



ASSESSING COMPETENCES IN ENGLISH STATE EXAMINATIONS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL EXAM QUESTIONNAIRESⁱ

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Abstract:

This study examines the extent to which English State Examinations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) assess learners' competences in accordance with the principles of competency-based education (CBE) and competency-based language teaching (CBLT). Although the national curriculum emphasizes communicative competence, practical language use, and progressive skill development, persistent gaps remain between instructional objectives and learners' actual proficiency levels. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the study analyzes the 2024 English examination papers from the Pedagogy and Technical Social sections. The analysis focuses on the nature of tasks, the type of skills assessed, the authenticity of content, and the overall alignment with competency-based principles. The findings reveal that while examination papers incorporate contextualized reading materials and professional themes, the assessment format remains predominantly multiple-choice and recognition-based. The exams largely measure discrete linguistic knowledge such as grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and phonetics, rather than integrated communicative performance. As a result, the behavioural and performance dimensions of competence are insufficiently evaluated. The study concludes that the English State Examinations in the DRC reflect a transitional model that partially aligns with competency-based principles but remains largely knowledge-oriented. It recommends the gradual integration of performance-based assessment tasks, including productive and authentic communicative activities, to enhance coherence between curriculum objectives and national evaluation practices.

ⁱ L'ÉVALUATION DES COMPÉTENCES EN ANGLAIS AUX EXAMENS D'ÉTAT EN RÉPUBLIQUE DÉMOCRATIQUE DU CONGO : ANALYSE DE CONTENU DES QUESTIONNAIRES NATIONAUX

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Résumé :

La présente étude examine dans quelle mesure les examens d'État d'anglais en République Démocratique du Congo (RDC) évaluent réellement les compétences des apprenants conformément aux principes de l'approche par compétences (APC) et de l'enseignement des langues fondé sur les compétences. Bien que le programme national mette l'accent sur la compétence communicative, l'usage pratique de la langue et le développement progressif des habiletés, un écart persiste entre les objectifs pédagogiques et le niveau effectif de maîtrise linguistique des apprenants. À travers une analyse qualitative de contenu, cette recherche analyse les questionnaires de l'Examen d'État 2024 dans les sections Pédagogie Generale et Technique Sociale. L'analyse porte sur la nature des tâches proposées, les compétences évaluées, l'authenticité des contenus ainsi que le degré d'alignement avec les principes de l'approche par compétences. Les résultats montrent que, malgré la présence de textes contextualisés et de thématiques professionnelles, le format d'évaluation demeure essentiellement basé sur des questions à choix multiples axées sur la reconnaissance des connaissances. Les examens évaluent principalement des savoirs linguistiques fragmentés (grammaire, vocabulaire, compréhension écrite, phonétique) plutôt que la capacité des apprenants à mobiliser ces ressources dans des situations communicatives authentiques. L'étude conclut que les examens d'État d'anglais en RDC s'inscrivent dans un modèle transitionnel, partiellement aligné sur l'approche par compétences, mais encore largement centré sur les connaissances. Elle recommande l'intégration progressive d'épreuves de production et de tâches communicatives authentiques afin de renforcer la cohérence entre le curriculum et les pratiques nationales d'évaluation.

Mots-clés : approche par compétences, enseignement des langues fondé sur les compétences, examens d'état, et évaluation des apprentissages

1. Introduction

The present study focuses on a content analysis of national examination questionnaires used to assess English language competencies in state examinations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The study is based on the premise that English is currently used across the globe as a potent instrument for development and communication, bringing together individuals from a variety of linguistic backgrounds, including those from the DRC. Basing on cases like that of Nigeria, where English is regarded as a pivotal catalyst for continuous development, particularly in domains such as education, economic empowerment, and national unity (Obiegbo, 2015, p.85), several other countries (including the DRC) have also begun to frame English as a strategic resource for educational advancement and participation in the global economy (Prosper, 2024).

English functions as a lingua franca, serving to cohesively unite their heterogeneous society comprised of multiple languages. Consequently, the establishment of avenues that facilitate its ascension and expansion within various societal contexts, tailored to the individual perceptions of each community, is imperative.

In the case of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), English does not hold the status of either national or official language. Nevertheless, its influence over the Congolese population is evident from an external perspective. As posited by Ahmad (2016), the degree of adaptability, productivity, usefulness, universality and teachability of a language is pivotal in determining its necessity (p. 478). The Congolese population has demonstrated a high level of interest in acquiring proficiency in the English language, a development that is directly proportional to the necessity for such linguistic skills within their country. Therefore, based on this, Congolese learners are expected to identify and apply effective strategies to enhance their English learning, and the government is expected to support this effort by recommending suitable teaching and learning methods (MINESPS, 2007, pp. 3-4) and by monitoring progress through national assessments.

In light of this mounting societal demand for English and the policy expectations regarding its effective teaching, it becomes imperative to examine whether national evaluation practices are aligned with these aspirations. Therefore, the present study seeks to analyze the competency-based dimension of Congolese state examinations. To achieve this objective, the introduction first discusses the context of English as a foreign language teaching and learning in the DRC. Following this, the research problem and the research questions are discussed.

1.1 Context

The DRC is a country emerging from political and economic setbacks which extended their impacts to different sectors, including the sector of education, which is now struggling to set itself free from these damages. These challenges have weakened institutional structures and limited the capacity of public services to respond effectively to the needs of the population (World Bank, 2005). Today the government is busy, involved in poverty reduction, improvement of citizens' life conditions, search for external donors to supply the country and help cover the gaps seen in several different sectors. These efforts reflect an urgent need to rebuild the nation and address long-standing structural problems. Hope for change, transformation and improvement is the slogan of the Congolese people today, and the focus of the many struggles undertaken all around the country and abroad.

The sector of education is not excluded from the damaged system. In fact, education is frequently regarded as one of the sectors most impacted, given its reliance on stable political, economic, and administrative conditions (Ohlig & Timm, 2024). More surprisingly still, this effect on education has been in gradual decline over the decades, with the present state of the case being worse than it was some tens of years ago. This deterioration is closely linked to the persistent insecurity in large parts of the country, where recurrent armed violence, mass displacement and repeated attacks on schools

have interrupted schooling for hundreds of thousands of children and undermined any sustained improvement in educational provision (Diakubama, 2024). This decline gives rise to grave concerns regarding the future of human capital development in the country. The World Bank (2005) reported that, in comparison to fifteen years prior, in 2005 several children in the DRC were not enrolled in primary school, those who were enrolled attended irregularly, and of those who completed primary school, only a very small percentage acquired the ability to efficiently read with comprehension and produce correct grammatical sentences in written form (p. 1). This situation is indicative of significant systemic issues with regard to both access to and the quality of education.

1.1.1 DRC Curriculum and the Teaching of English

In accordance with the English DRC curriculum, English language teaching aims to provide training adapted to the real needs of the country, a practical and professional purpose for teaching, and training that is useful to society rather than a simple accumulation of theoretical knowledge (MINESPS, 2007, p. 3). The primary objective of English instruction in secondary education is to cultivate the students' competencies in comprehending, articulating, reading and composing English in a proper and accurate style. The initial two years of English education, which correspond to the first and second forms of secondary school, are dedicated to the development of spoken English skills. The initiation of learners into the correct articulation and intonation of the language constitutes an integral component of the educational experience. The final two years of the programme are dedicated to the instruction of written English and the initiation of learners into the culture of English-speaking countries. The subsequent table provides a synopsis of the competencies expected to be acquired by learners at each stage of their learning journey.

	Active vocabulary to acquire	Language practice (Skills)		
		Understand and speak	Read	Write
3rd form (1st year of English)	500 words	80%	15%	5%
4th form (2nd year of English)	1000 words	70%	20%	10%
5th form (3rd year of English)	1,500 words	60%	25%	15%
6th form (4th year of English)	2,000 words	50%	25%	25%

(MINESPS, 2007, p. 4).

The curriculum document rejects the traditional method, deductive grammar teaching, and excessive translation, and advocates an inductive method, oral exercises, dialogues, concrete situations, pattern drills, and the use of images and visual aids (MINESPS, 2007, p. 4). Language must be learned in context, through practice and use, not through abstract memorization, which implies a competency-based approach.

In order to achieve this ambition, the Congolese English curriculum proposes a structured and progressive learning approach. This approach involves the gradual introduction of grammatical structures, followed by their contextualisation and oral

rehearsal prior to formalisation. Regular reinforcement is also recommended to ensure the effective assimilation of these structures. Structures are not regarded as an end in themselves; rather, they are considered as a means to develop expressive abilities. Grammar is therefore regarded as a tool for developing communicative competence (MINESPS, 2007, p. 5). Furthermore, it is suggested that there is a progressive development of functional vocabulary. The vocabulary for the first year is 500 words, with an incremental increase to 2,000 words by the conclusion of the cycle. It is imperative that this vocabulary is perpetually studied in context, linked to students' interests, geared towards daily and professional life, and specialized according to the academic track (business, science, etc.) (MINESPS, 2007, pp. 4-5). The programme has been developed to demonstrate a competency-based approach that has been adapted to suit the educational profile.

The autonomy of the competency-based approach is developed in a progressive manner throughout the programme. For instance, the composition section of the subject of English evolves: in the first year, guided answers, summaries, narratives, descriptions, letters, and short essays are encouraged; whereas in the final year, freer-form writing, reports, debates, presentations, and business correspondence (specialized track) are preferred. Consequently, students are methodically guided towards the production of independent work (MINESPS, 2007, pp. 16-17).

1.2 Problem

The preparation of learners for the performance of specific tasks and the acquisition of abilities to face the job market is the aim of Competency-Based Teaching (CBT) and certainly, the aim of parents schooling their children, and society. English, being a subject among other subjects in the DRC curriculum, the aim should be to produce English language competent graduates. As Findley & Nathan (1980) stated, foreign language learners and what they are expected to do in life fully depend on the implementation of the teaching and learning process, and the national program implementation policy, while the content of the academic subjects comes next (as cited in Riyandari, 2004, p. 15). The abilities acquired (like the grammar structures, the linguistic features, etc.) should allow the learner to survive and be competitive in the global market. However, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), despite the well-defined objectives of English as outlined in the national curriculum, many students complete secondary school with significant linguistic deficiencies. A considerable number of graduates still demonstrate limited vocabulary and persistent language difficulties (Tshotsho *et al.*, 2015, p. 602). Despite the fact that English is taught from the first to the fourth form of secondary school, and then continued at the university level, the majority of Congolese graduates are still unable to communicate effectively in this language. This persistent discrepancy between instruction duration and the individual's communicative proficiency raises significant concerns about the efficacy of the English language learning process in the DRC. The argument is posited that the issue may not be confined solely to classroom practices, but may also extend to the evaluation and measurement of learning outcomes.

Consequently, conducting a competency-based assessment of the English learning process is imperative to ascertain whether students are being evaluated on their ability to use the language in real-life situations. Consequently, the present research endeavour seeks to examine the hypothesis that the national examinations in English are genuinely competency-based and aligned with the communicative objectives delineated in the curriculum.

1.4 Research Questions

The investigation outlined in this research is based on the rationale that English is taught for a considerable period in Congolese secondary schools, yet does not lead to communicative proficiency among secondary school graduates. The objective of the present investigation is to undertake an assessment of the national examinations, the basis of which is the following set of questions:

- To what extent do English state examination questionnaires in the Democratic Republic of Congo assess learners' competences rather than mere content knowledge?
- What language skills and competences are tested in English national examination questionnaires (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing, communicative use)?
- To what extent do the examination questions require learners to demonstrate communicative and real-life language use?

1.5 Structure of the Paper

In order to address the identified problem and research questions, this study is organized into three main chapters, in addition to the introduction and the conclusion. The first chapter presents the state of the research, defining the key concepts related to the study and reviewing relevant existing literature. The second chapter outlines the methodology adopted for the investigation, describing the research design, data collection procedures, and methods of analysis. It also presents and discusses the results obtained from the study.

2. State of Research

Teaching English in a predominantly French-speaking context, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, is a complex and demanding undertaking. It is notable that these challenges give rise to a number of factors that have the potential to hinder the realization of the curriculum's objectives and stated goals. To facilitate a deeper understanding of these phenomena from a scientific standpoint, this chapter is structured into two primary sections. The initial section will address the concept of competence in the context of education, with a focus on the process of teaching and learning English as a foreign language, and as the outcomes of a competency-based educational approach. The

subsequent section will address English as a foreign language and its potential in the current century.

2.1 Competence

In the context of education, competence is defined as a learner's ability to perform a specific activity after completing a learning process. Docking (1994) posits that the effective execution of a real-world activity or task is contingent upon possessing certain attitudes and skills. These collectively constitute what is termed 'competence' (cited in Bataineh & Tasnimi, 2014, p. 4). It is important to note that not all actors possess the necessary skills for success; however, it is essential for an actor to demonstrate an acceptable level of professionalism in their work in order to achieve competence. Competence comprises three interconnected components: the knowledge component (comprising the understanding element); the behavioural component (which includes the overt behavioural repertoire); and the value component (incorporating values, beliefs and attitudes). (O'Sullivan & Burce, 2014, p. 22).

A program is said to be competency-based when its objectives are in the observable and measurable changes in behaviour that are called 'behavioral objectives' (Riyandari, 2004, p.21). This is where it differs from knowledge, which is not quantifiable or observable. A competence is defined as a description in terms of behaviour (Walker, 1975, p. 5). This same researcher further posits that the catalogue of competencies should eschew emotional and/or vague phrases. The assessment of competences should entail the interrogation of aspects such as flexibility, responsibility, autonomy, fluency, ability and capacity. It is imperative to eschew non-quantifiable aspects, which are arduous to describe and assess. The most suitable approach to initiate a pilot programme would be to adapt competencies to align with structured educational settings (Alhassan & Abosi, 2017). The adaptation of competencies to a course of study has been demonstrated to facilitate the successful attainment of educational objectives and state requirements.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that a competency-based programme cannot guarantee that all its graduates will become proficient in their respective fields (Walker, 1975, p. 7). This is primarily due to the programme's failure to provide adequate focus for students. Given the uncertainty surrounding future employment prospects, many students find themselves lacking clarity regarding the development of key competencies and the execution of post-graduation roles (Riyandari, 2004, p. 24).

2.1.1 Competence as a Teaching Outcome

Competency-based education primarily focuses on learning outcomes rather than on the processes through which learning occurs (Levine & Patrick, 2019). In this approach, greater emphasis is placed on what learners are able to demonstrate in terms of knowledge and practical skills than on the conditions, time, or environment in which learning takes place. How students learn, where they learn and how much they need to pick what they have been taught is not at all the concern of a teaching process based on competence; but rather what they know and can do (O'Sullivan & Burce, 2014, p. 24). The

other aspects of the learning process, like the learning environment and the time spent acquiring the new lesson, are not very interesting. What is interesting is how much learners know about the lesson and how well they can practice it.

Competence is taken as the focus of educational quality, despite the various strategies that come to mind when the question of improving educational quality is raised (Sturgis & Casey, 2018, p. 26). This is the result of the ineffectiveness of other strategies often used to achieve and improve quality. O'Sullivan & Bruce (2014) identified eight features of Competency-based teaching that make it a relevant focus for quality. These are: (1) understanding how learners learn, (2) matching principles of learning and those of teaching, (3) facilitating, rather than controlling learning, (4) model humility, critical thinking, respect, competency and caring at all times, (5) support of acquisition of knowledge, skills and professional behaviours in all learning domains (cognitive, psychomotor, affective), (6) promoting and expecting learner accountability for learning, (7) providing timely, specific feedback on learner progress beginning with learner self-assessment, and (8) Individualizing learning experiences according to needs (p. 24). Taken together, these features demonstrate that competence is not merely an abstract objective but the measurable outcome of a well-structured teaching process. They show that the effectiveness of instruction is ultimately judged by the learner's demonstrated ability to apply knowledge, skills, and professional behaviors in meaningful contexts. Therefore, competence becomes the concrete result through which the quality of teaching can be evaluated and validated.

2.1.2 Competency-based Education

Competency-based education is regarded as an approach that emphasizes the acquisition of concrete skills rather than abstract knowledge. It is a type of education that is based on the Competency-Based Instruction approach, which was developed in the US and became widespread in the 1970s as a response to the question of 'what should be taught in schools' (Rambe, 2013, p. 42). The traditional approach was deemed unsuitable and inadequate to real-world issues. Consequently, there was an increasing demand for an approach that would result in tangible, effective, observable and measurable performances on the part of learners. Competency-based education has been identified as a pedagogical approach that emphasizes the practical application of the educational content and the learners' abilities to perform the requisite skills (Levine & Patrick, 2019). The overarching objective of the competency-based education system is the fundamental factor that differentiates it from the traditional system. The absence of this objective, which is to produce observable skills, results in a reversion to the traditional system (O'Sullivan & Burke, 2014; Sturgis & Casey, 2018). This phenomenon, characterised by the transition of students from high school to college with unresolved academic challenges, has been observed in multiple countries. These students often face significant financial burdens as they pursue remedial courses during their collegiate careers, a situation that can be both costly for the students themselves and their families (Sturgis & Casey, 2018, p. 11). This report also indicates that recent high school graduates encounter

significant challenges in their initial professional roles, suggesting a discrepancy between their educational preparation and the demands of the workplace. It is more disappointing to note that cases such as the above-mentioned ones are not limited in time or geographically. Examinations such as state graduation and accountability exams, practised in several countries, are not centred on skills, but rather on content knowledge. Nevertheless, the prevailing paradigm of education is that of competency-based education, which is regarded as a means of engendering structures and effective cultures that facilitate the realisation of educational purposes (Sturgis & Casey, 2018, p. 11). This approach places greater emphasis on the educational journey of each student as an individual, with the objective of enabling them to thrive in their post-graduation activities.

2.1.3 Competency-based Foreign Language Teaching

Competency-based language teaching (CBLT) is an approach that draws upon the principles of competency-based education (CBE) and their application to language teaching. Its focus is on the language learning outcomes achieved by the learners, and not the language teaching process itself (Ming Har Wong, 2008, p.181). To elucidate further, the focus is directed towards quantifiable performance and the utilisation of practical language skills, as opposed to theoretical language knowledge. This approach is predicated on the premise that curriculum designers should initiate the process by establishing an image of the learner as the intended outcome of the educational experience (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Consequently, instructional planning begins with clearly defined outcomes that delineate the competencies learners must demonstrate upon completion of the program. The fundamental question guiding the curriculum framing process is: "What competencies should students acquire upon completion of their training?"

Competency-based language teaching (CBLT) is grounded in competency-based education and communicative language teaching, emphasizing learners' capacity to mobilize linguistic knowledge, skills, strategies, and attitudes to perform meaningful real-world tasks. Emerging in the 1970s alongside accountability and performance-based education movements (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), CBLT shifts attention from content coverage and structural syllabi to clearly articulated competencies defined in terms of observable performance outcomes (Savignon, 1983). Drawing on communicative competence theory (Canale & Swain, 1980) and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001), CBLT promotes backward design from target competencies, criterion-referenced and performance-based assessment, authentic tasks, flexible pacing, and mastery learning. The literature suggests that this approach enhances transparency, accountability, and alignment between instruction and assessment, particularly in vocational and multilingual education contexts (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Mulder, 2014). At the same time, scholars caution against reducing communicative competence to fragmented micro-skills and note the substantial demands CBLT places on curriculum design, teacher expertise, and assessment literacy (Leung &

Scarino, 2016). Overall, CBLT is positioned as a performance-centered paradigm that integrates communicative competence theory with standards-based reform while continuing to evolve in response to global mobility and plurilingual education agendas.

2.2 English as a Foreign Language

The global predominance of English, bolstered by its extensive use and its association with economic and political authority, has established it as the primary contender for the role of world lingua franca. It is the most widely used of the 4,000 to 5,000 living languages worldwide, and it ranks second among languages spoken as a mother tongue, only after Chinese (Broughton *et al.*, 2002, p. 1). In addition to the significance it has acquired as the language of a powerful nation, which reflects military, political and economic power, and the fact that it is the more likely language to be chosen for art and science because of its potential for spread (Baugh & Cable, 1993, p. 3), it is reasonable to hypothesise that in the near future, it will be used as the world language (the world lingua franca). The assumption is made that the number of speakers of the language is considerable, given that it is spoken by 380 million people across the UK, the USA and the former British Empire. In addition, there are those from other countries who speak it as a second or foreign language, and those who are learning it for academic, administrative or business purposes worldwide. Consequently, English is gaining prestige on the global stage, inspiring a sense of pride among its native speakers, motivating foreign speakers to enhance their proficiency, and prompting users of other languages to pursue learning English (Crystal, 2003).

In light of these considerations, the continued expansion of English appears closely tied to processes of globalisation, technological advancement, and international mobility, which further consolidate its role in diplomacy, commerce, science, and digital communication. While the emergence of other influential languages and shifting geopolitical dynamics may shape the linguistic landscape in the future, English currently occupies an unparalleled position in global communication networks. Its institutional support, extensive educational infrastructure, and symbolic capital collectively reinforce its status as the most viable candidate for a sustained world lingua franca (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006).

3. Methodology

The present research was conducted using a qualitative approach, with content analysis serving as the method for the systematic and interpretive examination of the collected data. The methodological approach adopted is justified by the intrinsic characteristics of the topic under study, which necessitate a profound understanding of the content and pedagogical orientations imparted through the examination papers. As Sabourin (2009) pertinently notes, content analysis is a research technique aimed at the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communications. The term is used within the domain of the social sciences (like communication, sociology,

psychology and political science) to denote the systematic and objective study of the content of messages. The method also facilitates the identification of dominant trends, recurring themes, and any gaps or imbalances present in the analysed documents (Bardin, 2013; Krippendorff, 2018).

In this investigation, the 2024 national examination papers of English in the Democratic Republic of Congo were analysed, with a particular focus on the sections of general pedagogy and technical social (across all four series for each section). The analysed documents thus constitute the primary corpus of the study and represent a pertinent official source for evaluating the pedagogical and technical orientation of the examinations.

This technique was used for data collection, after which a qualitative analysis was conducted through in-depth interpretation and a study of implicit meanings and significance. The objective of the study was twofold: firstly, to provide a comprehensive description of the manifest content of the questionnaires, and secondly, to identify the underlying logic, pedagogical intentions, and implicit representations. This methodological approach ensured a thorough and contextualised understanding of the collected data while adhering to the scientific rigour intrinsic to qualitative research.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the results of the analysis of the English sections of the 2024 State Examinations (especially the four series of questionnaires for the pedagogy section and the four for the social technical section). Only the English components of the questionnaires were examined; all French sections were excluded from the analysis. The purpose was to determine whether the structure and content of these examinations reflect the principles of competency-based education (CBE) and competency-based language teaching (CBLT), particularly the emphasis on observable performance, integration of skills, and real-life application of knowledge.

The following table presents the summary of the results, before moving on to the discussion of the different aspects. Thus, after this table, this section presents and discusses the nature of tasks, the type of skills assessed, the authenticity and real-world orientation, the assessment format and measurability of competence, and the overall evaluation to see the degree of competency-based alignment.

Table 1: Summary of Alignment of English Exams with Competency-Based Principles

Dimension Analyzed	Observed Characteristics in the Exams	Degree of Competency-Based Alignment
Nature of Tasks	Predominantly multiple-choice items; recognition, matching, identification; no extended writing or production tasks.	Low (Focus on knowledge recognition rather than performance).
Type of Skills Assessed	Reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar manipulation, phonetic discrimination assessed separately.	Low to Moderate (Cognitive knowledge emphasized; limited integration of skills).
Authenticity of Content	Texts based on every day and professional themes (pets narrative, economic development, business letter format).	Moderate (Authentic themes present, but tasks not authentically performance-based).
Performance Requirement	No requirement to write full letters, essays, summaries, or solve communicative problems.	Low (Behavioural component of competence minimally assessed).
Assessment Format	Fully objective multiple-choice format; easily measurable and standardized.	Moderate (Measurable outcomes present, but complex competence not evaluated).
Overall Orientation	Emphasis on grammatical accuracy and lexical knowledge over communicative ability.	Partially competency-based , but predominantly knowledge-oriented.

4.1 Nature of Tasks: Knowledge-Oriented or Performance-Oriented?

A close examination of the English papers reveals a strong predominance of recognition-based tasks. In the Pedagogy 2024 series, each paper presents a short narrative text (such as the recurring text about the narrator’s preference for dogs over cats) followed by multiple-choice comprehension questions. Candidates are asked to identify what the narrator prefers, determine in which paragraph a given idea appears, or select the correct meaning of vocabulary items. For example, learners must associate words like “bark,” “mood,” or “beware” with their definitions, or indicate the correct interpretation of expressions such as “doesn’t mind” or “fond of.”

While these tasks are contextualized within a reading passage, they primarily assess the ability to recognize correct answers rather than to produce language. The observable behaviour required from the learner is limited to selecting one option among several. In terms of competency-based principles, this reflects a focus on knowledge of language rather than on performance through language (Rambe, 2013). Competence, as defined in the literature, involves the ability to carry out meaningful activities (O’ Sullivan & Burce, 2014); yet, in these examinations, learners are not required to perform a communicative task beyond recognition.

The same tendency is observed in the Technical Social 2024 series. Although the texts deal with realistic themes such as African automobile markets or economic development, the questions are only multiple-choice. Even when the context is professional, such as in the “Commercial English Correspondence” section, candidates are not asked to draft a business letter. Instead, they are asked to identify missing parts of a letter; such as the salutation, signature, or subject line; or choose the correct passive

transformation of a sentence like “Our mother has bought a new car.” A question like this measures structural knowledge but not the ability to compose or respond appropriately in a real communicative situation.

Thus, regarding the nature of tasks, the examinations are largely knowledge-oriented. They do not require learners to demonstrate extended written production, argumentation, or problem-solving through English. This limits their alignment with a fully competency-based approach.

4.2 Type of Skills Assessed: Fragmented or Integrated Competence?

Another important finding concerns the type of skills assessed. Across all papers, the English sections focus mainly on reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, grammar manipulation, and phonetic recognition. For example, candidates are asked to complete sentences with correct prepositions (“I am going to leave … the afternoon”), replace underlined words with appropriate modal auxiliaries (“mustn’t”, “may,” etc.), or identify the word containing a specific vowel sound (such as distinguishing between “bad,” “ball,” “bell,” “bird,” and “bus”).

These items clearly assess discrete linguistic elements. However, they do not evaluate whether learners can integrate grammar, vocabulary, and discourse strategies into every day communication. Yet, as indicated in the review of the literature, competence presupposes the effective performance of meaningful activities that require the integration of knowledge and skills (Bataineh & Tasnimi, 2014). There is no task requiring students to write a paragraph summarizing the text, express an opinion, formulate an argument, or compose a formal email in response to a business scenario, which are foreign language activities that are favourable to competence development as suggested by Richards & Rodgers (2001) (cited in Rambe, 2013). In the Technical Social examination papers, although the commercial correspondence section introduces workplace-related content, the learner’s role remains passive. It restricts to simple recognition of the correct element rather than producing a complete and contextually appropriate message.

From a competency-based perspective, competence involves the integration of cognitive, behavioural, and attitudinal components (O’Sullivan & Burce, 2014). In the analyzed examination papers, the cognitive component (knowledge of rules and vocabulary) is clearly emphasized. The behavioural component (actual performance in communicative tasks) is only minimally present. There is no evidence of assessment of pragmatic appropriateness, strategic competence, or communicative effectiveness. Consequently, the skills assessed remain fragmented rather than integrated.

4.3 Authenticity and Real-World Orientation

The analysis nevertheless reveals certain elements that suggest an effort toward real-world relevance. The reading passages are not purely abstract; they are embedded in everyday or professional contexts. For instance, the narrative about pets in the Pedagogy 2024 examination papers (all 4 series) situates vocabulary and comprehension questions

within a coherent context-based story. In the Technical Social examination papers (all four series), the texts refer to economic growth, automobile markets, and business communication. The inclusion of a formatted commercial letter, complete with address, date, and signature, reflects awareness of authentic genres used in professional settings. However, authenticity at the level of content does not automatically translate into authenticity at the level of task. Although the commercial letter resembles a real business document, the learner is not required to respond to a complaint, request information, or negotiate terms. Instead, the candidate identifies structural elements of the letter. Similarly, the reading passages on economic development do not lead to tasks such as writing a report, summarizing key ideas, or proposing solutions. This contrasts with the principles of competency-based language teaching, which emphasize learners' ability to perform meaningful and job-related tasks using the target language rather than merely demonstrating knowledge about its forms (Rambe, 2013). In this sense, the exams privilege recognition of structure over effective performance in real-world communicative situations (Bataineh & Tasnimi, 2014).

Thus, the examinations incorporate authentic themes but stop short of requiring authentic performance. The learner interacts with realistic content in a limited way, primarily through recognition and selection rather than through meaningful language production.

4.4 Assessment Format and Measurability of Competence

All the English examination papers analysed rely exclusively on multiple-choice items. Note, however, that a reform that is aligned with Framework Law No. 14/004 of 11 February 2014 has enabled the introduction of an oral English examination in the State Examination, commencing in the 2025-2026 academic year. The overarching objective of this reform is to cultivate elites who possess the capacity to contribute to the nation's sustainable development. The equivalent weighting will be 2% of the overall grade, and it will be administered concurrently with the other oral exams. Nevertheless, the exclusive use of multiple choice in the analysed examination papers ensures objectivity and facilitates scoring, especially in large-scale national assessments. In this sense, the exams meet the requirement that competences be observable and measurable.

However, competency-based education emphasizes not only measurability but also demonstration of mastery in performing complex tasks (Sturgis & Casey, 2018). In the analyzed papers, assessment remains limited to discrete linguistic points. There is no rubric-based evaluation of written performance, no assessment of coherence or organization in extended discourse, and no opportunity for learners to demonstrate communicative strategies.

The standardized and uniform format across all series suggests a system designed primarily for reliability and comparability rather than for individualized demonstration of competence. While this may serve administrative efficiency, it restricts the possibility of evaluating higher-order communicative skills.

4.5 Overall Evaluation: Degree of Competency-Based Alignment

Taken together, the results indicate that the English State Examinations analyzed are not fully competency-based. They incorporate contextualized reading materials and, particularly in the Technical Social series, professional domains such as business correspondence. These features show partial alignment with the idea that education should prepare learners for real-life situations.

Nevertheless, the dominant assessment mode remains knowledge-based and recognition-oriented. Learners are tested on what they know about English grammar rules, vocabulary meanings, and phonetic distinctions; rather than on what they can do with English in authentic communicative contexts. The absence of extended writing, task-based production, and integrated skill performance limits the examinations' alignment with the core principles of competency-based language teaching.

The analyzed English examinations represent a transitional model. They move beyond purely decontextualized grammar testing by embedding items in thematic texts, yet they do not fully embody the performance-centered philosophy of competency-based education. To achieve stronger alignment, future examinations would need to incorporate authentic communicative tasks requiring learners to produce, integrate, and apply language skills in meaningful contexts.

5. Conclusion and Perspectives

This study set out to examine whether English State Examination questionnaires in the Democratic Republic of Congo effectively assess learners' competences in accordance with the principles of competency-based education and competency-based language teaching. Through a qualitative content analysis of the 2024 examination papers in the Pedagogy and Technical Social sections, the study analyzed the nature of tasks, the skills assessed, the authenticity of content, and the overall degree of alignment with competency-based principles.

The findings reveal a model that is partially but not fully competency-based. On the one hand, the examination papers incorporate contextualized reading passages and, particularly in the Technical Social section, professional and real-world themes such as business correspondence and economic development. These elements reflect an awareness of the need to connect English learning to practical domains. On the other hand, the assessment format remains exclusively multiple-choice and largely recognition-oriented. The exams primarily evaluate discrete linguistic knowledge (like grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and phonetics) rather than requiring learners to integrate and apply language skills in meaningful communicative tasks.

As a result, the behavioural and performance dimensions of competence are insufficiently assessed. Learners are tested on what they know about English rather than on what they can effectively do with the language. This imbalance may partly explain the persistent discrepancy between years of English instruction and the limited

communicative proficiency observed among many secondary school graduates in the DRC.

The recent introduction of an oral English component in the State Examination represents an important and promising reform. Nevertheless, stronger alignment with competency-based principles would require the gradual integration of performance-based assessment, including short guided writing tasks, authentic communicative scenarios, and rubric-based evaluation of productive skills. Such developments would not only enhance the coherence between curriculum and assessment but also strengthen the role of English education in preparing learners for higher education, employment, and participation in global communication.

Future research could extend this analysis to other examination years, explore the washback effect of national exams on classroom practices, or compare Congolese assessment practices with those of other countries implementing competency-based reforms. Ultimately, aligning evaluation practices with communicative and professional competences is essential if English is to function as a genuine strategic resource for individual empowerment and national development in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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