Language Proficiency in The Disruption Era (2022)	√	√	√	Accepted
7	The teaching of Arabic as a community language in the UK (2024)	√	√	√	Accepted
8	The Application of Language Proficiency Scales in Education Context: A Systematic Literature	√	√	√	Accepted

Review (2023)					
9	The Utilisation of The Animiz Application as a Medium for Arabic Language Learning on Students (2022)	√	√	√	Accepted
10	Language learners as invisible planners: a case study of an Arabic language program in a Chinese university (2022)	√	√	√	Accepted

The Scale of Measurement of Language Proficiency Based on the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Generally

Based on the Skill Level Descriptions (SLDS) from the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR), proficiency is described as the functional ability to comprehend written language reflecting current usage. SLDS delineate skills ranging from nocommunicative ability to mastery. The Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) provides a scale for measuring language skills used by U.S. government agencies. Still, this scale can also be applied to measure language skills in other languages, including Arabic (Abdullah et al., 2023). The scale is an ordinal measurement system comprising six fundamental levels, ranging from 0 to 5. Proficiency at each basic level (1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) generally indicates competence in the skills of preceding levels.

Additionally, "plus" levels exist for levels 0 through 4, signifying abilities that significantly surpass one basic level but do not entirely meet the requirements of the next. Achieving a plus level requires demonstrated proficiency that aligns with its specific descriptors rather than simply reflecting strong performance at the basic level. Each level rank has its interpretation, namely:

Table 4. Interpretation of Language Skill Ratings Interagency Language Roundtable

Level Ranking	Level Ranking Interpretation
0	No Proficiency
1	Elementary Proficiency
2	Limited Working Proficiency
3	Professional Working Proficiency
4	Superior Working Proficiency
5	Native-like Proficiency

Level 0 represents the lowest language skill level and indicates a complete lack of proficiency in the target language (García & Ziegler, 2023). This lack of proficiency entails an individual's inability to comprehend words or phrases, speak or write, and use the language in any context. At level 1, individuals have fundamental language skills and can function in minimal and routine situations, but not complex communication activities. Level 2 indicates individuals who can handle basic tasks required in professional and social contexts, but often

need assistance to handle more complicated situations (Brown, 2022). Similarly, at levels 3 and 4, but with higher complexity. Meanwhile, at level 5, individuals have language skills equivalent to native speakers. The individual has effectively and accurately mastered all listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

Standard of Arabic Language Proficiency Based on the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Skill Levels

Here are the standards of Arabic language proficiency based on the ILR skill levels for each proficiency area. However, this study describes only the standards for basic levels, not for the plus levels.

Table 5. Standards of Arabic Listening Proficiency Based on ILR Proficiency Levels

Scale	Listening Skills
1	Comprehending simple spoken Arabic related to basic information and within limited contexts. Understanding general lesson material presented orally in a simple manner.
2	Being able to adequately comprehend fluent spoken Arabic on everyday topics, including routine work-related matters, and understand conversations in daily interactions.
3	Able to comprehend formal and informal spoken Arabic accurately on general social and professional subjects. Able to understand arguments expressed through opinions, assumptions, and supported hypotheses.
4	Capable of understanding conversations with high precision using the Arabic language appropriate to the culture, tailored to diverse audiences on various topics.
5	Can comprehend clear and precise speech from diverse linguistic sources to create engaging Arabic communication.

Table 6. Standards of Arabic Speaking Proficiency Based on ILR Proficiency Levels

Scale	Speaking Skills
1	Capable of sustaining basic exchanges on topics related to oneself, albeit with numerous errors and limited contextual appropriateness. Can engage in daily activities or express simple actions using Arabic.
2	Able to express intended meaning clearly in everyday Arabic conversations and routine work-related interactions. Generally capable of reporting facts, making simple recommendations, and delivering smooth descriptions, directions, instructions, and narratives within a specific timeframe. Additionally, can engage in daily interactions and manage complications in routine transactions.

3	Able to speak with enough accuracy to engage effectively in both formal and informal settings on general social and professional topics. Can handle various tasks, including discussing and comparing social issues and their implications, expressing and defending viewpoints or policies, supporting opinions, hypothesising, gathering informed information and perspectives, addressing unexpected situations, and presenting topics. Capable of producing coherent Arabic discourse with clearly structured ideas.
4	Capable of speaking with utmost precision using the Arabic language that is culturally appropriate and tailored to diverse audiences on various topics. Can effectively advise, persuade, negotiate, or give counsel.
5	Able to speak with clear and precise expression, utilising various linguistic resources to generate articulate and engaging Arabic language in nearly all contexts.

Table 7. Standards of Arabic Reading Proficiency Based on ILR Proficiency Levels

Scale	Reading Skills
1	Capable of understanding simple written Arabic related to basic information, often with significant difficulty and within limited contexts. Can comprehend general lesson material presented in simple written form.
2	Able to comprehend written Arabic materials on everyday topics, including routine work-related matters. Can understand main ideas and some details in texts intended for general audiences, such as clear descriptions, instructions, and narratives across different time frames. However, generally lacks full proficiency in Arabic for making in-depth conclusions.
3	Able to accurately comprehend formal and informal written Arabic on general social and professional topics and tasks. Can understand arguments expressed through opinions, assumptions, and supported hypotheses.
4	Capable of understanding written texts with utmost precision using culturally appropriate Arabic language tailored for diverse audiences on various topics.
5	Capable of comprehending clear and precise written texts that employ diverse linguistic resources to create articulate, nuanced, and engaging Arabic in almost all contexts.

Table 8. Standards of Arabic Writing Proficiency Based on ILR Proficiency Levels

Scale	Writing Skills
1	Capable of producing simple Arabic statements, usually on topics related to oneself, although there are widespread errors and limited contextual appropriateness.
2	Able to write simple Arabic documents and participate in daily exchanges for routine work needs and correspondence.

3	Able to write with enough accuracy to communicate effectively in both formal and informal contexts on general social and professional topics using Arabic. Can handle various tasks, including explaining and comparing social issues and their implications, expressing and defending positions or policies, supporting opinions, and hypothesising.
4	Capable of writing with high precision using culturally appropriate and tailored language for diverse audiences on various topics. Effectively adjusts tone according to the situation to advise, persuade, negotiate, or counsel in Arabic.
5	Able to write with clear and precise expression, utilising various linguistic sources to produce articulate, nuanced, and engaging Arabic language in nearly all contexts.

Using the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale to measure Arabic language proficiency remains an understudied topic in the existing literature. However, the ILR system offers a valuable framework for understanding how language skills progress over time, particularly in professional and international contexts. Badarneh et al. (2023) emphasise that individuals at the No Proficiency level cannot understand or produce the Arabic language. This typically applies to those who are either complete beginners or have no prior exposure to the language. At this level, learners are generally unable to communicate in Arabic meaningfully. The implications of this level are significant, as it sets the foundation for further language learning (Hikmah et al., 2022; Mohamed, 2024). For instance, a person at this level might struggle with simple Arabic phrases like مرحباً (Hello) or كيف حالك؟ (How are you?), which are essential in everyday communication.

As learners progress to the Elementary Proficiency level, their language use is limited to fundamental communication, typically in everyday, predictable situations. According to Morkus (2021), Individuals at this level can exchange greetings and introduce themselves, but their vocabulary and grammar are still in the early stages of acquisition. Their communication tends to be restricted to memorised phrases or isolated words, primarily helpful for survival communication. For example, a learner at this stage might be able to say, أريد الماء (I want water), but they would struggle to engage in any complex conversation beyond straightforward needs. This limitation is also evident in their inability to grasp subtleties or engage in discussions that require a deeper understanding of the language's structure. (Jundi et al., 2024). This stage is critical for laying the groundwork for further learning, where learners develop confidence in basic exchanges but are far from fluent communication.

With continued practice and exposure to the language, learners reach the Limited Working Proficiency level, where they begin to handle more varied social and professional situations. Samin et al. (2022), individuals at this stage can express basic opinions, ask for clarification, and engage in limited discussions with native speakers. However, their communication remains somewhat constrained by their vocabulary and syntactical limitations. For instance, they may be able to hold a basic conversation about topics such as الطقس (weather) or العائلة (family). However, their ability to address more technical or

specialised subjects is minimal. In professional settings, these individuals might be able to communicate their needs effectively in simple work-related conversations, such as requesting information or confirming appointments. However, they may struggle with tasks requiring a deeper understanding of specialised vocabulary. Despite these limitations, their ability to interact with native speakers in everyday contexts gradually improves, marking an important milestone in their language learning journey (Soliman & Khalil, 2024).

At the Professional Working Proficiency and Advanced Professional Proficiency stages, learners attain the ability to communicate fluently and accurately in more complex professional and social contexts. These levels represent significant milestones in language development, as individuals can discuss various topics, including abstract or highly specialised subjects (Zhu et al., 2023). For example, they might comfortably discuss issues related to economics or politics in Arabic, using terms such as اقتصاد (economy) or سياسة (politics) with appropriate context and understanding. Their fluency at this level allows them to participate in debates or deliver highly accurate presentations on complex subjects. Additionally, their command of grammar, vocabulary, and cultural nuances enables them to interact smoothly in formal and informal settings. At this stage, learners can navigate professional environments without significant difficulty, reflecting a high level of linguistic competence.

At the Bilingual Proficiency level, learners achieve a near-native level of proficiency in Arabic, equivalent to highly educated native speakers. This stage represents the pinnacle of language acquisition, where individuals are proficient in communication and deeply attuned to the cultural and idiomatic expressions unique to native speakers (Hikmah et al., 2022). For instance, they would have a firm grasp of complex idiomatic expressions like في الحين والآخر (from time to time) or على الأقل (at least), which are often difficult for non-native speakers to understand fully. Furthermore, their proficiency extends beyond linguistic accuracy, encompassing an understanding of regional dialects and cultural references essential for complete fluency. This level of competence is typically required in high-level professional settings, such as diplomacy, academia, or international business, where cultural sensitivity and linguistic expertise are paramount. Learners at this stage can effectively navigate complex negotiations, write academic papers, and participate in intricate discussions, demonstrating mastery of the language and the cultural context in which it is used (Faez et al., 2021).

Despite the utility of the ILR system in measuring Arabic proficiency, its application has notable differences, particularly within Arabic. While many studies, such as Leaver (2021), support the general applicability of the ILR scale across languages, others argue that its application in Arabic requires further contextualization. The structure of the Arabic language, with its rich vocabulary, complex verb forms, and variety of dialects, presents unique challenges for language learners. For example, Arabic dialects such as الفصحى (Modern Standard Arabic) and العامية (colloquial Arabic) differ significantly, affecting the way proficiency is measured across different contexts. As such, some scholars suggest that ILR's general scale may not fully capture the nuances of proficiency in Arabic, especially when

considering the vast differences in how Arabic is used across various regions and fields (Long et al., 2012). Therefore, future research should focus on distinguishing between studies that apply ILR broadly and those that concentrate on Arabic-specific proficiency to refine our understanding of ILR's validity in this particular linguistic context.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale as a tool for measuring Arabic language proficiency through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of ten relevant articles. The analysis highlights that the ILR scale provides a robust framework for evaluating language skills across five levels, from Level 0 (no proficiency) to Level 5 (native or bilingual proficiency). Each level delineates specific criteria for listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities, offering a comprehensive measure of language competence. This scale can serve as an essential reference for assessing Arabic proficiency, particularly in the context of reading comprehension, by providing clear benchmarks for language mastery. Applying the ILR scale to Arabic language curricula in Islamic boarding schools and universities is highly beneficial. By aligning educational objectives with the ILR framework, institutions can enhance the accuracy of their learner assessments, improve instructional strategies, and ensure that teaching materials meet students' proficiency levels. However, the study is limited to theoretical exploration, and further research is necessary to test the practical implementation of ILR-based assessments in diverse educational settings. Future research could focus on developing ILR-adapted proficiency tests considering local linguistic, cultural, and academic contexts. Such efforts would contribute to refining the ILR framework's applicability, ensuring that it meets the specific needs of Arabic learners across various regions and educational environments.

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