

Competence-Based Assessment Strategies Applied By Teachers in English Subject: Case of Selected Lower Secondary Schools in Rulindo District, Rwanda

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ABSTRACT

Teaching and assessment are two intertwined aspects in learning, and teaching can't be separated from assessment. Since the introduction of Competence-Based curriculum, Competence-Based Assessment standards were also elaborated to ensure effective assessment. At lower secondary school, English subject is one among other subjects that students undertake. The purpose of this research was to find out what Competence-Based Assessment strategies teachers apply while teaching English subject. The following two specific objectives guided this research: (i) to identify Competence-Based Assessment strategies used by teachers in English subject, and (ii) how teachers incorporate Bloom's taxonomy levels of assessment in classroom. It was carried out in 9 selected schools in Rulindo district and comprises 17 teachers of English out of 31 who were selected based on the fact that they teach English in lower secondary school. It was qualitative in nature and used classroom observation and interview methods to gather information. Data was collected using a classroom observation checklist and an interview guide. Data was grouped into themes and analysed narratively. Findings revealed that teachers mostly apply clarifying questioning strategy during Competence-Based assessment. It was also realised that most of the assessment are limited to the lower levels of thinking and only few questions are set to assess higher levels of thinking. The study recommends that teachers should vary assessment strategies while assessing students and ensure all levels of thinking are assessed.

Key words: Assessment, Competence-Based, English, Strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

To meet societal needs, under the influence of globalisation, the education and professional competency have been given priority in order to enhance competency-based method which later helps in responding to social needs and shortage of professional manpower (Butova, 2015). Competency is defined as a combination of skills, abilities, and knowledge needed to perform a specific task while assessment involves collecting information regarding students' progress based on obtained results from a given task to achieve learning goals (Ghaicha, 2016).

As stated by Tabaro (2018), in Competence-Based Assessment, the focus is on learning outcomes and much emphasis is put on formative assessment. This means that the focal person in teaching is the student and it is for who the content is developed, the methods applied for and assessment carried upon.

In addition, Osaki (2004, cited in Ambei et al., 2020) also emphasized that in Competence-Based Assessment students should be assessed based on their ability to apply knowledge in real life situation not recalling what have been memorized. They added that theory and practice must go hand in hand and teaching must reflect real context in terms of provided examples by teachers and set activities to be accomplished by students. Furthermore, in CBA, the authentic assessment should be used whereby students are exposed to real-world tasks that require them to apply meaningful and essential acquired knowledge and skills (Mueller, 2018).

From the Curriculum framework elaborated by Rwanda Education Board (REB) in 2015, it is stated that conducting quality assessment is one of the ways to ensure the success of Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) implementation and the good quality of education. Also teachers should ensure that all types of assessment are Competence-Based and students are able to apply acquired knowledge through a given complex situation related to their everyday life (Andreev, 2023). However, from the researchers' observation and analysed examination papers,

questions asked by teachers were not in line with Competence-Based Assessment (CBA) criteria. This shows that students are not effectively assessed in classroom during teaching period, hence ineffective implementation of Competence-Based Assessment standards. Therefore, in this research the researchers' interest was to find out what Competence-Based Assessment strategies that teachers use in classroom especially in teaching English subject in Rulindo lower secondary schools.

1.1. Aims and Focus of the Study

Since the introduction of CBC in Rwanda, schools adopted the new ways of teaching and assessing in all subjects including English. This research was purposively conducted to examine the Competence-Based Assessment strategies applied by teachers in teaching English subject. The study strives to respond to the following research questions:

- 1) Which Competence-Based Assessment strategies are used by teachers in English subject?
- 2) How do teachers incorporate Bloom's taxonomy levels of assessment in classroom?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This research was guided by Piaget and Vygotsky's Constructivist Theories. Constructivism theory states that students must be actively involved in learning to construct knowledge from the interaction between what they know and the new acquired concepts (Nesrine, 2018). To apply Constructivist theory in classroom, teachers must be aware that: every student's points of view is valued, a variety of answers is better than a single fixed answer and provided activities are challenging to enable students think big. In addition, the assessment activities should be authentic and in-the-moment to bring in discussion questions or collaborative projects (Mueller, 2018; Ambei et al., 2020). Consequently, the constructivist theory is a contribution to this research to analyse the assessment strategies and questioning strategies that teachers use while assessing students.

2.2. Competence –Based Curriculum in Rwanda

Ndihokubwayo et al. (2018) stated that since 2016, the current implemented curriculum in Rwanda primary and secondary school is known as Competence- Based Curriculum (CBC) and was introduced to fill in the gaps observed in Knowledge-Based Curriculum (KBC). In a Competence- Based Curriculum, students are equipped with knowledge, skills and attitudes that will enable them to compete to the outside job-related market to respond to existing problems (REB/MINEDUC, 2015). Different authors (Ambei et al., 2020; Tabaro, 2018; Makunja 2016 cited in Tabaro, 2018) claimed that competencies are a combination of appropriate skills, knowledge and behaviours or right attitude that a person must have acquired to effectively accomplish different tasks, perform jobs or activities in a work setting. Furthermore, knowledge, skills and behaviours demonstrated by students are competencies that determine their competency (Hodge, 2007). They added that teachers play a crucial role in setting criteria to base on while assessing competencies and these specified competencies should explicitly reach expected levels of mastery under clearly stated conditions to meet the anticipated outcomes.

2.3. Competence-Based Assessment (CBA)

Hayton and Wagner (1998, cited in Pitman et al., 1999) defined Competence- Based Assessment as the assessment of evidence to determine a person's current abilities against a given set of competency standards. This implies that in a course of learning, students are assessed based on clearly pre-determined criteria that detail which competencies are to be acquired during learning. During assessment teachers do not only rely on a single technique but use a variety of techniques. Besides, assessment is the practice of identifying, testing and deciding on the acquired knowledge and skills through understanding and proven abilities by students (Habib, 2016).

Competence- Based Curriculum goes along with Competence-Based Assessment (CBA). Ngendahayo and Askill (2016) argued that assessment plays an important role in the Competence- Based Curriculum and teaching cannot be separated from assessing students' progress. They highlighted that assessment is crucial in a Competence-Based Curriculum as it informs teachers about students' progress and contribute in decision making. Assessment is a systematic way of collecting, measuring, analysing, synthesizing and interpreting students' results from a given test in comparison with pre-determined objectives (Ghaicha, 2016) . From the curriculum framework elaborated by REB in 2015, it is stated that in Competence- Based Assessment, students are exposed to a range of situations that require

them to practice what has been learned (knowledge, skills and attitudes) to overcome their everyday challenges. In addition, Ambei et al. (2020) stated that teachers should use realistic assessment methods to collect all evidences that show acquired and mastered competences.

2.4. Assessment Strategies in Competence-Based assessment

According to Sebasaza (2010) assessment activities should be in line with the curriculum. Each learning unit indicates necessary competences to be acquired by students during learning process. (Osaki, 2004, cited in Ambei et al., 2020; Mueller, 2018) also emphasized that in CBC students should be assessed based on their ability to apply knowledge in real life situation not recalling what have been memorized. Paulo and Tilya (2014, cited in Ambei et al., 2020) highlighted that in competence -based education, students' performance is assessed through a given and well defined task with an assessment rubric indicating criteria to base on during the assessment. They added that Competence-Based Assessment is a criterion-referenced test that measures student performance relatively to pre-established goals, standards or objectives rather than being a norm- referenced test that measure and compare the achievement of one student with other students.

2.5. Type of Questions Asked in Relation to Blooms' Taxonomy

When setting assessment activities, teachers should ensure that they are not only assessing the lower levels of thinking (knowledge, understanding, application), but also consider higher levels of thinking like analysis, synthesis and evaluation or creation (REB/MINEDUC, 2015). To ensure that learning has taken place, there should be knowledge transfer from school to the large community or society where students speak English and become language users. The assessment items or questions in a Competence-Based Assessment should not only be assessing lower levels of thinking but also considering higher levels of thinking as elaborated in Bloom's taxonomy (Andreev, 2023).

Table 1

Bloom's Taxonomy Sample Verbs and Activities as Presented by Andreev (2023)

Levels	What to assess	Verb examples	Type of activities
Remembering	Is a student able to recall or remember the information?	Recall, recognize, identify	fill-in-the-blank, matching, or multiple-choice questions
Understanding	Is a student able to explain ideas or concepts?	Interpret, exemplify, classify summarize, infer, compare, explain	summarize readings, compare and contrast paraphrase documents
Applying	Is a student able to use the information in a new way?	Apply, execute, use	use language to explain familiar or unfamiliar tasks
Analysing	Is a student able to analyse, and justify a stand or decision?	Analyse, evaluate, check, critique, assess	Activities that require students to analyse, judge, or critique readings against established criteria or standards
Creating	Is a student able to: create new product or point of view?	Create, compose generate, plan, produce, design	Activities that require students to make, write, compose, build, design or generate something new.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research methodology describes the whole process through which research is conducted (Goundar, 2019). In addition, as stated by Bhattacharjee (2012), research design is an elaborated plan about data collection methods, instrument or tools used, and the sampling strategies that are required for a research. This research is qualitative-oriented. The term population refers to all members that share common characteristics needed to be involved in the research (Datta, 2018). In this research, the population includes teachers of English in Rulindo District. A good sample helps the researcher to attain the objectives in case the whole population cannot be reached (Tracy, 2013). From the information provided by Rulindo District officer in charge of statistics, there are 78 schools with ordinary level which include 69-day schools and 9 boarding schools. As stated by Vasileiou et.al, (2018), there is no fixed sample size for qualitative research. To respond to financial and time constraints, 10% of all schools was thought as a good and

representative sample for qualitative research. The sample was selected using systematic random sampling. According to Datta (2018), in systematic random sampling, elements are selected at a regular interval which may be in terms of time, space or order. To select sample schools, both day and boarding schools were taken into consideration. For day schools, a 10% of 69 schools ($69 \times 10/100$) equivalent to 7 schools were selected using a 10 order- interval and for boarding schools ($9 \times 10/100$) equivalent to 1 school was the ideal. However, 2 boarding schools were considered for a variety of information and these were selected using a 5 order-interval. Therefore, a total of 9 schools which include 7-day schools and 2 boarding schools was used as a representative sample for this research. The total number of participants was 17 teachers of English out of 31 in the 9 schools who were selected based on the fact that they teach English in lower secondary school. According to Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtle (2006), qualitative research uses methods that help the researcher collect information from the real world environment by systematically observing the phenomena under investigation, searches for patterns or themes in the observations, and develops a generalization from the analysis of those themes. In this research, interview and observation were used to collect data. Obtained information from observation was presented in figures, themes were used to group the information from interview and analysis was done narratively.

Table 2*Number of O' Level Schools in Rulindo District and Selected Sample*

Category of Schools	Total	Selected Sample (10%)	Considered Sample size
Day schools	69	$69 \times 10\% = 7$	7
Boarding schools	9	$9 \times 10/100 = 0.9 = 1$	1+1=2
Total	78		9

Table 3*Number of Teachers of English in Selected Schools*

Category of the school	Name of the school	Number of all teachers of English in lower school
Day schools	GS SHY	5
	ES GAS	2
	GS RUS	3
	GS RUK	1
	GS GIS	1
	GS NGAR	1
	GS TAR	2
Boarding schools	LND	1
	CFSN	1
Total		17

Respondents were explained the purpose of this research to let them feel comfortable in their classes before classroom observation. As stated by Karim (2017), a structured interview enables the researcher to collect relevant information using ordered and scheduled questions. Therefore, a semi-structured interview with teachers of English using an interview checklist was used to collect information. According to Sürücü et al. (2020), validity of instruments is their ability to measure what is intended while reliability of instruments refers to trustworthiness of instruments. To elaborate research instruments, the researchers sought opinion from other researchers on the proposed instruments. As stated by Creswell (2009), in a qualitative research, information is collected from the real setting of individuals. Data were analysed and reported narratively to make them meaningful. Ethics in research refers to the acceptable moral and behaviours that an individual should demonstrate when conducting research (Huma & Nayeem, 2017). Before starting collecting data, participants were provided with information about the research and assured that their responses will remain anonymous and confidential.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Findings about classroom Competence- Based Assessment strategies

To gather information from classroom observation, researchers attended live teaching classes to observe how teachers conduct Competence-Based Assessment and identify which strategies are applied in English subject. A total of nine classroom observation were conducted from all sampled schools and different classroom levels were visited (from senior one to senior three). A number of strategies that teachers apply were identified as presented in the figure below:

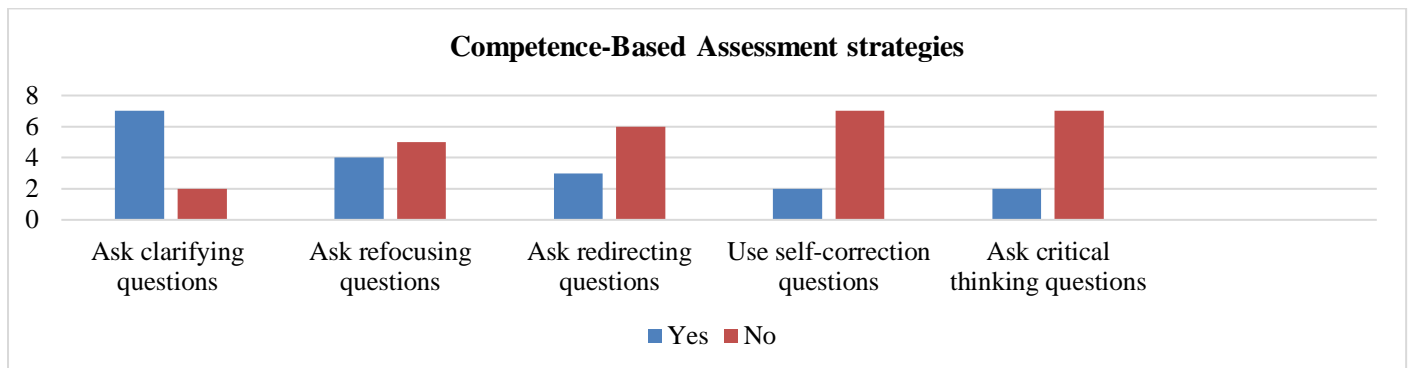


Figure 1
Competence-Based Assessment Strategies Applied by Teachers in Classroom

As observed from different classes, most of teachers ask clarifying questions when teaching English. The sample questions that have been recorded are the following: (i) *Can you explain it again?* (ii) *What parts does an essay have?* (iii) *Who can clearly differentiate passive from active voice?* Concerning other questioning strategies, it was observed that teachers use them occasionally. For example, only a few teachers ask refocusing questions such as: (i) *Is it really what you say the only way we define a verb?* (ii) *What do you think should be the synonym of the word in bold?* Redirecting questioning strategy was also used by few teachers. With this strategy, teachers asked students to add or explain more about what their colleagues have answered. For example, they asked students these questions: (i) *Can someone else give another example of a common noun?* (ii) *Do you have anything to add from what she/he said?* (iii) *Do you have the same opinion as his/hers?*

In addition, self-correction and critical thinking questioning strategies were often used by teachers. Sample questions that used in classroom were: (i) *Can you say it correctly?* (ii) *Do you think the man in the text was innocent?* (iii) *If you were the judge, how would you solve the issue?*

Generally, from various classroom observation, it was realized that teachers focused on some assessment strategies especially those assessing lower levels of thinking and do not care much for questions that reinforce critical thinking. However, most of these questions were not clearly formulated and might confuse students. During presentations, no more assessment strategies are used as students present individually. Furthermore, in some classes the lesson seems to be teacher-centred as teacher uses much talking although some teacher varied strategies to engage students. As stated by Hayton and Wagner (1998, cited in Pitman et al., 1999), when teaching, teachers should vary assessment strategies and avoid relying on a single technique. However, it was observed that some teachers do not follow this as most of the questions were clarifying questions.

4.2. Assessment Questions According to Bloom's Taxonomy

During interview, teachers were asked about how often they vary questions to reflect on Bloom's taxonomy levels of assessment that include Remember, Understand, Apply, Analyse, Evaluate and Create. From teachers' views, frequencies of each assessed level are presented below:

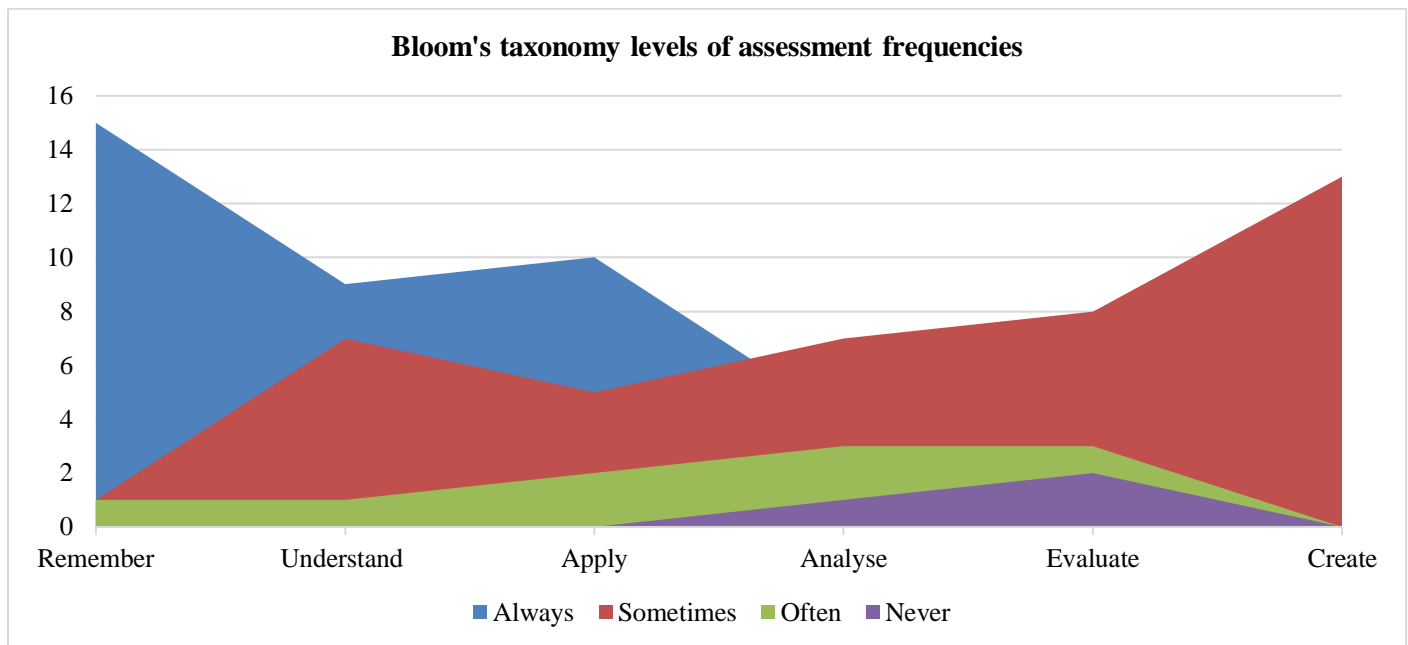


Figure 2
Bloom's Taxonomy Levels of Assessment Frequencies

To ensure the implementation of Competence-Based Assessment in teaching, teachers were asked about how often they set questions to assess different levels based on Bloom's taxonomy. From their responses, the majority of questions that teachers ask students assess the lower levels of thinking: Remember, understand and apply. One of the teachers replied in this way: *"In my class, I ask questions without thinking much on which level I assess. For example, I can ask students to define, to explain or to give examples. I don't plan before and I ask questions spontaneously as they come in mind"* (GAS 02). Another interviewed teacher coded (GIS 01) said: *"When I teach, I mostly ask questions that are easy to be answered to facilitate learners understand the content. I don't like to ask those questions that require much thinking because I am sure they cannot answer them"*. On the other hand, other teachers replied that they vary questions and mix the items. They try to assess all levels though higher thinking levels are not easy to assess. As quoted from (SHY05, RUS02 and GAS01) *they said that students must be asked questions that reflect on knowledge, skills and attitudes. They added that in class, when they prepare assessment they mix all types of questions.* Based on the provided responses, frequencies as presented in the figure above and teachers' own views, it is obvious that most of teachers assess lower levels of thinking and give little focus on higher levels which is contradicting the Competence-Based Assessment standards whereby it is stated that in a Competence-Based Assessment, higher levels of thinking questions should weight more than lower levels (REB,2015).

To add more on interview responses provided by teachers about the quality of questions they ask during assessment, a classroom observation was conducted and the following were identified.

From the observation, teachers mostly asked questions that reflect on remembering, understanding and few questions to assess the application level. Some of the questions were the following: (i) *what is a noun?* (ii) *What do you understand by an article?* (iii) *Change the given sentences into reported speech.*

On the other side, it was observed that few questions were asked to assess higher levels of thinking: analyse, evaluate and create. The few sampled questions asked to assess these levels were: (i) *Analyse the given sentence and say whether it is complete;* (ii) *Do you agree with the taken decision?* (iii) *Write an essay of not more than one page on the given topic.*

As stated in the Curriculum Framework, when setting exams, much focus should be put on assessing higher levels of thinking than lower levels (REB/MINEDUC, 2015). From the observation, it is indicated that teachers do not apply accordingly the Competence-Based Assessment because lower levels of thinking weigh more than higher levels of thinking. Therefore, teachers should plan assessment to ensure higher levels of thinking are given more weight than lower levels of thinking when assessing students. In a nutshell, it was observed that most of teachers ask questions that limit students at the lower level. They do not help students to think bigger and express their own opinion to develop their critical thinking.

V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

From the findings, it was realized that teachers mostly ask clarifying questions to check on understanding, occasionally few refocusing questions to emphasis on proved answers, use redirecting questioning strategy to encourage active participation by letting students add or explain more about what their colleagues have answered. In addition, self-correction and critical thinking assessment strategies were often used among others. Furthermore, teachers mostly ask questions that assess the level of remembering, understanding and few questions to assess the application level. Such questions do not help students to think big and express their own opinion to develop critical thinking. Only, few questions are asked to assess higher levels of thinking: analysis, evaluation and creation. The same issue was identified during interview with teachers whereby they said that they mostly ask questions that assess lower levels of thinking and give little focus on higher levels because they are easy to set and less time consuming. Nevertheless, the information proved that some teachers set questions which assess all levels. They showed that a mixed type of questions is a good strategy to ensure students are not only acquiring knowledge but also able to apply it in different situations.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings and the role played by English language in schools which is both a subject language and a medium of instruction, English learning is an issue that deserves attention from the stakeholders to ensure the effective Competence-Based Assessment implementation in English subject. Therefore, teachers should apply and vary Competence-Based Assessment strategies and focus much on those which assess higher levels of thinking.

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