

FROM IMPORTED THEORY TO LOCAL PRACTICE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PEDAGOGICAL TRANSLATION IN EAST AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the translation of imported teaching theories into practice by secondary school teachers in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. The focus of the problem is the disconnect between global teaching theories and practices in East Africa. Despite ongoing promotion of learner-centered, competency-based and constructivist pedagogies by governments and international entities, teaching practices have not changed or have only changed partially. This research aims to unravel the meanings, interpretations, resistance and transformations teachers make to imported teaching theories in their sociocultural and institutional contexts. This study used a qualitative comparative study design, with 72 teachers in 24 secondary schools. Semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and documents were analysed. The study shows that teachers engage in pedagogical translation in the following four ways: selective incorporation, syncretic blending, instrumental appropriation and transformative adaptation. These modes involve factors including examination, language policy, material resources and teacher experience. The research finds pedagogical translation is not an "implementation failure" but a process of adaptation and innovation. It suggests that education policies should be mindful of teacher agency, assessment practices to support pedagogical practices, and context-sensitive pedagogies.

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INTRODUCTION

The sharing of educational ideas across the world is a key characteristic of the world's education systems today. Policies and practices such as learner-centered education (LCE), competency-based curricula (CBC) and constructivist pedagogies have been rapidly disseminated across regions through international and development agencies and through transnational academic networks (Zapp & Dahmen, 2017). These approaches are often promoted as "one-size-fits-all" approaches to enhancing teaching and learning outcomes, based on assumptions of cognitive processes and democratic citizenship that are presumed to be universal. Yet, their adoption in various contexts has generated mixed and sometimes contradictory outcomes, especially in postcolonial contexts where education systems are shaped by colonial legacies and geopolitical power inequalities in the world today (Pashby, 2012).

In East Africa, in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, educational reforms have often included imported educational theories as integral parts of national development plans. For example, in 2017, the Kenyan government introduced its Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), marking a shift from content-based to competence-based teaching and learning (Kenya Institute for Curriculum Development, 2018). Tanzania has embarked on its own competence-based curriculum reforms to promote learner-centered and higher order thinking skills (Nzoka, 2024). Uganda has also embarked on similar measures to internationalize the education system to meet global quality and relevance standards. While these major investments in curriculum reform and teacher training initiatives have been made, a gap remains between the planned initiatives and classroom implementation in the region.

East African teachers are constrained by enormous challenges that make the direct exportation of theories problematic. Class sizes are often over 50 students, there are limited resources to teach, the high-stakes examination system and the complex language environment, all contribute to a very different context than where the learner-centered and constructivist approaches have been developed (Akintunde, 2023). The latest UNESCO statistics show that, in sub-Saharan Africa, primary and secondary education is the region with the lowest public education financing compared to other developing regions, and also the region with the largest number of out-of-school children and youth in the world (Skelton et al., 2024). The lack of resources has a profound impact on possibilities for pedagogical change.

This poses a significant challenge for educational research and policy: why don't theories of teaching imported from outside sub-Saharan Africa translate into expected teaching practices, and how do teachers actually make use of these theories in their professional practice? The literature tends to explain this problem as an issue of implementation failure, due to poor teacher preparation, lack of resources or teacher resistance to change (Stutchbury & Biard, 2023). But this approach ignores the role of teachers as meaning makers and decision makers who adapt pedagogical ideas and theories to their realities. Learner-centered pedagogy, as (van de Kuilen et al., 2022) discusses, cannot be "rolled out" in a one-size-fits-all approach; instead, it needs to be negotiated in the context of local cultural, political and material realities.

Further, many studies on pedagogic reform in Africa have been country-specific, making it difficult to understand regional trends and variations. Comparative research that considers variations in interpretations and adaptations of imported theories among teachers across countries is still limited. This is especially the case in East Africa, where countries share common histories of colonial education, structural similarities in educational policy, and are members of regional economic blocs, but differ in their pedagogical policy orientations, language policies, and priorities for their educational systems. In Kenya, English is used as the medium of instruction, whereas in Tanzania, the focus is on Kiswahili during primary school, while in Uganda there is a mix of languages. This offers a laboratory to study how national contexts play a role in translating global pedagogic ideas.

This research seeks to contribute to this debate with a study of the translation of imported pedagogies into classroom practice by teachers in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. In particular it aims to address the following questions: (1) What is teachers' understanding of imported pedagogical theories? (2) How do they implement these theories in their practices? (3) How does the context play a role? This research brings teacher voice and classroom practice to the forefront of educational transfer and educational change to offer

a more complex understanding of postcolonial education reform and to challenge deficit-focused views that African teachers are unsuited to implement global educational reforms.

METHOD

A qualitative comparative research design was used to understand pedagogical translation in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. A qualitative design was chosen because it offers the opportunity to explore in depth teacher experiences, views and meanings assigned to their pedagogical practices (Maluha et al., 2025). The comparative aspect allows for the comparison of similarities and differences across contexts in teachers' interactions with imported theories. The research design is based on an interpretivist epistemology, which posits that social life is created in interactions and that to understand teachers' practices we need to focus on their interpretations of the pedagogical theories they encounter.

A total of 72 secondary school teachers from 24 schools (eight in each of the three countries) participated in this study. To ensure the context of schools varied, schools were chosen to reflect urban and rural settings, government and non-government schools, and schools with high and low resourcing. Three teachers from each school were chosen to represent a diverse group of subjects (one science, one humanity, and one languages subject), years of experience (early career, mid-career and experienced) and gender. Teachers ranged in age from 24-58 years old with teaching experience ranging from 2-32 years. All teachers had training in learner-centered pedagogy, competency-based or constructivist pedagogies through their pre-service or in-service training or both.

Data collection took place over 12 months via three key methods. First, we interviewed all the teachers for 60-90 minutes using semi-structured interview guides to understand their views on imported pedagogical theories, training and professional development, and how they implement these in their classrooms. Interview protocol was created in English and translated into Kiswahili (for Tanzanian teachers) and Luganda (for some Ugandan teachers) and then back-translated for conceptual equivalence.

Second, classroom observations were undertaken to explore classroom practices. Teachers were observed in two lessons (one in their "typical" teaching style and one in which they tried to adopt "imported" teaching practices). Observation protocols captured strategies used, student engagement, materials, language practices and assessment.

Third, documents were analyzed to examine curriculum documents, teacher guides, examination syllabuses and school policies of each country. These documents gave us insight into the pedagogical requirements at the macro level and settings in which teachers operate.

We used inductive and deductive approaches to thematic data analysis (Gundlach & Pesina, 2015). We initially coded the data case by case, and subsequently within and across cases across the countries. Qualitative data analysis software NVivo was used to manage the data. Themes were created using an iterative process of moving back and forth between the data and the theoretical literature on pedagogical translation, teacher agency and postcolonial education. Validity was strengthened via triangulation of data sources, member checking and structured peer debriefings with the research team.

RESULTS

A. Modes of Pedagogical Translation

The interviews and classroom observations yielded four modes of pedagogical translation which are viewed as points along a spectrum from slight to significant translation of imported theories.

1. Selective Incorporation

The first and most prevalent mode was teachers taking specific strategies and techniques from imported theories and other elements. These teachers showed a practical approach to reform, adopting elements they saw as potentially effective or practical and rejecting the rest, as incompatible with current practices or contexts. For instance, Kenyan teachers often reported adopting group work and pair discussions - surface attributes of learner-centered pedagogy - while continuing to control the classroom in a teacher-centered manner. One Kenyan mathematics teacher reported, "I do group work because it is good for discussion, but I must control the time and ensure that we cover the syllabus for KCSE [Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education]." This adaptation is a case of embracing "the form rather than the spirit and content" of the reforms, as Leyendecker et al (Sifuna & Kaime, 2007).

2. Syncretic Blending

Another approach was the conscious blending of imported and local pedagogic practices to create syncretic forms. Teachers in this mode did not simply layer the newest techniques onto existing teaching repertoires but actively tried to blend them in a culturally sensitive way. For example, Tanzanian teachers recounted combining group discussion techniques with storytelling and proverb-based teaching to develop classroom activities that recognized participatory and cultural norms of knowledge sharing. One Tanzanian history teacher explained how she mobilized a relevant Kiswahili proverb to connect with students' culture at the beginning of lessons and then progressed to group discussion of historical documents in English. This mode speaks to teachers' innovative pedagogies and mediation of global reform and local cultures.

3. Instrumental Appropriation

A third mode involved superficial compliance with policy without any major shifts in practice. Teachers in this mode spoke of reform during inspections, in staff meetings or to the head teacher, but continued teaching in more traditional ways. A number of Ugandan teachers confessed they were "learner-centered" in their lesson plans for inspections, but mostly taught via lecture and note-taking. One teacher commented, "When the inspector inspects, I do group work, questioning and all that. When they leave, I go back to what is working for me, which is lecture, note taking and practice questions for UNEB [Uganda National Examinations Board]." This mode underscores the performative nature of policy enactment and disconnects between policy and practice.

4. Transformative Adaptation

The least frequent but most impactful mode was teachers' creative transformation of pedagogy that fundamentally reconceived the relationship between imported theories and local conditions. The pedagogies these teachers created were not simply adaptations of imported approaches to local circumstances, but radically new pedagogical forms that tackled local problems while drawing on the principles of reform. For instance, a science teacher in a rural Kenyan school with limited resources created a peer-teaching approach and student experiments using local materials that turned the constructivist focus on inquiry into a form that fit his resource limitations. Likewise, a Tanzanian English teacher developed a translanguaging strategy that leveraged the use of Kiswahili to understand difficult English literature, overcoming the language challenge while upholding the dialectical principles of learner-centered teaching.

B. Cross-National Patterns and Variations

The four modes of translation were present in each of the three countries, but expressed differently in each nation. In Kenya, selective incorporation and instrumental appropriation were the most common, given the pressure to teach to the examination (the KCSE) and the recent introduction of the CBC, which has resulted in uncertainty about what constitutes good pedagogic practice. Many Kenyan teachers reported that the examination was the biggest limitation on their pedagogic practice, with one teacher stating "The CBC says competence, but the university entrance is still based on KCSE grades. Until those changes, I must teach for the exam."

In Tanzania, syncretic blending was more common, especially among those teachers with more experience who had experienced several reform periods. These teachers exhibited keen insights into the disconnects between policy and practice, and many had developed subtle ways of practicing good pedagogy in constrained circumstances. But the dominance of NECTA exams, which ("between competence and compliance: examining the challenges of competence-based curriculum implementation under centralized examinations in Tanzania," 2025) has described as a structural "tension between competence and compliance", meant even these teachers felt limited in their ability to fully apply competence-based approaches.

Uganda was the most complex case, with differences between urban and rural and schools with different language policies. In urban schools using English as a medium, instrumental appropriation was prevalent, with teachers feeling compelled to show "modern" teaching techniques and to prepare students for English exams. In rural schools where teachers were more flexible in their use of local languages, syncretic blending and even transformative adaptation was more common, as they were able to adapt to students' needs.

C. Factors Influencing Pedagogical Translation

Data across the three countries highlighted various factors influencing teachers' forms of pedagogical translation.

1. Examination Systems

The highest rated influence was the influence of high-stakes national exams. Teachers in each country reported that examinations were incongruent with the ideas of learner-centred and competence-based teaching. "Continued focus on the 'right' facts and format for answers on high-stakes national exams inhibits many teachers from using approaches that develop important inquiry skills when they are not formally assessed" (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2019), as the UNICEF Innocenti synthesis report on education in Africa notes. Their sense of having to focus on curriculum coverage and examination preparation rather than the more process-based, explorative learning promoted by imported theories defined the teachers' perceptions. This disconnect between evaluation and teaching is part of the "core bottleneck" in competence-based curriculum reform in Tanzania identified by (Kasuga & Kalolo, 2025) and echoed in the region.

2. Resource Availability

Resources played an important role in teachers' ability to implement imported practices. Teachers in urban schools with relatively more resources reported they were able to engage in syncretic blending or transformative adaptation, while teachers in rural schools with relatively fewer resources were more likely to engage in selective incorporation or instrumental appropriation. Limited resources for teaching and learning, large class sizes and poor facilities posed challenges for

implementing participatory, activity-based approaches (Mohammed & Castulo, 2025). One Tanzanian teacher commented, "How can I do group work when there are 60 students and only 25 desks? Some have to sit on the floor". These issues reflect broader trends of under-investment in education in sub-Saharan Africa, and inequitable resource allocation in many countries

3. **Language Policy**

Medium of instruction was found to be a key issue in Tanzania and Uganda. Teachers felt that the linguistic skills required in learner-centered instruction (dialogued, questioning and critical discussion) were beyond the language skills of teachers and students. (Kyeyune, 2003) study on medium of instruction in African schools shows that the most common teaching method is teacher-centered when the language of instruction is a second or third language in African schools, as the language demands on teachers and students is higher than in teacher-centered methods. Teachers who used local languages and/or translanguaging were more successful in implementing dialogic approaches, but those who were limited to English tended to rely on more teacher-controlled interactions.

4. **Professional Experience and Training**

The amount of experience and training teachers received had a profound impact on their translation modes. Generally, teachers with greater experience had greater ability for blending and adaptation for change, as they relied on their professional knowledge to solve problems. But quality of training was critical. Teachers who reported ongoing, practical-based professional learning (as opposed to one-off workshops) felt more confident and able in adapting imported theories. This is consistent with evidence from abroad that teachers' ability to sustain classroom change is provided by ongoing, rather than one-off, professional support (Jeptepkeny & Keter, 2025).

5. **School Leadership**

The role of school heads and administrators emerged as an important mediating factor. Supportive school leadership which had a grasp of and valued pedagogical innovation enabled teachers to innovate. By contrast, authoritarian leadership that prioritized examination scores and classroom "discipline" did not encourage risk-taking and perpetuated traditional practices. A number of teachers indicated that school heads who have had positive experience of such professional development (PD) were more supportive of pedagogical translation.

DISCUSSION

This study shows that pedagogical translation is not a problem of implementation but a contextualised and dynamic process in which teachers enact their professional agency. This undermines the conventional linear approach to policy implementation that views a direct link between policy design and implementation. Rather, the study shows that there exists an ecology of interpretation, adaptation and negotiation, and that teachers are active agents in this ecology. The four pedagogical modes of translation (selective incorporation, syncretic blending, instrumental appropriation and transformative adaptation) are a range of teacher responses to imported theories.

These are not discrete categories, but rather strategies that teachers might use depending on circumstances, subject, and so on. One teacher may employ transformative adaptation when they have time and resources to do so, but choose instrumental appropriation when they are under pressure from inspection or lack resources. The use of instrumental appropriation and selective incorporation across the three countries

highlights the need for attention to educational reform design and implementation. If teachers are inclined to engage in "pretending" compliance, rather than engage with reform ideas, this points to potential disconnects between reform design and implementation settings.

As the IIEP-UNESCO study on adaptive implementation points out, "implementation is more effective when approaches are flexible, context-sensitive, and grounded in national institutional and political realities" (Paswan & Sapra, 2025). The persistence of examination-based assessment systems is probably the most obvious constraint on pedagogical reform. Until we change assessment systems to align with the work processes and skills valued by learner-centered and constructivist approaches, teachers will continue to be caught between competing pressures to comply, in a superficial way.

The study also demonstrates the innovations possible via syncretic blending and transformative adaptation. The teachers who engaged in these modes showed that innovation in teaching and learning can occur even in constraining circumstances, as long as they have enough autonomy to exercise their professional judgement, as well as leadership support and opportunities for ongoing learning. These insights endorse calls to view teacher agency as critical for educational improvement rather than a hindrance to implementing reforms (Biesta et al., 2015). The study demonstrates from a postcolonial standpoint the persistence of epistemological hierarchies in the East African education system.

Pedagogical theories that were imported into East Africa are still seen as modern and scientifically advanced, whereas local knowledge systems are seen as inferior or a hindrance to educational reform. Yet the teachers' syncretic blending and transformative adaptation of imported theories indicates that it is possible to decolonise pedagogy - not by abandoning imported theories, but by critically and creatively engaging with them from local epistemological positions. This is in line with the call by (Quintero & Olarte Clavijo, 2023) for "socially just pedagogies" that draw upon global and local knowledge traditions, and cater to the needs of learners in postcolonial settings.

The comparative perspective of the study highlights both regional and national similarities and differences. The three countries face challenges of examination-driven education, limited resources and language policy. But the particular combination of these factors (and policy responses) is unique. The dynamic of Kenya's ambitious but controversial CBC reform, Tanzania's longer experience with competence-based approaches and Uganda's multilingual context shape different contexts for pedagogical translation. These differences highlight the need for policy that is responsive to local contexts, and the risk of "off the shelf" reform models.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that teachers in the three study countries (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) actively adapt imported theories of education to local context in various ways. Rather than seeing the difference between policy and practice as a failure of implementation, policymakers and researchers should recognize this as an example of adaptation of the policy context. Teachers' reluctance to change is not a function of poor training, but rather their judgment and expertise in responding to complex teaching and learning demands.

This study highlights key implications for educational policy and practice, emphasizing the need to recognize teacher agency in contextualizing reforms beyond compliance-driven frameworks. Alignment between competence-based pedagogies and assessments is crucial, with assessment reform serving as the entry point for systemic

change. Professional development should be continuous, practice-oriented, and grounded in mentoring and collaborative learning. Language policies must support dialogic pedagogies through flexible approaches, including translanguaging strategies. Equitable and progressive funding is essential to address resource constraints and enable pedagogic innovation. Overall, the study underscores the importance of integrating global and local perspectives while foregrounding teacher creativity in navigating educational change.

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