

INTRODUCTION

Academic success depends on successful learning and successful learning depends on the ability to read (Evans, 2002; Pretorius, 2005). Research indicates that English Second Language (ESL) students at tertiary institutions in South Africa lack the academic language proficiency, specifically reading skills, necessary for academic success (Evans, 2002; Perkins, 1991; Pretorius, 2002; Weideman & Van Rensburg, 2002). Studies have also indicated that ESL learners at primary school level do not have the necessary skills to learn and succeed academically, through the medium of English (Langhan, 1982; Lemmer, 1995; Macdonald, 1991; Smyth, 2002). Few studies have attempted to investigate the language proficiency of primary and secondary school learners and although we are aware that language is a major concern in the general South African learning context, few studies have focussed on school programmes to remedy this dilemma.

Historically, language in education has been a contentious political issue in the South African context (Lemmer, 1995). The education policy of the South African Department of Bantu Education, during the apartheid era, made mother tongue instruction compulsory in the junior primary phase and specified that both English and Afrikaans be taught from the first year (Lemmer, 1995). In 1984, Dr. Carol Macdonald undertook the Threshold Project, which investigated the impact of this policy on learners. The primary finding of this project (Macdonald, 1991) was that learners entering standard three were not ready to learn through the medium of English. Macdonald (1991) attributed the ineffectiveness of their schooling experience, primarily to the fact that the majority of learners were having to learn through a language other than their own. The report also found that learners' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills were poorly developed in both first and second languages and that the learning experience from Grade one to Grade three was too limited to prepare learners for the range of skills they required from Grade three onwards. These findings (Macdonald, 1991) were strongly supported by the statistics of Taylor quoted in his introduction to this report: "almost one in four African

children who enter Grade one does not reach Grade two the following year, half of all African children do not graduate from primary school within the minimum 7-year period and it is estimated that apart from those who do not attend school at all, the system produces one third of a million illiterate children”. This suggests that the language policy guiding South African education, at the time, was not meeting the education needs of a vast majority of the South African population.

In the post apartheid era, although the language policy in South African education has changed, the pragmatics of language in South African education has remained essentially the same (Macdonald, 2002; Smyth, 2002; Taylor & Vinjevoold, 1999). Present language in education policy allows parents, via governing bodies, to choose the medium of instruction from the following three options: the “straight for” option involves the use of English, Afrikaans or an African language from the first year, the second option allows the sudden transfer from mother tongue to a second language medium in grade four and the last option allows for the gradual transfer from the mother tongue to a second-language medium during the first four years of schooling (Lemmer, 1995). With the dismantling of apartheid and the desegregation of South African schools, there has been an influx of African learners to English medium schools, probably motivated by political and economical issues rather than educational (de Wet 2002; Lemmer, 1995). Most African parents believe that English, rather than the home language, is the language of opportunity for their children (de Wet, 2002; Moyo, 2002; Weideman & Van Rensburg, 2002). By default, these learners have adopted either options one or two of the language in education policy, with the result that South Africa finds itself in the unique and unenviable position of having more than 90% of its learners adopting English as the language of learning and teaching although it is the home language of only 9,01% of the South African population (de Wet, 2002).

Learners in this context are English Second Language (ESL) learners, whose primary language is not English, acquiring their education through the medium of English. According to Lemmer (1995), ESL learners in English medium schools in South Africa are sufficiently fluent in English to pass language proficiency tests but often lack the level of English necessary for school success. Therefore, English Second Language (ESL) learners with no obvious learning difficulties, capable of fluent

reading and having good communication skills are not achieving academically on the same level as their first language counterparts (Collier, 1989; Lemmer, 1995). These learners face the unique challenge of acquiring English literacy and communication skills to function at a basic social level in the school setting, but at the same time, like their English first language counterparts, they must also master cognitive academic skills such as dealing with abstract concepts, problem solving, critical thinking and expression, all of which are highly language dependent (Collier, 1989; Meskill & Mossop, 2005). As learners advance through grades, content becomes increasingly abstract, and the difficulty involved in reading, writing, and understanding the content also increases (Collier, 1989; Meskill & Mossop, 2005). For ESL learners, with limited development of the language-dependent cognitive and academic skills needed for comprehension of content, the challenge is considerable (Meskill & Mossop, 2005).

English academic language proficiency appears to be a major obstacle to learning and hence the academic success of ESL learners in the general South African educational context. Present academic discourse, however, is directed at the impracticalities of implementing the Language-in-education policy of the Department of Education, at the limitations of Curriculum 2005 and the merits and demerits of mother tongue instruction, whilst very little discussion seems to contemplate practical strategies required to impact on the learning difficulties of learners trapped in this untenable situation. It is important to realise that for children in their formative, preadolescent years, learning English is a necessity for becoming socially integrated into the life of school and the community at large but also for academic success at school and ultimately for economic survival and wellbeing in adulthood (Genesee, 1994).

The theoretical context for this study is provided by Cummins' theory of language proficiency. This theory was developed by Cummins (Baker, 1996) to account for the distinction between surface fluency, required primarily for communicative purposes and the more evolved language skills required to benefit learners in the educational process. Cummins (Baker, 1996) describes two types of skills: BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and CALP (Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency). BICS refers to skills that allow a child to hold a simple conversation. This type of language is called 'context embedded' because it provides non-linguistic

support, such as facial expressions, to give participants contextual information about what is being communicated (Collier, 1987). In the 'context reduced' language of textbooks only limited contextual information is provided to aid meaning, this is CALP (Collier, 1987).

Cummins (Baker, 1996) further refined this theory and presented language proficiency on two continua: the horizontal continuum representing the amount of contextual support available and this ranges from context embedded to context reduced. The vertical continuum represents the degree of active cognitive involvement, which is defined as the amount of information that must be processed simultaneously or in close succession (Olivier, 1998). This continuum ranges from cognitively undemanding to cognitively demanding communication (Baker, 1996). In the quadrants thus formed and numbered in a clock-wise direction, BICS lies in quadrant 1, cognitively undemanding and context embedded, whilst CALP, cognitively demanding and context reduced, lies in quadrant 4 (Baker, 1996). The language proficiency required for academic success, related to cognitive skills and conceptual knowledge, is CALP (Collier, 1987). School personnel, unaware of the above distinction, often assume that learners demonstrating communicative competence in English are capable of learning and achieving academically, through this medium of instruction (Collier, 1989; Lemmer, 1995).

Based on the literature reviewed, it is apparent that the lack of English academic language proficiency is one of the factors impacting on the academic achievement of ESL learners, learning through the medium of English. This study focuses specifically on reading and spelling skills, two of the basic skills that underlie academic language proficiency. In this study, a peer-mentoring reading programme, aimed at improving the reading and spelling skills of Grade 8 ESL learners, was devised and implemented. A standardised reading and spelling test and a non-standardised comprehension test were administered before and after the implementation of the reading programme. The efficacy of the programme was determined by comparing these two sets of scores. The relationship between academic achievement, as indicated by learners' end of term total marks, and their reading (decoding) and spelling skills, as measured by the standardised reading (decoding) and spelling test, was also investigated.