



Variation in English Vocabulary Depth among Tanzanian Secondary School Learners: The Role of Sociolinguistic Background

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Abstract

This study examines how sociolinguistic background affects the development of English vocabulary depth among secondary school learners in Tanzania's multilingual context, where English serves as the medium of instruction from secondary to tertiary education, despite being primarily learned as a foreign language. Despite growing interest in vocabulary acquisition, there is limited empirical evidence on how sociolinguistic factors shape vocabulary depth among secondary school learners in Tanzania. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was adopted to triangulate quantitative and qualitative data. Using stratified random sampling, the Word Association Test was administered to 320 Form 3 and 4 students from eight secondary schools in Dodoma, and interviews were conducted with eight English teachers to provide deeper insight. Multiple regression and thematic analyses revealed that sociolinguistic background significantly affects learners' vocabulary depth ($p < 0.05$). Students who reported using English in informal settings, such as the playground or at home, demonstrated greater vocabulary depth than those who used English only in formal classroom contexts. In addition, learners whose parents had attained at least Form Four education and those who began learning English in early schooling exhibited more developed lexical networks than their peers. These findings highlight the importance of sociolinguistic exposure and early language-learning experiences. The study suggests that language-teaching and language-learning policies should consider learners' sociolinguistic diversity and provide a basis for targeted pedagogical interventions.

Introduction

In Tanzania, English holds a particularly significant role within the education system. Although Kiswahili functions as the national language and is widely used as a lingua franca, English is the official medium of instruction in secondary schools and higher learning institutions (Mapunda, 2022; Mtallo, 2015; Rubagumya, 2010; Tibategeza & du Plessis, 2012). This situation exists within a broader multilingual context in which more than 150 ethnic community languages are spoken across the country. For most Tanzanian learners, therefore, English is not acquired as a first language, but rather as a foreign language, primarily encountered within formal educational settings. As Tibategeza and du Plessis (2012) observe, English is largely absent from learners' everyday linguistic environments



outside the classroom. This creates a complex linguistic situation in which students are expected to learn academic content in a language with relatively limited exposure.

Within this multilingual educational context, concerns have emerged regarding learners' English language proficiency, particularly their ability to develop sufficiently rich vocabularies to support academic learning (Mtallo, 2026). Vocabulary knowledge plays a central role in language acquisition and comprehension, as it underpins learners' ability to interpret written texts, engage in academic discussions, and express ideas effectively (Makalela, 2024). However, the rate at which learners acquire vocabulary may vary considerably depending on several factors, including the linguistic and sociocultural environments in which they learn. In multilingual societies such as Tanzania, learners' sociolinguistic backgrounds may significantly shape their opportunities for language exposure and use, thereby influencing vocabulary development (Mtallo, 2026).

Against this background, the present study investigates the extent to which sociolinguistic factors influence the development of English vocabulary depth among secondary school learners in Tanzania. Specifically, the study examines factors such as language use at home, exposure to English in informal settings, parental education levels, early exposure to English instruction, and opportunities for interaction with English speakers, as outlined by Zaretsky and Lange (2015). The study focuses on secondary school students in Dodoma, Tanzania's capital city, where learners from diverse sociolinguistic backgrounds are represented. This setting provides an opportunity to examine how variations in learners' linguistic and social environments may influence their vocabulary development.

Literature Review

English continues to occupy a dominant position in many African education systems, particularly in countries that were formerly under British colonial administration. In these contexts, the language often serves as a key medium for academic communication, governance, and participation in global knowledge economies (Nankindu & Ssematya, 2026; Tom-Lawyer & Thomas, 2024). Consequently, English enjoys high prestige and institutional support in several African countries, including Nigeria, Ethiopia, South Africa, and Tanzania (Madiba, 2024; Madiba & Maseko, 2023; Mapunda, 2022; Mashige & Makalela, 2024; Mbunda, 2023; Mtallo, 2026; Ndhlovu, 2024). Recent studies also indicate an expansion of English use across multiple social domains in parts of Africa, despite the continued presence of rich, multilingual linguistic environments (Mergo & Daba, 2024; Mtallo, 2026; Nankindu & Ssematya, 2026; Sibanda & Tshehla, 2025; Tom-Lawyer & Thomas, 2024).

Previous research on language acquisition has identified different factors that influence learners' development of English proficiency. Some studies emphasise cognitive variables, such as memory capacity and language processing ability, as key determinants of vocabulary acquisition (Clark, 2004; Mekala, 2013). Other studies, however, highlight the role of sociolinguistic factors, including home language practices, exposure to English outside the classroom, parental education levels, and early language-learning experiences (Mtallo & Kimambo, 2024; Vaishnav, 2025; Zaretsky & Lange, 2015). These factors shape the environments in which learners encounter and use language, potentially influencing how deeply they develop their vocabulary knowledge.

Despite the growing body of research on English language-learning in multilingual contexts (Madiba, 2024; Madiba & Maseko, 2023; Mapunda, 2022; Mashige & Makalela, 2024; Mbunda, 2023; Mtallo, 2026; Ndhlovu, 2024), relatively little attention has been paid to how sociolinguistic factors influence vocabulary depth in particular. Vocabulary knowledge is commonly conceptualised in two dimensions: vocabulary breadth and vocabulary depth. Vocabulary breadth refers to the number of



words that learners know. In contrast, vocabulary depth refers to how well learners understand those words, including their meanings, associations, derivations, collocations, and usage in different contexts (Nation, 2013). While vocabulary breadth indicates the size of a learner's lexicon, vocabulary depth reflects the quality and complexity of lexical knowledge.

For example, a learner may recognise the basic meaning of a word such as active, demonstrating vocabulary breadth. However, deeper vocabulary knowledge involves understanding related synonyms (e.g., lively or energetic), derivations (e.g., activity and activation), and common collocations (e.g., active participation or active support). Such knowledge enables learners to interpret texts more effectively and use vocabulary appropriately in different communicative situations (Elmasry, 2012; Mtallo & Kimambo, 2022). Developing vocabulary depth is, therefore, essential for successful academic language use.

In multilingual contexts, the development of vocabulary depth may be particularly sensitive to sociolinguistic influences. Learners who encounter English across multiple social environments – for example, at home, in school, or in informal peer interactions – may have greater opportunities to develop richer lexical networks than those whose exposure to English is primarily limited to classroom instruction (Mtallo, 2026). Similarly, parental education levels, early exposure to English learning, and opportunities to interact with English speakers may contribute to differences in vocabulary development among learners (Mtallo, 2026; Zaretsky & Lange, 2015)

Given these considerations, understanding the relationship between learners' sociolinguistic backgrounds and their vocabulary development is crucial for improving language-teaching and learning in multilingual educational contexts. Such knowledge can inform educational policies and pedagogical practices that address learners' diverse linguistic experiences.

By exploring the role of sociolinguistic background in shaping English vocabulary depth, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of language acquisition processes in multilingual educational contexts. The findings are expected to inform language education policy and practice in Tanzania and other African contexts where English serves as a medium of instruction despite being primarily learned as a foreign language.

Theoretical Framework

Grounded in Sociocultural Theory (SCT), this study draws on Vygotsky's (1978) proposition that learning is socially mediated and occurs through interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), defined as the distance between what a learner can achieve independently and what can be accomplished with guidance from more knowledgeable others. Within this framework, language development, including vocabulary depth, is shaped through scaffolding provided by significant social agents such as teachers, parents, and peers (Lantolf, 2000; Swain, 2006). In the Tanzanian multilingual context, sociolinguistic factors such as parental education, early exposure to English, and opportunities for language use in informal settings can be understood as shaping the quality and availability of learners' ZPD. Learners from linguistically enriched environments are likely to experience more effective scaffolding, thereby facilitating deeper lexical development.

Methodology

This section presents the procedures used to address the study's specific objectives and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. It includes subsections such as the research design, population and sampling, as well as the data collection instruments and analysis plan.



Research Design

This research employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, integrating the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data to complement each other, as proposed by Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003). The study was mainly quantitative, examining the relationship between sociolinguistic variables (independent variables) and English vocabulary depth scores (dependent variables). Following Creswell (2014), this design provided greater insight into the same variables across quantitative and qualitative contexts. It enabled comparison by applying parallel concepts to both datasets, which were analysed separately and then contrasted to determine convergence or divergence. This approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the study by integrating statistical results and qualitative themes, enabling an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon.

Population and Sampling

Data were collected from selected secondary schools in Dodoma, covering urban and rural settings to capture diverse sociolinguistic backgrounds. The sample comprised 320 Tanzanian-born Form 3–4 students from eight schools and eight English language teachers from the same schools. Guided by Mason's mixed-methods approach, the sample was slightly below 384, given practical constraints and the minimum guideline of 30. Purposive sampling was used to select experienced teachers, while stratified random sampling ensured student representation across sociolinguistic groups and school types, reflecting population diversity.

Data Collection Instruments

In this study, quantitative data were obtained using the Word Association Test (WAT), while qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. The quantitative tests were conducted prior to the qualitative interviews to complement the interpretation of the results. The use of both instruments enabled triangulation, a critical component of qualitative research, thereby enhancing the study's validity and reliability through confirmation across multiple data sources.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight experienced secondary school English teachers to explore how sociolinguistic factors influence vocabulary depth. The interviews were transcribed and analysed in NVivo 12 using thematic analysis, with emergent themes identified, cross-checked against theory and empirical literature, and reported upon reaching saturation.

Quantitative data from the Word Association Test were analysed in SPSS 25. Correlation analysis identified relationships between sociolinguistic variables and vocabulary depth scores, while multiple linear regression examined their predictive capacity by regressing each variable against test scores. The integration of qualitative and quantitative analyses provided a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between sociolinguistic factors and English vocabulary learning.

Ethical Considerations

Before the commencement of data collection, research clearance was obtained from the College of Business Education, an institution authorised to issue research permits on behalf of the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH) for studies conducted within the country. After obtaining the clearance, informed consent was secured from both teachers and students who agreed to participate in the study. Participants were assured that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. To safeguard privacy and confidentiality, all collected data were anonymised and stored securely on a password-protected computer throughout the analysis and reporting processes. The following section presents the results.



Results

This section covers the essential findings from the collected and analysed data. The presentation follows the specific research questions guiding the study and the themes that emerged during the study's enquiry.

Does home language influence differences in depth mean scores among learners?

Table 1 shows mean English vocabulary depth scores by home language. The 135 students who used English at home scored a mean of 47.36, while the 185 who used Kiswahili or Ethnic Community Languages (ECLs) scored a mean of 43.40. This indicates that English at home speakers outperformed their peers, with statistically significant results. Greater use of English at home is therefore associated with better vocabulary depth, including knowledge of synonyms, collocations, and word derivations.

Table 1: T-test for comparing mean depth scores based on home language

Home language	N	Mean	t	sig
Kiswahili/ECLs	185	43.40	3.241	.021
English	135	47.36		

When asked about their experiences with students who use English at home and whether they have observed any differences in vocabulary comprehension between these students and those who use other languages, one teacher provided a perspective that aligns with the findings from the quantitative analysis:

In my teaching experience, I have encountered this situation. Even in my current classes, a few students use English at home because their parents, caregivers, or other family members prefer speaking to them in English. It is clear that these students, who use English at home, tend to be more curious about the language and often learn new vocabulary on their own. There is a saying – I don't remember it exactly – but it goes something like, 'Get the surroundings right, and you can reach for the stars and beyond.' To me, this highlights the importance of a supportive home environment, where learners become more intuitive in the language when their home surroundings encourage its use." (T2, June 2025)

Considering both quantitative and qualitative data, the frequency and extent of children's exposure to a language at home significantly influence their development, as reflected in second language vocabulary knowledge. Greater home exposure enables learners to become more intuitive and proficient, leading to deeper vocabulary understanding beyond superficial knowledge.

Does the language used in the classroom influence differences in depth mean scores among learners?

Table 2 shows the mean difference in depth scores between students who use English in class and those who use Kiswahili/ECLs. Results show that 173 students used English in class, with a mean depth test score of 43.57. On the other hand, 147 students used Kiswahili/ECLs in class, with a mean score of 44.84. Since the significance is greater than 0.05 ($\alpha > 0.05$), it can be concluded that there are no statistically significant differences in mean scores between those who speak English in class and those who speak Kiswahili/ECLs. Therefore, the present data do not provide evidence for the influence of language use on performance.



Table 2: T-test for equality of means for depth scores according to class language

Class language	N	Mean	t	sig
Kiswahili/ECLs	147	44.84	.475	.635
English	173	43.57		

In other words, these findings aim to distinguish between the use of English and performance in examinations, suggesting that there is no relationship between the use of English and performance, as those who achieve high performance in the assignments are not necessarily competent in English. However, this does not deny the experience that learners raised in primary English-medium schools seem to be more motivated in the language than those from primary Kiswahili-medium schools. This kind of motivation helps them to be more successful in acquiring and developing new insights into the L2 vocabulary.

During a semi-structured interview section, one of the participants had the following to contribute on whether languages used in the class influence the acquisition of vocabulary depth:

...yes, although it is not a guarantee for the learners who use English in the class to have better performance in the examinations than their fellows, some distinctions can be drawn in the way they use the language, especially in speaking. For instance, in my class (a public secondary school), I used to receive students from English-medium primary schools who joined the secondary school level with a strong interest and were well-motivated in English. Still, as time went on, they began to lose interest. I think it is because of the new school environment, where they lack ongoing, appropriate encouragement from the teachers. Even though I can still notice their generous ability to identify the meanings of English words, they never experience the same struggle as their counterparts do. (T3, June 2025)

Quantitative and qualitative analyses suggest that using a second language in class is not necessarily a measure of academic achievement but an important factor in language development. Although no statistically significant difference was found, qualitative evidence indicates that learners who use English in class have a better understanding of language items. Thus, frequent classroom use of a second language may influence its acquisition in a multilingual context.

Does the language used at the playground influence differences in depth mean scores among learners?

Table 3 shows the mean difference in depth scores between students who use English at the playground and those who use other languages. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to examine differences in vocabulary depth scores across language use at the playground. The results indicated a statistically significant difference between students who used English (M = 50.21, n = 159) and those who used Kiswahili/ECLs (M = 43.30, n = 161), $t(318) = -1.92, p = .046$. The negative t-value reflects the order in which the groups were entered in the analysis (Kiswahili/ECLs minus English). It can be seen that those who used English at the playground performed better on the vocabulary depth test than those who used other languages.

Table 3: T-test for equality of means for depth scores according to the language used at the playground

Playground language	N	Mean	t	df	p
Kiswahili/ECLs	161	43.30	-1.92	318	.046
English	159	50.21			



This was not captured in the qualitative data, as none of the eight participants had observed learners using English at the playground, likely because English is a foreign language in Tanzania and is rarely used in natural settings. While this limits generalisation, quantitative analysis still identifies it as a factor influencing vocabulary depth. It is also possible that teachers’ limited interaction with students outside class constrained their observations. This calls for further investigation, as noted in the recommendations.

Do the parents’ level of education influence differences in depth mean scores among learners?

Table 4 shows the mean difference in students' depth scores between those whose parents' level of education was Form 4 or higher and those whose parents’ levels of education was below Form 4. Results show that 163 students had parents with Form 4 or higher education, and their mean depth test score was 45.64. On the other hand, 157 students whose parents' level of education was below Form 4 had a mean score of 41.71. It can be seen that students whose parents' level of education was Form 4 or higher performed better on the depth test than those whose parents' level of education was below Form 4. The results are significant at $\alpha < 0.05$.

Table 4: T-test for equality of means for depth scores according to parents' level of education

Parents' Education Level	N	Mean	t	sig
Below Form 4	157	41.71	2.307	.022
Form 4 and above	163	45.64		

Besides, in this aspect, the qualitative analysis revealed the same, where one of the teachers explained the following:

Yes, I agree that educated parents can help their children learn English vocabulary, though this depends heavily on their language competencies and attitudes towards the language. This is because, in Tanzania, being educated has nothing to do with language competency, thus, my experience tells me that those learners whose parents are educated, competent and motivated in the language, find it easier to acquire the language than their colleagues since as their parents communicate to them in English, they become so much motivated and curious in the language, something that deepens their understanding of the language. (T5, June 2025)

Does having an opportunity to play with English-speaking children influence differences in depth mean scores among learners?

Table 5 shows mean depth scores for students who played with English-speaking children in their first 10 years and those who did not. The 144 students with such exposure scored 44.18, while the 176 without scored 43.43. As the significance exceeds 0.05, there is no statistically significant difference, indicating that this exposure does not influence depth test performance.

Table 5: T-test for equality of means for depth scores according to whether a student had a chance to play with English-speaking children

Did you have a chance to play with an English-speaking child?	N	Mean	t	sig
No	176	43.43	.425	.671
Yes	144	44.18		

Despite the quantitative analysis indicating that there is no statistically significant difference between students who had the opportunity to play with English-speaking children during the first 10 years of life and their counterparts, the qualitative analysis paints a different picture. Most of the interviewed teachers seemed to opine that learners who had a chance to play with English-speaking children or



interact with English-speaking communities during childhood demonstrate a higher ability to use English than their colleagues. For instance, one of the teachers was quoted as saying;

...those who had a chance to play with native speakers during childhood seem to be very confident in the language, and you can even see the way they enjoy it when speaking. You know, most of us lack the courage and ability to interact in English, perhaps because of a limited vocabulary; thus, we find ourselves incapable of using a particular English word in different contexts as these kids do. (T8, June 2025)

The discrepancy between qualitative and quantitative findings calls for further analysis, particularly of speaking skills. Teachers suggest that similar test scores do not reflect equal language proficiency, as differences may appear in unexamined areas. Future research should consider factors such as pronunciation, spelling, and the duration of early interaction with English speakers.

Does the level of initial English learning influence differences in depth-mean scores among learners?

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine differences in vocabulary depth scores across levels of English language exposure. As shown in Table 6, students who began learning English at kindergarten (n = 110, M = 46.26) and at the primary level through English-medium instruction (n = 107, M = 43.78) performed better than those who began at the secondary level (n = 103, M = 36.93). The results indicate two performance groups: students who began at the secondary level formed a distinct, lower-performing group, while those who began at kindergarten or primary levels did not differ significantly from each other. The ANOVA was statistically significant (p < 0.05), suggesting that earlier exposure to English enhances the acquisition of vocabulary depth in a multilingual context.

Table 6: Groups of means in the depth scores according to the level of starting learning English

English starting level	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05		F value	Sig.
		1	2		
Secondary school	103	36.93		5.923	.003
Primary (English-medium)	107		43.78		
Kindergarten	110		46.26		

Figure 1 shows the mean depth scores by level of English proficiency at the start. It supports results from the analysis of variance (ANOVA).

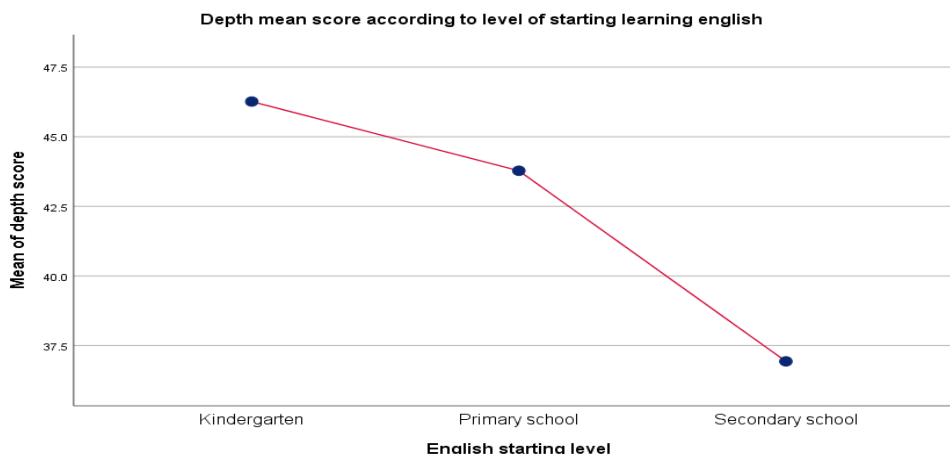




Figure 1: Mean depth scores according to the level of starting learning English

The study received the same information from the qualitative analysis, whereby, in sharing their experiences, all interviewed participants supported the quantitative results by explaining that learners who started learning English at early levels (primary/kindergarten) develop mastery of the language more easily than those who started learning it at the later levels (secondary schools and above). For instance, one of the teachers was quoted as saying,

You know, we are having a lot of trouble teaching those learners from Swahili-medium primary schools as they join secondary school, since they are still too shallow in English. For sure, I tell you that the language transition from primary to secondary school level is very problematic; something has to be done here, otherwise it will be very difficult for the country to achieve its education goals. If you are asking me about those learners from English-medium primary schools, my response is wow!!!... they are excellent, as they can use the language the way they want, comfortably. (T4, June 2025)

Based on analyses from both strands, it is clear that the level at which learners begin learning a second language is an important sociolinguistic factor in explaining their achievements in that language. Learners who have been oriented to such a language earlier are better positioned to achieve greater vocabulary depth than their colleagues.

In addition to the variables analysed above, the study considered background factors such as attendance at daycare centres and participation in English language courses. These variables were derived from the language background questionnaire and were used to categorise learners into sociolinguistic groups based on their levels of exposure to English. Although not analysed as standalone variables in the preceding subsections, they were included in the regression model because of their relevance to explaining variation in learners' vocabulary depth scores.

Regression Analysis

The study analysed data using multiple regression to determine the extent to which learners' sociolinguistic backgrounds influence English vocabulary depth scores.

Model Summary

The summary of the regression model is presented in Table 7. The R-value indicates the correlation between the observed values of the independent variable (learners' sociolinguistic background) and the depth scores. In this study, the correlation coefficient is 0.747, indicating a strong positive correlation among the variables.

The coefficient of determination (R^2) indicates the proportion of variation in depth scores explained by sociolinguistic background. As shown in Table 7, $R^2 = 0.558$, meaning 55.80% of the variation is explained by the model. The Adjusted $R^2 = 0.516$ indicates that 51.60% of the variation is explained after accounting for the predictors, with the remaining variation likely due to other factors, including cognitive influences.

The overall regression model was significant and appropriate for explaining the relationship between depth scores and the learner's sociolinguistic background, as indicated by $F(4, 315) = 3.277$ and $p < 0.05$.

Table 7: Depth model summary

Model	R	R-Square	Adjusted R-Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	Sig
1	.747	.558	.516	15.100	3.277	.012 ^b



Model Coefficients

To study the relationship between depth scores and the learner's sociolinguistic background, the following regression model equation was used;

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \beta_5 X_5 + \beta_6 X_6$$

The descriptions of the variables used in the equation above are given in the summary of variables in Table 8.

Table 8: A summary of the variables used in the depth model

Variable	Description
X ₁	Were all the subjects in primary school taught in English?
X ₂	Did you attend a nursery school during the first three years of your life?
X ₃	Did you happen to attend a daycare centre?
X ₄	Have you attended/participated in an English class course?
X ₅	What is your home language?
X ₆	What is your parents' level of education?
Y	Depth scores

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the influence of sociolinguistic factors on vocabulary depth scores. The model was statistically significant, explaining 55.8% of the variance. Key predictors included home language, parental education, starting level of English learning, and playground language. Additional exposure-related variables, such as attendance at daycare centres and participation in English language courses, were included to capture early and supplementary exposure. Overall, the findings indicate that both background and exposure-related factors jointly shape learners' vocabulary depth in a multilingual context.

The β values in the regression model quantify the change in depth scores resulting from a unit change in one learner's sociolinguistic background, holding other variables constant. The values of β_0 to β_6 are obtained from Table 9 in the unstandardized coefficients column. Substituting the Unstandardised Coefficients into the equation above yields a multiple regression model of the relationship between depth scores and the learner's sociolinguistic background. The coefficient is the value that increases the depth scores (dependent variable) by one unit for a unit increase in the respective independent variable, provided other factors are constant. The significance column indicates the significance level of each independent variable in the regression model. Four variables were found to be significant at an alpha (α) level less than 0.05. The last column of Table 9 indicates the 95.0% Confidence Interval for the coefficients of each independent variable, indicating the lower and upper bounds.

Table 9: Depth model coefficients

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients		95.0% Confidence Interval for B		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1 (Constant)	41.964	1.274		32.928	.000	39.457	44.472
X ₁	1.627	2.104	.047	.773	.044	.513	5.767
X ₂	5.932	2.029	.184	2.924	.004	1.941	9.924
X ₃	.089	3.190	.002	.028	.978	.365	6.187
X ₄	1.687	1.810	.054	.932	.032	.247	1.874



Discussion

The findings are interpreted through the lens of Sociocultural Theory, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Learners who reported using English in informal contexts and those with more educated parents appear to benefit from richer scaffolding environments, which expand their ZPD and support deeper vocabulary development. In contrast, learners with limited exposure to English outside the classroom may have fewer opportunities for mediated learning, thereby constraining the development of their lexical networks. These results suggest that sociolinguistic background is not merely a contextual factor but a mechanism through which differential access to scaffolding shapes vocabulary outcomes. Within this theoretical framing, specific sociolinguistic variables can be understood as concrete sources of scaffolding that either enhance or constrain learners' opportunities for vocabulary development.

The findings of this study demonstrate that learners' sociolinguistic background plays a significant role in shaping the depth of their English vocabulary knowledge. In particular, the language used at home emerged as an important factor influencing vocabulary depth. Learners who reported using English at home achieved significantly higher scores than those who primarily used Kiswahili or Ethnic Community Languages (ECLs). This finding suggests that sustained exposure to English in the home environment enhances learners' ability to develop deeper lexical knowledge, including understanding synonyms, collocations, and derivational forms. Such results support Zhou's (2020) argument that family linguistic environments significantly influence children's second language development, particularly when parents or caregivers regularly use the target language at home.

While Kiswahili serves as the national language and the medium of instruction in primary education (Mtallo, 2015), its role in enhancing the depth of English vocabulary appears limited. From a Sociocultural Theory perspective, Kiswahili may function as a mediational tool that supports initial comprehension; however, this mediation may not extend to deeper lexical development. Although it can aid basic vocabulary acquisition, it may not provide sufficient exposure to complex lexical relationships such as collocations and derivational forms, which are typically developed through sustained interaction in the target language. In addition, structural differences between Kiswahili and English may constrain direct transfer. Consequently, while Kiswahili may support foundational learning, continued engagement with English remains essential for developing deeper vocabulary knowledge.

In contrast, the language used in the classroom did not show a statistically significant influence on learners' vocabulary depth scores. Although learners who used English in class did not outperform those who used Kiswahili or ECLs, qualitative insights indicated that classroom language use may still contribute to learners' motivation and confidence in the language. These findings suggest that the use of English in class may influence aspects of language development beyond measurable test performance. This observation resonates with Khan's (2016) study, which emphasises that the use of English in classroom interaction facilitates language acquisition, especially when learners strategically utilise their first language as a supportive resource.

The study further revealed that learners who reported using English during playground interactions performed significantly better on the vocabulary depth test than those who used other languages. Although teachers rarely observed such interactions, the quantitative findings indicate that informal exposure to English in naturalistic settings may significantly enhance vocabulary development. This result aligns with Mtallo's (2026) study, which found that exposure to English in naturalistic environments positively correlates with deeper vocabulary acquisition among EFL learners.



Parental education level also appeared to influence learners' vocabulary depth. Students whose parents had attained at least Form Four education achieved significantly higher scores than those whose parents had lower levels of education. This finding supports Davis-Kean, Tighe, and Waters (2021), who emphasise that parents with higher educational attainment are more likely to support and stimulate their children's academic development. From a sociocultural perspective, educated parents may create richer linguistic and cognitive environments that facilitate second language learning.

While learners whose parents had attained at least Form Four education demonstrated greater vocabulary depth, this does not imply that such parents necessarily use English at home. Rather, parental education may indirectly influence learners' lexical development by increasing academic support, expanding literacy exposure, and encouraging the use of English. However, parental language practices were not examined and should therefore be interpreted with caution.

Interestingly, the study found no statistically significant difference between learners who had opportunities to play with English-speaking children and those who did not. Nevertheless, qualitative data suggested that such interactions might contribute to learners' confidence and communicative competence in English. This discrepancy between quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that the influence of early interaction with English-speaking peers may manifest in other language dimensions, such as pronunciation and speaking fluency, rather than in vocabulary test scores. Similar observations were reported by Zoubi (2018), who noted that exposure to English-speaking environments enhances overall language proficiency.

Another key finding concerns the level at which learners began learning English. Students who started at kindergarten or primary levels (through English-medium instruction) demonstrated significantly greater vocabulary depth than those who began at the secondary level. This aligns with Gawi (2012), who found that early exposure enhances language proficiency and vocabulary acquisition. Early and intensive exposure, particularly in English-medium primary schools, provides greater opportunities for meaningful language use, contributing to more developed lexical networks than later or less immersive exposure.

Finally, the regression analysis showed that sociolinguistic variables accounted for 55.8% of the variance in vocabulary depth scores. Key predictors included early exposure to English, the language of instruction in primary school, and participation in English courses. These findings support Cann's (1992) emphasis on factors such as age of acquisition and home language use and align with Tarone's (2007) view that sociolinguistic factors are central to second language development. Overall, the results confirm that vocabulary depth acquisition is shaped by interacting sociolinguistic and cognitive influences, consistent with sociocultural theory.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that English vocabulary depth among Tanzanian secondary school learners is not merely a cognitive achievement but a socially mediated one, shaped by the nature and extent of learners' interaction within their sociolinguistic environments. While vocabulary breadth may be developed through formal classroom exposure and structured learning, vocabulary depth appears to require sustained, meaningful engagement with the language in diverse contexts that allow for negotiation of meaning and lexical expansion. The findings further suggest that Kiswahili should not be viewed as a barrier to English vocabulary development, but rather as a foundational linguistic resource that supports initial learning. However, its facilitative role may be limited in fostering deeper lexical knowledge, which depends more heavily on active use of English in both formal and informal settings. Consequently, the study underscores the importance of creating opportunities for extended



use of English beyond the classroom, allowing the language to develop alongside Kiswahili within Tanzania's multilingual context.

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