



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i8/14209>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i8/14209

**Received:** 12 June 2022, **Revised:** 14 July 2022, **Accepted:** 28 July 2022

**Published Online:** 19 August 2022

**In-Text Citation:** (Nor & Sihes, 2022)

**To Cite this Article:** Nor, H. M., & Sihes, A. J. (2022). Critical Thinking in Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language; Teacher's Competence. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(8), 1266 – 1279.

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Vol. 12, No. 8, 2022, Pg. 1266 – 1279

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[www.hrmars.com](http://www.hrmars.com)

ISSN: 2222-6990

## Critical Thinking in Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language; Teacher's Competence

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### Abstract

Critical thinking is acknowledged as one of the important skills that is essential in the 21<sup>st</sup> century education. Although critical thinking is not on the mandated list of educational goals in Arabic language teaching, it has been understood as the learning outcome of all lessons. Given the importance of critical thinking, it is crucial to have a thorough grasp of what it entails. The majority of critical thinking research looks at students' critical thinking ability using a quantitative instrument that operationalizes a certain conceptualization. However, there is still limited study on the strategies used by teachers in enhancing students' critical thinking skills. The lack of such understanding makes it difficult to design effective teaching strategy and interventions. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the elements of personal competency that Arabic language teachers need to encourage critical thinking in the classroom. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted on six experts in the Arabic language education at secondary school and public university. Transcriptions of the data were analyzed to generate matrix tables and themes through NVivo version.12. The findings revealed four primary themes through thematic analysis of the interview transcripts represented by 15 subthemes in terms of teacher's personal competences; (i) content mastery competence; (ii) pedagogical competence; (iii) communication competence, and (iv) organizational competence. However, the ways in which these themes appeared varied considerably among the experts. These results point to the variety of ways in which teachers can be expected to think critically. In respect to the findings of this study, some recommendations have been proposed for upcoming researches underpinning critical thinking competence as the main focus include the diversity of research type and data analysis techniques.

**Keywords:** Critical Thinking, Arabic Language Teacher, Teacher's Competence

### Introduction

In a world of tremendous diversity, foreign language acquisition is today viewed as a facilitator of globalization and a powerful tool for encouraging international peace and

intercultural understanding. In the light of current events, the introduction of new paradigms for foreign language learning and teaching has accelerated. The reasons for studying Arabic are compelling besides being the 5<sup>th</sup> most spoken language in the world, encompassing approximately 300 million speakers as it is the official language of 20 countries and an official language of the United Nations, Arab League, Organization of Islamic Conference and African Union. Furthermore, most careers namely journalism, business and industry, education, finance, banking, translation and interpretation, consultations, foreign service and intelligence demand for Arabic bilingual speakers, making it an important language to be acquired.

In Malaysia for instance, Arabic language is offered in most educational institutions as early as kindergarten both for liturgical as well as academic purposes. When compared to the religious and intellectual purposes to which the language has been subjected, the study of Arabic for communicative purposes is restricted. The challenges faced by non-native learners of Arabic may be generic or context-specific. In general, language acquisition is considered to be less demanding than language learning. Thus, the focus on the development of Arabic language teachers' competencies needs to be emphasized to create an impactful learning environment for students (Zieger, 2018). Competent teachers are able to deliver and improve the quality of Arabic language teaching (Nawi, 2011; Mustapa & Arifin, 2012). Without a good level of competence, all the policies formulated are difficult to achieve. Ibrahim et al (2015) stated that the success or failure of the teaching and learning process in the classroom depends entirely on the level of teacher competence. In addition, the competence of teachers to teach thinking skills is an important aspect to determine the ability of students to achieve higher order thinking skill. According to Mahamod (2014), education today requires critical teachers to train students to actively think in the mold of their respective disciplines.

Critical thinking is frequently included in the list of must-acquired competence for the 21<sup>st</sup> century education (Binkley et al., 2012). Similarly, critical thinking is one of the ten core competencies outlined in the Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills (ACT21S) document (Binkley et al., 2012). Educational development should focus on empowering learners' critical thinking (Strauss, 2016). The importance of critical thinking skills have been studied by many researchers in order to sustain the quality of teaching and learning (Fauzi & Pradipta, 2018; Spencer-Rodgers & Cortijo-Ocana, 2015). Some research have tried to figure out what degree of critical thinking competence students have in order to see if there is a way to improve critical thinking during educational sessions (Huber & Kuncel, 2016; Tiruneh et al., 2014). It has been proven that the empowerment of critical thinking skill remains of lack of importance in some countries. For example, Gedik (2013) found that critical thinking skills among Turkish students is still categorized as low. This is also supported by Aktas & Unlu, (2013) who stated that Turkish prospective teachers' critical thinking was low. Another study in Philippines also found that students in that particular country possess low level of critical thinking skills (Salas, 2016) and Malaysia (Fadhullah & Ahmad, 2017). In certain nations, the educational system's structures and procedures may hinder students from actively employing their thinking process, resulting in a lack of focus to critical thinking skill empowerment (Sellars et al., 2018).

Based on the previous study, the competencies of Arabic language teachers are still reported to be at an unsatisfactory level. Arabic language teachers admit that they have problems in understanding and implementing communication teaching approaches and certain skills (Mat & Ying, 2010). Moreover, the teaching implemented in the classroom is examination-oriented and uses textbook only (Mustapa & Arifin, 2012). This situation

constrains teachers from creating an engaging environment of teaching and learning Arabic that is critical in nature. In addition, other problems reported are the weakness of the teachers themselves in implementing appropriate pedagogical strategies (Saad et al., 2005; Shuheb, 2016), lack of teaching aids, and failure to utilize technology in teaching activities (Saad et. al., 2005). As a result, it is vital to identify the elements of critical thinking competence needed by Arabic language teachers to promote critical teaching and learning. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the elements of critical thinking competence of Arabic language teachers in Malaysia.

## Methods

A qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with experts was conducted to explore the personal competencies required among Arabic language teachers in order to meet the research objective. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with experts as suggested by researchers (Creswell, 2012; Saleh & Sam, 2010; Marican, 2009). Semi-structured interviews are used when the researcher requires specific information from the participants. The issues are predetermined prior to the interview and the researcher will conduct the interview based on the list of questions. Meanwhile, the form of the question is determined depending on the time and situation (Merriam, 2009). It is important that the researcher has a framework of research questions in mind (Yin, 2011). The samples were selected through purposive sampling due to the extensive experience of the experts in Arabic language teaching. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants based on the criteria determined (Merriam, 2009). A total of six informants were interviewed in this study. The selected informants have more than 15 years experience in Arabic language teaching. Akbari and Yazdanmehr (2014), supported that informants in the education field with more than five years of experience in the specific field can be classified as an expert. Three Arabic language education lecturers, two Arabic excellent teachers, and an Arabic language teacher's main coach are among the participants. Participant's profile is presented in Table 1.0.

Themes that have been generated from the review of the literature were used to develop the interview protocols. Experts in the field of Arabic Language and critical thinking were sought to ensure the validity of the interview protocol. In this study, three expert lecturers in qualitative and critical thinking areas were involved. Following validation, a pilot study was undertaken to train field researchers before the actual research began and to examine the weaknesses and improvements that need to be made to the interview protocol (Merriam, 2009). With the permission granted by the interviewees, the interviews were recorded and transcribed in a form of a verbatim, besides being validated by all informants in advanced before being analyzed, classified, and coded (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Thematic analysis was conducted from transcripts to examine statements related to the research questions. These statements were then grouped into themes through a constant comparative process by using N'Vivo 12.

Table 1.0

*Participants Profile*

No	Demography	Indicator	Total
1	<b>Academic Qualification</b>	<i>Bachelor degree</i>	2
		<i>Master</i>	1
		<i>Doctorate</i>	3
2	<b>Position</b>	<i>Arabic language education lecturers'</i>	3
		<i>Arabic excellent teachers</i>	2
		<i>Coach of Arabic language teacher.</i>	1
3	<b>Teaching Experience</b>	<i>&lt;5 years</i>	0
		<i>5-10 years</i>	0
		<i>11-15 years</i>	0
		<i>&gt;15 years</i>	6

**Results**

The findings of this study were organized thematically. Themes were generated through analysis by using Nvivo 12. Four primary themes associated with critical thinking competence were identified from the interviews: content mastery competence, pedagogical competence, communication competence, and organizational competence. Each of these themes is discussed further below:

Table 2.0

*Theme and Codes*

Themes	Codes
<b>Contents Mastery Competence</b>	<i>DSKP Mastery</i> <i>Arabic Language Skills</i> <i>Student Ability Level</i> <i>Syllabus Scope</i>
<b>Pedagogical Competence</b>	<i>Learning Needs</i> <i>Coordinating Teaching</i> <i>Student Learning Styles</i> <i>Applications of ICT</i>
<b>Communication Competence</b>	<i>Communication Method</i> <i>Active Interaction</i> <i>Setting Example</i> <i>Giving Feedback</i>
<b>Organizational Competence</b>	<i>Professional Discussion</i> <i>Teamwork</i> <i>Managing Teaching and Learning Activities</i> <i>Teaching Documentation</i> <i>Professional Development</i>

**Content Mastery Competence**

The findings of this study showed that content mastery is one of the elements needed by Arabic teachers to implement critical thinking in teaching. This is clear when several key subthemes of content mastery are identified to improve the ability of Arabic teachers in teaching such as DSKP mastery, Arabic language skills, student ability level and syllabus



scope. The DSKP document is the main guide that needs to be studied and mastered by teachers, especially to plan and conduct Arabic language teaching. Teachers need to act critically to modify and link teaching activities based on the four main skills of the Arabic language, namely the skills of *al-Istima'*, *al-Kalam*, *al-Qira'at*, and *al-Kitabah*. P6 supported as follows:

*"Based on DSKP, teachers not only need to compile a 'syllabus' and plan the RPH alone but they are flexible to modify the existing syllabus" (P6).*

Then further added,

*"...there are some skills that teachers need to master. Even the goal or purpose of the BA itself refers to the 4 main skills, namely maharat al-Istima', al-Kalam, al-Qiraat and, al-Kitabah" (P6).*

Meanwhile, the planned teaching content must also be in line with the level of ability of students. This requires a critical attitude of teachers to make teaching more fun and suitable. This subtheme is the main requirement to increase the interest and motivation of students to learn Arabic which is seen as a difficult subject based on its status as a foreign language in Malaysia. P3 directly pointed out,

*"In terms of 'content', that is, students' perceptions need to be changed, especially from seeing something very 'complicated', that is, difficult to easy, and at the same time injecting motivation into them to learn" (P3).*

P5 also gave an example,

*"For example, in relation to Tasrif Fe'el Madhi, they will use various creativities to produce interesting videos" (P5).*

In addition, the subtheme of the subject scope or syllabus should be taken into account by teachers to make Arabic language teaching activities higher in quality. Therefore, teachers need to first examine the scope of teaching content to be in line with the abilities of students and the objectives that have been outlined. P3 pointed out:

*"It is necessary to follow the syllabus or content and textbooks" (P3).*

and concluded that,

*"In fact, BA teachers need to master and understand the 'content' before teaching. Teachers need to 'study' first before teaching. " (P3).*

### **Pedagogical Competence**

Pedagogical competence is important to Arabic language teachers. This is because the ability of teachers to perform critical pedagogical activities will have an impact on student achievement. Thus, the subthemes agreed upon by experts in pedagogical competence consist of learning needs, coordinating teaching activities, student learning styles and applications of ICT. To coordinate teaching activities, teachers need to be prepared to make changes and be professional based on the needs and learning styles of students. This is agreed upon by P3 as follows:

*"The competence of a teacher to manage their pedagogical activities and teaching work must occur professionally." (P3).*

In addition, Arabic language teaching activities need to use various approaches and different teaching aids to increase students' interest in the subject. Some informants highlighted the following points;

*"... Most importantly I use the technique of 'blending teaching' and entertaining students. There, I will be able to assess the students' inclinations" (P5).*

*"...They give facts but do not make explanations. Telling but without elaborating..." (P2).*

P4 and P2 added that:

*"We use a lot of CD songs from Ust. Azahari that are in accordance with the KSSM Arabic syllabus as an entertaining educational approach. In addition, I also do Project Based Learning (PBL). Pupils got a textbook, but I produced a pop-up card using 4 pieces of A4 paper. So, each student has to produce one according to the title (Form 1/8 Title)." (P4).*

*"Teachers can make changes in the PDP and not the same all the time in terms of techniques, pedagogical practices, teaching aids every year." (P2).*

Furthermore, P3 also stressed that traditional teaching should be avoided to change students' perceptions of subjects which are considered difficult and outdated. He said,

*"...complicated and traditional teaching such as translation should be avoided so that the perception of learning Arabic that is always boring can be removed..." (P3).*

He also suggested the *deodrama* technique as one example of an effective method in teaching Arabic. That is,

*"... we know it as 'deodrama' which is how the teacher brings the outdoor environment into the classroom. For example, we discuss topics related to going to the Zoo. But, in reality, we can't go to the zoo with the students." (P3).*

On the other hand, the practice of teaching Arabic in the world of education is also seen to need to grow in line with the increase in various applications and current technologies. P5 gave a detailed explanation,

*"... try to expose students to using Tiktok, Facebook, Instgaram, Blog, YouTube, and they learn to edit and they will create various activities, apps, games, and everything they can do." (P5).*

### **Communication Competence**

In the context of teaching Arabic as a foreign language, teachers need to have the ability to communicate critically. The theme of communication is seen as important in the teaching of Arabic to increase students' ability to speak and communicate using the language properly. There are several main subthemes identified that need to be possessed by Arabic language teachers namely communication method, active interaction, setting examples, and

giving feedback. Communication plays an important role in creating interaction between teachers and students. Most informants stressed the importance of communication method to interact actively. P2 strongly stated that,

*"Teacher interaction can be seen clearly from their speech and communication in the classroom ..."* (P2).

P4 and P3 added

*"DSKP KSSM emphasizes Maharat al-Kalam in the teaching of teachers."* (P4).

*"...Communication today is very important as I said a moment ago..."* (P3)

Meanwhile, P5 addressed that the way to communicate will also create a meaningful learning environment and encourages students to master the key skills of the Arabic language.

*"As critical teachers we need to 'live' with our audience. We need to talk to the audience at the right level."* (P5).

P6 further added

*"When they are able to talk and interact well. They will definitely be able to master other skills well."* (P6).

In addition, the role of teacher communication is also seen as important in providing feedback to students in various situations on topics discussed. Most informants agreed on the importance of feedback in teachers' teaching practices through effective communication. They argued that,

*"And then, students will ask all kinds of challenging questions beyond our level of thinking."* (P6).

*"Students will refer to the teacher to solve a problem."* (P2).

*"... despite various tasks but they still try to complete perfectly. Because what can they do??? Because of love!!"* (P5).

On the other hand, the subtheme shows that examples are also needed by Arabic language teachers to develop self -personality as a guide and followed by students. This opinion has been outlined by several informants;

*"If we want to see our students speak using BA, we also need to show speaking skills in BA."* (P5).

*"...teachers need to show a critical -thinking appearance or personality so that students can see what the teacher is highlighting from the words, personality and way of speaking."* (P2).



At the same time, P6 also added that there is a need for Arabic language teachers to play an important role towards creating motivation for students to learn Arabic by making the school as a niche area of Arabic language communication environment. According to the informant,

*"...their presence from the middle east in particular will make this school a niche area to increase the motivation of teachers and students to communicate using Arabic well" (P6).*

### **Organizational Competence**

Organizational elements are also identified as competencies required by Arabic language teachers towards managing teaching practices. There are several main subthemes required by Arabic language teachers, namely professional discussion, teamwork, managing teaching and learning activities, teaching documentation and professional development. Professional discussions need to be established in the school community especially between school administrators, teachers and community members to fill up the gaps in managing Arabic language teaching activities. They directly pointed out:

*"...need a community that mutually supports the sharing of Arabic language skills with other teachers." (P4).*

*"School administrators work together when we take the initiative to discuss professionally." (P3).*

*"...always collaborate with the parents and teacher's association (PIBG) regarding the funds needed for Arabic language student activities." (P5).*

Meanwhile, teachers also need to constantly work in teams to improve skills and expertise. This is clearly based on the overall view of the informants who support the subtheme of teamwork which is seen as important to improve the management capacity of the teaching organization of Arabic language teachers. According them;

*"...through discussions with other friends. We will be able to top up new knowledge!". (P6).*

*"...who actively produce modules, judges, coaches and so on. Here, showing the competence of teachers also needs support in the form of groups (task force)." (P4).*

*"...act critically to produce an innovation in teaching if they are given full support." (P3).*

At the same time, Arabic language teachers also need to manage teaching and learning activities. This is because the time allocated for teaching Arabic is too short. This emphasis is clearly based on information from several informants such as;

*"So, a critical teacher will know how to manage time, prioritize and not turn down work and give reasons." (P2).*

*"Teachers need to be professional and efficient in managing the organization efficiently such as preparing RPH, reviewing student exercise books, making reflections, making assessments and so on." (P3).*

Furthermore, the informants of the study highlighted the subtheme of teaching documentation management in order to increase instructors' abilities to handle Arabic instruction in a systematic manner. As mentioned by P6:

*"... demonstrates our ability to be a good teacher to manage and organize through the systematic preparation of materials and documentation." (P6).*

Apart from that, the subtheme of professional development is also seen as important towards producing competent Arabic language teachers in the future. This is clearly evident through the active involvement of teachers in the workshops and professional development courses organized. A few informants made a justification with their own comments as follows:

*"These teachers have the ability to think and act critically to produce an innovation in teaching if they are given full support." (P3).*

*"Teachers need to prepare themselves to go to workshops to improve their respective competencies." (P6).*

*"... usually involved in camps for Arabic language programs in Kelantan such as the Tahbibul al-Lughah." (P5).*

## Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, a personal competency model of Arabic language teachers in critical teaching has been produced. This model is illustrated in Figure 1.0.

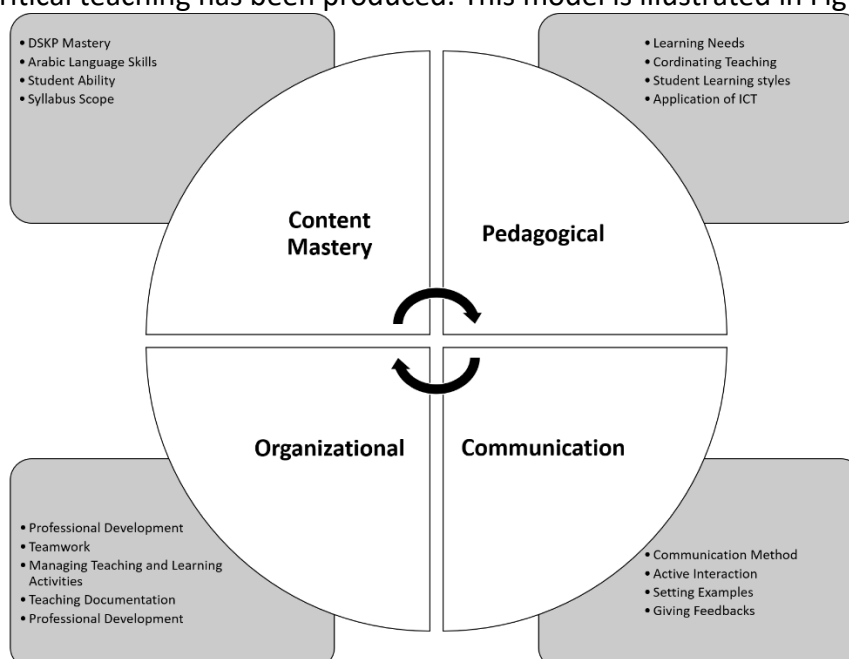


Figure 1.0 The Personal Competency Model of Arabic Language Teachers in Teaching

The overall findings reveal that content mastery competence, pedagogical competence, communication competence, and organisational competence represent the four primary themes in the personal competences of Arabic language instructors, as shown in Figure 1.0. These themes form the basis for developing the personal competencies of Arabic language teachers to implement critical thinking in teaching. These themes are represented by 15 subthemes that need to be possessed by Arabic language teachers at various levels. In fact, teachers need to master the content of Arabic language in order to plan teaching and learning activities. Content mastery allows Arabic language teachers to modify teaching activities based on the standard of curriculum documents and students' ability levels. In addition, it also encourages teachers to coordinate pedagogical activities effectively.

According to Spencer (1993), pedagogical competence refers to the notion of assessing one's ability to regulate learning. Pedagogical competency is constantly linked to a teacher's capacity to relate to a student's degree of comprehension, learning process, and self-actualization. In the context of Arabic language, pedagogical competence enables teachers to plan lessons in a structured manner and provide an active environment to improve high-level thinking skill among students. Subthemes that emerge under the pedagogical competence of Arabic language teachers include learning needs, coordinating teaching, student learning styles and applying ICT. Coordination between these elements will increase the readiness of teachers to implement the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language subject critically. Critical teaching activities will inject students' motivation and interest into Arabic subjects that are often seen as difficult and complicated. In addition, the role of technology is also seen as an important requirement to transform methodology of teaching Arabic language globally. Mulyasa (2007) defined pedagogical competence as is the capacity to manage learners' learning, which involves a knowledge of learners, instructional design and execution, evaluation of learning outcomes, and the development of learners to actualize their potential. Other than that, Arabic teachers should start pursuing a fresh vision of promoting Arabic's potential as a key mode of communication in a rapidly changing world besides developing the capacity to harness the resources offered by modern technology to enhance the effectiveness of their teaching in the classroom.

Furthermore, communication competence is also a priority in the teaching of foreign languages especially Arabic language spoken globally today. Active communication in learning activities will increase students' motivation and interest. In Arabic language education, several indicators emerge such as communication method, active interaction, setting examples and giving feedback. These subthemes create an active teaching and learning environment between students and teachers. Hakim (2015); Usman (2001) stated that one of the most important components of a teacher's interactions with students in the classroom is explanation, and most of the time, the instructor controls the discussion and has a direct effect, such as when offering facts, thoughts, or views. Therefore, its effectiveness must be addressed to achieve optimal results from the explanation and discussion so that it is meaningful to students. The description above explains that the learning activities require direct interaction between students and teacher, building rapport between one another to be ready to give and receive knowledge. Teaching delivered by teachers should have a variety of methods that can arouse enthusiasm and motivate students in the classroom where a teacher can achieve it through the communicative competence developed through his own teaching experience.

In addition, the organizational elements represented by several subthemes also contribute to the personal competence of Arabic teachers in teaching. Subthemes such as

professional discussion, teamwork, managing teaching and learning activities, teaching documentation and improving professionalism are some of the elements that prepare teachers to coordinate teaching activities in an organized and systematic manner. The capacity to manage teaching by teachers occurs holistically based on their ability to organize teaching very well. Koster et al (2005) supported that the role of teachers is not only to manage teaching activities in the classroom, but also to be involved in the school organization and external parties to achieve the desired goal. Muhammad Arifin (2015), also indicated that competence and organizational culture have positive and significant effect on teacher job satisfaction.

As a result, the researcher had shown the relationship between qualitative phenomena examined in a cycle of Arabic teacher competency in Malaysia. The components above show that despite the lack of competence of Arabic teachers in pedagogical aspects, the deficiencies can be embellished by other competencies. In other words, if the teacher's content mastery competence is good, then the lack of pedagogical competence will balance it. Besides, the results of this study also strengthen the concept that has been presented by Koster et al., (2005) in the professional profile for teacher educators which consists of four areas of competence; pedagogical competence, content mastery competence, communication/reflective competence and organizational competence. These findings also contributed to the concept of the effect between teacher's competence towards learning performance. Spencer (1993) concluded, that competency is an underlying characteristic of a person related to the effectiveness of individual performance on the job, and that competence is the basis of a personal characteristic that is the deciding factor in the success or failure of a person doing a job in a given situation (Mc Clelland, 1993).

## Conclusion

To summarise, today's education requires teachers to not only execute their tasks and obligations, but also to guarantee that their skills are continually strengthened in numerous areas in order to remain relevant in the present educational environment. Teacher competence is an important factor for the success of all teaching goals and objectives. In particular, Arabic language teachers need to be aware that competent teachers are professional teachers, skilled in pedagogical practice, master the content of the curriculum, skilled in managing teaching and have good communication skill. Various efforts and alternatives need to be sought in order to provide training plans to the teachers involved in an effort to improve their level of personal competence.

The findings of this study can be regarded as a support for some of the theories that have been presented. Scientific research support is a component of merit that aids in the development and selection of research undertaken by scholars and researchers in the area based on theory. The identification of various new indicators indicating constructs in teaching Arabic as a foreign language is one of the contributions of the current research. For research recommendation, this current study was conducted with a small sample size within a short period of time, hence the findings should be treated with care and caution. Future research should be conducted to gain further insights. Also, analysis of the written and verbal reflections should be useful in studying the reflection from teachers which can provide stronger empirical evidence of the findings.

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