

Lexical and Morpho-Syntactic Error Patterns in Kenyan Grade 6 Learners' Reading Comprehension: An Error Analysis Perspective within a Task-Based and Schema-Theoretic Framework

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Abstract: This study examines lexical and morpho-syntactic errors in the reading comprehension of Grade 6 learners under Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), drawing on Error Analysis theory to illuminate the underlying causes of poor performance. The data form part of a larger doctoral study grounded in Schema Theory and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which investigates how schema-building tasks can enhance comprehension. Using responses from a pre-test comprehension activity, learner errors were classified as either interlingual or intralingual and qualitatively analyzed for severity and potential impact on performance. Findings reveal a prevalence of intralingual errors, particularly in incorrect word collocations (e.g., *diseases of lifestyle* instead of *lifestyle diseases*) and morpho-syntactic misapplications (e.g., *Sayed* instead of *Said*), both of which led to significant penalization in marking. These patterns suggest limited exposure to accurate language input and insufficient activation of relevant schemata before engagement with the text. The study argues that integrating schema-building, task-based reading comprehension activities—particularly in pre-reading stages—can mitigate such errors, thus improving comprehension outcomes. Implications for classroom practice and teacher training under the CBC are discussed.

Keywords: Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), Error Analysis, Grade 6, Intralingual Errors, Lexical Collocation, Morpho-syntactic Errors, Reading Comprehension, Schema Theory, and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT).

1. INTRODUCTION

Poor reading comprehension outcomes remain a persistent challenge in Kenyan primary education, with recent national assessments indicating that many learners struggle to extract and accurately express meaning from written texts. Under the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), English serves both as a subject of study and as the principal language of instruction, making reading comprehension a foundational skill for academic success. Yet, errors in learners' written responses often point to deeper linguistic and cognitive barriers that extend beyond mere vocabulary deficits.

This paper draws from a broader doctoral investigation grounded in Schema Theory and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which explored how schema-building reading activities influence comprehension performance. While the larger study examined the overall impact of pre-, while-, and post-reading tasks, this paper narrows its focus to an error analysis of learners' pre-test responses. Error Analysis theory provides the analytical lens for categorizing and interpreting the observed errors, enabling a clearer understanding of their linguistic origins and pedagogical implications.

The study identifies recurrent lexical and morpho-syntactic error patterns, most of which were intralingual in nature, reflecting learners' overgeneralization of rules and unfamiliarity with appropriate collocations in English. By linking these error patterns to insufficient schema activation, the paper underscores the role of task-based, schema-oriented reading comprehension instruction in reducing errors and improving learner performance.

Reading comprehension remains a persistent challenge in Kenyan primary schools despite policy shifts toward learner-centered instruction under the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). The CBC foregrounds higher-order competencies such as communication, critical thinking and learning-to-learn and therefore positions comprehension as a teachable, curriculum-embedded competence rather than a narrow test outcome (KICD, 2017). Nonetheless, national and regional assessments continue to report weak performance in upper primary reading tasks, with analyses pointing to gaps in inferential reasoning, vocabulary knowledge and text interpretation (KNEC, 2021; Uwezo, 2019). These patterns suggest that poor comprehension is not simply an issue of individual motivation or effort, but is linked to the kinds of classroom instruction learners receive and the linguistic resources they have available when engaging with texts.

Why study learner errors? One productive way of unpacking comprehension difficulties is to examine the language errors learners make in response to comprehension tasks. Error Analysis and Interlanguage research show that systematic patterns of lexical and morpho-syntactic error reveal how learners are processing (or misprocessing) input, the schemata they bring to texts, and the strategies they use to construct meaning (Corder, 1967; Richards, 1971; Selinker, 1972). From a schema-theoretic perspective, comprehension depends on the interaction between incoming textual information and learners' existing knowledge structures; errors can therefore signal gaps or misalignments in those schemata (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). From a pedagogy viewpoint, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) emphasizes authentic, meaning-focused activities that activate prior knowledge and create opportunities for negotiation of meaning—features that may help prevent or remediate many of the errors that undermine comprehension (Ellis, 2003).

Despite growing interest in schema-based instruction and task-based approaches in African classrooms, there is limited micro-analytic work linking specific error types to comprehension failure and then to targeted, implementable interventions in the CBC context (Njiiri, 2022; Oluoch, Odundo, & Kahiga, 2023). By mapping the lexical and morpho-syntactic errors that Grade 6 learners produce in standardized comprehension tasks, this study seeks to make explicit the cognitive and linguistic obstacles that sit behind low scores. Doing so offers a twofold contribution: (a) diagnostically, it identifies the kinds of language patterns that most frequently disrupt meaning construction; and (b) pedagogically, it points to how schema-activating, task-oriented interventions (pre-, while- and post-reading) can be designed to target those specific weaknesses in classroom practice.

The aim of the paper is to analyze the lexical and morpho-syntactic errors Grade 6 learners produce in reading comprehension tasks and to discuss how schema-building, task-based interventions might address the identified problems. The paper is guided by the following objectives:

1. To analyze Grade 6 learners' lexical and morpho-syntactic errors in reading comprehension tasks
2. To propose schema-based, task-oriented instructional strategies that could address the identified comprehension challenges and reduce learner errors.

From these objectives, the following research questions were formed;

1. What lexical and morpho-syntactic errors do Grade 6 learners make in reading comprehension tasks, and what do these reveal about their comprehension processes and underlying schemata?
2. What schema-based, task-oriented instructional strategies could address these comprehension challenges and reduce learner errors?

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Kenya emphasizing learner-centered and task-based approaches to reading, national examination results continue to reveal persistently low reading comprehension performance among primary school learners. Grade 6 pupils, in particular, struggle to interpret, infer, and respond accurately to comprehension tasks, suggesting underlying linguistic and cognitive barriers. Preliminary classroom observations and assessments indicate that many of these difficulties manifest as lexical and morpho-syntactic errors, which may reflect gaps in learners' underlying schemata and limit their ability to make meaning from texts. However, limited research has systematically analyzed these errors to understand their nature and implications for reading comprehension under the CBC. Without such insights, instructional strategies risk remaining generic rather than targeted to learners' specific needs. There is a need to identify the patterns and causes of these errors and to explore how schema-based, task-oriented interventions, rooted in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), might effectively address these challenges and reduce error incidence.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Research on reading comprehension shows that successful understanding of text depends not only on general strategies but also on strong lexical and morpho-syntactic competence. These skills enable accurate form–meaning mapping and help learners build coherence from text (Grabe & Stoller, 2013; McNeil, 1992). In competency-based systems like Kenya's CBC, learner-centered pedagogies have improved engagement. However, many classrooms still struggle with form control, as inadequate vocabulary depth and weak grammar limit inference-making and summarizing (Ajideh, 2003; Nassaji, 2002). Kenyan evaluations also highlight that comprehension, especially at inferential levels, remains below expectations (KICD, 2017; KNEC/NASMLA, 2020).

Studies consistently link lexical and morpho-syntactic proficiency to comprehension outcomes. Learners with stronger collocational knowledge and grammatical control integrate ideas more effectively, resolve ambiguities, and make accurate inferences (Carrell, 1983; Nation, 2001; Nesselhauf, 2005). By contrast, errors such as miscollocations or unstable morpho-syntax depress comprehension even when the topic is familiar, because they break cohesion and obscure meaning (Corder, 1967; Richards, 1971; Farghal & Obiedat, 1995). African ESL studies confirm these trends, noting that recurrent lexical and grammatical errors strongly correlate with lower comprehension accuracy (Gathigia & Njoroge, 2016; Piper, Zuilkowski, & Ong'ele, 2016).

There is growing evidence that collocational awareness and grammar-focused instruction improve comprehension. Form-focused episodes embedded in meaning-based work—such as noticing tasks, concordance exploration, and guided reformulation—help learners internalize frequent word partnerships and syntactic frames (Ellis, 2003; Laufer & Nation, 1999; Webb, 2007). In Kenya, vocabulary-in-context and guided paraphrasing tasks have improved learners' ability to answer inference and detail questions, showing the value of linking lexico-grammatical cues to comprehension (Gathigia, 2017; Njiiri, 2022).

Task-based and schema-based approaches provide complementary mechanisms for reducing such errors. Pre-reading schema activation, for instance, primes learners with background knowledge and prepares them for the lexical and grammatical patterns likely to appear (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Rumelhart, 1980). While-reading tasks such as information transfer or jigsaw reading encourage negotiation of meaning and accurate form–function alignment (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007). Post-reading activities like summarizing or peer-teaching consolidate understanding and create opportunities for corrective feedback (Saville-Troike, 2006). In Kenya, research shows that when teachers integrate these strategies with explicit focus on language form, comprehension scores improve and error rates decline (Oluoch & Odundo, 2023).

Yet gaps remain. Many CBC studies report overall comprehension outcomes without analyzing the specific error types that undermine performance. Few have integrated detailed error analysis with task design, leaving unclear how particular intralingual errors (e.g., collocational substitutions) respond to schema-based or task-based interventions. Kenyan research has also tended to emphasize policy–practice gaps without linking lexico-grammatical development to actual comprehension performance.

The present study responds to these gaps by classifying Grade 6 learners' pre-test errors into lexical and morpho-syntactic categories, identifying their impact on comprehension scores, and mapping them to targeted schema-based and task-oriented

strategies. By connecting fine-grained error analysis with classroom tasks under CBC, the study offers practical, evidence-based guidance for improving reading comprehension through systematic attention to language form in meaning-focused work.

This study is anchored in two complementary perspectives: Schema Theory and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). Together, these frameworks offer a lens for interpreting learners' reading comprehension errors and for designing targeted interventions.

Schema Theory (Bartlett, 1932; Anderson & Pearson, 1984) posits that comprehension is an active, constructive process in which readers interpret new information by integrating it with existing mental frameworks, or schemata. When a reader's schemata are incomplete, culturally misaligned, or inadequately activated, comprehension breakdowns are likely to occur. In the context of Kenyan Grade 6 classrooms, lexical and morpho-syntactic errors may signal not only gaps in linguistic knowledge but also weak activation of relevant content, linguistic, or formal schemata. For instance, inappropriate word choices or misapplied grammatical structures can reflect mismatches between the learner's internalized mental models and the textual demands.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007) emphasizes the use of authentic, meaning-focused tasks as the primary unit of instruction. TBLT is grounded in the idea that language learning occurs most effectively when learners engage in purposeful communication and problem-solving. Within reading comprehension, task-based pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities can be designed to activate and expand schemata, foster hypothesis testing, and consolidate language form-meaning connections. Such tasks provide contextualized opportunities for learners to notice, negotiate, and refine problematic lexical and morpho-syntactic patterns.

Empirical studies have demonstrated the value of integrating schema-activation strategies with task-based instruction. Nassaji (2002) found that explicit schema activation before reading significantly improved ESL learners' inference-making and vocabulary use. Similarly, Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) showed that schema congruence between text and reader facilitated both recall and accurate language production. In African contexts, studies such as Onchera and Manyasi (2013) have linked contextualized, learner-centered reading tasks with improved comprehension outcomes under constrained resources. These findings suggest that schema-based, task-oriented approaches can directly address error patterns by strengthening the cognitive and linguistic processes underpinning comprehension.

In this study, Schema Theory provides the explanatory framework for identifying the likely cognitive sources of learners' comprehension errors, while TBLT offers the pedagogical framework for designing responsive instructional strategies. The integration of these perspectives supports a dual focus: diagnosing the nature and origin of comprehension errors, and developing interventions that are both linguistically targeted and cognitively supportive.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods design. The qualitative component focused on an in-depth analysis of learner errors in reading comprehension tasks, while quantitative elements were used to assess the relative impact of these error types on learners' comprehension scores. The integration of both approaches provided a richer understanding of the nature of errors and their pedagogical implications within the framework of Schema Theory and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT).

4.2 Context of the Study

The research was conducted in a public primary school in Kenya, at the Grade 6 level under the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). At this stage, learners are transitioning towards more complex comprehension skills, with English functioning both as a subject and the main language of instruction. The CBC framework emphasizes learner-centred, task-based approaches, making this setting particularly relevant for exploring the links between comprehension errors, schema activation, and TBLT-informed interventions.

4.3 Participants

The participants comprised Grade 6 learners aged between 11 and 13 years. The class represented a typical CBC Grade 6 cohort in terms of linguistic diversity, with English as a second language for most learners.

4.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data were drawn from learners’ scripts from a pre-test reading comprehension exercise administered by the researcher. The test was designed to reflect CBC-aligned comprehension tasks requiring inferential, literal, and evaluative understanding of a given passage. Learners completed the test under exam conditions, and their responses were collected for analysis.

4.5 Error Identification

The identification of comprehension-related errors followed the error analysis framework outlined by Corder (1967) and Selinker (1972).

Table 1: Framework for Content Analysis of Learners’ Errors in the Pre-Test

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 combined framework is particularly effective

Firstly, the researcher and an assistant independently marked the scripts, noting errors at lexical and morpho-syntactic levels that interfered with accurate comprehension. Second, the researcher classified the errors for analysis. Errors were classified into two main categories:

- **Interlingual errors:** Errors resulting from direct transfer from learners’ first language.
- **Intralingual errors:** Errors arising from incomplete mastery of English linguistic structures or overgeneralization of rules.

The classification process was informed by the principles of Schema Theory, which emphasizes the role of prior knowledge in interpreting text, and by TBLT, which considers how task design influences learner output.

For each error, its potential impact on the overall comprehension score was analyzed. Errors that significantly altered meaning or disrupted the activation of relevant schemata were categorized as high-impact and considered penalizable in scoring. To enhance reliability, inter-rater checks were conducted between the researcher and the assistant during both the error identification and classification phases. Agreement levels were calculated and discussed to ensure a shared understanding of error categorization.

5. FINDINGS

This section presents examples of lexical and morpho-syntactic errors identified in the Grade 6 learners’ pre-test comprehension scripts, along with qualitative commentary on their possible sources and implications for comprehension. The analysis draws on Corder’s (1967) and Selinker’s (1972) error taxonomy, distinguishing between interlingual and intralingual errors, and applies a qualitative severity scale to determine their potential impact on comprehension scores.

5.1 Morpho-Syntactic Errors

Example 1: "Sayed" instead of "Said"

Learner script excerpt:

"The teacher **sayed** we should read the passage twice."

This error is classified as intralingual, specifically an overgeneralization of regular past tense formation rules. The learner applies the -ed suffix to an irregular verb, suggesting incomplete mastery of English irregular verb forms. Under Schema Theory, such an error may reflect insufficient activation of linguistic schema related to common irregular verbs, potentially due to limited exposure or reinforcement. From a TBLT perspective, this indicates the need for tasks that recycle irregular verbs in meaningful communicative contexts.

The severity of this error is significant, as it could lead to penalization in formal assessment, even though the intended meaning is recoverable. The substitution introduces a non-standard form that reduces grammatical accuracy, which is a key scoring criterion in comprehension question responses.

5.2 Lexical Errors

Example 2: "Diseases of lifestyle" instead of "Lifestyle diseases"

Learner script excerpt:

"The passage explains about diseases of lifestyle such as diabetes and hypertension."

This lexical error is intralingual and reflects unfamiliarity with correct word collocations in English. The learner appears to translate the concept literally or restructure it syntactically in a way that violates common collocational patterns. Such errors suggest limited exposure to authentic English input where target collocations occur naturally.

From a schema-theoretic viewpoint, this may indicate partial activation of content schemata (topic knowledge about health) without corresponding activation of linguistic schemata (how such concepts are typically expressed in English). In TBLT terms, the absence of task-based practice involving authentic collocational use in context might contribute to the persistence of this error.

The severity is significant because collocational inaccuracy can lead to reduced clarity and may be marked as incorrect in comprehension tasks that require precise phrasing.

Example 3: "This" instead of "These"

Learner script excerpt:

"**This** two questions were the most difficult."

This is a lexical error, classified as intralingual, arising from confusion over singular-plural demonstratives. The learner selects "this" for a plural noun, possibly due to overgeneralization from high-frequency forms or limited sensitivity to number agreement in English demonstratives.

Under Schema Theory, this reflects incomplete mapping between grammatical form and quantity concepts. In TBLT, this type of error suggests the need for communicative tasks that highlight form-function relationships through meaningful plural-singular contrasts.

The severity is significant, as the error may result in penalization for grammatical inaccuracy and could disrupt reader comprehension in more complex sentences.

5.3 Summary of Error Implications

Across the examples, errors predominantly stem from intralingual sources, indicating developmental issues in learners' interlanguage rather than direct transfer from the mother tongue. The recurrence of overgeneralization, collocational unfamiliarity, and form-function confusion suggests gaps in both linguistic and procedural schemata. Such gaps hinder precise comprehension and accurate written responses, underscoring the need for schema-based, task-oriented instructional interventions.

6. DISCUSSION

The analysis of Grade 6 learners' pre-test scripts revealed recurrent lexical and morpho-syntactic errors that point to deeper comprehension challenges. From a Schema Theory perspective, such errors can be interpreted as evidence of insufficient or incorrectly activated schemata. For instance, the collocational error "*diseases of lifestyle*" instead of "*lifestyle diseases*" suggests that while learners possess partial topical knowledge about non-communicable diseases, they lack the necessary linguistic schemata to express this knowledge accurately in English. This aligns with Anderson's (2010) view that schema activation is not merely about topic familiarity, but also about accessing the appropriate linguistic structures to convey meaning in the target language. Similarly, the morpho-syntactic substitution of "*Sayed*" for "*said*" points to incomplete mastery of English spelling conventions, potentially compounded by overgeneralization of phoneme-grapheme relationships—an intralingual process described by Corder (1967).

Within a TBLT framework, these errors highlight the potential value of targeted pre-, while-, and post-reading tasks. Pre-reading schema activation tasks (e.g., brainstorming, guided vocabulary introduction, contextual prediction activities) could help learners connect new input to existing knowledge and strengthen both conceptual and linguistic schemata. While-reading tasks focusing on form-meaning mapping (Ellis, 2003) could reinforce correct usage by prompting learners to notice and process accurate collocations and grammatical forms. Post-reading output tasks, such as summarizing texts or peer teaching, could consolidate correct language use by encouraging repeated, contextualized production.

The Kenyan CBC places a strong emphasis on learner-centered, competency-based approaches, yet these findings suggest that comprehension problems persist despite this policy direction. This gap may stem from limited teacher training in schema-based instructional strategies and TBLT principles, leading to missed opportunities for proactive error prevention during reading lessons. Without deliberate activation of relevant schemata, learners may rely on literal translation from their L1 or on partial lexical recall, increasing the likelihood of both interlingual and intralingual errors.

Comparatively, similar error patterns have been documented in other African and ESL contexts. Mphahlele (2018) found that South African ESL learners also struggled with lexical collocations due to insufficient exposure to authentic input, while Otieno (2015) reported morpho-syntactic transfer errors among Kenyan upper primary learners, linked to L1 interference and limited vocabulary range. The predominance of intralingual errors in the current data mirrors findings by Njoroge (2019), who attributed this trend to the transition from learning English as a subject to using it as a medium of instruction—a stage at which learners often overgeneralize rules before fully internalizing them.

Overall, the errors identified in this study reflect not merely surface-level inaccuracies but deeper gaps in the interplay between linguistic form and meaning-making. Addressing them will require instructional designs that systematically integrate schema activation and task-based reading comprehension to build both conceptual understanding and precise language use.

7. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Practical strategies for teachers:

- Pre-reading schema activation to address collocational knowledge gaps.
- Task designs that integrate lexical and morpho-syntactic accuracy in comprehension work.
- Feedback and corrective scaffolding techniques.

8. CONCLUSION

This study examined task-based reading comprehension activities among Grade 6 learners under Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum through the lenses of Schema Theory and Task-Based Language Teaching. The findings show that most errors were intralingual, pointing to developmental issues in learners' interlanguage rather than direct mother-tongue transfer. Frequent collocational misformations and morpho-syntactic substitutions revealed gaps in both linguistic and procedural schemata, which limited learners' ability to express conceptual knowledge with precision.

From a Schema Theory perspective, these results suggest that insufficient or incomplete schema activation reduces learners' ability to connect prior knowledge with new input, leading to fragmented comprehension and error-prone responses. From a TBLT perspective, the lack of well-sequenced pre-, while-, and post-reading tasks restricts opportunities for learners to

notice, process, and consolidate accurate language use. Together, these insights highlight that comprehension challenges are tied as much to weaknesses in language form as to limitations in content knowledge.

The findings further indicate that while the CBC emphasizes learner-centered, competency-based instruction, its classroom implementation does not consistently reflect schema-based or task-oriented principles. Teachers' limited training in these areas contributes

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