



Enhancing writing skills through a genre-based approach in O level classrooms in Uganda

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Abstract

In this globalized era, communication is essential across all fields, with language as the key tool for interaction. In Uganda, English is both the medium of instruction and a bridge to national and global opportunities. The secondary school English curriculum emphasizes communicative competence and encourages teaching various text types, but it lacks a structured framework to guide students in mastering different genres of writing. This study investigates the role and impact of implementing the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) in a Senior Three English classroom, focusing on its potential to enhance students' writing skills and academic literacy. Using a qualitative research design, including literature review and classroom-based case studies, the study examines how GBA influences students' ability to produce coherent, well-structured texts. Findings suggest that GBA improves genre awareness, writing proficiency, and students' confidence. However, challenges such as inadequate teacher training, limited resources, and curriculum rigidity may hinder full implementation. Addressing these challenges through teacher development, resource provision, and gradual curriculum reform could maximize GBA's impact. This study offers valuable insights into strengthening writing instruction in Uganda, equipping students with the skills needed for academic success and effective communication in diverse contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

The development of proficient writing skills is a critical component of academic literacy and communicative competence, particularly in multilingual and post-colonial educational contexts such as Uganda. English, functioning both as the medium of instruction and a gateway to higher education and employment, places substantial demands on learners' ability to express themselves coherently in written form (Ssentanda, 2024; AbdulSwamad, 2024). However, writing remains one of the most challenging language skills to master, especially in environments where instructional methods are predominantly traditional and exam-oriented (Kiwanuka, Mugagga, & Nakabugo, 2020). The teaching of writing in Ugandan O-Level classrooms often focuses on surface-level grammatical accuracy rather than equipping learners with an understanding of how different text types function across contexts (Medadi, Kendrick, Jones, & Mutonyi, 2022).

The Genre-Based Approach (GBA) offers a promising alternative, advocating for explicit instruction in the structural and linguistic features of texts within their social purposes (Martin & Rose, 2008; Derewianka & Jones, 2012). GBA draws on Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1978) and Vygotskian sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), emphasizing both the social context of language use and the importance of scaffolding in the learning process. In countries such as Indonesia (Haryanti & Sari, 2019), Kenya (Dida & Nyongesa, 2020), and Saudi Arabia (Muhammad, Talal, & Tahani, 2024), GBA has shown positive effects on students' writing proficiency, confidence, and genre awareness. Yet in Uganda, empirical research on its implementation remains limited, despite curriculum reforms that call for more competency-based and learner-centered approaches (Jackson & Mukasa, 2024).

GBA is theoretically grounded in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which posits that language is a resource for making meaning and varies systematically according to its social context (Egins, 2004). In this theory, language is viewed not merely as a set of grammatical rules but as a functional system shaped by the contexts in which it is used. Halliday's framework emphasizes three meta-functions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. These functions collectively help learners understand how meaning is constructed within a particular genre to serve specific communicative purposes. Accordingly, the Genre-Based Approach teaches students how to recognize and produce texts such as narratives, expositions, or reports that conform to the social expectations embedded in their contexts of use (Martin & Rose, 2008).

Complementing SFL, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory contributes a psychological dimension to GBA by highlighting how learners acquire complex skills through social interaction. Central to this theory is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the difference between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance. Within a GBA framework, this guidance is realized through pedagogical scaffolding initially provided by the teacher and gradually transferred to the learner. Collaborative activities such as joint text construction, peer review, and teacher modeling are all grounded in this principle. Emilia (2011) explains that such structured support, when aligned with genre expectations, enables learners to internalize writing conventions and progress from dependence to autonomy in their writing. Together, SFL and sociocultural theory provide GBA with a dual foundation that addresses both the structural features of texts and the developmental processes of learners.

International studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of GBA in diverse educational settings and across a wide range of learner demographics. For example, Ahmad, Yumelking, and Uran (2023) investigated the impact of GBA on tenth-grade students in Indonesia and reported substantial improvements in narrative writing proficiency. Their findings showed that students not only wrote longer texts but also demonstrated better control of narrative structure, such as orientation, complication, and resolution, after explicit instruction through the GBA cycle. Similarly, Gebhard (2019) examined the use of genre-focused instruction with English Language Learners (ELLs) in the United States and found that GBA significantly enhanced learners' academic literacies. Through activities such as text modeling and joint construction, ELLs developed an improved understanding of textual purpose, audience awareness, and genre-specific features.

In the Russian context, Olga and Tatiana (2023) implemented GBA with learners studying Russian as a foreign language. Their study highlighted how GBA enabled students to write more coherent and contextually appropriate recommendation letters. Students developed an awareness of formality, tone, and organizational patterns, all of which are crucial for writing in institutional contexts. These results affirm GBA's adaptability across linguistic and cultural boundaries, as well as its utility for developing functional writing skills that respond to real-world demands.

In Africa, Dida and Nyongesa (2020) demonstrated the positive influence of GBA on student fluency and writing quality in Kenyan secondary schools. Their study emphasized the approach's alignment with communicative pedagogy, arguing that GBA helps bridge the gap between language use in the classroom and in the students' everyday lives. The structured nature of GBA encouraged learners to express ideas more confidently and systematically, while peer collaboration and feedback fostered critical engagement with texts. Collectively, these studies affirm that GBA supports not only technical writing skills but also deeper cognitive engagement, allowing learners to analyze and produce texts within meaningful social contexts.

Uganda presents a complex linguistic and pedagogical landscape, shaped by its colonial history, multilingual demographics, and evolving educational reforms. Although English is designated as the official language and medium of instruction from primary four onward, many learners encounter English primarily within classroom contexts and lack exposure to it in their daily interactions (Ssentanda, 2024). This discrepancy often results in limited proficiency, particularly in productive skills such as writing. English language instruction in Uganda is embedded in a curriculum that historically emphasized grammar and translation over communicative competence. While the national syllabus outlines goals related to functional language use and integrated skills, classroom practice frequently reverts to traditional teacher-led instruction (Kiwanka, Mugaga, & Nakabugo, 2020).

Writing, in particular, is treated as a skill subordinate to reading and grammar. Assessment practices typically prioritize the memorization of model texts and grammatical correctness, which restricts students' ability to develop creative and critical writing abilities. These challenges are compounded in rural areas, where teacher training, resources, and learner exposure to English are more limited. Flavia (2019) observed that many English teachers in Uganda focus on product-oriented writing models that emphasize final output rather than the process of drafting, feedback, and revision. Consequently, learners often view writing as a high-stakes activity centered on correctness rather than as a process of meaning-making.

This educational context underscores the need for pedagogical strategies such as the Genre-Based Approach (GBA), which supports language development through structured, contextualized, and meaningful engagement with texts. Medadi et al. (2022) advocate for multimodal approaches to address diverse learner needs, highlighting the potential of visual, audio, and interactive texts to make writing instruction more accessible. In this context, GBA offers a promising alternative to rote learning, encouraging students to understand not only the forms of writing but also their purposes and audiences critical for fostering deeper, transferable writing competence in English.

The recent adoption of a Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) signals a policy environment more receptive to GBA, given its focus on skills development and learner engagement (Jackson & Mukasa, 2024). Martin and Rose (2008) outline a four-phase GBA cycle Building Knowledge of the Field, Modeling, Joint Construction, and Independent Construction that supports gradual transition to independent writing. Research by Nabella and Rini (2023) and Omnia and Ibrahim (2024) show that this structure not only fosters genre mastery but also increases student motivation, collaboration, and critical awareness of content. In their studies, students developed greater confidence in producing structured, purpose-driven texts after working through GBA phases.

GBA's emphasis on collaboration and shared meaning-making is particularly significant for Uganda's multilingual classrooms. Peer feedback and joint construction phases allow learners to build on one another's linguistic and cognitive resources, a process strongly aligned with Vygotsky's ZPD. Matt and Casal (2024) note that in contexts where students bring diverse language backgrounds and literacy experiences, genre-based instruction provides a common scaffold that can bridge these gaps effectively. Moreover, the structured nature of GBA helps demystify the writing process, making expectations clearer for students and offering teachers a systematic framework for instruction.

Nonetheless, effective implementation of GBA requires adequate teacher training and institutional support. Matt and Casal (2024) observed that insufficient understanding of genre theory and large class sizes often hinder deep integration of the approach. In Uganda, challenges such as exam-driven curricula, lack of teaching materials, and limited digital resources compound these issues (AbdulSwamad, 2024). Ramesh and Tatwa (2024) emphasize the need for sustained professional development that targets teacher beliefs, planning capacity, and classroom management strategies tailored to the GBA cycle. Without addressing these constraints, implementation may remain superficial or inconsistent.

Although the Genre-Based Approach has gained recognition internationally, there is limited empirical evidence on its effectiveness and feasibility in Ugandan secondary schools. This absence of localized research creates a significant gap in understanding how GBA functions within the unique linguistic, pedagogical, and infrastructural conditions of Uganda's education system. Most current discussions of GBA in Uganda remain conceptual or policy-driven, with little classroom-based data available to inform pedagogical decisions. Moreover, there is minimal documentation on how Ugandan teachers adapt GBA to local needs or how students respond to genre-based instruction over time.

To address this gap, the study is guided by two primary research questions:

1. How does the implementation of the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) enhance the writing skills of Senior Three students in Ugandan classrooms?
2. What challenges do teachers and students encounter in adopting the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) for narrative writing instruction in Ugandan classrooms?

By exploring these questions, the study seeks to generate insights that can inform both policy and practice, with the aim of strengthening writing instruction through evidence-based, contextually relevant strategies. It explores how the pedagogical principles of GBA align with the Ugandan educational context, what benefits learners derive from its implementation, and what challenges teachers face. In doing so, it contributes to the broader discourse on writing instruction in English as a second language (ESL) contexts, offering insights into localized, culturally responsive applications of global pedagogical models.

METHODS

This chapter presents the research methodology, covering the approach, data collection, and data analysis techniques used to investigate the role of the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) in improving students' writing skills. The methodology is structured to align with the study's objectives and research questions; How does the implementation of the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) enhance the writing skills of Senior Three students in Ugandan classrooms? And What challenges do teachers and students encounter in adopting the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) for narrative writing instruction in Ugandan classrooms? providing a thorough exploration of GBA's impact on student learning outcomes.

The study adopted a qualitative research design with a case study approach, incorporating elements of mixed methods to enrich the findings. Nabella and Rini (2023) stated that a qualitative approach is effective in capturing in-depth insights into participants' perceptions, teaching practices, and the contextual challenges of implementing GBA in Ugandan secondary schools. The case study design enabled an in-depth exploration of GBA practices within a real classroom setting, generating detailed, context-specific data.

The research was conducted at Nibras High School in Kasangati, Wakiso District, Uganda. The target population included 32 Senior Three students (20 girls and 12 boys) and two senior English teachers with over 23 years of experience, 10 of which involved teaching with GBA. Zurdianto (2016) reported that these teachers had developed a deep understanding of GBA principles, making them reliable sources of information for the study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevant and rich data collection, as Munawir (2022) argued that purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants with relevant experience, which is crucial for gathering meaningful data.

Data were collected using classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and pre/post-writing assessments. Observations were guided by Rothery's Genre Teaching and Learning Cycle (1994), as adapted by Phan and Ganapathy (2020). It was highlighted that the cycle's stages (Modeling and Building of Field, Joint Construction, and Independent Construction) help scaffold student learning. A validated rubric was used to assess students' writing content, structure, and language use.

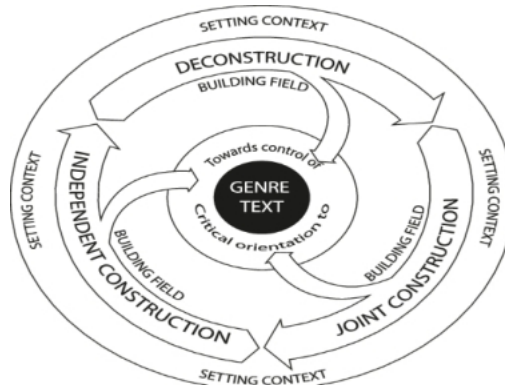


Figure 1. Explains Rothery's Genre Teaching and Learning cycle

Student interviews explored their perceptions of writing development and creativity, while teachers shared their instructional strategies and the challenges, they faced in implementing GBA (Nabella & Rini, 2023). Pre- and post-writing assessments provided quantitative insights to complement qualitative findings, as Sessions (2020) noted that such assessments can effectively measure student progress.

The collected data were analyzed through a hybrid approach. Thematic analysis was used for qualitative data, where interviews and observations were coded and categorized to identify recurring themes (Miles et al., 2014). Descriptive statistical analysis was applied to the writing assessments, using rubrics and sample statistics to track changes in students' writing quality over time.

To ensure research credibility, the study employed data triangulation, member checking, and expert review. Kiwanuka et al. (2020) emphasized that triangulating data from observations, interviews, and document reviews helps verify the consistency of findings. Preliminary findings were shared with participants for validation, and research instruments were reviewed by experts to strengthen reliability (Sessions, 2020). The implementation of the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) among students demonstrably enhanced their writing performance by improving their understanding of genre conventions. For example, students began to organize their writing into clear stages orientation, complication, and resolution and consistently used linguistic features such as temporal conjunctions and past tense forms.

Limitations

The study acknowledged limitations, including the small sample size and focus on a single school, which may affect generalizability. It was recognized that self-reported data from interviews might be subjective, so researcher observations and document analysis were used to provide additional context. It also restricted the ability Time and resource constraints since 60% of the research was conducted online because the researcher was based in Indonesia, a country far away from Uganda. to conduct longitudinal analysis. Despite these limitations, the study successfully provided valuable insights into the potential of GBA in enhancing English language education in Uganda.

Overall, this chapter outlined the methodological framework for exploring GBA's influence on writing development in senior three classrooms in Uganda. Integrating multiple data sources and rigorous analytical processes ensured a robust investigation, contributing valuable insights into GBA's potential to enhance student writing outcomes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Enhancing Writing Skills through the Genre-Based Approach

The implementation of the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) demonstrably enhanced Senior Three students' writing performance by improving their understanding of genre structures, boosting their confidence, and fostering independent writing practices. These outcomes are interpreted through the lens of Halliday's (1978) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which collectively emphasize the role of structured language input and socially mediated learning in literacy development.

A notable improvement was observed in students' mastery of genre-specific features. Approximately 85% of learners were able to consistently organize their narratives using structural components such as orientation, complication, and resolution. Additionally, there was a marked increase in the use of appropriate language features, such as sequencing markers and past tense verbs, supporting Halliday's assertion that language functions in context to serve social purposes. For instance, phrases like "First, the lights went out..." exemplify how students internalized and deployed text-stage conventions meaningfully.

Scaffolding practices within the GBA framework particularly during the Joint Construction phase provided students with the opportunity to engage in collaborative composition and reciprocal learning. These experiences align closely with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), whereby learners benefit from the guided expertise of peers and teachers. Peer interactions during feedback sessions not only promoted idea development but also supported learners in internalizing genre features.

Furthermore, students exhibited increased confidence and autonomy in writing. Teachers reported that 75% of learners produced coherent narratives independently by the final phase of instruction. This shift from dependent to autonomous writing reflects the effectiveness of gradual scaffolding and dialogic learning in promoting writer agency. Students also found the writing process less intimidating, suggesting a decrease in writing anxiety due to GBA's structured support.

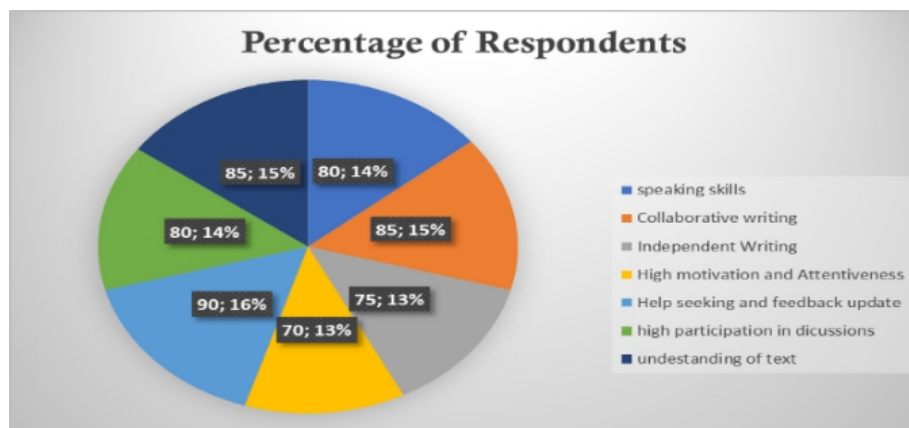


Figure 2 shows the percentage of Respondents on various variables used

Cultural and contextual relevance was also a strong enhancer of learning. Students were encouraged to integrate real-world experiences into their writing, such as community energy shortages or indigenous Ugandan stories like the legend of Kintu and Nambi. This aligns with SFL's emphasis on language as a socially and culturally situated practice. By connecting textual structures to their lived experiences, learners developed writing that was both purposeful and reflective of their environment.

Finally, evidence of long-term retention of writing skills was noted. In follow-up tasks, students continued to apply genre structures with increasing fluency and sophistication. This outcome highlights GBA's capacity to support sustained academic literacy development through explicit instruction, scaffolded practice, and contextual relevance. Together, these findings underscore the effectiveness of GBA in developing learners' academic writing. The approach not only improved structural and linguistic proficiency but also fostered meta-cognitive growth, self-efficacy, and critical awareness dimensions that are vital for meaningful engagement with writing in academic and social contexts.

Challenges in Implementing GBA in Ugandan Classrooms

While the Genre-Based Approach proved effective in enhancing writing skills, its implementation in Ugandan secondary schools revealed multiple challenges that could hinder its widespread and sustained adoption. These challenges span pedagogical, institutional, and infrastructural domains.

One major issue concerned teacher preparedness. Several teachers indicated that they lacked sufficient training in GBA pedagogy, particularly in assessing narrative texts using genre-specific criteria. This gap undermines the fidelity and effectiveness of GBA implementation. According to

Vygotsky's theory, instructional effectiveness depends on the teacher's ability to scaffold learning; thus, inadequate professional development poses a serious limitation.

Another challenge involved student participation. Approximately 25% of learners were passive during collaborative writing sessions, relying heavily on peers to complete group tasks. This reflects a partial breakdown in scaffolding, where some learners may not have been adequately supported to engage fully in the learning process. The uneven participation also indicates a need for differentiated strategies to encourage more equitable engagement.

Moreover, although 90% of students expressed receptiveness to feedback, only a small proportion consistently revised their drafts. This limited revision culture suggests that students may not fully internalize the purpose of feedback within the writing cycle an essential component of Vygotsky dialogic learning.

Significant resource constraints further complicated GBA implementation. Teachers cited limited access to digital tools, instructional materials, and genre-specific exemplars, especially in rural or underfunded schools. These deficiencies restricted the multi-modal delivery of GBA, thereby reducing opportunities for dynamic and interactive learning experiences as envisioned by both SFL and Sociocultural Theory.

Finally, systemic factors such as rigid curricula and overcrowded classrooms posed practical challenges. The GBA's multi-phase cycle demands time for modeling, joint construction, and independent writing yet many schools struggle to allocate sufficient instructional time within the constraints of examination-oriented syllabus.

These findings underscore the need for institutional support, curriculum reform, and investment in teacher professional development to address the contextual barriers to effective GBA adoption. Without addressing these systemic issues, the pedagogical potential of GBA may remain underutilized, limiting its impact on improving students' academic writing outcomes in Uganda.

Expanded SFL Discussion on Findings

The implementation of the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) in the Ugandan secondary classroom reflects core tenets of SFL, particularly the focus on language as a socially situated, functional resource for meaning-making (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The emphasis on scaffolding learners into control of specific genres resonates strongly with Martin & Rose's (2008) Reading to Learn pedagogy, which posits that explicit teaching of genre structure empowers learners to engage more confidently with academic literacy. The peer feedback practices identified in the study exemplify "collaborative knowledge building" (Martin & Rose, 2005), where students interactively negotiate meaning and co-construct text features, reinforcing genre control while sharing responsibility for learning.

Christie (2012) highlights the developmental progression of academic literacy through genre mastery, arguing that explicit genre teaching supports students' transition into higher-order thinking and writing. The findings especially relating to students' ability to construct complex argumentative essays affirm this notion. As students learned to justify claims with evidence and contextualize narratives within personal experiences, they demonstrated not just structural competence but the meta-linguistic awareness Christie considers essential for disciplinary literacy.

Additionally, Derewianka and Jones' (2016) focus on curriculum sequencing and genre progression is clearly manifested in the scaffolded genre cycle used in this study. The three phases; Building Knowledge of the Field, Modeling of Text, and Joint Construction form a "synoptic sequence" that gradually shifts responsibility from teacher to learner. In the Building Knowledge stage, students are exposed to the contextual and linguistic features of the genre through discussions and examples, establishing a foundation for deeper understanding. The Modeling stage provides explicit deconstruction of a mentor text, enabling learners to see how language choices shape meaning within the genre. During Joint Construction, students co-author texts with guided support, practicing the genre conventions collaboratively before attempting independent writing. This gradual release of responsibility aligns with Derewianka's emphasis on empowering learners to internalize genre knowledge, thereby building autonomy, confidence, and mastery.

From a linguistic standpoint, Dreyfus (2020) foregrounds the need to develop students' awareness of "field, tenor, and mode" the contextual variables that shape language use. In this study, students demonstrated control over the field by selecting culturally grounded narratives, such as recounting flood experiences or retelling indigenous legends. Their engagement with peers and teachers further refined their tenor (relationship between writer and reader) and mode (textual organization), equipping them to craft coherent, audience-aware texts. This integration of personal

experience, collaboration, and explicit instruction reinforces the value of genre pedagogy in fostering both linguistic proficiency and sociocultural engagement.

The ability to differentiate instruction for diverse learning needs through tools like graphic organizers aligns with the inclusive pedagogy endorsed by Jones (2021), who argues that genre pedagogy becomes equitable when teachers attend to varying levels of learner readiness and cultural backgrounds. Your mention of graphic organizers for weaker writers like Amina and Peter supports this claim, demonstrating how GBA can reduce linguistic barriers and enhance participation.

Finally, the findings concerning student confidence and ownership reflect SFL's commitment to emancipatory education. Martin and Rose (2008) describe genre pedagogy as a democratizing tool, enabling students from varied backgrounds to participate in powerful discourses. The Ugandan learners' reflections "I knew what each part should do" indicate that structured genre teaching equipped them not only with writing skills but with a sense of efficacy and agency, consistent with the learner empowerment goals central to SFL.

By integrating insights from leading SFL scholars, these findings reinforce GBA as a socially responsive and cognitively empowering framework for language education. The Ugandan classroom demonstrates that when genre pedagogy is situated within scaffolded instruction, peer collaboration, and culturally grounded texts, it not only builds genre mastery but also cultivates student voice, critical engagement, and long-term academic autonomy.

CONCLUSION

This study has illustrated the transformative potential of the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) in enhancing writing skills among Ugandan secondary school learners. Grounded in the principles of Systemic Functional Linguistics, GBA enabled students to internalize genre structures through scaffolded instruction, peer feedback, and meaningful engagement with culturally relevant content. As learners moved through the Genre Cycle, they gained both linguistic competence and confidence, applying genre conventions independently in subsequent writing tasks. The approach also supported the development of critical thinking, creativity, and learner agency, as students crafted texts based on lived experiences and real-world issues.

Despite these promising outcomes, the study identified several systemic barriers that threaten GBA's scalability, including limited teacher training, inadequate teaching resources, and curriculum structures that continue to favor rote learning. Scholars like Jackson (2024), Latif (2024), and Ssentanda (2024) emphasize the need for coordinated reforms in teacher education, curriculum development, and resource allocation to ensure the successful integration of GBA in Ugandan classrooms. This aligns with policy recommendations aimed at promoting skill-based instruction, especially in under served rural schools where access to learning materials remains a challenge.

Future research should explore the role of educational technology in supporting GBA, particularly in contexts where material shortages hinder instructional quality. Tools such as digital storytelling platforms and online writing workshops could help bridge gaps in access while engaging learners in multi-modal composition. Moreover, participatory action research involving teachers, students, and policymakers is encouraged to refine GBA practices based on local needs and insights.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of evidence that GBA is an effective and culturally responsive pedagogy for literacy development. By addressing structural challenges and fostering collaboration across educational sectors, GBA can serve as a sustainable model for improving writing instruction and empowering Ugandan learners to become competent, confident communicators in diverse academic and social contexts.

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