

# Project-Based Language Teaching in Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum: Structural Alignment, Implementation Tensions, And A Design Framework

MONICAH ONYANCHA

*Department of Languages and Linguistics, Laikipia University, Kenya*

*Abstract- Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum articulates ambitious language education goals but provides language teachers with little methodological guidance on how to achieve them. The curriculum demands that learners develop integrated, demonstrable communicative competence through purposeful, collaborative activity — yet the pedagogical approaches available to most Kenyan teachers operate at the level of individual lessons and discrete tasks, which cannot generate the cumulative competency evidence the curriculum's assessment framework requires. This paper argues that project-based language teaching (PBLT) addresses this gap because its organising logic — extended inquiry, collaborative production, embedded assessment, authentic driving questions — corresponds to the curriculum's own structure of learning as a progression toward integrated competence. Drawing on communicative language teaching theory, sociocultural theory, and activity theory, the paper analyses the alignment between PBLT principles and competency-based curriculum design, examines the structural tensions that arise in Kenyan classroom implementation, and proposes the Competency-Anchored PBLT Framework (CA-PBLT) as a practical design tool. The paper concludes that the principal obstacles to PBLT implementation in Kenya are institutional rather than pedagogical, and identifies directions for empirical follow-up research.*

*Index Terms- Project-Based Language Teaching, Competency-Based Curriculum, Kenya, Communicative Competence, Language Pedagogy, Curriculum Reform*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Kenya's introduction of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in 2017 marked a significant shift in the country's educational philosophy, replacing an examination-driven 8-4-4 system with a framework premised on the development of integrated,

demonstrable competencies across all learning areas (Jonnaert et al., 2007; Westera, 2001). For language education the reform is consequential: where the 8-4-4 system rewarded discrete grammatical knowledge and reading comprehension measured through terminal examinations, the CBC requires learners to demonstrate the capacity to use language purposefully, collaboratively, and critically in authentic communicative contexts. The shift is from performance on a test to the development of communicative competence in the fuller sense articulated by Canale and Swain (1980).

What the CBC does not provide is a pedagogy. The curriculum framework specifies what learners should be able to do, but offers teachers limited guidance on how to organise learning so that those abilities develop. Teachers trained under the 8-4-4 system and accustomed to its transmissive pedagogies face the transition without adequate methodological support. The communicative language teaching (CLT) activities and task-based language teaching (TBLT) approaches most commonly adopted in Kenyan language classrooms address the communicative dimension of the reformed curriculum, but they operate predominantly at the level of individual lessons and discrete tasks. They do not provide the macro-level pedagogical architecture needed to generate cumulative, portfolio-evidenced competency development across weeks and terms, which is what the CBC assessment framework requires.

Project-based language teaching (PBLT) fills this gap. PBLT is the only widely theorised language teaching approach whose structural organisation — extended, inquiry-driven, product-oriented, collaboratively managed — corresponds to the CBC's

own organisation of learning as a progression toward integrated competence. The paper develops this argument in four stages: a review of the theoretical literature on PBLT and competency-based curriculum design; an account of the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis; a discussion of the structural alignment between PBLT and the CBC, including the implementation tensions that must be addressed; and the proposed CA-PBLT Framework.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Project-Based Language Teaching

Project-based language teaching is a form of language pedagogy in which extended, collaborative projects organised around authentic driving questions serve as the central unit of curriculum design (Beckett & Slater, 2005; Blumenfeld et al., 1991). Where task-based approaches work at the level of individual purposeful activities, PBLT operates across multiple sessions and involves the production of a tangible final product or performance that integrates language skills with content knowledge and higher-order thinking.

Blumenfeld et al. (1991) identify two requirements for effective project-based learning: the driving question must sustain learner engagement and anchor inquiry over time, and the final artefact must require learners to apply rather than reproduce knowledge. In the language classroom these requirements translate into sustained opportunities for authentic language use — reading, discussing, drafting, presenting — in service of a goal that extends beyond the language lesson itself. Beckett and Slater's (2005) project framework adds a language-specific dimension, insisting that projects in the language classroom must carry explicit language objectives alongside content objectives so that linguistic development is not sacrificed to subject matter engagement.

From a cognitive perspective, PBLT draws on Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis — which holds that acquisition requires exposure to comprehensible input beyond the learner's current level — and on Swain's (1985) output hypothesis, which demonstrates that language production pushes learners to notice and address gaps in their linguistic knowledge in ways that input exposure alone does

not. The extended, multi-modal nature of PBLT creates conditions for both: learners encounter diverse input through project research, and they produce purposeful, skill-integrated output in constructing their final products. Ellis (2003) argues that this combination is the condition under which both fluency and accuracy develop most robustly.

### 2.2 Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Approaches

PBLT sits within the broader tradition of communicative language teaching (CLT), which emerged as a response to structuralist methods and holds that the primary goal of language education is the development of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972). CLT approaches prioritise meaningful interaction, authentic texts, and the negotiation of meaning over formal accuracy drilling, and they have been widely influential in curriculum reform across sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), associated with Long (1991) and Nunan (1989), extends the CLT tradition by making the communicative task — rather than the grammatical structure — the primary unit of curriculum organisation. Its contribution to the field is substantial, but it operates predominantly at the lesson level. Individual tasks are designed to generate communicative interaction within a single class session, and the sequencing of tasks across a course does not necessarily produce the systematic, evidenced competency development that contemporary curriculum frameworks require. Richards (2001) identifies this as a persistent limitation of task-based curricula: they are effective at generating communicative activity but less effective at producing the longitudinal competency record that CBC assessment demands.

PBLT addresses this through scale. Where TBLT provides the architecture for individual lessons, PBLT provides the architecture for extended learning sequences that generate the multi-modal, process-and-product evidence that competency-based assessment frameworks demand. The two approaches are complementary rather than competing: individual tasks are nested within projects, and projects are anchored in competency development pathways. This

layered structure is what the CBC requires but TBLT alone cannot provide.

### 2.3 Competency-Based Curriculum Design

Competency-based education (CBE) represents a reorientation of curriculum theory that originated in vocational and professional training before being adopted in general education systems internationally (Jonnaert et al., 2007; Westera, 2001). Its defining feature is the shift from content coverage to the development of demonstrable, integrated competencies — the ability to mobilise knowledge, skills, and attitudes effectively in real situations (Weinert, 2001). The implications for pedagogy and assessment are substantial: if the goal is integrated, situated performance, then learning experiences must be designed to develop and provide evidence of such performance, not just to transmit knowledge that might, in other circumstances, be applied.

Rychen and Salganik (2003) argue that competencies are not reducible to discrete skills but involve the integration of cognitive, motivational, and social dimensions in purposeful action. Jonnaert et al. (2007) draw out the pedagogical consequence: translating competency objectives from curriculum documents into classroom practice requires a fundamental reconsideration of how learning is organised in time, space, and social structure. Lesson-by-lesson content delivery, however communicatively oriented, cannot generate the kind of purposeful, integrated performance that CBE envisions as its outcome criterion.

Kenya's curriculum reform, introduced in 2017, reflects these international debates. The reformed curriculum articulates a set of cross-cutting competencies — among them communication and collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, digital literacy, and citizenship — intended to permeate all subject areas rather than be confined to discrete lessons (Jonnaert et al., 2007; Rychen & Salganik, 2003). For language education, this means that developing language competence is inseparable from developing competence in other domains. Westera (2001) notes that CBE effectively dissolves the boundary between language learning and learning through language — a position that PBLT, which situates language development within content inquiry

rather than treating it as a prior condition, enacts at the pedagogical level.

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 3.1 Communicative Competence

This paper takes Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence — encompassing grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic dimensions — as its primary organising construct, supplemented by Bachman's (1990) extension to include pragmatic competence. The model is appropriate here because communicative competence, understood as a holistic and integrated capacity rather than a collection of separable sub-skills, is the overarching goal shared by both PBLT and the CBC's language framework. PBLT, which requires learners to integrate all language skills in service of a single project goal, is a pedagogy calibrated to developing this kind of integrated capacity. Approaches that drill individual skills in isolation develop something different, and the difference matters when the criterion is communicative performance in authentic contexts.

### 3.2 Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, particularly the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), provides the second theoretical lens. The ZPD — the distance between what a learner can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with support — is the space in which development occurs. PBLT creates persistent ZPD conditions by embedding learners in collaborative projects that require them to operate at the upper edge of their current linguistic competence, with teacher and peer scaffolding providing the necessary support. The claim is about mechanism, not mere grouping: what matters is that the collaborative project structure consistently places language demands on learners that they could not fully meet alone, and that the scaffolding provided allows them to meet those demands progressively.

Vygotsky's (1978) account of language as the primary tool of cognitive development is equally relevant. In PBLT, language is simultaneously what is being learned and the medium through which the project is constructed, negotiated, and presented. The

CBC's vision of language competency as a cross-curricular capacity rather than a subject-specific skill reflects this understanding: language development does not precede learning in other domains but is woven through it.

### 3.3 Activity Theory

Activity theory, developed by Leont'ev (1978) and elaborated for educational contexts by Engeström (1987), provides the third lens and the one most productive for analysing the institutional conditions of PBLT implementation. In activity theory, learning is a goal-directed activity system comprising a subject (the learner), mediating tools (language, texts, digital resources), an object (the competency to be developed), a community (the classroom), rules (curriculum and assessment norms), and a division of labour (teacher and learner roles). The framework treats contradictions within the system — tensions between its components — as the primary drivers of learning and change rather than as obstacles to it.

For the present analysis, activity theory is productive because it foregrounds the contradictions that arise when PBLT — a pedagogy that presupposes learner autonomy, resource access, and extended project time — is introduced into Kenyan classrooms structured around teacher authority, scarce resources, and term-bound syllabi. These contradictions are examined in Section 4.3 not to argue that PBLT is impractical, but to show that recognising them is a precondition for designing implementation strategies that can survive contact with actual classroom conditions.

## IV. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 The Structural Correspondence Between PBLT and CBC

The alignment between PBLT and CBC language education is most visible at the level of structural logic. Both are organised around extended learning sequences that generate cumulative evidence of competency development, culminating in a product or performance that demonstrates integrated competence. This correspondence is grounded in shared theoretical premises about how competency develops: through sustained, purposeful, socially situated activity rather than through the accumulation of lesson-sized knowledge units.

The CBC's assessment framework, which emphasises formative documentation, portfolio evidence, and performance tasks over terminal examinations, requires the kinds of learning artefacts that PBLT generates through its normal operation: research notes, drafts, feedback records, peer review documents, and final products. Beckett (2002) and Krajcik and Shin (2014) both argue that assessment in PBLT must be embedded within the project process, tracking development continuously rather than measuring outcomes at a single point. The CBC assessment framework demands exactly this, and conventional lesson-level CLT and TBLT do not produce it as a matter of course.

The CBC's cross-cutting competency of communication and collaboration is enacted rather than simply supported by PBLT. The project framework requires learners to communicate with peers, negotiate task distribution, evaluate sources, draft outputs, present findings, and respond to feedback — all of which are purposeful communicative acts in authentic social conditions. Hymes (1972) argued that language ability developed in decontextualised exercises does not transfer reliably to real communicative performance; PBLT creates the contextualised conditions under which transfer is more likely.

### 4.2 Assessment Alignment and Portfolio Evidence

The correspondence between PBLT and the CBC assessment framework deserves extended attention because it addresses the most significant practical challenge facing Kenyan language teachers in the post-reform context: how to generate credible, multi-modal evidence of competency development within the constraints of large classes, limited contact time, and an educational culture in which assessment has historically meant written examinations.

PBLT generates assessment evidence through the learning process itself. At each stage of a project — question formulation, research, drafting, peer review, revision, presentation — learners produce artefacts that document their developing competence. The teacher's role shifts from setting assessment tasks to observing, annotating, and collecting these process artefacts, building a portfolio that provides a longitudinal record. Krajcik and Shin (2014) argue

that this embedded, process-oriented approach is a more valid measure of genuine competency than point-in-time tests, since competency — as Weinert (2001) and Rychen and Salganik (2003) both argue — is inherently developmental and cannot be adequately captured in a single performance episode. The logistical demands on teachers are real: managing portfolios across classes of forty or more learners requires observational and documentation skills that most Kenyan language teachers have not been trained to develop. Pre-service and in-service professional development programmes need to address this directly, and school-level systems for portfolio management need to be established, if the assessment alignment between PBLT and the CBC is to be realised in practice rather than remain a theoretical correspondence.

**4.3 Implementation Tensions: A Critical Examination**  
The theoretical and structural case for PBLT in CBC language classrooms is strong. What a credible analysis cannot avoid is the set of structural tensions that activity theory surfaces when PBLT is examined in the specific institutional conditions of Kenyan schooling. Four tensions are identified here.

The first is between PBLT's requirement of learner autonomy and the classroom reality of teacher-centred authority. Kenyan classrooms have historically been organised around the teacher as the primary knowledge authority and the learner as a passive recipient (Ackers & Hardman, 2001). PBLT requires learners to take genuine agency over inquiry direction, source evaluation, and product design — a demand that presupposes a degree of self-regulation that learners trained under the 8-4-4 system may not yet have developed. Addressing this tension requires scaffolded transition: structured project roles and explicit metacognitive instruction in the early stages, with learner-directed inquiry developing gradually as collaborative skills and self-regulatory habits are established.

The second tension is between PBLT's extended timeframe and the pressures of term-bound syllabi and assessment calendars. A PBLT project of the kind described in the literature typically spans two to four weeks of sustained work. In a curriculum context where teachers are under pressure to cover

specified content within term boundaries, this investment can seem prohibitive. Ellis (2003) and Nunan (1989) both note that project-based and task-based approaches are most sustainable when integrated into the curriculum as its primary organisational unit, rather than appended to it as enrichment activities — a point that has implications for how schools interpret and implement the CBC at the level of weekly planning.

The third tension is between PBLT's resource assumptions and the material conditions of many Kenyan schools. Project inquiry typically involves access to multiple texts, research materials, and digital tools that schools in rural and peri-urban areas cannot reliably provide. PBLT design in these contexts must draw on locally available resources — community interviews, oral testimony, observable social phenomena — rather than on library and internet access. García and Wei (2014) suggest that locally grounded projects are often more educationally productive than resource-dependent ones, since they situate language learning in contexts that are directly meaningful to learners. The adaptation required is pedagogical reorientation, not compromise.

The fourth tension is the persistence of summative assessment culture. Even as the CBC formally endorses formative and portfolio assessment, the expectations of parents, school administrators, and examination boards continue to privilege written examinations as the primary measure of achievement. Teachers who commit class time to project work face institutional pressure to demonstrate attainment through conventional tests. Resolving this tension requires not only teacher professional development but sustained communication with school communities and policymakers about what competency-based assessment evidence looks like and why it is valid.

**4.4 Integrating Local Linguistic Resources**

One underdeveloped dimension of the CBC's language framework is its recognition of Kenya's multilingual ecology. Kenya is home to approximately forty-two indigenous languages alongside Swahili and English, and most learners arrive in the language classroom with multilingual

repertoires that conventional language teaching has treated as interference rather than as pedagogical resource. The CBC's orientation toward mother tongue instruction in the early years, and its recognition of cross-cultural communication as a competency, open space for a more plurilingual approach.

PBLT can accommodate and mobilise this multilingual resource. Projects that engage with locally significant communicative practices — documenting community oral traditions, investigating language use across social domains, comparing how concepts are expressed across languages in the learner's environment — simultaneously develop language competencies and draw on the linguistic knowledge learners already have. García and Wei (2014) argue that such translanguaging pedagogies, which treat learners' full linguistic repertoires as integrated resources rather than as competing systems, produce stronger engagement and more durable language development than approaches premised on strict language separation. They also ground the language classroom in genuine inquiry about learners' own communities, which connects directly to the CBC's competencies of citizenship and cultural identity.

#### V. THE COMPETENCY-ANCHORED PBLT FRAMEWORK

The Competency-Anchored PBLT Framework (CA-PBLT) proposed here draws together the preceding analysis into a practical tool for designing PBLT experiences within the CBC. What distinguishes it from existing PBLT models is that it maps project design elements explicitly onto CBC competency pathways, builds the implementation tensions identified in Section 4.3 into the design process as variables to be managed rather than problems to be wished away, and positions portfolio assessment as the structural link between project activity and competency evidence.

The framework has four dimensions, each of which must be addressed in project design. The first, Competency Anchoring, requires that each project be mapped onto one or more competency pathways, with language objectives woven into competency

goals rather than listed alongside them. The driving question of the project is formulated to require the specific communicative competencies being developed, so that engagement with the project and development of language competency are the same activity. This addresses the risk identified by Jonnaert et al. (2007) that CBE curricula are enacted as content curricula with a competency vocabulary grafted on top.

The second dimension, Structured Inquiry, addresses the tension between learner autonomy and the classroom conditions of Kenyan schools through a scaffolded progression. In early project stages the teacher directs inquiry heavily; as the project develops and learners establish collaborative working habits, direction is progressively withdrawn. This is a Vygotskian scaffolding strategy (Vygotsky, 1978): learners are supported to operate at the upper edge of their autonomous capacity, with support reduced as capacity grows. The driving question anchors the inquiry throughout, ensuring that the shift toward learner direction does not dissolve the language focus.

The third dimension, Integrated Assessment, treats assessment documentation as a design requirement from the outset. Every stage of the project — question formulation, research, collaboration, drafting, revision, presentation — generates artefacts that are collected in a learning portfolio. The teacher's assessment role is defined in the project design prospectively: which competency indicators will be observed at which stage, and how they will be documented. Building this into the design phase means assessment is not retrofitted to a completed project but embedded in its architecture, producing the continuous competency record that the CBC framework expects.

The fourth dimension, Contextual Adaptation, requires that each project be designed with explicit attention to the resource, linguistic, and cultural conditions of the specific classroom. This ensures the framework functions as a flexible design tool rather than a prescriptive template developed for conditions that may not obtain in rural or under-resourced Kenyan schools. It also provides the integration point for the translanguaging resources discussed in

Section 4.4, requiring project designers to identify what local linguistic and cultural knowledge can be drawn into the project as a resource.

The four dimensions are interdependent rather than sequential. Decisions about Contextual Adaptation shape what forms of Structured Inquiry are feasible; decisions about Competency Anchoring determine what the Integrated Assessment is looking for. Teachers working through these decisions for a given project context are, in effect, developing the professional judgment that sustains PBLT practice over time. Activity theory suggests this iterative problem-solving within the constraints of the activity system is where professional learning happens — which is another reason for treating implementation tensions as productive features of the framework rather than as defects to be eliminated.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The CBC creates a language education mandate that most available pedagogical approaches cannot fulfil. The curriculum requires language learning to be organised as a progression toward integrated, demonstrable competence, evidenced through longitudinal portfolio documentation — and lesson-level CLT and TBLT, however communicatively oriented, do not produce that kind of evidence as a structural feature of their operation. PBLT does, and this paper has argued that the correspondence goes deeper than surface compatibility: the two share theoretical premises about how competence develops, about what authentic language use requires, and about how assessment should relate to learning.

The CA-PBLT Framework proposed here is an attempt to make that correspondence actionable. By treating the tensions of implementation — learner autonomy, resource access, curriculum coverage, assessment culture — as design variables, the framework produces guidance that is grounded in Kenyan classroom conditions. The argument is that these tensions are manageable, not that they are negligible; the professional development, institutional advocacy, and curricular reframing they require are substantial and need to be taken seriously at the level of school leadership and teacher education policy.

Future research should test the CA-PBLT Framework empirically across diverse school contexts in Kenya — urban and rural, well-resourced and under-resourced, in both English and Swahili language classrooms. Specific questions include how teachers navigate the framework's design dimensions under time pressure; how learners with varying levels of self-regulatory skill respond to the autonomy demands of project inquiry; and whether portfolio evidence generated through PBLT is accepted as legitimate by parents, administrators, and examination boards. These questions cannot be answered at the theoretical level, and pursuing them is the natural next step.

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