

Teacher Competence and Implementation of the Competence-Based Kiswahili Curriculum in Lower Secondary Schools in Uganda: A Case Study of Selected Schools in Mukono District

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Abstract: *This study examined the relationship between teacher competence and the implementation of the competence-based Kiswahili curriculum in lower secondary schools in Mukono District, Uganda. Following Uganda's adoption of the competence-based lower secondary curriculum and the elevation of Kiswahili to a compulsory subject, effective implementation has depended heavily on the capacity of teachers to deliver learner-centred, competence-oriented instruction. The study investigated how subject-matter mastery, pedagogical competence, assessment competence, and language proficiency relate to curriculum implementation. A cross-sectional survey design with a mixed-methods approach was adopted, and data were collected from 180 respondents comprising Kiswahili teachers, heads of language departments, and head teachers using structured questionnaires, lesson observation checklists, and interviews. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression were used for analysis. The results revealed a strong positive and significant relationship between teacher competence and curriculum implementation ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$), with the competence dimensions jointly explaining 52.4% of the variance in implementation ($R^2 = 0.524$). Pedagogical competence and language proficiency emerged as the strongest predictors. The study concludes that teacher competence is central to the effective implementation of the competence-based Kiswahili curriculum and recommends targeted in-service training, structured mentoring, and improved teacher preparation in learner-centred pedagogy and assessment.*

Keywords: teacher competence, competence-based curriculum, Kiswahili, curriculum implementation, lower secondary schools, Mukono District, Uganda

1. Introduction

Curriculum reform has become a defining feature of education systems across Africa as governments seek to align schooling with the demands of contemporary economies and societies. Uganda's introduction of the competence-based lower secondary curriculum in 2020 represents one of the most far-reaching such reforms in the country's recent educational history, replacing a largely content-driven, examination-oriented model with one that prioritises the acquisition of demonstrable competencies, learner-centred pedagogy, continuous assessment, and the practical application of knowledge (NCDC, 2020; Ministry of Education and Sports, 2023). Within this reform, languages occupy a position of particular significance, since language competence underpins learning across the entire curriculum and shapes learners' capacity to participate in regional and national life.

Kiswahili holds a distinctive place in this reform. As one of the official languages of the East African Community and a language of wider communication across the region, Kiswahili has been accorded increasing prominence in Ugandan education policy, and its designation as a compulsory subject in the lower secondary curriculum reflects both regional integration commitments and national aspirations for linguistic and economic participation in East Africa (Ssentanda & Nakayiza, 2022; East African Community, 2021). The competence-based approach to Kiswahili departs sharply from earlier grammar-translation and rote-memorisation traditions, requiring instead that learners develop functional communicative competence—the ability to listen, speak, read, and write Kiswahili for authentic purposes (Mukama & Nabirye, 2023).

The success of any curriculum reform, however, ultimately depends on the teacher. Curriculum documents, however well designed, are mediated through classroom practice, and it is the teacher who translates policy intention into learning experience (Fullan, 2021). Teacher competence in this context is multidimensional. It encompasses subject-matter mastery—a secure command of Kiswahili language, literature, and structure; pedagogical competence—the ability to design and facilitate learner-centred, activity-based lessons consistent with competence-based principles; assessment competence—the capacity to design, administer, and interpret continuous and formative assessment of competencies rather than of recalled content; and language proficiency—the teacher's own fluency and accuracy in Kiswahili, which conditions their ability to model the language and conduct instruction in it (Shulman, 1987/2021; Tondeur et al., 2021).

The Ugandan context presents particular challenges for the implementation of the competence-based Kiswahili curriculum. Many teachers assigned to Kiswahili were trained under content-based paradigms and may lack familiarity with competence-based pedagogy and assessment (NCDC, 2020). A shortage of specialist Kiswahili teachers means that the subject is sometimes taught by teachers with limited proficiency in the language, and in-service training on the new curriculum has been uneven in coverage and depth (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2023; Ssentanda & Nakayiza, 2022). Mukono District, situated in central Uganda within

the greater Kampala metropolitan corridor, hosts a diverse mix of government and private lower secondary schools implementing the reform under varying conditions of staffing and resourcing, making it an instructive setting in which to examine how teacher competence shapes implementation (Nakato & Kigozi, 2023).

2. Statement of the Problem

Uganda's competence-based lower secondary curriculum requires that Kiswahili be taught in a learner-centred, activity-based manner that develops demonstrable communicative competencies, supported by continuous formative assessment (NCDC, 2020). Ideally, teachers should possess the subject mastery, pedagogical skill, assessment expertise, and language proficiency necessary to deliver instruction in this mode. In practice, however, implementation of the competence-based Kiswahili curriculum in lower secondary schools in Mukono District has been inconsistent, and the extent to which teacher competence accounts for this inconsistency has not been established through rigorous empirical research (Mukama & Nabirye, 2023; Nakato & Kigozi, 2023).

Observations and stakeholder reports from the district suggest that many Kiswahili lessons continue to follow content-transmission patterns rather than competence-based approaches, that continuous assessment is applied mechanically or inconsistently, and that some teachers assigned to the subject lack adequate proficiency in Kiswahili itself (Ssentanda & Nakayiza, 2022; Ministry of Education and Sports, 2023). These deficits are compounded by uneven access to in-service training on the new curriculum and by the legacy of content-based teacher preparation (Fullan, 2021). Yet the precise contribution of each dimension of teacher competence to the quality of implementation remains unclear, which hampers the design of targeted capacity-building interventions.

If this problem remains unaddressed, the competence-based Kiswahili curriculum risks being implemented in name but not in substance, learners will not acquire the communicative competencies the reform was designed to develop, and the substantial national investment in curriculum reform and regional language policy will yield limited returns (East African Community, 2021). This study therefore sought to establish the relationship between teacher competence and the implementation of the competence-based Kiswahili curriculum, and to identify which competence dimensions most strongly influence implementation, so as to provide an evidence base for effective intervention.

3. Main Objective

The main objective of the study was to examine the relationship between teacher competence and the implementation of the competence-based Kiswahili curriculum in lower secondary schools in Mukono District, Uganda.

3.1 Specific Objectives

- i. To assess the level of teacher competence among Kiswahili teachers in selected lower secondary schools in Mukono District.
- ii. To determine the level of implementation of the competence-based Kiswahili curriculum in the selected schools.
- iii. To establish the relationship between teacher competence dimensions (subject-matter mastery, pedagogical competence, assessment competence, and language proficiency) and curriculum implementation.
- iv. To determine the relative contribution of each competence dimension to curriculum implementation.

4. Literature Review

Research on teacher competence and curriculum implementation is anchored in several theoretical frameworks, most notably Shulman's model of pedagogical content knowledge, curriculum implementation theory, and communicative language teaching theory. Shulman (1987/2021) argued that effective teaching requires more than subject knowledge or generic pedagogical skill; it demands pedagogical content knowledge—the distinctive amalgam of subject matter and pedagogy that enables a teacher to render content comprehensible to learners. Applied to Kiswahili under a competence-based curriculum, this implies that a teacher must not only know the language but also know how to structure activities that build communicative competence. Curriculum implementation theory, developed extensively by Fullan (2021), holds that the fate of any reform is determined at the level of classroom practice, and that teacher capacity, beliefs, and support conditions mediate the translation of curriculum intention into enacted curriculum. Communicative language teaching theory further specifies that language competence is developed through meaningful interaction and authentic use rather than through the transmission of grammatical rules (Richards & Rodgers, 2021).

Empirical studies across Africa consistently affirm that teacher competence is a principal determinant of curriculum implementation quality. Studies of competence-based curriculum reforms in Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda report that implementation fidelity is strongly conditioned by teachers' understanding of competence-based principles and their skill in learner-centred methods, and that reforms falter where teacher preparation lags behind curriculum change (Komba & Mwandangi, 2021; Ndiokubwayo et al., 2022). Research in Uganda on the lower secondary reform similarly documents that teachers' limited

familiarity with competence-based pedagogy and assessment constrains implementation, notwithstanding generally positive attitudes towards the reform's goals (NCDC, 2020; Nakato & Kigozi, 2023).

Pedagogical competence features prominently in the literature as the decisive dimension. Studies show that teachers who are skilled in facilitating group work, project-based tasks, role-play, and other learner-centred activities implement competence-based curricula more faithfully than those who default to lecture and dictation (Komba & Mwandaji, 2021; Fullan, 2021). In language teaching specifically, pedagogical competence involves the orchestration of communicative tasks that require learners to use the target language for authentic purposes, a practice repeatedly linked to stronger implementation and better learner outcomes (Richards & Rodgers, 2021). Conversely, teachers who lack such skills tend to reduce competence-based curricula to content coverage, undermining the reform's intent (Ndihokubwayo et al., 2022).

5.0 Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design employing a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative techniques (Creswell & Creswell, 2021). The quantitative component enabled the measurement of variables and the statistical testing of relationships, while the qualitative component provided contextual depth on classroom practice and implementation challenges. A cross-sectional design was appropriate because data were collected at a single point in time from a representative sample of teachers and school leaders, permitting efficient examination of the association between teacher competence and curriculum implementation.

5.2 Study Population and Area

The study was conducted in selected lower secondary schools implementing the competence-based curriculum in Mukono District, central Uganda. The target population comprised Kiswahili teachers, heads of language departments, and head teachers. Kiswahili teachers were central as the direct implementers of the curriculum and the subjects of the competence dimensions under study, while heads of department and head teachers provided supervisory and institutional perspectives on implementation.

5.3 Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

A sample of 180 respondents was drawn from 20 selected lower secondary schools, comprising 130 Kiswahili teachers, 30 heads of language departments, and 20 head teachers. The sample size was determined with reference to the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) guidelines for a known population. Schools were selected using stratified sampling by ownership (government-aided and private) and location (urban and rural) to capture variation in staffing and resourcing conditions; teachers were then selected using simple random sampling within schools, while heads of department and head teachers were selected purposively as key informants.

5.4 Data Collection Instruments

Three instruments were used. A structured, self-administered questionnaire measured teacher competence across four dimensions—subject-matter mastery, pedagogical competence, assessment competence, and language proficiency—and curriculum implementation, using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). A lesson observation checklist was used to corroborate self-reported competence and implementation with observed classroom practice, recording indicators such as use of learner-centred activities, use of Kiswahili as the medium of interaction, and formative assessment practices. An interview guide was used with heads of department and head teachers to obtain qualitative insights into implementation and capacity constraints.

5.5 Validity and Reliability

The validity of the instruments was established through expert review by specialists in language education and curriculum studies, who assessed the content validity index, which exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70 (Amin, 2005). Reliability was tested through a pilot study conducted in schools not included in the main sample, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the teacher competence scale was 0.87, indicating high internal consistency across the instrument.

5.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) summarised the levels of teacher competence and curriculum implementation. Pearson's product-moment correlation examined the strength and direction of the relationships between variables, and multiple linear regression assessed the combined and relative effects of the competence dimensions on implementation. Qualitative data from observations and interviews were analysed thematically to complement and contextualise the statistical findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

5.7 Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant district education authorities and participating schools. Informed consent was sought from all respondents, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity of respondents and institutions were assured and maintained throughout the study in accordance with established research ethics (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

6.0 Results and Interpretation

6.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the teacher competence dimensions and curriculum implementation based on responses from the 180 participants.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
Subject-matter mastery	3.38	0.81	Moderate
Pedagogical competence	3.04	0.88	Moderate
Assessment competence	2.87	0.92	Moderate
Language proficiency	3.16	0.86	Moderate
Overall teacher competence	3.11	0.75	Moderate
Curriculum implementation	2.98	0.79	Moderate

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The descriptive results in Table 1 indicate that teacher competence among Kiswahili teachers in Mukono District was, on the whole, moderate, with an overall mean of 3.11 and a standard deviation of 0.75. Subject-matter mastery recorded the highest mean (3.38), suggesting that teachers generally possessed a reasonable command of Kiswahili content, followed by language proficiency (3.16), which was nonetheless below the level ideally required for a teacher to serve as a fluent model of the language (Ssentanda & Nakayiza, 2022). Pedagogical competence (3.04) and, most notably, assessment competence (2.87) attracted the lowest ratings, pointing to precisely the capacities most central to competence-based delivery—learner-centred facilitation and formative assessment of competencies (Komba & Mwandanji, 2021; Black & Wiliam, 2021). Curriculum implementation recorded a moderate mean of 2.98, consistent with the inconsistent implementation reported in the district (Nakato & Kigozi, 2023). The sizeable standard deviations, particularly for assessment competence, reveal considerable variation between teachers and schools, distinguishing those who had received substantive in-service training from those who had not.

6.2 Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation was computed to establish the strength and direction of the relationships between the teacher competence dimensions and curriculum implementation. The results are presented in Table 2.

Variable	Curriculum Implementation (r)	Sig. (p)
Pedagogical competence	0.63	0.000
Language proficiency	0.59	0.000
Assessment competence	0.55	0.000
Subject-matter mastery	0.48	0.000
Overall teacher competence	0.68	0.000

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The correlation results in Table 2 demonstrate that all four competence dimensions were positively and significantly associated with curriculum implementation at the 0.01 level. Overall teacher competence showed a strong positive correlation with implementation ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that more competent teachers implement the competence-based Kiswahili curriculum more faithfully, consistent with curriculum implementation theory's emphasis on teacher capacity as the mediating condition of reform (Fullan, 2021). Among the specific dimensions, pedagogical competence exhibited the strongest association ($r = 0.63$), underscoring that the skill of facilitating learner-centred, activity-based lessons is most closely tied to faithful implementation (Komba & Mwandanji, 2021). Language proficiency followed ($r = 0.59$), reflecting the particular importance of the teacher's own command of the target language in a communicative language classroom (Richards & Rodgers, 2021). Assessment competence ($r = 0.55$) and subject-matter mastery ($r = 0.48$) were also significantly correlated, though more moderately; notably, subject mastery alone showed the weakest association, consistent with Shulman's (1987/2021) argument that content knowledge without pedagogical knowledge is insufficient for effective teaching. The consistently positive pattern across all dimensions lends robust support to the study's central proposition.

6.3 Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression was conducted to determine the combined predictive power of the competence dimensions and the relative contribution of each to curriculum implementation. The model summary and coefficients are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Model Summary		Value	
R		0.724	
R Square		0.524	
Adjusted R Square		0.513	
Std. Error of Estimate		0.471	
F (4, 175)		48.19 (p = 0.000)	
Predictor	Beta (β)	t	Sig. (p)
Pedagogical competence	0.33	4.86	0.000
Language proficiency	0.27	4.02	0.000
Assessment competence	0.19	2.94	0.004
Subject-matter mastery	0.13	2.08	0.039

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The regression model summary in Table 3 indicates that the four competence dimensions jointly explained 52.4% of the variance in curriculum implementation ($R^2 = 0.524$), a substantial proportion that establishes teacher competence as a major determinant of implementation quality. The model was highly significant ($F(4, 175) = 48.19$, $p < 0.01$), confirming the predictive validity of the combined dimensions. The remaining 47.6% of variance is attributable to factors outside the model, such as availability of instructional materials, class size, school leadership support, learner characteristics, and the intensity of curriculum monitoring, which fall beyond the study's scope (Fullan, 2021; NCDC, 2020).

The standardised coefficients in Table 4 clarify the relative importance of each predictor. Pedagogical competence emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$), demonstrating that a teacher's ability to design and facilitate learner-centred, activity-based lessons has the greatest influence on faithful implementation of the competence-based curriculum—a finding that directly reflects the pedagogical reorientation at the heart of the reform (Komba & Mwandani, 2021; Ndiokubwayo et al., 2022). Language proficiency followed ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that in a communicative language classroom the teacher's own fluency materially conditions the quality of implementation, since it determines the extent to which Kiswahili can serve as the medium of authentic classroom interaction (Richards & Rodgers, 2021; Ssentanda & Nakayiza, 2022). Assessment competence ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$) and subject-matter mastery ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$) contributed positively but more modestly. The comparatively small coefficient for subject mastery is theoretically instructive rather than surprising: it indicates that knowing Kiswahili is necessary but far from sufficient, and that the decisive difference lies in knowing how to teach it in a competence-based mode, precisely as pedagogical content knowledge theory predicts (Shulman, 1987/2021). Taken together, the results suggest that capacity-building interventions should prioritise learner-centred pedagogy and teacher language proficiency, complemented by training in competence-based assessment.

7.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that teacher competence is positively and significantly related to the implementation of the competence-based Kiswahili curriculum in lower secondary schools in Mukono District, with pedagogical competence and language proficiency being the most influential dimensions. Given these findings, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education and Sports, the National Curriculum Development Centre, and teacher-training institutions prioritise sustained in-service training in learner-centred pedagogy and competence-based assessment for Kiswahili teachers (NCDC, 2020; Komba & Mwandani, 2021); that programmes be established to strengthen teachers' own proficiency in Kiswahili, including immersion and refresher courses (Ssentanda & Nakayiza, 2022); that pre-service teacher preparation be realigned with competence-based principles rather than content transmission (Fullan, 2021); and that school leaders institute structured mentoring, peer observation, and departmental support to reinforce classroom practice. Future research could employ longitudinal designs, learner achievement data, and comparisons across districts to further establish causality and examine how school-level conditions moderate the effects of teacher competence.

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