

Implementation of Competency-Based Lessons in Class: Case Study: Luweero Region in Uganda

Sarah Kobusinge

Mazzoldi College School– Nakaseke, Uganda

amootisarah2@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the implementation of competency-based lessons (CBL) in secondary schools in Uganda following the introduction of a competency-based curriculum in 2020. The study's objective is to assess the impact of CBL on learners' academic achievement and teachers' teaching practices, focusing on the Luweero region of Uganda. The study involved 282 secondary school teachers from 84 government-aided and private schools. Over 10,000 learners were sampled from Nakaseke, Nakasongola, and Luweero between August 2022 and March 2023. Different subject teachers participated in focus group discussions (FGDs), and lesson observations were conducted to represent each discipline. Thematic coding was used to analyse the data, revealing that many teachers must be more adequately prepared for CBL and prioritise achieving intended learning outcomes. The study recommends providing teachers with more training and professional development opportunities to enhance their understanding and implementation of CBL. The themes from the data analysis included content coverage, tracking progress over three years, and managing learner activities during delivery time. The study highlights the need for continued efforts to support the successful implementation of competency-based education in Uganda.

Keywords: Assessment, Competency-Based Lesson, Preparedness, Science and Mathematics Teachers.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a global shift towards Competency-Based Education (CBE), which focused on the mastery of specific skills and knowledge rather than just completing a set of prescribed learning activities (Jung et al., 2018). In Uganda, the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) introduced a new secondary school curriculum emphasising CBE, which is being implemented nationwide. This called for a shift in the traditional teaching practices to align with the goals of CBE. Schools/classes were designed to provide a learning environment for exploration, self-awareness, and connecting with other children.

This study aims to examine the implementation of competency-based lessons in classes in the Luweero region of Uganda and to assess their impact on learners' academic achievement and teachers' teaching practices.

The CBC challenges traditional notions of grading, promotion, and even classroom dynamics. Support from administrators can help drive this cultural shift at an institutional level, while parents can reinforce it at home.

The findings indicate that assessing individual learner performance in CBL, especially during group activities, was challenging as some learners dominated the discussion while others remained passive.

The learning resources available ought to support a competency-based pedagogy rooted in behaviourism, mastery learning, and modular teaching (Molders, 2004). Furthermore, these resources rarely encourage learners to engage in higher-order thinking skills. Notably, the teacher's guides available provide limited guidance on facilitating mastery of these activities (Nakiguli et al., 2022).

The textbooks supplied in schools still reflect some elements of the traditional curriculum. For example, working out numbers in mathematics textbooks hinders learners' creativity and promotes rote learning among learners. Over 220 teachers (about 78%) responded that textbooks and other reference materials supplied reflected a traditional way of teaching. This hinders teachers from adopting the new teaching and learning styles.

Some learning activities in the textbook cannot relate to learners' lived experiences, making it hard for them to see the relevance or importance of the concepts they are learning. Generic skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication are essential for success in many aspects of life, but textbook activities focus more on content knowledge. By integrating these skills, learners may develop them adequately.

Competency-based instruction emphasizes diverse learning modalities, such as musical, visual, and logical-mathematical thinking. However, teachers often need explicit guidance on integrating information and communication technology (ICT) into this teaching approach. According to the survey, 53 schools possess ICT tools. Their primary uses include storing learners' scores, typing and printing reports, addressing learners during assemblies, and entertainment. These tools are seldom employed to enhance classroom learning.

Methodology

This part highlights the research design, study area, population description, sampling design, methods of data collection, data processing as well as data analysis and interpretation.

Research Design

The researcher adopted a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is a type of research that aims to gather and analyse non-numerical (descriptive) data in order to gain an understanding of individuals' social reality, including understanding their attitudes, beliefs, and motivations (Elizabeth et al., 2022). The study explored ways competency-based lessons are applied in classes and various challenges associated with implementing competency-based lessons in classes in the three districts comprising the Luweero region.

Area of Study

The study was conducted in secondary schools in the Luweero region (the districts of Nakaseke, Nakasongola, and Luweero), both government-aided/community and privately-owned schools. Schools in urban, semi-urban, and rural areas were visited. The choice of the study area was due to the convenience the researcher had in accessing the schools and having many acquaintances in the schools, teaching in one of the schools in the same region, and being the Regional Trainer (SESEMAT) for Luweero region, something that eased getting of the required information.

Population of the Study

The study involved 282 secondary school teachers from 84 government-aided/community and privately-owned secondary schools and over 10,000 learners from Nakaseke, Nakasongola, and Luweero districts.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to choose different categories of respondents. Teachers were chosen according to their subject disciplines because they are classroom implementers in CBC. The learners of S1, S2 and S3 were selected because they are the beneficiaries of the CBC.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed qualitatively. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. The researchers coded and identified categories and patterns emerging from the data collected. The categories were categorized into themes to support writing of key findings. The researcher presented findings on each theme.

Findings and Recommendation

Theme One: Classroom teaching practices used in selected secondary schools for effective implementation of competence-based curriculum

What is the current status of competency-based lessons in the Luweero region of Uganda? What challenges do teachers face in implementing competency-based lessons in the Luweero region? How do learners perceive competency-based lessons in the Luweero region of Uganda?

Findings

The research findings indicate that implementing competency-based lessons in the Luweero region of Uganda is still at an early stage. Kafumbe (2019) posed that teachers face significant challenges in implementing competency-based lessons due to a lack of understanding of the concept and, inadequate training, limited resources, including textbooks and technology, which also pose a significant challenge to the successful implementation of competency-based lessons.

During an FGD in most schools, teachers raised concerns about the challenges they face in implementing competency-based lessons.

On the other hand, students have generally positive perceptions of competency-based lessons, finding them more engaging and interactive than traditional teaching methods. According to Mwesigwa (2019), students appreciate the practical focus of the lessons and the development of competencies relevant to their future careers. During lesson observation, teachers needed to create an environment for learners to describe, explain, demonstrate, create, or design to develop content during lessons. It was also found that in most classes there are a big number of students which has led to a very high textbook learner ratio.

Findings showed that there are few teachers in the Luweero region who prepare adequately for lessons using the skills acquired from SESEMAT training. Teacher preparedness regarding knowledge, attitude, and skills to create CBL needs to be improved (Nthulanyane, 2004). Teachers' preparedness consists of content analysis from the learning outcomes to create exercises, activities, and experiences geared to learning.

Most Focus Group Discussions revealed that due to limited number of textbooks in schools, teachers avail to students textbooks by different authors which may affect the lesson's logical flow. Although the skills expected to be achieved by the student are clearly stated in the syllabus book for each subject, teachers need to be oriented on how to develop these skills during the teaching and learning process.

According to the subsequent FGDs, only a minority of the teachers in the Luweero region knew the kind of students who aspired for competence-based curriculum. Of the 282 teachers interviewed, only 34 understood this concept of competence based. In comparison, the remaining 148 teachers were still rooted in the old systems prioritising examination performance over mastery of competence, which, as a result, hinders the successful implementation of competency-based lessons in the region. It is suggested that the teachers handling competency-based lessons in their classrooms must be adequately prepared to identify key concepts of learning outcomes.

Recommendations

From the research findings, the following recommendations were made to improve the implementation of competency-based lessons in the Luweero region:

There is a need for more training and professional development opportunities for teachers on the concept and implementation of the CBC. Owuor (2022) argues that teachers should be fully prepared to implement competency-based lessons. The study recommends enhancement in teachers' capacity in ICT through continuous in-service training, seminars, and workshops, providing certification to teachers, and providing scholarships for further studies to teachers who excel in order for them to become professional teachers.

To be effective, competency-based lessons must be supported by flexible, individualised, and diverse resources. This means not just having textbooks and technology but ensuring they are tailored to the unique requirements of a competency-based system. Failure to provide these resources can hinder the approach's success thus limiting its potential benefits for learners.

There is also a need to encourage school administrators and parents to support the implementation of the CBC by doing the following:

- i) School administrators should enforce curricular changes.
- ii) School administrators should be transparent and accountable in controlling the budgets, staffing, and resource allocation for successful implementation.
- iii) School administrators should facilitate and prioritise training to equip teachers to handle the demands of a competency-based system.
- iv) The parents, as primary observers of their children's growth, should provide valuable feedback on the effectiveness of the CBC. Their insights can help schools refine and improve the implementation process.
- v) Both the school administrators and parents should advocate for higher-level educational policies that support CBC.
- vi) School administrators can help drive a cultural shift of grading, promotion, and classroom dynamics at the school level, while parents can reinforce it at home.
- vii) Parents should ensure that the home environment is conducive to the educational approaches adopted by schools.

The findings suggest a pressing need to ensure that only approved textbooks relevant to the current CBC are available in the market. In order to optimise the learning experience for students, it is recommended that teachers only bring a single textbook to the class that portrays the required competencies of a given subject.

Teachers need to create a conducive environment to bring their students into a cohesive and supportive learning community by:

- i) Determining the appropriate and manageable number of learners in each group.
- ii) Ensuring the sitting arrangements encourage collaboration, communication, creativity, and innovations, among others, and impact the value of respect, love, and citizenship.
- iii) During lessons, teachers should enable learners to develop content from their prior knowledge and experience, including those from home culture. Kimaryo (2011) argues that implementing a competency-based lesson in classes is still complex since teachers still focus on developing content for the learners, hoping that they will automatically develop the intended competence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, implementing competency-based lessons in the Luweero region of Uganda is still in its infancy and it's too early to make conclusions. However, there is evidence to show that teachers face several challenges in implementing this approach. Students generally, however, have positive perceptions of competency-based lessons. To improve the implementation of CBE, teachers and school administrators need more training, resources, and support. By addressing these challenges, the Luweero region of Uganda can better prepare students for the future and equip them with the necessary competencies for success.

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