

Research Article

# Exploring the Influence of Social Context on the Development of Swahili Reading Literacy Among Foreign Children in Zanzibar

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## Abstract

This article was intended to explore the influence of social context in helping foreign children develop Swahili reading literacy. The study was guided by Marie Clay's Literacy Development Theory. A total of 28 informants participated, including 16 foreign children and 12 parents. The questionnaire method was used to gather information from parents in order to determine the social context of foreign children. Additionally, interviews were conducted with foreign children to gather information about the role of the social context in learning Swahili literacy skills. Through interviews, the article identified various elements of the social context such as Swahili books, digital literacy resources, interaction with friends, and parents' positive attitudes toward the Swahili language have influenced the development of reading literacy among foreign children. The study also found that parents' involvement in practicing Swahili reading and engaging in conversations in Swahili played a significant role in developing Swahili reading skills among foreign children. The article concludes that, even when the formal language learning environment is unstable, the social context in which a language learner resides, with access to language input, significantly contributes to proficiency in various language skills. Based on the findings of this article, it is recommended that aspects of the social context be given consideration by Second Language (L2) and Foreign Language (FL) educators as an essential pedagogical element in teaching L2 and FL reading literacy. Additionally, further research is recommended to investigate the role of social context in developing other L2 and FL literacy skills.

## Keywords

Reading Literacy, Swahili Language, Social Context, Foreign Children

## 1. Introduction

Swahili has emerged as a language experiencing significant growth, attracting attention worldwide for various purposes. Learning a Second Language (L2) in its country of origin is believed to have positive impacts on the language learner [14]. Zanzibar, in particular, is the birthplace of the standardized variety of Swahili. However, learning Swahili in a country

like Uganda, where no standardized variety of the language exists, presents a more complex challenge [13]. Many international schools in Tanzania prioritize the use of English by both students and teachers within the school environment. For instance, visitors to such schools might encounter signs that read "No English, No Service" or "Smart Area, Speak English

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Only." In general, the learning environment for Swahili is not conducive, thus limiting learners' exposure to the language.

However, preliminary research conducted on foreign children learning Swahili at the Feza International School Zanzibar (FISZ) revealed that these children demonstrate significant proficiency in reading Swahili. This finding prompted researchers to investigate what specifically enables these children to acquire Swahili reading skills in an environment that is not particularly supportive. This article aims to identify the social context factors that support foreign children in learning to read Swahili in Zanzibar and to explore the role of the social context in developing Swahili reading literacy for foreign children in Zanzibar.

#### *Literature Review*

Foreign children as used in this article, they refer to children whose parents are not Tanzanians, and they already have a first language other than Swahili while residing in Zanzibar. Social context of language learning involves parents/guardians, friends, and the environmental elements related to language learning, such as books and publications [17, 18]. In this study social context includes interaction with language users and resources, experiences, the opportunity to use language in conversations, and the culture of parents/guardians to use L2 at home environment. Elements within the social context could aid in the acquisition of reading proficiency [17]. Additionally, watching L2 television programs leads to unintentional vocabulary acquisition, including the ability to recall meanings and recognize words [20]. The studies have identified fundamental factors related to learning to read in the social context, including the presence of real-world items associated with language learning, the parent's habit of reading at home. Parents' beliefs and home literacy environment has positive impacts on pre-schoolers' attitudes toward learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) skills [18]. Parents who actively engaged in literacy activities and provided a supportive home environment positively influenced their children's interest and proficiency in the language. This suggests that similar practices in Kiswahili could enhance children's language skills [6, 15, 18].

Access to books in the target language has been found to be an important resource for L2 and FL literacy learning. The availability of a variety of books in the language learner's environment provides opportunities to acquire and practice vocabulary, which is essential for improving L2 and FL reading skills. Children can develop reading skills in a foreign language by engaging with foreign language books and employing strategies such as pre-reading activities, vocabulary development, and post-reading discussions [18]. Additionally, online educational books can facilitate the development of FL reading skills in primary school children. This goal can be achieved through the presence of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) resources in both home and school environments [3, 9].

Previous studies have suggested that children's exposure to social interactions enhances their ability to acquire foreign

language input, such as vocabulary and language forms. For example, [11] examines the social aspects of exposure to foreign language interaction among three- to four-year-old Korean children, highlighting how it facilitates their acceptance of multiple labelling conversations across languages. However, these studies do not address the influence of social interaction on developing L2/FL reading literacy among foreign children.

Most previous evidences have emphasized the importance of children's interaction with literacy resources in developing foreign language writing skills [16, 21]. The role of social media as a literacy resource has been investigated in the context of developing English language writing skills. One study concluded that social media yields positive outcomes and serves as a convenient tool for improving students' writing skills [16]. Another study by [21] explored the effectiveness of using WhatsApp as a pedagogical tool to enhance EFL reading and writing skills. It proposed that WhatsApp provides an excellent opportunity for students to practice natural language use, particularly in written communication. However, these studies have not sufficiently addressed the role of children's interactions with digital literacy resources in developing L2 and FL reading literacy.

Parent's involvement in development of foreign literacy skills have been revealed in various literatures. Among the types of parental support in foreign language literacy development, such as creating a supportive reading environment, actively participating in literacy activities, and working collaboratively with teachers [2]. The qualitative study by [10] has assessed parents' involvement in their children's English learning process from 10 parents of children aged nine to twelve, representing various professions. The study found out that active parental involvement significantly impacts the academic success of children, exerting a considerable influence in the enhancement of foreign language learning. The study revealed four distinct roles those parents in facilitating their children's acquisition of a foreign language: acting as facilitators, motivators, models, and monitors. This study was essential in the current research since it highlighted the role of parents in developing Swahili reading literacy among children foreign in Zanzibar.

On the other hand, [7] researched the relationship between children's English reading ability and parental behaviour in supporting their children's learning to read. The study took place in the United States and involved 28 children whose parents had Chinese origins. Parents participated in the study to determine how they are involved in their children's English language learning process. The researcher used structured interviews outlining various aspects related to the child's language learning. In the study, many parents claimed that their children's success in learning to read English is significantly linked to their active involvement in helping their children. Parents outlined various methods they use to assist their children in learning English language skills, such as parents enjoying reading various books themselves and

reading various English language texts to their children from a young age. Parents revealed that they read English texts to their children between the ages of six months and two years. [8] identified the role of parents in helping children learn English reading skills in Hong Kong.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This article is informed by Marie Clay's Literacy Development Theory, as outlined in the work of [5]. According to this theory, a child learns to read through proper guidance from people who surpass them in reading ability. The child needs not only interaction but proper interaction that enables them to gain the confidence to read on their own anywhere. The theory also states that learning to read is intertwined with social aspects. Through interactions with people who have greater abilities, as well as with various objects and symbols related to language, the child is influenced to acquire reading skills. The principles of the Literacy Development guide this article in examining the presence of social context elements related to learning the Swahili language, such as Swahili books and the presence of people who know Swahili in the social context of foreign children.

Moreover, theorist of Literacy Development have identified that the student's desire to learn the language, regular practice, and sufficient vocabulary are crucial tools in mastering the reading skills. Theory of Literacy Development also emphasizes the importance of reading various stories from books to the child and narrating stories through conversations [5]. Additionally, the theory explains that the benefits of reading stories to a child include learning the direction of reading (from left to right) and understanding the grammar of the language.

## 3. Methodology and Setting

The research was conducted in the West Urban region of Zanzibar, focusing on foreign children and their parents. A total of 28 informants participated in providing data for this study. The study involved 12 parents of foreign children to assess the social context of these children through a questionnaire. This sample size, based on participants' availability and the nature of the target population, specifically focuses on foreign families whose children are learning Swahili. Additionally, 16 foreign children learning Swahili as a second language participated in the study. These children are under the age of 12 and have been in Zanzibar for at least two years. The children were interviewed to gather information about the role of the social context in their learning of Swahili reading literacy. Each child was interviewed individually by the researcher. The interview questions focused on key elements of the social context identified in the Theory of Literacy Development. These elements were based on responses from the parents' questionnaires. The social context aspects included in

the questionnaire involved the interaction between the child and friends who know Swahili, the interaction between the child and books, and the role of the parents in the child's reading development. Since the participants for interview were children, the researcher selected this method to provide an opportunity to clarify any questions that the children did not understand. The SPSS program was used to analyze the statistical data from the parents' questionnaires and to quantify the responses from the children's interviews. Parents or guardians of foreign children learning Swahili as a second language were asked to evaluate various items on a scale of 1 to 4, reflecting their experiences. Higher ratings signified a stronger influence, while lower ratings indicated a weaker impact on the development of Swahili reading literacy skills. Given that the data obtained through interview was collected from children under 18 years of age, ethical considerations were prioritized. Parents of the participating children provided written informed consent, granting permission for their children to be involved in the study. In addition, verbal assent was obtained from the children themselves prior to the commencement of data collection, ensuring their voluntary participation.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This section present the finding of the article along with the discussion related to the first and second objectives of the study.

### 4.1. Social Context Supporting Swahili Reading Literacy

The first objective of this article was to identify the social context that supports foreign children in Zanzibar in acquiring reading literacy skills in Swahili. To achieve this goal, the researcher used a questionnaire method to assess the social context in which these children live and interact with. In general, the investigation focused on identifying the socio-cultural situation in the environment where these children reside and the surrounding community. The questionnaire was directed at parents/guardians of foreign children learning Swahili language. The parents were asked to rate the identified social context items based on a scale of 1 to 4 based on their experiences. Items with higher scores indicated a greater influence, while those with lower scores indicated a lesser influence on supporting Swahili reading literacy development. A total of 12 parents participated in completing the questionnaire to identify various elements of the social context that, in one way or another, assist children in acquiring reading skills in Swahili. The following question was used to gather the necessary information: "What factors help foreign children learn to read Swahili in the social context?" The answers to this question are presented in Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4 below.

**Table 1.** Literacy resources environment.

	n	%
Digital literacy resources	29	24.2
Swahili books	33	27.5
Toys and objects	30	25
Drawings/pictures	28	23.3

Source: Field results

As the [table 1](#) indicates, the research results according to the questionnaires filled out by parents show that, concerning the environment of Literacy resources, parents acknowledged the presence of Swahili books at home. This element scored a total of 33, equivalent to 27.50% of the total score for all elements of the Environment of Literacy resources. The next weighted element present in the social context is the existence of toys and children's play items like iPad which related to language learning, scoring 30, equivalent to 25%. Regarding the presence of drawings/pictures of various things, this element obtained a score of 28, equivalent to 23.30% of the total score of the Environment of Literacy resources elements. Additionally, parents have indicated the presence of digital resources like television, smartphones used by children for reading and watching Swahili programs such as sports, news, and songs. This element received a score of 29, equivalent to 24.20% of the total score for all elements.

**Table 2.** Child-peer Interaction with Swahili Friends.

	n	%
Child's Swahili friend	36	28.13
Swahili language user at home	38	29.69
Swahili use at home	29	22.65
Reading Swahili with peer	25	19.53

Source: Field results

These results show that the presence of Swahili books at home for those learning the Swahili language provides a greater opportunity for these children to learn to read Swahili compared to other elements of the Environment of Literacy resources. Due to the children's eagerness for reading story-books, these books have provided an opportunity to learn vocabulary along with the context of using Swahili words. The findings align with the research conducted by [\[10, 21\]](#) who emphasized the significance of literacy materials, like literary works, in fostering the vocabulary development of children learning a foreign language. The study revealed the

importance of literatures in providing daily practical vocabulary for 5th and 6th graders to enhance their language learning experience.

Another element of the social context is interaction with friends. According to the research results, children have friends who speak Swahili. Parents have indicated the overall weight of 38, equivalent to 29.69% of the total score for the interaction with friends at home and at school environment. Moreover, the opportunity to communicate in Swahili with someone inside the house received a weighted score of 36, equivalent to 28.13% of the total score of all elements of interaction with friends. The opportunity to speak Swahili with other speakers in the community scored 29, equivalent to 22.65%, and the opportunity to read Swahili with peers attained a weighted score of 25, equivalent to 19.53%. Based on these results, it shows that the presence of Swahili speakers around the child is the most significant element compared to other elements of interaction with friends. With these results, it shows that the presence of Swahili speakers around the child is the element that has the highest significance compared to other elements of interaction with friends. The findings of this study contrast with those of [\[4\]](#), who identified a positive influence of peer interaction on the speaking rather than reading development of English as Second Language Learners (ESL). It's worth noting that the research by [\[4\]](#) focused specifically on adult foreign language learners.

**Table 3.** Parents' attitude on Swahili language.

	n	%
It is important for a child to learn to read in Swahili.	38	24.84
It is important for me to know Swahili.	40	26.14
It is important to teach children how to read.	37	24.18
It is important to build a child's love for reading.	38	24.84

Source: Field results

Additionally, element of the social context is the attitude of parents regarding learning the Swahili language. This element received the highest score compared to other elements of the social context. Parents believe that knowing the Swahili language is important for them, as indicated by a score of 40, equivalent to 26.14% of the total score. Additionally, parents believe it is crucial for their children to know the Swahili language, showing the importance with a score of 38, equivalent to 24.84%. Furthermore, parents believe it is the responsibility of parents to build the children's love for reading, emphasizing this point with a total score of 38, equivalent to 24.84% of the total score for this section. They have also highlighted the essential role of parents/guardians in teaching children to read Swahili, giving it a score of 37, which is 24.18% of the total



score. The results align with findings pointed out by [1], which underscores the significance of parents' positive attitude and literacy awareness in influencing children's reading behaviours. This includes aspects such as choosing suitable reading materials and allocating dedicated time for reading.

**Table 4.** Parents' habit to interact with Swahili context.

	n	%
I read Kiswahili books and newspapers	32	25.6
I watch Kiswahili TV channels	27	21.6
I buy Swahili book for reading	32	25.6
I communicate in Kiswahili	34	27.2

Source: Field results

Regarding the practice of parents/guardians to interact with Swahili context, this aspect is given the highest weight compared to other elements, with a score of 34, equivalent to 27.2% of the total points for this section. It was also found that Kiswahili is sometimes used at home with children, with this aspect scoring 32 points, equivalent to 25.6% of the total points for the parental/guardian reading behavior section.

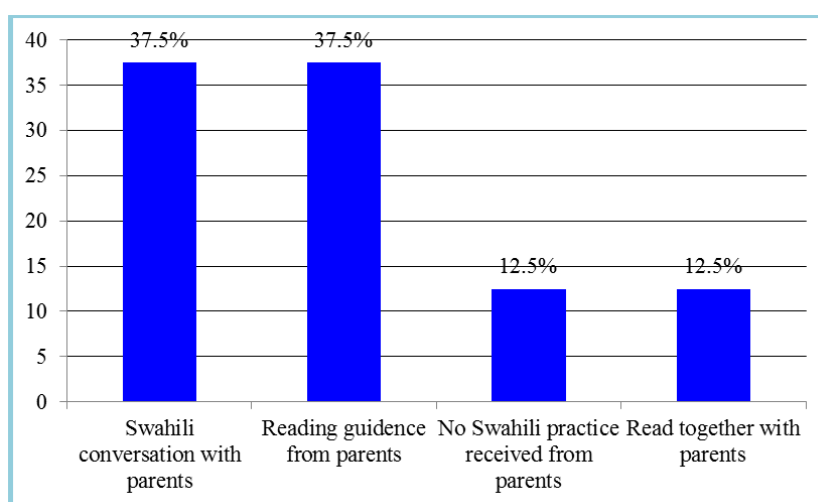
Additionally, parents/guardians indicated a habit of buying Swahili books for personal reading. This aspect was given a total weight of 32 points, equivalent to 25.6% of the overall

score. Parents/guardians also reported the habit of watching television programs and discussing them with their children, incorporating the use of Kiswahili. The weight of points for this aspect is 27, equivalent to 21.6% of the total score.

The findings underscore the pivotal role of parent habit to use language in children's acquisition of Kiswahili language skills. Similar results found out by [6] showed that the limited exposure to Swahili language at home further impeded children's acquisition of pre-reading skills. Engaging in conversations, storytelling, and reading in Kiswahili at home provides children with a solid foundation for language proficiency. Studies have shown that parental involvement in reading activities positively influences children's reading and spelling progress. However, the study focused on learning Swahili reading skills as First Language (L1). The current study focused on Swahili as L2 reading skills.

## 4.2. Role of Social Context in Developing Swahili Reading Literacy

Based on the second objective of this article, it was about exploring the role of social context in learning Swahili reading literacy. Results from interview have been quantified and presented as shown in the Figures 1, 2 and 3. The results have been categorised into three main aspects of role of social context with reference to Theory of Literacy Development. These aspects are role of parents in developing child's Swahili reading literacy, role of friends in developing child's Swahili reading literacy and role of books in developing child's Swahili reading literacy.



Source: Field results

**Figure 1.** Role of parent in developing Swahili reading literacy.

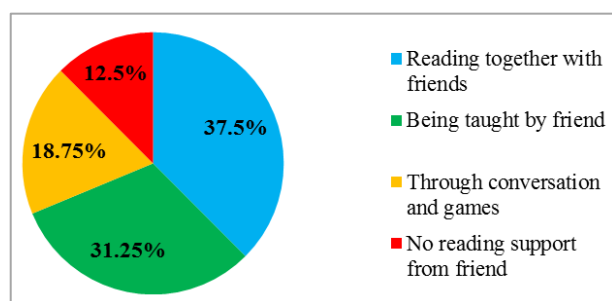
As illustrated in Figure 1, the results regarding the role of parents in supporting children to master Swahili reading literacy reveal that six children (37.5%) stated that parental support involves learning Swahili vocabulary through daily

conversations. They emphasized that these conversations help them understand the meaning of various words. Additionally, six children (37.5%) identified their parents' role as teaching them to read Swahili together at home. However, two children

(12.5%) reported not receiving any assistance in learning to read Swahili from their parents, citing the absence of individuals in their households who speak the language.

These findings align closely with those reported by [2], highlighting the importance of parental involvement in foreign language literacy activities. According to Clay's Literacy Development Theory, interaction between parents and children using conversational language fosters the child's understanding of language structure, vocabulary acquisition, text prediction, and reading fluency. This foundation underscores how interaction with parents or guardians significantly aids children in learning the Swahili language.

On the other hand, concerning the contribution of friends in helping foreign children acquire the skill of reading in Swahili, as shown in the figure below:



Source: Field results

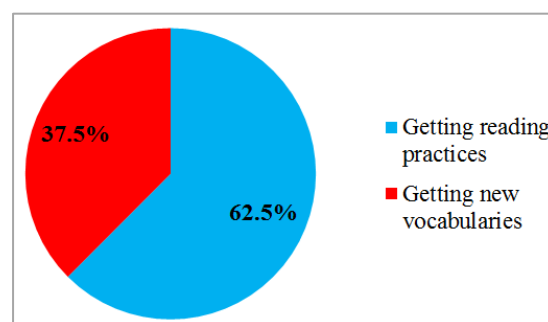
**Figure 2.** Role of friends in developing Swahili reading literacy.

Children reported a significant relationship between their reading abilities in Swahili and the support they receive from friends who speak Swahili language. Six children (37.5%) mentioned that they read and engage in various Swahili activities with their friends. Additionally, five children (31.25%) stated that their friends teach them how to read. Furthermore, three children (18.75%) noted that they learn pronunciation and vocabulary through conversations and games with friends. Conversely, two children (12.5%) admitted to not receiving any support from friends to learn Swahili. [15] found similar results regarding the influence of peers on foreign language development, emphasizing that language peers play a crucial role as mediators and experts in the language learning process, thereby significantly contributing to language acquisition.

As for the results regarding the role of Swahili books in enabling foreign children to master reading in Swahili, the following figure shows the field results:

The findings identified two main roles of Swahili books in learning to read Swahili, as illustrated in Figure 3. Ten children, representing 62.5% of the participants, reported that one role of Swahili books is to provide practice in reading Swahili texts. Additionally, six children, equivalent to 37.5%, stated that Swahili books help them acquire the vocabulary of the Swahili language, especially when reading storybooks. Based on these responses, all 16 children acknowledged the contri-

bution of Swahili books they possess in learning to read Swahili. These results align with [18] on the role of written texts in foreign language learning, as they contribute to the development of reading skills by supporting vocabulary acquisition, enhancing grammatical knowledge, and fostering critical thinking. The Literacy Development on the other hand explains that a child's reading habits are developed through the practice of reading, observing, and listening to those who know how to read. The habit of self-reading is derived from the child having access to books and texts that help them learn new words and the structure of the language.



Source: Field results

**Figure 3.** Role of books in developing Swahili reading literacy.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The aim of this article was to explore the role of the social context in helping foreign children understand the skill of reading in Swahili in Zanzibar. The interviews conducted with foreign children learning Swahili have revealed various elements in the social context, such as Swahili books, radios, newspapers, friends, and parents, which assist them in mastering reading in Swahili. The presence of these items enables children to read and listen to various pronunciations of the Swahili language. Through reading and listening, children gain a solid foundation different from what they receive in a school environment. Foreign children acquire new vocabulary through reading newspapers, listening to radios, and television broadcasting advertisements in the Swahili language. Also, through listening to conversations made by their guardians or friends around them. In general, it has been found that the presence of these items makes the environment for learning Swahili, including learning the skill of reading, friendly for foreign children in Zanzibar. The social context provides an opportunity to learn the vocabulary of the language by interacting with Swahili speakers and interacting with Swahili books. Furthermore, according to the results, it is evident that achieving success in learning a foreign language depends largely on the positive attitude of people surrounding the child, such as parents, guardians, and friends, towards the language they are learning. It is recommended that L2 and FL educators consider social context aspects, such as access to FL

and L2 books, parental involvement in reading activities, and children's interaction with target language speakers, in teaching L2 and FL literacy skills. The article recommends further research to explore the role of social context in developing other L2 and FL literacy skills among children.

## Abbreviations

ESL	English as a Second Language Learner
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
FISZ	Feza International School Zanzibar
FL	Foreign Language
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
L2	Second Language

## Author Contributions

Msellem Mohammed Ali is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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