



International Journal of Contemporary Research In Multidisciplinary

Research Article

Beyond The Classroom: Project-Based Learning and English Language Competence in Uganda's Secondary Schools

Okello Lameck

Assistant Lecturer, Department of Language Education, Faculty of Education
Uganda Martyrs University Ngetta Campus, Lira, Uganda

Corresponding Author: * Okello Lameck

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22339802>

Abstract

English occupies a central position in Uganda's education system as the official language of instruction from upper primary onwards and as a compulsory subject at secondary level, yet national assessments repeatedly show that many learners progress through the system without securing functional competence in the language. This review examines the potential of project-based learning (PBL) — an inquiry-driven, learner-centred pedagogy in which students construct knowledge through sustained, authentic tasks — to strengthen English language competence in Uganda's secondary schools. Drawing on the theoretical lineage of PBL from Dewey and Kilpatrick to social constructivism, and synthesising empirical evidence from English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings across Africa, Asia and Latin America, the paper argues that PBL offers a coherent means of developing the four language skills, learner autonomy and motivation while simultaneously advancing the generic competencies at the heart of Uganda's 2020 competence-based lower secondary curriculum. The review also confronts the structural constraints — large classes, resource scarcity, examination pressure, uneven teacher preparation and socio-economic disparity — that condition whether PBL can move from policy aspiration to classroom reality. It concludes with practical recommendations for teacher development, assessment design and phased implementation, and identifies the near-absence of Uganda-specific PBL research as a priority gap for future inquiry.

Manuscript Information

- **ISSN No:** 2583-7397
- **Received:** 11-07-2026
- **Accepted:** 30-08-2026
- **Published:** 05-09-2026
- **IJCRM:** 5(5); 2026: 75-80
- **©2026, All Rights Reserved**
- **Plagiarism Checked:** Yes
- **Peer Review Process:** Yes

How to Cite this Article

Lameck O. Beyond the Classroom: Project-Based Learning and English Language Competence in Uganda's Secondary Schools. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2026;5(5):75-80.

Access this Article Online



www.multiarticlesjournal.com

KEYWORDS: project-based learning; English language competence; secondary education; competence-based curriculum; Uganda; learner-centred pedagogy.

1. INTRODUCTION

English is more than one subject among many in Uganda's schools; it is the gateway through which almost all formal learning is transacted. Under the country's language-in-education policy, local languages serve as the medium of instruction in the first three years of primary school, a transitional year follows, and English becomes the language of learning and teaching from upper primary onward and throughout secondary education (Ssentanda, 2014). By the time learners reach secondary school, therefore, competence in English is not merely desirable but is the precondition for engaging with the curriculum, sitting national examinations and progressing to higher education or the labour market.

Set against this high-stakes role is persistent evidence of weak language attainment. National citizen-led assessments conducted by Uwezo Uganda have documented stagnating and, in some respects, declining literacy outcomes. In the 2024 assessment, the share of Primary Seven pupils who had not attained even a Primary Two level of English proficiency rose from 11.3 per cent in 2021 to 23.2 per cent, while only about one in ten Primary Three pupils could read and comprehend a Primary Two-level story in English or a local language (Uwezo Uganda, 2025). Although these figures describe the primary phase, they signal a pipeline problem: many learners cross into secondary school without the foundational literacy on which secondary English competence must be built.

These difficulties coincide with an ambitious reform agenda. In 2020, the Ministry of Education and Sports, through the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC), replaced the long-standing knowledge-based lower secondary curriculum with a competence-based framework that foregrounds critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication and information literacy (NCDC, 2020; Barasa et al., 2025). The reform explicitly seeks pedagogies that move learning "beyond the classroom" — connecting school knowledge with real-world application — yet it offers teachers comparatively little concrete guidance on how to enact such pedagogies in crowded, resource-constrained English classrooms.

It is within this gap that project-based learning (PBL) becomes relevant. PBL is a learner-centred approach in which students investigate authentic questions or problems over an extended period and produce a tangible product or performance that requires them to use language purposefully (Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Thomas, 2000). This paper reviews the conceptual foundations of PBL, situates it within Uganda's language and curriculum context, synthesises international evidence on its effects on English language competence, assesses its fit with the competence-based curriculum, and examines the constraints that will determine its success. The central argument is that PBL is pedagogically well aligned with both the linguistic and the competence goals of Ugandan secondary education, but that realising its promise depends on deliberate investment in teachers, assessment and equity.

The review is conceptual and integrative in nature. Because empirical studies of PBL conducted specifically in Uganda's English classrooms are, at the time of writing, extremely limited, the paper deliberately draws on a wider body of research from English as a Foreign Language and second-

language settings elsewhere — particularly rural, resource-constrained and examination-oriented contexts that resemble Uganda's — and reads that evidence against Ugandan policy and assessment realities. This strategy allows a well-grounded argument about PBL's potential, while making transparent that the transfer of findings across contexts is provisional and in need of local testing. Throughout, "English language competence" is understood broadly to encompass the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, together with the communicative confidence and autonomy that enable learners to deploy those skills purposefully.

2. Conceptualising Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning traces its intellectual roots to the progressive education movement of the early twentieth century. John Dewey's conviction that "education is not preparation for life; education is life itself," and his associated principle of "learning by doing," positioned experience and purposeful activity at the centre of learning (Dewey, 1938). His student William Heard Kilpatrick formalised this into the "project method," which he described as wholehearted purposeful activity carried out in a social environment (Kilpatrick, 1918). Later constructivist and social-constructivist theory — particularly the work of Piaget on how learners actively construct meaning, and Vygotsky on the social mediation of learning — supplied the theoretical scaffolding that underpins contemporary PBL, framing knowledge as something learners build through inquiry, interaction and reflection rather than receive passively (Kokotsaki et al., 2016).

Modern definitions converge on a recognisable set of features. In his influential review, Thomas (2000) identified criteria that distinguish genuine PBL from mere classroom activities: projects are central rather than peripheral to the curriculum; they are organised around a driving question that leads students to encounter the core concepts of a discipline; they involve constructive investigation; they are learner-driven and grant meaningful autonomy; and they are realistic rather than contrived. Blumenfeld and colleagues (1991), in a foundational account, emphasised that sustaining the "doing" of projects while supporting the "learning" requires careful design so that students remain cognitively engaged with subject matter and not merely busy.

For language education specifically, these features carry particular value. Because projects culminate in an authentic product — a report, a debate, a magazine, a documentary, a community survey — learners are obliged to use English for real communicative purposes, integrating reading, writing, speaking and listening rather than practising them in isolation (Andargie et al., 2025). Autonomy and ownership are equally important: when learners choose topics that matter to them and take responsibility for planning and executing tasks, engagement and intrinsic motivation tend to rise (Kokotsaki et al., 2016). PBL thus reframes the English classroom from a site of decontextualised drills into a workshop for meaningful language use, which is precisely the shift that competence-based curricula seek to promote.

3. The Ugandan Context: Language Policy and the Competence-Based Curriculum

Language-in-education policy and the place of English

Uganda is a highly multilingual society, and its language-in-education policy reflects an attempt to balance mother-tongue literacy with proficiency in English, the official language. Following the 1992 Government White Paper and the introduction of the thematic curriculum in 2007, local languages became the medium of instruction in lower primary, with a planned transition to English-medium instruction from Primary Five (Ssentanda, 2014). In practice, however, the policy has been implemented unevenly. Ssentanda (2014) documents substantial discrepancies between the official (*de jure*) policy and actual (*de facto*) classroom practice: many urban and private schools use English from the outset, while rural and government schools may lack the materials or trained teachers to manage the transition effectively. The consequence is wide variation in the English exposure learners bring to secondary school, and a cohort of students for whom English remains, in effect, a foreign language rather than a comfortable second language.

The 2020 lower secondary curriculum reform

The competence-based lower secondary curriculum, rolled out from 2020, represents the most significant structural change to Ugandan secondary education in decades. It replaced a content-heavy, examination-driven model with one intended to cultivate transferable competencies and skills for life and work (NCDC, 2020). Under the reform, learners in the first years of the ordinary level study a reduced set of subjects, with English retained as a compulsory subject, and assessment combines formative work with the terminal Uganda Certificate of Education examination (Barasa et al., 2025). The reform's stated "cross-cutting" aims — communication, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and citizenship — mirror the competencies that PBL is designed to develop, making the curriculum an unusually hospitable policy environment for project-based approaches.

Yet the reform's architects retained existing administrative and funding arrangements even as they multiplied demands on schools. Barasa et al. (2025) found that schools in high and low socio-economic contexts differed markedly in their preparedness to implement the competence-based curriculum, warning that without targeted support the reform could deepen rather than narrow educational inequality. Any account of PBL's potential in Uganda must therefore reckon with the fact that the schools best placed to adopt resource-intensive, learner-centred methods are frequently those that already serve advantaged learners.

4. Project-Based Learning and the Development of English Language Competence

A growing international evidence base, drawn largely from EFL and second-language contexts comparable to Uganda's, indicates that PBL can strengthen each of the four language skills as well as the affective conditions for learning. Because rigorous PBL research within Uganda itself is scarce, the following synthesis draws on studies from settings that share

features with Ugandan classrooms — rural, resource-limited or examination-oriented environments — while flagging the need for local validation.

Speaking and oral competence

Oral competence is often the skill most constrained in EFL contexts, where learners have few opportunities to use English outside school. PBL directly addresses this by embedding speaking in collaborative planning, negotiation and presentation. A case study in a rural Turkish school found that participation in projects increased learners' interest and confidence in using English and improved their overall proficiency, demonstrating that PBL is feasible even where teachers must invest additional effort (Novitas-ROYAL, 2022). Similar findings have emerged from micro-projects such as market role-plays, which expand learners' opportunities for authentic, autonomous communication.

Writing

Writing benefits from the iterative, purpose-driven nature of projects. In an experimental study of EFL learners, Andargie et al. (2025) found that project-based instruction significantly enhanced writing performance, attributing the gains to idea generation, data collection, organisation and collaboration among students. Because projects require writing for authentic audiences and purposes — proposals, reports, articles — and involve cycles of drafting, peer feedback and revision, they align writing instruction with real communicative goals rather than treating it as a decontextualised exercise.

Reading, listening and integrated skills

Projects also create demand for reading and listening as learners gather and evaluate information. A mixed-methods study of ninth-grade learners in Ecuador reported that PBL increased both interest and competence in reading and comprehension (Imbaquingo & Cárdenas, 2023). Crucially, PBL rarely isolates a single skill: a single project may require learners to read source materials, discuss and negotiate in English, draft written outputs and present orally, so that the four skills reinforce one another in the service of a shared goal.

Collaboration and peer scaffolding

A distinctive strength of PBL for language learning lies in its social organisation. Working in groups, learners plan, draft and revise together, and in doing so they scaffold one another's language use — negotiating meaning, correcting errors and modelling expression in ways that mirror the social-constructivist principle that learning is mediated through interaction (Kokotsaki et al., 2016). In the writing study by Andargie et al. (2025), students themselves attributed part of their improvement to cooperation and shared idea generation, valuing project work over traditional assignments for the sense of ownership and mutual support it produced. For Ugandan classrooms, where individual teacher attention is thin because of large class sizes, this peer-scaffolding function is especially valuable: it distributes the burden of feedback across the group and multiplies the opportunities each learner has to produce and process English. The same collaborative structure, however,

must be managed carefully, since unequal participation can allow more confident learners to dominate while weaker ones remain silent.

Motivation, autonomy and twenty-first-century skills

Beyond discrete skills, PBL appears to reshape learners' relationship with the language. An eight-week intervention in a Chinese rural junior middle school found that PBL enhanced learners' motivation and generated greater interest in English lessons, although its effect on standardised achievement tests was limited — a reminder that motivational and communicative gains do not automatically translate into higher examination scores (Yang et al., 2025). Studies of learner autonomy similarly report that granting students control over their projects fosters self-reliance, engagement and ownership (Kokotsaki et al., 2016). These outcomes matter doubly in Uganda, because they simultaneously serve English competence and the generic competencies the national curriculum now prizes.

5. Aligning Project-Based Learning with Uganda's Competence-Based Curriculum

The strategic case for PBL in Uganda rests on the close correspondence between what projects demand of learners and what the competence-based curriculum asks schools to develop. The reform names communication, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and citizenship among its cross-cutting competencies (NCDC, 2020). Each is intrinsic to well-designed projects: communication is exercised whenever learners present findings or negotiate roles; critical thinking is engaged by the driving question and the evaluation of evidence; creativity is expressed in the design of the final product; collaboration is structured into group work; and citizenship is cultivated when projects address issues in learners' own communities.

This alignment allows PBL to serve two purposes at once. A project in which secondary learners investigate, say, water access or waste management in their locality, and produce an English-language report, poster campaign or oral presentation, develops English competence and curricular competencies in a single integrated activity. It also enacts the reform's aspiration to connect learning with real life — the very idea captured by the phrase “beyond the classroom.” In this sense PBL is not an additional burden layered onto the curriculum but a practical vehicle for delivering its central intentions.

PBL is likewise congruent with the reform's assessment philosophy. The competence-based curriculum elevates formative, continuous assessment alongside terminal examinations (Barasa et al., 2025). Projects generate rich formative evidence — drafts, presentations, peer evaluations and reflective work — that teachers can use to monitor and support the development of competence over time, provided suitable rubrics and moderation practices are in place.

6. Challenges and Constraints

The promise of PBL should not obscure the real obstacles to its adoption in Ugandan secondary schools, several of which are structural rather than merely technical.

Large classes and resource scarcity. PBL is demanding of space, time and materials. In classrooms with very high learner-to-teacher ratios and limited access to books, printing or digital devices, organising sustained group projects is difficult. Studies in comparable settings note that overcrowding, low resources and limited out-of-school exposure to English constrain active, communicative methods (Yang et al., 2025). The socio-economic disparities documented by Barasa et al. (2025) mean these constraints fall most heavily on the schools serving disadvantaged learners, raising the risk that PBL benefits the already-advantaged unless deliberate support is provided.

Teacher preparation and beliefs. PBL requires teachers to shift from transmitting content to facilitating inquiry — designing driving questions, scaffolding investigation, managing group dynamics and assessing process as well as product. Where teacher training has emphasised examination-oriented, teacher-centred instruction, this shift is substantial. International evidence indicates that training, collegial support, time and available resources strongly shape whether teachers adopt PBL and hold positive attitudes towards it. Without professional development, teachers may implement PBL superficially, retaining old habits under a new label.

Assessment and examination pressure. A recurring tension is the mismatch between PBL's formative, process-oriented gains and high-stakes summative examinations. The finding that PBL can raise motivation and communicative confidence without necessarily improving standardised test scores (Yang et al., 2025) is significant in a system where examination performance carries decisive weight for learners and schools. Unless national assessment credibly rewards the competencies PBL develops, teachers face a strong incentive to prioritise examination drilling over projects.

Time, group dynamics and language proficiency. Reviews of PBL in language teaching consistently identify time constraints, uneven participation within groups and the complexity of assessing collaborative work as practical challenges (Kokotsaki et al., 2016). A further constraint specific to EFL contexts is that learners with very weak English may struggle to carry out project tasks in the target language, which can push groups towards using the mother tongue and dilute the language-learning purpose. Careful scaffolding, graded tasks and clear rubrics are needed to keep projects both feasible and linguistically productive.

7. Implications and Recommendations

The evidence reviewed suggests that PBL is a promising but conditional strategy for strengthening English competence in Uganda's secondary schools. Several implications follow. First, teacher development is decisive: sustained, practical training and school-based coaching should equip English teachers to design driving questions, scaffold inquiry and manage group work, rather than one-off workshops that leave classroom practice unchanged. Second, PBL should be introduced in a phased, context-sensitive way — beginning with short, low-resource “micro-projects” that fit large classes before scaling to

more ambitious undertakings — so that teachers and learners build capacity gradually.

Third, assessment must be aligned: clear, shared rubrics for project work, together with credit for competencies within formative and, where possible, summative assessment, will reduce the tension between projects and examinations. Fourth, equity must be addressed directly. If PBL is not to widen the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged schools, resource support — materials, teacher deployment and infrastructure — should be targeted towards low socio-economic schools, consistent with the principle of treating unequal schools unequally (Barasa et al., 2025). Finally, and most fundamentally, there is a pressing need for rigorous Uganda-specific research. The current evidence base rests on studies from other countries; well-designed local studies — including intervention and mixed-methods designs in Ugandan secondary English classrooms — are required to establish what forms of PBL work, for whom and under what conditions.

At the level of classroom design, teachers can make PBL workable in Ugandan conditions through pragmatic adaptations. Projects can be anchored in locally available, low-cost resources — community interviews, observation of local practices, recycled materials — so that meaningful inquiry does not depend on well-stocked libraries or reliable electricity. Driving questions can be drawn from learners' own environment, which both raises relevance and reduces the language barrier by allowing students to build on familiar content. Group sizes and roles can be structured so that every learner has a defined, language-productive task, mitigating the free-rider problem. Where learners' English is fragile, teachers can grade tasks in difficulty, provide sentence frames and model outputs, and permit strategic use of the mother tongue in planning stages while requiring the final product in English. Such adaptations keep projects both feasible in large classes and faithful to their language-learning purpose.

8. CONCLUSION

English language competence sits at the heart of educational opportunity in Uganda, yet national assessments reveal that the system is not reliably producing it. Project-based learning offers a pedagogy whose logic — authentic, learner-driven inquiry culminating in meaningful use of language — speaks directly to this challenge and, at the same time, to the communication, collaboration and critical-thinking competencies that Uganda's 2020 curriculum reform seeks to develop. International evidence from comparable EFL contexts indicates that PBL can enhance speaking, writing, reading and integrated language use, while raising motivation and autonomy, even if its effect on examination scores is more equivocal.

Whether these possibilities are realised in Ugandan classrooms will depend less on the merits of PBL in the abstract than on the conditions of its implementation: the preparation and beliefs of teachers, the design of assessment, the availability of resources, and above all the political will to distribute support equitably. Approached as a vehicle for the competence-based curriculum rather than as an add-on to it, and matched by investment in teachers and by locally grounded research, project-based learning has the potential to help Ugandan secondary learners move genuinely beyond the classroom — using English not merely to pass examinations, but to think, communicate and act in the world.

REFERENCES

1. Andargie A, Amogne D, Tefera E. Effects of project-based learning on EFL learners' writing performance. *PLoS One*. 2025;20(1): e0317518. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0317518.
2. Barasa MC, Ssentamu PN, Chang'ach JK, Kurgat SJ. Implementing the Uganda lower secondary competence-based curriculum: the equity question. *Qual Educ All*. 2025;2(1):138-157. doi:10.1108/QEA-03-2024-0026.
3. Blumenfeld PC, Soloway E, Marx RW, Krajcik JS, Guzdial M, Palincsar A. Motivating project-based learning: sustaining the doing, supporting the learning. *Educ Psychol*. 1991;26(3-4):369-398. doi:10.1080/00461520.1991.9653139.
4. Boardman AG, Polman JL, Scornavacca K, Potvin AS, Garcia A, Dalton B, et al. Examining enactments of project-based learning in secondary English language arts. *AERA Open*. 2024;10. doi:10.1177/23328584241269829.
5. Dewey J. Experience and education. New York: Macmillan; 1938.
6. Imbaquingo A, Cárdenas J. Project-based learning as a methodology to improve reading and comprehension skills in the English language. *Educ Sci*. 2023;13(6):587. doi:10.3390/educsci13060587.
7. Kilpatrick WH. The project method. *Teach Coll Rec*. 1918;19(4):319-335.
8. Kokotsaki D, Menzies V, Wiggins A. Project-based learning: a review of the literature. *Improv Sch*. 2016;19(3):267-277. doi:10.1177/1365480216659733.
9. National Curriculum Development Centre. The lower secondary curriculum: curriculum framework. Kampala: NCDC; 2020.
10. Novitas-ROYAL. Project-based learning in English language teaching at a rural school: a case study from Turkey. *Novitas-ROYAL Res Youth Lang*. 2022;16(1).
11. Ssentanda ME. Mother tongue education and transition to English medium education in Uganda: teachers' perspectives and practices versus language policy and

- curriculum [doctoral dissertation]. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University; 2014.
12. Thomas JW. A review of research on project-based learning. San Rafael, CA: Autodesk Foundation; 2000.
 13. Uwezo Uganda. Are our children learning? Learning recovery and challenges for Uganda. Kampala: Uwezo Uganda; 2025.
 14. Yang P, Chen S, Zhang W, Chen J. The impact of project-based learning on EFL learners' learning motivation and academic performance: an empirical study in a Chinese rural school. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun.* 2025; 12:1132. doi:10.1057/s41599-025-05519-y.

Creative Commons (CC) License

This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution–Non-Commercial–No Derivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) license. This license permits sharing and redistribution of the article in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes only, provided that appropriate credit is given to the original author(s) and source. No modifications, adaptations, or derivative works are permitted under this license.

About the Author



Okello Lameck is an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Language Education, Faculty of Education, at Uganda Martyrs University, Ngetta Campus, Lira, Uganda. His academic work focuses on language education, teaching and learning, and developing effective language-learning practices that support students' communication skills and educational development.