

Social Competencies and Reading Skills Acquisition in Childhood: Is there a Link?

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Abstract

This paper is based on a study that deployed quantitative research methods to examine the relationship between social competencies and the acquisition of reading skills in childhood. The paper is a response to the Tanzanian government's efforts towards improving the learning outcomes among primary school learners. Literature shows that among the key skills that need to be instilled by teachers in pupils is reading ability. Several attempts have been made by the government to improve learners' learning outcomes; yet empirical evidence reveals that things have not worked to the expectations. It was, therefore, important to investigate the position of social competence skills in the acquisition of reading skills. The study was conducted in Babati Town Council, Manyara region in Tanzania. The study involved six wards from which 17 primary schools were randomly selected. Stratified random sampling was deployed to recruit pupils from the selected schools. A total of 340 pupils were recruited (163 boys and 177 girls). Data on social competence skills were collected using the social competence skills assessment tool, while those on reading skills were collected using an age-appropriate reading skills assessment tool. Logistic Regression analysis was run to estimate the impact of social competence skills on binary outcomes, while Ordinary Least Square Regression (OLS) with multiple predictors was used to estimate outcomes of continuous variables. The findings generally show that the studied six social competence skills (predictors) had no statistically significant contribution towards the pupils' reading acquisition. The study concludes that social competence skills have a slightly positive impact on children's acquisition and mastery of reading skills. This study represents an important shift in the focus of research by shedding light on the children's social adjustment and reading acquisition in early childhood education.

Keywords: Social competence skills, reading skills, academic success, early childhood education, reading achievement, socio-cultural

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1. Introduction

The aim of taking children to school is to enable them to develop knowledge that can help them master their environment. Among the key skills that need to be instilled by teachers to the pupils is reading ability. The acquisition of basic skills such as reading and writing has been considered an absolute human right (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization-UNESCO, 2015) since 1948. Several studies conducted have indicated that there is a positive link between social competencies and reading skills acquisition; focusing mainly on pre-primary and primary school education. However, the reviewed literature has revealed that most of these studies are Western-based; US, Australia, Canada, Lithuania, and so forth. Literature on the same topic from Africa and Tanzania, in particular, is limited. The available literature in developing countries has identified several factors as responsible for reading skills acquisition among children. These factors range from poor education supervision, unfavorable learning conditions, poor teachers' motivation, and insufficient teaching and learning materials (Etsey, et al., 2005); large class sizes and poor administration of home works (Butler, 1987); as well as other home, school and teacher-related factors. Other factors include background knowledge, ability, home environment, school experiences, and interest level. However, the position of social competencies in the acquisition of reading skills is not fully examined.

Social competence skills have been identified internationally as of great importance educationally, especially in the lives of young children. It is recognized that successful reading adjustment at school requires not only cognitive competencies but also social competencies (Bernard, 2006; Denham, et al., 2009; Ladd et al., 2006). Evidence shows that pupils, who lack social competence skills, do less well in school (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004). In addition, social competence skills have been regarded as important in the upbringing of children.

Further research has shown that social competence skills are among the cornerstones of school readiness, and therefore early mastery of social competence skills predicts later academic success (Denham, 2006; Oades-Sese, Esquivel, Kaliski, & Maniatis, 2011). Social competence skills are further believed to be critical in laying down the foundation for good outcomes in the context of school, and providing healthy development in life (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012). Pupils depicted as socially competent for instance, get higher scores on standardized maths and reading tests, while those without social competence skills are at greater risk for

academic complications (Oades-Sese et al, 2011). Elias and Haynes (2008) in another study found that cooperation (i.e. relationship skills) was significantly related to academic success (reading and maths grades). Social competence skills are also linked to higher school graduation and college completion. Pupils with high self-discipline, or self-management, for instance, outperform their colleagues on some academic-performance variables (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). It was also found that self-control (management) was significantly related to academic performance (reading and math grades) (Elias & Haynes, 2008).

Despite their critical role in reading achievement and school success in general, research shows that social competence skills are rarely taught systematically, and pupils have to acquire them through accidental learning, or by trial and error. Research has further revealed that social competence skills are not prioritized in the classroom and at the practical level. Several studies have explored the attitude of teachers towards the importance of pupils' social behavior (Gresham & Elliott, 1990) which leads to one being socially competent, and found the lack of social competence skills training by teachers in the schools. Some researchers have reported that formal social competence skills training does not exist in schools (Vaughn, 1985). Howell (1985) argued that teachers place more emphasis on decreasing those behaviors that make classroom control difficult than on teaching social competence skills.

1.1 Reading Skills Acquisition in Tanzania

Tanzania has recently made significant progress in ensuring that the majority of primary school-going-age children have access to education (Haki Elimu, 2014). According to Basic Education Statistics Tanzania-BEST (Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Vocational Training 2018), the total enrolment of pupils in standard I-VII increased by 8.5% from 9,317,791 pupils in the year 2017 to 10,111,671 pupils in the year 2018. This increase was attributed to fee-free education policy introduced in 2014 through the revised Education and Training Policy (ETP) to replace the one instituted in 1995, as well as the presence of a strong partnership between government, private institutions, faith-based organizations (FBOs), and community-based organizations (CBOs) in the provision of primary education (MoEST, 2018). Yet, the major concern has been on the learning outcomes.

Research by EQUIP Tanzania (2015), Ligembe (2014) and UWEZO (2010, 2015, 2017, 2019) show that the level of reading ability among primary school pupils in Tanzania is relatively low. Low reading ability is reflected in the performance in Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). Studies on factors associated with pupils' poor reading skills achievement in Tanzania, in particular, have focused on learning environment, learning outcomes, teachers' characteristics (Haki Elimu, 2014; Carroll, 2011; EQUIP-Tanzania, 2015). This implies that the role of social competence skills, specifically on reading acquisition has not been given its deserving attention in studies. This situation may lead to difficulty in mitigating the reading problem. In light of the above background, the present study aimed to examine the relationship between social competencies and reading skills acquisition among children.

2. Theoretical Perspective

This study was guided by Lev Semenovich Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory. Sociocultural Theory underscores the significance of the social processes between adults and children for children's learning, which includes reading skills. It holds that participation in social interactions and culturally organized activities influences the individual's cognitive and non-cognitive development. The theory asserts that the environment is critical for children's development, and it emphasizes the role of socially appropriate interactions and instructions. The theory was thought relevant to this study because it explains how individual mental functioning is related to cultural, institutional, and social context. Adopted here was the stance that learning is the result of a dynamic interaction between individuals, other people, and cultural artifacts, all of which contribute to the social formation of the individual's mind (Wertsch, 1991). Thus, the child and learning (through interaction) are situated in a social plane where learning emerges within the context of social and cultural practices.

This study examined the role of sociocultural and its different aspects to several opportunities for the acquisition of reading skills for children at their early stages. As a result, sociocultural theory and its aspects of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding were reviewed to come up with a clear understanding of the process of acquisition of reading skills. Vygostky's (1978) concept of Zone of Proximal Development gives further insights for the understanding of several observable changes in the children's early years as they strive to attain their reading development potential. In this regard, a review of the scaffolding concept gives the needed clue on the concern of what adults could do to help children reach the ZPD while in the learning process. According to Damon (1984), skillful adults can help young children to attain new skills such as reading and writing.

3. Methods

3.1 Approach and study area

This was a quantitative study. The study could be conducted in Manyara (39%), Mtwara (37%), Mwanza (36%),

Tanga (36%), Singida (36%), Mara (35%), and Morogoro (35%) since UWEZO’s report of 2017 identified these regions as the relatively moderate performing regions in reading in Tanzania. However, Manyara Region, Babati Township Council was selected through simple random sampling to be studied. The assumption behind selecting the moderate performing region was that a good sample of pupils with high and low reading abilities would easily be found.

3.2 Selection of wards and schools

The lists of wards and schools were provided by the Babati Town Council’s education officials. With the assistance of the same officials, wards and schools were randomly selected as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 Distribution of the selected wards and schools

Ward	School
Maisaka	Sinai
	Kiongozi
	Maisaka
Nangara	Ziwani
	Nangara
Singe	Gendi
	Managha
Bonga	Bonga
	Himiti
	Darajani
Bagara	Babati
	Harambee
	Kwaang'w
	Komoto
	Oysterbay
Babati	Hangoni
	Waang'waray

This table presents the distribution of wards and schools from each ward that were recruited to participate in the study. A total of six (6) wards and seventeen (17) primary schools were surveyed. Many schools were sampled from Bagara Ward because the ward was the largest and had scattered schools, some in Babati town and others along the sides of the town (interior). A sample of six wards and 17 out of 30 primary schools was thought to be representative, as it was almost more than half of the schools in Babati Town Council.

3.3 Selection of pupils

Selection of pupils was guided by a stratified random sampling technique. To get a representation by gender, pupils were first sat in groups composed of boys and girls. Therefore, a simple random sampling technique was administered to them. A simple random sampling procedure without replacement was employed to recruit pupils from each sampled school to avoid inconsistencies attached with random sampling technique with placement. The population was known (standard four pupils in the selected schools), the sample size was determined (at least 10% of pupils in each class), and pupils were assigned with numbers from which the sample size was randomly selected.

Numbered cards were prepared and put in two boxes according to the number of pupils (boys and girls) in a particular classroom. Each pupil was then asked to pick one card from respective boxes, whereby only those with cards numbered one to ten (from each box) were involved in the study. A total of 340 pupils were recruited to participate in this study (163 boys and 177) girls; twenty were from each selected school. The variation in the number of boys and girls was detected during data cleaning and analysis, and the reason could be that some boys indicated ‘KE’ in the tool which meant ‘female’, rather than ‘ME’ which stood for ‘male’. Figure 1 summarizes the background information of the pupils who were involved in this study.

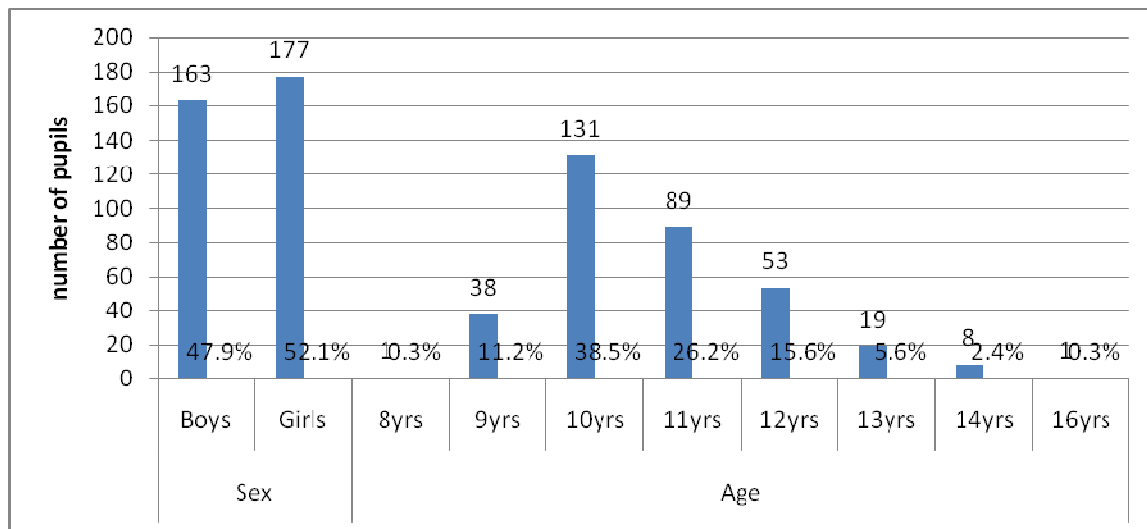


figure 1: Background information of the pupils

It can be depicted from the figure that many standard four pupils (131) in the studied 17 schools were of ten years of age. This is in accordance with the Tanzanian Education and Training Policy (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2014) which requires pupils to start primary education at the maximum age of seven years. Cases of starting primary education at an older age could also be observed – as a large number of standard four pupils were ten years old. According to the ETP (2014), seven years is an ideal age for a child to start standard one.

3.4 Data collection

Data on social competence skills were collected using the social competence skills assessment tool for children. The tool was adopted from the MESSY-II (Matson Evaluation of Social Skills with Youngsters –II). The MESSY-II is a social skills measure for a broad range of children, ages 2–16, based on observations of both appropriate and inappropriate social behaviors. The scale has one form, which is a parent/caregiver report form, and it was filled in by class teachers. The class teachers were guided by the researcher and research assistants to fill in the tool about the behaviors displayed by the pupils. The MESSY-II has 64 items which are each rated on a Likert-type rating scale from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“very much”). Recent studies indicate that the scale has strong psychometric properties including internal consistency (Matson, et al., 2013). For this study, only six items (behaviors) relevant to the reading acquisition were selected from the 64. The social competence skills assessment tool was administered to all 340 pupils who were recruited to participate in the study. The interest was to find out the extent to which participants displayed such behaviors; communication, cooperation, self-control, self-management, engagement, and assertion which were the focus of the study. Reliability analysis was carried out on this scale’s items. Cronbach’s alpha showed that the tool had reached acceptable reliability (internal consistency) of 0.81, thus the items appeared to be worthy of retention.

After assessment of social competence skills, again the age-appropriate reading skills assessment tool was administered to all (340) selected learners. The content and context of the instrument were in line with the Standard Four Curriculum for reading development. The tool was developed by the researcher based on the syllabus and the content of standard four textbooks. Pupils were assessed on vocabulary mastery, listening comprehension, silent reading comprehension, passage reading, and word recognition.

As for the mastery of vocabulary, a table was prepared with ten vocabularies. After each vocabulary, there were five words in which one of them had the same meaning as the mentioned vocabulary. Thus, pupils were supposed to match the vocabulary with the word of the same meaning from the five words provided. Word identification involved the preparation of fifteen (15) words in a table, and after each word, there were three columns to tick (✓) whether pupils identified the word ‘quickly and correct’, ‘slow but correct’, and ‘not correct by reading the provided words aloud before the researcher. It was the researcher who judged and scored whether the pupil read quickly and correct, slow but correct, or incorrect reading. For listening comprehension, pupils were provided with a story ‘Why Anansi (spider) has Eight Thin Legs?’ (read before them by their local teacher), after which comprehension questions were asked to the pupils. Thus, the pupil would be good at comprehending if s/he got all the questions right, and vice versa. In assessing silent reading skills, pupils were given a story ‘Mama Pweza-Mother Octopus’ to read silently, and then attempt the questions that followed. Same as in the reading comprehension, those who got all the questions right were good at reading silently than their counterparts. The last reading skill assessed (loud reading) was assessed by providing a story in a table with columns to show the number of words read quickly and correct, words read correctly but slowly, and the

incorrectly read words. The counting of words was done by the researcher when pupils read the story. A higher score under the ‘quick and correct’ column meant the pupils were good at that skill. The combination of the social competence caregivers’ scale (filled by the class teachers) and reading skills assessment tools was meant to compare the scores to find out if there was any link between the two components.

3.5 Data analysis

Descriptive analysis for demographic variables and some visualization was conducted. Also, Logistic Regression analysis was run to estimate the impact of social competence skills on binary outcomes, while Ordinary Least Square Regression (OLS) with multiple predictors was used to estimate outcomes of continuous variables. The analysis for each predictor of the six (communication, cooperation, self-control, self-management, engagement, and assertion) of social competence was conducted against the outcomes of each literacy component tested (vocabulary, word identification, listening and reading comprehension, passage reading, and silent reading) to find out any association. Both regressions provide coefficients that estimate the number of changes in the reading skills that would be predicted by changes in social competence characteristics, holding other characteristics like age and gender of the student constant.

4. Findings, Discussions and Limitations

4.1 Findings

The tool for literacy assessment was divided into five sections namely vocabulary, word identification, listening comprehension, silent reading, and reading aloud. These were the outcomes in the analysis against the six predictors namely communication skills, cooperation, engagement, assertion, self-management, and self-control. The six predictors were run against each outcome to find out their impact. As for vocabulary, the findings showed that the predictors had no significant impact on the pupils’ ability to match the vocabulary. However, there was a slight impact of self-management skills (33%) on matching the vocabulary ‘laugh’ at a 95% confidence level (see table 2).

Table 2

Predictors	Outcomes									
	return	far	swallow	swim	Get out	laugh	joy	Stand up	give	Take out
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
Communication: Agree	-0.0719	-0.0181	0.118	-0.147	0.0139	-0.224*	0.00921	0.0786	-0.364***	0.0150
	(0.174)	(0.0787)	(0.158)	(0.127)	(0.0869)	(0.129)	(0.0845)	(0.147)	(0.0765)	(0.114)
Cooperation: Agree	0.209	0.111	-0.223***	-0.0153	0.170	-0.299**	0.0959	0.00441	-0.166	0.165
	(0.134)	(0.189)	(0.0745)	(0.243)	(0.248)	(0.146)	(0.170)	(0.191)	(0.208)	(0.228)
Engagement: Agree	-0.0460	0.0242	0.172	-0.00905	-0.0424	0.155	0.0458	0.00537	0.135	0.00325
	(0.178)	(0.105)	(0.177)	(0.168)	(0.0686)	(0.207)	(0.104)	(0.141)	(0.180)	(0.122)
Management: Agree	0.00496	0.0569	0.0769	-0.0760	0.000542	0.325**	-0.00146	0.0629	0.105	-0.00761
	(0.136)	(0.0978)	(0.131)	(0.122)	(0.0720)	(0.129)	(0.0668)	(0.125)	(0.146)	(0.0966)
Assertion: Agree	0.110	0.0137	0.113	0.0762	0.0840	0.0685	0.131*	0.166*	0.0348	0.159*
	(0.0804)	(0.0601)	(0.0942)	(0.0954)	(0.0728)	(0.0978)	(0.0746)	(0.0923)	(0.0976)	(0.0882)
Control: Agree	-0.0829	0.139	0.182	0.0258	0.0942	0.203	0.169	0.0441	0.0511	0.0137
	(0.127)	(0.108)	(0.127)	(0.125)	(0.100)	(0.132)	(0.111)	(0.113)	(0.129)	(0.0994)
Standard errors in parentheses										
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1										

Notes: This table is based on the results of Logistics regression testing for marginal estimates. Column (1) describes the predictors/determinants used in the model to make prediction in each row. Columns (2) to (9) are the outcomes of interest respectively.

It was also found in the analysis of the six predictors against word identification; that there was no statistical significance that the predictors might have any contribution towards the pupils’ ability to identify words. In addition, the findings on listening comprehension, silent reading, and reading aloud were not different from the previous two outcomes. This generally shows that the studied six social competence skills (predictors) had no statistically significant contribution towards the pupils’ reading achievement.

4.2 Discussion

The importance of social competence skills to reading and academic skills achievements, in general, is highlighted in many studies. Birch and Ladd (1997) point out that social competence skills are crucial to learners’ school readiness and adjustment as pupils with more social competence skills are better in peer interaction and reading skills. Such skills continue to be critical to pupils’ academic accomplishment through their development and into adolescence. The findings in the current study showed no significant relationship between social competence skills and the acquisition of reading skills.

This, however, does not mean that the findings are not important. According to Hoekstra, Finch, Kiers, and Johnson (2006), interpreting non-significant tests as conclusive confirmation for the lack of the outcome in question is misleading. Hoekstra and colleagues argue that a non-significant effect can occur for two reasons; the outcome might be present with about the predicted size, but it could simply have been overlooked because the

evidence in the given sample is not sufficiently strong. Two, the outcome could be smaller than expected, sometimes even closer to zero, and might therefore be thought negligible or absent.

The author appreciates the significance of non-significant results. Statistically significant results (Frenzel, 2014) are those that are understood as not likely to have occurred purely by chance, and thereby have other underlying causes for their occurrence. Several factors could be attributed to non-significant findings in the current study. The scales (social competence and literacy assessment) were administered to pupils only. The sample size of 340 pupils might not be large enough to elicit the desired relationship between the two variables of the study. According to Frenzel (2014), a high sample size permits the researcher to increase the significance of the results. The larger the sample size, the more accurately it is expected to reflect the behavior of the whole group. The current study had a sample of approximately 10% of the total population (standard four pupils), which was thought enough for the study. In that regard, on the other hand, the researcher became reluctant to increase the sample as that would likely create false-positive results.

Failure to control some participants' characteristics can also result in non-significant findings. According to the situation in the study area, the author had anticipated the following intervening characteristics which were controlled; positive attitude towards school, better mental health, socio-economic background, and parents level education. Literature, however, shows that there are characteristics that are also central to the pupils' learning. These characteristics are such as the number of family members, access to books and play materials at home, stability of home life, quality of child care, going to preschool, exposure to stress (in the womb, as an infant, and as a child) and others (Bjork, 2011), of which they were not included in this study.

4.3 Limitations

Although this study yields remarkable findings, they should be considered against several possible limitations. Some of the limitations, however, imply exciting future research directions. The potential limitation was the difference between the language used in the field and the medium of research instruments. The tools were developed in the English language, reviewed by the experts, and then translated into Kiswahili. A common language problem in research occurs when two sides (researcher and participants) do not share the same language as they will need an interpreter to facilitate communication. This was not the case in the current study, as the challenge was just on one concept; social competence skills. The Kiswahili word for *social competence* posed a challenge. This made the research team (researchers and participants) sit after the pilot study and agree on the proper terminology that would stand for social competence in Kiswahili; which was *mwenendo mzuri*.

Lastly, this study focused on a small group of schools in one geographical area of the Manyara Region. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all standard four pupils in Tanzania. Nonetheless, the findings provide insights into social competence skills and reading acquisition in the African context, they do not cover the whole population of children in the country with different sociolinguistic and cultural contexts.

5. Conclusion

Much has been written on the contribution of social competence skills to academic acquisition in general, and reading skills in particular. However, the impact of social competence skills on reading skills acquisition differs according to the context in which the variables exist. The current study has thus presented the relationship between the two variables in the African context, as most of the existed literature on the topic focused on Western, Asian, and American countries. In conclusion, this study posits that social competence skills have a slightly positive impact on children's acquisition and mastery of reading skills. An exploration of the two variables (social competence and reading skills) suggests that there is an existence of a positive relationship between the two. This study represents an important shift in the focus of research by shedding light on the children's social adjustment and reading acquisition in early childhood education.

6. Recommendations

- i. This study was a cross-sectional study of standard four pupils. It solely focused on the relationship between social competence skills and reading skills acquisition. A longitudinal study would be interesting to further establish this assertion. This would be of great benefit to researchers because they will be able to detect developments or changes in the characteristics of the targeted learners at both the group and individual levels.
- ii. The non-statistical significant findings provide an avenue for future researchers to study a different population or look at a different set of variables. Since this study was correlational (assessing the statistical relationship between two variables), a future researcher might borrow some experimental ideas to yield significant findings.

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