

Application of the CEFR to an Arabic Corpus: A Case Study

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The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) was developed by the Council of Europe and first published in 2001. It has since evolved significantly and new volumes have been published; most recently, the CEFR Companion Volume (CEFR/CV) in 2020. The CEFR aims to provide the basis for L2 learning, teaching, and assessment of European languages. However, it has been widely used around the world in non-European contexts.

This article presents a case study of the application of the CEFR to an Arabic corpus comprising 214 texts produced by first year students at Zayed University in the UAE, which is part of a bilingual corpus in Arabic and English. This article focuses on the application of the CEFR to the Arabic texts which posed specific challenges, including Arabic diglossia whereby there are two distinct varieties of the language used for writing and speaking. Furthermore, the complexities of Arabic grammar include that it has formal features which only appear in writing. There is also some overlap between Arabic and other languages, particularly English, as many English expressions are used in everyday life in Arab societies. These factors, among others, lead to unique issues to consider when applying the CEFR to a written Arabic corpus. However, due to the generic nature of the CEFR descriptors, they have been applied successfully to the assessment of the Arabic written corpus, which provides the basis for further applications of the CEFR to other competencies in Arabic and to other non-European languages. This article describes the process of rating the corpus, outlines the practical implications of the application of the CEFR to an Arabic written corpus and presents an overview of student performance mapped across the six CEFR levels.

Keywords: CEFR, Arabic, written Corpus, Assessment, Non-European languages, Diglossia

1 Introduction to the CEFR

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) was published in 2001 as the culmination of a lengthy process that aimed to support communicative language learning and teaching across Europe. The CEFR has various political, socio-cultural, and educational aims, and was envisaged as a tool to help language planners, educators, and learners in course design, assessment, and certification across Europe and beyond: “It aims to facilitate transparency and coherence between the curriculum, teaching and assessment within an institution and transparency and coherence between institutions, educational sectors, regions and countries” (Council of Europe 2020: 27). The CEFR was perceived as a flexible document that can be used by practitioners in different ways. Moreover, it has been evolving, with the *CEFR Companion Volume with New Descriptors* published in 2018, and the *CEFR Companion Volume* published in 2020, and myriad other relevant resources which are available on the [CEFR website](#), and beyond. The Companion Volume updates the original framework by adding descriptors for online interaction, collaborative learning, and mediating text, as well as descriptors for plurilingualism and pluriculturalism, and a chapter on sign language scales and descriptors (Council of Europe 2020).

The CEFR emphasizes fundamental concepts, such as the role of the learner as a social agent, and the co-construction of meaning in interaction, as well as the notions of mediation, and plurilingual/pluricultural competences. It provides a comprehensive descriptive scheme for language proficiency across Common Reference Levels from A1 to C2, and it is based on ‘can-do’ statements that provide a clear yet nuanced instrument for the assessment of progress and proficiency. The CEFR views language as “a vehicle for opportunity and success in the social, educational and professional domain” (Council of Europe 2020: 27), and its ‘action-oriented’ model guided by the ‘can-do’ statements focuses on real-life tasks and the learner’s proficiency rather than their deficiency.

The main purpose of the CEFR is to improve the quality and effectiveness of language learning and teaching. It has been argued that the CEFR project has never been about assessment or harmonisation, but rather about learning and teaching (North et al. 2022: 27); however, the CEFR has key applications in both assessment and accreditation. The CEFR aims to promote co-operation between educational institutions in different countries, provide a basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications; and assist learners, teachers, and course designers among others to co-ordinate their efforts. This is achieved via common reference levels and illustrative descriptors which provide a metalanguage for language professionals to facilitate communication, networking, mobility, and recognition of qualifications (Council of Europe 2001). The CEFR has been a flexible tool used for many purposes and in various contexts, both European and non-European. This has been its purpose from the beginning, as the CEFR does not set out to tell practitioners what to do, or how to do it, as it raises questions, rather than answering them. Moreover, the CEFR is innovative in its approach; North emphasizes that “the main purpose of the CEFR project is to stimulate innovation in language education through the concepts of the user/learner acting as a social agent, (co)constructing meaning and knowledge, while drawing on their full plurilingual repertoire to do so” (2022: 1). However, the CEFR has faced many criticisms which extend from its theoretical basis to its interpretations and applications (Alderson 2007; Deysgers 2019; Hulstijn 2007). Its scales have been criticized for being underspecified (Neff-van Aertselaer 2013) and impressionistic in their wording (Alderson 2007), and some of the scales read as outdated or Eurocentric which may limit their applicability to the global community of language learners (Foley 2019). Nevertheless, there have been attempts to apply the CEFR outside Europe in relation to teaching English as a foreign language, e.g. in China, Japan, Turkey, among others (Hazar 2021; Lu 2017; Negishi 2012; O’Dwyer 2017). For example, countries in the ASEAN region adapted the CEFR for the teaching and assessment of English as a foreign language in their contexts, which resulted in different version of the framework, e.g. CEFR-J for Japan, CEFR-M for Malaysia, CEFR-V for Vietnam, and the CCFR or the Common Chinese Framework of Reference for Languages. Each of these versions reflects the local context, needs of learners, and the educational systems of the country in which it was developed (Foley 2019). Additionally, there have also been limited attempts to adapt and apply the CEFR to non-European languages. This paper describes how it has been used in the assessment of an Arabic written corpus. The following sections introduce the Arabic language and the relationship between the CEFR and Arabic.

2 The Arabic Language

Arabic is the official language of 22 countries and the native language of over 400 million speakers in North Africa and Western Asia. It belongs to a group of languages known as the Semitic languages (Versteegh 2001), which in turn belong to a broader group of languages, termed Afro-Asiatic (Ryding 2005). This distinguishes it from many European languages which belong to a family of languages known as the Indo-European.

“The linguistic situation in the Arab world is strongly characterised by diglossia” (Ryding 1991: 212). The term *diglossia* was first used by Marçais (1930), but it received a lot of attention with Ferguson’s seminal paper in 1959 in which he describes the situation in which two dialects or varieties exist, one which may be a vernacular or spoken dialect alongside a standard written or formal variety (Ferguson 1959; Horn 2015; Kaye 2001). Kaye (2001) argues that colloquial Arabic is grammatically and lexically less complex

than Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and that there is a continuum between MSA and colloquial forms as well as between one colloquial dialect and another to the point that some uneducated people may find MSA unintelligible, and a speaker of a certain dialect may find another one unintelligible.

Badawi (1973) argues that MSA and colloquial dialects are independent varieties of the same language, each with its own lexicon and grammar, and they differ in the context of use. However, there is no clear-cut division between standard Arabic and colloquial dialects. Instead, there is a great deal of overlap and there are various geographic and socio-cultural variations or levels that exist within the language; sometimes they are quite distinct and at other times they are very subtle and hard to notice.

Arabic native speakers learn their local spoken dialect as their mother tongue, and then they learn MSA at school. It is then that the child becomes diglossic. So, the experience of learning MSA is like the experience of learning a second language (L2), especially given that MSA is nobody's mother tongue (Maamouri 1998). It should be noted, however, that MSA has higher prestige than spoken dialects even though they are used in different contexts and although they have distinct lexical and grammatical inventories, since MSA must be learned and is associated with having received an education. It would be inappropriate to use MSA in everyday life, but it is equally inappropriate to use spoken lexis in an academic essay. The two varieties co-exist in literary output that involves dialogue in spoken Arabic and narration in MSA.

Although Arabic speakers learn MSA at school, they are exposed to it much more than they are to a second language since mainstream media have strong elements of MSA; for example, in news, documentaries, dubbed TV shows, and so on. Moreover, a considerable proportion of the cartoons that children watch is also dubbed in MSA. Consequently, Arabic speakers are exposed to MSA at a young age, but they do not effectively produce it until they go to school, except in very limited contexts such as performing religious duties. Therefore, the experience of Arabic native speakers with MSA is somewhat similar to their experience with a second language. Moreover, there are substantial similarities between the native dialects and MSA, which makes the learning of MSA easier than learning a foreign language. This complex relationship between spoken and written Arabic is one of the major challenges faced in the application of the CEFR to Arabic.

3 Arabic and the CEFR

It has been noted that there is an increasing familiarity with the CEFR terminology and scales outside the EU, including the Arab world, yet there is no systematic effort to apply the CEFR to Arabic, however, there are some sporadic attempts. In 2021, an official Arabic version of the *CEFR Companion Volume* has been published, which should have an impact on Arabic language teaching, assessment, and research. However, it has also been noted that there is no coherent agenda for the application of the CEFR or a similar framework for Arabic teaching (Soliman 2018: 122). Soliman discusses the difficulties faced in the design of detailed CEFR level descriptors for Arabic in the light of the vast differences between Arabic and European languages, e.g. Arabic diglossia, the reality of language learning and use, and the linguistic complexity of Arabic. Therefore, the application of the CEFR to Arabic has been attempted on an individual or very small-scale basis, and mostly in an unsystematic way.

The CEFR has been mainly applied to assessment in Arabic, and there are many Arabic language tests which claim to be aligned with the CEFR. Soliman (2018: 213) lists some of these tests, e.g. the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the Al-Arabiyya Test developed by Eckehard Schulz, the Standardised Arabic Test developed by the Saudi Electronic University, the ILA certificate in Arabic, and the TELC Arabic language test, among others.

Moreover, many Arabic courses claim to be aligned with the CEFR. This is common in courses taught by language centres in many UK universities. This could be influenced by the way European languages are described in these institutions, so that the same terminology is used with Arabic courses. Moreover, some Arabic qualifications and resources also claim to be mapped against the CEFR.

The CEFR has also impacted research on Arabic pedagogy. There are academic papers and conference presentations that deal with the application of the CEFR to Arabic in different contexts (e.g., Al-Jarf & Mingazova 2020; Mohamed 2021, Mohamed 2023; Soliman 2018). This paper aims to contribute to this body of research by discussing the application of the CEFR to a corpus of Arabic texts that were produced as part of a bilingual learners' corpus.

4 Introduction to ZAEBUC

The Zayed Arabic-English Bilingual Undergraduate Corpus ([ZAEBUC](#)) is an annotated Arabic-English bilingual writer corpus comprising short essays by first-year university students at Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates. "The corpus comprises short essays written by 397 first-year university students totalling 388 English essays (87.6K words) and 214 Arabic essays (33.3K words)" (Habash & Palfreyman 2022: 79). It is available in both raw and corrected versions and is an open resource available for researchers. Moreover, it has been rated using the CEFR. Although the corpus is bilingual, this chapter focuses on the assessment of the Arabic texts using the CEFR. The assessment process is described as well as the challenges faced in the application of the CEFR to Arabic, and then a commentary is provided on the outcome of the assessment of the Arabic texts using the CEFR, and the potential of furthering the application of the CEFR or a similar framework to Arabic.

5 Application of the CEFR to ZAEBUC

5.1 The Rating Process

The assessment of the ZAEBUC using the CEFR involved several steps, as the raters were applying the CEFR to a corpus of written Arabic texts for the first time. Initially, two raters discussed the potential and limitations of applying the CEFR to both the Arabic and English samples in the corpus. They worked on 10 Arabic and English texts written by the same student. A subsequent meeting discussed the outcomes of the assessments. It became clear that the assessments may have been influenced by the fact that the raters had access to English and Arabic samples by the same writer. Moreover, the raters focused on different aspects of writers' performance. For example, for one rater accuracy seemed crucial, while for the other the range of lexis and the cohesion of texts were deemed more important than accuracy, and the rater was more tolerant towards accepting grammar errors if the range of lexis was wider.

Then, 10 randomized samples, where the raters did not get the English and Arabic texts by the same student, were assessed, followed by another meeting in which it was decided to randomize the samples before assessing the corpus. These discussions helped the raters to consider which criteria were important to each of them and to agree on common grounds. Based on the CEFR, criteria selected at this stage involved writer's ability to address the topic in a clear, organized way, the range of lexis and structures used, the use of cohesive devices, the accuracy of grammatical structures and the appropriateness of lexical choices.

Since both raters were native speakers of Arabic with excellent knowledge of English and considerable teaching experience, the decision was made to involve a third rater who was a native speaker of English with teaching experience and excellent knowledge of Arabic. There was another round of assessment of samples in both languages by the three raters, followed by a meeting with an expert on the CEFR who discussed divergences in the assessments and assisted in normalizing a sample of English texts. After that meeting, the three raters completed their independent assessments of the corpus and entered their ratings on Google forms.

Most of the initial discussions focused on the assessment of Arabic samples, as the CEFR was designed for European languages and the raters wanted to ascertain its applicability to Arabic; especially that Arabic was L1 of the students and the CEFR was designed for L2 contexts. The CEFR proved to be applicable to the Arabic samples. Due to the generic nature of the CEFR descriptors, it was possible to apply them

to Arabic L1 samples. However, as pointed out by Neff-van Aertselaer (2013: 200), the “reference-level descriptors for each of the 6 broad competence bands are under-specified”. This under-specification led to some divergence in interpretations of the criteria, and different raters relied on their backgrounds in interpreting the criteria and applying them to the samples. As a result, there were differences between the ratings and the average of the three assessments was used as the final assessment for each text.

5.2 Agreement between Raters

There has been an acceptable level of agreement between the raters. In 28.30% of the samples, all three raters gave the same assessment. In 90.57% of the samples, at least two raters gave the same assessment. Where raters differed, there was one band difference between the raters in 54.72% of the cases, and in 20.28% of cases the difference was two bands.

Based on their experience with the ZAEBUC, the raters found the CEFR to be an effective tool for the assessment of the writing competence in Arabic, and the participants’ performance could be mapped across the scales of the CEFR. The scales were deemed very appropriate in assessing the samples, as they provided the raters with a flexible, consistent, and reliable tool for the assessment of competence. The CEFR descriptors could be applied consistently across the corpus. The standardization meetings showed that the assessors might have placed different weights on certain aspects of the participants’ performance, but generally there was agreement as to what constituted A-, B- or C-level performance in a piece of writing. However, within the same scale, the same text was sometimes assessed as level 1 or 2 depending on the experience and focus of different raters, but it was not common for raters to assess the same text for different scales. Comprehensibility, range of lexis and structures, coherence and cohesion, thematic development, and accuracy were considered crucial criteria for all three assessors. However, the type of errors and their significance were sometimes debated among raters, such as the importance of certain formal grammatical features which did not significantly affect the meaning even if they were not used accurately.

5.3 Students’ Scores

The scores of assessing the Arabic samples ranged from A2 to C1. 3% of the samples achieved A2. This means that the students who were assessed as A2 could “produce simple texts on familiar subjects of interest, linking sentences with connectors like ‘and’, ‘because’ or ‘then.’” Most of the samples were in the B scale. 52% of the samples achieved B1, which means that these students could “produce a text on a topical subject of personal interest, using simple language to list advantages and disadvantages, and give and justify their opinion.” Of the samples, 38% of them achieved B2, which means that those students could “produce an essay or report which develops an argument systematically with appropriate highlighting of significant points and relevant supporting detail.” Additionally, 5% of the samples achieved C1, which means that the students could “produce clear, well-structured expositions of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues”. None of the samples was assessed as C2, and this could be attributed to the nature of the task, since students were not required to “set out multiple perspectives on complex academic or professional topics, clearly distinguishing their own ideas and opinions from those in the sources” (Council of Europe 2020: 68).

5.4 Examples from the Arabic Corpus

The broad and generic nature of the descriptors allowed them to be applied to the texts readily. However, there were certain issues pertaining to the Arabic texts that merited extensive discussion in the assessments; for example, the diglossic nature of Arabic. Academic writing was considered a formal activity, and therefore Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) was expected to be used in the Arabic samples;

therefore, deviations from it would be seen as problematic in terms of using the correct register and style. Nevertheless, there were instances of students using colloquial Arabic in their essays.

The raters discussed whether this could be regarded as evidence of plurilingualism, because students might exploit their plurilingual repertoires by using features from their colloquial dialects. It was believed that students used colloquial Arabic because they lacked mastery in the appropriate variety and did not have the competence required to complete the communicative task in MSA as would be expected. As a result, they resorted to compensating, which is “a strategy for maintaining communication when one cannot think of the appropriate expression” (Council of Europe 2020: 69).

The participants’ writing samples showed influences from colloquial dialects at the phonological, lexical, syntactic, and stylistic levels. Examples of colloquial features that students used in their writing are presented below. It should be noted that these examples are not based on the entire corpus, but on a randomly selected sample of 10 texts.

At the phonological level, it was possible to notice influences from the phonology colloquial Arabic in students’ writing, for example, replacing the sounds /d/ with /z/, replacing the final (*tā’ marbūḥah*) with (*tā’ maftūḥah*) in certain structures, replacing short vowels with long vowels, and reducing the glottal stop to a short vowel. Table 1 show examples of influences from colloquial Arabic at the phonological level.

Table 1. Examples colloquial influences at the phonological and orthographic levels

(a) replacing the sound *ḍ* with *ẓ*

Error	Correct form
محاضرات <i>muḥā/ẓa/rāt</i> 'lectures'	محاضرات <i>muḥā/ḍa/rāt</i> 'lectures'
حظاري <i>ḥa/ẓā/rī</i> 'civilised'	حضاري <i>ḥa/ḍā/rī</i> 'civilised'

(b) replacing the final (*tā’ marbūḥah*) with (*tā’ maftūḥah*). This change can only be noticed in the orthography of Arabic words on the final syllabus, as the English transcription shows the same sounds.

Error	Correct form
خاصتاً <i>khāṣṭan</i> especially	خاصةً <i>khāṣṭan</i> especially
شهرتاً <i>Shuhratan</i> fame	شهرةً <i>Shuhratan</i> fame
معرفة <i>ma ‘rifat</i> knowledge	معرفة <i>ma ‘rifat</i> knowledge

(c) replacing short vowels with long vowels. This change can only be noticed in the orthography of Arabic words.

Error	Correct form
لهذا <i>lihādhā</i> thus	لهذا <i>lihādhā</i> thus
هاذي <i>Hādhi</i> this (f.)	هذه <i>hādhīhi</i> this (f.)

(d) reducing the glottal stop to a short vowel.

Error	Correct form
شي <i>/shay/</i> thing	شيء <i>/shay’/</i> thing
نبدي <i>Neb/dī/</i> <i>we start</i>	نبدأ <i>Nab/da’/</i> <i>we start</i>

At the lexical level, some students replaced certain lexical items from MAS with their colloquial counterparts. As noted earlier, it would be inappropriate to use colloquial words in an academic essay as required in the task. Thus, students compensated for not knowing the formal words appropriate for the context of academic writing by using the colloquial words they were familiar with, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Examples of colloquial influences at the lexical level

(e) replacing certain lexical items from MAS with their colloquial counterpart.

Error	Correct form
زعل <i>za’al</i> sorrow	حزن <i>ḥuzn</i> sorrow
الأشاعات <i>al’shā’āt</i> rumours	الشائعات <i>ash-shā’i’āt</i> rumours
اجاب <i>’ujāwib</i> I reply	أجيب <i>’ujīb</i> I reply

At the syntactic level, it has been noted that, very often, the syntactic complexity of standard Arabic is not upheld. There are highly formal features of Arabic grammar that only appear in writing and that are often found difficult to apply by most Arabic speakers as they are not used in spoken dialects, for example the case marking system. This system involves selecting certain endings for words to mark their case, i.e., their function or position in the sentence. Errors in cases do not usually affect the comprehensibility of the text, as it could still be understood correctly despite being grammatically incorrect. This is a typical example of the influence of colloquial Arabic on the writing of students or of confusion about

the appropriate syntax of MSA. In both examples below, case marking rules were either confused when using the nominative case instead of the genitive in the first example or ignored such as in missing the accusative ending in the second example. Case marking is a very formal characteristic of Arabic which is hardly reflected in spoken dialects, and therefore, confusion here could be a feature of the influence of colloquial dialects. Examples of colloquial influences at the syntactic level are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Examples of colloquial influences at the syntactic level

(f) confusing cases; using nominative instead of accusative and genitive.

Error	Correct form
فأصبح سهل للمجرمون <i>fa'şbaḥa sahl [NOM.SG] lilmujrimūn [NOM.PL]</i> it became easy for criminals	فأصبح سهلاً للمجرمين <i>fa'şbaḥa saḥlan [ACC.SG] lilmujrimīn [GEN.PL]</i> it became easy for criminals

(g) ignoring cases; not adding the accusative case ending.

سوف يجعله شخص كسول <i>saūfa yaj 'aluhu shakhṣ kasūl [NOM.SG]</i> it will make him a lazy person	سوف يجعله شخصاً كسولاً <i>sawfa yaj 'aluhu shakhṣan [ACC.SG] kasūlan [ACC.SG]</i> it will make him a lazy person
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At the stylistic level, some colloquial expressions were used in the students' writing. These expressions are characteristic of spoken Arabic and would be inappropriate to use in writing, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Examples of colloquial influences at the stylistic level

(h) using colloquial expressions instead of standard ones.

بالاخير <i>bil 'ālākhīr</i> eventually	في نهاية المطاف <i>fī nihāyat al-maṭāf</i> eventually
الكلام الفاضي <i>al-kalām al-fāḍī</i> trivialities	التفاهات <i>at-tafāhāt</i> trivialities

It is interesting to note these instances of colloquial influences in students' writings since their main training in Arabic writing will have been in MSA. But the participants are young people who often communicate with each other through digital and social media. The writing codes typically used in these media are often informal and inconsistent, with a great deal of codeswitching. This inevitably affects the quality of the writing, and the registers students use, especially because a great deal of the language they use is influenced by the features of language used on social media. Bies et al. (2014: 93) noted that "the language used in social media expresses many differences from other written genres: its vocabulary is informal with intentional deviations from standard orthography such as repeated letters for emphasis; typos and non-standard abbreviations are common; and non-linguistic content is written out, such as laughter, sound representations, and emoticons."

Another characteristic of the Arabic texts is their short length, whereas it was noted that the English texts in the corpus were longer. This could partly be due to the nature of Arabic as a "morphologically rich and complex language. Arabic words are agglutinated words, composed by an inflected word form (base) and attachable clitics" (Mallek et al. 2017: 299). However, this only explains some of the differences

found. The average length of the English texts of the corpus was 226 words, in comparison to 155 words for those in Arabic. Some of the Arabic texts scored A2 due to being too short for the topic to be developed properly. Moreover, some Arabic texts were too short to assess at all and were, thus, marked as 'unassessable.' It is interesting to note that some of the texts were so short that they sounded more like tweets.

The Arabic texts also included examples of the use of non-Arabic words, especially for names of places and brands such as Dubai Mall, Expo 2020 and Ferrari. It is worth noting that UAE is a largely bilingual setting, e.g. English and Arabic are used together on all road signs, shop banners and other places, which makes it a norm to blend English terms into Arabic vocabulary. Moreover, many English words are used in everyday life in Arab societies, e.g. in greetings and informal settings. In academic institutions, it is common to find students switching between both Arabic and English while speaking, as in most of the universities, the medium of instruction is English.

6 Discussion

The application of the CEFR to the Arabic learners' corpus has proven to be possible, and the CEFR descriptors lent themselves quite well to the corpus although it contained L1 texts in a non-European language. This is due to the generic nature of the descriptors and the nature of the learning of Arabic which is similar to L2 learning as a result of Arabic diglossia. Although the present study is a small-scale project, it demonstrates the advantage of a framework like the CEFR for the learning, teaching, and assessment of Arabic.

The Arab world is vast, and it includes 22 countries with different regional dialects, educational systems, as well as varying economic and socio-cultural contexts, and thus, such a framework would be extremely useful for the purposes of cooperation and mutual accreditation. There are many challenges that would be faced in the establishment of such a framework, but it is believed to be a very worthwhile endeavour with benefits that can extend beyond Arab nations.

Despite criticisms of the CEFR, it has proven to be effective when adapted to different contexts, such as in the ASEAN region (Foley 2019). These adaptations made it possible to apply the CEFR flexibly in the specific contexts of different countries to achieve a range of purposes. However, it has been noted that many language professionals outside the EU are not familiar with the underlying concepts of CEFR, which may lead many teachers to associate it with testing only, which is a limited view of what the CEFR is about. The application of the CEFR in the ASEAN region has led to the identification of many issues with the educational systems of these countries, e.g. teachers' proficiency in English and understanding of the CEFR, lack of local experts on the CEFR, lack of training on the CEFR, and the limited view of the CEFR as a testing tool, among others (Foley 2019).

Although the CEFR has been used mainly for European languages, even in non-European contexts, there is no reason why it should not be adapted to the context of Arabic. In order to achieve this objective, it will be necessary for language professionals from across the Arab nations to collaborate in a concerted manner. Then, it may be possible, given the existence of the Arab League and its Arab Organisation for Education, Culture and Science, as well as organisations that support the learning and teaching of Arabic such as the Qatar Foundation and many universities and research institutions in the Arab world.

The application of the CEFR for the assessment of Arabic written texts in the current study has shown important findings: the average proficiency of first year university students in Arabic, i.e. their mother tongue, was B1, which is the level expected for a foreign language. This has serious implications for teaching Arabic in UAE and other Arab countries. More rigorous studies are needed to find out the average level of students' language proficiency at different levels, as it would impact their ability to understand and express certain academic concepts. This in turn could lead to reviewing Arabic learning objectives and teaching methodologies. It has been noted that students' proficiency in writing may

be affected by their exposure to the language of social and digital media. However, new technologies available to students, such as Generative Artificial Intelligence tools may have more profound impacts on how they learn the language and use it in academic and other contexts.

The Arabic learning and teaching context is very complex, and trying to understand attainment of students in different countries is a major challenge, with the absence of a framework like the CEFR. The Arab world needs a framework which helps in language policy and planning, informs decision making about curricula and learning objectives, and helps with the accreditation and mutual recognition of qualifications across the Arab region, as was the case for the CEFR and the EU. This framework needs to address the specific challenges that Arabic learners face due to Arabic diglossia, the grammatical complexity of the language, and other features that distinguish Arabic from European languages for which the CEFR was created, as well as the different socio-cultural contexts within the Arab region. If the CEFR is to be used as the basis of this endeavour, radical adaptation will be necessary for Arabic; alternatively, a similar framework could be developed specifically. Nonetheless, the need for such framework exists, and it is urgent. The existence of an Arabic translation of the CEFR is welcomed as a positive step. However, it is also clear that a tailored framework that considers the specific features of the Arabic language needs to be developed.

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8 Biography

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