Teachers' Competence in English Language Teaching in Tanzanian Primary Schools

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Abstract: *This study assessed the competence of teachers in teaching English in private English medium and public Kiswahili medium primary schools in Dodoma. The aim was to examine whether teaching practices aligned with the Tanzanian curriculum adopted in 2015, which emphasises quality education. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) served as the theoretical framework. A mixed-methods approach with a convergent parallel design was employed. Data were collected through classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaires administered to English teachers of Standards 3 and 6. Purposive sampling was used to select teachers from four schools, and the data were analysed thematically and descriptively. The findings revealed that many teachers lacked competence in teaching English due to limited in-service training, short teaching experience, low language proficiency, inadequate resources, large classes, and limited awareness of CLT principles. The study concludes that these challenges hinder effective English teaching and reduce pupils' opportunities to develop communicative competence. It recommends strengthening in-service training, enhancing teachers' proficiency, providing adequate resources, reducing class sizes, and raising awareness of CLT to improve the quality of English teaching in Tanzanian primary schools.*

1. Introduction

Tanzania's Education and Training Policy (ETP), first introduced in 1995, aimed to improve educational quality through enhanced teacher competence and professional development (URT, 1995). This policy led to initiatives such as the Primary Education Development Plan (PEDP I–III), the Secondary Education Development Plan (SEDP I–II), and the Teacher Development and Management System (TDMS), which collectively expanded access to education and aimed to improve learning outcomes (URT, 2001; 2004a; 2006; 2007; 2010; 2012b). Despite these reforms, classroom instruction, particularly in English language teaching, continues to face significant challenges.

This indicates a persistent gap between policy intentions and classroom realities.

Research shows that teacher competence directly affects pupil outcomes. Kalinga (2008) demonstrated that low teacher proficiency and ineffective teaching practices reduce pupils' performance. This highlights that mastery of both language and pedagogy is essential for learning. Barad (2013) similarly emphasises that teacher competence shapes students' academic achievement, particularly in second-language classrooms, indicating that investments in training must translate into practical classroom effectiveness. Imelwaty (2014) reported that teachers' insufficient training in communicative approaches limits their ability to implement competency-based curricula effectively. As a result, pupils' English proficiency remains

low. Elibariki (2017) observed that structural factors, including large class sizes, limited teaching materials, and the dominance of Kiswahili as the medium of instruction, constrain English teaching. These findings demonstrate that teacher competence cannot be considered in isolation from the classroom context. Rugemalira (2005) notes that gaps in teacher preparation and theoretical understanding undermine consistent curriculum implementation. This highlights systemic weaknesses in teacher development programs.

Despite comprehensive policies and initiatives, English teachers in Tanzanian primary schools often lack the competence required to implement the curriculum effectively. This shortfall leads to suboptimal pupil outcomes and highlights a persistent policy–practice gap, where the intended benefits of educational reforms are not fully realised. Improving English proficiency therefore demands more than policy statements or training programs; it requires addressing structural, pedagogical, and resource-related constraints that affect teacher competence. Understanding the link between policy design, teacher competence, and pupil outcomes is essential for identifying targeted interventions that can enhance the quality of English language teaching and learning. Accordingly, this study examined the competence of English teachers in Tanzanian primary schools and its influence on curriculum implementation and pupil learning outcomes.

2. Literature Review

This section critically examines empirical studies on challenges faced by English language teachers in primary school contexts. It highlights how these challenges influence teacher competence and student learning outcomes while identifying gaps that this study addresses, particularly in Tanzanian primary schools.

2.1 Empirical Studies

Falah et al. (2023) investigated challenges faced by English teachers in Indonesian primary schools under the Merdeka Curriculum. The study found that a lack of professional development programs hindered teachers' ability to teach effectively. Teachers struggled to align instruction with curriculum requirements, support slow learners, and prepare appropriate learning materials. These findings accentuate the importance of continuous professional development in enhancing teacher competence, which is a central concern of this study that seeks to examine how Tanzanian primary school teachers' training and

preparedness affect their classroom performance and students' mastery of English.

Similarly, Shan and Abdul Aziz (2022) examined challenges faced by English teachers in rural Malaysia. They identified a shortage of qualified teachers as a major barrier, with low welfare and limited pay discouraging service in rural areas. This resulted in high turnover and disrupted student learning. This study draws on these findings to explore whether similar systemic and contextual factors in Tanzania contribute to teachers' competence and classroom effectiveness, thereby influencing pupil outcomes.

Levina (2017) investigated English teachers' understanding and application of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in New Zealand. The study revealed that misconceptions about CLT, reliance on grammar-focused methods, limited English proficiency, and insufficient professional training constrained the use of learner-centered strategies. These results highlight the need for teacher competence in applying curriculum-recommended approaches, directly informing this study's investigation of Tanzanian teachers' ability to implement CLT-aligned instruction effectively.

Wambua (2019) explored implementation challenges of the competency-based curriculum in Machakos County, Kenya. Teachers were unprepared for the new curriculum, which hindered classroom effectiveness. Wambua recommended in-service training and teacher involvement in curriculum planning. This aligns with the aim of present study's focus on Tanzanian teachers, examining whether lack of preparation and training similarly limits their competence and negatively affects pupils' learning outcomes.

Mosha (2012) assessed factors affecting students' performance in English in Zanzibar secondary schools. The study found that unqualified and untrained teachers often skipped difficult topics, leaving knowledge gaps. Training teachers was identified as a strategy to improve instructional skills and student performance. This finding parallels the current study's purpose of determining how teacher competence in Tanzanian primary schools influences mastery of English among pupils.

In the Tanzanian context, John (2024) examined the implementation of CLT principles in primary schools. Despite policy guidance, many teachers struggled to apply CLT strategies effectively, indicating a persistent gap between curriculum expectations and classroom practice. Similarly, Mwandondwa (2025) found that professional development significantly enhanced teacher effectiveness. These studies provide local evidence of the critical role of teacher competence in mediating policy implementation and student outcomes, directly supporting the focus of this

study. Hillary and Makundi (2024) explored inquiry-based teaching strategies in Bagamoyo District, Tanzania. While effective in improving pupil performance, implementation was hindered by limited resources. Boniface (2020) found that in-service training improved teachers' lesson preparation, delivery, and mastery of subject matter. Therefore, these studies highlight the importance of teacher competence, both in knowledge and pedagogy, as a determinant of student success, reinforcing the rationale for investigating Tanzanian primary school teachers' competency in English instruction.

The reviewed literature consistently identifies teacher incompetence as a major challenge in English language instruction. However, most studies primarily describe the problem without fully exploring how teacher competence mediates the translation of curriculum policy into effective classroom practice and student performance. There is limited research that explicitly links teacher competence, policy implementation, and student outcomes, particularly in Tanzanian primary schools. Addressing these gaps is essential for designing interventions that enhance teacher competence and improve student learning outcomes.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) theory, a language learning approach that emerged in the 1970s and emphasises interaction as both the means and the goal of language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Unlike traditional grammar-translation methods that focus on memorisation and form, CLT encourages learners to use language meaningfully in authentic contexts. Students are expected to communicate effectively to produce accurate vocabulary, grammatical structures, and pronunciation while achieving communicative intent.

In CLT-based classrooms, teachers employ learner-centered strategies such as pair and group work, authentic materials and tasks, illustrations, visual aids, and information gap activities to develop pupils' communicative competence (Richards, 2006). Successful implementation requires teachers to be proficient in English and skilled in designing and facilitating interactive lessons. Competence in CLT extends beyond subject knowledge to include pedagogical expertise, classroom management, and the ability to adapt instruction to learners' needs (Littlewood, 2004; Harmer, 2015).

The adoption of CLT is particularly relevant for Tanzanian primary schools, where national curriculum reforms emphasise communicative competence, learner-centered approaches, and functional English skills (URT, 2015). Despite these policy directives, many teachers face challenges such as limited professional development, low English proficiency, large class sizes, and insufficient teaching resources, which constrain effective CLT implementation (John, 2024; Mwandondwa, 2025). Framing this study within CLT provides a theoretical lens to examine how these challenges affect teacher competence and, consequently, pupils' ability to acquire English in meaningful communicative contexts.

CLT also provides a conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between teacher competence, curriculum implementation, and student outcomes. Teachers who effectively apply CLT strategies create interactive learning environments that enhance language acquisition and build learners' confidence in using English (Savignon, 2002; Brown, 2007). Conversely, underprepared or inadequately trained teachers may struggle to facilitate communicative learning, resulting in gaps in pupils' mastery and overall academic performance.

Situating this study within CLT allows a systematic assessment of English teachers' competence, identifying areas where training, experience, or resources may be insufficient. This framework directly supports the study's main purpose: to investigate how teacher competence influences the quality of English instruction and pupils' mastery of English in Tanzanian primary schools. It emphasises both the pedagogical and linguistic dimensions of teacher effectiveness and provides a foundation for designing targeted interventions to improve teaching and learning outcomes.

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to collect and analyse data, as it allows integration of qualitative and quantitative methods, providing both breadth and depth of information (Maxwell, 2016). A convergent parallel design was adopted, in which qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously, analysed independently, and interpreted together, with equal weight given to both data types (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). This design enabled a comprehensive understanding of teacher competence and its impact on pupil learning outcomes.

The target population comprised Standard 3 and Standard 6 English teachers from four primary schools in Dodoma region. Two public Kiswahili-medium schools, referred to as School C and School D, and two private English-medium schools, referred to as School A and School B, were purposively selected. Standard 3 and Standard 6 classes were chosen because they are not NECTA examination candidates, minimising disruption to exam preparations.

Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations. Questionnaires were administered to English teachers to obtain information on their competency, teaching practices, and challenges in delivering English instruction. This method allowed for efficient and cost-effective collection of a substantial amount of data (Brown, 2001). Non-participant classroom observations were conducted to assess whether teachers' practices aligned with Communicative Language Teaching principles and to capture real-time instructional dynamics (Johnson & Turner, 2003). Semi-structured interviews were used to explore teachers' awareness of CLT, their pedagogical goals, and strategies for facilitating learning, providing in-depth contextual understanding (Johnson & Turner, 2003).

Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analysed using thematic analysis. Data were transcribed, coded, and analysed inductively, with themes refined iteratively and cross-checked for reliability, following Kothari (2004). Findings were presented through verbatim quotations, descriptive narratives, and thematic summaries to illuminate classroom pedagogy and its influence on pupils' learning. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, and inferential statistics where applicable (Creswell, 2014).

To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, triangulation and a pilot study were employed. Triangulation involved using multiple data sources and methods, including questionnaires, observations, interviews, and documentary reviews, to validate findings and enhance credibility (Creswell, 2017). A pilot study was conducted in one primary school in Dodoma to test data collection instruments and procedures, allowing refinement before the main study. Ethical consideration was ensured in this study, as the researcher got introductory letter for data collection from SJUT and DED who was responsible for all activities in the district. Participants were informed about the objectives and benefits of the study and voluntary participation. Furthermore, participants were told not to write or mention their names during data collection for the purpose of ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. This methodology provided a vigorous framework to examine teacher competence, identify challenges in implementing CLT-based instruction, and assess the impact on pupils' mastery of English in Tanzanian primary schools.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study are presented in line with the main objective, which was to assess the competence of teachers in teaching English in both private English-medium and public Kiswahili-medium primary schools in Tanzania. The results indicate that teachers in both school types exhibit varying levels of incompetence in English language instruction. The main factors contributing to this incompetence are discussed below.

4.1 Lack of In-service Training

The researcher, through questionnaires administered to eight English teachers from School A, School B, School C, and School D, found that many teachers do not attend in-service training programs. In the questionnaire, teachers were asked to indicate whether they had participated in any in-service training related to English language teaching.

The findings indicate that the majority of teachers had not received professional development in recent years. This lack of in-service training limits teachers' opportunities to update their pedagogical skills, adopt learner-centered approaches such as CLT, support slow learners, and prepare appropriate learning materials. Consequently, insufficient professional development significantly contributes to gaps in teacher competence and negatively affects pupils' mastery of English. Their responses were as follows in Figure 1 below.
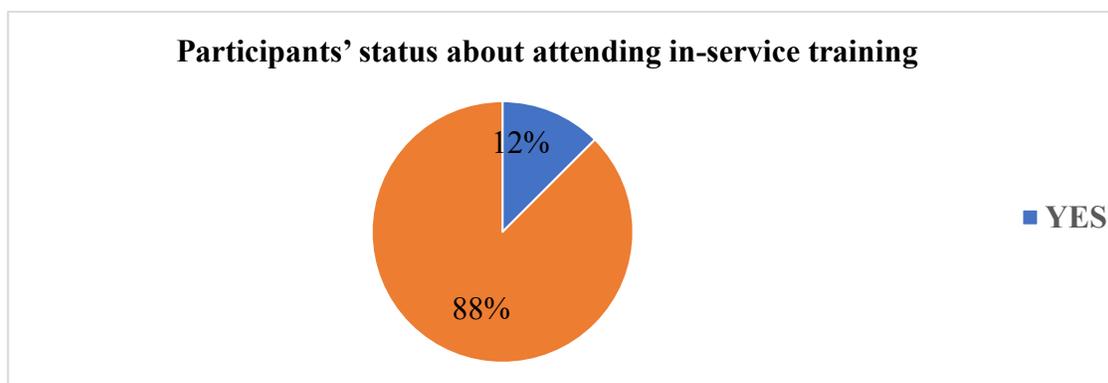

Figure 1: Status of attendance of in-service training for teachers of English
Source: Field Data (2024)

From the figure, out of the eight English teachers who participated in this study, only one (12.5%) from a public Kiswahili-medium school reported receiving in-service training, while the remaining seven (87.5%) had not. This indicates that English teachers rarely receive regular professional development and often teach without updating their knowledge or instructional strategies. This finding aligns with Littlewood (2007), who argues that teachers may struggle to execute instructional strategies effectively if they lack both practical and theoretical training. Similarly, Ekpoh et al. (2013) note that teachers who participate in in-service training demonstrate stronger performance in subject knowledge, classroom management, instructional strategies, and student evaluation. The Welsh Government (2010) also emphasises that regular professional development enables educators to maintain a firm understanding of the subjects they teach. The evidence accentuates the critical need for English teachers to receive regular in-service training to enhance their competence, ensure the implementation of competency-based curricula, and improve pupils' mastery of the English language.

4.2 Limited Teaching Experience and Teacher Competence

The researcher sought to determine whether teaching experience influences teachers' competence in teaching English. Teachers were asked to indicate their years of teaching experience. Their responses are presented in Figure 2 below.
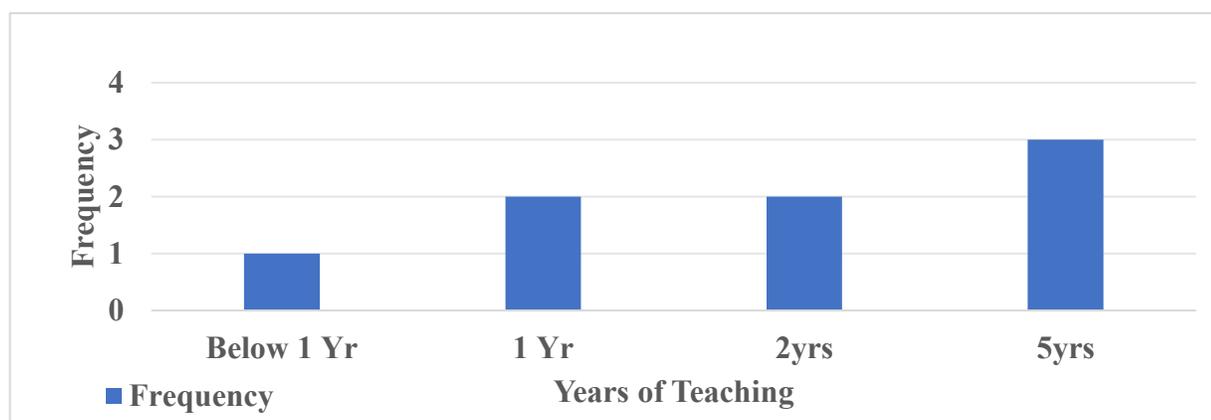

Figure 2: Teachers experience in teaching English
Source: Field Data (2024)

The bar graph in Figure 2 shows that while the majority of teachers from both private English-medium and public Kiswahili-medium schools reported having five years of teaching experience, the combined number of teachers with less than one year, one year, and two years of experience exceeds those with five years. This indicates that many teachers have relatively limited teaching experience. Limited teaching experience affects teachers' competence in handling learners with diverse learning needs. Inexperienced teachers often struggle to adapt instructional methods, manage classrooms effectively, and employ varied teaching strategies tailored to individual students' differences. In line to this, Bamidele and Adekola (2017) found significant differences in pupil achievement between those taught by experienced teachers and those taught by less experienced teachers. Similarly, Harris and Sass (2008) argue that teachers' experience and qualifications considerably influence students' performance in English. Strauss et al. (2001) indicate that teaching experience is a strong predictor of student academic achievement. Furthermore, Ojo (2008) asserts that teachers' experience, among other factors, directly affects students' performance in English language. These findings suggest that insufficient teaching experience contributes to gaps in teacher competence, which may negatively impact pupils' mastery of English. Addressing this challenge requires mentorship for novice teachers and continuous professional development to enhance instructional effectiveness.

4.3 Low English Proficiency of the English Teachers

Classroom observations revealed that many English teachers exhibited poor grammar, limited vocabulary, and incorrect pronunciation. While some teachers used simple language and attempted to correct pupils' grammar, others struggled with English accuracy themselves and therefore failed to correct pupils' mispronunciations. For example, some teachers pronounced English words using Kiswahili phonetics. Observed mispronunciations included:

*"/chaki/" instead of "/chalk/", "/ deksi/ instead of "/desk/", (**English language teacher from SCHOOL C, August 2024**)*
*"/Sentesi/" instead of "sentence", (**English language teacher from SCHOOL C, August 2024**)*
*"/Leji/" instead of "large", "/bradikast/" instead of "/broadcast/" (**English language teacher from SCHOOL C, August 2024**)*
*"/dhifu/" instead of 'thief" (**English language teacher from SCHOOL D, August 2024**).*

These examples indicate that some teachers lack fluency and accuracy in English, which can result in pupils learning incorrect pronunciations and developing gaps in language acquisition. When teachers are not proficient in the language, students' opportunities to develop communicative competence are significantly constrained.

This finding aligns with Madya (2018), who asserts that instructors' English competence directly affects their teaching effectiveness. Teachers with limited proficiency often experience low self-confidence, struggle to communicate with learners, and find it difficult to deliver

lesson content effectively. Similarly, Mwinsheikhe (2008) argues that teachers' poor English competence negatively impacts students' language learning by reducing the quantity and quality of linguistic input in the classroom. In such contexts, both teachers and pupils often resort to Kiswahili to cope with communication barriers, thereby undermining the development of pupils' English proficiency.

4.4 Inadequate Teaching and Learning Materials

Findings from questionnaires administered to English teachers revealed that insufficient teaching and learning materials contribute significantly to teachers' incompetence in English language instruction. The questionnaire asked teachers whether available instructional materials were sufficient and how their availability affected teaching and learning. Responses indicated that teachers struggled to deliver lessons effectively due to inadequate resources. Table 1 presents the teachers' responses regarding the availability of teaching and learning materials.

Table 1: Teachers' responses on availability of teaching and learning materials

	YES	%	NO	%
School A	02	25	00	00
School B	02	25	00	00
School C	00	00	02	25
School D	00	00	02	25
Totals	**04**	**100**	**04**	**100**

Source: Field Data, (2024)

The data show that teachers from the two English medium schools (School A and School B) reported having sufficient teaching and learning materials. In contrast, teachers from the two public Kiswahili medium schools (School C and School D) indicated that materials were either insufficient or completely unavailable. For example, teachers reported:

> *"NO, because the school does not have enough books for pupils and teachers' guide" (**English language** teacher **from SCHOOL C, August 2024**)*

> *"There are no enough materials such as extra materials apart from (TIE), Dictionaries for students and shortage of audio-visuals materials" (**English language teacher from SCHOOL D, August 2024***

These findings are consistent with Johnson (2020), who observed that teachers are severely constrained in their ability to employ diverse and effective teaching methods when instructional materials are lacking, often leading to lower student performance. Similarly, Najumba (2013)

argued that poor student outcomes often result from teachers' limited capacity to implement engaging and varied teaching strategies due to insufficient resources.

Insufficient teaching and learning materials may also demotivate teachers, hinder their professional development, and lower the overall standard of English language education in primary schools. Resource availability is therefore a crucial factor in enabling teachers to apply modern pedagogical approaches, such as CLT, which directly impacts both teacher competence and pupils' learning outcomes.

4.5 Large Classes

Large class sizes create significant challenges for classroom management and effective instruction. Teachers in overcrowded classrooms struggle to provide individual attention, monitor student progress, and implement interactive teaching methods. These limitations reduce the effectiveness of teachers' skills and negatively impact

pupils' learning outcomes. Classroom observations, questionnaires, and interviews conducted in Tanzanian primary schools revealed that overcrowded classrooms hinder the implementation of learner-centered instruction, timely feedback, and accurate evaluation of pupils' mastery of English. Although teacher competence is a key determinant of effective instruction, its impact is often constrained in large classes due to limited opportunities for personalised learning and practical language application.

In public Kiswahili-medium schools, classrooms were particularly congested. In School D, pupils were divided into groups of 10–15 for group activities, while in School C, Standard 6 pupils were grouped in sets of 10–20. Such arrangements often caused noise and disengagement, with some pupils failing to participate in presentations. For instance, Standard 6 in School C had 98 pupils, while School D had 138 pupils in a single classroom. Each desk accommodated 4–5 pupils, and many sat on the floor due to insufficient desks, limiting access to textbooks and hindering participation in group discussions. Pupils without desks were unable to place books properly, and teachers tended to focus on groups with proper seating and materials, leaving others unsupported. Consequently, pupils sitting on the floor had reduced opportunities to understand lessons and practice English effectively.

These findings align with Sulaiman (2015), who reported that large classrooms are challenging for both knowledge delivery and classroom management. Such settings require innovative teaching strategies, which were largely absent in the observed classes. Herzallah (2019) further emphasised that overcrowded classrooms prevent teachers from providing the individual attention essential for CLT activities, such as group discussions, role-plays, and pair work. Generally, large class sizes in public Kiswahili-medium primary schools in Tanzania significantly hinder the ability of English teachers to deliver effective instruction and implement CLT strategies.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This section presents the study's overall findings and provides recommendations for policy, practice, and future research based on the competence of English teachers in Tanzanian primary schools.

5.1 Conclusion

This study assessed the competence of English teachers in the teaching and learning of English in both public Kiswahili medium and private English medium primary schools in Tanzania. The findings revealed that teacher competence is influenced by a combination of professional, institutional, and contextual factors, all of which directly affect pupils' mastery of the English language. Insufficient

in-service training emerged as a significant challenge. Many teachers had limited exposure to updated pedagogical practices, which constrained their ability to implement the competency-based curriculum and CLT effectively. Teachers with fewer years of teaching experience also showed limited ability to address diverse learners' needs, highlighting the importance of experience in developing classroom management skills, flexibility, and instructional confidence.

Poor English proficiency among teachers, manifested in incorrect grammar, limited vocabulary, and inaccurate pronunciation, further reduced the quality of instruction and exposed pupils to errors that could impede language acquisition. Inadequate teaching and learning resources, particularly in public Kiswahili medium schools, limited the use of interactive, learner-centered strategies, undermining both teaching effectiveness and pupil engagement. Large and overcrowded classes significantly constrained individualised attention, timely feedback, and the practical implementation of CLT activities such as group work and role-playing. This structural challenge, compounded by limited resources and teacher experience, contributed to suboptimal learning outcomes. Therefore, teacher incompetence in English instruction is not solely a matter of individual capability but also a consequence of systemic issues, including insufficient professional development, limited teaching experience, low English proficiency, inadequate resources, and overcrowded classrooms.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. English teachers should attend regular in-service training programs to update pedagogical skills, adopt learner-centered strategies, and enhance the mastery of English language teaching.
2. The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology should ensure curriculum implementation is supported by sufficient resources, including textbooks, teachers' guides, and digital learning tools, to facilitate effective English instruction.
3. Educational authorities should provide adequate learning environments by developing libraries, ensuring sufficient desks and seating, and constructing classrooms that support interaction, group work, and CLT-based activities.
4. Further research is recommended to explore the impact of teacher competence on English language acquisition in large and resource-limited classrooms, with particular attention to the effectiveness of CLT strategies in such contexts.

This will provide empirical evidence to guide interventions that enhance both teaching quality and student outcomes.

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