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Teachers' Understanding and Implementation of Competency Based Teaching and Learning in Ethiopia A Qualitative Document Analysis

Dr. Fekede Sileshi Fufa

fekedesilo@gmail.com

Oromia state University

Research Article

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Abstract

Competency-based teaching and learning (CBTL) has become a widely adopted educational reform approach aimed at strengthening learners' ability to apply knowledge in practical and meaningful contexts. Globally, education systems are increasingly moving away from traditional content-heavy instruction toward competency-oriented approaches that emphasize demonstrable skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, communication, and problem-solving. In Ethiopia, national education policies, including the Education and Training Policy and the Education Development Roadmap, strongly promote learner-centered pedagogy and competency development. Despite these policy commitments, the extent to which teachers understand and implement CBTL remains unclear and uneven across schools. This study examined teachers' understanding and classroom implementation of competency-based teaching and learning in Ethiopia using qualitative document analysis. Relevant policy documents, curriculum frameworks, peer-reviewed studies, and institutional reports were systematically reviewed. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns. Findings reveal that while many teachers associate CBTL with active learning strategies such as group work and student participation, deeper conceptual understanding of competency development, mastery learning, and performance-based assessment remains limited. Implementation is also inconsistent due to overcrowded classrooms, insufficient training, limited instructional resources, and continued reliance on examination-driven instruction. The study concludes that successful implementation of CBTL in Ethiopia requires coordinated reforms in teacher education, assessment systems, school leadership, and resource allocation, alongside stronger alignment between policy expectations and classroom realities.

1. Introduction

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Educational systems across the world are undergoing continuous transformation aimed at improving the quality, relevance, and effectiveness of teaching and learning. In many countries, traditional education models that emphasize memorization, passive learning, and teacher-centered instruction are increasingly criticized for their limited ability to equip learners with practical skills needed in real-life situations (Schweisfurth, 2013; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). As a response to these limitations, competency-based teaching and learning (CBTL) has emerged as a prominent educational reform approach that prioritizes what learners can actually demonstrate in terms of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values rather than what they can simply recall during examinations (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Wesselink et al., 2010).

Competency-based education is grounded in the idea that learning should be outcome-oriented, meaning that instructional processes are designed to ensure that learners achieve clearly defined competencies that are observable, measurable, and applicable beyond the classroom (Guskey, 2002; Wesselink et al., 2010). This approach places learners at the center of the educational process and requires teachers to act as facilitators of learning rather than sole transmitters of knowledge

(Schweisfurth, 2013). It emphasizes active learning strategies such as collaboration, inquiry, problem-solving, and project-based learning, all of which are intended to foster deeper understanding and long-term skill development (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

The global shift toward competency-based education is largely driven by the demands of the twenty-first century, where societies and labor markets require individuals who are adaptable, innovative, and capable of applying knowledge in dynamic and complex environments. Skills such as critical thinking, communication, creativity, collaboration, and digital literacy have become essential competencies for personal development, employability, and national development (UNESCO, 2017; World Bank, 2018). In this regard, international organizations such as UNESCO have strongly advocated for competency-based education as a key strategy for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4, which focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2017).

The Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia (FDRE, 1994) introduced major reforms aimed at expanding access and improving educational quality. More recently, the New Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia (MoE, 2023) reaffirmed the government's commitment to competency-based learning, learner-centered pedagogy, technology-supported education, quality improvement, inclusion, and outcome-based educational practices. The policy emphasizes the development of competent, innovative, and problem-solving citizens capable of contributing to national developmentIn the Ethiopian context, competency-based teaching and learning has been strongly integrated into national education reform policies(MoE; 2020; World Bank, 2018).

Following these policy directions, Ethiopian schools have introduced learner-centered and competency-based curricula at different educational levels. Teachers are expected to implement instructional strategies that promote active participation, continuous assessment, and the development of practical competencies. These include group discussions, cooperative learning, project-based instruction, inquiry-based learning, and other interactive pedagogical approaches (Schweisfurth, 2013; Tadesse, 2018). In principle, these reforms aim to shift classroom practice from knowledge transmission to competency development.

Despite these policy commitments and curricular reforms, there is growing concern that classroom practices in many Ethiopian schools have not fully aligned with the intended goals of competency-based education. Several studies indicate that traditional teacher-centered methods remain dominant in many classrooms, with teaching still heavily focused on syllabus coverage and preparation for national examinations (Tadesse, 2018; Araya, Boru, & Abrham, 2025). This situation raises important questions about the extent to which teachers understand competency-based teaching and learning and how effectively they are able to implement it in practice (Temesgen, 2020; Schweisfurth, 2013).

Teachers play a central role in the success of any educational reform because they are the key actors responsible for translating policy into classroom practice. Their understanding of curriculum goals, pedagogical approaches, and assessment methods directly influences how educational reforms are

implemented. If teachers have limited or incomplete understanding of competency-based education, there is a high likelihood that implementation will remain superficial and inconsistent, regardless of policy intentions (Guskey, 2002; Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019).

In addition to teacher-related factors, the implementation of competency-based education is also influenced by broader institutional and systemic conditions. Issues such as large class sizes, inadequate instructional materials, limited professional development opportunities, weak school leadership support, and examination-oriented assessment systems can significantly hinder effective implementation (UNESCO, 2017; World Bank, 2018; Fullan, 2007). These challenges often create a gap between policy expectations and actual classroom realities.

Although there is a growing body of literature on educational reform and learner-centered pedagogy in Ethiopia, studies that specifically synthesize teachers' understanding and implementation of competency-based teaching and learning remain limited. Much of the existing research focuses on isolated aspects such as active learning strategies or curriculum reform without providing a comprehensive view of how teachers interpret, understand, and apply competency-based education in real classroom settings (Tadesse, 2018; Temesgen, 2020; Schweisfurth, 2013).

Therefore, this study aims to explore teachers' understanding and implementation of competency-based teaching and learning in the Ethiopian educational context through qualitative document analysis. By reviewing policy documents, curriculum frameworks, and existing empirical studies, the study seeks to provide a synthesized understanding of how CBTL is conceptualized and implemented, the challenges affecting its practice, and the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. The findings are expected to contribute to improving curriculum implementation strategies, teacher professional development programs, and overall educational quality in Ethiopia (MoE, 2020; UNESCO, 2017; World Bank, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

2. Statement of the Problem

Competency-based teaching and learning (CBTL) has been introduced as a major educational reform in Ethiopia with the intention of improving the quality, relevance, and practicality of education. National policy documents including the Education and Training Policy (FDRE, 1994), the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (MoE, 2020), and the New Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia (MoE, 2023) emphasize competency development, learner-centered pedagogy, continuous assessment, and the acquisition of twenty-first-century skills. These reforms align with global education reform agendas that prioritize twenty-first century skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity (UNESCO, 2017; World Bank, 2018; Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Despite these strong policy commitments, there remains a persistent concern that classroom practices in many Ethiopian schools do not fully reflect the principles of competency-based education. Instead, teaching and learning processes continue to be dominated by teacher-centered instruction, lecture-based delivery, and examination-oriented practices. This persistent mismatch between policy and

practice has been widely documented in education reform literature as a common implementation challenge in developing education systems (Schweisfurth, 2013; Fullan, 2007; Tadesse, 2018; Araya, Boru, & Abrham, 2025).

One of the central challenges contributing to this gap is the limited and uneven understanding of competency-based teaching and learning among teachers. Effective CBTL implementation requires teachers to have deep pedagogical knowledge, including curriculum interpretation, learner-centered facilitation skills, and competency-based assessment literacy (Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019; Guskey, 2002). However, studies indicate that teachers often reduce CBTL to surface-level practices such as group work, discussion, or student participation, without understanding its underlying theoretical and assessment foundations (Temesgen, 2020; Schweisfurth, 2013).

This limited understanding directly affects classroom practice. When teachers lack conceptual clarity, instructional activities tend to become fragmented and activity-focused rather than competency-driven, weakening the alignment between learning objectives, instruction, and assessment (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Wesselink et al., 2010). As a result, learners may participate actively without necessarily achieving measurable competencies or transferable skills (Guskey, 2002).

In addition to teacher-related factors, several systemic and institutional challenges further hinder the effective implementation of CBTL in Ethiopia. Overcrowded classrooms reduce opportunities for individualized instruction and formative assessment. Inadequate instructional materials, including textbooks, laboratory equipment, and ICT resources, limit experiential and inquiry-based learning. Furthermore, insufficient teacher professional development weakens teachers' ability to adopt and sustain new pedagogical approaches (UNESCO, 2017; World Bank, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Another significant barrier is the dominance of examination-oriented assessment systems. High-stakes testing environments prioritize memorization and recall, which discourages teachers from fully implementing competency-based strategies. Instead, teachers tend to focus on syllabus completion and exam preparation, even when CBTL policies emphasize continuous and performance-based assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Fullan, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2004). This misalignment between curriculum intentions and assessment systems remains one of the most persistent barriers to educational reform (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Furthermore, weak instructional leadership and limited school-level support contribute to inconsistent implementation of CBTL. Research shows that effective curriculum reform depends heavily on strong instructional leadership that provides guidance, supervision, and professional support to teachers (Leithwood et al., 2004; Fullan, 2007). In many Ethiopian schools, however, such structured pedagogical support is limited, reducing the sustainability of CBTL implementation (Araya, Boru, & Abrham, 2025).

Although several studies have examined learner-centered pedagogy and curriculum reform in Ethiopia, there remains a lack of integrated synthesis specifically focusing on teachers' understanding and implementation of CBTL. Existing studies tend to address isolated components such as instructional

practice or assessment without fully examining their interdependence within the CBTL framework. International literature emphasizes that successful competency-based reform requires systemic alignment among curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment rather than isolated classroom-level changes (Schweisfurth, 2013; Biggs & Tang, 2011; Temesgen, 2020).

Therefore, this study addresses the need to systematically explore teachers' understanding and implementation of competency-based teaching and learning in Ethiopia. By synthesizing policy documents and empirical studies, the study aims to identify implementation gaps, underlying challenges, and classroom-level realities. The findings are expected to inform policy refinement, strengthen teacher education programs, and improve alignment between curriculum expectations and classroom practice in Ethiopia (MoE, 2020; UNESCO, 2017; World Bank, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

3. Objectives of the Study

3.1 General Objective

The general objective of this study was to explore teachers' understanding and implementation of competency-based teaching and learning (CBTL) in the Ethiopian educational context through a qualitative document analysis. The study aimed to generate a comprehensive understanding of how CBTL is conceptualized in policy and literature, how it is interpreted by teachers, how it is implemented in classroom settings, and what systemic and institutional factors influence its effective practice.

3.2 Specific Objectives

Specifically, the study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine teachers' conceptual understanding of competency-based teaching and learning in Ethiopia, particularly how they define and interpret CBTL principles in relation to classroom practice.
2. To analyze the extent to which competency-based teaching and learning is implemented in Ethiopian primary and secondary school classrooms.
3. To identify the major pedagogical, institutional, and systemic challenges that hinder effective implementation of CBTL in Ethiopian schools.
4. To explore strategies and improvement mechanisms that can enhance the effective implementation of competency-based teaching and learning in the Ethiopian education system.
5. To synthesize findings from existing literature and policy documents in order to identify gaps between curriculum intentions and classroom realities in CBTL implementation.

4. Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do teachers in Ethiopia understand and interpret competency-based teaching and learning in relation to their classroom practices?
2. To what extent is competency-based teaching and learning implemented in primary and secondary schools in Ethiopia?
3. What are the major challenges affecting the effective implementation of competency-based teaching and learning in Ethiopian schools?
4. How do institutional, pedagogical, and systemic factors influence teachers' ability to implement competency-based teaching and learning?
5. What strategies can be recommended to improve the implementation of competency-based teaching and learning in the Ethiopian education system?

These objectives and research questions were designed to ensure a comprehensive investigation of CBTL, capturing not only teachers' understanding but also classroom implementation practices, structural constraints, and possible improvement strategies within the Ethiopian educational context.

5. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Competency-Based Teaching and Learning (CBTL) Implementation in Ethiopia

The diagram presents a one-way flow model illustrating the relationship between key variables influencing the implementation of competency-based teaching and learning (CBTL) in Ethiopia. The model begins with the national education policy context, which provides the foundation for curriculum reform. Policies such as the Education and Training Policy (1994), the Education Development Roadmap (2020–2030), and the New Education and Training Policy (2023) provide the foundation for competency-based curriculum implementation and learner-centered educational reform in Ethiopia. This includes teachers' conceptual knowledge of competency-based education, their pedagogical understanding of learner-centered approaches, their assessment literacy, and their ability to design competency-based lessons. This understanding determines how teachers interpret and translate policy expectations into classroom practice.

The second stage is classroom implementation practices, which function as a mediating variable. Teachers' understanding of CBTL is translated into actual instructional activities such as active learning, collaborative learning, and inquiry- or project-based learning. These practices are supported by continuous assessment and the teacher's role as a facilitator rather than a sole knowledge provider. This stage represents the practical execution of CBTL in the classroom. The final stage is learners' competency development, which is the dependent variable. This refers to the outcomes of the teaching and learning process, including the development of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, communication abilities, creativity, and collaboration. These competencies reflect the intended goals of CBTL.

In addition to the linear flow, the model includes moderating or contextual factors that influence all stages of implementation. These factors include class size, teacher training, availability of instructional resources, school leadership, assessment systems, and school infrastructure. These conditions either support or hinder the effective implementation of CBTL across schools. Overall, the framework illustrates a one-way causal relationship where policy influences teacher understanding, which shapes classroom practices, ultimately leading to learners' competency development, while being shaped throughout by contextual constraints.

6. Literature Review

Competency-based education is widely understood as an approach that prioritizes what learners are able to demonstrate rather than what they can memorize. It shifts attention from content coverage to mastery of defined learning outcomes. In CBTL systems, teachers are expected to act as facilitators rather than sole knowledge providers. Instruction typically involves learner participation through discussion, problem-solving tasks, and collaborative activities. Assessment is continuous and focuses on performance rather than final examinations alone. In Ethiopia, policy documents strongly support this shift. However, studies indicate that implementation remains uneven. Many teachers still rely heavily on traditional teaching methods due to limited training and contextual constraints.

At primary and secondary levels, learner-centered methods are partially implemented, but often inconsistently. Teachers frequently struggle with large class sizes and lack of materials, which limits interactive instruction. Teacher understanding is a critical factor in implementation. Where teachers lack clarity about competency-based principles, instructional practices tend to become superficial, focusing only on activity-based teaching without clear competency measurement.

Institutional constraints, particularly examination-oriented systems and weak professional development structures, further limit effective implementation. As a result, CBTL often remains more of a policy ideal than a fully realized classroom practice.

6.1 Conceptual Understanding of Competency-Based Teaching and Learning

Competency-based teaching and learning (CBTL) is widely conceptualized as an educational approach that emphasizes the demonstration of learning through observable performance rather than mere acquisition of theoretical knowledge. In this approach, learning is structured around clearly defined competencies that integrate knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values required for real-life application (Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019). Unlike traditional education models that prioritize content coverage and memorization, CBTL focuses on mastery learning, where learners progress only after demonstrating adequate understanding of specific competencies. This shifts the role of the teacher from knowledge transmitter to learning facilitator, responsible for guiding learners through active engagement and performance-based tasks.

UNESCO (2017) emphasizes that competency-based education promotes learner autonomy, critical thinking, collaboration, and lifelong learning skills, which are essential in modern knowledge economies. In this sense, CBTL is not merely a pedagogical technique but a broader reform framework aimed at transforming educational outcomes.

However, literature also shows that implementing CBTL is complex and context-dependent. Wesselink et al. (2010) argue that successful competency-based education requires strong alignment between curriculum design, teaching strategies, and assessment systems. Without such alignment, implementation tends to remain superficial, focusing only on activity-based instruction rather than genuine competency development.

6.2 CBTL in African and Developing Country Contexts

In many developing countries, CBTL reforms have been introduced as part of broader efforts to improve educational relevance and employability. However, research consistently shows a gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. Studies from Sub-Saharan Africa indicate that although curricula are redesigned to reflect competency-based principles, teachers often continue using traditional lecture-based methods due to limited training, large class sizes, and lack of instructional materials (Altinyelken, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2004). In such contexts, CBTL is frequently reduced to procedural changes, such as group work or classroom activities, without deeper shifts in pedagogy or assessment practices. This results in what some scholars describe as "surface-level implementation," where reform language is adopted but instructional practice remains largely unchanged.

6.3 CBTL in the Ethiopian Education System

In Ethiopia, competency-based teaching and learning has been promoted through successive educational reforms, including the Education and Training Policy (FDRE, 1994), the Education Development Roadmap (MoE, 2020), and the New Education and Training Policy (MoE, 2023). The 2023 policy reinforces the importance of competency development, innovation, critical thinking, entrepreneurship, technology integration, inclusion, and learner-centered pedagogy. It views education as a means of developing self-confident, competent, and productive citizens capable of contributing to national development. These policy directions further strengthen the implementation of competency-based teaching and learning across all levels of education.

6.4 Teachers' Understanding of CBTL

Teachers' understanding is widely recognized as a critical factor influencing curriculum implementation. According to Guskey (2002), meaningful educational reform depends on teachers' beliefs and their ability to translate policy into practice. In CBTL contexts, teachers are expected to understand not only instructional strategies but also competency development, assessment alignment, and mastery-based progression. However, studies in Ethiopia and similar contexts show that teachers often interpret CBTL narrowly as group work or student participation (Temesgen, 2020). This limited understanding leads to fragmented implementation, where classroom activities are introduced without clear links to learning

outcomes or competency measurement. As a result, teaching becomes activity-oriented rather than outcome-driven.

7. Methodology

7.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative document analysis research design to explore teachers' understanding and implementation of competency-based teaching and learning (CBTL) in Ethiopia. Qualitative document analysis is a systematic procedure used to review, interpret, and synthesize information from existing written materials in order to generate meaningful understanding of a particular social or educational phenomenon. The approach was selected because the study focused on analyzing existing educational policies, curriculum frameworks, scholarly literature, and institutional reports related to CBTL implementation rather than collecting primary data from participants.

The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand meanings, interpretations, policy intentions, implementation experiences, and contextual realities surrounding competency-based education in Ethiopia. Unlike quantitative methods that focus on numerical measurement, qualitative document analysis enables deeper interpretation of educational reform processes, institutional practices, and conceptual understandings embedded within texts and reports.

The study was guided by the interpretivist research paradigm, which assumes that educational realities are socially constructed and understood through interpretation of human experiences, institutional practices, and policy meanings. Through this paradigm, the study sought to understand how competency-based teaching and learning is conceptualized in educational documents and how teachers' understanding and classroom implementation are described in existing literature.

7.2 Sources of Data

The study relied entirely on secondary data obtained from educational documents and scholarly materials relevant to competency-based teaching and learning (CBTL) in Ethiopia. Sources included national education policy documents, curriculum frameworks, curriculum reform guidelines, government reports, institutional publications, peer-reviewed journal articles, academic theses, dissertations, and international education reports. Key policy documents reviewed included the Ethiopian Education and Training Policy (1994), the Education Development Roadmap (2020–2030), curriculum reform documents, and Ministry of Education guidelines related to learner-centered pedagogy and competency-based education. The study also examined scholarly literature on competency-based teaching and learning, curriculum implementation, assessment practices, teacher professional development, and classroom instruction in Ethiopia and other developing-country contexts. In addition, reports from UNESCO and other international educational organizations were consulted to provide broader conceptual and comparative perspectives on competency-based education.

7.3 Document Selection Criteria

Documents included in the study were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research objectives and questions. The following inclusion criteria guided document selection:

1. Documents directly related to competency-based teaching and learning;
2. Literature focusing on learner-centered pedagogy and curriculum implementation;
3. Studies conducted in Ethiopia or comparable developing-country contexts;
4. Publications discussing teacher understanding, instructional practices, or assessment systems;
5. Official policy documents and institutional reports relevant to educational reform.

Documents that were outdated, lacked clear relevance to CBTL, or contained insufficient methodological rigor were excluded from the analysis. The purposive selection process ensured that only documents capable of providing rich and relevant information regarding CBTL implementation were included in the study.

7.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved systematic identification, retrieval, and organization of relevant documents related to competency-based teaching and learning (CBTL). Academic literature was accessed through electronic databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, ResearchGate, and institutional repositories. Government websites and Ministry of Education publications were also consulted to obtain policy documents and official reports. Key search terms used during document retrieval included “competency-based teaching and learning,” “competency-based education in Ethiopia,” “learner-centered pedagogy,” “curriculum implementation,” “teacher understanding of CBTL,” “continuous assessment in Ethiopia,” and “educational reform in Ethiopia.” After retrieval, documents were screened based on relevance to the study objectives and organized into thematic areas such as policy context, teacher understanding, classroom implementation, assessment practices, institutional challenges, and improvement strategies.

7.5. Data Analysis Procedures

The study employed thematic analysis to examine the collected documents. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytical approach used to identify, organize, interpret, and report recurring patterns within textual data. The analysis began with repeated reading of the selected documents to gain broad understanding of the content and identify recurring issues related to competency-based teaching and learning. Meaningful statements and concepts relevant to the research questions were then highlighted and assigned codes. Coding focused on areas such as teacher understanding, learner-centered pedagogy, classroom practices, assessment methods, institutional constraints, and policy implementation.

Related codes were grouped into broader categories representing similar concepts and issues. For instance, codes associated with active learning, group discussion, and inquiry-based instruction were categorized under classroom implementation practices. These categories were further organized into major themes reflecting broader patterns emerging from the data. The major themes included teachers’ conceptual understanding of CBTL, classroom implementation practices, institutional and systemic

challenges, assessment practices, policy-practice gaps, and improvement strategies. Finally, the identified themes were interpreted in relation to the study objectives, conceptual framework, and existing literature in order to understand the relationships between policy expectations, teacher understanding, implementation realities, and contextual constraints.

7.6 Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, several strategies were employed throughout the study. Triangulation was used by reviewing multiple data sources, including policy documents, scholarly articles, institutional reports, and curriculum frameworks. Comparing information from these different sources helped improve the consistency and credibility of the findings. In addition, systematic coding and thematic categorization procedures were followed to reduce subjective interpretation and enhance the dependability of the analysis.

The study also applied thick description by providing detailed explanations and contextual interpretations of the findings. This helped readers gain clear understanding of the educational context and enhanced the transferability of the study. Furthermore, most of the academic materials included in the analysis were obtained from peer-reviewed sources, which increased the reliability and scholarly quality of the information used in the study.

7.7 Ethical Considerations

Since the study relied entirely on publicly available documents and secondary data sources, no direct interaction with human participants occurred. Consequently, issues related to informed consent and participant confidentiality were minimal. Nevertheless, ethical responsibility was maintained throughout the study by properly acknowledging and citing all sources used in the analysis. Care was also taken to accurately represent authors' ideas and findings, avoid plagiarism and misinterpretation, and ensure objective interpretation of the reviewed documents. All references and quotations included in the study were appropriately cited according to accepted academic standards.

7.8 Limitations of the Methodology

Although qualitative document analysis provided valuable insights into CBTL implementation in Ethiopia, the methodology also had limitations. First, the study depended entirely on existing documents and therefore lacked direct classroom observation or interviews with teachers. As a result, some practical experiences and contextual nuances may not have been fully captured. Second, the quality and depth of findings depended on the availability and quality of existing literature and policy documents. Some documents may have reflected institutional perspectives more than actual classroom realities. Despite these limitations, the methodology was appropriate for generating comprehensive understanding of teachers' understanding and implementation of competency-based teaching and learning within the Ethiopian educational context.

8. Findings and Discussion

8.1 Teachers' Understanding of CBTL

The findings of this study indicate that teachers in Ethiopia generally associate competency-based teaching and learning with learner participation, group activities, and interactive classroom practices. This aligns with previous studies that report a growing awareness of learner-centered pedagogy among teachers (Tadesse, 2018).

However, the findings also reveal that teachers' understanding remains largely procedural rather than conceptual. Many teachers equate CBTL with visible classroom activities such as group work, without fully understanding underlying principles such as competency mastery, learning progression, and performance-based assessment. This finding is consistent with Mulenga and Kabombwe (2019), who argue that in many educational systems, CBTL is misunderstood as a methodological change rather than a structural transformation of curriculum and assessment. The implication is that while teachers may appear to implement CBTL, the absence of deep conceptual understanding limits the effectiveness of classroom practices.

8.2 Implementation Practices of CBTL

The study found that CBTL implementation in Ethiopian classrooms is uneven and context-dependent. In some primary school settings, teachers attempt to apply learner-centered strategies such as discussion, group work, questioning, and collaborative tasks. Still, in most cases, implementation remains partial. Instruction is still largely teacher-centered, especially in secondary schools where examination pressure is high.

This finding aligns with O'Sullivan (2004), who notes that in resource-constrained educational systems, teachers often revert to traditional methods despite policy reforms. The persistence of lecture-based instruction is often a response to large class sizes, limited time, and curriculum coverage demands. The study also shows that continuous assessment practices are weak. Instead of ongoing performance-based evaluation, teachers continue to rely heavily on written examinations. This contradicts CBTL principles, which emphasize ongoing feedback and competency demonstration.

8.3 Institutional and Systemic Constraints

A key finding of this study is that CBTL implementation is strongly influenced by structural and institutional conditions. The most significant barriers include overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching materials, and limited professional development opportunities. These findings support UNESCO (2017), which emphasizes that competency-based reforms require strong institutional capacity, including trained teachers, adequate resources, and supportive leadership structures.

In Ethiopia, large class sizes limit teachers' ability to provide individualized support or conduct meaningful assessment. Similarly, lack of laboratories, textbooks, and ICT tools reduces opportunities for practical learning.

Furthermore, examination-oriented schooling culture continues to shape teaching behavior. Teachers often prioritize test preparation over competency development because student performance in national examinations is highly valued.

8.4 Strategies to Improve the Implementation of CBTL in Ethiopia

The findings of this study align closely with existing scholarship on competency-based teaching and learning (CBTL) implementation in developing education systems, particularly in contexts where curriculum reform has advanced faster than classroom transformation. Overall, the evidence suggests that although policy documents in Ethiopia strongly emphasize learner-centered pedagogy and competency development, actual instructional practices in schools remain only partially aligned with these expectations. This mismatch reflects a broader systemic challenge commonly identified in curriculum reform literature, where intended reforms are diluted during implementation due to contextual and structural constraints.

A key synthesis emerging from the findings is that teachers demonstrate a moderate level of awareness of CBTL principles but lack deep conceptual and procedural understanding of its full requirements. This pattern is consistent with Temesgen (2020), who notes that teachers often equate competency-based education with visible classroom activities such as group work or discussion, without fully understanding its emphasis on mastery, measurable outcomes, and performance-based assessment. As a result, CBTL tends to be interpreted at a surface level, rather than as a comprehensive pedagogical shift requiring alignment between curriculum goals, instruction, and assessment.

In addition, the findings show that classroom implementation is largely activity-oriented but not fully competency-driven. While teachers frequently engage students in discussions, group tasks, and participatory learning, these activities are not consistently linked to clearly defined competencies or systematically assessed learning outcomes. This means that learner engagement increases, but competency mastery is not always guaranteed. This partial implementation reflects a common pattern in reform contexts where innovative pedagogical practices are adopted in form but not fully internalized in function.

The study further reveals that assessment practices remain predominantly examination-oriented, with limited use of performance-based or continuous assessment strategies. Despite policy emphasis on formative and competency-based evaluation, classroom assessment continues to prioritize written tests and memorization-based outcomes. This finding reinforces concerns raised in curriculum reform studies that assessment systems often remain the most resistant component of educational change, thereby

constraining the full realization of CBTL objectives. Institutional and structural constraints also play a significant role in shaping implementation outcomes. Factors such as overcrowded classrooms, limited instructional resources, insufficient teacher professional development, and weak school-level support systems collectively hinder effective pedagogical transformation. These constraints reduce teachers' capacity to apply learner-centered strategies consistently and meaningfully, further widening the gap between policy expectations and classroom realities.

Taken together, these findings clearly illustrate a persistent disconnect between policy discourse and classroom practice, a phenomenon widely described in curriculum implementation literature as the "implementation gap" (Fullan, 2007). This gap highlights that educational reform success depends not only on policy formulation but also on the readiness of teachers, institutions, and systemic conditions to support meaningful pedagogical change.

9. Conclusion

The findings should also be interpreted in light of the New Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia (2023), which further strengthens national commitments toward competency-based, learner-centered, and outcome-oriented education. This study concludes that competency-based teaching and learning (CBTL) is firmly embedded within Ethiopia's educational policy framework, particularly through national reform agendas that emphasize learner-centered pedagogy, active learning, and competency development. However, despite this strong policy foundation, actual classroom implementation remains limited, uneven, and in many cases superficial. The evidence suggests that teachers generally possess only a partial understanding of CBTL, with their interpretations largely centered on visible instructional techniques such as group work, discussion, and learner participation. While these practices reflect an important shift away from purely lecture-based teaching, they do not consistently reflect the deeper pedagogical principles of CBTL, which include mastery learning, outcome-based instruction, continuous assessment, and the systematic development of transferable competencies.

The study further concludes that this limited implementation is not solely a teacher-related issue but is strongly shaped by broader systemic and institutional conditions. In particular, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate instructional materials, limited access to professional development, and insufficient pedagogical support significantly constrain teachers' ability to implement competency-based approaches effectively. In addition, the persistent dominance of examination-driven instruction continues to shape classroom priorities, encouraging teaching practices that focus on content coverage and test preparation rather than meaningful competency development. As a result, there is a clear disconnect between policy intentions and classroom realities.

Overall, the study highlights that without strong and coherent alignment between educational policy, teacher preparation systems, school-level support structures, and assessment reforms, the implementation of CBTL will continue to be inconsistent and fragmented. Sustainable improvement in

CBTL therefore requires not only policy commitment but also practical transformation of teaching conditions and institutional capacity within schools.

10. Recommendations

To improve the implementation of competency-based teaching and learning in Ethiopia, the study recommends a multi-level reform approach targeting teachers, assessment systems, institutional conditions, and school leadership.

First, teacher education programs should be strengthened to provide more practical, classroom-oriented training in competency-based instruction. Pre-service teacher education should move beyond theoretical coverage of CBTL and emphasize hands-on pedagogical skills such as lesson planning aligned with competencies, facilitation of learner-centered activities, and the use of formative and performance-based assessment strategies. In addition, in-service professional development programs should be continuous, structured, and practice-based. These programs should include mentoring, peer coaching, classroom observation, and feedback mechanisms that support teachers in translating CBTL theory into effective classroom practice.

Second, assessment systems should be reformed to better reflect competency-based principles. Schools and education authorities should gradually reduce overreliance on high-stakes, memory-based examinations and instead strengthen continuous assessment approaches. These should include portfolios, project work, presentations, practical demonstrations, and other performance-based evaluation methods that more accurately capture learners' competencies. Aligning assessment with CBTL principles will also encourage teachers to adopt more meaningful instructional practices.

Third, substantial investment in educational resources and school infrastructure is necessary to support effective implementation of CBTL. This includes improving access to textbooks, laboratory facilities, teaching aids, ICT tools, and adequately equipped classrooms. Reducing overcrowding through classroom expansion and teacher recruitment is also essential, as manageable class sizes are a critical condition for learner-centered and competency-based instruction.

Finally, school leadership should play a more proactive role in supporting instructional improvement. School principals and supervisors should provide regular pedagogical guidance, monitor classroom practices, and create a supportive environment for innovation in teaching. Strong instructional leadership is essential for ensuring that competency-based education is not only understood but consistently practiced at the classroom level.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this study. No financial, professional, institutional, or personal relationships influenced the conception, design, analysis, interpretation, or reporting of the research findings. The study was conducted independently, and the conclusions presented reflect the author's objective interpretation of the reviewed documents and literature.

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Ethical Approval

Formal ethical approval was not required for this study because it employed a qualitative document analysis approach based exclusively on publicly available secondary sources. The study relied on educational policy documents, curriculum frameworks, institutional reports, and peer-reviewed scholarly literature that were already in the public domain. No human participants, personal data, interviews, surveys, observations, or animal subjects were involved in the research process. All sources were accessed and utilized in accordance with accepted academic, legal, and ethical standards.

Consent to Participate

Not applicable. This study did not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, experiments, or any direct data collection from individuals. It is based entirely on analysis of publicly available documents and published literature.

Consent to Publish

Not applicable. This study does not include identifiable human participants or individual-level data. All information used in the manuscript is drawn from publicly available policy documents and published academic literature.

Data Availability Statement

All data generated and analyzed during this study are included in this published article and its reference list. The study relied exclusively on publicly available policy documents, institutional reports, and published literature. Since this research employed qualitative
document analysis based entirely on publicly available documents and reports, the key sources and their access links are provided below:

Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE). Education and Training Policy (1994). Access link:https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/ethiopia_education_and_training_policy.pdf?utm.

Ministry of Education (MoE). Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2020–2030). clr.africanchildforum.org/policy per country/2018

Update/Ethiopia/ethiopia_drafteducationroadmap_2018_en.pdf

Ministry of Education (MoE). Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia (2023)

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UNESCO. Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives (2017). https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000247444.

World Bank. World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise. https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2018.

In addition, peer-reviewed journal articles included in the review were accessed through academic databases and publisher websites, including Google Scholar, ERIC, ResearchGate, Taylor & Francis Online, SpringerLink, and other scholarly repositories. All sources used in the study are fully cited in the reference list of the revised manuscript.

Author Contributions

The author solely conceived and designed the study, conducted the document search and review process, performed the data analysis and interpretation, and prepared the manuscript for publication. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Clinical Trial Number

Clinical trial number: Not applicable.

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Figures

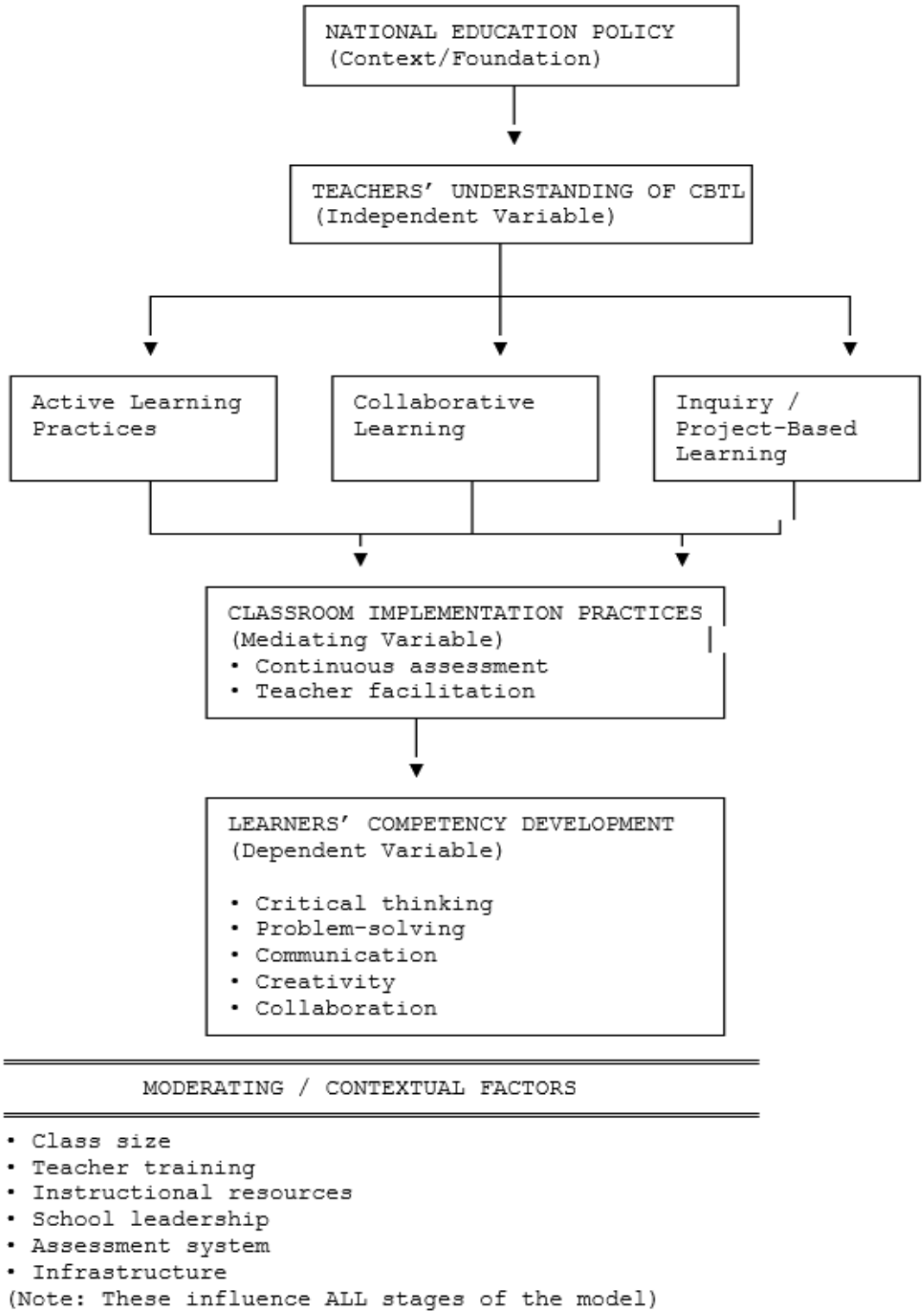


Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Competency-Based Teaching and Learning (CBTL) Implementation in Ethiopia