



## **BUILDING EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS' PROFESSIONALISM IN ARABIC LANGUAGE LEARNING: AN EXPLORATIVE STUDY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF COMPETENCE THEORY AND SOCIOCULTURAL**

**Sri Zulfida<sup>1</sup>, Nuruddin<sup>2</sup>, Muhammad Kamal<sup>3</sup>**

**Universitas Negeri Jakarta<sup>123</sup>**

**sri.zulfida@mhs.unj.ac.id<sup>1</sup>, nuruddin.unj@unj.ac.id<sup>2</sup>, m.kamal.ah@unj.ac.id<sup>3</sup>**

### **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to explore the professional competence of Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers in learning Arabic, especially in Islamic education units in the Riau Islands region. This topic is important considering the increasing need for Arabic language learning from an early age, which has not been matched by the readiness of teacher competence in the field. This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to understand the meanings, strategies, and dynamics of social interactions that color the practice of teacher professionalism. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participatory observation of five early childhood teachers, and analyzed thematically with reference to professional competence theory and sociocultural theory. The results show that teachers have high initiative in developing play-based and interactive teaching strategies, despite facing limitations in training and specific teaching materials. Their learning practices show integration between pedagogical content knowledge and socio-cultural approaches, including the application of scaffolding and the creation of zone of proximal development (ZPD). The findings confirm the importance of institutional support and contextualized teaching materials to strengthen teachers' professionalism on an ongoing basis. The research contributes to the development of theory and practice of second language education in the early years, and provides a basis for the development of more reflective and adaptive Arabic language learning training and curricula. Recommendations are directed towards the development of contextualized teaching materials and collaborative practice-based teacher training in the future.

**Keywords:** teachers' professional competence, early childhood education, Arabic language, qualitative case study, sociocultural approach

### **INTRODUCTION**

Early childhood education (ECE) plays a fundamental role in shaping the foundation of children's sustainable cognitive, affective and social development. Within the framework of 21st century human resource development, PAUD teachers are required not only to have basic pedagogical capacity, but also to be able to present a learning process that is reflective, contextual, and relevant to the dynamics of society. Teachers' professional competence, in this case, is the main requirement in ensuring the quality of meaningful and sustainable learning. Various studies state that teachers' professional competencies consist of content mastery, pedagogical skills, communication skills, and reflective and innovative attitudes. (Arifin et al., 2020; Zulkipli et al., 2022). In the context of early childhood education, this complexity increases as teachers must adapt learning strategies to the very specific stages of early childhood development. (Tuah et al., 2021). However, various field findings show that many ECD teachers in Indonesia do not fully

understand or are able to fully implement professional competency standards in their daily practices. (Latifa & Eliza, 2023; Syafril et al., 2020).

The challenge becomes even more complex when it comes to teaching foreign languages, particularly Arabic, at the ECD level. The increasing demand for Islamic value-based education has prompted many ECD units to incorporate Arabic into their curriculum. However, most PAUD teachers do not have an adequate background in Arabic language education, both in terms of linguistic competence and pedagogical strategies (Aziz et al., 2021; S Umar et al., 2022; Zulfida et al., 2024). As a result, the learning process often runs mechanistically, not in accordance with the characteristics of early childhood language development which relies more on social expression and sensorimotor experiences (Edwar et al., 2022; Musthofa & Fauziah, 2021). In many cases, teachers tend to rely on rote memorization or repetition without strong contextualization, making it difficult for children to internalize the meaning of the vocabulary taught (Arrasyid & Istiqomah, 2021; Hamidi & Bagherzadeh, 2018). This reality indicates a serious gap between the demands of the curriculum, the readiness of teachers and the needs of children.

A number of studies underline that foreign language learning in ECD should be based on social interaction and cultural mediation, in accordance with the sociocultural theory developed by Vygotsky. In this approach, teachers act as mediators who facilitate children's learning process through scaffolding and meaningful social activities (Deshmukh et al., 2022; Romeo et al., 2022). However, this kind of practice requires professional competence that is not only technical, but also reflective and contextualized (Ghorbani et al., 2018). In practice, PAUD teachers have not been given much training that integrates linguistic aspects with child development approaches and their socio-cultural diversity (Bacus & Macalisang, 2024; Kaļķe et al., 2022). Academic supervision, institutional support, and strengthening learning communities are also weak factors in the ecosystem of ECD teacher competency development, especially in areas with limited access such as Riau Islands (Alamsyah et al., 2024; Riyandanita et al., 2020).

Studies on teacher professional competence have so far been dominated by quantitative approaches, which focus more on measuring the achievement of standards or evaluating policies (Shidiq et al., 2022; Shopia et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the processual, reflective and interactional dimensions of teachers' professionalism practices have not been studied much in depth, especially in the context of Arabic language education at the PAUD level. This gap then encourages the importance of conducting research with an exploratory qualitative approach that is able to explore the subjective meanings and real practices of teachers in developing their professional competence (Buzzelli, 2018; Stepic, 2022). Such studies not only broaden our understanding of the dynamics of Arabic language learning from an early age, but also offer methodological and theoretical contributions in the development of more contextualized and transformative teacher training models and education policies.

Within this framework, this study aims to explore how the professional competence of ECD teachers is realized in the practice of learning Arabic, by focusing on the dimensions of teacher understanding, learning strategies, challenges faced, and forms of social interaction that occur in the context of learning. This research uses a qualitative case study approach to gain an in-depth and contextual understanding of the dynamics of professionalism of Islamic-based ECD teachers in the Riau Islands region. The theory of teacher professional competence formulated by Shulman through the concept of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), as well as Vygotsky's sociocultural



theory became the main conceptual foundation used in analyzing data and interpreting findings (Shulman in Ghorbani et al. 2018; Vygotsky in Romeo et al. 2022).

This research is not only academically important, but also has strong practical relevance. On the one hand, it seeks to expand the conceptual understanding of the integration between professional competence and inclusive and communicative Arabic language learning practices. On the other hand, it makes a concrete contribution to the development of ECD teacher training programs that are based on local needs and reflective practice. Through an in-depth exploration of teachers' experiences, this research is also expected to enrich the literature on foreign language learning in early childhood, which has so far received little attention in educational studies in Indonesia. This research is also expected to be an important reference in the formulation of policies to strengthen the capacity of early childhood teachers in a systemic and context-based manner.

The problem formulations raised in this study include: (1) How do early childhood teachers understand professional competence in teaching Arabic? (2) What strategies do teachers use in teaching Arabic to early childhood? (3) What are the challenges faced by teachers in implementing Arabic language learning? (4) How do teachers' social interactions with children, parents, and colleagues support the development of professional competence? This problem formulation is not only a guide for field exploration, but also a meeting point between theory and practice that this research aims to bridge. Thus, this research stands on a strong academic foundation, is contextually relevant, and has the potential for substantial contributions in the realms of theory, methodology, and ECD teacher education policy in Indonesia.

## METHOD

This research used a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore in depth the meanings, experiences and practices of ECD teachers' professional competence in Arabic language learning in an Islamic-based school environment. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the complexity of phenomena from the perspective of the subjects studied, including the dynamics of social interactions, cultural contexts, and teachers' personal meanings of their professional practices (Creswell in Ghorbani et al., 2018). Case studies are used as the main strategy because they allow researchers to focus on one case or a small number of cases that have distinctive characteristics and are relevant to the formulation of the problem, namely how teachers' professional competence is realized in the context of early childhood Arabic language learning (Buzzelli, 2018; Stepić, 2022). This design was deemed most appropriate to address the exploratory, reflective and contextual research objectives and to explore how teachers experience, understand and implement their professional competencies in practice.

The subjects of this study were five PAUD/TK/RA teachers who teach Arabic in the Riau Islands region, who were purposively selected with the following inclusion criteria: (1) actively teaching children aged 4-6 years in Islamic-based education units; (2) having a minimum of two years' experience in teaching Arabic in PAUD; and (3) willing to fully participate in the research process, including interviews and classroom observations. Exclusion criteria were set for teachers who were only assisting or did not yet have a full role as the main teacher in learning activities. The choice of location in the Riau Islands was based on consideration of the unique socio-cultural context as well as the representation of local community-based Islamic education that is growing rapidly in the region (Alamsyah et al., 2024; Riyandanita et al., 2020). The number of subjects was

determined to be limited but representative for the purposes of a qualitative study, given that the focus of the research was not on statistical generalization, but on the depth of understanding of the context and meanings socially shaped by the teachers.

The main instruments in this study were semi-structured in-depth interview guides and open-ended participatory observation sheets. The interviews were structured based on the indicators of teachers' professional competence that have been formulated by Zulkipli et al. (2022), and the framework of social interaction in learning according to sociocultural theory (Deshmukh et al., 2022; Romeo et al., 2022). The interview guide included themes on teachers' understanding of professionalism, Arabic teaching strategies, teaching challenges, and forms of interaction with children, parents and colleagues. Meanwhile, the observation sheet was designed to record teachers' verbal and non-verbal behaviors during the learning process, including the use of scaffolding, responses to children, and consistency between lesson plans and implementation (Shidiq et al., 2022). The content validity of the instrument was developed through analysis of curriculum documents and the results of theoretical studies, while reliability was strengthened through readability testing by two PAUD expert lecturers and early childhood Arabic language practitioners.

The data collection procedure was conducted in three stages. First, the preparation stage included licensing to educational institutions, preparing schedules, and training research assistants. Second, the field data collection stage, which includes conducting in-depth interviews face-to-face (conducted outside of teaching hours) and direct observation of the Arabic language learning process in the classroom for a minimum of two sessions per teacher. Observations were conducted with a moderate participatory approach, where researchers were present in the classroom without interfering with the dynamics of learning (Latifa & Eliza, 2023). Third, the documentation and transcription stage, where all recorded interview data and observation notes were transcribed verbatim and analyzed systematically. The whole process took place over a period of three weeks, taking place in five PAUD institutions spread across Tanjungpinang and Bintan District.

The data obtained were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, which included open coding, thematic categorization, and theoretical interpretation based on the theoretical framework of professional competence and sociocultural theory. Each unit of data was analyzed inductively to identify patterns, meanings, and trends that emerged from teachers' narratives and field observations (Ghorbani et al., 2018; Zulkipli et al., 2022). The resulting themes were then linked to dimensions of competence theory such as pedagogical content knowledge, professional reflection, and instructional innovation, as well as to sociocultural concepts such as zone of proximal development, scaffolding, and social mediation in language learning (Hamidi & Bagherzadeh, 2018; Romeo et al., 2022). To increase the validity of the findings, data triangulation between interviews, observations, and learning documents was conducted, as well as member checking with teachers to confirm the interpretation results.

With the above design and procedures, this research is expected to authentically describe how ECD teachers' professional competence in Arabic language learning is formed, practiced, and interpreted in a specific socio-cultural context, as well as provide theoretical and practical contributions in the development of ECD teacher education that is more inclusive and transformative.



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Research Results

This research revealed five main themes that describe the form and implementation of ECD teachers' professional competence in Arabic language learning. These themes were generated through thematic analysis of in-depth interview data and participatory observation of five preschool teachers who teach Arabic in the Riau Islands region. Each theme is described based on the dimensions of professional competence theory (Zulkipli et al., 2022; Shulman in Ghorbani et al. 2018) and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky in Deshmukh et al., 2022; Romeo et al., 2022).

#### 1. Teachers' Interpretation of Professionalism in Arabic Language Learning

Most teachers understand professionalism as the ability to deliver learning in a fun, communicative and developmentally appropriate manner. Teacher A stated that "professionalism is not only being able to teach, but being able to make children happy while learning," which reflects the affective dimension in professional competence. (Latifa & Eliza, 2023). Teacher B emphasized the importance of method adaptation by saying, "Sometimes we plan A, but in class it changes according to the children. That's where professionalism is tested." This affirms the role of spontaneous reflection in the practice of professionalism (Shidiq et al., 2022; Zulkipli et al., 2022).

However, some teachers also recognize their limitations, especially in the aspect of mastering the structure of the Arabic language. Teacher C stated, "I learned Arabic only from textbooks. There is no special training." This reinforces the findings Bacus & Macalisang (2024) that PAUD teacher training has not specifically touched on foreign language teaching.

#### 2. Pedagogical and Linguistic Strategies in Arabic Language Teaching

All teachers use a multimodal approach in delivering materials, including through songs, card games, body movements, and simple role plays. Observations showed consistent use of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method, especially when introducing new vocabulary.

Teacher A explained that "movement makes it easier for children to catch on. If you just say it, they forget it quickly." Teacher D combines cards and hand puppets to deliver short stories containing Arabic vocabulary, combining cognitive and emotional aspects in the learning process (Musthofa & Fauziah, 2021).

However, challenges arise in curriculum consistency and structure. Teacher E admitted, "I created my own materials because there is no specific Arabic guide for PAUD." This is in line with the findings Edwar et al. (2022) which emphasizes the need for contextual curriculum support.

#### 3. Challenges and Obstacles in Developing Professional Competence

Most teachers cited lack of specific training, limited learning resources and preparation time as the main constraints. Teacher B stated, "We are often trained on administration, but there is rarely specific training on teaching Arabic to young children." This reflects the teacher training policy gap highlighted by Riyandanita et al., (2020).

Teacher D also highlighted the lack of technological support: "If there is an interactive application specifically for Arabic-speaking PAUD children, it would be very helpful. But so far it is not available." This is in line with the issues raised Berezhna & Bessarab (2024) related to the limitations of contextual digital media.

#### **4. Meaningful Social Interaction and the Use of Scaffolding**

Observations show that social interactions between teachers and children are intense and positive. The teacher mentions the child's name in sample sentences (e.g. "This is 'ainun Laila"), provides scaffolding through verbal prompts ("Ra'..."), and creates a two-way dialog in the classroom (Romeo et al., 2022).

Teacher A stated, "I want children to feel valued, so I often call their names when explaining." Teacher C encourages children to ask each other questions in simple Arabic. This practice not only reflects the application of the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development), but also the social function of language as a tool to mediate learning (Hamidi & Bagherzadeh, 2018).

In observations, children were seen helping each other during role-playing and vocabulary naming, showing the formation of educational social relations that support collaborative learning.

#### **5. Consistency between Lesson Plan and Actual Practice**

Observations show that teachers consistently implement the daily learning activity plan. All stages from opening, material delivery, play activities, to reflection went according to plan, but remained flexible when class dynamics occurred.

Improvisation was shown when the teacher changed the method to singing when the children began to lose focus. Teacher E said, "Children cannot be forced to sit for long. We must quickly change activities to keep them active." This reinforces the reflection dimension of teacher professionalism (Ghorbani et al., 2018).

The use of time is also very effective, with no empty learning sessions. The children were enthusiastic, able to repeat the vocabulary correctly, and demonstrated an understanding of the basic meaning as per the language learning outcome indicators (Zulkipli et al., 2022).

#### **Discussion**

The main findings of this study show that ECD teachers' professional competence in learning Arabic language is still within a varied spectrum, reflecting the complexity of experiences, meanings, and pedagogical strategies that each teacher has. Within the theoretical framework of professional competence developed by Shulman through the concept of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), it can be seen that most of the teachers studied are able to integrate mastery of Arabic content with teaching methods that are in accordance with the characteristics of early childhood, such as the use of Total Physical Response (TPR) methods, games, songs, and visual-kinesthetic aids. This strengthens the argument Zulkipli et al. (2022) that professional teachers not only master teaching materials, but are also able to design learning strategies that are meaningful and fun for children.

The consistency of this finding with previous literature can be seen in the observation results which show the spontaneous reflection of teachers in responding to classroom dynamics, such as adaptation of methods when the class begins to lose focus. This is in line with the findings of Shidiq et al. (2022) that reflection is one of the characteristics of professional teachers who are oriented towards the needs of learners. However, not all teachers demonstrate a deep theoretical understanding of the concept of professional competence. Some teachers articulate professionalism in a pragmatic way, limited to active engagement and academic success of children, without linking it to the reflective and sociocultural dimensions as described by Latifa dan Eliza (2023).

In the context of Arabic learning strategies, teachers adopt intuitive approaches and personal experiences, instead of using methods based on second language development



theories. This finding confirms the findings of Musthofa dan Fauziah (2021) that most Arabic language teaching in ECD is still mechanical, focusing on repetition without a systematic approach. This disconnect indicates a gap between theory and practice, and the need for more targeted teacher training. In this regard, Bacus dan Macalisang (2024) highlighted the lack of specific pedagogical training for ECD teachers in foreign language teaching, including Arabic, which has resulted in low creativity and teaching effectiveness.

In terms of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, this study shows that teachers have applied the principles of scaffolding and zone of proximal development (ZPD) through strategies such as verbal prompts, use of body cues, and group work. This practice is in line with the view of Deshmukh et al. (2022) that early childhood learning should be facilitated in meaningful social contexts, with gradual support from more competent adults. Despite this, teachers' theoretical awareness of these concepts is still low, as also revealed by Hamidi dan Bagherzadeh (2018) that scaffolding is only effective if teachers understand when and how to apply it contextually.

This finding expands our understanding of the teacher competency model by emphasizing the importance of social context and local values in shaping professionalism. In some cases, teachers adapted methods to children's cultural backgrounds, such as using local songs adapted in Arabic, or reinforcing Islamic values through story narratives. This approach supports the argument that Romeo et al. (2022) that social mediation in language learning is an important element in building children's cognitive and linguistic abilities.

However, some notable differences from the literature were also found. For example, unlike what Edwar et al. (2022) that contextual classroom-based training can significantly improve teacher professionalism, this study found that despite sufficient teaching experience, without systematic training teachers still show confusion in designing learning that is in line with children's developmental stages. This shows that experience alone is not enough to shape professionalism, but must be accompanied by mentoring and training based on theory and practice.

The theoretical implication of this study is the need to develop a professional competency model that not only emphasises knowledge and skills but also reflective awareness, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to build meaningful social relationships in the context of language learning. This study reinforces the importance of integrating competency and sociocultural theory as an analytical framework for examining the professionalism of early childhood education teachers.

From a practical perspective, these findings provide a basis for designing more contextual and specific teacher training for Arabic language instruction at the PAUD level. Training institutions and Islamic PAUD providers can use these findings to develop training curricula that include modules on second language pedagogy, scaffolding techniques, and meaningful play-based learning design. Additionally, educational policies such as the Merdeka Curriculum need to be balanced with appropriate human resource development support to ensure that the freedom to develop local content like Arabic is not hindered by teacher limitations (Riyandanita et al., 2020; Sudarso et al., 2019).

The limitations of this study include its limited scope to five teachers in the Riau Islands, making it impossible to generalise the results. In addition, the data is descriptive-qualitative and highly dependent on the teachers' subjective narratives, although validity has been enhanced through triangulation and member checking. Another limitation is the

absence of longitudinal tracking of teachers' professional development post-observation, so it is unknown whether their practices changed or evolved after a particular intervention.

Recommendations for future research include expanding the location and population of teachers, using a mixed-methods approach to quantitatively measure the effectiveness of strategies, and further exploring the influence of institutional values and local policies on teacher professionalism. Further research could also focus on designing a systematic model for early childhood education teacher training based on the integration of PCK and sociocultural factors, so that the findings of this study can be applied on a larger scale and influence national education policy.

Thus, this discussion shows that the professional competence of PAUD teachers in Arabic language learning is not only determined by individual factors but is also greatly influenced by institutional support, social context, and deep theoretical understanding. A contextual, reflective, and interactive approach has proven to be a strategic path to strengthening teacher professionalism and improving the quality of language education for young children in Islamic educational environments.

## CONCLUSION

This study has explored in depth how the professional competencies of early childhood education teachers are manifested in Arabic language teaching practices in Islamic educational institutions in the Riau Islands region. Using a qualitative approach and case study design, this research successfully identified five main themes that directly address the objectives and research questions, namely: (1) teachers' understanding of professional competencies, (2) pedagogical and linguistic strategies used in Arabic language instruction, (3) structural and cultural challenges in implementing instruction, (4) the role of social interaction in learning mediation and competency enhancement, and (5) consistency between lesson planning and implementation. The research findings indicate that, despite various limitations such as unspecialised training and non-standardised curricula, teachers are able to demonstrate adaptive, reflective, and contextual professionalism, particularly in fostering social interaction and implementing learning strategies aligned with children's developmental needs.

The main theoretical contribution of this study lies in the integration between the theory of teacher professional competence (Zulkipli et al., 2022; Shulman in Ghorbani et al., 2018) and sociocultural theory Vygotsky (Deshmukh et al., 2022; Romeo et al., 2022), which shows that teacher professionalism is not only determined by mastery of content and methods, but also by the ability to build meaningful and contextual social relationships. From a practical perspective, this study provides strategic insights for the development of teacher training based on real needs in the field, as well as the importance of building a learning support system that is sensitive to the characteristics of early childhood and local values in Islamic education.

Specifically, the main recommendation resulting from this research is the importance of developing contextual, visual Arabic teaching materials that are appropriate for the cognitive development of early childhood. The lack of relevant teaching materials is one of the main obstacles teachers face in designing engaging and meaningful learning experiences. Therefore, educational institutions and policymakers need to provide modules, picture books, interactive media, and activity guides that integrate basic Arabic vocabulary into daily activities in early childhood education classrooms. These teaching materials will not only enrich teachers' learning resources but also serve as a strategic tool to enhance their professional competencies in a structured

manner. Additionally, integrating teaching materials into teacher training can bridge the gap between theory and practice, which has remained separate until now.

This study also recommends conducting further longitudinal research to examine the development of teachers' professionalism as they use systematically developed teaching materials. Future research is also advised to explore the effectiveness of a training model based on real classroom practice supported by thematic teaching materials designed according to the principles of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development. With this approach, the strengthening of PAUD teachers' competencies in Arabic language instruction can be carried out in a sustainable, contextual, and measurable manner, while also making a tangible contribution to the quality of early childhood education rooted in values, culture, and language.

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