

## **DISCUSSION**

Cummins' theory of language proficiency (Baker, 1996) unequivocally states that the language proficiency required for academic success is Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency or CALP. CALP refers to the ability of learners to utilize context-reduced language in the learning environment and includes the ability to decode and make meaning of academic content. According to Handscombe (1994), becoming proficient users of context reduced language is eventually essential for achieving high levels of academic success. Since English is the language of learning and teaching of more than 90% of South African learners but the home language of only 9.01% of the South African population (de Wet, 2002) the majority of South African learners find themselves ill equipped to learn and succeed academically. ESL learners in English medium classrooms, having received limited or no mother tongue instruction, have not acquired CALP skills in either first or second language. This is reflected in research results that indicate that ESL learners at tertiary and primary academic institutions, in South Africa, lack the skills required for academic success (Evans, 2002; Lemmer, 1995; Macdonald, 2002; Perkins, 1991; Smyth, 2002 and Weideman & Van Rensburg, 2002). Lack of English academic language proficiency has also been regarded as the primary factor responsible for poor senior-certificate results (de Wet, 2002 & van Gruenewaldt, 1999). In the face of such compelling evidence, this study set out to firstly, establish the relationship between academic achievement and reading and spelling ability, the basic skills that underlie, academic language proficiency the of Grade 8 learners and secondly to develop and implement a reading programme to enhance the reading and spelling skills of Grade 8 ESL learners.

### **READING AND SPELLING SKILLS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE:**

The results of this study demonstrate a significant positive relationship between reading and spelling skills of learners as measured by the ESSI Reading and Spelling Test and their academic achievement, as measured by their end of term total marks, empirically establishes the impact of reading ability on the academic achievement of learners. Learners demonstrating good decoding and spelling skills achieved greater academic success than those that did not. These findings provide evidence that

decoding and spelling ability of secondary school learners is a good indicator of their academic achievement. Similar findings have been reported for tertiary students. Pretorius (2002) concluded that reading ability was a robust indicator of academic performance for both medical and mathematics students at the Medical University of South Africa. However, Pretorius (2002) assessed reading skill as comprehension skill i.e. the ability of students to draw inferences during the reading of expository texts, whereas the present study measured reading skill as the ability to decode. This demonstrates that both aspects of reading are good indicators for general academic performance. These results suggest that the ESSI Reading and Spelling Test can be quickly and easily utilised to identify learners at risk for poor academic achievement.

### **READING AND SPELLING SKILLS OF GRADE 8 LEARNERS:**

The focus of this research has been on the learning difficulties and academic success of ESL learners in South African schools. However, our results clearly and surprisingly reflect that poor reading ability is not the predicament of ESL learners only. Over 50% of EFL (English First Language) learners in our sample manifested below average reading and spelling skills, suggesting that factors other than second language learning are impacting on the acquisition of academic language proficiency. Weideman & Van Rensburg (2002) suggest that language proficiency is low amongst South Africans generally and is not limited to second language speakers of English neither is it limited to students at universities but also includes young professionals and students at teacher training colleges.

These results have serious implications for the process of remediation. Literature has thus far concentrated on ESL learners only and the majority of researchers suggest that the solution lies in mother tongue instruction (Lemmer, 1995; Macdonald, 1991; Moyo, 2002; Reagan, 1985; Smyth, 2002; Vermeulen, 2000). However, a number of these same authors have also documented the resistance of the majority of African parents to the notion of mother tongue instruction because of its close association with the apartheid ideology (de Wet, 2002; Lemmer, 1995; Macdonald, 1991; Reagan, 1985; Vermeulen, 2000; Weideman & van Rensburg, 2002). Results of the EMIS survey conducted by the Department of Education at the school where the study was undertaken, indicates that although 53% of learners do not regard as their home

language, 93% of the learner body chose English as their preferred language of learning and teaching. Suggesting that learners have similar resistance to mother tongue instruction. However, if mother tongue instruction is to be seriously considered, new policy in keeping with the ideal of allowing mother tongue instruction through the foundation and intermediate phases and gradual introduction of the second language, will have to be developed. The previous policy of mother tongue instruction for the first 4 years of schooling was clearly flawed (Macdonald, 1991; 2002). Unfortunately, South Africa presently does not have the necessary resources, in terms of personnel and learning material, to support ideal mother tongue instruction in all learning areas, in the course of primary schooling (Moyo, 2002; Weideman & van Rensburg, 2002). The use of mother tongue instruction may be impractical in the South African context: in our cosmopolitan urban classrooms any combination of our eleven official languages may exist and choosing a particular mother tongue will obviously disadvantage some learners. At a Johannesburg school some learners are from families that together total 15 home languages (Macdonald, 2002). Finally and most significantly, mother tongue instruction will recreate the segregated classrooms of the apartheid era (Taylor & Vinjevold, 1999).

The general nature of the reading problem compels us to consider the following two factors. One, the impact of Curriculum 2005 on the development of reading skills. With the dismantling of apartheid, a new curriculum, based on outcomes-based education, implemented in parts of the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, Curriculum 2005, was adopted by the South African Department of Education (Macdonald, 2002). Macdonald (2002) makes it very clear that the development of reading and writing skills seems not to be a priority in Curriculum 2005. The policy document states, “the skill of teaching reading is beyond the scope of the LLC SOs (Specific Outcomes) statement” to the extent that at least one trainer informed educators “you underestimate the ability of your learners; they can learn to read and write by themselves; you don’t have to explicitly teach this-they will pick it up incidentally”(Macdonald, 2002: 31). Although Macdonald (2002) states that some educators have resisted the model proposed by Curriculum 2005 and have continued to develop basic numeracy and literacy skills, other educators ignored them. Macdonald (2002) concluded that this was the main reason for Grade 3, historically disadvantaged children’s inability to read in their main language or in English, the

additional language, and later the language of learning and teaching. If this misconception amongst educators is not rectified then Curriculum 2005 can only add to the “language crises” in South African education, impacting on both first and second language learners.

The second factor to be considered is the premise in the South African educational system, that decoding skills are required to be taught in the foundation phase (Grades 1 to 3) only and that learners exiting this phase are able to decode adequately (Macdonald, 2002; Pretorius, 2005). In the intermediate phase decoding skills are largely taken for granted with very little attention given to further developing decoding skills just acquired and it is also assumed that the ability to decode means the ability to comprehend (Pretorius, 2002). Therefore for many children reading skills are sub-optimally developed (Pretorius, 2002).

If the lack of academic language proficiency is realized in the general school population then mother tongue instruction, with its own limitations, cannot be regarded as the ideal and only solution. More research needs to be undertaken to understand the real extent of the problem. We need to assess the academic language proficiency of learners in the general South African school population to determine whether it is indeed as widespread a problem as suggested by Weideman and Van Rensburg (2002) and supported by the results of this study. Although this may appear to be a monumental task, this study has shown that assessment of learners’ reading and spelling skills can be quickly and simply undertaken, by educators, with instruments like the ESSI Reading and Spelling Test. Only when the true extent of the problem has been ascertained can solutions be posited.

If we do ascertain that lack of academic language proficiency is indeed widespread in the general schooling population then the Department of Education needs to develop policy specifically aimed at improving the reading skills of all learners. This policy should consider clearly re-instating policy, for the development of reading, in the specific outcomes statements, of Curriculum 2005. In addition, this policy should also focus on specifically promoting decoding and comprehension skills throughout the intermediate phase and into the secondary phase, if required. The compulsory implementation of reading programmes, similar to the intervention applied in this

study, maybe required to achieve this goal. Although Weideman and Van Rensburg (2002) place the responsibility for solutions on the shoulders of learners and educators this may not be feasible. Educators may be unaware of the extent of the problem and may have little idea of the solutions required since majority of South African educators were poorly educated and poorly trained (Macdonald, 2002). Responsibility for this catastrophe in education and the initiative to generate workable solutions must be taken by the Department Of Education.

Regardless of the reasons, if EFL learners are experiencing difficulties in acquiring academic language proficiency in South African public schools then the situation must be much worse from the perspective of ESL learners. South African learners generally seem to have underdeveloped academic language proficiency and it is crucial that steps be taken to rectify this situation immediately.

#### **EFFICACY OF THE READING PROGRAMME:**

The reading programme implemented in this study was a peer-mentored programme that required learners to be paired. These learners were required to read and discuss curricular content in two learning areas, English and Life Orientation, during the normal teaching and learning programme, under supervision of their educators. Results indicate that the reading programme had a significant impact on the decoding skills of learners although it had minimal, non-significant effect on spelling and comprehension skills.

Smyth (2002), promoting mother tongue instruction, suggests that possible solutions to the dilemma of ESL learners is the structured inclusion of abstract, context reduced text in home language courses, which would allow learners to develop relevant subject relevant vocabulary and develop language skills vital for learning across the curriculum, i.e. a programme that will develop CALP skills in the mother tongue. Considering the limitations of mother tongue instruction, as discussed above, the development of a reading programme to develop CALP skills in English, the second language and the language of learning and teaching of ESL learners seems more appropriate. In view of the outcomes of this study, not limiting the development of

CALP skills to home language courses may prove advantageous if our focus should be on learners generally and not on ESL learners in particular.

The reading programme was developed to impact on academic language proficiency of ESL learners, specifically their decoding and comprehension skills. One of the major concerns in developing the programme was its implementation in the teaching and learning environment. It was crucial that the programme did not deviate from the “normal” teaching process and did not require major input of limited educator resources hence making it a burden for educators to implement. Feedback from both educators and learners concur that implementation of the programme was non-problematic. Both agreed that the programme was easy to follow and implement with the normal teaching methods employed. Educators felt that the programme relieved them of the responsibility of “reading content to learners” and did not tax their already overstretched resources. This augurs well for the general implementability of the programme in the public school context.

Data presented above, indicate that the reading programme only impacted significantly on the decoding ability of learners. It had no significant impact on their spelling or comprehension skills. This supports the conclusion of Fuchs and Fuchs (2000) that repeated reading programmes enhance reading fluency. The researcher observed that all learners were more confident and fluent in their reading after implementation of the programme than before. The empirical evidence is supported by learner feedback obtained in the interviews with all participants at the end of the programme. The majority of learners indicated that the programme had impacted on their reading ability. They suggested they were reading more fluently, their pronunciation had improved and they were able to read more content as the programme progressed. Most participants could not however, relate to the impact of the programme on their learning ability, although a few mentors suggested that “teaching” others had made learning easier for them.

We do not however expect the reading programme to impact on the academic performance of learners at this early stage. This follows from the lack of impact of the programme on the comprehension skills of learners. Reading to learn essentially requires the ability to both decode and comprehend text. Decoding skills do not

necessarily imply skills in comprehension (Pretorius, 2002), learners may be able to decode text but still have difficulty in understanding what has been decoded. It seems that in the course of the reading programme only decoding ability was impacted on. The ability to make meaning of text seems unaffected. Fuchs and Fuchs (2000) suggest that fluency in decoding and word recognition reduces cognitive demands on these processes and allows readers to allocate greater cognitive resources to comprehension. It is possible that mentee decoding is not yet at a fluent enough level to allow for greater cognitive resources to be utilized in the comprehension process.

In her inductive reading programme implemented at the University of Transkei, Perkins (1991) found that improvement in the comprehension skills of students was directly linked to their attendance at the Reading Center, therefore suggesting that the length of exposure to the programme impacted on the acquisition of comprehension skills. Similar dynamics may be at play in this reading programme. It is important to bear in mind that the significant change in the decoding ability of learners' was achieved in only 6 weeks and as suggested by literature the acquisition of reading skills is sequential, beginning with the ability to decode. The ability to comprehend develops later. This aspect is borne out by the results of this study. The significant change in decoding ability was accompanied by a small insignificant improvement in comprehension ability. It is possible that increasing the length of programme implementation and applying it across all learning areas, thereby increasing learners' active reading experiences, may enhance the non-significant effect on comprehension skills and hence learning and academic performance. It is an aspect that needs to be clarified by further research.

A second factor impacting on the effectiveness of the reading programme is that of motivation. The implementation of this reading programme relied on intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic motivation. This decision was based on the idea that intrinsic motivators would produce more enthusiasm and have a greater impact than extrinsic motivators which may be seen as coercive by learners. The necessity of not overburdening educators also contributed to this decision. Therefore, although learners were required to compile personal vocabulary lists, educators did not monitor this. In retrospect, it may have been of more value to build extrinsic motivators for e.g. assessments into the programme. One possibility is a bi-monthly vocabulary

assessment, for purposes of continuous assessment. Therefore learners would be required to pay closer attention to vocabulary and this could have amplified the impact of the programme.

The third and possibly most significant limitation of this study is the absence of a control group. As discussed in the methodology, the inclusion of a control group was deemed impractical and the ethical dilemma of excluding some learners from the benefit of the reading programme in the same unit was also considered. The absence of the control group means that we cannot conclusively suggest that the improvement observed in the decoding ability of learners was due to the intervention only. It may be due to normal teaching and learning processes. In retrospect, this aspect may be investigated by including a control group.

This study indicates a strong positive relationship between the academic performance of learners and their reading and spelling ability. The short-term implementation of peer-mentored paired reading programmes is a practical and effective technique of impacting on the decoding skills of learners. Although the implementation of the reading programme did not impact significantly on the spelling and comprehension skills of learners, an extended implementation maybe a truer reflection of the programme's worth.



## CONCLUSION

The lack of academic language proficiency is a major concern in the general South African learning context. Learners who find it difficult to fully understand what they read will no doubt find difficulties in studying, assimilating new information and in many other situations requiring text comprehension (Carnoldi & Oakhill, 1996). Whether we focus on English Second Language learners or English First Language learners is irrelevant. What is relevant is that we need to desperately find solutions to this dilemma. Our focus on ESL learners has presented mother tongue instruction as the popular solution by far (Lemmer, 1995; Macdonald, 1991; Moyo, 2002; Reagan, Reagan, 1985; Smyth, 2002; Vermeulen, 2000). The limitations of mother tongue instruction notwithstanding, it is not an ideal solution when we consider the general nature of the crisis. Although literature suggests that acquisition of CALP skills in the second language is greatly facilitated by its achievement in the first language (Collier, 1989), is it possible for second language learners to acquire CALP skills in the second language, without having achieved it in the first language? The results of this study suggest that this is a possibility. This study is only the beginning and indicates that short-term implementation of such programmes impacts on the decoding ability of learners. Much more research is urgently needed to ascertain whether reading programmes are indeed part of our solution. The responsibility to orchestrate solutions must lie with the Department of Education.