

Competence-Based English Language Teaching in Rwanda: Opportunities, Challenges and possible solutions

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Abstract

Starting from the 2016 school year, Rwanda embarked on the implementation of a competence-based curriculum, shifting the focus from what learners know to what they can do in performing tasks. This new curriculum was introduced in order to enable Rwandan school leavers and graduates to use what they learn to solve practical problems of life or, in other words, to apply what they have learnt in real life situations. Such ability is referred to as competence, hence the term competence-based. With specific reference to language teaching, competency-based teaching is based on a functional perspective, focusing not on what students know about the language but on what they can do with it: the ability to communicate competently. This paper reflects on the opportunities, challenges and possible solutions regarding the implementation of a competence-based approach to teaching English in the Rwandan context. On the one hand, the unprecedented need for English, its international and official status, its use as the only medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards, its association with numerous advantages and the positive attitudes towards this language among Rwandans are some of the opportunities for the adoption of CBLT for English. On the other hand, the limited use of English in daily life, the lack of competent teachers of English and lack of competence-based teaching aids and materials which reflect the Rwandan context are some of the challenges which CBLT is likely to face. This calls for measures to address these, including adequate training for teachers of English, the development of teaching/learning materials and approaches which reflect, and are appropriate to, the Rwandan context and clear language policies in different institutions to regulate how the different languages should be managed and used.

Key words

Competence-based curriculum, Competence-Based Language Teaching, English, communicative competence, language policy, language proficiency, implementation.

Introduction

Rwanda has identified education as one of the pillars of its socioeconomic growth in the drive to achieve a 'knowledge-based economy' through its strategic plan, the Vision 2020 (Rwanda Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2000), and to implement the second phase of its Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy – EDPRS II (Republic of Rwanda, 2013). This is one reason why there has recently been a heavy investment in the education sector: a lot of schools have been built by the government, the private sector has been encouraged to invest in education and the nine year and, subsequently, twelve-year free basic education system has been introduced. All this was done in order to offer access to education to all school-aged children with the aim of achieving 'Universal Education for All'. These efforts resulted in increased enrollment rate at all education levels. Curriculum has not been left behind in this drive to achieve (quality) education for all: there have been a number of curricular changes in the last twenty years, all of which were aimed at providing learners with quality education (Rwanda Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2000). The most recent curricular change in Rwanda has been the introduction of a 'competence-based curriculum' (CBC) with the 2016 school year. This article discusses the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing the competence-based curriculum in English and some of the ways in which the challenges can be mitigated. Effective implementation of CBC in English may improve the teaching of other school subjects because this language is used as the only medium of instruction from Grade Four.

The concept of competence-based curriculum

The International Confederation of Midwives (2012) indicates that there is no common definition of competence-based education (CBE). However, the Confederation points out some of the common elements of the definition of this concept. The most important of these is that "the learner must be engaged and active in all aspects of acquiring the knowledge, skills and professional behaviors needed to demonstrate practice in a specific discipline" (2012, p. 2). In other words, the Confederation continues, CBE uses teaching and learning strategies that facilitate the development and demonstration of competency. In short, the focus is on what students "can do in performing a task rather than what they know about the tasks" (Masduqi, 2006, p. 2). Students need to be able to do these tasks in varying and complex situations. Put differently, competency-based curriculum is workplace focused: it emphasizes outcomes (competencies) that are linked to workforce needs,

as defined by employers and the profession (Council on Education for Public Health, 2011). What competence-based curriculum is all about is to equip learners with abilities to use what they have learned to solve practical problems in their daily life. In order for this to be achieved, all education components (curriculum, teaching approaches, assessment, etc.) need to be aligned together (Biggs, 2007). With reference to assessment, for example, Masduqi (2006) notes that learners are evaluated in terms of what they can do with specific learning tasks.

The Rwanda Education Board (REB) recently introduced a competence-based curriculum with the aim to engage learners in active learning and help them apply what they have learnt in real-life situations. As explained by the Head of Curriculum and Pedagogical Materials Department at REB, the new methodology involves developing generic competences such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication and cooperation¹. The vision of this curriculum is to “optimize the potential of all learners and enabling every young Rwandan to make a valuable contribution to the sustained growth of the nation” (REB, 2015, p. 3). In order to achieve this vision, REB (2015) indicates that the curriculum will provide challenging and engaging learning experiences which require deep thinking rather than just memorization. This decision is a good initiative because if people cannot use what they have learned to solve daily life problems they cannot claim ownership of knowledge.

Competency-based language teaching (CBLT)

Competency-based language teaching (CBLT) is viewed as the application of the principles of CBE to language teaching emphasizing what learners are expected to achieve with the target language (Wong, 2008). Wong indicates that CBLT is based on a functional perspective and, therefore, as Docking (1994, p. 16), in Wong (2008, p. 181), summarizes it, it is "designed not around the notion of subject knowledge but around the notion of competency. The focus [of both teaching and assessment] moves from what students know about the language to what they can do with it." In other words, the approach views the language function as more important than language structure. Indeed, language is learned mainly to achieve a range of communicative functions (Tribus, 2017). Thus, language programmes need to teach learners in such a way that they achieve communicative competence or use the target language to communicate effectively. In order for

¹ Retrieved from <http://www.education.rw/news/development-training-materials-new-curriculum-competence-based-curriculum>, on 25 April 2017.

this to be possible, according to Masduqi (2006), three conditions need to be met: (i) teachers who are proficient and who can work as models from whom students can learn the language, (ii) a great deal of exposure to the language in the real life situations, and (iii) the involvement in meaningful communication. In the next sections, I will explore the context of Rwanda as regards the application of CBLT for the English subject.

Methodology

The study reported in this article is a desk research which “is the collection of secondary data from internal sources, the internet, libraries, trade associations, government agencies, and published reports ... without field work.”² In this study, this approach involved a review of available literature and research findings on CBLT globally and in Rwanda. The literature and research findings were used to offer an analysis of the Rwandan context with reference to the adoption of a competence-based approach in the teaching of English in schools.

The need for competency-based language teaching for English in Rwanda

English is an official language in Rwanda, alongside Kinyarwanda, French and Kiswahili. It is taught as a school subject from kindergarten to university and is used as a medium of instruction from Grade Four onwards. In addition to being one of the school subjects, English serves different communicative functions in Rwanda. This language is also used to varying extents on all public and private radio and television stations and in printed media in Rwanda. It is also an official language for the East African Community and serves as a lingua franca between Rwanda and other East African Community and the Common Wealth member countries. As Sibomana (2014) notes, this situation gives an impression that English is widely used in daily communication in Rwanda and, therefore, that a considerable number of Rwandans can speak it. However, as pointed out by the 4th Population and Housing Census in Rwanda only 7% of the population can read and write this language (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda - NISR, 2014). NISR notes that this information was self-reported and was “not verified through a literacy test or similar means” (p. 43). Thus, the number of Rwandans who can actually use English may be smaller. In addition, the proficiency of those who claim the ability to speak English in Rwanda (including university

² Retrieved from https://www.b2binternational.com/assets/ebooks/mr_guide/04-market-research-ch4.pdf, on 17 September 2017.

graduates) has generally been found limited (Kagwesage, 2012; Muhizi, 2014; Nzitabakuze, 2012; Pearson, 2014; Sibomana, 2014 & 2015; Uwambayinema, 2013).

Some examples will be provided to illustrate the limited proficiency in English by educated people in Rwanda. Recently, one Rwandan soccer player, who had completed high school, ran away from journalists who wanted to interview him after he had been ‘the man of the match’; he simply told them, “me I don’t know English³”. This is in spite of the player having studied the language as a school subject from primary and having used it as a medium of instruction in his secondary education. A research conducted in 2014 by the Rwanda National Capacity Building Secretariat (NCBS) found that 90% of district officials, who are university graduates, still find it difficult to use English (Muhizi, 2014). Nothing speaks better to the above finding than the following announcement from the administration of one sector in Kigali City⁴:

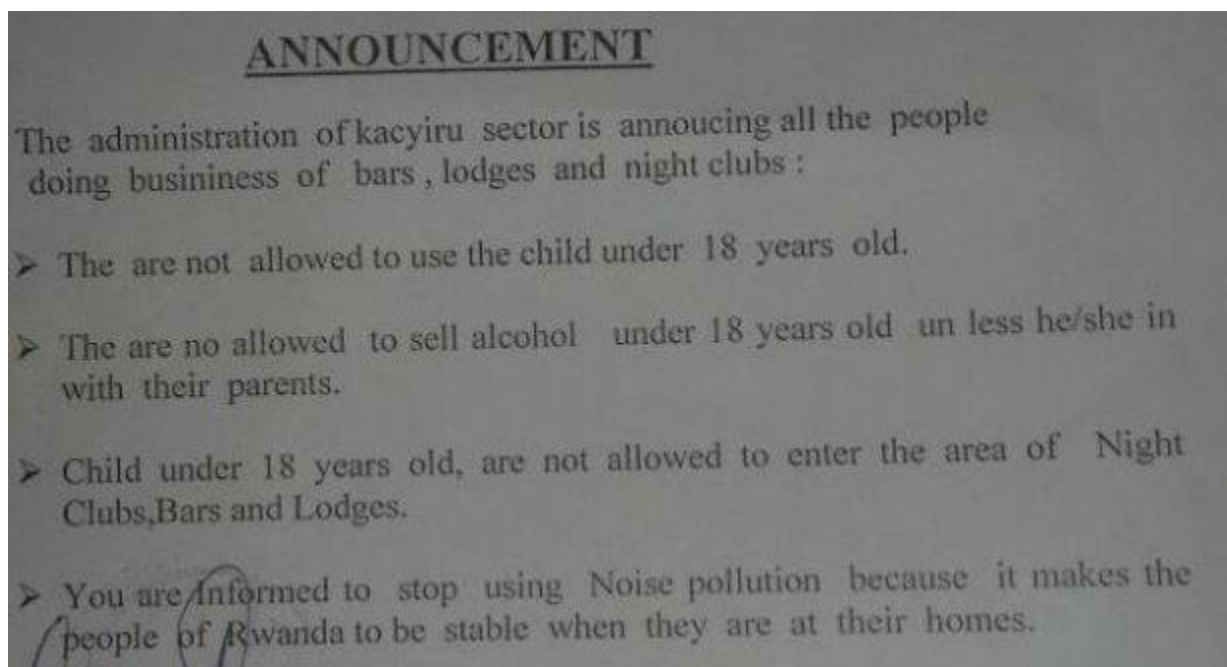


Diagramme 1: A copy of the announcement from one sector in Kigali City

In addition, Kagwesage (2012) and Sibomana (2010) found that university (including Masters and PhD) students found it difficult to express themselves clearly and understand texts written in

³ Retrieved from <http://ibyamamare.com/umukinnyi-wa-apr-fc-yahunze-mikoro-za-televiziyo-ya-super-sport-kubera-kutamanya-icyongereza/>, on 14 October 2017.

⁴ Retrieved from <http://www.ukwezi.rw/mu-rwanda/3/icyongereza-cyuzuye-amafuti-cyanditswe-n-umurenge-wa-kacyiru-kirimo-kuvugisha-benshi>, on 21 October 2018.

English. Studies by Nzitabakuze (2012), Pearson (2014) and Uwambayinema (2013) indicated that the teachers who took part in their respective studies generally had limited ability to use English to teach. For instance, none of the Rwandan teachers (from both rural and urban schools) in Pearson's (2014) study reported having sufficient knowledge and skills to teach in English, five years after the introduction of this language as the only MOI from Grade 4. It should be noted that all these people studied English at different levels and to different extents but with one aim: to be able to use this language for communication. This situation suggests that the teaching of English has not enabled the learners to apply the acquired knowledge to solve communication problems in their daily life, among other weaknesses. This justifies the need for a competence-based approach to be applied in the teaching of this subject.

It should be noted that English has a particular status compared to other languages which are used in Rwanda: it is the medium through which all other subjects are taught from Grade 4. This implies that the teaching of English largely influences the teaching of all the other subjects (including languages to some extent) and, therefore, plays a central role in quality education. Indeed, various scholars (for example, Kyeyune, 2003; Senkoro, 2005; Qorro, 2006; Prah, 2008; Brock-Utne, 2014) consider the medium of instruction as one of the key contributors to quality education. According to Qorro (2006), the language used as a medium of instruction is a tool or a resource that both learners and teachers use or draw on to organize learning and teaching. In order for this resource to be used effectively to maximize learning outcomes, both learners and teachers need to be able to use it effectively. Given the situation described in the above paragraph indicating how limited teachers' knowledge of English is, there is little doubt that teaching through the medium of English faces numerous challenges. This calls for a reconceptualisation of the teaching of English as a school subject notably through the espousal of a competence-based approach.

Opportunities and challenges to implementing CBLT in English in Rwanda

There are a number of opportunities and challenges related to the implementation of CBLT in the teaching of English in Rwanda. With reference to opportunities, it is noteworthy that many education stakeholders and researchers understand that there is an urgent need to equip learners in Rwandan schools with proficiency in English (Kagabo 2008; Ndabaga 2008; Pennycook, 2006; Sibomana, 2015, 2018). Today, English plays a crucial role in the global academic field: it is the medium of instruction in many of the prominent academic systems and English language products

of all kinds dominate the international academic marketplace (Altbach, 2004). In short, “English has become a lingua franca to the point that any literate educated person is in a very real sense deprived if he does not know English” (Phillipson, 1997, p.5, citing Burchfield, 1985). English is important not only in education but in other areas of life as well to the point of becoming a global lingua franca (Altbach 2004; Bhatt 2001; McKay, 2008).

After English had been made the only medium of instruction from kindergarten in 2008 and subsequently from Grade Four in 2011, many education policy makers, stakeholders and media in Rwanda portrayed and promoted English as an important language. In addition, this language is the main lingua franca between Rwanda and many other countries. As a result, learners are ready to adopt any learning/teaching approach in order to become proficient in this language and parents are ready to pay any cost to enable their children to access this proficiency (Sibomana, 2015; Tabaro, 2013). Thus, many Rwandans have positive attitudes towards English and motivation, which is one factor affecting second/foreign language acquisition according to Lightbown and Spada (2001), is high among learners and parents. The political will is also favorable to the development of English in Rwanda. For instance, the government has heavily invested in activities aimed at helping primary and secondary school teachers to increase their proficiency in English by hiring English school-based mentors from foreign countries (Rwanda Education Board, 2012) and has made English one of the main school subjects by increasing its weight in the curriculum. In addition, the 15th National Leadership Retreat recommended a review of “the teaching methods of languages in primary and secondary schools with emphasis on English proficiency” (Government of Rwanda, 2018).

In spite of the above opportunities, however, there are a number of challenges which may impede the implementation of a competency-based curriculum in the teaching of English. First, the aforementioned conditions necessary for the adoption of CBLT are far from being met in Rwanda. We will examine these one after the other. With reference to proficient teachers who can work as models for learners, Rwandan teachers’ proficiency in English is generally limited, as has been noted previously (see Nzitabakuze, 2012; Pearson, 2014; Sibomana, 2014 & 2015; Uwambayinema, 2013). This situation can also be found in pre-service English teacher trainees’ poor writing skills in English as reported in Sibomana and Uwambayinema (2016). This is a serious challenge because learners do not have a model to look up to and if teachers are not

competent there is very little chance for learners to achieve competence. Thus, we may be having a curriculum which looks good on paper but which is not enacted as such on the grassroots level.

It has been mentioned that only 7% of the Rwandan population self-reported that they can read and write this language (NISR, 2014). This means that the use of English in daily communication in this country is limited, as a number of researchers pointed out (Pearson, 2014, Samuelson & Freedman, 2010; Sibomana, 2014). As a result, the other two conditions are also difficult to meet: there is limited exposure to English in real-life situations and, as a result, learners can hardly be involved in meaningful communication using English. This constitutes a serious challenge to the attainment of communicative competence in English because, as Nkwetisama (2012, p. 519) puts it, a competency-based approach entails the ability to know what to say and how to say it, “where, when and with whom” or, in other words, having all the four components of communication competence (Canale & Swain, 1980) in the target language, which helps the learner to integrate learning and daily life. In short, the competence-based approach “seeks to bridge the wall between school or the classroom and everyday real life: seeking and giving information by interacting with people in the market, hospital, school, offices, etc. through listening, reading, writing and speaking” (Nkwetisama, 2012, p. 519). The classroom can hardly suffice for the above requirements to be met. In this regard, Lightbown & Spada (2001) suggest that the ‘the street’ or daily communication settings can do better than the classroom because, Sibomana (2014) argues, the latter may be prescriptive and thus limiting. Indeed, the best way to learn a language is to use it (Marsh & Langé, 2000) and if there are no opportunities to use a language, chances of knowing it are limited.

Possible strategies to mitigate these challenges

The first step to address these challenges is to make sure that the teaching of English in Rwanda is effective so that at least school leavers and graduates are proficient in this language, as a strategy to increase the use of English on Rwandan ‘streets.’ In order for this to be possible, there is need for competent teachers of English because, educational researchers argue, teachers constitute a key factor in effective teaching (Tucker & Stronge, 2005). This is the kind of competence that is not evidenced by having a degree because having a degree does not necessarily translate into the expected competences. If this were the case, Rwandan school leavers’ proficiency in English would not be what it is while the teachers’ qualification rate is relatively high in Rwanda (Leach,

2014). In addition, research needs to investigate and suggest appropriate approaches and methods to teach English in Rwanda. In fact, given the limited proficiency in English amongst the educated people, it appears that the approaches which have been used to teach English in Rwanda have not been effective, at least to some extent (Sibomana, 2014). This is more so now that English has become a global lingua franca (Jenkins, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2004), implying that traditional (Western) English language teaching methods are not necessarily “consistent with the current profile of English” (Jindapitak & Teo, 2013, p. 191). Furthermore, Sibomana (2015) indicates that the teaching of English in Rwanda has been overshadowed by the efforts to implement English medium of instruction policy, forgetting that the latter is hardly possible without the former.

The lack of proficiency in English may not be the only factor which limits the use of English for communication in Rwanda. There is a lack of clear language policies in different institutions, which leads to unpredictability in the use of the different languages used in Rwanda. For instance, while the University of Rwanda’s regulations indicate that English is the medium of instruction at the University, they do not specify the place and role of the other languages found in its different campuses (Niyomugabo, Sibomana & Niyibizi, 2018). The actual situation is that Kinyarwanda dominates all interactions and English is used almost only in interactions involving foreigners and in academic settings such as classes, workshops and other academic forums). However, in some of these settings Kinyarwanda is also used (Sibomana, 2006). This situation may not allow English to move from the status of a foreign language to become a second language in Rwanda. Thus, there is a need to specify the respective roles of the different languages, including English, in daily communication in different institutions, including schools, so that learners can find opportunities to be involved in meaningful communication using English. Such policies would make it possible to take the teaching and the use of English outside the four walls (the classroom).

Furthermore, being a new approach, CBLT may pose implementation challenges to teachers of English in Rwanda. Thus, there is need for thorough training for teachers on the different aspects of this new curriculum: its meaning, rationale, relevance and principles and how best it can be implemented in the Rwandan context. Such training cannot be achieved by just telling teachers what to do; they need to be shown and given an opportunity to practice the best ways to implement it in their classes. That is, someone needs to model lessons adopting a competency-based approach and give teachers time to discuss it in order to have a deep understanding of the approach, and let

some of them teach and be helped reflect on their teaching. Furthermore, teachers of English need to be offered regular refresher courses in order to keep them updated about new trends and approaches of teaching English as a second, foreign and/or global language, adopting a competence-based approach. In fact, given the global needs to acquire proficiency in this language (Crystal, 2003) and its status as a global lingua franca (Altbach, 2004; Crystal, 2003), several scholars have written and are still writing about the best methods and approaches to teach this language, which makes the literature around English education very dynamic. Lastly, educational research findings and teachers' views and perspectives should be used to inform educational policies which, so far, are sometimes not research-based as indicated by the 2015 review of the Rwanda national education for all (Rwanda Ministry of Education, 2015).

Conclusion

Rwanda has adopted a competency-based curriculum in its education in order to enable learners to be able to use the acquired knowledge to solve practical problems in life and thereby contribute to the country's economic growth. Being one of the main school subjects in Rwanda and the only medium of instruction from Grade Four, English should receive special attention in the implementation of a competence-based approach. This is because learners do not only need to be competent in English but they also need to be able to use it to acquire competences in all other school subjects. Therefore, the adoption of a competency-based approach in the teaching of English in Rwanda is long overdue. The Rwandan context offers a number of opportunities for the adoption of this approach while teaching English: people have positive attitudes towards this language and they are motivated to learn it as it is associated with several material and immaterial advantages. However, the context also poses a number of challenges: there is a shortage of qualified teachers of English as a second or foreign language, very few people in Rwanda speak English fluently and the use of this language in daily communication is very limited. Therefore, achieving communicative competence in English in Rwanda is not easy because it largely depends on the use of the target language outside classroom. In order to mitigate these challenges all education stakeholders should find ways of equipping teachers with the ability to teach English effectively and of increasing the use of English in daily communication.

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