

Understanding Learner Errors in Reading Comprehension: A Schema-Theoretic and Task-Based Perspective from Kenyan CBE Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This paper re-examines data from a broader doctoral study to provide a focused linguistic analysis of lexical and morpho-syntactic error patterns in Grade 6 reading comprehension under Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). Specifically, the study identifies dominant error types and examines how these errors relate to learners' overall comprehension performance. Drawing exclusively on pre-test data, the analysis is limited to errors that compromise clarity and meaning in learner responses. Guided by Schema Theory, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and Error Analysis, the study analyses scripts from 611 learners across six public primary schools in Athi River Sub-County, Kenya. Findings reveal that errors are largely intralingual, with lexical errors accounting for 58% and morpho-syntactic errors 42% of the total identified. Frequent issues include incorrect collocations, morphological overgeneralization, and grammatical inaccuracies, all of which significantly obscure meaning and contribute to reduced comprehension scores. The study argues that learner errors in reading comprehension are systematic and closely linked to cognitive processing demands, underscoring the need for instructional approaches that integrate attention to linguistic form within comprehension tasks. The findings offer important implications for both pedagogy and assessment in upper primary English classrooms.

Keywords: Reading comprehension, Schema Theory; Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT); Competency-Based Education (CBE); Learners' errors, error analysis;

INTRODUCTION

English reading comprehension remains a central component of literacy development in Kenyan upper primary classrooms, particularly under the Competency-Based Education (CBE), which foregrounds meaning-making, learner engagement, and communicative competence (KNEC, 2020). At Grade 6 level, learners are expected to demonstrate not only literal understanding but also inferential and interpretive comprehension through written responses. However, evidence from national and large-scale assessments continues to point to persistent challenges in learners' comprehension outcomes, often accompanied by weaknesses in language accuracy (Uwezo, 2022).

Within second language acquisition research, learner errors are no longer viewed merely as deficiencies but as systematic reflections of developing linguistic competence (Corder, 1967). In the Kenyan ESL context—where English functions both as a subject and as the principal medium of instruction—analyzing learner error patterns in reading comprehension tasks provides valuable insight into how learners process text and deploy lexical and grammatical resources under cognitive pressure. Recent local studies have highlighted that comprehension difficulties among upper primary learners frequently co-occur with lexical and morpho-syntactic inaccuracies,

suggesting a close relationship between linguistic form and meaning construction (Karogo, 2020; Oluoch, 2023; Oluoch, Odundo, & Kahiga, 2023).

Despite the centrality of reading comprehension under CBE, much classroom-based research has focused on performance scores or strategy use, with comparatively limited attention to the linguistic nature of learners' written comprehension responses. This gap is significant because errors such as inappropriate collocations, inaccurate word formation, and unstable sentence structures can obscure meaning even when learners demonstrate partial conceptual understanding. From an error analysis perspective, such patterns are often intralingual in nature, arising from overgeneralization, incomplete rule application, or developmental restructuring rather than direct first-language transfer (Ellis, 2013, 2022).

This paper addresses this gap by offering a linguistic interpretation of lexical and morpho-syntactic error patterns observed in Grade 6 reading comprehension tasks. Using data drawn from a broader doctoral study, the paper identifies dominant error types and examines how these errors interact with comprehension performance. Particular attention is paid to collocational misuse and morphological inaccuracies, which have been shown in other ESL contexts to significantly affect comprehension clarity (Rosa, Tasnim, & Fitriyah, 2021).

The study is theoretically grounded in Schema Theory and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). Schema Theory emphasizes the role of prior knowledge in text interpretation and lexical choice, arguing that comprehension is facilitated when learners can meaningfully connect new textual information to existing cognitive structures (Carrell, 1984). Complementing this, TBLT highlights the importance of purposeful, meaning-focused tasks in promoting cognitive engagement and authentic language use (Nunan, 2004; Willis, 2007). Within the Kenyan context, recent studies suggest that schema-building and task-based pre-reading activities can enhance learners' engagement with texts and support more accurate language production during comprehension tasks (Oluoch, 2023).

By examining comprehension tasks preceded by schema-based and task-based pre-reading activities, this paper explores how instructional design influences not only comprehension outcomes but also the quality of learner language. It argues that systematic analysis of lexical and morpho-syntactic errors offers important pedagogical and assessment insights for CBE-aligned literacy instruction. Understanding how such errors emerge—and how they can be mitigated through targeted schema activation and task-based scaffolding—has implications for classroom practice, assessment design, and teacher professional development in Kenyan upper primary education.

The following objectives guided this study:

1. To identify and classify the predominant lexical and morpho-syntactic errors made by Grade 6 learners during reading comprehension tasks.
2. To examine the extent to which schema-based and task-based pre-reading activities contribute to error reduction.
3. To determine the relationship between identified error patterns and learners' overall comprehension performance.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the emphasis placed on reading comprehension within Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBE), a significant number of upper primary learners continue to demonstrate low levels of achievement in comprehension tasks (Uwezo, 2022). Existing classroom practices and assessment approaches tend to prioritize comprehension outcomes in terms of scores and task completion, with limited attention to the linguistic features of learner responses. As a result, the role of language form—especially vocabulary use, collocation, and grammatical accuracy—in shaping comprehension performance remains underexplored. Furthermore, while Schema Theory and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) have been widely acknowledged as effective

frameworks for enhancing comprehension, there is insufficient empirical attention to how these approaches influence the reduction of specific linguistic errors in learner output.

In the Kenyan ESL context, where English functions as both a subject and the primary medium of instruction, failure to address such errors may have cumulative effects on learners' academic performance across subjects. There is therefore a need for a focused linguistic analysis that not only identifies the dominant error patterns in learners' comprehension responses but also examines how instructional strategies—particularly schema-based and task-based pre-reading activities—can mitigate these errors. This study addresses this gap by analyzing lexical and morpho-syntactic errors in Grade 6 learners' reading comprehension and exploring their relationship with instructional practices and overall performance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in Schema Theory, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and Error Analysis, which together provide a complementary lens for interpreting how Grade 6 learners construct meaning during reading comprehension and how linguistic errors emerge within that process. While Schema Theory accounts for the cognitive activation of prior knowledge during text processing, TBLT foregrounds the role of task design and learner engagement. Error Analysis, in turn, offers a principled framework for interpreting the nature and sources of learners' lexical and morpho-syntactic deviations.

Schema Theory and Reading Comprehension

Schema Theory posits that comprehension is an interactive process in which readers actively integrate incoming textual information with existing cognitive structures or schemata (Carrell, 1984). These schemata—whether content-based, formal, or linguistic—enable learners to predict meaning, interpret unfamiliar vocabulary, and organize textual information coherently. In second language reading contexts, insufficient or weakly activated schemata can result in fragmented comprehension and unstable lexical choices.

Within ESL classrooms, schema activation has been shown to play a particularly critical role in learners' lexical selection and syntactic formulation during comprehension tasks. When learners lack relevant background knowledge or fail to activate appropriate schemata, they may resort to literal decoding, guesswork, or partial rule application, leading to errors in word choice, collocation, and grammatical structure. In the Kenyan CBE context, where texts increasingly reflect real-world themes and cross-curricular content, effective schema activation becomes essential for both comprehension and accurate language use (Karogo, 2020; Oluoch, 2023).

This study adopts Schema Theory to explain how pre-reading activities that activate learners' background knowledge can reduce cognitive load during reading, thereby supporting more accurate lexical and morpho-syntactic production in written comprehension responses.

Task-Based Language Teaching and Cognitive Engagement

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) emphasizes the use of meaning-focused tasks that require learners to use language purposefully to achieve communicative outcomes (Nunan, 2004; Willis, 2007). In TBLT, tasks are not merely practice activities but cognitive events that engage learners in problem-solving, negotiation of meaning, and language use under realistic conditions.

From a cognitive perspective, well-sequenced tasks can scaffold learners' processing of input and support deeper engagement with text. Pre-reading tasks such as prediction, vocabulary categorization, and guided discussion serve to orient learners to text content and linguistic demands before full comprehension is attempted. Such tasks align closely with the CBE emphasis on learner-centered instruction and competency development (KNEC, 2020).

In this study, TBLT provides the pedagogical lens through which schema-building activities are operationalized. Drawing on Willis's (2007) task cycle, pre-reading tasks are viewed as preparatory stages that enable learners to access meaning more efficiently and deploy language with greater accuracy during comprehension tasks.

Evidence from Kenyan classroom-based studies suggests that task-based pre-reading activities enhance learners' engagement and reduce surface-level errors in comprehension responses (Oluoch, 2023; Oluoch, Odundo, & Kahiga, 2023).

Error Analysis: Intralingual and Interlingual Perspectives

Error Analysis, as originally articulated by Corder (1967), treats learner errors as systematic and developmentally meaningful, reflecting learners' evolving hypotheses about the target language. Rather than viewing errors as deficiencies to be eliminated, Error Analysis positions them as diagnostic tools for understanding language learning processes.

Ellis (2013, 2022) distinguishes between Interlingual errors, which arise from first-language transfer, and intralingual errors, which stem from overgeneralization, incomplete rule application, or faulty rule formation within the target language. In contexts where learners share multiple linguistic backgrounds—as is the case in Kenyan classrooms—intralingual errors often dominate, particularly in written comprehension tasks that demand simultaneous processing of meaning and form.

Recent studies have shown that intralingual lexical errors, especially inappropriate collocations and morphological inaccuracies, are prevalent among upper primary ESL learners and can significantly interfere with meaning construction (Rosa, Tasnim, & Fitriyah, 2021; Karogo, 2020). This study therefore adopts an intralingual error framework to classify and interpret the dominant lexical and morpho-syntactic errors observed in learners' comprehension responses.

By integrating Error Analysis with Schema Theory and TBLT, the study conceptualizes errors not merely as linguistic shortcomings but as outcomes of interaction between prior knowledge, task design, and cognitive processing demands during reading comprehension.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Data Source

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design, drawing on data from a broader doctoral study that investigated the role of schema-based and task-based pre-reading activities in enhancing Grade 6 learners' reading comprehension under Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). The present paper constitutes a secondary linguistic analysis focusing specifically on error patterns in learner output.

The data analyzed in this paper were obtained from pre-test reading comprehension scripts, administered before any instructional intervention. These scripts were selected because they provided unmediated evidence of learners' baseline linguistic competence and error patterns before exposure to schema-building and task-based instructional support.

Participants and Research Context

The study involved 611 Grade 6 learners drawn from six public primary schools in Athi River Sub-County, Machakos County, Kenya. The sample was selected from an estimated population of approximately 2,600 Grade 6 learners in the sub-county, representing over 20% of the population. This proportion was considered adequate to enhance the reliability and representativeness of the findings. It also satisfied the minimum sample size of 46 participants for linguistic investigation as proposed by Mustafa & Robillos, (2020).

The six schools were purposively selected from a total of 38 public primary schools to reflect typical CBC instructional contexts. Learners represented diverse linguistic backgrounds, providing a suitable basis for examining both intralingual and interlingual error patterns in an ESL setting.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through a structured reading comprehension pre-test administered to all sampled learners. The pre-test consisted of a grade-appropriate passage followed by questions targeting literal, inferential, and interpretive comprehension. Learners produced written responses, which constituted the primary corpus for error analysis. The pre-test was designed to establish baseline performance and to identify

Two primary instruments were used in the original study and form the basis of the present analysis:

Reading Comprehension Pre-Test

The pre-test consisted of a grade-appropriate reading passage followed by structured comprehension questions requiring short written responses. The questions were designed to assess literal, inferential, and interpretive comprehension, in line with CBE learning outcomes. Learners' written responses constituted the main corpus for error identification and classification.

Teacher Questionnaires

To corroborate learner data, questionnaires were administered to English teachers from the participating schools. The questionnaires elicited teachers' observations regarding common learner difficulties in vocabulary use, sentence construction, and comprehension response accuracy. These perceptions were used to triangulate patterns identified in the learner scripts.

Error Identification and Analysis Procedures

Error analysis in this study was guided by Corder's (1967) framework below.

Table 3.1 Corder's Framework for Analysis of Learners' Errors

Component	Description	Purpose
Error Identification	Identify and categorize errors in learners' work by type (e.g., grammatical, lexical, orthographic).	Provides a clear picture of error types.
Error Classification	Distinguish errors as Intralingual (within the target language) or Interlingual (L1 interference).	Explains origins and patterns of errors.
Quantitative Analysis	Calculate error frequencies and use statistical tests (e.g., Chi-square) to compare groups.	Quantifies errors and reveals group trends.
Qualitative Analysis	Analyze the underlying reasons for errors (e.g., overgeneralization, transfer, fossilization).	Offers insights into cognitive processes.
Evaluation of Errors	Assess error severity (e.g., impact on intelligibility and communication).	Determines the significance of errors.
Pedagogical Implications	Suggest teaching strategies and curriculum adjustments based on findings.	Provides practical applications for teaching.

Source: Corder (1967) and Selinker (1972).

This model conceptualizes learner errors as systematic and reflective of underlying language learning processes. Learner responses were examined line by line to identify deviations from standard English usage that impeded or obscured meaning.

Identified errors were then classified into lexical and morpho-syntactic categories. Lexical errors included inappropriate word choice, incorrect collocations, and misuse of vocabulary items, while morpho-syntactic errors encompassed inaccuracies in tense, agreement, word formation, and sentence structure. Following Ellis (2013, 2022), errors were further interpreted as predominantly intralingual in nature, arising from overgeneralization, incomplete rule application, or developmental restructuring rather than direct first-language transfer.

To ensure analytical reliability, recurrent error patterns were identified across scripts and compared with teacher-reported observations from the questionnaires. This triangulation strengthened the validity of the error classifications and interpretations.

Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Data analysis involved qualitative pattern identification and descriptive interpretation of error types, supplemented by quantitative frequency counts to establish dominant error categories. Learner performance scores from the pre-test were also examined to explore relationships between error density and overall comprehension performance.

Ethical considerations were addressed in the original doctoral study, including institutional approval, informed consent, and anonymization of learner data. For the purposes of this paper, all learner scripts and teacher responses were treated confidentially, with no identifying information reported.

FINDINGS

Dominant Lexical and Morpho-Syntactic Error Patterns

Analysis of learners' pre-test comprehension scripts revealed recurring lexical, morpho-syntactic, semantic, phonological, and pragmatic errors, as illustrated in Table 5.3. These errors consistently interfered with meaning construction and frequently resulted in loss of marks, indicating their significance in assessment contexts.

A prominent pattern observed was the dominance of intralingual errors, supporting earlier findings that such errors are characteristic of developing second-language competence rather than direct first-language transfer (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 2013). For example, the morpho-syntactic error "sayed" instead of "said" reflects overgeneralization of regular past tense rules, where learners apply the -ed suffix to irregular verbs. This error type suggests partial rule acquisition rather than lack of grammatical awareness.

Lexical intralingual errors were particularly salient. The use of "diseases of lifestyle" instead of the target collocation "lifestyle diseases" demonstrates learners' difficulty with collocational restrictions in English, despite conceptual understanding of the phrase. Similar collocational inaccuracies have been reported among ESL learners and are often linked to insufficient exposure to formulaic language in meaningful contexts (Rosa, Tasnim, & Fitriyah, 2021). From a schema-theoretic perspective, this suggests weak activation of linguistic schemata, even where content schemata appear intact.

Confusion between demonstratives ("this" vs "these") and homophones ("their" vs "there") further illustrates intralingual lexical instability. Such errors point to incomplete mastery of grammatical distinctions and phonological representations, which are exacerbated during cognitively demanding comprehension tasks. These findings align with Ellis's (2022) assertion that form-meaning mappings are particularly vulnerable when learners process input and produce output simultaneously.

Interlingual and Cross-Linguistic Influences

Although intralingual errors predominated, selected instances of Interlingual influence were identified. The sentence "The doctor keeps an apple every day"—intended to reproduce the proverb "An apple a day keeps the doctor away"—reflects literal translation and restructuring influenced by first-language conceptualization. This

semantic distortion alters the idiomatic meaning entirely, demonstrating how inadequate familiarity with formulaic expressions can severely compromise comprehension accuracy.

Similarly, phonological transfer was evident in the spelling the words ‘an’ and ‘apple’. Several learners wrote ‘happle’ / hæp.əl/ instead of ‘apple’ /æp.əl/ apple" and ‘han’ /hən/instead of ‘an’ /ən/

Here it is evident that incorrect sound production has been transferred into written form. The same was evident on the use of “This” /ðɪs/ for "These" /ði:z/Such errors underscore the interaction between oral and written language systems in ESL learners and suggest that phonological awareness remains a relevant factor in written comprehension performance at Grade 6 level.

Pragmatic and Task-Related Errors

Beyond lexical and grammatical inaccuracies, the analysis identified pragmatic errors related to task interpretation, particularly the repetition of comprehension questions without providing answers. This pattern reflects a failure to perform the required speech act of responding, despite apparent comprehension of the question form.

While classified primarily as an intralingual pragmatic error, this phenomenon may also be partially influenced by first-language discourse norms, where repetition functions as a legitimate communicative strategy. Importantly, such errors resulted in complete loss of marks, highlighting how misalignment between learner discourse strategies and assessment expectations can negatively affect performance.

From a TBLT perspective, this finding suggests insufficient task familiarization and inadequate scaffolding at the pre-reading stage. Learners who are not oriented to task demands may struggle to translate comprehension into appropriate written responses, even when some level of understanding is present (Nunan, 2004; Willis, 2007).

Error Severity and Relationship to Comprehension Performance

Across error categories, the majority were evaluated as significant, leading to penalization or denial of marks. This finding reinforces the close relationship between linguistic accuracy and comprehension performance, particularly in written assessments aligned with CBE standards (KNEC, 2020).

Learners whose responses contained dense clusters of lexical and morpho-syntactic errors tended to score lower overall, suggesting that error frequency and severity may serve as predictors of comprehension difficulty. This relationship is consistent with previous Kenyan studies linking linguistic competence to reading achievement (Karogo, 2020; Oluoch, 2023; Oluoch, Odundo, & Kahiga, 2023).

DISCUSSION

This study focused on identifying dominant lexical and morpho-syntactic error patterns in Grade 6 learners’ reading comprehension and examining how these errors relate to overall comprehension performance. Using pre-test data, the analysis was restricted to errors that compromise meaning and clarity in learner responses, without extending to post-intervention outcomes. The findings indicate that these errors are systematic, largely intralingual, and closely associated with cognitive processing demands during comprehension tasks.

Consistent with Corder’s (1967) position that learner errors reflect developing linguistic systems, the predominance of intralingual errors suggests that Grade 6 learners are actively constructing rules of English rather than relying primarily on first-language transfer. Errors such as “sayed” for “said” (/say_ɪ d/ for /sed/) and demonstrative confusion “this” vs “these” (/ðɪs/ for /ði:z/) point to overgeneralization and incomplete rule application, phenomena widely documented in second language development (Ellis, 2013; 2022). These errors become particularly visible in reading comprehension tasks, where learners must process input, retrieve relevant schemata, and produce written output simultaneously.

Lexical errors—especially inappropriate collocations—emerged as a major source of meaning distortion. The use of “diseases of lifestyle” instead of “lifestyle diseases” demonstrates that learners may grasp conceptual meaning while lacking control over conventional lexical patterning. This finding aligns with Rosa, Tasnim, and Fitriyah (2021), who argue that collocational competence plays a critical role in comprehension clarity. From a schema-theoretic perspective, this suggests that while content schemata may be partially activated, linguistic schemata—particularly those related to formulaic language—remain underdeveloped (Carrell, 1984).

The presence of pragmatic errors, such as the repetition of comprehension questions instead of providing answers, highlights an often-overlooked dimension of comprehension assessment. Such errors suggest not only linguistic difficulty but also misinterpretation of task demands. In line with TBLT principles, this underscores the importance of task orientation and explicit modelling of expected response formats (Nunan, 2004; Willis, 2007). Without adequate task familiarization, learners may fail to translate understanding into acceptable written responses, resulting in complete loss of marks despite partial comprehension.

Importantly, the study demonstrates a clear relationship between error density and comprehension performance. Learners whose responses contained frequent and severe lexical and morpho-syntactic errors tended to perform poorly overall, supporting previous Kenyan studies that link linguistic competence to reading achievement (Karogo, 2020; Oluoch, 2023; Oluoch, Odundo, & Kahiga, 2023). This relationship challenges approaches that treat comprehension as separate from language form and reinforces the need for integrated form-meaning instruction under CBE.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Conclusion

This paper has provided a linguistic interpretation of lexical and morpho-syntactic error patterns in Grade 6 reading comprehension under Kenya’s Competency-Based Education. Drawing on pre-test data from six public schools in Athi River Sub-County, the study has shown that learner errors are systematic, predominantly intralingual, and closely tied to comprehension outcomes.

The findings affirm that lexical inaccuracies—particularly collocational misuse—and morpho-syntactic errors significantly hinder meaning construction and assessment performance. While instances of Interlingual influence were observed, these were less frequent than intralingual errors arising from developmental processes such as overgeneralization and incomplete rule formation. The study further demonstrates that pragmatic misunderstandings of task demands can be just as detrimental to performance as grammatical errors.

By integrating Schema Theory, TBLT, and Error Analysis, the paper underscores the value of viewing comprehension errors not merely as surface-level mistakes but as indicators of cognitive processing, instructional alignment, and language development.

Pedagogical and Assessment Implications

The findings carry several implications for English language teaching and assessment under CBE:

First, explicit attention to lexical patterning and collocation should be incorporated into reading instruction. Teachers should move beyond isolated vocabulary teaching to include exposure to formulaic expressions and authentic language use, enabling learners to develop stronger linguistic schemata.

Second, schema-based and task-based pre-reading activities should be deliberately designed to support both content understanding and linguistic accuracy. Prediction tasks, guided discussions, and vocabulary categorization activities can reduce cognitive load during reading and promote more accurate written responses (Willis, 2007; Nunan, 2004).

Third, error-sensitive assessment practices are necessary. Teachers and examiners should recognize that certain error types—particularly pragmatic and collocational errors—may reflect task misinterpretation or

developmental language use rather than lack of comprehension alone. Diagnostic use of error analysis can therefore inform targeted instructional interventions.

Finally, the study highlights the importance of teacher professional development in linguistic awareness. Teachers' ability to identify, interpret, and respond to learner errors meaningfully is critical for improving reading outcomes, as corroborated by teacher perceptions in this study and supported by national assessment concerns (Uwezo, 2022; KNEC, 2020).

Directions for Future Research

Future research could examine how specific task types influence particular error categories or track changes in error patterns longitudinally across CBE grade levels. Further studies might also explore the interaction between oral proficiency and written comprehension errors, especially in multilingual classroom contexts.

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