



# Teachers' Understanding of the Learner-Centred Approach in English Language Classrooms in Selected Secondary Schools in Central Uganda

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**Abstract:** *Despite the changes in the curricula to Competence Based Education (CBE), there are still issues related to comprehension of the concepts of learner-centred learning. This study aimed at investigating teachers' understanding of Learner-Centred Approach (LCA) in English language classrooms within selected secondary schools in Central Uganda inspired by curriculum reforms advocating for a change from teacher-centred to learner-centred learning. The research adopted a qualitative research using multiple case study design. Sixteen secondary school English language teachers with a minimum of four years teaching experience in Central Uganda were purposively selected as participants. Interviews served as the data collection method used while data analysis was done through thematic analysis of Braun & Clarke's model with the use of ATLAS.ti software. Findings reveal that although teachers are generally aware of curriculum reforms promoting learner-centred pedagogy, their understanding remains largely procedural rather than conceptual. It is common practice for teachers to connect learner-centred approaches to classroom learning using cooperative learning, learner interaction, and active learning but adopted only in a restricted and teacher-controlled environment. Integrating ICT, contextual learning, learner autonomy, and formative assessments have not been effectively adopted due to overcrowded classes, workload pressures, curriculum requirements, and assessment practices based on examinations. The study found that there is a significant mismatch between policy expectations and classroom practice with respect to adopting a learner-centred approaches. The study recommends strengthened professional development for teachers, improved alignment between curriculum and assessment systems, and enhanced school-level support to facilitate meaningful implementation of learner-centred pedagogy.*

**Keywords:** *Learner-Centred Approach, English language teaching, teacher understanding, competency-based curriculum, competence based education.*

## How to cite this work (APA):

Nakazinga, R., Waiswa, M. M., Kalanda, E. D. & Tumuheki, P. B. (2026). Teachers' Understanding of the Learner-Centred Approach in English Language Classrooms in Selected Secondary Schools in Central Uganda. *Journal of Research Innovation and Implications in Education*, 10(3), 35 – 47. <https://doi.org/10.59765/vpr8>

## 1. Introduction

Incorporation of Learner-Centred Approach (LCA) has become one of the hallmarks of curriculum reforms in the Ugandan secondary education system, which began in

2020 through the implementation of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). Curriculum reform in this context focuses on shifting from teacher-centred approaches of teaching towards pedagogy that supports the engagement of learners in their learning processes. With

regard to English language classrooms, it is essential to highlight that English not only becomes a subject but also the medium of instruction for learners (National Curriculum Development Centre [NCDC], 2019; NCDC, 2020).

Although LCA has been promoted, there has been inconsistency regarding its application in classroom settings. Research findings show that despite the shift towards LCA within the curriculum, many English language classes continue to be teacher-dominated through direct instruction, examination-driven lessons, and lack of autonomy on the part of learners (Altinyelken, 2011; Wambi et al., 2024). Challenges regarding LCA in English language classes are not only related to structural obstacles but also to limited teachers' understanding of LCA pedagogy. In many cases, learner-centred teaching is reduced to procedural classroom activities such as group work and learner participation rather than deeper constructivist principles of interaction, scaffolding, and collaborative knowledge construction (Habiyaemye et al., 2023; Ndomondo et al., 2022).

Research conducted in diverse educational settings also reveals that despite teachers being aware of learner-centred reforms, they still resort to teaching approaches that are teacher-centred (Ahmed et al., 2022; Matewera et al., 2022). However, most of these studies are conducted in contexts other than Uganda or cover curriculum implementation but not the conceptualization of learner-centred pedagogical approach by teachers in English classes. Therefore, there is scarce empirical research on the conceptualization of learner-centred pedagogy among Ugandan secondary school English teachers and how it influences their practice.

However, one should consider the global education reforms which influence Uganda in terms of shifting from teacher-centered to learner-centred approaches in line with constructivism and competencies. As observed in several education reforms in sub-Saharan countries in particular, education reforms across Sub-Saharan African nations have been concerned with issues of rote-learning and examinations which characterized traditional education reforms and sought to incorporate elements of constructive and competence-based learning through increased focus on learner involvement, development of critical thinking skills, and skills acquisition rather than learning by memory (Schweisfurth, 2015; Tikly, 2019). Thus, Uganda's Competency-Based Curriculum aligns with this global shift, seeking to reposition learners as active participants in knowledge construction rather than passive recipients of information. Nonetheless, the process of implementing such policies has always been challenging. From evidence gained from analogous scenarios,

pedagogic change through policy reform may face some resistance or partial implementation in light of deeply rooted classroom culture, lack of resources, and examination-based accountability measures (Westbrook et al., 2013; Altinyelken, 2021). Often times, such reforms have involved introduction of new pedagogical terminology without changing what actually happens in classroom practice or beliefs of the teachers and particularly the English language classes in secondary schools where the basic concepts of the language are built.

With regard to English language teaching, learner-centred pedagogy is very crucial for communicative language teaching which stresses interaction, fluency, and application of language in a meaningful manner. However, English language classes in most African schools still rely on grammar teaching and teacher explanations due to the critical importance of language examinations in assessing learner ability (Borg, 2018; Malekela, 2020). This creates a persistent tension between communicative goals and examination demands. This forms the larger context within which this current study is carried out, with emphasis placed on the way secondary school English language teachers in central Uganda conceptualize learner-centered approaches to learning within the competency-based curriculum.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the emphasis on learner-centred pedagogy in the CBC adopted in Uganda, there is clear indication that classroom implementation is not always consistent and often does not meet curriculum requirements. The CBC requires teachers to support learner engagement using learner interaction, group work, assessment, and contextualisation of lessons. However, classroom instruction in most secondary schools still favours teacher-centred instruction in examination environments whereby teachers face constraints due to high enrolment numbers and inadequate instructional resources (Altinyelken, 2011; Wambi et al., 2024). Past research has shown that some teachers are aware of the instructional procedures of learner-centred pedagogy but lack conceptual knowledge on the principles underpinning this approach to education. Consequently, learner-centred pedagogy has been found to be reduced to instructional strategies such as group discussions and question and answer, thus missing out on actual autonomy and knowledge building by learners (Habiyaemye et al., 2023; Ndomondo et al., 2022). Although such challenges have been investigated in different educational environments, little empirical work has been done on the conceptualisation of learner-centred pedagogy among Ugandan English language teachers in secondary schools. This gap affects comprehension on whether issues arising in the implementation of the learner-

centered approach are theoretical, situational, or systemic. This paper, therefore, sought to analyze the comprehension that teachers had regarding the Learner-Centered Approach in the teaching of English language classes.

### 1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to explore teachers' understanding of the learner-centred approach in English Language classrooms in selected secondary schools in Central Uganda that effect CBC implementation.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Review

The present research is based on Social Constructivism, which is a theoretical model of learning that sees the acquisition of knowledge as a socially-mediated process, whereby learning involves active processes of constructing meanings as a result of social interactions. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning takes place in the context of social interactions, and cognitive development is best accomplished in the zone of proximal development (ZPD), whereby learners develop greater understanding through the scaffolding offered to them by their educators or fellow learners. In such a theoretical framework, learning is not considered to be a passive process of acquiring information but an active process of meaning making. Constructivist classrooms imply changes in the role played by the teacher from one of a disseminator of knowledge to that of a facilitator of learning through providing the appropriate conditions for inquiry, dialogue, reflection, and discussion (Bruner, 1996). Such pedagogical practices involve creating environments for learning in which the active participation of the learner in the process of meaning construction is prioritised instead of passive learning processes like rote memorisation. Nonetheless, the existing body of literature on educational change suggests that the application of constructivist pedagogy presupposes not only the need for methodological changes but also the requirement to make significant alterations to the teachers' epistemology with regard to knowledge and power relations within the class (Bardakci et al., 2021). The adoption of constructivist philosophy often happens on a policy level and remains symbolic because teachers do not undergo epistemological changes, thereby causing discrepancies between theory and practice, in which the discourse is used but not realised. Against this theoretical background, learner-centred pedagogy can become feasible only if teachers incorporate constructivist epistemology into their thinking and shift the nature of interaction towards the construction of collective knowledge. Without such epistemological alignment, pedagogical reforms risk remaining procedural and

externally driven rather than deeply embedded in classroom practice.

### 2.2 Empirical Review

The empirical studies carried out in respect of learner-centred pedagogy demonstrate clearly that the learner-centred approach has become increasingly popular across the globe in education systems. The application of learner-centred approach has been witnessed in various curriculum reform efforts that have been implemented to enhance the level of learner engagement, critical thinking skills, and skills development. Generally, learner-centred pedagogy is viewed positively as an active learning strategy involving collaboration, learner autonomy, and participation in the process of building knowledge (Schweisfurth, 2015; Yoshida et al., 2023). However, while this concept is increasingly applied to curriculum reform, it appears that there are challenges to applying the principles into practice in classroom settings. Research carried out in various education contexts suggests that teachers tend to adopt a more procedural view of what learner-centred pedagogy entails. While learner-centred pedagogy is based on constructivist theory, most teachers perceive this approach in respect of its practical applications through learner interaction in groups, discussions, and questions posed and answered by learners (Sari et al., 2025). This indicates that learner-centred pedagogy is frequently reduced to methodological techniques rather than understood as a broader pedagogical shift in the roles of teachers and learners. Other studies have shown that this discrepancy is most noticeable in situations where teacher-centred methods have been prevailing for a relatively long time. It happens that curriculum changes in many education systems make references to the learner-centred concepts while leaving their practice the same. In this case, scholars refer to "surface-level implementation" of reforms in the educational system (Muganga & Ssenkusu, 2019; Habte et al., 2021). This implies that the teachers continue using old methods of teaching without much change in the way students' learning takes place amidst assumptions of embracing reforms.

For English language teaching, LCA is associated with promoting interaction and fluency. Despite this fact, the classroom practice tends to focus on grammar learning and exam preparation for vocabulary and accurate language use (Malisa & Lyamuya, 2022). One should also notice the fact that many exams in English language are highly stressful because they require precise language use. As stated by Van De Kuilen et al. (2022), exam-oriented education systems promote teacher-centred teaching methods, especially when they deal with grammar classes where efficiency and syllabus coverage become primary instructional goals. Furthermore, the role of structural and

institutional limitations is one of the critical determinants of the adoption of the learner-centred approach. Others include; class size, lack of instructional material, heavy workload, and assessment through examination have been noted as some of the common obstacles to effective learning-centered pedagogy (Matewera et al., 2022; Almuhamadi, 2025). Such structural limitations limit the scope for personalized learning, learner participation, and continuous assessment; key aspects in learning-centered education. Consequently, teachers tend to modify LCA so as to be accommodated within existing classroom limitations.

In the face of these limitations, the modified LCA continue to be adopted while maintaining the dominance of the teacher-centric form of instruction. This development is reflected in the growth of hybrid pedagogies in which some degree of involvement of learners is included in the dominant paradigm without necessarily changing classroom dynamics. Empirical studies suggest that such hybridity reflects pragmatic adaptation rather than full pedagogical transformation. Similarly, there are concerns of professional development for teachers as an essential factor in pedagogical innovation; teachers who participate in systematic, reflective, and theory-based professional development programs tend to develop a more profound understanding of the principles of constructivist learning as well as implement them more effectively (Mkimbili & Kayima, 2022). At the same time, numerous professional development practices implemented at present are fragmented and limited by short-term periods and mainly deal with procedural implementation of curricula rather than theoretical concepts underlying constructivism. In addition, unequal availability of opportunities for professional development is the reason for inconsistent understanding and implementation of learner-centred approaches does not help the situation. In fact, there are cases when only some selected teachers receive formal professional training; others receive their knowledge through informal learning within social networks. This fragmented model of professional learning results in uneven interpretation and application of learner-centred pedagogy.

All in all, empirical studies indicate that despite LCA being widely promoted in education policies and reforms, their application is subject to structural constraints, testing methods and teachers' belief systems. It is evident that effective implementation of such pedagogical practices necessitates not only the transformation of education policy and reforms, but also consistency among the intended curriculum, teachers' beliefs, systems of professional development and teaching environments. That notwithstanding, there is a shortage of empirical studies that would focus on the ways in which English language teachers working in Ugandan secondary schools

understand the concept of the LCA under the CBC. The current study fills this void by exploring teachers' perception of the LCA in English language.

### 3. Methodology

The research study utilized the qualitative research approach and multiple case study design in order to investigate how teachers perceived the LCA in English classrooms in some selected secondary schools in Central Uganda. The use of the qualitative research approach was found suitable due to the nature of the study, which aimed at obtaining deep insights into the perceptions, meanings, and experiences of the teachers regarding learner centeredness within their classroom contexts. As Yin (2018) notes, the use of a case study design is particularly suited for the examination of contemporary phenomena within their real-life contexts where the context is crucial to understanding the phenomenon being studied. The multiple case study approach enabled the researcher to examine similarities and differences in teachers' understandings across different school contexts, thereby enhancing the richness and credibility of the findings. This research was carried out in selected secondary schools in Central Uganda, an area where Uganda's CBC was introduced in 2020. The CBC focuses on learner-centered teaching strategies, designed to enhance learning by promoting the learners' involvement in thinking, solving problems, cooperating, and developing competence. English language teachers were appropriate respondents for this study since English was used both as a subject and the main means of communication in Ugandan secondary schools.

Sixteen English language teachers took part in this study. Information-rich respondents were purposefully selected because of their experience in implementing the Competency-Based Curriculum and their teaching experience exceeding four years. Purposeful sampling was suitable because it allowed selecting such respondents who could provide rich information concerning learner-centered pedagogy and how it can be applied in the classroom environment (Palinkas et al., 2015). The selected teachers represented different school settings and possessed varying levels of professional experience, thereby providing diverse perspectives on the phenomenon under study.

Data collection was done using semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Interviews were selected for data collection because they enable the researcher to explore participants' experiences, interpretations, and meanings extensively while also being flexible enough to allow for any issues arising within the course of the interview. Interview guide questions were based on major concepts of learner-centered pedagogy found in existing literature.

They included active learning, learner participation, collaborative learning, learner autonomy, contextual learning, ICT-based teaching, and continuous assessment. The interviews were carried out at the respective school of each participant at a time suitable to the interviewee. The interview period lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Interviewees consented to conversations being recorded. In addition, field notes were taken to document contextual information, participant reactions, and non-verbal expressions that enriched interpretation of the interview data.

Thematic analysis as introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used during data analysis. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for any transcription errors. The data were then anonymised before being uploaded to ATLAS.ti software. This helped in organising, coding, and retrieving the qualitative data easily. The following six stages were involved in the analysis: becoming familiar with data; generating codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and writing up the report. Both deductive and inductive approaches to coding were used during the analysis. Codes using deductive approach were generated based on theoretical frameworks such as literature and learner-centred dimensions whereas codes using inductive approach arose from the data gathered during participants' experiences. Through an iterative process of coding and comparison, related codes were grouped into broader themes that captured teachers' understandings and enactment of learner-centred pedagogy.

A number of methods were used to provide credibility of the findings. The first method involved the technique known as member checking, where participants were asked to validate or clarify their understanding of interpretations. Triangulation was performed by comparing the data collected from the interviews with the field notes taken throughout the process of collecting the data. The reliability of data was ensured through keeping thorough records of decisions taken while collecting the data, coding and developing themes. The process of analysing data and the researcher's reflection on the process were meant to make sure that confirmability is reached. Detailed descriptions of the study setting and procedures used were aimed at increasing transferability.

The study involved minimal risk and followed ethical guidelines for social science fieldwork. Formal approval from an Institutional Review Board was not required under the policies of Uganda Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants, and all data were anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Procedural Understanding of Learner-Centred Approaches

The findings show that teachers generally had wide awareness of the changes in the CBC reforms, which were expected to promote LCA to teaching within classrooms. The use of terminology related to topics like "learner participation," "group work," "active learning," and "classroom interactions" was common among the participants, indicating that the teachers had been exposed to reform discourse. As indicated by one participant that, *"From this year onwards, we will start the transition from the teacher-centred to a learner-centred approach."*

Despite the awareness teachers had regarding the language of reform, there was limited insight into the concept of LCA in relation to its deeper constructs. According to most participants, LCA referred to the application of classroom techniques such as group work, discussions, presentation by learners, and questioning exercises like one of the participants specified that; *"I always start my lessons by forming groups amongst the learners."* This is due to the tendency in the field of education to understand learner-centered pedagogy in terms of physical classroom organization instead of intellectual stimulation. Although group work was practiced widely among teachers, their use of such strategy seemed to be more in terms of organizational procedure geared towards ensuring participation and classroom management instead of fostering intellectual discourse and inquiry. Hence, it was evident from the results obtained that the process of curriculum reform dissemination has been largely procedural while being deficient in conceptual change. The teachers exhibited an understanding of the policy aspects of what LCA consists of, but did not exhibit much knowledge of its underlying theoretical concepts according to social constructivist learning theories. This procedural interpretation was reinforced by curriculum implementation practices that emphasised instructional techniques more than pedagogical reasoning. In other cases, the participants characterized learner-centered pedagogy in compliance language, which reflected their view that learner-centered instruction entailed meeting curricular objectives rather than questioning classroom epistemologies. Thus, learner-centered education remained an exercise in participation devoid of any major change in teachers' power and learners' autonomy.

### 4.2 Persistence of Teacher-Centred Instruction within Reform-Oriented Classrooms

Although there was recognition of the learner-centred paradigm shift, teaching in classrooms continued to be strongly influenced by teacher-centred practices.

As one of the participants put it: *“Sometimes I have to employ teacher-centred approaches such as the ‘chalk-and-talk’ approach, particularly when teaching grammar-related subjects.”*

And another participant remarked: *“When time is not enough, and the syllabus is vast, explaining becomes the best way out.”*

Such responses imply that teacher-centred pedagogic approaches continue to play the role of stabilisers in examination-focused classrooms. While the use of learner-centred approaches such as discussions was practised, they did so in an environment largely dominated by teacher-centred approaches. This indicates that while pedagogical change may have led to hybrid teaching practices rather than complete change in classroom instruction. Participants indicated that they adopted an alternating approach based on the complexity of the subject matter, the level of difficulty of the learners, issues of control, and examination considerations.

As one teacher noted, *“Sometimes I do group work, but when the issue is complicated I turn to explaining.”* The adoption of such an approach appears to be a practical approach rather than theory-based application. Complex content areas resulted in teachers reverting back to direct instruction as they considered the process of direct instruction more efficient than any other form of teaching in terms of delivering content and preparation for examinations. This meant that learner-centered pedagogies were practiced under the constraints of traditional didactic practices. The persistence of teacher-centred instruction also reflects broader institutional expectations associated with syllabus completion and national examination performance. Teachers consistently associated effective teaching with successful coverage of examinable content, reinforcing instructional practices that prioritised efficiency and control over exploratory learning and learner autonomy.

### **4.3 Structural Constraints Shaping Learner-Centred Classroom Practice**

During interviews, the participants highlighted institutional and structural constraints as the key impediments to the application of learner-centred teaching methods. Some of the institutional constraints that came out during the interviews were the high number of learners per class, workload, instructional time, the need to cover the syllabus, and exam-focused approaches to evaluation. As noted by one participant: *“The ratio of one hundred learners for one*

*teacher is quite high.... It is virtually impossible to implement the learner-centred teaching.”*

A second participant remarked: *“Preparing Continuous Assessment Items is quite a challenge, given the large number of learners.”* This shows that teachers are highly constrained in their instructional choices by classroom conditions. Most of the participants indicated that implementing learner-centred instruction was quite challenging in overcrowded classrooms.

Class size was another factor that had an impact on the following: learner interaction, personalization, assessment, discussion, and learner-centeredness. In response, teachers were forced to turn learner-centered activities into practical routines that emphasized classroom management and completing activities rather than fostering deep learning. Pressure from examinations was also influential in the decisions made regarding the use of learner-centered techniques. Participants indicated time and again that it was important to cover the curriculum and prepare students for exams. Under these circumstances, teachers tended to opt for methods such as direct instruction. In addition, it becomes clear from the analysis of findings that structural barriers influenced not only the way that the methods were employed but also the way that teachers understood learner-centered techniques. Being consistently exposed to large classes and exam-based education systems, some participants came to view learner-centered approaches as unrealistic, idealistic, or simply possible only under certain favorable circumstances.

### **4.4 Contradictions in Learner-Centred Implementation**

Despite positive perceptions of learner-centered pedagogy, certain contradictions arose between reform expectations and practice in this regard. These contradictions were especially apparent in relation to ICT integration, learner interaction, contextualized learning, learner autonomy, and continuous assessment. The teachers mentioned that there is ICT equipment available in terms of projectors, computers, and smart TVs in the classroom. However, ICT was integrated in an instrumental manner with regard to the use for teacher explanations.

One of the participants said: *“We are lucky that in our classrooms there are computers and projectors, and it is easy for me to integrate ICT into my lessons.”*

ICT was not used in order to foster learner-centered practices; in other words, learners' investigations, collaboration, and autonomous learning were not supported. In addition, although it was believed that learner interaction was one of the major features of learner-centered pedagogy, learners' classroom interactions

remained well-structured and monitored by the teacher. A participant explained: *“We go around the class ensuring that there is nothing challenging for them and helping them.”*

Such an interaction ensured that teachers maintained their position as the central authority, even during learner-centered interactions. It was not common for learners to engage in collaborative inquiry or construct new knowledge but instead to complete their allocated exercises.

*Contextualized learning and differentiated instructions were mentioned by participants as important considerations. Implementation of such practices was constrained by classroom circumstances.* This was described by one of the teachers in the following terms:

*“Where fast learners can answer more questions, I give them more questions whilst I try helping slow learners.”*

Even though this reflects an understanding of learner differences, there were only minor variations of tasks for differentiated instruction. Learner independence was low as most classroom activities still depended significantly on the facilitation of the teacher. There were also inconsistencies with regard to continuous assessment practices. Teachers understood that the concept was important for implementing the Competency-Based Curriculum but because of constraints in workload and time, teachers used tests and end-of-topic activities to assess their students. Feedbacks, reflection by learners and competency monitoring could be described as inconsistent formative assessment practices. Overall, this study found that learner-centred teaching and learning practices at the examined institutions have only been partially adopted, adapted and compromised.

## **4.5 Uneven Professional Development and Teacher Understanding**

The results suggest that knowledge about learner-centred teaching approaches was greatly shaped by the availability of professional development activities. Those participants who had been exposed to curriculum-related seminars exhibited significantly higher awareness about concepts and practices of learner-centredness than those lacking such exposure. Nonetheless, professional development opportunities were found to be highly irregular, discontinuous, and insufficiently sustained. A participant commented: *“The training process is not well-organized since only one representative from each department is selected for this training.”*

This irregularity in teacher training was partly responsible for diverse interpretations of learner-centred teaching approach among teachers. Moreover, some participants

revealed that teachers resorted to peer communication to gain insight into curricular changes.

The participants also revealed that in most of the professional development, the emphasis was much on implementation processes such as lesson plan formats, group work processes, and assessment formats but not on engaging deeply with the concepts of constructivism. As a result, many teachers have procedural knowledge of how to practice learner-centered pedagogy without the full understanding of the pedagogic theory behind them.

The research findings thus imply that professional development for teachers practicing under the CBE curriculum emphasizes more compliance with the process of implementation of the curriculum.

## **4.6 Discussion**

### **4.6.1 Procedural Understanding of Learner-Centred Pedagogy**

It can be observed that teachers at selected secondary schools in Central Uganda generally have knowledge of the CBC reforms as well as the policy mandate for making classroom teaching practice learner-centred. However, such knowledge appears more procedural than conceptual because learners-centred pedagogy is associated with observable elements of instruction like group work, learning engagement, and classroom discussions rather than fundamental epistemic changes in knowledge creation, learner empowerment, and facilitation role of the teacher. This procedural understanding of reform corresponds to what Biggs and Tang (2011) refer to as surface-level alignment where there is no adoption of pedagogical principles but the adoption of mere superficial characteristics of reform. Likewise, Biesta (2017) holds the view that most educational reforms do not work in situations where teachers are instructed to use “methods” without understanding the essence of education. From the data presented above, one would conclude that teachers have adopted the procedural approach to reform by focusing on activities only.

Specifically from a constructivist approach, this result takes significance. Social constructivism proposed by Vygotsky states that learning is an outcome of social interaction and scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). Nevertheless, the findings point out that group work and participation have been introduced as organisational practices instead of cognitive scaffolding within the zone. This supports the claim made by Kirschner et al. (2006) that some forms of unguided activities and superficial guidance are wrongly termed as constructivist approaches since they lack in

cognitive development. Similarly, the results echo the findings made on the current research on reforms of curriculum in Africa where teachers' comprehension of the principles of learner-centred pedagogy is usually limited to "visible participation" (Muganga & Ssenkusu, 2019; Altinyelken, 2021). Indeed, Wambi et al. (2024) found out that Ugandan teachers perceive CBC as the adoption of new activities in classrooms and not new ways of thinking as such. Therefore, there is a high likelihood that teachers' understanding of the reforms is based on the activities recommended rather than the rationale behind the changes. This research thus validates the claims of Fullan (2016) that changes to education will not succeed unless they engage with the "inner logic" of the teachers' belief systems. Without addressing these beliefs, any change can be purely superficial.

#### **4.6.2 Persistence of Teacher-Centred Instruction and Hybrid Pedagogical Practices**

While a generally favorable disposition towards learner-centered instruction was revealed by teachers, it has become evident in the research conducted that teacher-centered approaches are prevalent in many contexts, including when teaching grammar, preparing students for examinations, and completing syllabi. According to Cuban (2013), such a finding can be attributed to the so-called "reculturing challenge" associated with attempts at educational reforms, which entail the persistence of long-standing instructional practices despite innovations made in policy-making efforts. Indeed, the emergence of hybrid pedagogies, where learner-centered and teacher-centered approaches are combined, suggests an effort at practical adjustment, as opposed to a genuine shift in the way lessons are taught. Such a result is also shared by other research, conducted by Westbrook et al. (2013) and Schweisfurth (2015). From the socio-cultural point of view, this kind of hybridity cannot be seen as irrational, but it represents an attempt on the part of the teachers to find a compromise between conflicting situations. Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse provides insight into such a process because pedagogic discourse in classrooms is formed through its recontextualization within the framework of institutions. Learner-centered pedagogy, in turn, is being recontextualized in the schooling system that focuses on examinations. As a result, a new form of pedagogical discourse is generated, which focuses on both transmission and participation. Finally, the prevalence of teacher-centeredness in grammar lessons can be explained by the "efficiency imperative" described by Richards and Rodgers (2014). Language teachers feel that explanations provided by the teacher are more efficient, especially when time is limited. This perception is reinforced by assessment systems that continue to reward memorisation and accurate reproduction of language forms rather than communicative competence. In addition to that, the continuity of teacher-

centred pedagogical practices is due to professional identity. According to Borg (2018), teachers' decisions on how to deliver instruction depend significantly on their previous experience as learners, socialisation as professionals, and the demands of institutions. Where teachers have themselves undergone teacher-centred learning experiences in institutions, the uptake of reforms cannot be considered as transformative but as a negotiated one. This means that teacher-centred practices do not constitute rejection of reforms but contextual rationality. Teachers are not opposing learner-centred teaching but contextualising it, which Borg calls "Contextual Hybridisation of Pedagogy" (Tabulawa, 2013).

#### **4.6.3 Structural Constraints and the Recontextualisation of Learner-Centred Pedagogy**

In addition to this, it becomes clear from the study that structural factors heavily affect both the actual process of implementation as well as the very conception of what a learner-centred pedagogy entails. Large class sizes, workload demands, shortage of time, and an exam-focused system were repeatedly pointed out as some of the key obstacles to effective implementation of learner-centred pedagogy. Nevertheless, these structural issues not only affect the way in which teacher can implement the reforms but also define the very notion of what learner-centred pedagogy may look like in reality. As such, this observation corresponds to the theory of "school grammar," put forward by Tyack and Cuban (1995). Specifically, in the context of overcrowded classrooms, learner-centred pedagogy gets translated into such practices as group activities and brief engagement as opposed to collaborative inquiry. Likewise, Lipson et al. (2020) contend that pedagogical reforms get "translated downwards" into more simplistic forms due to resource shortages. In the present study, learner-centred pedagogy becomes a pragmatic tool for managing large classes rather than a transformative pedagogical philosophy.

Large class sizes specifically reduce the chance for formative assessment, feedback to the learners, and differentiation in teaching. Formative assessment, according to Black and Wiliam (2018), is a major tenet of learner-centred pedagogy; however, it is practically impossible when there are more than 100 learners in one class, and a teacher has no choice but to focus on efficiency. Examination-focused educational systems add to the problem, creating an environment in which a teacher must make curricular decisions based on examination criteria. Au (2017) asserts that high-stakes testing systems promote measurement-driven instruction because of their impact on curriculum implementation in that they encourage teaching to the test. Indeed, Ugandan schools operate within a measurement-driven education system due to the prevalence of examinations, and teachers have no

choice but to focus on teaching exam-relevant material rather than exploring new things with their learners. Consequently, teachers perceive learner-centred instruction as a lofty ideal rather than something feasible in a real-world situation. This perception contributes to the normalisation of teacher-centred instruction as a rational response to systemic limitations rather than a pedagogical preference.

#### **4.6.4 Contradictions in ICT Integration, Learner Autonomy, and Continuous Assessment**

Findings show major contradictions in terms of policy expectations and reality concerning ICT integration, learner autonomy, contextualised learning, and continuous assessment. Even though ICT facilities were available to the teachers, the way these technologies were used in teaching was mostly presentation-focused as opposed to interactivity or self-initiated processes. This is in line with what Ertmer and Ottenbreit-Leftwich (2013) posit about ICT integration, which is not simply about having such technologies but rather about having a certain pedagogy. If the teachers have a transmissive approach to learning, they will use ICT to improve their explanations without transforming the learning environment in any way. On the same note, Tondeur et al. (2017) point out that without pedagogical transformation, ICT only translates traditional pedagogy into a digital environment. Learner autonomy was also found to be lacking among the teachers despite their positive attitude towards autonomy. This reflects a broader tension identified by Benson (2013), who notes that autonomy is often rhetorically endorsed in policy but weakly enacted in practice due to teacher-centred control structures.

Learners in this particular study depended mostly on instruction by the teachers, thus upholding hierarchies in the classroom. Continuous assessment was used and yet there was still some gap when it came to implementation. Even though continuous basic education encourages formative assessment, it was observed that teachers had to conduct summative assessment because of issues regarding workload. This observation agrees with what Heritage (2018) said about formative assessment needing time, feedback mechanisms, and small class size, which cannot be found in most education systems. These inconsistencies indicate that learner-centred pedagogy is only selectively practiced, with teachers incorporating the outward appearance of reform while retaining the structure of traditional assessment and instruction. This selective implementation supports Coburn's (2004) concept of "depth of reform enactment," where superficial adoption occurs without deep structural change.

#### **4.6.5 Professional Development and Uneven Pedagogical Transformation**

Professional development has also been found to be integral to the formation of teachers' perception regarding learner-centered pedagogy. Nevertheless, professional training has been inconsistent, scattered and procedural. Such a view has been supported by Avalos (2011), who has noted that many teacher professional development programs, especially in developing nations, focus primarily on acquiring skills rather than theoretical knowledge. As a result of this fragmented model of teacher training in Uganda, there emerges what Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) refer to as "episodic professional learning." Under such circumstances, teachers may learn the procedures for conducting group work and assessments without grasping the underlying pedagogy.

Additionally, inequality exists in terms of pedagogical knowledge between teachers since selected teachers are the only ones attending these workshops. This inconsistency makes some teachers practice reform partially while other teachers practice tradition. Furthermore, Guskey (2002) points out that professional development should be both consistent and collaborative for effective reform in instruction. Additionally, such scattered training models undermine teachers' ability to critically evaluate reform expectations. Indeed, as suggested by Opfer and Pedder (2011), it is through the connection between theory, practice, and reflection that teachers learn effectively. The absence of such integration means reforms will continue being externally imposed rather than internally embraced. The second implication that can be drawn from the findings of this paper pertains to the fact that the implementation of learner-centred teaching does not only encounter structural and institutional limitations but also pedagogical translation loss. It seems like the process of translating curriculum concepts to pedagogical action involves loss of complexity associated with the theory, and as a result of such translation, the learner-centred approach gets reduced to a simple set of actions in the classroom. This conclusion is corroborated by the arguments put forth by Fullan (2016), who suggests that educational reforms frequently do not work because they are perceived by practitioners not as cultural changes but as technical packages of measures. In this case, the application of the learner-centred paradigm can be seen not necessarily as an act of resistance or a failure to understand the approach in question but rather as a logical response to contextual constraints. Teachers work within frameworks where performance in examinations, efficiency, and coverage of the syllabus are rewarded. This implies that there is a necessity for system coordination among curriculum aims, teacher education, assessment frameworks, and school-level contexts. Lack of coordination will lead to a disintegrated approach towards learner-centred approaches to teaching and learning.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusion

In this study, the comprehension of the Learner-Centred Approach among English language teachers in selected secondary schools in Central Uganda against the background of competency-based curriculum reforms was investigated. According to the results obtained from the research, despite the general awareness of the principles of the curriculum that advocate for learner-centred approach among teachers, the comprehension was more procedural and less conceptual in nature. The teachers tended to link learner-centred approach with specific teaching methods like group work, participation, and discussion, which did not imply any significant change in terms of classroom authority, learner autonomy, and knowledge construction.

Further findings reveal that there was no full adoption of learner-centred approach in the classroom. In particular, active learning, ICT incorporation, contextual learning, and continuous assessment approaches were adopted in part, but were teacher-controlled and simplified versions. The teacher-centred approach remained dominant especially during examinations and grammar classes due to syllabus coverage constraints.

Significantly, this study shows that contextual factors like overcrowding in classrooms, excessive workload, test-driven systems of assessment, and insufficient professional assistance not only inhibit the implementation process in terms of practical considerations but also change the understanding and practice of learner-centred pedagogy within classroom contexts. As such, learner-centred pedagogy is transformed into procedural practices that can fit well within institutional realities rather than being a revolutionary approach in itself.

Thus, it appears that through the implementation process of CBA, proceduralized learner-centred pedagogy is developed, meaning that new procedures are adopted without any transformation of teachers' cognition and classroom epistemology. Thus, it becomes apparent that there is an ongoing problem of reconciling ideal notions of curriculum reform with classroom reality, which continues to persist within secondary education systems. In effect, the study informs discussions regarding the implementation of curriculum reforms by showing that pedagogic change entails more than changes in policy or methodology, but that there must also be sustained work in terms of constructivist learning ideas.

Consequently, the study suggests that the absence of a parallel change in teacher philosophy, assessment approaches, and physical learning environments might well

result in pedagogic compliance being achieved only symbolically. This means that for learner-centered pedagogies to be truly implemented in the classroom, there must be consistency across curriculum policies, teacher education, assessment processes, and learning environments.

### 5.2 Recommendations

From the results of the above study, various suggestions have been put forward to ensure proper implementation of learner-centered pedagogy in secondary schools in Uganda.

1. The first recommendation is that the Ministry of Education and Sports as well as the National Curriculum Development Center should reform professional development programs and focus on engaging teachers with concepts underlying constructivist pedagogy rather than only on procedural aspects of the pedagogy such as skills related to classroom teaching and curriculum compliance. Training in teacher education should include concepts such as autonomy, scaffolding, collaboration, formative assessments, among others.
2. The second recommendation is that teacher education institutes should reinforce learner-centered pedagogy in teacher preparation programs. Teacher education should go beyond providing theoretical insights and include reflection practices, simulation exercises, mentoring and supervised practicum in preparation for teacher implementation of learner-centered pedagogy in the classroom.
3. Thirdly, it is important to note that professional development based on the Curriculum should extend beyond limited workshops targeting a few selected teachers. The schools should consider forming learning communities within which the teachers critically reflect on their practices, share pedagogical experiences, and come up with learner-centred strategies to improve pedagogy.
4. Fourthly, the Uganda National Examinations Board should consider aligning the national assessment system to the intended pedagogical purposes associated with the Competency Based Curriculum. This can be done through focusing more on assessment and examination of competencies, critical thinking, problem-solving and communications skills among others. Without reforming this area, teachers are likely to continue focusing more on exam oriented teacher-centred pedagogies despite the demands of the Curriculum being learner centred.

5. Fifthly, it is important that structural constraints associated with implementation of learner-centred pedagogies should also be considered in the implementation process. There should be an increase in instructional time and reductions in class sizes as well as proper recruitment of teachers. In addition, there should be improvements in the availability of teaching/ICT resources.
6. Ultimately, there is a need for teachers to embrace the principles of reflective pedagogy whereby learner-centeredness is not simply equated to group work and participation. Emphasis needs to be placed on inquiry-oriented approaches, learner agency, differentiated teaching methods, co-construction of meaning and reflective assessments, among others.

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