

An Evaluation of Websites for Learning Swahili as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

The Internet provides enormous opportunities for people intending to learn practically anything there is to learn, including a new language. Swahili language is, therefore, no exception since there are numerous resources for people intending to learn Swahili as a Foreign Language (SFL). Compared to the traditional approaches to teaching and learning, the Internet has the potential to optimize communication technologies to make learning simpler, better, faster and more convenient to both learners and teachers. Unfortunately, though, these benefits come with a similar cache of problems. In this regard, there is a proliferation of SFL learning websites whose authority, credibility and accuracy is unknown. This study applies a website evaluation model to evaluate selected Swahili learning websites based on specific criteria. The study will benefit individuals who use the Internet to learn and teach Swahili as a foreign language as well as those who intend to develop Swahili learning websites.

KEYWORDS: *website evaluation, criteria, language learning, Swahili as Foreign Language (SFL), Internet*

1.0 Introduction

Out of the roughly 2000 languages of Africa, Swahili is the most widely spoken indigenous African language. It is spoken as a first language by about 15 million people in Eastern Africa and as a second or foreign language by over 140 million people across the world. International travel and immigration has led to the spread of Swahili use in the diaspora in Europe, Americas and Asia. Over 100 top universities are now teaching Swahili across these regions.

Consequently, there is a huge demand for learning Swahili worldwide. Other than institutional based instruction – like in colleges and universities - there are also online learning and teaching resources for those keen on learning this language. Accordingly, there are many websites that are developed to facilitate the teaching and learning of Swahili as a foreign language (SFL). Indeed, these websites play a huge role in seeking to meet the demand for the Swahili language across the world. But at the same time, there is need to evaluate these websites to ensure that the

information and content presented on them is not only authoritative, but also accurate, reliable and credible.

2.0 Literature Review

The subject of website evaluation with respect to teaching and learning of foreign languages is a fairly recent undertaking. Indeed, few pioneering studies were conducted during the late 1990s while a vast majority of them are post-2000. English, being one the most widely taught foreign languages in the world, has attracted substantive studies of this nature. A number of researchers have also investigated websites that teach Arabic language to foreigners.

It is instructive to note that despite the existence of hundreds of websites that teach Swahili as a foreign language, no evidence was found by us to indicate that a study has been carried out to systematically evaluate these websites. That is why the current study is significant.

Son (2005) is among the researchers who have contributed significantly to the development of framework of evaluating websites as well as undertaking actual evaluation of language learning websites. Son (2005) argues that "since not all materials are equally reliable or valuable...language teachers need to be discerning and thoughtful users with clear ideas of Web resource quality factors" (p. 216).

Son (2005)'s model of web evaluation proposes 15 criteria that were used in developing a form for evaluating websites that teach English as a Foreign/Second Language (EFL/ESL). The criteria focused on the following factors and questions:

- a. Purpose: whether purpose is stated and content developed accordingly
- b. Accuracy: seeks to determine if content is accurate and correct, including spelling and grammar
- c. Currency: is the website current and up-to-date?
- d. Authority: Is the author known and well recognized?
- e. Loading speed: whether the website is fast or slow in opening and downloading content
- f. Usefulness: is the information provided and tasks useful or not?
- g. Organization: looks at the overall organization and presentation of the website
- h. Navigation: seeks to assess the ease of navigation including instructions and directions
- i. Reliability: seeks to find out whether the site is free of bugs, breaks and deal links
- j. Authenticity: whether learning materials and contexts of presentation are authentic
- k. Interactivity: is the website interactive and does it facilitate user input?
- l. Feedback: What are the learners saying and how are errors handled?
- m. Multimedia: how, if at all, are graphics, sound and color used on the website? What about their quality?
- n. Communication: Can user communicate and get real time online assistance?
- o. Integration: can content and materials fit into integrated curriculum?

After analysis, Son (2005) concluded that the different score ratings that various criteria received did not necessarily affect overall rating of a website.

Kelly (2000) outlines 9 factors that should be taken into account when designing an effective website. According to Kelly (2000), therefore, a good website should be:

- a. Usable to all people without trying to limit those who can use it including those using different applications, browsers and software
- b. Fast so as to benefit people with expensive and/or slow Internet connections. They should also avoid things that can slow down content such as color, file sizes and formats.
- c. Easy to read, navigate and use free of unnecessary registration and log in requirements.
- d. Useful in a way that serves an existing need and that is relevant.
- e. Honest, professional and of high integrity by avoiding exaggeration and inaccurate information.
- f. Friendly and fun to use; both visually and functionally.
- g. Wise and effective in use of "cutting edge technology" by avoiding "cosmetic" use of technological tools and devices.
- h. Aware that there could be misconceptions and "facts" that are not facts especially online and hence the need to be careful.
- i. Considerate of users with less powerful computers and slow Internet.

Kelly concludes that "from a visitor's perspective, a good website is one that ..is usable.. has something he/she wants...doesn't waste his/her time.. and isn't irritating..".

Aly (2008) conducted an evaluation of websites for learning and teaching EFL. In this study, Aly (2008) used 17 participants drawn from a postgraduate student population at an Egyptian university to conduct evaluations of selected EFL websites. The evaluation criteria consisted of 63-item checklist broadly categorized into the following 8 dimensions:

- a. Authority
- b. Purpose
- c. Coverage
- d. Currency
- e. Objectivity
- f. Accuracy
- g. Technical aspects
- h. Usefulness to TEFL teachers and students

Different websites scored differently in various aspects on the checklist. But overall, the study concluded that despite the fact that some of the websites obtained low scores on such criteria as authority, purpose and currency, most of them scored highly on their usefulness to both teachers and students of EFL.

Hadhemi & Abdesslam (2012) conducted an evaluation of Arabic language learning websites where they proposed and employed the 9-point evaluation model below.

- a. General website information: whether relevant information is clear from the website including targeted audience and level, author identity and authority, updates and contact information.
- b. Language skills: whether the site is clear about language skills to be learnt including speaking, reading, writing, listening, among others.

- c. Educational content: what materials are available; such as lessons, exercises, games and tests.
- d. Multimedia use: the use of texts, graphics, sound and video.
- e. Interactivity: availability of online guidance and help as well as feedback functionality.
- f. Communication: channels of communication such as email, chats and social networks.
- g. Aid tools and linguistic resources: such as monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, search engines, e-books among others.
- h. Website ergonomics: assesses general presentation of the website including structure, color, fonts, navigation and speed.
- i. Content quality: whether the content on the website is accurate, adequate, reliable and useful.

Hadhemi & Abdesslam (2012) concluded that the websites they evaluated were wanting in terms of "richness of educational materials, interactivity and reliability" (p. 4).

Kartal and Uzun (2010) argue that although there are many foreign language teaching websites on the Internet, most of them lack standardized unity and management and they do not exploit the full potential of the Internet. Further, they posit that there is a close connection between foreign language learning and globalization, especially when such learning is conducted on the Internet. Accordingly, Kartal and Uzun emphasize that foreign language learning websites are "unavoidable elements of computer assisted learning (CALL)" (2010:90). In this study, they used a sample of university students to evaluate 28 foreign language teaching websites for 7 languages (English, French, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish and Turkish).

In their study, the researchers developed and used a 16-point evaluation checklist categorized into 3 "characteristics of a good website" (2010:93).

- a. Physical characteristics. A good website should:
 - i. Be user-friendly.
 - ii. Allow easy transition and navigation.
 - iii. Have stimulating colors.
 - iv. Allow use of online dictionaries and other tools and aids.
 - v. Have rich written, audio and visual materials.
- b. Contextual characteristics: A good website should:
 - i. Have materials appropriate for level, subject and type of learners.
 - ii. Have authentic and up-to-date materials.
 - iii. Contain materials in various formats and types.
 - iv. Allow support from external sources and programs.
 - v. Be flexible to allow customization and contribution of users.
 - vi. Provide feedback to users (learners).
 - vii. Have wide choice of practice tools and exercises for various levels.
- c. Pedagogical characteristics: A good website should:
 - i. Have short but clear explanations and guidance.
 - ii. Provide constructive feedback.
 - iii. Contain content that is designed according to innovations in education and language learning fields.

- iv. Have materials that are appropriate, authentic and applicable.

Many other researchers have developed and used their models focusing on criteria that are largely similar to those outlined above. For instance, Kir and Kayak (2013) have identified their own 9 criteria for web evaluation including a) ease of finding information, b) quality of information and activities, c) ease of reading, d) appearance, e) speed, f) fun and entertainment value, g) overall learning experience, h) understanding of instructions and i) ease of navigation around the website.

3.0 Criteria for Evaluation of Websites

3.1 Website Evaluation Model

The literature review above demonstrates that there is a wide range of criteria that can and have been applied to the evaluation of websites that teach languages to foreigners. After studying many of them, this study developed a model that is based on a 28-item list of evaluation criteria organized into 5 key aspects of a website as under.

- a. *Goal, purpose and objective(s)*

It is important to find out if the author(s) of a language teaching website have stated the purpose of the website. This includes broad goal, specific objectives and the identification of knowledge and skills to be learnt. A statement on the target audience or level of language learning is equally significant.

- b. *Authority and credibility*

This is a critical set of criteria because the content, language skills and the pedagogical aspects of teaching a foreign language depend, substantially, on the qualifications, expertise and experience of the author or teacher. In this case, a credible website ought to state the qualification and credentials of the authors in the given field. Is the website an individual, institutional, organizational or commercial entity? Domain names and other website aspects can be used to establish such information.

- c. *Content and learning materials*

This is the core of a website where the learner is exposed to the content. In particular, the following key question matter when assessing a website:

- i. Is the content and information accurate, well researched, verifiable and correct?
- ii. Is the content as well as learning materials appropriate and relevant to the target group (if it is identifiable)?
- iii. Is the coverage and scope of the content and skills adequate (including speaking, listening, reading and writing)?
- iv. Does the website contain authentic materials?
- v. Does the website contain content and materials in multimedia formats including text, audio and video?
- vi. Is there objectivity in the presentation of content and use of materials? Are there any biases evident?
- vii. Is the content or information current?

d. *Pedagogical dynamics*

A website may contain adequate and appropriate content but that alone may not help a learner. Appropriate pedagogical considerations ought to be made to enable the learner achieve the objective of learning the language successfully. Hence, the following questions:

- i. Is the content presented and explained in a clear manner?
- ii. Is there evidence of logical organization of content, skills and materials?
- iii. Are the methods of teaching the content and skills appropriate?
- iv. Are there learning activities like exercises, tests or even games?
- v. Is the learning process interactive? Can the learner give and obtain feedback as well as online help? Is the help real-time or not?
- vi. Are there learning aids and tools such as bilingual dictionaries, language processing tools such as translators, search engines, among others?

e. *Website design and ergonomics*

Ergonomics refers to science of equipment design that is meant to maximize productivity while minimizing user fatigue and discomfort.

Therefore, the overall design, structure, organization and appearance of a website contribute substantially to its effectiveness as learning platform.

- a. How well is the website organized and structured?
- b. Is it stable and reliable? Does it break down often or have dead links?
- c. What about the general appearance and color harmony?
- d. Is the website easily legible in terms of font size, style and format?
- e. How easy is it to navigate and transition from one page to another?
- f. Are there links and do they work?
- g. Is the website well maintained, current and up-to-date? When was the last update done?

3.2. *Website Selection Criteria*

There are so many websites that are offering SFL lessons. It is not possible, or even desirable, to attempt a comprehensive inventory of all those websites. This study will use data from selected websites for purposes of conducting its investigations. The findings of this study will apply to the selected sites even though some results might be relevant to other sites not included in the study.

There are two salient factors that were considered when selecting websites for this study:

- a. *Kiswahili content*: For a website to be included in this study, obviously, it must contain materials for the learning of Swahili as a foreign language.
- b. *Free access*: The website has to be an open source site meaning that it is free and open for access to anybody. There should be no conditions, restrictions or requirements to access these websites or their instructional materials. In that regard, any website that requires registration process or membership fee was not included in this study.

3.3. Selected websites

The following 10 websites were selected:

- a. *Surface Languages* <http://www.surfacelanguages.com/language/Swahili.html>
- b. *Swahili Language and Culture*
<http://www.glcom.com/hassan/>
- c. *My Languages*
www.mylanguages.org
- d. *101 Languages*
www.101languages.net
- e. *Learn 101*
www.learn101.org
- f. *ilanguages*
www.ilanguages.org
- g. *Learn Swahili*
www.learnswahili.net
- h. *Open Languages*
<http://www.openlanguages.net/swahili>
- i. *Live Lingua Project*
<https://www.livelingua.com/project/fsi/Swahili/>
- j. *Free Language*
<https://freelanguage.org/learn-swahili>

4.0 Data Analysis and Discussion

Using our 28-item criteria explained in our model as explained in 3.1 above, we analyzed the 10 websites under study and the findings are discussed below under the 5 main categories of the model.

4.1 Goal, purpose and objective(s)

Out of the 10 websites, 7 stated either clearly or implicitly what purpose they were meant to serve. All of them but one indicated the kind of language skills that a learner was expected to obtain from the website. However, only 3 of the websites specified the targeted audience or level of language learning. It is not possible to tell if this is an oversight on the part of the site developers or a deliberate way of leaving the websites open to anybody. It is, however, important for instructional materials to be developed with the learner in mind whether it is beginner, intermediate and advanced.

4.2 Authority and credibility

Since there are so many websites that offer Swahili lessons, it is imperative to establish the authority and credibility of authors and sponsors. In half of the websites under study, the authors or sponsors could not be identified. In that case, it was not possible to determine the authority and credibility of the websites. Among the other half, 3 are authored or sponsored by individuals who are not trained linguists but rather language enthusiasts while the other two were done by USA government agencies (Foreign Service Institute and the Peace Corps) and a group of language teachers from the USA and Tanzania.

Most of these websites are polyglot language learning sites that contain content and materials for learning many world languages while a few are dedicated to Swahili language. Among the 7 polyglot websites, one covered 43 languages while the highest had 130 languages and the other 5 were in between. On the other hand, only 2 websites were dedicated to Swahili while 1 covered 4 languages.

Unlike many world languages, such as English, in which native speakers are responsible for the development of ESL/EFL learning websites and other online materials, the reverse situation obtains when it comes to Kiswahili. Only one website was developed by native Swahili speakers while the rest were developed by speakers of Swahili as a foreign language.

4.3 Content and learning materials

4.3.1 Coverage of Language Skills: In language learning 4 skills are emphasized; namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. All the 10 websites in this study had content and/or materials for reading Swahili words or texts. Five (5) of them had audio materials for listening while 2 of them had virtual keyboards for writing (typing practice). Only one website had a pronunciation tool for learning and practicing speaking.

Based on these findings, it is apparent that speaking and writing, in that order, are the most challenging language skills to integrate in online language learning platforms. Therefore, learning and teaching Swahili from websites must be supplemented with alternative methods and approaches that can accommodate those two critical skills. Where one-on-one teacher-learner interaction is not possible, several Internet based e-learning and video-enabled interactive technologies are available such as *Skype*, *Vidyo*, *Apache* open meeting, *Viber* among others.

4.3.2 Content accuracy and correctness: The importance of providing learners with accurate and correct information cannot be over-emphasized. Seven of the websites under study scored between "average" and "good" on this criterion. The remaining three scored below average on account of presenting content that is grammatically incorrect and poorly edited as evidenced by typographical mistakes. Some of the specific examples are:

- a. Lack of correct concordial agreement: "*nchi lako*" (your country), "*ziara langu*" (my journey), "*chakula sizizo*" (food which is not), "*yeye ni mirefu*" (he/she is tall), "*haya nyota*" (this star).
- b. Incorrect translation: "*chumba yasiyo na sigara*" (non-smoking room), "*ahirisho*" (reservation), "*mimi sielewi Kifaransa*" (I do not speak French), "*ningependa kuagiza meza ya viti mbili*" (I would like a table for two", "*msingi*" (basement), "*wito ambulansi*" (call ambulance), among many others. Even translation of "I am married" as "*nimeoa*" does not take care of the gender variation with respect to a woman where "*nimeolewa*" will be more appropriate. This could be as a result of unchecked use of machine or e-translators.
- c. Poor punctuation and mechanics: Proper nouns have to be capitalized. Yet in some of the websites that scored below average had illustrations where names of people, countries and languages are not capitalized.

- d. Poor editing was evidenced by typographical mistakes, which ultimately undermine the clarity and correctness of information.

It appears that some of the website or content developers who may not have requisite competence in Swahili depend on e-dictionaries and online translators, which often do not give the correct output. Incidentally, two of the three under-performing websites not only happened to have similar web design and structure but also used the same content and illustrations that replicated the same mistakes discussed above.

4.3.3 Multimedia materials and activities: All the websites under study had reading materials while most of them (7) also had audio files for listening. In particular, 3 websites had a wide range of multimedia tools and activities including video clips, flash cards, games, vocabulary building exercise and voice recording. However, a few of them had radio links that do not work probably because of lack of required frequencies.

4.4 Pedagogical Factors

4.4.1 Clarity of presentation and guidance: Half of the websites had a score of "good" while the other 3 are "average" and 2 "poor" in terms of explaining and guiding the learner. In particular, those that obtained a "poor" score plunge the user straight into content without any introduction or explanation of how it is organized and presented.

4.4.2 Learning methods and activities: Only one of the 10 websites scored "very good" on account of integrating a variety of methods of delivering content. This particular website utilized reading text, listening to audio files, writing with virtual keyboard, watching video clips and games. Three other websites scored "good" for integrating either 3 or 4 different approaches and activities while 4 others were "average" for using 2 approaches. The remaining two scored "poor" for using the reading approach only.

4.4.3 Online help and interactivity: Whereas none of the websites under study provide real-time online help (except one – but which requires registration – and hence we did not test it), 8 of them have provision for giving feedback through messaging or e-mail. Only two did not have any contact link or any form of giving feedback.

4.5 Website design and ergonomics

4.5.1 Organization and structure: Two of the websites scored "good" in this criterion of systematic organization and structure. Four scored "average" for lacking symmetry and balance, too much white space, average layout, random arrangement of content or having tabs that are not useful. Four websites scored "poor" for lacking order, being too cluttered and having irrelevant pictures of animals and the savannah. This fascination of having giraffe, hippopotamus, lions and other wild animals was actually common among the websites under study. One particular polyglot website even had some links that opened content from different languages other than Kiswahili. The same website appeared incomplete as well.

4.5.2 *Appearance and legibility*: Most of the websites, 8 of them, scored “average” and “good” in appearance, color harmony and legibility. The other two scored “poor” because they either had too many colors and/or used all capitals on the tabs of the home page. The use of all capital letters is especially discouraged in design because it impedes readability.

4.5.3 *Functionality and navigation*: One website scored “very good” in functioning and navigating of links while 6 scored “good”. They had adequate links that are operational and help the user to move from one page to another. The three that scored “poor” either had some dead links or irrelevant links such as to music videos that are not related to content.

4.5.4 *Currency and maintenance*: It is important for websites to update their content so as to include the latest content, materials and approaches in language learning. In this respect, half of the websites under study obtained a “very good” score for being current – last updated within the year 2016. One that was updated last in 2015 scored “good” while 2 websites got “average” for updates that range between 6 – 7 years. Two websites were last updated 11- 12 years ago and hence scored “poor”. One website did not have any indication on its last update. Some sites appeared incomplete and still promising “coming soon” content that was supposed to be uploaded years ago.

5.0 Conclusions

After evaluating the 10 websites in this study, some key conclusions emerged. First, majority of SFL learning websites are developed by individuals and government agencies from the West where Kiswahili is a foreign language. Consequently, people who may not have requisite competence or fluency in Swahili language are, nevertheless, at the forefront of creating websites to teach Swahili. This could explain the apparent dependence and over-reliance on e-dictionaries and online translation tools, which often give mistranslations, contextually inaccurate and factually incorrect content. This, ultimately undermines the authority and credibility of the sites.

Secondly, of the 4 critical language skills, speaking and writing are the least taught online. These two language learning skills appear to be the most difficult to integrate in online platforms. Therefore, online learners and teachers of SFL need to explore alternative approaches to accommodate those skills.

Thirdly, there seems to be a lack of authenticity and seriousness as evidenced by poor editing and typographical mistakes as well as mixing up of content from different languages.

Lastly, and regardless of the aforesaid, the websites under study offer invaluable amount of content and materials that are useful to the teaching of Swahili as foreign language. Indeed, many of them are useful tools to both students and teachers of SFL. However, teachers and learners of SFL need to carefully select which websites to use and generally be aware of the pitfalls that come with uncritical consumption of online content.

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Appendix : Data Collection Tool**Swahili Learning Website Evaluation Form**

Name or Title of Website _____

Website _____

URL _____

Date _____

Reviewed _____

| 1. Goal, Purpose and Objective(s) | | |
|---|------------|-----------|
| Criteria | Yes | No |
| Is goal, purpose or objective clearly stated? | | |
| Are language skills to be learnt or scope specified? | | |
| Is the level of language learning or target audience specified? | | |

| 2. Authority and Credibility | | |
|--|------------|-----------|
| Criteria | Yes | No |
| Is the author or sponsor of website identified? | | |
| Does author have qualification and expertise on subject? | | |
| Is the author or sponsor credible or professional | | |
| Is this a personal/individual website? | | |
| Is this an institutional website? | | |

| 3. Content and Learning Materials | | | | | | |
|---|-------------------------|------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|------------------|
| Criteria | Website Evidence | Very poor | Poor | Average | Good | Very Good |
| Accuracy and correctness of information | | | | | | |
| Appropriateness and relevance for target audience | | | | | | |
| Adequate coverage of skills (speaking, reading, listening, writing) | | | | | | |
| Use of authentic materials | | | | | | |
| Types of content and materials (text, audio, video) | | | | | | |
| Objective presentation | | | | | | |
| Currency of content and materials | | | | | | |

| 4. Pedagogical Considerations | | | | | | |
|---|-------------------------|------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|------------------|
| Criteria | Website Evidence | Very poor | Poor | Average | Good | Very Good |
| Clear presentation of content | | | | | | |
| Logical organization | | | | | | |
| Appropriate methods and approaches | | | | | | |
| Learning activities and exercises | | | | | | |
| Interactivity, feedback and online help | | | | | | |
| Learning aids and tools | | | | | | |

| 5. Website Design and Ergonomics | | | | | | |
|--|-------------------------|------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|------------------|
| Criteria | Website Evidence | Very poor | Poor | Average | Good | Very Good |
| Organization and structure | | | | | | |
| Stability and reliability | | | | | | |
| Appearance and color harmony | | | | | | |
| Legibility | | | | | | |
| Ease of navigation and transition | | | | | | |
| Functionality of links | | | | | | |
| Website Currency, maintenance and updating | | | | | | |