

**Eötvös Loránd University**  
**Faculty of Education and Psychology**

**Summary of the dissertation**

**The implementation of the English curriculum  
in upper-secondary schools in Mongolia**

**by**

**BYAMBASUREN NYAMKHUU**

**Budapest, 2025**

## ABSTRACT

Mongolia, with its rich cultural heritage and strong emphasis on education, has prioritized English language learning as a gateway to global knowledge and international engagement. Over the past few decades, the Mongolian government has introduced major curriculum reforms, including competency-based standards, a competency-based curriculum, and the Mongolia-Cambridge Education Initiative, all aimed at aligning English instruction with international standards. However, despite these efforts, challenges persist in the implementation of the English curriculum in upper-secondary schools.

This study examines the implementation of the English curriculum in upper-secondary schools in Mongolia through the lens of competency-based education framework, drawing on Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory and Piaget's constructivist theory as theoretical foundations. Despite the growing emphasis on competency-based education worldwide, limited research has examined how English teachers and students experience upper-secondary English curriculum implementation in Mongolian schools. Addressing this gap, the study explores teachers' perception of upper-secondary English curriculum, the challenges they face in curriculum implementation, and the extent to which competency-based teaching is incorporated. It also examines students' perceptions of the rationale behind the key elements of competency-based practices, their exposure to its practices, and their overall contentment with the English course.

This study utilizes a concurrent embedded mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Within this mixed-methods approach, qualitative findings serve to enhance and contextualize the quantitative results, providing deeper insights into the realities of curriculum implementation. Data was gathered through questionnaires administered to English teachers and students across Zavkhan, Bayankhongor, and Govi-Altai provinces, as well as Ulaanbaatar city. Additionally, focus group interviews were conducted with English teachers and upper-secondary students in Ulaanbaatar. All data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. For data analysis, SPSS was used for quantitative analysis, while thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data to identify key themes and patterns.

The study examines the experiences of both English teachers and students through quantitative and qualitative findings. While most teachers find the curriculum's goals clear, many struggle with assessment criteria, resource shortages, and time constraints, which hinder effective English language teaching and learning that embeds competency-based approaches. Basic English language skills are evident among students, but they require further support in advanced competencies, particularly in listening and speaking, while flexible assessments

remain underutilized. Regional disparities indicate that English language teaching and learning which embeds competency-based approaches is more effectively implemented in some provinces than in others. Qualitative insights further reveal that a reliance on textbook and grammar-focused teaching limits real-world language applications and student engagement. Assessments prioritize reading and writing over communicative skills. Overall, the study underscores the need to reconsider English curriculum implementation policies, particularly in terms of time allocation, practical workshops for professional development, and a systematic approach to involving teachers in professional development without adding undue burdens, especially when competency-based teaching and learning are intended to be effectively integrated into English language education in Mongolia.

## **Introduction**

### **1.1 Research problem**

In Mongolia, curriculum reforms over the past decade have been criticized for their lack of comprehensive research, theoretical foundation, and adequate preparation (MIER, 2019). The existing curriculum reform processes have often proceeded with limited analysis of underlying theoretical and methodological principles, resulting in significant challenges in both teacher preparedness and student outcomes (MECSS & JICA, 2018). These issues have led to increased difficulty in curriculum implementation, particularly within upper-secondary education, where reforms are frequently introduced without sufficient public consultation or teacher involvement.

Furthermore, “In Mongolia, the competency-based educational standards were approved in 2004, along with the development of national curricula for the transition from 10 to 11 and then 12 years of schooling (2008–2019), marked the establishment of a competency-based approach to teaching and learning” (UNESCO, 2020, p. 65). In addition, the English curriculum was revised and published as the second edition in 2019 to improve upon the previous framework, and it remains the curriculum currently in use (MECSS, 2019). As the country embraced this educational shift, it became essential to examine the challenges associated with implementing the English curriculum. English has become the most important foreign language in Mongolia, succeeding Russian in prominence and holding a central role in academic and social settings (Dovchin, 2017). Despite its significance, research on the English curriculum, particularly in upper-secondary schools, remains scarce, and its competency-based dimensions have not been thoroughly explored. There is a notable lack of inquiry into the

competency-based dimensions of the curriculum and the perceptions of teachers and students regarding its implementation. This research, therefore, seeks to address these gaps by investigating the impact of the English curriculum, offering insights to inform future curriculum development and enhance English language education in Mongolia.

## **1.2 Research aims**

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the implementation of the English curriculum in upper-secondary schools in Mongolia through the lens of competency-based aspects. Both teachers and students are the main target groups and experience the implementation of the curriculum on a daily basis. Teachers are responsible for delivering the curriculum content and facilitating learning, while students engage with the curriculum through classroom activities, assignments, and assessments. Therefore, the research has six aims targeting English teachers and students of upper-secondary schools, with three aims for each group.

For English teachers, the research aims to: 1) explore their understanding of competency-based aspects, 2) identify the issues and challenges faced during curriculum implementation, and 3) examine the extent to which lessons incorporate competency-based teaching and learning.

For students of upper-secondary schools, the study will: 1) delve into their comprehension of the rationale behind practices that reflect elements of competency-based learning, 2) explore their exposure to English language skills and competencies, and 3) assess their satisfaction with the English curriculum. Simultaneously, this research hopes to find ways to enhance the English curriculum, thereby responding more effectively to English language teaching and learning.

## **1.3 Research questions**

The research questions are categorized based on the target groups as follows:

*For English teachers*

1. How do English teachers perceive the implementation of the upper-secondary English curriculum?
2. What are the challenges of the implementation of the English curriculum of upper-secondary education?
3. To what extent do English teachers integrate competency-based teaching practices?

*For students of upper-secondary schools*

4. To what extent do the students perceive the rationale behind practices in English courses that reflect key elements of competency-based learning?
5. To what extent are the students exposed to the key elements of competency-based learning?
6. What is the students' contentment with the English course?

### **Theoretical perspectives**

The research employed Competency-Based Education (CBE), Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT), Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory to explore English language teaching and learning in Mongolian upper-secondary classrooms. These theoretical frameworks served as core lenses that guided the entire study, shaping the data collection, and analysis. CBE and CBLT provided insights into how English instruction aligns with skill mastery and real-world application, while Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory highlighted the role of scaffolding, and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in language learning. Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory helped examine teachers' role and students' learning in the classroom. Together, these theories enabled a structured analysis of the findings, allowing for a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in implementing the upper-secondary English curriculum in Mongolia.

### **Research design**

The study employs a concurrent embedded mixed methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of English curriculum implementation in upper-secondary education. The qualitative data was collected through focus group interviews, allowing for an in-depth exploration of teachers' and students' perspectives to respond to the research questions. Meanwhile, the quantitative data was gathered using questionnaires. Qualitative analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes and key insights, whereas quantitative analysis was performed using SPSS. Both the questionnaire and focus group interviews were conducted with English teachers and students from upper-secondary education in the provinces of Zavkhan, Bayankhongor, Govi-Altai, and Ulaanbaatar during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period that posed additional challenges to data collection.

## Summary of the results

### *Quantitative results*

- The majority of teachers (83.1%) agree that the national curriculum's goals and objectives are clear, with 78.0% finding the learning objectives understandable, though 22.0% express uncertainty. Only 62.7% perceive alignment between curriculum goals and learning objectives, while 37.3% do not. Assessment goals and criteria are a significant concern, with 52.5% finding them unclear and feeling they do not align with the curriculum's objectives.
- Teachers report moderate support from national organizations ( $M = 3.19$ – $3.29$ ) and schools, with those having 2–5 years of experience perceiving the highest support, while those with 21–25 years report the lowest. Teachers generally feel confident and well-prepared in terms of knowledge, professional skills, and teaching methods, disagreeing with statements about limited knowledge or weak methods. However, they face significant pedagogical and logistical challenges, including aligning lessons with curriculum goals (50.8% find it difficult), addressing students' diverse needs (57.6%), and planning lessons based on competency-based education (61.0%). Limited time for lesson planning (79.7%) and availability of teaching materials (71.2%) also pose major obstacles. Despite being prepared personally, external factors like time and resources hinder effective teaching.
- Teachers demonstrate strong practices in helping students master English skills, with high mean scores for providing examples ( $M=4.19$ ) and explanations ( $M=3.71$ ). Personalization is also emphasized, with high engagement in group work ( $M=3.74$ ), independent learning ( $M=3.78$ ), and additional support for students in need ( $M=3.97$ ), reflecting consistent and uniformly applied personalized instruction. Similarly, teachers focus on developing resilience and persistence through consistent practices, such as offering advice during challenges ( $M=4.31$ ), recognizing when extra time is needed ( $M=4.14$ ), and providing support after poor grades ( $M=4.00$ ). However, flexible assessments are less commonly used, with lower mean scores for presentations ( $M=2.53$ ) and project-based learning ( $M=2.16$ ), and considerable variability among teachers.
- The Kruskal-Wallis H test reveals no significant differences across Ulaanbaatar, Zavkhan, Govi-Altai, and Bayankhongor in the use of competency-based practices like mastery of competencies, personalization, and skill development. However, flexible assessment varies significantly by location ( $H = 8.601$ ,  $p = .035$ ), with Govi-Altai

demonstrating the highest implementation (mean rank = 39.32), while Bayankhongor (mean rank = 24.03) and Zavkhan show lower usage.

- Teachers prioritize grammar (M = 4.13) and show attentiveness to speaking (M = 3.69) and listening (M = 3.82) skills. Across locations, grammar receives the highest focus, with mean scores ranging from 3.85 in Govi-Altai to 4.39 in Ulaanbaatar. While Ulaanbaatar shows slightly higher attentiveness to speaking and writing skills, the overall emphasis on foundational language skills, particularly grammar and listening, is consistent across regions, reflecting a standardized approach to English instruction.
- In English courses, nearly half of the students (49.4%) reported "sometimes" having opportunities to demonstrate competencies in multiple ways, while 26.9% indicated they "often" did. However, 19.4% were uncertain, and a substantial 61.1% skipped the question, indicating a lack of understanding about competency-based grading. This highlights the need for educators to better communicate the goals and benefits of competency-based grading to enhance its impact on student learning.
- The findings show mixed levels of student exposure to competency-based learning. While competency relevance is well-communicated, assessment criteria lack clarity. Support for skill development and disposition is moderate, but individual needs are often overlooked. Personalization opportunities are limited, and flexible assessments are underused, favoring traditional exams over diverse methods like projects or presentations.
- Based on the Chi-square test results, there are significant differences across provinces in students' exposure to competency-based learning practices. Zavkhan province demonstrates stronger exposure to CBL, providing more consistent opportunities for mastery, skill development, and personalized learning compared to Ulaanbaatar, where engagement and support are less frequent. Zavkhan and Govi-Altai also offer more diverse assessment types, while students in Ulaanbaatar have fewer opportunities to showcase competencies through varied methods.
- In terms of grade, 12th-grade students report significantly greater exposure to demonstrating mastery, skill development, and personalization compared to 10th-grade students, where these practices are less frequent. Exposure improves steadily through 11th grade, highlighting a progressive increase in support and opportunities. Flexible assessment practices show no significant differences across grades and are moderately implemented, with most students across all grades.

- Students demonstrate confidence in basic listening, reading, writing, and grammar skills but require further development in advanced competencies to align with CBE goals. Listening and speaking skills need more focus on interactive and real-world applications, while reading and writing skills would benefit from more work on complex texts and structured academic tasks. Advanced grammar instruction is also needed to improve fluency and accuracy in complex contexts.
- Listening skills development showed the highest regional variation, with Govi-Altai students reporting the strongest proficiency (mean rank = 209.57), followed by Zavkhan (190.08) and Bayankhongor (172.31), while Ulaanbaatar students had the lowest (169.64). Speaking, reading, writing, and grammar skills showed no significant differences across regions. However, Govi-Altai consistently ranked highest in all these skills, indicating slightly higher confidence levels, while Ulaanbaatar generally reported lower mean ranks across all categories.
- The analysis found no significant grade-wise differences in perceived English language skills, with students across 10th, 11th, and 12th grades showing consistent experiences in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar. However, slightly higher mean ranks for listening, reading, and grammar in 12th grade suggest that cumulative learning over time may boost student confidence. Similarly, the gender-wise analysis revealed no significant differences in self-perceived language skills between male and female students. Mean ranks for all skills, including listening, speaking, and reading, were closely aligned, indicating that gender does not influence students' perceptions of their English proficiency.
- Students expressed moderate dissatisfaction with the English course's lack of real-life applications, with low scores for addressing real-world issues ( $M = 2.74$ ) and balancing theory with practice ( $M = 2.78$ ). While teachers were rated highly for subject knowledge ( $M = 3.69$ ), respect ( $M = 3.62$ ), and support ( $M = 3.61$ ), suggesting a supportive learning environment, students were less satisfied with English course than teaching quality.
- Students were moderately dissatisfied with the English course's lack of real-life applications, with low scores for addressing practical issues ( $M = 2.74$ ) and balancing theory with practice ( $M = 2.78$ ). While teachers were rated highly for knowledge ( $M = 3.69$ ), respect ( $M = 3.62$ ), and support ( $M = 3.61$ ), satisfaction with English course was lower than teaching quality. Regionally, Zavkhan students reported the highest satisfaction, Ulaanbaatar the lowest, and Govi-Altai and Bayankhongor showed

moderate levels, indicating room for improvement. Grade-wise, satisfaction was lowest in 10th grade, improved in 11th grade, and peaked in 12th grade, reflecting increasing relevance of the curriculum. Gender differences in satisfaction were not significant, with both male and female students reporting moderate satisfaction.

### ***Qualitative results***

- The English curriculum faces several challenges, including insufficient opportunities for speaking skills due to time constraints and a heavy focus on grammar and vocabulary, driven by the state exam's lack of assessment for listening and speaking. Teachers criticize the curriculum for being overly theoretical, lacking real-world applications, and frequently changing. Additionally, the curriculum is described as either too advanced or too simplistic for its target age group, leading to disengagement and frustration. Its extensive content also makes it difficult for teachers to complete within the allocated time, further hindering effective learning.
- Teachers face significant challenges due to a lack of resources, including insufficient technology (e.g., no printers, TVs, projectors, or audio equipment) and inconsistent internet access in classrooms. Time constraints further hinder teaching, leading to an emphasis on grammar and vocabulary while overlooking speaking and listening skills and leaving little opportunity to address content beyond the textbook. A mismatch between textbook content and student proficiency levels adds to the frustration. Professional development initiatives, while present, are often inadequate, usually theoretical, and not practical, with limited access for teachers due to workload disparities, as only a small number can attend training sessions.
- Teaching approaches vary by experience, with less experienced teachers blending student-centered and teacher-centered methods, while more experienced teachers rely on teacher-centered strategies for content coverage, especially under time constraints. The English curriculum is criticized for lacking real-life applications, failing to align with students' future needs in using English practically. Assessment criteria are perceived as unclear and complex, leading to subjective and inconsistent evaluations, with a predominant focus on writing and reading skills, while speaking skills remain undervalued.
- The qualitative analysis highlights students' limited exposure to CBL practices, with teacher-centered methods prevailing in classrooms. Textbook exercises and grammar-focused instruction dominate, leaving little room for interactive, student-centered approaches or real-life applications of English. Practical use of English is rare, as

students report minimal in-class activities encouraging communicative contexts while speaking and listening skills are mostly neglected compared to the emphasis on writing. Active learning is limited, with students primarily seeking clarification on grammar rather than engaging with broader learning activities, and teachers often taking a reactive rather than proactive role, focusing on active students while overlooking quieter ones. Assessment methods rely on tests and homework, lacking fair and individualized evaluations that align with CBE principles. Peer collaboration is minimal, with group work occurring only a few times per term, and students express dissatisfaction due to the lack of personalized support and inconsistent teacher engagement.

- Students expressed mixed satisfaction with English lessons, appreciating strengths in grammar and writing instruction but feeling underprepared for exams and lacking practical language skills, particularly in speaking. They highlighted challenges such as vocabulary difficulties, inadequate learning environments, overwhelming homework, and misallocated class time, all of which hinder engagement and learning. An overemphasis on textbook completion at the expense of flexibility and understanding further exacerbates these issues, leaving students feeling rushed and unsupported. Additionally, negative teacher-student communication, characterized by impatience and harshness, creates fear and discourages students from seeking help, leading to disengagement and gaps in understanding.

## **Discussion**

The discussion section serves as a platform to explore findings that emerged from English teachers and students in upper-secondary education by comparing or contrasting with each other, emphasizing the added value of the mixed-methods approach in providing a comprehensive understanding of the research questions. The section also interprets the findings of the study in relation to the theoretical frameworks by connecting them to key theoretical foundations, including CBE, Vygotsky's theory, Piaget's theory, and existing literature. The section also acknowledges the limitations of the study, ensuring a transparent narrative that considers the scope and boundaries of the research. The findings are multifaceted. Therefore, the structure of the discussion is presented under the key elements of CBE practices.

*Teacher-centered vs. Student-centered learning*

The study found that teacher-centered instruction tends to remain dominant, despite policy efforts to encourage student-centered approaches. While younger teachers integrate interactive methods, older teachers rely on textbook-based teaching. Students often struggle with unclear explanations, highlighting a gap between teachers' instructional intent and students' experiences.

### *Real-life application in learning*

While the curriculum promotes communicative and task-based learning, classroom implementation remains weak. Students rarely engage in real-world language use, with learning limited to textbook exercises. Teachers acknowledge the need for more practical applications but cite time constraints and resource shortages as barriers.

### *Collaborative learning*

Peer learning opportunities are limited, despite teachers' reported efforts to encourage group work. Structural constraints, such as time limitations, inadequate resources hinder meaningful collaborative learning. Students confirm that small-group activities occur infrequently and inconsistently, impacting their ability to develop teamwork and communication skills.

### *Personalized learning & assessment methods*

Teachers attempt to provide personalized support, but students experience inconsistencies in differentiation. Assessment methods remain traditional (written exams and grammar-focused tasks), despite policies encouraging performance-based assessments like debates and presentations.

### *Development of English language skills*

*Grammar:* Teachers prioritize grammar instruction due to time constraints, leaving little room for communicative practice.

*Speaking & Listening:* These skills are underdeveloped, as classroom interactions focus on reading aloud and dictation rather than interactive discussions. Limited access to audio materials further weakens listening instruction.

*Reading & Writing:* While reading is regularly practiced, it lacks depth, with students engaging mostly in oral reading rather than critical analysis. Writing exercises emphasize copying from textbooks rather than creative composition.

### *Barriers to effective teaching & learning*

*Time Constraints:* Teachers and students express frustration over insufficient instructional time, which forces teachers to focus on grammar at the expense of speaking and listening.

*Lack of Resources:* Schools lack essential teaching aids, and teachers often rely on personal equipment. Rural schools face additional infrastructure challenges.

*English Textbooks:* Teachers find textbooks mismatched with students' proficiency levels, while students feel overburdened with textbook-driven lessons and excessive homework.

### *Teacher-student communication & professional development*

Students report that teachers' mood and communication styles impact lesson. Fear of criticism discourages students from asking questions, leading to disengagement while some of the are encouraged.

### *Teachers' perceptions of the curriculum*

While teachers acknowledge the clarity of curriculum objectives, they struggle with its complexity, density, and lack of practical alignment with classroom realities. They cited that it is challenging to understand it due to its vague, difficult terms to understand.

### *Students' contentment with English course*

Students are moderately satisfied with teachers' subject knowledge but express concerns about the lack of real-world application and interactive learning. Contentment levels vary by region, with rural students reporting higher contentment than urban students, possibly due to stronger teacher-student relationships.

## **Limitations of the research**

This study faced several limitations. Firstly, there was a significant limitation regarding the availability of sources. The government agency and its affiliated educational organizations had not systematically accumulated a database related to curriculum reform and processes (MECSS & JICA, 2018, p.7). Additionally, the conditions for developing a research and evidence-based curriculum had been inadequate. There was a lack of modern curriculum research results and reports, and no comprehensive compilation of research information on the implementation and processes of previously implemented educational standards and curricula (MECSS & JICA, 2018, p.16). Second of all, the global pandemic significantly impacted the research process. During the pandemic, schools and provinces in Mongolia were closed due to Covid-19, which

postponed and challenged the data collection and data analysis processes. The closure of upper-secondary schools slowed down the process of collecting questionnaires and conducting focus-group interviews with English teachers and students.

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation explored the implementation of the English curriculum in upper-secondary schools in Mongolia through a competency-based education (CBE) framework, addressing a research gap in competency-based English language teaching. The study examined how teachers and students perceive and experience the curriculum, focusing on competency-based practices. It investigated teachers' understanding of the curriculum, challenges in implementation, and integration of CBE, while also analyzing students' comprehension, exposure to English language competencies, and satisfaction with the curriculum.

Grounded in CBE and competency-based language teaching (CBLT), the study incorporated Piaget's constructivist theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. These theories provided a holistic perspective, emphasizing active learning, cognitive development, social interaction, and scaffolding in competency-based education.

A concurrent embedded mixed-methods research design was used, combining quantitative and qualitative data. Findings revealed that while teachers understood competency-based principles, challenges such as time constraints, resource limitations, and inconsistent collaboration hindered implementation. Students had varied experiences with competency-based learning, with some appreciating the practical focus while others found certain aspects lacking in real-world relevance and depth. The study contributes to literature on curriculum implementation by highlighting the need for curriculum alignment with both developmental and social learning needs. It emphasizes a learner-centered approach where teachers act as facilitators and students take an active role in their learning. The research underscores the importance of structural support for teachers and curriculum adjustments to create a more engaging and effective English language learning environment. Ultimately, this dissertation demonstrates that improving the English curriculum in Mongolia requires better support for teachers and alignment with students' needs. The insights provided offer a foundation for enhancing English language teaching and learning in upper-secondary education, fostering a more meaningful and competency-based approach.

### **References**

- Dovchin, S. (2017). The role of English in the language practices of Mongolian Facebook users: English meets Mongolian on social media. *English Today*, 33(2), 16–24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078416000420>
- MECSS & JICA, Ministry Of Education, Culture, Science And Sports and Japan International Cooperation Agency. (2018). *Монгол улсын ерөнхий боловсролын сургуулийн сургалтын хөтөлбөрийг боловсруулах, хэрэгжүүлэх, үнэлэх үйл явцын тайлан [Report on curriculum development, implementation and evaluation of primary and secondary education in Mongolia]*.
- MECSS, Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports. (2019). *Бүрэн дунд боловсролын сургалтын хөтөлбөр: Сайжруулсан хоёр дахь хэвлэл [Upper Secondary Education Curriculum: Revised Second Edition]*. Ulaanbaatar.
- MIER, Mongolian Institute for Educational Research. (2019). *Education in Mongolia: A country report*. Mongolian Institute for Educational Research.
- UNESCO. (2020). *Mongolia, Education policy review: Towards a lifelong learning system*.

## Articles

- Nyamkhuu, B.**, Attila, H. H., & Pereira, A. E. (2021). Analysis of the present English language curriculum of upper-secondary education in Mongolia. *International Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 1(2), 38–47.
- Nyamkhuu, B.**, Estrela Pereira, A., Phavadee, S., & Horváth, A. C. (2024). Contemplating the English Curriculum of Upper-Secondary Education in Mongolia through the Lens of Asia as Method. In *Learning from Asia in Education: How the West Can Learn from the East in Education in the 21st Century*.
- Nyamkhuu, B.**, Czabaji Horváth, A., & Pereira, A. E. (2024). Historical overview and current curriculum of English language curriculum in senior secondary school in Mongolia. *Educational Science | Education – Research – Innovation*, 12(1), 66–81.
- Pereira, A. E., Alghneimin, J., Trindade, B. G. P., Dung, D. T., **Nyamkhuu, B.**, & Konopleva, E. (2023). Learning Outcomes and Social Emotional Competences: A Cross-Feeding Relationship to Promote Meaningful Learning Experiences. *International Journal of Childhood Education*, 4(2), 19–28. <https://doi.org/10.33422/ijce.v4i2.430>