# The Compatibility of English Language Textbooks with Rwanda's Competency-Based Curriculum in Primary Education

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**Abstrak**

**Tujuan**-Penelitian ini mengkaji sejauh mana buku teks Bahasa Inggris selaras dengan Kurikulum Berbasis Kompetensi (Competence-Based Curriculum/CBC) Rwanda di sekolah dasar, serta mengidentifikasi keselarasan yang kuat pada level desain namun mengalami kendala pada level implementasi di kelas. **Metodologi/Desain/Pendekatan Penelitian** -Penelitian ini menggunakan telaah konten kritis terhadap buku teks Bahasa Inggris sekolah dasar terpilih (P2, P4, P5, dan P6) serta dokumen kurikulum CBC resmi yang disetujui/diterbitkan oleh Rwanda Education Board (REB). Analisis memadukan analisis isi dan tematik untuk membandingkan kompetensi yang ditargetkan, capaian pembelajaran, ekspektasi kebahasaan, dan orientasi asesmen antara dokumen kebijakan dan buku teks. **Temuan** - Temuan menunjukkan adanya keselarasan kuat pada level desain antara buku teks dan dokumen kurikulum, terutama dalam tujuan pembelajaran dan orientasi kompetensi. Namun, terdapat ketidaksesuai signifikan pada level implementasi yang dipicu oleh: (1) ketegangan antara penggunaan Kinyarwanda dan kebijakan Bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa pengantar utama, (2) rendahnya kemahiran Bahasa Inggris guru, (3) kendala struktural seperti keterbatasan waktu pembelajaran dan kepadatan kelas, serta (4) praktik asesmen yang dapat secara tidak langsung menggeser pembelajaran dari tujuan CBC. Meski Rwanda memiliki komitmen kebijakan yang jelas melalui regulasi pendukung, investasi pelatihan guru, dan inisiatif pembelajaran digital, masih terdapat kesenjangan antara ketersediaan sumber belajar berkualitas dan akses/pemanfaatannya secara efektif di ruang kelas. **Orisinalitas/Nilai**-Studi ini menawarkan perspektif keselarasan kurikulum–buku teks–implementasi yang menjelaskan mengapa reformasi berbasis kompetensi dapat tampak koheren pada level dokumen namun kurang optimal dalam praktik. Penelitian ini juga memberikan rekomendasi yang operasional untuk memperkuat koherensi kebijakan, menyempurnakan strategi pedagogi dan asesmen, meningkatkan kesiapan guru, serta mempercepat alokasi sumber daya yang lebih merata guna meningkatkan kemahiran Bahasa Inggris dan mutu pembelajaran secara umum di Rwanda.
**Kata kunci**: *Kurikulum, apresiasi budaya, kreativitas, pengetahuan konten pedagogis, ketidakmampuan.*

**Abstract**

**Purpose** -This study examines how well English language textbooks align with Rwanda's national Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) in primary schools, and identifies where alignment succeeds at the design level but breaks down during classroom implementation. **Research Methodology/Design/Approach**-the study conducts a critical content review of selected primary English textbooks (P2, P4, P5, and P6) alongside official CBC curriculum documents approved/published by the Rwanda Education Board (REB). The analysis integrates content and thematic analysis to compare intended competencies, learning outcomes, language expectations, and assessment orientations across policy and textbook materials. **Finding**-The findings reveal strong design-level alignment in learning intent and competency orientation across textbooks and curriculum documents. However, substantial implementation-level misalignments persist, driven by (1) tensions between Kinyarwanda use and English as the mandated medium of instruction, (2) limited teacher English proficiency, (3) structural constraints such as insufficient instructional time and overcrowded classrooms, and (4) assessment practices that may inadvertently shift teaching away from CBC goals. Although Rwanda demonstrates policy commitment through supportive legislation, investment in teacher training, and digital learning initiatives, a persistent gap remains between the availability of high-quality resources and their effective accessibility and use in classrooms. **Originality/Value** -This study contributes a curriculum–textbook–implementation alignment perspective that clarifies why competence-based reforms may appear coherent on paper yet underperform in practice. It offers actionable recommendations to strengthen policy coherence, refine pedagogy and assessment practices, enhance teacher preparation, and accelerate equitable resource allocation to improve English proficiency and overall learning quality in Rwanda.
**Keywords**: *Curriculum, cultural appreciation, creativity, pedagogical content knowledge, incompetence*

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## Introduction

Music Rwanda has pursued ambitious education reforms aligned with national development priorities and the longer-term aspiration to cultivate a knowledge-based society. A central pillar of this reform agenda is the transition toward a competence-based curriculum (CBC), which is intended to move classroom practice beyond content coverage toward the development of transferable competencies, including critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and communication. In Rwanda's national curriculum framework, policy coherence is framed as a core implementation requirement specifically, the alignment of curriculum intentions, pedagogy, assessment practices, and instructional materials (Ministry of Education, 2015).

However, large-scale curriculum reforms rarely succeed on policy intent alone; their effectiveness depends on the extent to which "intended curriculum" (standards/syllabi) is coherently translated into "implemented curriculum" (textbooks, classroom tasks, and assessment routines). This concern is consistent with broader scholarship on curriculum coherence and constructive alignment, which emphasizes that learning outcomes, teaching/learning activities, and assessment must be mutually reinforcing if competence-oriented reforms are to produce meaningful classroom change (Biggs, 1996; Sullanmaa et al., 2019). Within this logic, textbooks and teacher guides are not neutral repositories of content; they are policy instruments that can either operationalize learner-centered pedagogy or, conversely, reproduce traditional routines that undermine competence-based aims. Recent alignment studies across contexts show that misalignment between standards and textbooks can systematically constrain opportunities to learn especially when textbooks underrepresent higher-order competencies or provide activities that do not reflect the intended pedagogy (Yu et al., 2022).

These alignment challenges are particularly consequential in language education, where competence-based outcomes (e.g., communication, interaction, and meaning-making) require sustained opportunities for practice, feedback, and authentic tasks. In Rwanda, the stakes are amplified by the language-in-education policy environment. The 2008 shift that established English as the principal medium of instruction across schooling levels was strongly motivated by regional integration and perceived economic competitiveness, yet research has consistently documented implementation strains especially teacher readiness, classroom interaction constraints, and unequal learner access to English outside school (Pearson, 2014; Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). Evidence from higher education also illustrates how multilingual learners in Rwanda adopt coping strategies to manage English-medium academic demands, signaling broader systemic pressures on language proficiency and instructional practice (Kagwesage, 2013).

More recent empirical work continues to show that English-medium instruction can generate pedagogical and cognitive tensions in classroom delivery. For instance, qualitative evidence from Rwandan primary schools indicates that teachers may resort to translanguaging or mixed-language explanations to preserve comprehension, reflecting the practical difficulty of sustaining instruction fully in English in contexts of limited proficiency and resource variability (Ukobizaba et al., 2025). At the same time, Rwanda's CBC explicitly requires learner-centered instruction and active participation an expectation that can be difficult to realize when teachers' linguistic confidence is limited and when textbooks, tasks, and assessments do not consistently support competence-based language learning.

Against this backdrop, ensuring robust alignment between the English primary syllabus and the textbooks used in classrooms becomes a critical implementation priority. Rwanda's curriculum framework explicitly positions textbooks as part of the coherence architecture of reform—alongside pedagogy, assessment, and quality assurance (Ministry of Education, 2015). Yet, international research suggests that textbook–curriculum alignment cannot be assumed: even where topics appear matched, deeper misalignments may persist in the cognitive demand of tasks, the balance of skills coverage, the nature of learner activities, and the assessment signals embedded in exercises (Yu et al., 2022). In competence-based language curricula, such

"hidden misalignment" can lead to classrooms that prioritize surface-level knowledge or decontextualized drills rather than communicative competence, thereby weakening reform outcomes.

Despite the importance of these issues, there remains limited Rwanda-focused evidence that systematically examines (a) what the national upper primary English curriculum (P4–P6) emphasizes in content, skills, and pedagogy, and (b) how the structure and learning activities of English primary textbooks (across key grades) reflect—or diverge from—CBC expectations. Addressing this gap is urgent for two reasons. First, the English syllabus explicitly frames learning outcomes through a competence lens, implying that instructional materials should embed active, learner-centered tasks rather than rely primarily on passive reception. Second, persistent challenges in English teaching capacity and professional development documented in Rwanda suggest that textbook design and curriculum clarity may play a decisive role in shaping what teachers can realistically enact in everyday classroom conditions (Mushakamba & Andala, 2024).

Accordingly, this study investigates the alignment between Rwanda's competence-based English curriculum and primary English textbooks, focusing on content coverage, skills representation, and pedagogical orientation, while also identifying challenges that constrain effective implementation. By linking curriculum intentions to textbook structure and classroom-facing demands, the study contributes to policy-relevant evidence on curriculum coherence and offers actionable directions for strengthening English language learning outcomes under the CBC reform agenda.

## Research Questions

1. What key content areas, skills, and pedagogical principles are emphasized in the national upper primary English curriculum (P4–P6) issued by the Rwanda Education Board?
2. How are English primary textbooks structured, and what key topics and learning activities do they provide?
3. To what extent do English primary textbooks align with CBC expectations in terms of content, skills, and learner-centered pedagogy?
4. What major challenges hinder effective textbook–curriculum alignment and CBC implementation in Rwandan primary English classrooms?
5. What recommendations can strengthen alignment and support improved English language proficiency among Rwandan primary learners?
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## Method

## Research Design: Critical Content Review

The conformity between Rwanda's primary English textbooks and the official national curriculum is systematically assessed in this study using a critical content review methodology based on the principles of qualitative analysis (Ahmed, 2024). The review goes beyond a cursory comparison of subjects to examine the explicit and tacit pedagogical strategies present in these teaching resources. In this context, a "critical" examination entails going beyond a straightforward list of topics discussed to examine underlying presumptions, potential biases, and the viability of applying the curriculum as it is given in textbooks in a Rwandan classroom. Instead of just detecting the existence of misalignments, this method takes into account the underlying causes. It seeks to ascertain how well the textbooks support the development of higher-order thinking abilities and the CBC's central tenet of active, learner-centered education.

## Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The analysis relies on a combination of primary and secondary data sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of curriculum and textbook alignment.

## Primary Data Sources

The majority of the papers examined were the official curricular guidelines, the REB English syllabus for upper primary (grades P4–6). The 2015/2022 REB English Primary P2, 4, 5, and 6 Pupils' Book. REB. (2022c), REB. (2022d), REB. (2022b) and REB. (2022f).

**Secondary Data Sources:**

Scholarly articles and reports that address curricular alignment, teacher attitudes, English language competency, and CBC implementation in Rwanda and other African countries. Materials closely relevant to English language instruction in Rwandan primary schools received particular attention.

**Data Analysis Approach: Thematic and Content Analysis**

The data analysis employs a dual method that blends content analysis with theme analysis to provide a thorough assessment of alignment. It involved an analysis of content and themes. Content analysis entails a methodical examination of the textbook tables of contents, unit objectives, and particular activity kinds as well as curriculum syllabi. The objective is to pinpoint certain subject areas, abilities, and grammatical constructions that are outlined in the textbooks and required by the curriculum. To ascertain the degree of content overlap and sequencing consistency across grades, this technique involves mapping subjects and learning outcomes. Theme analysis involves finding of recurrent themes, patterns, and connections within the textual data particularly with regard to pedagogical techniques, observed difficulties, and reported successes this strategy enhances content analysis. This entails classifying the data for both the presence of implementation problems (such as time restrictions, teacher proficiency, and evaluation demands) and adherence to CBC principles (such as active learning, critical thinking, and learner-centeredness).

**Framework for Alignment**

Curriculum and textbook coherence is evaluated using a multi-dimensional alignment framework that includes content, cognitive demand, and pedagogical style. A thorough evaluation is made possible by the application of both content and thematic analysis. Thematic analysis tackles the "how" and "why" (pedagogical alignment, underlying obstacles, systemic concerns), whereas content analysis focuses on the "what" (themes, skills). This two-pronged strategy guarantees a comprehensive and critical review that goes beyond a cursory analysis of the material to explore the usefulness and efficiency of curricular implementation as it is represented in the textbooks. The analysis must go beyond merely identifying topics if the CBC emphasizes how students learn and what abilities they acquire. Understanding the real alignment in practice, not simply on paper, requires an investigation of instructional practices, teacher views, and structural impediments, all of which can be done through thematic analysis.

**Table 2a:** Overview of English Primary Textbook Units and Key Topics (P2)

| Grade Level | Unit Number | Unit Title | Key Topics Covered |
|---|---|---|---|
| **P2** | 1 | Greetings, introductions and talking about school | Greetings, introductions, school subjects, telling time, timetables, instructions, asking permission. |
| | 2 | Sport | Talking about sports, describing ability, famous Rwandan sportspeople, and sports equipment. |
| | 3 | Telling the time | Reading time, daily routines, time of day, days/months of year. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 4 | Food | Mealtimes, food types (countable/uncountable), likes/dislikes, healthy diets. |
| | 5 | Stories and descriptions | Listening to/writing stories, describing processes. |
| | 6 | Family members and household activities | Describing family members, jobs, household activities, daily routines. |
| | 7 | Weather | Describing weather, temperature, and rainfall. |
| | 8 | Animals, birds and insects | Naming/describing animals (movement, sounds, food, habitat, color, types). |
| | 9 | Mathematics | Counting, writing numbers, addition, subtraction, multiplication, division. |
| | 10 | Talk about events in the past and future | Recounting past events, describing a day in the past, telling stories, future plans. |

Source: REB. (2020).

**Table 2b:** Overview of English Primary Textbook Units and Key Topics (P4)

| Grade Level | Unit Number | Unit Title | Key Topics Covered |
|---|---|---|---|
| P4 | 1 | Our School | School subjects, personal preferences, future hopes, timetables, school size, journeys, plans. |
| | 2 | My Friends and I | Hobbies, past activities, reading preferences, storytelling, plans, physical appearance, personalities, and comparing people. |
| | 3 | Our District | Places of residence, population, facilities, transport, directions, and comparing transport. |
| | 4 | Weather | Today's weather, past weather, weather in Rwanda/district, advantages/disadvantages of weather. |
| | 5 | Jobs and Roles in Home and Community | Naming/describing jobs, helping at home/community, and future jobs. |
| | 6 | Wild Animals | Naming/classifying/comparing animals, animals in Rwanda, habitats, surveys. |
| | 7 | Rights, Responsibilities, and Needs | Rights, responsibilities, rules, consequences, and basic needs. |
| | 8 | Talking about the Past | Recounting past activities, traditional/modern tools, farm |

| | | | products, household objects, farming, and food. |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 9 | Countries, Rivers, Famous Architectural Structures of the World | Naming/locating countries, personal/family experiences, describing/comparing rivers, cities, buildings. |
| | 10 | Climate Changes | Describing causes/effects of climate change, responsibilities, suggestions, and prohibitions. |

Source: REB. (2022b).

**Table 2c:** Overview of English Primary Textbook Units and Key Topics (P5)

| Grade Level | Unit Number | Unit Title | Key Topics Covered |
|---|---|---|---|
| P5 | 1 | Past and Future events | Telling stories, recounting past events/experiences, describing weekend activities, planning trips, talking about future activities/hopes. |
| | 2 | The language of study subjects | Following instructions, answering questions, working in groups, defining, contrasting, using reference materials, planning/evaluating writing. |
| | 3 | Reading | Telling stories, naming sources of reading, reading preferences, habits, reasons for reading, skimming/scanning, using tables of contents/indexes. |
| | 4 | The environment | Describing maps of Rwanda/Western Province, physical features, uses of features, wildlife. |
| | 5 | Measurement | Calculating, describing dimensions, measuring people, describing Rwandan geography, comparing places. |
| | 6 | Transport | Means of transport, purposes of travel, comparing transport, uses of transport, visits in Rwanda. |
| | 7 | Hygiene and Health | Describing diet, food groups, balanced diet, health, hygiene, illness. |
| | 8 | Crafts in Rwanda | Describing past/modern crafts, raw materials, making craft objects. |
| | 9 | Traditional and modern agriculture in Rwanda | Describing past/present/future tools/farming, agricultural exports. |
| | 10 | Geography of the world | Naming continents/countries/capitals, |

| | | | describing position/geography of countries. |
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Source: REB. (2022a).

**Table 2d:** Overview of English Primary Textbook Units and Key Topics (P6)

| Grade Level | Unit Number | Unit Title | Key Topics Covered |
|---|---|---|---|
| P6 | 1 | Leisure and sports | Likes/dislikes, surveys, past activities, music, entertainers, sportspeople. |
| | 2 | Making future plans | Tourist destinations, trips, talking about tomorrow, suggestions. |
| | 3 | Weather | Talking about/predicting weather, planning future events, seasons. |
| | 4 | Behaviour, rules and laws | Describing people/social behavior, opinions, school rules, laws, punishment. |
| | 5 | Family relationships | Family tree, members, personalities, likes, life stories. |
| | 6 | Reading books, writing compositions and examination | Finding information, reading stories, writing compositions, understanding exam instructions. |
| | 7 | Animals | Prehistoric animals, classifying animals, personal experiences with animals. |
| | 8 | Environment | Resources (natural/man-made, renewable/non-renewable), location of resources in Rwanda, environmental dangers, protection. |
| | 9 | Maintaining harmony in the family | Household jobs, parental expectations, family quarrels, giving advice, and family rules. |
| | 10 | The solar system | Describing the solar system, distance in space, planets, moons, and past events related to space. |

Source: REB. (2022g).

These tables provide a clear, consolidated view of the content coverage across different primary English textbooks. It serves as a direct reference for comparison against the national curriculum syllabus, making it easy to identify areas of content overlap or omission, and to trace the progression of topics across grades.

**Findings and discussion**

The findings of this study reflect a common pattern in competence-based curriculum (CBC) reforms: strong coherence at the policy and design level, yet substantial gaps at the level of classroom enactment. At the document level, the upper primary syllabus (P4–P6) and the selected textbooks demonstrate broad alignment in thematic coverage, and the textbooks include activities that are consistent with CBC principles (e.g., discussion, group work, role play, and inquiry-oriented tasks), alongside an intention to integrate the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Such design-level coherence matters because curriculum reform is more likely to succeed when learning outcomes, learning activities, and assessment are mutually reinforcing an idea captured in the notion of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996).

Nevertheless, the study also shows that alignment in curriculum materials does not necessarily translate into alignment in classroom practice. First, teachers' reliance on textbooks and teacher guides often exceeding their engagement with official curriculum documents suggests that textbooks function as the "operational curriculum" in everyday teaching. This pattern is consistent with research on teachers' use of curriculum materials, which emphasizes that teachers interpret and adapt materials through the lens of their knowledge, beliefs, and contextual constraints (Remillard, 2005). In CBC contexts, the key risk is that instructional routines may prioritize "covering units" rather than building targeted competencies such as oral communication, reflection, and self-assessment.

Second, while the textbooks encourage active pedagogy, teachers frequently revert to teacher-centred instruction due to structural pressures such as time limitations, heavy content demands, and large class sizes. These constraints align with broader evidence on learner-centred reform in low-resource contexts, where ambitious pedagogical expectations often collide with classroom realities and established school cultures (Schweisfurth, 2011). Thus, the misalignment identified in this study should not be interpreted as a textbook problem alone, but rather as an enactment-capacity problem: teachers may be unable to implement CBC pedagogy consistently when conditions do not support it.

Third, language policy and linguistic capacity appear to generate systemic misalignment. Rwanda's shift to English as the medium of instruction has been widely discussed as a policy with high strategic ambition but uneven implementation support, particularly in relation to teacher readiness and classroom interaction (Pearson, 2014; Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). Where teacher proficiency in English is limited, a negative feedback loop can emerge: lower language confidence reduces pedagogical confidence, limits communicative classroom interaction, and encourages safer, less interactive methods such as lecturing or written drills. At the same time, bilingual education research suggests that strategic use of learners' first language can support second-language learning under certain conditions (Uchikoshi, 2010). This implies that language-related barriers should be treated as core implementation issues rather than peripheral challenges.

Fourth, the finding that speaking and listening receive limited emphasis despite a curriculum that expects balanced skill development suggests a likely influence of assessment regimes and test-oriented classroom cultures. Washback research indicates that classroom instruction tends to mirror what is assessed, especially when examinations reward easily scorable skills such as reading, writing, and discrete grammar knowledge (Alderson & Wall, 1993). More broadly, alignment research shows that misalignment among standards, assessments, instructional materials, and teaching practices can create contradictory signals for teachers, weakening reform impact (Martone & Sireci, 2009; Porter, 2002). Cross-national evidence from East Africa further indicates that system coherence (curriculum–examinations–instruction) is often limited and that examinations can narrow the competencies teachers prioritize in practice (Atuhurra & Kaffenberger, 2022). Taken together, the current findings reinforce the argument that improving textbooks alone is insufficient if national assessment signals do not meaningfully value communicative competence and learner-centred learning.

Fifth, reported challenges in CBC assessment (e.g., projects being shifted to homework, parental concerns, limited use of portfolio tools, and minimal peer/self-assessment) indicate a

gap between assessment design and classroom feasibility. Alignment requires not only conceptual fit between aims and instruments, but also practical feasibility and interpretive clarity at the classroom level (Martone & Sireci, 2009). In crowded classrooms and under time pressure, teachers are more likely to default to paper-and-pencil testing unless they receive streamlined assessment tools, targeted training, and feasible monitoring mechanisms that support authentic and formative assessment approaches.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the central challenge lies in system coherence and implementation capacity rather than the absence of CBC principles in policy documents. From an alignment perspective, priorities should include: (1) strengthening teachers' engagement with curriculum documents beyond textbook routines, (2) professional development that directly builds capacity for communicative activities (especially listening and speaking) and feasible formative assessment, (3) assessment reforms that reduce narrowing washback effects, and (4) language-in-education supports that acknowledge linguistic realities while protecting opportunities for meaningful learning (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Biggs, 1996; Pearson, 2014; Samuelson & Freedman, 2010; Schweisfurth, 2011).

## Conclusion

This multiple-case study provides robust evidence of a persistent training–practice gap in music education between Rwanda's Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs) and the enactment of music teaching in associated demonstration primary schools. Across the two cases, music education was systematically constrained by insufficient protected time for practical learning, uneven music-specific pedagogical capacity and confidence, and limited access to essential resources (e.g., instruments and teaching aids). These constraints interacted to produce irregular or minimal music instruction at primary level, undermining continuity and equity in learners' access to arts-based learning opportunities.

The findings imply that closing the gap requires an integrated reform strategy that strengthens both teacher preparationand school-level enabling conditions. First, TTC programs should increase dedicated time for hands-on music instruction and embed practice-based pedagogies including structured micro-teaching, coached rehearsal, and supervised practicum tasks to support the development of usable classroom routines and strengthen teacher self-efficacy. Second, minimum standards for basic instruments and teaching aids should be ensured to make competence-oriented music teaching feasible. Third, professional development for in-service teachers should be redesigned to reflect evidence-based features of effective PD content focus, active learning, coaching/feedback, collaboration, and sustained duration so that instructional improvements are maintained beyond short workshops. Collectively, these actions are essential to improve the consistency, quality, and fairness of music education provision from teacher training into classroom practice.
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**Consent for publication**

Not applicable

**Availability of data and materials**

Not applicable

**Competing interests**

All authors declare that there are no relevant conflicts of interest related to this research.

**Author contributions**

JM, and OG responsible for the conception and design of the study, JM collection data, manuscript writing, OG analysis, and interpretation. All author also reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript

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