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An exploration of ESL- English as a Second Language students' experiences of academic writing in the discipline of Psychology

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CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The objective of the following review is to discuss major issues in the theory of academic writing necessary for this study. It begins by providing the context of the problem, viewing language historically within the South African educational context. The focus thereafter moves specifically to academic writing. In this section, major theorists in the field of academic writing, such as Angelil-Carter (2000), Boudieu and Passerson (1994), Cope and Kalantzis (1993), Kamler (2001), Kress (1985), Mendelowitz (2003), Street (1990; 1995), Turner and Street (1999), are used to explain the purpose and function of academic discourse. This is followed by discussion of the function of language, concentrating predominantly on the divide between informational and social functions of language, leading to the theory of BICS and CALP, as formulated by Cummins (1978; 1980a; 1981a; 1984; 1989; 1991; 1994; 1996; 1997; 2000; 2001; 2003; 2004).

2.1 The context of the problem: Language in the history of South African education

South Africa's past and its recent transformation into democracy have been major contributory factors in determining current language issues. Apartheid and the resistance it brought about dominated the history of language and education in South Africa in the second half of the twentieth century. The main ideology of Apartheid was to divide all South Africans by race. Amongst the plethora of segregation acts, educational segregation featured prominently. From this long and involved history, the most relevant factors have been selected for the discussion and overview of language and education in the history of South African education.

According to Bekker (1999), it is difficult to draw out direct connections between the pre-colonial history of South Africa and current language issues. The pre-1806 period, under the Dutch, was more bilingual than ordinarily supposed. The British occupation of the Cape in 1806 resulted in language policies centered on the British attempt to promote English as the dominant language in the colony. The education of the local population fell mostly to the missionaries. White learners were given well-resourced, free and compulsory education, while missionaries were commissioned with the task of implementing African education (Christie, 1991). As South Africa's population grew so did the educational problems. One of the major problems arising was the shortage of schools. The Eiselen Commission of Inquiry

set up in 1936 to investigate this and other problems, identified none. With the introduction of the Homelands Act (Christie, 1991) and the 'pass laws' came the control of free movement of Blacks, and the establishment of separate education departments yet again denied them access to education (Vuyisele, Ntshona & Abrahams, 1990).

In 1953 the Bantu Education Act was passed, requiring schools to be registered with the government and resulting in the closure of a number. The schools were state-controlled, as was the curriculum (ibid). Prior to this Act, mother tongue education occurred for the first four years of schooling, but after was extended to the first eight years (Heugh, 1995). The policy of mother tongue education under the National Party (NP) government was rationalized as an attempt to preserve the language and diverse cultures of the indigenous groups, but in reality it was a divide-and-rule tactic that served the party's policy of 'separate development' (Bekker, 1999). The language-in-policy of the time resulted in "the adoption, among many members of the local population, of positive attitudes towards English and language at the expense of their own cultures and languages" (Bekker, 1999, p.103). For the local population to improve their socio-economic and socio-cultural status meant a command of the English language vis-à-vis the local languages. Hence, from the late 1970s the number of Black learners increased and, according to Christie (1991), the number of learners[1] enrolling in Bantu education was larger than the numbers attending school in the past.

With regard to language issues, the high apartheid years (1948-1990) were characterized by the NP government's preoccupation with the dispute between Afrikaans and English in education. In 1975, learners were expected to make a change from mother tongue learning to a split between English and Afrikaans in grade seven. In other words, half of the subjects would be taught in English and the other half in Afrikaans (Heugh, 1995). Amongst the host of inequalities and oppression of the apartheid system, this ruling functioned as a major contributory factor to the Soweto uprising of 1976, in direct protest against the enforcement of Afrikaans as the language of instruction. Moreover, the uprising provided momentum to the liberation struggle itself (Herman, 1998). The change from mother tongue education to English caused problems, one of which being that learners did not have sufficient English skills to cope with the syllabi. At the same time, the African language speakers were subjected to a cognitively impoverished curriculum that was difficult for them to cope with in

[1] The terms learners and students are used synonymously to mean students at school or university.

English (Heugh, 1995). Bantu Education resulted in resistance towards mother tongue education and an overestimation of the role of English as a key to success in education (ibid).

As such, schools served as tools of ideological oppression (Kapp, 2000). In the 1980s and 1990s the African National Congress (ANC) began to develop policies to address the past discrimination (King, 1998). The unbanning of the ANC, the release of Nelson Mandela, and the 1994 elections raised hopes and expectations of the development of education. However, in post-apartheid South Africa poverty continues, and a considerable number of students come from disadvantaged educational backgrounds. These students' primary discourses may be very different from those of the universities they attend. Failure to make transitions in discourse may result in academic failure overall. According to Moore (1996, p.72) "for many learners in South Africa this systematic educational deprivation has led, and still leads, to a persisting heritage of educational under-preparedness". The apartheid years were instrumental in the social and economic development of the dominant minority, and the simultaneous underdevelopment of the marginalized majority. This translates into a general lack of basic linguistic, conceptual and analytical skills and a level of proficiency in the English language that has proven to be insufficient in the pursuit of tertiary education (Makoni, 2000; Stephenson & York, 1996).

The South African educational system seems to have inherited two distinct traditions, namely elite education and mass education. Mass (or Bantu) education was characterized by a low literacy tradition, which aimed at providing minimal levels of competence in the majority (poor) population (Resnick & Resnick, 1977). Morris and Hyslop (1991) noted that Bantu education was in a state of collapse and that the material infrastructure had inadequate supplies of books and other basic equipment. At present, in some of the ex-Department of Education and Training[2] (DET) schools this situation still persists. The lack of quality education for the majority poor population has engendered educational institutions, which today are historically disadvantaged.

It is evident that the power of English in South Africa is rooted in its colonial past and legacy of Apartheid education. The inferior Bantu education offered to Black school pupils resulted

[2] The Department of Education and Training was a body set up to govern and manage black schooling at the time.

in many leaving school without an adequate command of English. This resulted in a certain sense of importance attached to English by those who were denied learning. In South Africa, English was used as a device in the social engineering of Apartheid. Black South Africans knew that a good command of English was the entry ticket to social mobility and middle class jobs which would yield middle class salaries, while working class people were denied the means to access the language and hence denied the greatest possibility of social mobility (Granville, Janks, Mphahlele, Reed, Watson, Joseph & Romani, 1998).

Theoretically, the new South African constitution provides status and an official role for all South African languages in fostering a democratic South Africa. Asmal (1994) in de Wet (2002, p.123) states:

> Educational matters are naturally crucial to development far beyond the education sector…we need to have the right conditions for the nurturing of a democratic environment. All children thus need to feel they are equal when they enter the formal educational arena. They need to feel that their home languages, their religions, their home environments, their home customs…are all equally important.

However, in reality it has been found that many South Africans still prefer English and not their home language as the language of learning and teaching after the first four years of schooling (de Wet, 2002; James, 2000).

Hartshorne (1987) gives a reason for the low standard of English among Black learners and teachers as Bantu education and its effects. In addition, some English teachers do not have sufficient competence to teach English for communicative purposes and do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to support English language learning (de Wet, 2002). Another reason is the segregation of English mother tongue speakers and ESL learners in schools. The last two reasons may be considered to be derivatives of the first. Hartshorne (1987) agrees with Starfield (1984) that the previous government and its Apartheid policy were the direct cause of the present disarray in education. However, he argues that there are general language problems with which ESL students struggle. A major obstacle for ESL learners who have limited second language proficiency is that they often have to absorb large amounts of content knowledge and language knowledge in as short a time as possible. Dison and Pinto (2000) argue that all students new to tertiary education require a transition period in which

they need to develop both cognitive and linguistic competence, and that ESL students at university bring with them inadequate academic skills and background information, which make it more difficult to assimilate new content, especially in the English-as-medium of instruction situation. As such, it takes an ESL learner up to seven years to acquire adequate skills in a second language (Hartshorne, 1987; Nkosi, 1997 in de Wet, 2002).

Young (1987) concurs that one of the main problems in the English-as-a-medium of instruction in tertiary institutions is the low proficiency in English, which then blocks the development of other skills. Young (1987) believes that at university level one would expect students to have a fair amount of high school first language skills. However, as has been established, a growing number of tertiary students in South Africa do not possess such skills nor have they practiced them (Higgs, 1990). Mascher (1991, p.2) agues that "the medium of instruction from standard three upward is a language which is non-cognate to the learner's first language". Mascher (1991) explains that cognate languages are those that belong to the same family of languages, sharing a common origin, historically and culturally, which makes their grammar and vocabulary similar. Because of this, Mascher (1991) has found that the ESL students' task is doubly difficult as they are faced with the difficulty of learning not only through the non-cognate language but also the non-cognate itself. Mascher (1991) writes that for the ESL student to learn a non-cognate second language in a tutored situation requires special linguistic skills of an analytical nature, the kind which Bantu education denied ESL learners.

The social and economic deprivation of the marginalized majority during apartheid years, which has been argued to result in the consequent educational under-preparedness of a mass of South Africans, stands out as the most valid of opinions given to explain from where the current problem of language in the South African context is stemming. There is an insufficient level of basic linguistic, conceptual and analytic ability to perform in the cognitively demanding and context-reduced environment of academic study at university.

The next section examines the issue of academic writing at university, before exploring particularly the ESL student's cognitive and linguistic ability to write academically. The aim is to show that academic discourse is viewed as a skill that first and second language students alike have to learn. Academic discourse constitutes a numbers of un-written practices with

rules that the learner is expected to acquire. The discussion looks at these un-written practices and asks whether it is possible to learn the skills without formal instruction.

2.2 Explicating the problem: Academic writing at university

Amongst the many divergent and contradictory notions of literacy, there are some essential commonalties. It is agreed that literacy is a vitally important skill, even if its morphology has been mapped and remapped in many different configurations, and even if there is disagreement about its precise use. It is commonly felt that literacy has something to do with reading and writing. What that reading and writing entails, what it is about, how it is done, by whom and to what ends, are all elements in understanding literacy, moreover, in understanding that it has different meanings in different cultural, social, spatial and temporal settings (Street, 1990). In the context of the university, literacy seems to be perceived as the transmission, appropriation and construction of meaning. Academic literacy constitutes the value system of academic discourse that is validated by the university (Turner & Street, 1999).

Kress (1985, p.7) explains that discourses are "systematically organized sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. A discourse…provides descriptions, rules, permissions and prohibitions of social and individual actions". In the university setting, academic discourse often forms the basis for the evaluation of students and, as such, becomes a powerful gatekeeper. Those who do not succeed are denied access to social goods, emphasizing the social discourses as social practice. Fairclough (1992) understands discourses as being both constitutive and transformative of social practice. This suggests that the extent to which students are able to control academic discourse determines the extent to which they can challenge, reshape and remake it (Angelil-Carter, 2000).

However, Bourdieu and Passeron (1994) point out that academic discourse is something that has to be learned, as it is not anybody's home language but a linguistic product whose features can be analyzed and taught. It is a way of presenting academic thinking, but as with presentation of academic discourse, it appears to be closer to the home-based discourses of particular groups (Turner & Street, 1999). This translates into differential success rates across the university, and in order to even out these amongst students it is no longer enough just to grant access to students from all discourse backgrounds. The codes of academic discourse

need to be made explicit in order to address its elusive nature: “if you define criteria for assessment and make a framework of expectations clear and explicit, you can significantly reduce the disadvantages of the disfavored groups without favoring any group in particular” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1994, p.22).

Academic disciplines are seen as *cultures* in which academic discourse is maintained and expressed. The academic discourses which academics themselves know unconsciously are seldom made explicit to students (Angelil-Carter, 2000). In fact, there is the common myth that the writing problem will vanish with very little effort (Rose, 1985). This myth of transience is just that. Academic literacy cannot just disappear or appear without engagement in the respective discipline as writing is intimately related to disciplinary inquiry. Angelil-Carter (2000, p.10) posits that:

> We need to understand a discipline as a culture with its own set of rules and behaviors, which is learnt best within the culture. Writing is an integral part of the way in which the culture is expressed, developed and maintained. This leads us to an understanding of why, unless the codes are explicitly taught, historically excluded students are at greater risk.

While discourses are described as larger institutions whose meanings they carry, genres refer to social events or occasions and the forms of the text these occasions demand (Kress, 1985). For example, the institution of Psychology has resulted in Psychological discourses, as it has its own social occasions, which are organized into genres such as cognitive psychology, educational psychology and psychoanalytic theory and so on. Both the discourse and the genre determine the outcome of the text (Angelil-Carter, 2000). In order to provide students access to social goods, the patterns and designs of the written academic genres must be made visible to learners. However, the reality is that literacy pedagogy has had a history of unwritten rules that learners have had to embrace before being able to deliver a text that successfully passes academic scrutiny.

One of these rules is traditional grammar. Traditional grammar is based on the idea that the world can be described in terms of *facts*. The teaching of traditional grammar was previously conducted in a rote transmissionary fashion with the logic of producing a universal standard of writing that was good enough to fit the canon of the modern curriculum (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). Traditional grammar, according to Shuy (1978), constitutes the visible,

identifiable formal aspects of language. It is the linguistic domain that students have to gain knowledge of in order to produce structurally correct essays. Academic writing has been been known to favor traditional grammar, the main aim being an objective expression of ideas with a concerted effort made to avoid personal opinions. This has often meant offering students the blanket assertion that all academic texts are impersonal (Hyland, 2002).

Traditional literacy pedagogy, with its traditional grammar and literacy canon, has been criticized by the progressivists, whose paradigm stressed individual control, student-centered learning, purposeful writing, individual ownership of writing and the power of voice. Hence, the formal conventions of traditional grammar was invariably replaced by process writing and whole language which were drawn from the theories of how one learns spoken language and how one learns written language. This shift stressed *process* over *content.* Students were now given the opportunity to be active learners, to learn by participating and not just by rote learning grammar. Ownership of writing was encouraged and the teacher functioned as a resource assisting the students instead of being a fixed source of knowledge about language. Language facts and the rules of correct writing were less important than students' experiences and communicative intent (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). In other words, from the extreme of being schooled in the structural aspects of language, learners were now left to make self-discoveries of language as a process of learning. Instead of merely equipping learners with the linguistic means to achieve rhetorical invisibility, they began to be guided towards an awareness of the manifold options that academic writing offers (Hyland, 2002). However, by the early 1990's, the progressivist approach to academic writing began to be criticised by genre literacy theory. Genre literacy pedagogy explains that the most significant reason for the failure of progressivism is because process writing simply encourages students to produce texts in a limited range of written genres, mostly personalized recounts, resulting in texts that are often monotonous, repetitive, and structurally poor (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). In this way, learners lose sight of the meaning they intend to communicate and how well they use language in order to do so.

By way of contrast, genre theorists argue that the connection between structure and purpose must be made explicit, and further stress the reason why the *hows* of language are significant is because they can be used to provide historically marginalized groups equitable access to a broader range of social options. Cope and Kalantzis (1993) argue that genre literacy is meant to give students access to educational and social options by providing them with the discourse

of educational significance and social power. However, literacy theorists, such as Street (1995), argue that genre theorists' notion of empowerment through making genres explicit is an over-simplification of the way in which power structures operate. He argues that making genres explicit is only a small part of access to social goods. The learner has to be taken through a process which exposes both *forms of genre,* as well as *processes of power*. In this way the learner develops a critical perspective to what is being learnt.

According to genre theorists, Cope and Kalantzis (1993), grammar need not be a matter of rigid rote learning but rather a tool for uncovering the principles of order in language, i.e., how it works, who it works for and why it works. Hence, the objective of grammar should not only be to assist students to learn how to write, but it can embody fundamental linguistic-cognitive objectives (Vygotsky, 1962). Cognitively, this is a move to conceptual thought. For example, children move from knowing their relatives as *family* to understanding the *concept of family*. The same word *family* is represented both linguistically and in terms of underlying cognitive structures. This sort of linguistic-cognitive transition is critically achieved through formal training, where the child learns to think and speak through syntax of abstractions that ties concepts into frameworks and meaning. In other words, the linguistic-cognitive process involved in using grammar comes from understanding that the real world represents associations of a text, to being able to understand that text operating grammatically in context and to generalize about its operations (conceptual thought). Genre literacy should not mean presenting model texts from the dominant culture in one's own words, but using a knowledge of genre and grammar to find one's own voice, in association with genres (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993).

Kamler (2001) argues against a rigid division between argumentative and personalized writing. According to Kamler (2001), there are other issues besides genre theorists' emphasis on gaining control of powerful forms of writing for writing construction. She emphasizes the "power relations that shape the writer as she attempts to speak out in the genres her culture says she adopts" (Kamler, in Mendelowitz, 2003, p.83). Kamler claims that students need *authorial voice* in order to write convincing essays. Like Kamler (2001), Mendelowitz (2003) also argues against a rigid divide between personal and impersonal writing. Mendelowitz (2003) researched responses of a multi-cultural group of students in a South African context to a local and controversial issue that raged in the South African media in 1999 and 2001. She obtained her data from questionnaires, focus group discussions and individual interviews, and

showed how writing an argumentative essay can be deeply personal and tap identity issues in powerful ways. Mendelowitz's (2003) aim was to teach students to write an argumentative essay, where class debates and discussions served as preparation for writing it. These small group discussions provided students with opportunities to explore and clarify different positions and to practice taking up a position in a debate.

Through these debates, Mendelowitz (2003) tapped students' racial, class and cultural identities in personal ways, and discovered that the argument structure and discourse in the essay was not as progressive as in the debate. Given the reality that performance on written assignments are what counts within the institutional structures, she claims that most students in her study required more exposure to the form and mechanics of writing argumentative essays. Her findings suggest that it is just not enough to empower ESL learners by using material that is familiar and relevant to their lives. These students need to be engaged at the level of content and at the same time need to be provided with skill development support within the relevant genres. She maintains that it is not sufficient to provide ESL students with empowering material and content if it is not accompanied by a substantial focus on form, the mechanics of writing and the conventions of argumentation.

From the ensuing discussion it is evident that the acquisition of academic discourse is a highly contested terrain in academia. There is agreement that academic discourse is a skill that first and second language students have to master in order to be successful at university. However, academics differ as to what aspects of language are more-or-less important for academic success. Their arguments range from complete reliance on linguistic function to the recognition of the significance of the cognitive domain. They are also uncertain about how the student should access the un-written practices and rules in which they are expected to become skilled. The following discussion expands on the functions of language, the aim being to illustrate those aspects of language necessary for academic achievement.

2.3 What is the function of language?

Thinking and language are interrelated, the clearer the thinking the more likely the chances of communication being clear. Clear thinking is seen as preceding the formulation and transmission of the message. As Neilson (1975) in Viviers and Van Schalkwyk (1992, p.21) express:

> Tyrants and charlatans of all shades know the power of language to reshape history, obliterate events, bend memory, and blur difficult truths into palatable verbal mush. Precise and vivid language is our best protector against equivocations. Clarity of language is both cause and effect of clarity of thought; our vision of life can be no better than the words we use to express it.

This quotation highlights the essence of good communication. When one communicates one uses either verbal or non-verbal language. When referring to verbal communication one uses words to communicate. Words are selected and combined from a particular language according to a recognized pattern to make the message understandable. Verbal messages may be oral or written, and thoughts are encoded in words to formulate a message, whilst the message transmitted in writing is in turn decoded in thoughts. Effective communication takes place when the idea in the receiver's mind is as close as possible to the idea in that of the sender (Viviers & Van Schalkwyk, 1992).

Hence, Kinneavy (1983) argues that the *function* of language is paramount to language study because it tells us 'why' we use language and what message is being transmitted. The 'why' is connected to the 'what' (content), the 'where', (context) and the 'how' or 'how well' (accuracy and language use). The aims of the discourse, for Kinneavy (1983), are the creation, expression and communication of meaning. Language is gradually learnt as a system of meanings in functional contexts (Halliday, 1975).

Halliday (1975, p.5) proposes two meanings of the term *function*: "functions in structure" and "functions of language". The former is concerned with the relationship between different words of a sentence. For example, the word 'fill' by itself can be either a verb or a noun, and it needs the context of a sentence to determine its function. The latter meaning of 'function', on the other hand, goes beyond linguistic elements or words, to discourse. Besides knowledge of the rules of discourse the individual also requires one or more of the other forms of knowledge (Bialystok, 1978), that is knowledge of the world, situational knowledge and information gained from earlier utterances. These three forms of knowledge combined are referred to as 'content knowledge'.

Some argue that content can subsume knowledge, skills and understanding in language use (Popham, 1981), while others, such as Nunan (1988), see knowledge and skills as products that can be distinguished from the process of learning. According to Callis (1994), it is difficult to separate, as Nunan (1988) does, the *product of knowledge* from the *process of learning*. All three: products, knowledge, skills and the process of learning, are aspects of cognition or mental processing. Cognition is a collective term refering to the processes involved in acquiring, organizing, manipulating and using knowledge. Remembering, understanding, problem-solving, imagining, creating, organizing and using symbols are all cognitive processes, though not directly visible (Cockcroft, 2002 in Hook, Watts & Cockcroft, 2002). Carroll (1993, p.10) further defines the cognitive task as "any task in which correct or appropriate processing of mental information is critical to successful performance. A cognitive ability is any ability that concerns some class of cognitive tasks, so defined". The role of the products of knowledge and the processes of learning in second language learning, specifically academic language learning, will be elaborated upon in the next section.

2.3.1 Informational and social functions of language

When classifying language functions, one needs to draw a distinction between the social/ interactional uses of language on the one hand, and the informational and transactional uses of language on the other hand (Halliday, 1975; Leech, 1981). Van Lier (1988, p.228) maintains, "much of our day-to-day communication is not aimed at transacting information or discussing content-matter problems, but rather at developing and maintaining social relationships and at self-expression". For learners in a classroom the main emphasis is on the referential use of language for information and report, while the social use of language is marginal. For theorists such as Van Lier (1988), the emphasis of language is on face-to-face communication (talk). However, in the scholastic environment, the emphasis progressively moves away from talk towards transacting information through reading and writing. This movement has special relevance for second language learners. While first language learners attain basic communicative competence, many second language learners do not readily attain this competence in their second language. This is a crucial issue, which underlies the debate of whether basic communicative skills in a second language are a prerequisite for academic proficiency in a second language.

In contrast to the strong emphasis of the social function of language by authors such as Van Lier (1988), others such as Cummins (1978, 1980a, 1981a, 1984, 1989, 1991), Saville-Troike (1984), Oller and Perkins (1978), examine more closely the relationship between language proficiency and academic achievement. Saville-Troike (1984) firmly maintains that communicative competence in social interaction does not necessarily guarantee communicative competence in academic situations. Larsen-Freeman (1987, p.7) claims that "… just because students can speak and hear does not mean that they know how to communicate orally or listen effectively", and suggests that the specific social and pragmatic skills of oral communication that relate to academic skills require a deeper level of language proficiency than basic interpersonal communication. Cummins (1984, 1991), who divides language into BICS and CALP, shares the same view, arguing that the former is necessary but not sufficient for the latter. The next section focusses specifically on Cummins's theory of language proficiency in order to explain communicative competence in the de-contextualized academic setting.

2.4 Cummins' BICS and CALP theory of language proficiency

Cummins (1984) points out that most of the contentious debates in the areas of psycholinguistics and educational psychology during the previous twenty years had centered on the issue of how language proficiency was related to academic achievement. Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukamaa (1976) had earlier theorized about metalinguistic awareness in language proficiency, arguing that meta-linguistic awareness was most developed when a learner's L1 and L2 were developed to their highest level, and that a certain level of proficiency had to be attained before the positive effects of bilingualism or metalinguistic awareness could occur. This, they termed, the 'Threshold theory', which suggested that a learner had to be good enough in both L1 and L2 to experience the respective cognitive gains of speaking two languages.

According to Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukamaa (1976), language proficiency and bilingualism were best explained by the different thresholds, each presenting a level of language competence that had certain consequences. The first was a level that should be reached to avoid the negative consequences of bilingualism with likely negative cognitive effects. The second was a level to be reached in order to experience the possible positive benefits of bilingualism with likely positive cognitive effects. Consequently, the Threshold theory is

portrayed as a ‘house with three floors’ (Refer to Figure A- The Threshold Theory). On the first floor are those learners with currently insufficient or relatively inadequate competence in both languages. Negative cognitive effects generally accompany lower levels of competence. A bilingual learner on this floor will not be able to cope with learning in either L1 or L2. As such, a learner who is unable to cope in the lecture room in either language may suffer when processing information. On the second floor are those individuals with age-appropriate competence in one of their languages, but not in both. For example, individuals who can operate in a subject in their first language, but not in their second language, may reside on the second level. At this level it is possible to find that a monolingual individual is not very different in cognition from a partially bilingual one. On the third floor reside those who possess age-appropriate competence in two or more languages, known as ‘balanced bilinguals’, that is one who can cope in either language and whose bilingualism will be a positive advantage, being able to cope with curriculum material in either of their languages (Baker, 1993). However, despite the support obtained from Clarkson and Galbraith (1992) and Dawe (1983) cited in Baker (1993) the Threshold theory is not very precise. For example, it states that learners will benefit from bilingualism if they are (or become) *competent enough* in the two languages.

However, the theory does not clarify what *competent enough* means. It also becomes problematic when defining the level of language proficiency that one must obtain in order to avoid the negative effects of bilingualism, and feel its positive effects. The danger lies in constructing artificial critical stages. It is uncertain at what language point the ‘ceilings’ become ‘floors’ (Baker, 1993), but despite these drawbacks, Baker (1993) argues that the Threshold theory is useful since it helps to summarise why minority language children taught through a second language sometimes fail to develop sufficient competency in their second language (e.g. English), and fail to benefit from weak forms of bilingual education. Baker (1993) points out that their low level of proficiency in English, for example, limits their ability to cope in the curriculum.

Cummins (1978) developed the *Linguisitc Interdependence Hypothesis* from the Threshold theory, a hypothesis that suggests that, in part, second language competence is dependent on the competence already achieved in the first language. Hence, if the first language is more developed it follows that the second language would be easier to develop. Young (1995) points out that Cummins (1978) challenged the inadequacy of the widespread belief that first

and second-language development and learning are independent processes in the brain. His hypothesis holds that there is a common underlying proficiency between the first and second languages. In light of Cummins' (1978) Linguisitc Interdependence Hypothesis, Apple and Muysken (1990) emphasize that a high level of proficiency in the first language makes possible a similar level in the second language. In other words, children can reach high levels of competence in their second language if their first language development, especially usage of certain functions of language relevant to learning and the development of vocabulary and concepts, is strongly promoted by their environment. However, when skills in the first language are not well developed and education in the early years is completely in the second language, further development of the first language will be delayed. This in turn is likely to have a limiting effect on second language acquisition (Apple & Muysken, 1990).

Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukamaa (1976) also drew attention to the distinction between surface fluency in a language and academically related aspects of language proficiency. Having studied Finnish immigrant students who were born in Sweden or who migrated there at a young age, they found that, in both L1 and L2, these students were able to converse in everyday face-to-face situations, but in both languages their reading and writing skills were below age-appropriate levels. From the Finninsh study it was deduced that surface language competency, not only in L1, but in both L1 and L2, does not necessarily imply an acquisition of academically related aspects of language proficiency. For the present study this deduction suggests that ESL students at university may be able to use both L1 and L2 in everyday contexts, but that does not necessarily mean that their language ability is sufficient to be able to write academically sound assignments.

Following Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukamaa's (1976) finding, Cummins (1978) proposed that there were two related aspects of language proficiency, namely basic interpersonal skills, that is control over the phonology (sounds), grammar and meanings of the language for everyday interpersonal communication, and cognitive academic language proficiency, that is the learner's control over literacy development and language-specific tasks. In 1984, Cummins formalized the distinction between *surface fluency* and *conceptual-linguistic knowledge* in terms of *Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS)* and *Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)*. BICS is defined in terms of language proficiency in everyday communication contexts. It is the day-to-day language needed to interact socially with others. ESL students employ BICS in such situations as at the canteen, on the sports field or talking

on the telephone. These social interactions occur in social contexts (context-embedded), that are not generally cognitively demanding and do not require a specialized use of language. CALP is conceptualized in terms of the manipulation of language in decontextualized academic situations, including listening, speaking, reading and writing about subject area content material.

Cummins (1978) further explains that understanding content area vocabulary alone does not constitute academic language acquisition. It includes skills such as comparing, classifying, synthesizing, evaluating and inferring. Academic language tasks are context-reduced, such as selecting information from text books and extracting information presented in lectures. ESL students will be presented with new ideas and concepts frequently as the language becomes increasingly cognitively demanding. Overall, three major propositions of CALP can be drawn out. Firstly, CALP can be distinguished from BICS in both L1 and L2. Secondly, the same underlying cognitive dimension is responsible for CALP proficiencies in both L1 and L2. Lastly, since the same dimension underlies CALP in both L1 and L2, older language learners, whose language proficiency is better developed, will tend to acquire CALP more rapidly than younger learners (Cummins, 1978).

Cummins (1980a, 1981a, 1984) expressed the distinction between BICS and CALP in terms of the *iceberg* metaphor (Refer to Figure B- The Dual Iceberg Representation of Bilingual Proficiency), which he adapted from Shuy (1978). Shuy used the iceberg metaphor to highlight the differences between the visible, quantifiable, formal aspects of language (such as pronunciation, basic vocabulary and grammar), and the less visible, less easily measured aspects of dealing with semantic and functional meaning (pragmatic aspects of proficiency). This *Common Underlying Proficiency Model (CUP)* of bilingualism depicts two separate icebergs visible above the surface of the water. These represent the ESL speaker's two languages, which are visibly different in outward conversation. Underneath the surface, however, the two icebergs are connected so that the languages do not function separately, rather through the same central processing system. A distinction can be made between the *Separate Underlying Proficiency (SUP)* and CUP models of bilingualism, both proposed by Cummins (1980a). According to the CUP model, irrespective of the language in which a person is operating, the thoughts that accompany talking, reading, writing and listening come from the same central cognitive processing engine. In other words, when a person owns two or more languages there is one integrated source of thought. Information processing skills and

educational attainment, according to the CUP model, are able to develop through two or more languages as well as through one language.

When one or both languages are not functioning fully, perhaps due to an unfavourable attitude to learning through the second language, cognitive functioning and academic performance may also be negatively affected. Overall, the model suggests that promoting literacy in L1 is a significant factor in reversing ESL failures in reading and writing in L2 (Cummins, 1980a).

According to Baker (1993), the BICS and CALP distinction helps to explain the relative failure of many ESL students. Having achieved surface fluency the students often fail because their cognitive academic language proficiency is not adequately developed to cope with the demands of the curriculum. What is essential for Cummins (1984) is that the CUP is well developed, that is, an individual's cognitive and linguistic abilities in the first or the second language should enable him/her to cope with the curriculum processes of the lecture room. The aim of the current research was to investigate ESL students' cognitive and linguistic proficiency in English L2 from their intitial entrance to university to the submission of their second written assignment in first-year Psychology in term two. The aim was to determine to what extent these students felt that their writing skills had developed from answering lower order knowledge questions that required simple recall of facts or definitions, to higher order questions which called on them to go beyond factual knowledge by predicting events and applying principles.

The cognitive and linguistic processing assessed by the current sudy was operationalized in terms of the cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom, 1956; Bloom, Krathwhol & Masia, 1964; Bloom & Krathwohl, 1977; Chamont, 1981; Skinner, 1981) (Refer to Figure C- Surface and Deeper Levels of Language Proficiency). Bloom (1956) developed a taxonomy of educational objectives as a set of standard classifications to facilitate the exchange of information, particularly for cognitive processing. Bloom (1956) believed that education should focus on 'mastery' of subjects and the promotion of higher forms of thinking, rather than a 'utilitarian' approach which sees learning as the simple tranfer of fact. Bloom's (1956) taxonomy model is in three parts, or 'overlapping domains': the 'cognitive domain' (intellectual capability i.e. knowledge or think); the 'affective domain' (feelings, emotions and behavior i.e. attitude or feel); and the 'psychomotor domain'(manual

and physical skills, i.e. skills or do). Various theorists, such as Anderson and Krathwhol (2001), have since built on Bloom's (1956) work, particularly the psychomotor domain. Bloom's taxonomy is based on the premise that the categories of each domain are odered in degree of difficulty. Moreover, each category ('level') must be mastered before progressing to the next. As such, the categories within each domain are levels of learning development.

The cognitive domain of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy includes the recall or recognition of knowledge and the development of intellectual abilities and intellectual skills.The cognitive domain may be described as including cognitive processes, such as remembering, reasoning, problem solving, concept formation and, to some degree, creative thinking. These cognitive objectives are categorised from the simplest to the most complex, as illustrated in Figure C-Surface and Deeper Levels of Language Proficiency. As the cognitive domain is currently organized, it contains six major classes of cognitive abilities, these being cognitive abilities at a surface level: 1) *knowledge* (remembering something previously encountered or learned); 2) *comprehension* (grasp of basic meaning without any relation to other material) and; 3) *application* (use of abstractions in particular and concrete situations). Cognitive abilities at a deeper level include: 4) *analysis* (breaking down a whole into parts so that the organization of elements is clear); 5) *synthesis* (putting elements into a concrete whole) and; 6) *evaluation* (judging the adequacy of ideas or material for a given purpose) (Bloom, 1956). The corresponding linguistic processes (see Figure C) includes pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, semantic meaning and functional meaning.

Levels five and six of Bloom's (1956) cognitive domain, synthesis and evaluation, were subsequently inverted by Anderson and Krathwhol (2001). Debate still continues as to the order of synthesis and evaluation. It is believed that the inversion of synthesis and evaluation is problematic since it can be argued that in order to evaluate effectively and strategically it is important to have learnt and experienced the execution of strategies. This means that one has to have first completed the synthesis step before evaluation can occur. Anderson and Krathwhol (2001) point out that changing levels five and six is warranted if the circumstance alters the degree of difficulty, especially since the taxonomy is based on the premise that the degree of difficulty increases through the levels (Anderson & Krathwhol, 2001).

Cummins (1984) operationalised the cognitive domain of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives in terms of surface and deeper levels of language proficiency,

emphasising that surface level cognitive and linguistic processes are necessary for conversational proficiency, while deeper level cognitive and linguistic processes are needed for cognitive/academic proficiency. Cummins (1984) further developed the distinction between surface and deeper levels of language proficiency in terms of the *contextual support* and *cognitive involvement* dimensions which underly language performance, while at the same time retaining the basic tenants of BICS and CALP. As such, the BICS and CALP framework proposes that language proficiency may be conceptualized along two continua (Refer to Figure D- Range of Contextual Support and Degree of Cognitive Involvement in Communicative Activities).

The horizontal continuum indicates the variation in contextual support, ranging from the one extreme of *context-embedded* communication on the one side, to the extreme of *context-reduced* communication on the other side. In the former, the participants can actively negotiate meaning through face-to-face feedback, which relies on interpersonal involvement (paralinguistic and situational cues), and a shared reality, for example, by providing feedback that the message has not been understood, and allowing for it to be conveyed in a different manner. An example of context-embedded communication would be two individuals who are barely able to use each other's language, yet who are able to communicate quite well by gestures, non-verbal reinforcement and bodily movements (Baker, 1993). In other words, in a tertiary setting, lecturers tend to give and receive plenty of clues (pointing to objects, using the eyes, head nods, hand gestures and intonation, emphasis) to help students understand the content of the message within a lecture context.

In context-reduced communication, the participants rely primarily on linguistic cues for meaning and thus the successful interpretation of the message depends on knowledge of the language itself. The context alone does not provide sufficient meaning, for example questions in an examination paper. Instead, a fairly high level of linguistic ability is required. The current study aims to identify what students and academics perceive this linguistic ability to consist of. While context-embedded communication is more typical of the everyday world outside the lecture room, context-reduced communication involves many of the linguistic demands of academia (Cummins, 1984). In a lecture room, where cognitively demanding communication is required and where a large quantity of challenging information needs to be processed very quickly, both context-embedded and context-reduced communication may function together. However, written exercises and assignments are predominantly context-

reduced, which is where the difficulty lies for ESL students. In all, the activities along the horizontal continuum, from left to right, may be chatting to a friend, writing an informal letter to reading and writing an academic article (Cummins, 1984).

The vertical continuum of Figure D- Range of Contextual Support and Degree of Cognitive Involvement in Communicative Activities, indicates the level of active cognitive involvement in communicative activities, which Cummins (1984, p.13) conceives in terms of the "amount of information that must be processed simultaneously or in close succession". This means that the level of cognitive involvement is determined by the amount of cognitive effort that is needed to organize specific information into a coherent piece of discourse. For example, making a mind-map of loosely related ideas would be less cognitively demanding than combining the ideas together into a logical or chronological essay. The top end of the vertical continuum *cognitively undemanding* communication in Figure D consists of communicative tasks and activities which do not require much cognitive involvement because they are fairly automated. On the bottom end, *cognitively demanding* communication may occur in a lecture room where much information at a challenging level needs processing quickly.

Cognitively demanding communication consists of tasks and activities which require active cognitive involvement because the communicative tools have not been automated. Cognitively undemanding communication occurs when a person has sufficient mastery of the language skills to enable easy communication. For example, the skills of quadrant B and D in (Figure D- Range of Contextual Support and Degree of Cognitive Involvement in Communicative Activities) may be persuading another of one's viewpoint (B), or writing an essay (D). As such, the theory supposes that bilingual education will be successful when students have sufficient first and/or second language proficiency to communicate effectively in context-reduced, cognitively demanding situations (Baker, 1993). Cummins' (1984) suggests that second language competency develops relatively independently of the first language surface fluency, however, the underlying proficiency is common and orginates from the same position.

This theoretical framework was an improvement on the BICS/CALP distinction in the following three ways. Firstly, it incorporated a developmental perspective showing the different BICS competencies amongst individuals. Secondly, it showed the differences between academic language demands of the learning environment and the language demands

of interpersonal contexts outside the learning environment. Lastly, it described the developmental relationships between L1 and L2 (Cummins, 1981a). Cummins (1984) argues that it would be erroneous to equate CALP with *cognitive* and BICS with *communicative.* Both BICS and CALP are cognitive and communicative, the difference between the two lying in the level of cognitive involvement, as illustrated in Table 1. For example, BICS refers to basic social tasks such as chatting (lower left quadrant of the framework), and not to advanced cognitively demanding social and pragmatic communicative skills, such as the skill of persuasion (upper left quadrant of the framework).

Cummins' (1984) context-embedded and context-reduced framework encompasses Donaldson's (1978) distinctions of *embedded* and *disembedded* language and thought. According to Donaldson (1978), normal productive speech is embedded within a context of fairly immediate goals, intentions and familiar patterns of events. However, thinking and language that is beyond the bounds of meaningful interpersonal contexts (disembedded or context-reduced), make it necessary to focus on the linguistic forms themselves for meaning. It is at this level that ESL students seem to encounter language difficulties in that they do not necessarily have the mastery of sufficient linguistic forms, syntactically and structurally, that enable easy and effective verbal and/or non-verbal communication. Donaldson (1978) argues that students are able to manifest higher levels of cognitive performance when the task is presented in an embedded context, or one that makes human sense. She argues that the unnecessary disembedding of early instruction in reading and other academic tasks for students' out-of-university experiences contributes significantly to educational difficulties. Together with researching ESL students' own assessment of their cognitive and linguistic proficiency, a crucial inquiry of the current research is whether ESL students perceive the instructions given to them for academic tasks to be context-reduced and cognitively demanding, and whether this is perceived as related to their difficulty in understanding the content of the curriculum and engaging in the higher order cognitive processes of the lecture room, such as synthesis, discussion, analysis, evaluation and interpretation. This will be elaborated on further in the study.

Cummins (1984) emphasizes that CALP (as in BICS) is rooted in social interaction. Even though context-reduced, cognitively demanding communication may be impersonal, it does not occur in a social vacuum. Snow et al. (1991) agree that a complete understanding of literacy skills in a second language depend on an analysis of the context in which the

language is acquired. The transfer between the ESL student's L1 and L2 may occur in the lecture room, but only once a solid level of proficiency in L1 has been attained. The first language (used in the home) enhances conversational skills, but according to Snow et al. (1991) it does not appear to directly enhance language skills necessary for the lecture room. It is this latter lecture room skill referred to as *decontextualized language* use, or "language used in ways that eschews reliance on a shared social and physical context in favour of reliance on a context created through the language itself" (Snow et al., 1991, p.91), that is most predictive of successful literacy and university achievement.

In other words, the formal decontextualized use of language constitutes the metalinguistic task in which both analysis of language and control of processing are primary determinants of cognitive academic achievement. ESL students mastery of L1 is useful for interpersonal communication but it does not guarantee that he/she will be able to cope with decontextualized academic language usage. The ESL student needs to show that he/she has mastered the formal decontextualized use of language, not only through understanding the language content of the subject but also by being able to manipulate the form and mechanics of writing in the context of academia as expected by academics in the tertiary context.

Cummins' (1984, 2001, 2003) distinction between *context-embedded/conversational* and *context-reduced/academic* language proficiency, also refered to by Donaldson (1978) as *embedded* and *disembedded* language and thought respectively, and by Snow et al. (1991) as *contextualized* and *decontextualized* use of language respectively, has been drawn on by a considerable number of investigators and is supported empirically in a substantial number of studies (Bialystok, 1991). For example, the relationship between L1 and L2 context-embedded and context-reduced language skills among immigrant students has been extensively explored in three seminal groups, namely, Finnish students in Sweden, Hispanic students in the United States and Asian students in the United States and in Canada (Cummins, 1991). The next section elaborates further on these studies.

2.4.1 Research in support of Cummins' BICS and CALP

The Finnish studies conducted by Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukamaa (1976) were designed to determine the level of Finnish immigrant learners' academic achievement in both Finnish and Swedish. A variety of tests in both languages were used to assess cognitive and academic abilities, such as vocabulary and knowledge of synonyms and antonyms. Significant correlations were observed between Finnish and Swedish verbal academic proficiency. For example, for grades seven to nine, five out of six partial correlations between Finnish and Swedish verbal academic skills were significant. In other words the study supports the notion of interdependence of L1 and L2 verbal academic skills. Linde and Lofgren (1988) used path-analysis in a longitudinal study involving 32 grade three children in the first study and 319 and 157 grade six students in the second and third study respectively, and 388 grade 8 students in the fourth study, all with Finnish backgrounds. They also found significant positive relationships between Finnish and Swedish verbal academic proficiency, indicating a moderate degree of interdependence between L1 and L2 verbal academic proficiency in the L2 acquisition process.

Ramirez (1985) monitored seventy-five Hispanic elementary school students in New Jersey, enrolled in bilingual programmes for three years. It was found that only students with relatively high levels of L1 academic proficiency on entry to the programme, developed high levels of proficiency in L2. Hakuta and Diaz (1985), from their study of Hispanic students, found an increasing correlation between English and Spanish academic skills over time. Carlisle (1986) examined the writing development of grades four and six, English monolingual students in regular programmes and Hispanic students in either submersion or bilingual programmes. An analysis of covariance revealed an advantage for the bilingual-programme students in English rhetorical effectiveness, syntactic maturity and productivity. However, both the bilingual and the submersion groups performed less well than the English monolingual students in regular programmes on overall quality of writing. As with the Scandinavian studies, the Hispanic studies indicate a moderate degree of interdependence between minority students' L1 and L2 academic skills.

Cummins and Nakajima (1987) conducted a study of 273 grades two-to-eight Japanese students in Toronto. English and Japanese standardised measures of reading were administered to the sample, together with assessments of writing skills in both languages.

Length of residence in Toronto accounted for 35 percent of the variance in English reading scores. In a sub-sample of 70 students, the relationship between English and Japanese writing was examined. A significant relationship was found between Japanese writing and the overall quality of English writing and English spelling. Amongst the strongest relationships was that between Japanese spelling and English spelling. Iwasaki (1981, in Cummins & Nakajima, 1987) reported consistent results in a study of Japanese children in New York. She investigated the effect of initial age of intensive exposure to L2 and transferability of cognitive/academic skills across languages among grades seven and eight students, seventy-six of whom were full time and seventy-two of whom were part-time students in Japanese schools. The Gates McGinty level E reading-comprehension test Normal Curve Equivalent scores were used as the dependent measure for English cognitive and academic proficiency. Length of local schooling was found to be strongly related to English reading performance, accounting for 52 percent of the variance. In short, moderate relationships were observed between reading performance in Japanese and English.

The interdependence hypothesis is also supported in one of the few studies on cognitive processes and text production (Cumming, 1987). The study assessed the relationship between writing expertise, L2 proficiency and ESL adults' writing performance. Both writing expertise and L2 consistency accounted for large proportions of variance in the qualities of ESL texts and composition ability. The relationship between these findings and the interdependence hypothesis is that writing expertise is common across languages, but for effective writing performance in a L2, expertise and specific knowledge of the L2 are required. Cumming (1987) pointed out that the research identified the empirical existence of certain cognitive abilities entailed in writing expertise, namely problem-solving strategies, attention to complex aspects of writing while making decisions, and the qualities of content and discourse organization in compositions, which may not necessarily relate directly to L2 proficiency but which appear integral to effective performance in second language writing. Writing expertise is viewed as a central cognitive ability that is facilitated by L2 proficiency.

The research reviewed suggests moderate relationships between decontextualized aspects of L1 and L2 proficiency in studies carried out in a variety of sociolinguistic contexts and involving subjects ranging from early childhood to adulthood. According to Cummins (1991), the cross linguistic relationships between academic or decontextualized aspects of proficiency are a function of the fact that both L1 and L2 proficiencies are subsumed by

cognitive attributes of the learner. Geva and Ryan (1987) suggest the development of a more refined model of the cognitive attributes that subsume L1 and L2 decontextualized abilities, in other words one that distinguishes between the contribution of verbal versus non-verbal ability. This is in line with Cumming's (1987) conclusion that writing expertise represents a specific underlying competence that manifests itself in writing performance in both languages, and is not reducible to other underlying cognitive attributes such as verbal or non-verbal IQ.

Research into the academic language needs of students also incorporates their wants and preferences. A major study in the area was Geoghegan (1983, cited in Carter & Nunan, 2001) whose interviews of ESL students at Cambridge University revealed how their perspectives of academic language differed from those of academics. Casanave (1990) and Johns (1992) studies, cited in Carter and Nunan (2001), also tapped on students' experiences of academic language, as did those of Connor (1996), Kaplan (1966, 1988), and Connor and Kaplan (1987) see (Carter & Nunan, 2001).

2.4.2 Critiques of the BICS and CALP distinction

Despite the support that Cummins' postulations have received, there are theorists who do not support certain aspects of the theory. Early critiques of the BICS/CALP distinction were advanced by Edelsky, Hudelson, Altwerger, Flores, Barkin and Jilbert (1983) and Edelsky (1990). Other critiques include Martin-Jones and Romaine (1986) and, more recently, Wiley (1996). Edelsky et al. (1983) and Edelsky (1990) dispute the legitimacy of the BICS and CALP constructs. Edelsky et al. (1983) argue that the BICS/CALP distinction reflects an autonomous perspective on language that ignores its location in social practice and power relations. Furthermore, the CALP construct consists of 'test taking skills' and it encourages skills-oriented instruction, which impedes the literacy development of bilingual students who flourish in meaning-oriented, whole-language instructional contexts. Edelsky (1990) adds that the sociopolitical determinants of students' academic difficulties are dismissed as suffering from 'internal contradictions'. In other words, the notion of CALP, insofar as it attributes the failure of bilingual students to low cognitive/academic proficiency, does not seem to consider sufficiently the role of inappropriate schooling. Cummins and Swain (1983) made basic points in response to the arguments that the CALP/BICS distinction attributed academic failure to 'low CALP' and that it promoted a 'skills' approach to pedagogy that

would further victimize minority groups. Firstly, Cummins and Swain (1983) point out that Edelsky (1990) failed to define what she meant by a 'deficit position'. Secondly, when CALP is discussed as part of a causal chain it is not discussed as an isolated causal factor, as depicted by Edelsky and her colleagues. CALP is rather one of a number of individual learner attributes which are determined by societal influences and it interacts with educational treatment factors in affecting academic progress. As such, language proficiency is always seen as an intervening variable that develops through social interaction rather than as an autonomous causal variable (Cummins & Swain, 1983).

Martin-Jones and Romaine (1986) argue that Cummin's theoretical framework still requires direct empirical investigation across cultures, time and educational traditions. Hence the current study aimed at operationalizing BICS and CALP in a South African tertiary institution in order to investigate academic language proficiency in a context with a unique socio-economic, historical and political background. In this way it aimed at providing an empirical investigation within a particular culture, time, educational history and tradition.

According to Wiley (1996) terms such as BICS and CALP may be vague, value-laden and over-compartmentalized. He explains that the danger exists in the over-simplification of hypothetical terms and stereotyping of individual functioning and lecture room processes. Wiley (1996) concurs with Edelsky et al. (1983), that the terms BICS and CALP, and the contextual and cogitive dimensions outlined in Figure D appear to invoke an autonomous orientation to language and literacy that isolates language and literacy practices from their sociocultural and sociopolitical context. Cummins and Swain (1983) stress that 'language proficiency' is seen as an intervening variable that mediates academic development. It has never been explained as 'autonomous' or 'independent' of the sociocultural context. In fact, the development of conversational and academic aspects of proficiency are shaped by the language context in which they are acquired and used, and academic language is specific to the cultural setting of the educational context.

Moreover, the BICS and CALP language distinction raises issues of its location in social practices and power relations in particular educational contexts. In the current study the notion of CALP raises questions regarding the academic failure of ESL students in the South African context. It challenges one to think of ESL students' problems with academic writing

in terms of low cognitive and academic proficiency, given the under-preparedness in schooling of Black learners in South Africa and their particular cultural experiences.
Frederickson and Cline (1990) found, when applying Cummin's (1984) two dimensions to curriculum tasks, that it was difficult to disentangle the cognitive from the contextual. In some cases, movement along the contextual dimensions has actually been represented in the model as a diagonal shift (on Figure D, from top left to bottom right). It was found that, in practice, making tasks or instructions more context-embedded also made them somewhat less cognitively demanding. It is argued that although ESL students may require a certain degree of context-embeddedness in instruction giving, instructions and tasks do not necessarily have to be simplified into such small and isolated steps and to such a degree that that they may sometimes result in meaningless contexts given to curriculum tasks and instructions.

Nonwithstanding these criticisms, however, the BICS/CALP distinction has been one of the first and few to generate significant debate around the issue of language proficiency. The BICS/CALP distinction has provided one of the most noteworthy explanations of the relation between language proficiency and academic achievement. It has served to highlight the specific ways in which theorists understand or misunderstand the nature of language proficiency and academic success and difficulties. Despite this valid contribution to the field, Cummins (2000) recognizes that the BICS/CALP distinction, at a theoretical level, is likely to remain controversial, reflecting the fact that there still is no cross-disciplinary concensus regarding the nature of language proficiency and its relationship to academic achievement.

2.5 Conclusion

The literature review has demonstrated the complex relationship between ESL students' cognitive abilities, language and academic language usage. The task of understanding ESL students' language proficiency was underpinned by Cummins' (1978; 1980a; 1981a; 1984; 1989; 1991; 1994; 1996; 1997; 2000; 2001; 2003; 2004) distinction between BICS and CALP. The review showed how literacy skills in L2 depend on an analysis of the context in which the language is acquired and while L1 use may enhance conversational skills in the L2 it does not necessarily enhance language skills necessary for the decontextualized academic context. As such, students may acquire BICS in their mother tongues, but this does not mean that they are capable of achieving the level of CALP required for the decontextualized setting of academic study. Research supporting the BICS/CALP distinction was presented, as well as

relevant criticisms of these concepts. In the next chapter the research method used in this study is outlined. The context underpinning the investigation is explained, including the research paradigm used, the sample and procedure followed and the instruments utilised.