

Competence-based language curricula: implementation challenges in Africa

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Drawing on a case study design, this article examines the real-life adaptive challenges secondary school teachers of English in Uganda face while implementing the 2020 English language competence-based curriculum innovation. Findings indicate that scarcity of instructional materials, time constraints and large class sizes, limited planning and stakeholders' support, dissonance between local culture and learning styles significantly underlie complications ESL teachers face adapting and implementing competence-based curricula innovations in English language classrooms in low-income contexts in the global south. The experiences of teachers in Uganda resonate across most global south ESL educational contexts. They illustrate the universality of challenges teachers face and are likely to face when implementing competence-based curricula in sub-Saharan Africa and the wider global south where the teaching and learning of English is premised on facilitating acquisition of English language for meaningful interaction.

Key words: language curriculum, competence-based curricula, curriculum implementation, Africa, Uganda

Introduction

As part of the wider effort to improve the quality of teaching and learning and to equip future generations of Africa with competences necessary to work and innovate for today's job market, competence-based curricula are being introduced across a wide range of countries in sub-Saharan Africa including Rwanda, Tanzania, Kenya, Cameroon, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Ghana, and South Africa. However, several challenges have been encountered during the process of adapting and implementing this new curricula, including time constraints, insufficient teaching and learning resources, lack of stakeholder clarity and training about the new curriculum innovation, and overcrowded classrooms, among others (Komba and Mwandaji 2015; Makunja 2016; Nyoni 2018; Cheptoo and Ramadas 2019; Mutale and Malambo 2019; Amunga, Were, and Ashioya 2020). Similar challenges are likely to hinder effective implementation of the same in Uganda despite well-intentioned efforts of the innovation.

This article seeks to align with these studies by drawing on a case study of the real-life challenges secondary school teachers of English language in Uganda face when implementing the competence-based English language curriculum. The article seeks to foreground and give voice to the concerns of the key curriculum implementation stakeholders—the teachers—who are oftentimes at the periphery of the macro policy-level decision-making process of curriculum innovation in Uganda.

The Ministry of Education and Sports in Uganda through the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) introduced a Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) in secondary schools in 2020 and has since held training sessions for teachers across the country on how to implement the new curriculum. The CBC emphasizes learner-centered pedagogies and integration of technological and practical innovations in the teaching/learning process. The 2020 secondary school Language Competence-Based Curriculum (LCBC) replaced the 2008 Integrated English teaching syllabus that emphasized the use of integration at either subject or unit level as opposed to the teaching of language in isolated compartments like grammar, vocabulary, comprehension or writing (NCDC 2020a). While the former syllabus focused on classroom interaction and content coverage, the latter emphasizes the practical enactment of the outcomes of the learning process as opposed to simply mastering knowledge of English as a content subject. The competent learner according to the LCBC ‘is one who uses the knowledge and skills learnt across the subjects on the curriculum, to deal with daily life problems’ (NCDC 2020b: vi). Teachers are the major stakeholders in the implementation process as they are expected to bridge the gap between theory and practice by interpreting and ensuring that the desired policy goals are achieved. Hence, in this case study we focus on the secondary school teachers of English language in Uganda to establish the challenges they have so far faced in implementing the 2020 LCBC curriculum. Teachers’ challenges should not be underestimated but warrant critical and careful consideration by those intending to implement a competence-based curriculum in low-income contexts in the global south.

Methodology

The study used a case study research design (Simons 2009). The case study employed qualitative research methods to collect data that sought to investigate: what challenges have Ugandan teachers of English language faced when implementing the LCBC? The case study research design enabled an in-depth exploration of the challenges of implementing the LCBC policy within a real-life Ugandan context of the implementers using a variety of data collection research methods such as key informant interviews, documentary analysis, focus group discussions (FGDs) and open-ended online survey. Two specialists in charge of overseeing the development of the English language curriculum at Uganda’s National Curriculum Development Centre were purposively selected and interviewed in-depth to provide background information about what teachers are expected to know and steps to be taken to implement the LCBC in Uganda. To enable the researchers to gain teachers’ insights on the implementation process, 69 in-service teachers of English trained in the implementation of the LCBC were purposively selected to respond to a qualitative open-ended online survey form whose link was shared on a WhatsApp group comprising of teachers of English and Literature from different parts of the country. An informed ethical consent was sought from each participant

on the study. Lastly, three FGDs were held with teachers of English to elaborate and unpack some of the responses received from the qualitative survey, and to formulate themes about the implementation challenges that emerged. Data collected from the interviews and FGDs was transcribed and repeatedly read and discussed by the researchers before it was coded along thematic and sub-thematic strands. Quotes from interview transcripts were selected based on emerging themes and sub-themes and the most repeated were highlighted, themed and coded.

Findings

Scholars within Africa have highlighted the challenges faced in implementing the CBC including overcrowded classes, insufficient instructional materials, lack of readiness for teachers and learners to take up the changes, weak teacher training institutions and limited support from policy makers (Komba and Mwandaji 2015; Makunja 2016; Mutale and Malambo 2019). This scholarship resonates with the current study as participants involved in implementing the 2020 LCBC English language curriculum in Uganda identified the following challenges: *scarcity of instructional materials, time constraints and large class sizes, limited planning and stakeholders' support, and dissonance between local culture and learning styles*, which are discussed below.

Scarcity of instructional materials

A total of 65 out of 69 teachers who responded to the qualitative survey form indicated that limited and/or lack of materials was the number one challenge facing the implementation of the LCBC in Uganda. One respondent stated that:

Some classroom activities require frequent purchase of perishable and non-perishable materials. With bureaucracies of procurement processes in government schools, administrators and teachers may not be able to purchase all the required materials and this is a challenge particularly in universal secondary education schools where parents may be resistant to purchasing materials for their children, not because they do not want but because they cannot afford to do so. Even administrators of privately owned schools don't want to spend extra money, they see it as a loss of profits.

Besides frequency and bureaucracies of materials procurement, absence of internet and ICT equipment for learners in the classroom, lack of computers, and power blackouts are other cited resource challenges. One respondent noted that 'the framers didn't have rural schools and students in mind as such, some schools struggle financially to implement LCBC'. Further, the LCBC emphasizes the integration of ICT at different levels of teaching and yet the gadgets and skills are inaccessible to most of the teachers and learners as noted below:

Not all learners have access to learning resources like computers due to the crowding in classes yet the new curriculum emphasizes the use of ICT, the teachers too are challenged since many are not equipped with the ICT skills.

In one of the lessons I was to use technology to teach about communication. I did not have the gadgets to use to get the whole class to participate. I had only one personal small laptop computer in a class of 50 students. All the students ended up cramming around it. They couldn't all see nor hear very well. The class ended up being a disaster.

There was also concern about the mode of distribution and quality of the available materials such as the English Language and Literature in English Senior One textbooks:

A few language textbooks were only sent to government funded schools. Private schools were left to fend for themselves. Even the texts sent to public funded schools were very few and not proportionate to the large populations of schools in universal secondary schools funded by government.

Teachers' responses suggest that they still consider textbooks to be the major resource, yet the LCBC requires other realia such as pictures, foodstuffs and radio adverts for topics such as 'personal life and home', 'finding information', 'food', and 'at the market' that are in the language syllabus.

According to the CBC guidelines, a school day should start at 8:00 am and instruction should end at 2:40 pm, and between 2:40 pm and 4:30 pm learners are supposed to be under the supervision of teachers as they do their creativity and innovation activities. Only 4 hours (six periods of 40 minutes each) per week is allocated to the teaching and learning of English. Participating teachers of English argued that the innovations in the curriculum are time-consuming as the 'teacher will be spending more time in preparation to ensure that the activities enhance higher order thinking skills'. More so, the time allocated is not enough to cover all the content, especially while using the teaching strategies suggested by the LCBC:

The new curriculum requires students to participate in group work, roleplay, class presentations, yet, the time allocated for the subject is not enough to engage in such time-consuming activities. For example, under the topic 'The Market', students are supposed to visit a market near their school, listen to a radio advert about markets, write an advert, write about their experiences in the market, etc. It is hard to cover the syllabus.

Another teacher was concerned about the time needed to listen to all the students and their points of view:

There is an argument by the new curriculum that the learners have knowledge of the content, they are not a clean slate. Giving learners time to share their experiences is time consuming yet this is the basis of the competence-based curriculum.

The time constraint is compounded by the large class sizes that are a common phenomenon in Ugandan secondary schools. Over 70% of the respondents to the questionnaire indicated large classes was a major setback especially when carrying out participatory and collaborative teaching and learning. The sitting arrangement in the CBC implementation process requires students to sit in groups facing each other as opposed to the traditional position where they all had to face the blackboard. One of the teachers who commented in the FGD stated:

You step into a class and there are more than 100 students, even simple things like distributing materials and listening to their presentations consume time. For example, if they are supposed to read aloud for the class, it means only two to three groups will have a chance to present and receive feedback.

Time constraints and large class sizes

Limited planning and stakeholder support

These time constraints imply and produce inequalities in a large class whereby some students will be left behind because their work will not receive audience from the rest of the class and perhaps the teacher. Language learning in particular requires that students should practice with the different skills such as speaking and listening for them to be competent users of the language being taught. However, in a large class such practice can easily deteriorate into chaos as learners find their pace. This challenge is more widespread across sub-Saharan Africa as is, for example, highlighted by Foley and Masingila in their expository study of the challenges of large classes in higher education (Foley and Masingila 2014). Participants noted that large classes pose challenges of peer bullying and discrimination based on tribalism, students with special learning needs and those who are shy and have 'low self-esteem' find it difficult to participate as they find large groups intimidating: 'some students, when given group assignments, tend to lose their individuality. They don't participate directly, which makes assessment difficult'.

While the NCDC language specialists stated that stakeholders were consulted during the curriculum innovation, participants observed limited teacher involvement. The seminars for training on curriculum implementation were brief, lacking adequate time for comprehensive learning, and lacked a follow-up mentorship program. Initially, teachers faced confusion due to discrepancies between local cultural and resource realities and the new curriculum's expectations. One typical response was that:

. . . when they asked us to come for the workshops and be taught how to implement the curriculum, it was like fitting a square peg into a round hole. The entire process of shifting from the old to new in such a short time was confusing and chaotic. I found myself asking, what am I supposed to do? What is going to be examined at the end of the cycle by UNEB? Where will I get the resources to pull off the recommended activities? The training was a one-off and was outside the classroom – the context where the implementation is supposed to take place and this makes it difficult to translate the workshop training into actual classroom practice.

The response underscores the formidable obstacles encountered by teachers when transitioning from the old curriculum to the new iteration. The metaphor of fitting a square peg into a round hole explains the perceived incongruence between the imparted training and the pragmatic demands of executing the curriculum. The deliberate description of the process as "confusing and chaotic" indicates the profound disorientation experienced by teachers amidst the abrupt pedagogical shift. This teacher also raises important queries concerning the overarching objectives and results of the curriculum change, articulating uncertainties surrounding examination criteria, resource accessibility, and the feasibility of recommended activities. This reveals that teachers didn't get clear guidance and support during the transition. In addition, the teacher's criticism of the one-time training being outside the classroom is important as it points out the gap between the training and the actual teaching, making it hard for teachers to use what they learned in the classroom.

The lack of ongoing support or follow-up makes this problem even worse. This all points to how important it should have been to emphasize a more thoughtful approach to changing the curriculum by focusing on continuous support, clear guidance, and making sure that training matches the real challenges teachers face in the classroom.

Respondents also noted that ‘there is lack of a critical mass of trained teachers to implement the new LCBC’. English is not only a compulsory subject but is also the language of instruction in Uganda, hence the training of teachers should have been extensive starting right from university by training pre-service teachers to be prepared to implement the curriculum as noted by the teacher below:

There is a lack of students from primary level with competences that would help them hit the ground running in Senior 1. There was a need to create a culture in them that tallies with the new curriculum. The framers had to create a competence-based curriculum right from primary to O’ Level and finally to A’ level. At the moment, students are introduced to a new mode of studying, yet cues of what they would find in O’ Level should have been offered right from primary.

Indeed, several teachers who participated in the FGDs confirmed that they were part of the training as one teacher said: ‘NCDC is training. I have attended several training workshops’. However, there was pushback from participants who said that their regions had not received any training:

In most of the schools at our side, in Kaberamaido we were not trained at all. And to make matters worse, we do not have any materials.

The issue of training teachers on the implementation of LCBC raised detailed discussion and it was clear that this was an ongoing activity (beyond the time of data collection) as noted below:

Between 19 and 24 October, NCDC is conducting regional training for teachers on assessment in the revised lower secondary school curriculum and now you of Kaberamaido, you will go to Teso College Aloit.

As noted above, the training of teachers was still insufficient at the time of this study, yet the curriculum was being implemented. This led some teachers to continue using the old English textbooks that basically use teacher-centered approaches because NCDC has not provided sufficient resources:

The old English textbooks are still good but the challenge is that with the nature of the methodology in the competence-based curriculum they always advocate for giving activities in class, yet the old books were into giving lots of information.

In this way the implementation of the LCBC is undermined because the teachers, students and parents do not seem to be on the same page, as some people have stuck to the old curriculum due to lack of adequate support to plan and use the innovations in the classroom.

Parents are co-partners in enabling successful implementation of the CBC in general. Hence it is expected for them to play some roles such as

providing extra materials and time to supervise their children's practical activities as noted below.

Parents have not been fully engaged and brought to the full knowledge of the new system – they do not support their children to procure the resources necessary for class activities. Even for common things like giving the family history like for that topic 'My family', some parents are reluctant to give the necessary information.

Yet other respondents thought that perhaps the education levels of the parents are responsible for this lack of commitment. After all, the English language activities are meant to be administered in English and the process of translation could be difficult for the parents and students to negotiate:

Some parents have developed a negative attitude towards this curriculum because they can't communicate using English, so when children ask questions in English it is like they are provoking them.

Again, this attitude hurts the implementation of the LCBC because the learners' chances for finding materials, answers, and for practicing the skills are limited due to the context outside the school.

Data from FGDs and the survey suggested that part of the implementation challenges is directly related to students' attitude and limited readiness to take up the curriculum innovation due to inconsistencies between local cultural norms and learning styles promoted by the new curriculum. Some participants revealed that:

There is a huge challenge with getting students to search for information [one of the topics in the LCBC is 'Finding information'], students still need to learn the research culture that wasn't inculcated in them while still in primary.

Now for a topic like 'The market' the students have to visit the market as part of fieldwork. The language of transaction is usually the local language and here we are teaching English. Obviously, the students will have to improvise to get the information they need and it is part of the learning process but it takes longer.

Learners' attitude to work by themselves is still negative due to the old orientation of a spoon-feeding learning style and this presented a challenge to some of the participants as some of them said:

The exam-oriented teaching practices whose focus is on knowledge acquisition and regurgitation in the exams have seriously impacted the teaching of competences which focus on practical applications of language skills.

Most learners don't understand it still. They are used to receiving from the teachers always. They sometimes don't make notes until they are told. Yet now it is their duty to develop their own notes with minimal guidance from the teacher.

The new language curriculum requires learners to do individual research study even on things like vocabulary and do guided discovery; however, there is a low reading culture which hinders research among learners.

Inconsistencies between local culture and expected change in learning styles

These learning styles, where students are on the receiving end, are coupled with some of the cultural and religious orientations of students, to make collaborative learning of English difficult. Some students seemed to struggle to work in groups whereby at least three teachers reported that it was hard having 'boys work freely with girls' because of the school ethos.

The new curriculum calls for a high sense of confidence and even situations where a learner can challenge teachers and find information peers and adults in society. However, one teacher observed as follows:

Some learners fear to express themselves as they are afraid of being judged as disrespectful which could be a cultural issue. Culturally if one is older than you, you listen to them as a sign of respect so students fear to talk back or have back and forth conversations with teachers for fear of being disrespectful. Students are unwilling to partake of certain interactive activities.

The core of the LCBC is focused on the learner and what they should do and say after experiencing the innovations, hence such beliefs will hold back the implementation process, specifically if the students are not ready to take on the practical aspects of the language curriculum.

The challenges facing the implementation of the CBC as shown above resonate with many other educational contexts on the continent (Komba and Mwandaji 2015; Cheptoo and Ramadas 2019; Mutale and Malambo 2019; Akala 2021). However, it is important to note that most of these studies focused on the general implementation of CBC and not a specific subject as is done in this article. Different subjects have peculiar implementation needs, hence it is important for the implementation training sessions to target specific subject teachers. For instance, as a language of instruction, English cuts across the entire curriculum and directly affects its effective implementation, hence the need for targeted training of teachers. Alternatively, subjects could be grouped according to closeness in content and delivery, e.g., all language teachers for both local and international languages could be trained together. On the other hand, the teachers from the sciences and humanities could also be grouped according to proximities within their subjects.

It is commendable that the government of Uganda through NCDC has undertaken the necessary steps to train some teachers and other stakeholders in the implementation of the CBC in Uganda. However, the imbalance in the training of teachers is quite visible, with some teachers saying they have trained multiple times while others have not trained at all. That said, it was encouraging to note teachers guiding each other on the possible future training venues, which highlights the fact that teachers can contribute to the implementation process by sharing relevant information and materials about the LCBC with each other. In addition, as recommended by other scholars in contexts where the implementation of CBC is still a challenge, the teacher training institutions should be brought on board to offer continuous training and retooling of teachers because they are in a position to have a multiplier effect (Makunja 2016; Akala 2021).

Discussion and conclusions

This study revealed that teachers' lack of awareness and knowledge of curriculum innovation impedes effective implementation as has been found in other education contexts beyond sub-Saharan Africa such as China (Wang 2013) and the global world (Wedell and Grassick 2018). Wedell and Grassick observe that, oftentimes, during the process of curriculum change, 'those responsible for curriculum implementation at local level are rarely informed or consulted' because of 'the 'linear, sequentially ordered industrial production line" kind of hierarchical top down planning and implementation process' (Wedell and Grassick 2018: 3). Curricula change decisions and processes are decided along a top-down management model which process forecloses the voices of key stakeholders in the implementation process, such as teachers. However, despite the fact that several participating teachers were not yet fully on board, most of the participants could clearly describe the different topics, teaching activities, materials and the modes of assessment in the LCBC. We acknowledge the fact that we did not use classroom observation as one of the research methods, but the participants' descriptions can be considered as the first steps of understanding the innovations. Nonetheless, teachers' knowledge could be enhanced further with additional resources from NCDC to address some of the possible controversies when teaching some topics such as 'My family' where some students may not have families and such assignments could cause distress.

The LCBC aligns well with some of the recommended approaches of teaching English such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). These approaches are largely learner-centered and suggest using real-life situations consistently to practice and learn a new language. Whereas such consistency can lead to language acquisition as pointed out by NCDC (2020a), it should be noted that the actual language aspects such as grammar appear to be allocated less attention because the focus is mainly on the various activities. As shown in the findings, the students may not have the space and human resources to experiment on their English language skills due to the multilingual practices in society. Hence the teacher's supervisory role becomes more pronounced to ensure that the activities of integration are carried out effectively. Otherwise, it would be a moot point to assume that the students automatically follow through with the instructions to find their own information about English language.

Finally, the limited sensitization of all stakeholders in the implementation process is one of the challenges that has featured in the findings above. Actively involving students and parents by engaging them in debates and training about the innovations in the curriculum may lead to increased uptake of this curriculum innovation. The media—newspapers, radio and TV shows—can also support this process if it is intentionally and consistently exploited to this effect.

This article shares important evidence on the challenges teachers face implementing competence-based curricula in English language classrooms in low-income ESL contexts. It is hoped that this evidence will likely be useful to stakeholders in curriculum innovation working in sub-Saharan Africa and the wider global south.

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