THE ESSENCE AND STRUCTURE OF THE ARABIC LANGUAGE COMPETENCE
OF ISRAELI SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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This article addresses the ambiguity surrounding the concept of competence, as identified in prior studies. It highlights the lack of a universally agreed-upon definition, citing complex and overlapping interpretations encompassing skills, performance, and knowledge. Through a comprehensive review of existing research, the authors assert that competence's nuanced and precise meaning is context-dependent. Specifically, the article delves into language competence, examining its components in both general and school contexts. Focusing on Israeli high schools functioning in the multilingual environment, the authors offer a refined understanding of the essence and structure of the school students' Arabic language competence.

Keywords: language competence, secondary school students, Arabic language.

Introduction. Competence is a term of great interest to researchers in multiple disciplines; hence, they try to define it accurately and clearly. It is commonly used in various research areas, including biology, law, sociology, linguistics, economics, politics, and others; it has different meanings, contributing to the confusion resulting from its precise description, the functional view of competence, and the effort to develop it. These factors contribute to the widespread interest in research related to competence and its definition, aspects, and proper description. In addition, it is used in both written literary language and everyday spoken language, and it is widely used in various ratios with such words as "skill", "performance", "ability", and "experience".

It is important to note that the definitions discussed competence and defined it based on more than one criterion: skill, knowledge, and ability. However, there was some overlap between the various definitions, which necessitated a need for more clarity over the distinction between them. Although there is some ambiguity or a lack in the descriptions, shared higher criteria in the definitions, there is an ongoing argument over whether competence is a verb or a reaction. Competence, on the other hand, relates to the kinds of actions that a person ought to be able to carry out. So, we found that several researchers pointed to this issue and complained about the definition of competence.

Pedagogical literature analysis shows that the number of academic works that devoted to problems of the language competence of secondary school children is quite fragmented, and they do not provide a conventional definition. The issue of specifying the meaning and framework of every concrete competence seems to be significant when it comes to reflection on the general nature of the school students' language competence in their native language without reference to any educational curriculum or syllabus requirements which apparently may differ in different countries, be it Israel, Belarus, or others, as well as without reference to a particular language a child is acquiring as their mother tongue. As for the studies devoted to the development of Israeli secondary school students' language competence in Arabic, they have not been undertaken so far at all, while the terms "competence" in general and "language competence" in particular have been intensively used in academic texts for decades. This situation deprives the educational school practice a certain holistic direction. Thus, the purpose of our research is to specify the essence and structure of Israeli secondary school students' language competence in Arabic, based on the body of the existing general knowledge on the phenomenon of competence.

Main body. The difference in definition between competence and skill, as well as the degree of skill, has yet to be covered by the studies that have been done. Whether someone can be competent without being skilled? This misunderstanding has been brought up in Arab studies. For instance, competence is correlated to the lowest degree of skill, whereas skill is the highest level of competence [1; 2; 3; 4]. Therefore, the term competence can be used to communicate initial and fundamental skills, and the term skill can be used to describe excellent efficiency instead of the highest skill level.

Competence can be confined to doing the appropriate task in the proper sector. It means conduct, skill, ability, and the fields of education, self-development, and other related fields. Table 1 summarizes most of the definitions the researchers dealt with.

There is a significant number of researchers (S. Blömeke, J. E. Gustafsson, R. J. Shavelson, T. Hoffmann, J. Jacques, E. Klieme, J. Hartig, E. C. Short, A. Stoof, R. L. Martens, J. J. G. van Merienboer, T. J. Bastiaens, O. Wilhelm, R. Nickolaus, F. E.Weinert, P. D. Ashworth, J. Saxton) [14; 15; 16; 17; 18; 19; 20] who "highlight the ambivalence of the concept of competence, pointing out the fact that many implicit (in word use) and explicit (in theoretical frames of reference) definitions of competence are so heterogeneous that only a small, vague conceptual core remains" [18, p. 2], and sometimes it is "not clear whether a competence is a personal attribute, an act, or an outcome of action" [21, p. 16].

Table 1. – Main emphases in various definitions of competence

Emphasised component	Authors	Examples of definitions
Capacity	R.W. White, M. Mulder	"…an organism's capacity to interact effectively with its environment" [5, p. 301]. "Capability to perform effectively" [6, p. 13]. "Integrated set of capabilities" [6, p. 16]
Ability	F. E.Weinert, M. Eraut	"A competence is defined as the ability to meet individual or social demands successfully, or to carry out an activity or task" [7, p. 6]. "…the ability to perform tasks and roles to the expected standard" [8, p. 127]
Performance	R. E. Boyatzis	"It's characteristics that facilitate superior performance…" [9, p. 7]
Action, behavior	M. Thomann, N. Fernandez	It "arises from a concrete action through the deletion of one or more concrete components of the action" [10; 11]
Preparedness for work	P. Hager, A. Gonczi, M. Thomann, C. Velde	"Competence is perceived as a way of conceiving issues and problems that are relevant to the workplace" [12, p. 144]. Analogically in [10; 13]

Although there may be some overlap in the provided definitions of competence, it can be concluded that competence still covers a broader concept, encompassing skills, knowledge, and the ability to apply that competence effectively in different situations. So, competence can be described in other terms depending on the context in which it exists.

Regarding language as a field for competence application, and language competence as such, it is vital to look at the work of psycholinguistic researcher N. Chomsky, who considered linguistics a subfield of cognitive psychology. Knowledge of language is essential to competence, specifically, an implicit understanding of the structural characteristics shared by all a language's sentence. Although, before Chomsky, other scholars, such as R. Lado and J. B. Carroll, sought to describe the command of language by merely putting competence components; they believed it to be grammar, vocabulary, phonemes, and writing; nevertheless, they did not deal with the skills in defining it. After them, linguists B. Malinowski and R. Firth began to integrate language with its social and psychological surroundings. They named this the context of the linguistic situation. Finally, N. Chomsky identified two categories of linguistic ability: speech and competence [22].

H. L. Nostrand, one of the researchers who examined the texts-cultural authenticity, concluded that language competence is an efficient language communication that transforms verbal messages into connections [23]. It is also an oral and written communication skill about common knowledge. It relates to the fluency of achievement, which is part of the mental tool that exists in the human mind and utilizes it to generate and interpret language. Additionally, it is a capacity to communicate common knowledge orally and in writing. N. Chomsky thinks that the distinction between performance and knowledge of language is made because knowledge of language is mental rather than unconscious [22].

E. D. Bozovich says that "language competence should be considered as a psychological system, which includes two main components: data on speech experience accumulated by the child in the processes of communication and activity; and language knowledge learned through specially organized school learning" [24]. She highlights that, "according to the observations of teachers, methodologists, psychologists, the speech of many adolescents is more primitive than the speech of younger schoolchildren. There is reason to think that one of the factors hindering the development of language competence at the syntax level is the gradually deepening gap between the content of speech experience, insufficiently reflexed by schoolchildren, and the assimilated knowledge about the language" [24, p. 38].

A.V. Hutorskoy points out that language competence includes knowledge of the language, the ability to communicate and interact with other people, as well as to participate in collective activities [25].

All the aforementioned definitions refer to the significance of language skills and cognitive capacities that regulate language usage since these factors interact in the underlying language. Therefore, the issue that must be asked now is what exactly the elements that make up the language competence are?

Linguists have taken an interest in studying the components of the competence related to language and have attempted to discover the aspects that influence them. As a result of their efforts, they have developed a list of standard components [26; 27; 28].

1. Phonetics and phonology.These terms refer to the correct pronunciation of sounds and the comprehension of pronouncing them correctly.

2. Grammar and syntax. It contains grammatical aspects such as the formation and construction of sentences, the order and formation of words, and verbs and their conjugation, creating relationships and meanings of sentences.

3. Morphology. It refers to studying the structure and production of words. In addition to the laws of word construction, such as affixing and composition, there are also the rules of morphology and the formation of words.

4. Vocabulary and lexicon. These refer to the capacity to identify words and their meanings and apply them in various suitable circumstances.

5. Semantics. The study of the meaning of words and phrases, including the ability to explain and understand meaning, includes lexical and syntactic semantics, among other subfields.

6. Pragmatics. It deals with the link between comprehending and grasping hidden meanings and understanding and using language contexts, such as conversational and meta-conversational contexts.

7. Discourse and communication. This term refers to the organization, composition, and formulation of information in a verbal or written text.

Taking into account all the ideas mentioned above, we have developed the *contextual definition of the Arabic language competence of secondary school students*, which is a dynamic personal quality of a complex structure which includes two components: 1) *applied language experience in Arabic,* and 2) *theory-based knowledge of the Arabic language, proposed by the school syllabus.* The first component is divided into the following elements: (a) proficiency (a certain level) in Arabic as a native language; (b) synthesis of personal empirical observations of the Arabic language functioning, made by the student as a native Arabic speaker, regardless of special knowledge of the language. The second component is also divided into two elements such as: (a) categorical characteristics of the Arabic language units of different levels; (b) techniques or schemes of analysis of various types (phonetic, morphological, syntactic ones) and description of these units. Schematically, the structure of this entity has been shown in the figure.
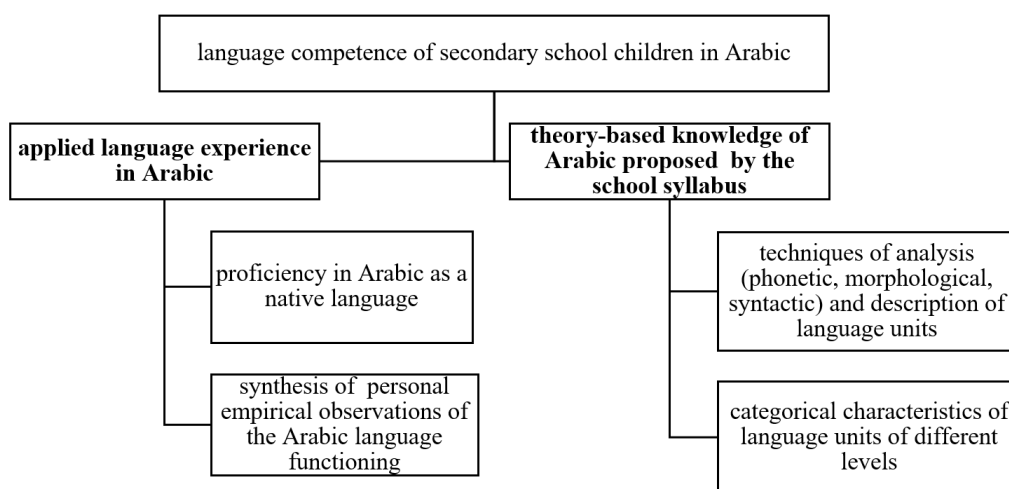

**Figure. – The structure of the Arabic language competence
of secondary school students**

We have tried to summarize the structure of the language competence in Arabic of secondary school children of grade seven, based on the established aspects of the competence as a model for this. It should be mentioned that Arabic is a native language for a particular fraction of Israeli school students, at the same time living in a bilingual environment, thus we are being based on this fact in the framework of our research.

Table 2 displays the language components within the key categories of the Arabic language school learning, accompanied by illustrative examples from the seventh-grade Arabic language curriculum [29]. The components and elements constitute the basis of the Arabic language competence (knowledge of Arabic) and are distributed under four headings: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Linguistic knowledge added to it is: grammar, morphology, semantics of words, punctuation marks, and dictation (spelling). It is essential to mention that some of these elements fall under more than one category.

Table 2. – The language components within the key categories of the Arabic language learning in secondary school, constituting the basis of language competence (knowledge of Arabic)

Aspects of the Arabic language learning	Language components	Descriptions	Illustrative applied examples	Examples for 7th grade students in Arabic
1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
Reading	Vocabulary and lexicon	The ability to identify words and their meanings (knowing and understanding) and apply them in various suitable circumstances [30]	When teaching reading comprehension, the type of text, the length of the text, and the number of the new vocabulary words in it are considered	If a student reads the word "ذُعر" (thueir), they need to know that it means "panic." Understanding this word is part of their vocabulary

Continuation of table

1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
Reading	Semantics of words	The study of the meaning of words and phrases, including the ability to explain and understand meaning. Includes lexical and syntactic semantics, among other subfields [30]	The student infers the meaning of the words in the text from the context. For example, in the activating text, student understands the meaning of words without relying on personal interpretation. The ability to understand the writer's opinions and positions in the text	Considering the words "فرح" (farah) and "حزن" (hozon), both meaning "gladness" and "sadness" respectively. Understanding when to use these words properly in a sentence demonstrates a grasp of their semantics
	Pragmatics	Deals with the link between comprehending and grasping hidden meanings and understanding and using language contexts, such as conversational and meta-conversational contexts [31; 32]	The student links causes to results and can detect contradictions in positions while presenting counterarguments. The student distinguishes rhetorical methods and their relationship to the content of the text	A character saying "بصراحة" (bisaraha) might convey honesty or openness in a conversation
Writing	Discourse and communication	Refers to the organization, composition, and formulation of information in a verbal or written text [33]	The student writes a story, or an event in which he imitates his diary entries, or uses appropriate linguistic structures to write a letter. In a text that is of type of a message, the student must adapt the writing style of the address and the discourse to the status of the addressee by understanding the choice of words, the language and the structure	When students are asked to write a paragraph in Arabic to describe a favorite location, they should follow to a defined format, which may consist of an introduction, several explanations and details, and a summary at the end
Listening and speaking	Phonetics and phonology	These terms refer to the correct pronunciation of sounds and the comprehension of pronouncing them correctly [28]	This skill is important to reflect clearer listening and speaking competence	Pronouncing the Arabic letter "ح" (ḥa) in words like "حيوان" (ḥayawan - animal) correctly, which is important for clear communication
	Discourse and communication	This term refers to the organization, composition, and formulation of information in a verbal or written text [33]	The student expresses his opinion about an issue, and also expresses his feelings and opinions in the audio text with an explanation	When students are asked about their opinion in a specific topic, students should be able to arrange their ideas and communicate them in an understandable way
Linguistic knowledge	Grammar and Syntax	It contains grammatical aspects such as the formation and construction of sentences, the order and formation of words, and verbs and their conjugation, creating relationships and meanings of sentences [34]	Identify the verb form, past present and imperative. Distinguishing types of nouns the agreement between verbs and nouns	In Arabic, students should be able to know that the verb form would change based on gender and the singular or plural subjects. In the sentence "الطالب يدرس" (altalib yadros - The student studies), the student should know that the verb "يدرس" (yadros) agrees with the singular noun "الطالب" (altalib)
	Morphology	It is a term that refers to studying the structure and production of words. In addition to the laws of word construction, such as affixing and composition [30], there are also the rules of morphology and the formation of words [35]	Knowledge of grammatical function built and expressed. Plural type of the root system, prefixes, suffixes	Students should define that the word "كتب" (k-t-b) is a root for words like "كتاب" (kitab- book), and "مكتبة" (maktaba - library). Students should be faimilar of suffixes, like "ات-" (at), which would indicate , when added, the plural form, as in "مكتبات" (maktabat – liberaries)

Ending of table

1	2	3	4	5
	Semantics of words	The study of the meaning of words and phrases, including the ability to explain and understand meaning, includes lexical and syntactic semantics, among other subfields [30].	Understanding meanings from context, connections and extracting ideas not stated in the text. Cultural and contextual awareness of the meanings of words	A word like "جميل" (jameel) would have meaning of "beautiful", but it can also be used to show appreciation for someone's character or actions in some contexts.

Conclusion. Therefore, our research shows that the usage of the term "language competence" has not had a conventional definition in pedagogical discourse for years. Taking language as a field for competence application, it is fair to admit that the language competence as such has not received a conventional understanding, too. What is in common for some studies is that their definitions refer to the significance of language skills and cognitive capacities that regulate language usage. Having synthesized existing researchers' opinions on that phenomenon, our study has allowed us to define key characteristics of the Arabic language competence of secondary school students as a dynamic personal quality of a complex structure which includes two interrelated components such as applied language experience in Arabic and theory-based knowledge of the Arabic language, proposed by the school syllabus. The first component includes two elements: proficiency in Arabic as a native language and synthesis of personal empirical observations of the Arabic language functioning, made by the student as a native Arabic speaker, regardless of special knowledge of the language. The second component includes categorical characteristics of the Arabic language units of different levels and techniques of analysis of various types (phonetic, morphological, syntactic ones) and description of these units. This understanding provides operational characteristics of the language competence subjected to practical pedagogical impact. The provided structure of the secondary school students' Arabic language competence makes secondary school language education more focused and provides clear benchmarks for the measurement of education outcomes.

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СУЩНОСТЬ И СТРУКТУРА ЯЗЫКОВОЙ КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТИ УЧАЩИХСЯ СРЕДНИХ ШКОЛ ИЗРАИЛЯ В АРАБСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

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Исследуется проблема неоднозначности дефиниций, связанная с концептом компетентности, выявленная в имеющихся исследованиях. Статья подчеркивает отсутствие общепризнанного определения, обращаясь к сложным и пересекающимся толкованиям, включающим навыки, эффективность деятельности и знания. Посредством всестороннего обзора существующих исследований авторы считают, что конкретный смысл понятия компетентности зависит от контекста. В частности, в статье рассмотрена сущность языковой компетентности, изучены ее компоненты, как в общем контексте, так и в контексте школьного обучения. Сосредоточив внимание на израильских средних школах, функционирующих в условиях многоязычия, авторы предлагают уточненное понимание сути и структуры языковой компетентности старших школьников в арабском языке.

Ключевые слова: языковая компетентность, учащиеся средней школы, арабский язык.