

Teachers' Perceptions on the Implementation of the Competence-Based Curriculum: A Study of Albanian Upper Secondary Schools¹

Assoc. Prof. Dr. ELVANA SHTEPANI

University of Tirana

Faculty of Foreign Languages

elvana.shtepani@unitir.edu.al

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9372-4021>

Assoc. Prof. Dr HATIXHE LEKA

University of Tirana

Faculty of Foreign Languages

hatixhe.sejdini@unitir.edu.al

ORCID ID <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9899-5366>

Abstract

This article presents the results of a field study on the implementation of the competence-based curriculum in foreign language teaching in Albanian upper secondary schools. The study focuses on the acquisition and application of communicative competence in classroom practice. It examines how competence is fostered and applied and explores teachers' perceptions of its effectiveness.

The research employed a questionnaire administered to 30 foreign language teachers across several schools in Albania. The questionnaire was completed both online and in person, ensuring broader accessibility and greater participation. The data collected provide a comprehensive overview of the extent to which communicative competence is integrated into everyday teaching practices, as well as the challenges and obstacles encountered in this process.

The study's findings reveal persistent issues, including limited resources, uneven teacher preparation, and variations in student engagement. These factors impede the achievement of competence-based teaching objectives. Conversely, the data also reveal specific examples of successful practices, such as well-supported teacher initiatives which demonstrate effective implementation of communicative competence and may serve as models for broader use.

The study sets a strong basis for further curriculum reform in Albania through the documentation of these insights. It highlights critical issues that demand immediate attention and provides research-supported recommendations to enhance foreign language instruction in secondary schools.

Keywords: Albania; competence-based curriculum; communicative competence; foreign language teaching; upper secondary school education; teachers' perspectives

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Albanian education system has implemented significant reforms to align teaching and learning practices with the principles of competence-based education.

¹ Based on Article 10.2 of the contract concluded with AKKSHI, No. Prot.999/12, we must state the following: This publication has been made possible with the financial support of AKKSHI. Its content is the responsibility of the author; the opinions expressed therein are not necessarily the opinions of AKKSHI.

Within this framework, foreign languages play a key role, as they not only develop linguistic skills but also equip students with communicative competence, a requirement for engagement and participation in a globalised society. Communicative competence, which is defined as the ability to use language effectively and appropriately in real-life contexts (Tarvin, 2015), has become a primary objective in upper secondary school curricula.

Despite these efforts, implementing the competence-based curriculum remains a significant challenge. Teachers often encounter barriers related to resources, methodology, and classroom dynamics, which may hinder the effective acquisition and application of communicative competence. Meanwhile, examples of innovative practices demonstrate the potential of competence-based curriculum approaches to enhance the quality of foreign language education when properly supported.

The present study seeks to contribute to this discussion by presenting findings from a field investigation into the implementation of the competence-based curriculum in Albanian upper secondary schools. More specifically, the research pursues three objectives:

1. To examine the extent to which communicative competence is applied in classroom practice.
2. To identify the challenges and practices experienced by teachers.
3. To suggest strategies, approaches, and activities aimed at improving competence-based curriculum teaching.

By addressing these objectives, the study offers useful insights into the development of pedagogy and educational policy and urges decisive steps to strengthen foreign language instruction in upper secondary schools in Albania.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The shift from knowledge-based to competence-based education has been reshaping education globally. (Anderson-Levitt, 2017) The aim is to move away from rote memorisation toward the development of transferable skills, problem-solving abilities, and the application of knowledge in real-world contexts (European Commission, 2018). Foreign language teaching is particularly affected by the new approach: competence-based education foregrounds communicative competence, ensuring that students can use language effectively in authentic situations (Byram, 1997; Hymes, 1972). This shift is reflected in the use of interactive activities, real-life communication exercises, and digital tools in classroom practice, which facilitate language immersion and engagement. It is important for curriculum reforms to focus clearly on communicative competence to ensure effective language education.

The literature suggests that the concept of communicative competence, defined as the ability to learn language and use it in context, was introduced by Hymes (1966) and further developed as a response to the limitations of the idea of linguistic competence (Hymes & Dell, 1966). Hymes emphasised that knowing how to use language in real-life contexts is just as important as the other components, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. “There are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless.” (Hymes, 2001). He argued that language competence extends beyond knowledge of grammar and vocabulary; it also encompasses understanding the social and cultural rules governing language use. The issue has sparked discussions that now involve intercultural communicative competence, especially in today’s intercultural, multilingual and digital society. (Byram, 2020).

Following Hymes’ foundational ideas, Canale and Swain (1980) divided communicative competence into four parts: grammatical (syntax, vocabulary, and rules), sociolinguistic (social settings), discourse (cohesion in communication), and strategic (error correction for effective communication). (Canale et al., 1981) Later, Savignon (1972, 1983) and Terrell & Krashen (1983) emphasised the importance of developing practical communicative skills in language learning, placing greater value on learners’ ability to use language effectively in real-life situations rather than on explicit teaching and learning of grammatical rules. (Savignon & J., 1972) Moreover, Widdowson (1978) highlighted the gap between knowledge and its realisation, reminding us that competence is demonstrated in real communication. These linguists and methodologists introduced models that moved from theory to practical, real-world approaches. This shift has greatly influenced language teaching, encouraging a focus on communicative competence and on the use of language in real situations rather than on teaching grammar rules alone.

Implementing the competence-based curriculum poses questions about teaching and assessment. The Albanian curriculum reform highlights student engagement, digital literacy, and autonomy, with communicative competence at its core (Ministry of Education, 2021–2026). International frameworks, such as the EU Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2018) and the OECD Learning Framework 2030 (2019), emphasise the importance of communication, critical thinking, and digital skills. (OECD Learning Compass 2030, 2019) Albania’s Digital Agenda (2015–2020) supports these goals with digital resources for interactive learning.

Education reform involves both personal and professional dimensions. Fullan (2007) argues that successful change depends on the individuals responsible for implementation, as top-down reform alone is insufficient. (Fullan & Michael, 2007) In Albania, the introduction of the competence-based curriculum is challenged by issues of teacher training, resource availability, and alignment between curricular goals and assessment methods. (Maghnouj et al., 2020) Nonetheless, practices such as project-based learning and the integration of digital tools illustrate the potential of competence-based methods to increase student engagement and language proficiency.

This study demonstrates how new curricula help students use language in real-world contexts by making communicative competence a key component of both international and national reforms. Achieving communicative competence requires student-centred teaching, practical assessment, and strong support for teachers and schools.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design, with greater emphasis on quantitative data collection via structured surveys, complemented by qualitative insights from open-ended responses. The integration of quantitative and qualitative components enabled a comprehensive exploration of the research questions, combining large-scale data with the depth of individual participant perspectives.

The quantitative survey was distributed to a broad sample of upper secondary school language teachers across Albania to ensure that diverse experiences and teaching contexts were represented. The open-ended questions embedded in the survey provided participants with an opportunity to elaborate on their responses, offering detailed

insights into the challenges they encounter and the strategies they use to implement competence-based teaching.

This methodological approach was selected to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings and capture the complexity of classroom realities. The central aim of the study was to evaluate the extent to which communicative competence, a fundamental component of competence-based teaching, is being applied in Albanian upper secondary school foreign language instruction. Through this design, the study sought to illuminate both the systemic patterns and the individual practices shaping communicative language teaching in the current educational landscape.

Instruments

The primary research instrument was a structured questionnaire, designed for English teachers in Albanian upper secondary schools. The questionnaire consisted of several sections designed to capture:

1. Demographic data (age, gender, teaching experience, school type, grade level).
2. Strategies and techniques, planning and assessment regarding communicative competence in teaching.
3. Teaching Strategies: teaching materials, personalised activities, technological tools, etc.
4. Assessment, interventions and feedback.
5. Challenges encountered in implementing competence-based teaching.
6. Suggestions for improvement, focusing on strategies, approaches, and activities.
7. Comments derived from open-ended questions

The questionnaire comprised closed-ended items, including Likert-scale questions (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), multiple-choice questions, and dichotomous (Yes/No) items. Additional measures were incorporated to capture performance-related variance and to provide insights extending beyond traditional scale-based assessments. Open-ended questions were also included to elicit qualitative feedback and to allow respondents to propose strategies for enhancing competence-based teaching.

The instrument demonstrated high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.935 for 48 items, indicating strong internal consistency and suitability for educational research. (Chan et al., 2017) Additionally, specific sources of construct validity were considered in the design. Item content was carefully aligned with the theoretical model of communicative competence, ensuring that it accurately reflected the concepts intended to be measured. This coherence strengthens the validity claim and the reliability statistics, supporting the findings on teaching practices and challenges and ensuring that later interventions or policies are based on reliable, consistent data.

Population and Sample

The study population consisted of 30 teachers of English from across Albania. A total of 14 paper-based questionnaires and 16 online responses were distributed. Teaching experience ranged across all levels, ensuring representation from novice to highly experienced educators. The sample of teachers across Albania enabled triangulation and allowed the researchers to examine the implementation of competence-based teaching from multiple perspectives. However, it is essential to consider the potential sampling error, particularly with the teacher sample size of 30, which introduces a margin of error that may influence broad conclusions. The small sample may limit the generalizability of the findings, potentially affecting their applicability to all contexts within Albania. To

ensure that claims remain proportionate to the sample size, it is crucial to consider the confidence interval for teacher-related data when interpreting the results.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred during the 2024–2025 academic year. Questionnaires were distributed in both physical and digital formats, thereby expanding the study's reach and ensuring diverse participation across regions. Participating schools were located in urban and regional contexts, including Tirana, Durrës, Vlorë, Elbasan, Kavajë, Kukës, and Vorë.

Data quality was ensured by using the Clean Score system to filter out incomplete or invalid responses before conducting the analysis. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and participation was voluntary, aligning with ethical standards for educational research.

Data Analysis

The data collected were processed by SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), version 27. The following analyses were conducted to draw conclusions and insights from the data. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to map demographic distribution and capture general trends. To address RQ1, one-sample t-tests ($\alpha = 0.05$) were conducted to determine whether the mean values differed significantly from the neutral point (3) on the Likert scale, thereby assessing the strength of participants' perceptions. Correlation analyses using Pearson's r (correlation coefficient) were conducted to examine associations among demographic variables, challenges, and suggested improvements, identifying key areas of focus. Qualitative analysis of open-ended responses was coded thematically to complement the quantitative findings with participant narratives and examples, providing a richer understanding of the data.

RESULTS

Descriptive Findings

The demographic data show an uneven sample distribution: 83.87% of the 30 English teachers are female, and 16.13% of teachers are male (M), reflecting the gender imbalance typical of Albanian upper-secondary English teaching. This may warrant future research on whether gender influences teaching methods or perceived challenges. The teachers are generally highly experienced: 29.03% have over 20 years of experience, 25.81% have 16-20 years of experience, 22.58% have 6-10 years of experience, and 16.13% have 11-15 years of experience. Only 6.45% have 1-5 years of experience. This vast experience is a significant advantage; however, it can also pose a challenge in adopting new methodologies (such as competency-based curricula), particularly if teachers were educated in a traditional approach and continue to employ it with students.

The detailed analysis of the data collected from the teachers' questionnaires, which uses descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) and inferential tests (One-Sample Test), has focused on several key sections, which are related to the assessment and feedback process, the challenges and problems encountered, as well as the necessary improvements in practice. From our observations, some questionnaire questions serve as essential reference points for a deeper understanding of the real situation in foreign language classes, as perceived by teachers. They are instrumental in illuminating key aspects of the situation, such as teachers' practices and perceptions.

For example, when asked about interventions, comments, and feedback in communicative activities, most teachers reported that their feedback is personalised and ongoing, which helps students improve their communication skills. In total, 87.6% of teachers (43.8% Agree and 43.8% Strongly Agree) support giving personalised feedback. This shows a strong commitment to supporting students individually.

Regarding non-intervention during activities, except in cases of interruption, teachers state that they adopt a student-oriented approach, refraining from providing answers, asking questions, clarifying, or prompting questions. 81.3% of teachers (50% "Agree" + 31.3% "Strongly agree") indicate that they prefer not to intervene, but to use additional questions to help students reach the answer themselves.

The data reveal that teachers widely adopt the continuous monitoring of communicative competence to sustain student motivation. A significant majority—71.9% (50% Agree and 21.9% Strongly Agree)—highlights the importance of monitoring students’ progress to inform future teaching strategies.

In contrast, the practice of student self-assessment and peer assessment is underused. Only 25% of teachers (12.5% Agree and 12.5% Strongly Agree) report implementing these strategies, whereas 21.9% Strongly Disagree. This lack of engagement suggests persistent resistance or limited familiarity with these more innovative, learner-centred assessment approaches.

On the other hand, the use of assessment as a continuous process is strongly supported. A total of 84.4% of teachers (50% Agree and 34.4% Strongly Agree) view continuous assessment as essential for accurately monitoring student development and minimising subjective bias. (Jacob et al., 2014)

When it comes to problems and challenges, teachers overwhelmingly point to a decline in student interest as the most critical issue. A notable 90.7% of teachers (43.8% agree and 46.9% strongly agree) share this view, highlighting a widespread concern about student motivation.

Teachers also report that students struggle with communication due to limited exposure to English. The lack of opportunities to engage in the language outside the classroom is regarded as a major barrier. In total, 71.9% of teachers (43.8% agree and 28.1% strongly agree) consider this a significant problem.

Another question concerns the lack of technology in classrooms, which hinders the development of communicative competence.

Responses to the question about the lack of technology in classrooms reveal a clear divergence of opinion. While 43.8% of teachers “Agree” or “Strongly Agree”, a significant share, 34.4%, only “Somewhat Agree,” and 21.9% remain “Neutral.” This suggests that while technology is essential, it may not be seen as the only solution for developing this competence.

Teachers see a clear need for improvements in the curriculum. A total of 59.4% of teachers (34.4% “Agree” + 25.0% “Strongly Agree”) agree that the curriculum requires changes. Approximately 12.5% of teachers report being “Neutral,” indicating uncertainty or a lack of a clear opinion. Only a small group, 6.3% (“Strongly disagree”), believe no improvement is necessary, showing some teachers are fully satisfied. Meanwhile, 21.9% agree “to some extent,” indicating only minor changes may be needed. Overall, the data suggest a consensus for change, but without overwhelming support, leaving room for discussion and further curriculum improvement based on teachers' diverse views.

The descriptive analysis indicates that teachers hold a very positive perception of the implementation of intervention and feedback practices. This is reflected in the high average scores for related questions. Specifically, practices such as “interventions,

comments, and personalised feedback” and “recording dialogues and discussing them” received an average of 4.25, demonstrating strong consensus among teachers. Similarly, “systematic monitoring of communicative competence” received an average score of 3.78, indicating that this practice is widely used. In contrast, “student self-assessment and peer assessment” received a lower average score of 2.63, indicating that this area remains underdeveloped in the current teaching context.

Teachers identify “the decline in interest in education in general” as a significant concern, with a very high average of 4.38, reflecting a strong and shared apprehension about student motivation. Other notable obstacles include “lack of technology” (4.13) and “lack of motivation” (3.81). Conversely, lower averages for “lack of time” (3.03) and “large classes” (2.87) suggest that teachers perceive these issues as less pressing than declining interest or insufficient technological resources.

The section on suggested improvements emphasises teachers’ consistent demand for concrete changes. Three areas were highlighted as most important, with averages above 4.40: “smaller classes” (4.44), “opportunities for immersion in the country of the target language” (4.47), and “projects in collaboration with businesses” (4.42). These results indicate an apparent demand for structural and practical improvements that extend beyond classroom methodology.

Qualitative feedback further illuminates teachers’ priorities. A central concern is class overcrowding. Teachers highlight the critical role of smaller class sizes in achieving better learning outcomes. This aligns with calls for infrastructure improvements to provide more suitable learning spaces. Another recurring theme is the integration of technology. Teachers propose incorporating tools such as virtual reality and upgrading technological equipment. They recognise the importance of modern resources in fostering communicative competence. Finally, teachers emphasise the need for additional training, reflecting a strong desire for ongoing professional development and a willingness to enhance their skills when opportunities arise.

To sum up, both quantitative and qualitative findings converge to highlight the areas that teachers perceive as most crucial. They advocate not only for methodological improvements but also for structural and practical changes, such as smaller classes, enhanced technological infrastructure, and expanded professional development opportunities. Together, these insights provide a comprehensive picture of the priorities and challenges in foreign language teaching and offer a clear framework for targeted improvements.

Correlational Analysis

This study analyses data collected from teachers to identify patterns and relationships between demographic variables, experience, and perceptions within the learning process. Beyond describing participant characteristics, the research examines whether statistically significant relationships exist among these factors. Accordingly, both descriptive and correlational analyses were conducted to determine the degree and direction of relationships between the variables studied.

The survey revealed that teachers value communicative competence and incorporate it into classroom practices, including dialogue exercises, role-playing, and collaborative problem-solving. A strong positive correlation was observed between recording class discussions (mean 4.25) and monitoring communicative competence to motivate students (mean 3.78), as well as a perceived need for technological resources (mean 3.22) and practical experiences such as travel.

Assessment practices varied: self- and peer-assessment were rarely used (mean 2.63), whereas continuous feedback was common (mean 4.25). Traditional teacher-led assessments negatively correlated with student-involved methods, highlighting barriers to implementing modern techniques.

Key challenges included large class sizes (mean 2.87), lack of time (mean 3.03), limited technology (mean 4.13), and low student motivation (mean 3.81). These challenges are directly aligned with suggested improvements, such as smaller classes (mean 4.44), technological support (mean 3.22), training, and practical project-based learning with foreign businesses (mean 4.42).

An unexpected finding was the disconnection between teachers' recognition of modern assessment methods and their actual implementation, indicating constraints such as time and curriculum demands. Overall, the study highlights that while communicative competence is valued and partially implemented, systemic and practical barriers limit its full integration.

Key Practices: Teachers reported feedback and monitoring as standard practices ($M = 4.25$, $p < 0.001$), whereas self- and peer-assessment were less frequently used ($M = 2.63$, $p > 0.05$), indicating limited systematic integration. Real-life communication tasks were rated positively but were implemented inconsistently across schools, reflecting variations in resources and pedagogical approaches.

Challenges: Recurring challenges included limited resources and technology, particularly insufficient ICT tools in regional schools, and inconsistent teacher training in competence-based methods. Student engagement was also uneven, with some students struggling to adapt to new teaching approaches—time constraints and large class sizes further limited opportunities for individualised feedback and interactive activities.

Learner Autonomy and Motivation: Promoting learner autonomy—such as involving students in co-creating learning goals—emerged as a strategy to enhance engagement and address challenges beyond class size or time constraints.

Correlation analyses: Large class sizes and time constraints correlated positively with the suggestion to reduce class sizes ($r > 0.40$). Technology gaps are strongly correlated with calls for ICT-equipped classrooms and internet access. Low student motivation was associated with recommendations for project-based learning and real-life communicative tasks, often in collaboration with external partners.

Open-ended question insights: Teachers emphasised the need for ongoing professional development, particularly in digital pedagogy and competence-based methods. They also suggested expanding assessment beyond traditional tests to include authentic evaluations such as presentations, peer review, and portfolios.

Interpretation: Communicative competence is recognised as a central goal in Albanian upper secondary schools, but implementation remains inconsistent. Feedback and communicative activities are common, while peer assessment and project-based evaluations are underutilized. Structural constraints—insufficient resources, uneven teacher preparation, and low student motivation—significantly impede the integration of competence-based approaches. Technology gaps, large class sizes, and variable teacher training have the most substantial impact on student engagement and learning outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The improvement of the education system requires refining the competence-based curriculum, strengthening digital infrastructure, and ensuring continuous professional

development for teachers. The establishment of regional coaching networks will promote knowledge sharing and support consistent implementation. The use of authentic materials, interactive pedagogies, and technology-enhanced teaching should be encouraged at the school level. Assessment practices should shift toward continuous, competence-based approaches that include self- and peer-evaluation. Resource allocation must prioritise ICT training for teachers and provide schools with grants to expand technological capacity. Addressing class size and promoting project-based learning will further enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

The successful implementation of competence-based curricula requires active collaboration among teachers, students, and policymakers. By prioritising communicative competence, fostering innovative teaching, and addressing structural challenges, Albanian schools can better prepare students to participate effectively in a globalised world. A coordinated and collaborative educational ecosystem is essential for sustaining meaningful reform and ensuring that competence-based approaches are fully realised.

REFERENCES

1. Albania, Government of. (2015). Digital Agenda of Albania 2015–2020. Ministry of Innovation and Public Administration.
2. Anderson-Levitt, K.M. (2017). Global Flows of Competence-based Approaches in Primary and Secondary Education. *Cahiers de la recherche sur l'éducation et les savoirs*.
3. Byram, M. (1997). Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence. *Multilingual Matters*.
4. Byram, M. (2020). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence: Revisited*. Multilingual Matters.
5. Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1–47.
6. Council of Europe. (2018). Reference framework of competences for democratic culture. Retrieved from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture>
7. Fullan, M. (2007). *The new meaning of educational change* (4th ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
8. Hymes, D. (1966). Two types of linguistic relativity. In W. Bright (Ed.), *Sociolinguistics* (pp. 114–158). Mouton.
9. Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative competence. In J. Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics* (pp. 269–293). Penguin.
10. Hymes, D. (2001). *On communicative competence* (Rev. ed.). University Press of the Pacific.
11. Krashen, S. D., & Terrell, T. D. (1983). *The natural approach: Language acquisition in the classroom*. Pergamon Press.
12. Maghnouj, S., Sultana, R. G., Facer, K., & Radinger, T. (2020). *OECD reviews of evaluation and assessment in education: Albania*. OECD Publishing.
13. Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth. (2014). *Curriculum reform in pre-university education*. Tirana, Albania
14. Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth. (2021–2026). *Education strategy 2021–2026*. Tirana, Albania:
15. OECD. (2019). *OECD Learning Framework 2030*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/>
16. Savignon, S. J. (1972). *Communicative competence: An experiment in foreign-language teaching*. Philadelphia: Center for Curriculum Development.
17. Savignon, S. J. (1983). *Communicative competence: Theory and classroom practice*. Addison-Wesley.

18. Tarvin, L. (2015). Communicative Competence: Its Definition, Connection to Teaching, and Relationship with Interactional Competence. 10.13140/RG.2.1.3214.2807.
19. Widdowson, H. G. (1978). Teaching language as communication. Oxford University Press.