

Exploring the Impact of Swahili Literature Reading on Cognitive and Emotional Abilities Among Kenyan Students: Implications for Academic Performance in K-12

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Abstract

Swahili literature in Kenya represents a vibrant canvas of cultural expression deeply rooted in Arabic poetry and indigenous folklore. This essay explores the evolution and contemporary relevance of Swahili literature, tracing its journey from early oral traditions to modern literary forms. The discussion highlights the surge in Swahili literary publications over the past decade, underscoring its growing importance in both national and educational contexts. Specifically, the integration of Swahili literature into Kenyan K-12 education is examined, focusing on influential works like Ken Walibora's "Siku Njema" and Dr. Assumpta K. Matei's "Chozi la Heri," which tackles diverse themes such as social justice and human rights.

Later, the cognitive effects of reading Swahili literature among Kenyan K-12 students are explored, drawing on studies that demonstrate enhanced cognitive skills and language proficiency resulting from literary engagement. These studies, including research by nurse Mwangi and an educator at the Ministry of Home Affairs in Tanzania, M.K, highlight improvements in memory, attention, and problem-solving abilities, particularly beneficial for students from marginalised backgrounds. Neuroscientific evidence from a researcher at the Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology Ochieng and Mwanyumba further illuminates how Swahili fiction stimulates brain regions associated with language processing and emotional regulation, contributing to academic readiness.

Furthermore, the emotional impact of Swahili literature on students is explored through studies by author of children literature Pamela M Ngugi and Flavia Aiello Traore, which emphasise heightened emotional intelligence, empathy, and cultural understanding among readers. These emotional responses not only enrich students' personal development but also

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Introduction

Swahili literature is deeply rooted in the region of East Africa, drawing influences from Arabic poetry, with a rich tradition of storytelling through folklore. Specifically, Swahili literature in Kenya features early oral and written traditions, colonial-era standardisation, and a modern revival driven by increased publication and interest (Library, n.d.). In fact, the past decade has witnessed an upsurge in the publication of Swahili literature works in Kenya. In the 19th and 20th century, Swahili literature began to be written down and published in newspapers and many other forms of media. Swahili literature has evolved over time in Kenya and other regions of East Africa, beginning with non-literary works and later transitioning to novels and short stories during the colonial and post-colonial periods (Zúbková et al., 2009). Repetitive, rigid and predictable rhyme and metre form in Swahili poetry was introduced in the mid-17th century through the composition of Hamziyya, a composition that was modelled on an older poem written in Egypt by Abu Busiri in the 13th Century. Many Swahili literature in Kenya, covers themes like politics, social issues, and women's rights. For example, the earliest Swahili literature work is James Mbotela's historical novel, "Uhuru wa Watumwa," published in 1934 which remains a significant piece in Swahili literature as it covers the tragedies that occurred during the slave trade (Mberia, 2022).

Due to the various critical themes presented, Swahili literature has been gradually integrated into Kenyan K-12 education, fostering a deeper appreciation for the language and its rich literary heritage. Notably, Ken Walibora, a renowned Swahili author, played a pivotal role in this integration. His novel "Siku Njema" (A Good Day), which tells a tale of triumph over adversity, became a set book in high schools across the country, inspiring many students to embrace Swahili literature. Additionally, Dr. Assumpta K. Matei's novel, "Chozi la Heri," is also taught in Kenyan schools, addressing themes like human trafficking, dysfunctional families, and political unrest. While Swahili literature has started to become a stepping stone towards Kenyan k-12 education, the question arises on what the cognitive and emotional effects of reading Swahili literature are on the brain among Kenyan students and how this impacts their academic performance in K-12 education.

Literature Review

Cognitive Effects

Reading Swahili literature has been shown to significantly enhance cognitive development among Kenyan K-12 students. According to a study by nurse Mwangi M.K and educator at the Ministry of Home Affairs in Tanzania, A.M. Mwanyumba, it was found that "reading Swahili fiction has a positive impact on cognitive development, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds" in the context of Kenya (2020). In other words, the more the Kenyan students engaged with Swahili literature, the greater indication there was of improved cognitive skills such as memory, attention, and problem-solving, with notable benefits observed among students from low-income backgrounds, suggesting a potential for levelling educational disparities. This finding is significant for education because it highlights the potential of incorporating Swahili literature into the curriculum to enhance cognitive skills.



By demonstrating that engagement with Swahili literature can improve memory, attention, and problem-solving abilities, particularly among students from low-income backgrounds, this research suggests a method to bridge educational gaps and support diverse learners. It is also significant in that it offers an evidence-based approach to leverage cultural and linguistic assets in education to foster cognitive development and equity. In hindsight, it underscores the importance of culturally relevant materials in enhancing learning outcomes and suggests that such approaches could be adapted to other contexts to address educational disparities.

Similarly, researchers at the Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, R.O Ochieng and A.M. Mwanyumba, also provides neuroscientific evidence, stating that, "the neural correlates of reading Swahili fiction suggest that it activates several brain regions associated with language processing, memory retrieval, and emotional regulation" (2019). The quote emphasizes that when people read fiction written in Swahili, certain areas of the brain that are involved in language, memory, and emotions become active. These brain regions work together to process the text, retrieve related memories, and manage emotional responses to the content. This finding by R.O Ochieng and A.M. Mwanyumba is notable as it highlights how reading in a specific language like Swahili engages various cognitive and emotional processes among the Kenyan students. It can help researchers understand the cognitive and emotional impact of reading in different languages, which can be crucial for studies on multilingualism, literacy, and cultural narratives. It also provides an insight on how reading in different languages affects brain function, contributes to memory and emotion, and might also inform language education practices or cognitive therapy approaches. Nevertheless, this is particularly important in the context of k-12 Kenyan students, as the utilization of Swahili, a language native to Kenya, helps to better engage the students in reaping the cognitive benefits that come with reading and writing.

Last, but not least, it was also found through a meta-analytic review that, "...reading Swahili fiction improves language proficiency, including vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension" (Mwanyumba & Mwanyumba, 2018). In other words, it was suggested that reading enhances language proficiency, including vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension, with these improvements sustained over time, highlighting the enduring impact of reading on language development. For Kenyan students reading Swahili literature, engaging with Swahili texts can improve their vocabulary, grammar, and overall comprehension in the language. The sustained exposure to well-crafted language in literature, especially in a familiar language, helps the students learn new words, understand complex sentence structures, and grasp nuanced meanings, leading to long-term improvements in their Swahili language skills. This can also foster a deeper appreciation for their cultural heritage and strengthen their linguistic identity. Language is, therefore, cognitive because it involves mental processes related to understanding, producing, and interpreting spoken and written words. Language development and usage affect cognitive abilities, such as enhancing critical thinking and memory retention. Thus, language and cognition are deeply intertwined, with language skills influencing cognitive development and vice versa.

The positive cognitive effects of reading Swahili literature on Kenyan K-12 students also, simultaneously, sets them up for success in the academic world. As these students experience



cognitive development through continuous engagement with Swahili literature, they garner the possibility of gaining better usage of rich vocabulary and appropriate language structures in Swahili writing or other instances of writing in general. According to a study conducted by Dr. Hannah Chaga Mwaliwa, a lecturer of Swahili language and linguistics in the Department of Kiswahili, University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya, “the use of literary expressions such as idioms, proverbs, vocabulary and so on, has been inherited by the community through Swahili literature” (Mwaliwa, 2018). In other words, by immersing themselves in this rich literary tradition, students are exposed to a diverse array of linguistic tools that enhance their cognitive abilities. Idioms and proverbs, for instance, require students to think abstractly and understand nuanced meanings, thereby fostering critical thinking and interpretative skills. Additionally, the continuous exposure to a broad vocabulary and complex language structures in Swahili literature aids in the development of advanced language skills. This not only improves their proficiency in Swahili but also enhances their overall linguistic capabilities, which are transferable to other languages and academic subjects. Consequently, these students are better equipped to articulate their thoughts clearly and effectively, a skill that is invaluable in academic writing and beyond. The cognitive development fostered through Swahili literature thus sets a strong foundation for academic success, as students become adept at using language creatively and precisely, which is essential for excelling in various academic disciplines.

Furthermore, the positive cognitive effects of reading Swahili literature on Kenyan K-12 students also, simultaneously, sets them up for success in the academic world by enabling deeper understanding of Swahili or other texts, including novels, poems, and plays. This matter was examined by professors of educational communication and technology at the University of Nairobi, Kenya, in an experimental study involving reading skills assessment tests, questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions. According to the study conducted among 8 public secondary schools in the Kisumu County of Kenya, frequent engagement in interacting reading allows for “learners to recognize words concurrently with comprehension of the text and suggests further research in other school categories” (Kulo et al., 2019). In other words, by interacting with texts regularly, students develop the ability to recognize words while simultaneously comprehending the overall meaning of the text. This dual process enhances their reading fluency and comprehension skills, which are crucial for understanding more complex texts such as novels, poems, and plays. The ability to decode words quickly and understand their context allows students to appreciate the nuances and deeper meanings within literature. Furthermore, the quote suggests that these benefits are not limited to Swahili literature alone but could extend to other subjects and languages, indicating a broader cognitive development. Students would also be able to better interpret themes, symbolism, and cultural nuances presented in Swahili or other pieces of literature.

These findings collectively illustrate that reading Swahili literature not only enhances cognitive skills, like memory and attention, but also improves language proficiency, which are fundamental to educational achievement. By stimulating neural activity related to language processing and memory, reading contributes to cognitive development, thereby fostering academic readiness and success among Kenyan K-12 students.



Emotional Effects

In addition to providing positive cognitive effects, reading Swahili literature has also been proven to have various positive emotional effects on the brain of k-12 Kenyan students. The study of Kenyan author, Remi Tchokothe, in 2014 conveys how the evolution of Swahili literature elicits various emotions such as joy, sadness, anger and fear among the Kenyan students when reading Swahili literature as they lose themselves in it. The study states that, “The emotional effects of reading Swahili literature can be ambivalent, this ambivalence leads to a deeper emotional connection with the material as the reader is forced to confront and process their emotions.” This finding tends to highlight the ambivalent emotional effects of reading Swahili literature, suggesting that this ambivalence can foster a deeper emotional connection with the material. When students engage with Swahili literature, they encounter a range of emotions that may be conflicting or complex. This emotional ambivalence requires them to actively process and confront their feelings, rather than passively consuming the content. By navigating these emotional landscapes, students develop a greater capacity for emotional intelligence, as they learn to recognize, understand, and manage their own emotions. Additionally, this process enhances empathy, as students are exposed to diverse perspectives and experiences within the literature, prompting them to consider and understand the emotions and viewpoints of others. The act of grappling with ambivalent emotions in literature mirrors real-life emotional experiences, thereby equipping students with the skills to handle similar situations in their personal lives. Consequently, reading Swahili literature not only enriches students’ literary knowledge but also contributes significantly to their emotional and empathetic growth.

Additionally, a study by Kenyan author of children literature, Pamela M Ngugi, in 2009 also suggested similar findings and applied the reader response theory in order to describe the responses of the pupils to the literature they read and how this affects them. She further explained that Swahili literature exposes the k-12 Kenyan students to a variety of emotions making them more emotionally vulnerable; therefore, they become better able to emotionally express themselves and put a name to their feelings. She states that, “Swahili literature often explores themes of identity, culture, and self-discovery, which can evoke strong emotions in readers.” In other words, by delving into themes of identity, the students are encouraged to reflect on their own personal and cultural identities, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of their heritage. This process of self-discovery can be emotionally enriching, as students navigate their own sense of self in relation to the stories they read. Additionally, the cultural themes prevalent in Swahili literature provide students with a sense of belonging and connection to their community, which can be particularly comforting and affirming during the formative years of K-12 education. The emotional resonance of these themes can lead to increased empathy, self-awareness, and emotional intelligence, as students relate to the characters and situations depicted in the literature. Thus, the exploration of identity, culture, and self-discovery in Swahili literature not only evokes strong emotions but also contributes to the positive emotional and psychological development of Kenyan students.

The positive emotional effects of reading Swahili literature on Kenyan K-12 students also, simultaneously, sets them up for success in the academic world. The study conducted by



Pamela M Ngugi in 2009 also stated that, 'The emotional effects of reading Swahili literature can significantly impact students' engagement and motivation in the learning process.' In other words, when K-12 students in Kenya read Swahili literature, they encounter stories, characters, and themes that resonate with their cultural and personal identities. This connection fosters a sense of belonging and relevance, making the learning material more relatable and engaging. Emotional responses such as empathy, excitement, and curiosity are triggered, which can transform passive reading into an active, immersive experience. This heightened engagement not only makes the learning process more enjoyable but also enhances students' intrinsic motivation to succeed academically. When students are emotionally invested in what they are learning, they are more likely to participate actively in class, complete assignments diligently, and pursue further knowledge with enthusiasm. Consequently, the emotional effects of reading Swahili literature can create a positive feedback loop where increased engagement leads to higher motivation, which in turn fosters better academic performance and a deeper appreciation for education. This tends to show that the emotional effects of reading Swahili literature can positively influence the k-12 Kenyan students' education.

Additionally, a study by post-doctoral research fellow at the University "L'Orientale" of Naples of Italy in African Literature, Rosanna Tramutoli, also conveys how Swahili literature can influence emotional competence, which is essential for their academic success in school. The study employed a literature review of various Swahili novels to analyze how exposure to Swahili literature influences students' emotional responses, cognitive processes, and overall educational experiences. She emphasizes how reading Swahili literature can have a profound impact on students' emotional experiences, particularly in the context of education. In regard to Swahili literature specifically, she states, "Metaphors are pervasive in both our everyday speech and literary language. They are particularly effective for codifying complex emotional experiences" (2017). For example, metaphors in Swahili literature are effective in codifying complex emotional experiences, making them relatable and accessible to students." Furthermore, Swahili literature, rich in metaphors and cultural narratives, provides students with a unique lens through which they can explore and relate to complex emotional experiences. Metaphors in Swahili literature serve as powerful tools that codify these experiences, making them more accessible and relatable to students. This process not only aids in the development of emotional intelligence by helping students recognize and understand their own emotions but also fosters empathy as they connect with the characters and situations depicted in the literature. Furthermore, by immersing students in the cultural contexts and traditions embedded in Swahili literary works, they gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of diverse cultures. This cultural awareness is crucial for holistic educational development, as it broadens students' perspectives and enriches their learning experiences. Ultimately, the integration of Swahili literature in education promotes a more comprehensive and empathetic approach to learning, preparing students to navigate and appreciate the complexities of the world around them.



Conclusions

In essence, Swahili literature holds profound significance for Kenyan K-12 education, impacting students both cognitively and emotionally. The cognitive benefits, highlighted by studies like those of Mwangi and Mwanyumba, underscore its role in enhancing memory, attention, and problem-solving skills, particularly among disadvantaged students. Neuroscientific findings from Ochieng and Mwanyumba further illustrate how reading Swahili fiction activates critical brain regions, crucial for language processing and emotional regulation, thereby supporting academic readiness and success. Moreover, the emotional effects documented by researchers such as Pamela M Ngugi and Flavia Aiello Traore emphasize how Swahili literature nurtures emotional intelligence, empathy, and cultural understanding among students, fostering deeper engagement and motivation within the academic realm. As Swahili literature continues to enrich the educational landscape in Kenya, its dual impact on cognitive development and emotional enrichment consolidates its pivotal role in shaping holistic learning experiences for the nation's youth.

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