

**LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND ACADEMIC  
PERFORMANCE:  
THE CASE STUDY FOR A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN  
KWAZULU-NATAL.**

by

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## DEDICATION

I humbly dedicate this book to the Lotus feet of my beloved guru **Bhagavan Shree Sathya Sai Baba**, through whose Divine Grace and Love I have accepted my noble calling as a teacher.

## DECLARATION

I declare that: LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE: THE CASE STUDY FOR A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN KWAZULU-NATAL is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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**ANUSHA PAROPCAR RAMCHARAN**

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**DATE**

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To God, for inspiring me to fulfill my spiritual journey –

**Om Sai Ram**

## ABSTRACT

I have been fortunate in my teaching career to have taught young learners from Grade 1 to Grade 12 in English home language. This has led me to the realisation that English home language learners have a considerable advantage over their second language counterparts in acquiring education in general.

Language proficiency in the language of learning and teaching is essential for academic success. Many secondary school learners lack the required academic proficiency in English, the language of learning and teaching. The English language proficiency of isiZulu-speaking Grade 8 learners at a Durban secondary school was evaluated in order to suggest ways in which these learners could be helped to maximise their academic success. This school was chosen on the basis of poor matric results.

The study used a mixed-method research methodology. A sample of Grade 8 learners was selected, and their language proficiency levels were determined. The data collection techniques used were the focus group interview to generate pupils' response to problems and barriers to learning, as well as document analysis of school documents. The findings indicated that the learners were generally not capable of handling the requirements of the Grade 8 curriculum. The language issue is complex and cannot be explained as an isolated variable as there are a variety of other mediating factors that interact to impact on the academic performance of learners with limited English language proficiency. It was recommended that the learners be guided to make optimal use of facilities, such as libraries. This could enhance the learner's language development.

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## Definitions of Terms

### **Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS)**

This is the first level of communicative competence, which is a face-to-face conversation. According to Cummins (2000:46) BICS can be acquired if a learner is immersed in a language for between two and three years.

### **Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)**

This is the second level of communicative competence and involves higher order thinking skills such as analysis and synthesis. CALP skills also indicate the learners' language skills. Cummins (2000:47) views a period of six to seven years for the second language (L<sub>2</sub>) learners to acquire CALP.

### **First Language (L<sub>1</sub>) Acquisition**

This is the language one learns first, knows best, uses most and identifies with most readily. A person's linguistic environment can determine the number of first languages.

### **Second Language (L<sub>2</sub>) Acquisition**

This is the language learnt after the age of three years. It could also be a language learnt at school.

## Preamble: Structure of the Thesis

The structure of the thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter contextualises the study by presenting a background to schooling in South Africa and the implications this has for learners at the Secondary School under study, who are learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. This chapter further alludes to low proficiency levels and the impact on academic achievement.

The second chapter provides an overview of the theoretical basis of language acquisition and development and the impact that these theories have on linguistic realities in South African education.

The third chapter contains the conceptual basis of this study and the implications for the Secondary School under study.

The fourth chapter contains the research methodology which enabled this study to access data that played a major role in identifying the reason for learners' low proficiency levels in English and poor academic success at the Secondary School under study. An account of a selection of tests, scoring procedures and data analysis is also included.

The fifth chapter concerns the actual findings and the analysis of data. These played a major role, as both informed the nature of teaching and learning at the Secondary School under study. This chapter further alludes to language proficiency and the learners' background.

The sixth chapter offers concluding remarks based on the data gathered in Chapter Five. This chapter also provides recommendations on how to improve language proficiency and academic achievement among learners at the Secondary School under study. The limitations of this study and suggestions for further studies are offered at the end of this chapter.

## **Chapter 1: Background to the Study.**

The nature of education in South Africa has transformed over the years. It is therefore vital to examine the developments that have taken place in the field of education. Tracing such developments cannot be sufficient without issues around language proficiency.

Language proficiency is the ability to use language accurately and appropriately in its oral and written forms (Cloud et al 2000:60). The ability to read and write in this context has the potential to empower individuals to engage proficiently in activities and tasks. Reading is a core competency at school, and all academic achievement depends, to a greater extent, on reading literacy (Rose, 2003).

In this context, given the fact that English is the medium of instruction in most schools in South Africa, proficiency in English can therefore be regarded as essential to empowering individuals to gain access to, and control over, the mechanisms which govern their existence (Mgqwashu 2002:4). Language skills enhance a learner's academic performance. According to Mahabeer (2003:26), language is crucial to cognitive development and can subsequently have an impact on scholastic performance. The matric academic performance and English language performance of learners at a Secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal have deteriorated from 2006. The researcher has embarked on this study to explore ways in which learners, with limited English proficiency, experience education at this English medium secondary school. In relation to this, Balfour (2007:9) postulates that, despite huge increases in the funding of education, performance and literacy levels have remained constant or have even declined, especially in the case of literacy.

Writing about the correlation between mastering conceptual and linguistic knowledge for students with English as an additional language, Clayton ( in Mgqwashu 2002:30) correctly points out that

The problem of language proficiency in relation to academic achievement in second language students becomes even more acute if we realise that those same students may not reveal any language barriers in conversational settings and hence appear to be able to articulate their ideas adequately.

While many learners at the Secondary School under study may be able to speak English, they certainly lack the skills to read and write English proficiently.

Several research studies which have attempted to investigate issues of language and learning, regard English language proficiency as an enabling and/or disabling vehicle for tackling academic progress. T. van Dyk and A. Weideman (2002:5) postulate that low academic language proficiency levels have indeed been mooted as one of the primary causes of the lack of academic success experienced by many learners. Academic language proficiency, according to Van Rensberg and Weideman (2002:1), remains a prerequisite for academic success.

Learners who are not fully proficient in English produce poor academic results and usually drop out of school at the Secondary School under study as they feel overwhelmed. As Blanton (in Street 2007:23) notes, we “...agree that individuals whom we consider academically proficient speak and write with something we call authority: that is one characteristic – perhaps the major characteristic – of the voice of an academic reader and writer. The absence of authority is viewed as powerless...”

Weideman and Van Rensberg (2002:152) further consider there to be a high correlation between language proficiency and academic performance. Learners at the Secondary School under study do not use English socially or at home and they are apathetic towards reading: “There is no doubt that reading ability, more than any other skill, is a critically important factor in academic success” (Weideman and Van Rensberg 2002:157). Learners who fail to become proficient readers are unlikely to do well at school or even after school.

Mahlobo and Lemmer (1996:334) argue that the English language proficiency of South African learners is integral to academic achievement, career development and functioning in a multilingual society. We all need proficiency in English, as this is the language of modern-day business, science, information and communication technology. Language proficiency and competence form the cornerstone to academic performance and are a strong predictor for success.

“English has, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, become the international language par excellence” (Phillipson 1998:6).

The current, undeniable status of English as a teaching medium poses a challenge to us. While we might have mixed feelings about the international perception that English is the current *lingua franca* and will increase as such, one can predict a consolidation of English as the first choice as the second language – and the reinforcement of the view, where it is a first language, that learning another is less important.

“There is a risk in English-speaking countries that literacy (in English) could become the sole focus, supported politically and financially, ignoring the benefits of bilingualism, the strength of multiculturalism and the wealth of multilingualism” (D. Cunningham: 2007).

The history of the South African education system has transformed over the years.

## 1.1 The Context of Schooling in South Africa.

The onset colonialism of South Africa created social divisions based on colour and class, which had a great impact on education. White children received free and compulsory education whereas Black children received some form of education by the missionaries who constantly experienced shortage of funds. The pattern of schooling in South Africa was characterised by a system of unequal and separate education.

The 'homeland' policies and pass laws placed restrictions on Black people, which made access to education difficult. The State controlled the schools and the curriculum. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 saw the extension of mother-tongue education to the first eight years of schooling. According to Van Zyl (2002:14) the introduction of English and Afrikaans, in the school curriculum of 1975, gave rise to the 1976, SOWETO Uprising.

The apartheid years, according to Heugh (2000:48), led to the formation of separate goals: social and economic development for the dominant minority, and social and economic underdevelopment for the marginalised learners who spoke their mother-tongues did not have sufficient proficiency in English to cope with the syllabus. In 1995, the Language Task Action Group (LANTAG) recommended a change in language policy and a focus on the present climate of multilingualism. LANTAG was requested to develop a language strategy for South Africa, as Balfour (2000:3) points out:

A key argument for retaining English as a medium of instruction in education, according to the LANTAG Report, is that indigenous languages in South Africa do not have the linguistic complexity to enable them to be used in technical and scientific contexts.

The quality of education for Black people in South Africa prior to 1994 was the lowest in the country. During the colonial and apartheid administrations, political favour was given to both English and Afrikaans. Education at former Black schools was characterised by poor academic results because of teacher-pupil ratios, lack of parent-teacher co-operation, poor teacher qualifications, and inadequate provision of resources.

The history of the South African education system can be described as having two phases. The first phase is associated with education under the missionaries and colonial administrations. The second is the emergence of apartheid and the education and political system associated with power and education.

Education for Black South Africans began with the arrival of the Christian missionaries. The medium of instruction was, however, English, as Balfour (2000:40) puts it: "...the standard of missionary education was generally equivalent to that received by Europeans in the colony but it was not consistent, especially in terms of teacher training."

After 1948, politicians sought to control education, and there were political motives to maintain racial segregation. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 saw the end of missionary schools, and this impacted on the quality of the teaching of English. The missionaries were native English speakers, whereas the teachers at government schools were trained in Afrikaans; hence the quality of English teaching was poor. Christian National Education (CNE) promoted racial segregation so as to stifle equal education for Black learners. Afrikaans was introduced together with English as a medium of instruction.

The apartheid system of education in South Africa led to the establishment of racially categorised departments of education; namely the House of Assembly (HOA) for Whites, the House of Representatives (HOR) for Coloureds, the House of Delegates (HOD) for Indians and the Department of Education and Training (DET) for Blacks.

Hendrik Verwoerd, then Minister of Education, enforced payment of school fees for Black learners, which led to many school dropouts. Black teachers remained lowly qualified, and this impacted on their teaching of English. In 1982 the government funding for White learners was twice that of Black learners despite the larger enrolment of Black learners at schools. This difference in government spending, together with student-teacher ratios, had a tremendous impact on the quality of teaching in Black schools.

By 1989 the Department of Education and Training (DET: the government agency responsible for education of Black South Africans) still had the highest rate of matriculation failures in the country (over 60%). The LANTAG Report of 1996 also revealed that by 1993 46% of Blacks were illiterate, compared to 34% of Coloureds, 16% of Asians and 1% of Whites.

After 1994 there were progressive steps towards full educational integration. The government adopted an “open schools policy,” and schools became multicultural and multiracial. Black learners, however, were still viewed as inferior in these ‘open’ schools and were ill-equipped to cope with the curricula. The Model C schools (schools almost exclusively for White learners), on the other hand, commanded high school fees and offered very little to accommodate cultural differences, thus making it virtually impossible for Black learners to enroll, as Balfour (2000:67) points out:

English is viewed as the vehicle of progress in South Africa, however monolingualism is still the ‘norm’ in townships and rural areas. English may be the language of power, however it remains inaccessible to most people.

The South African society is a kaleidoscope of races, cultures and languages that interact in all spheres, creating a rich culture of language diversity, being an apt metaphor as the rainbow nation.

The historical imbalances of the past in education have created a negative impact on the new policies that have been implemented. All education policy documents since 1994 are enshrined in the Bill of Rights of the Republic of South Africa. Despite policy changes, there are still, however, considerable differences in terms of learners’ socio-economic backgrounds, school infrastructure and resources, learner-teacher ratios, qualifications of teachers, availability of teachers, and shortages in key subjects.

Recent research shows that African language speakers believe that English is the most important medium of instruction in schools (Kapp 2000:23). The trend at present is for parents to send their children to English medium schools, even if the learner has never been exposed to English before. Any suggestion that an African language be used is seen with a great degree of suspicion (Kamwangamalu 2002:16). Many mother-tongue learners, however, are not adequately proficient in the English medium schools owing to having been subjected to cognitively impoverished curricula, which has led to their not being able to cope with the new syllabus. The Secondary school under study, for



example, has a school population of 99% Black learners who received their primary school education in former DET schools.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

Learners at the Secondary School under study are isiZulu and Xhosa Home Language learners, and their medium of instruction is English. English Home Language is also their first language at school. The anxieties experienced by educators and learners from disadvantaged educational backgrounds point to inconsistencies within the current educational setting.

Researchers support the view that the most important factor that needs to be considered in relation to academic success is simply proficiency in the language of instruction.

Van Rensberg and Weideman (2002:6) postulate that “Everyone seems to want high proficiency for their children in a high status language such as English. They choose a disastrous alternative: low proficiency levels in a high status language.” The Secondary School under study, as a consequence of such choices, is now considered to be an underachieving school as reflected in its academic records over the last three years. Against this background, the main research question for this study is:

- How does the acquisition of English as an Additional Language (EAL) impact on academic language proficiency among isiZulu learners at a secondary school?

In endeavouring to address this main research question, the following two sub-questions were formulated:

- What are the factors that contribute to language proficiency in speakers of English as an Additional Language (EAL)?
- How does language proficiency impact on academic achievement?

### 1.3 Focus of Study

The researcher is a teacher of English at the Secondary School under study. This Secondary school attracts a large percentage of learners from Westrich, Richmond Farm and Kwa-Mashu townships. Many of these learners are effectively learning English for the first time when they enrol at this school. There has been a transformation of learner enrolment and academic performance at this school over the past ten years. The focus of this study is to determine the level of acquisition of English and academic language proficiency among isiZulu speaking learners at this Secondary School.

Possible obstacles experienced by learners from township schools to developing English proficiency in English medium schools include contextual factors, linguistic factors, socio-economic factors, school factors and intrinsic factors. These contributing factors will help to determine and verify the assumption that isiZulu-speaking learners from township primary schools are disadvantaged when they attend English medium secondary schools. Grade 8 learners have been chosen for this study because they represent an important stage in the development of academic language proficiency. The study will also help to determine the learner's ability to cope with the language demands of the curriculum, which requires Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins 2001:2).

The nature of teaching and learning in the present South African (S.A.) climate of multilingualism poses numerous teaching and learning problems for both the educator and the learner. This is owing to the fact that, for many learners, the Language of Teaching and Learning (LOTL) is English. As a result, the majority of learners are linguistically handicapped and find learning through this medium challenging. As an educator at a secondary school, with learners experiencing this challenge, I find that they perform poorly in their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. Part of the problem is that the English language is embedded in cultural, economic and social issues, and the rich culture of English at school is virtually non-existent.

It is within this context that this study examines the extent to which English language proficiency impacts on schooling success for learners with Limited English Proficiency (LEP). Learners with LEP often experience alienation and marginalisation from the curriculum and culture of the school. The assessment procedures implemented at this Secondary school will help in investigating the relationship between language ability and academic success. The English language proficiency of IsiZulu- speaking learners will be evaluated in order to suggest ways in which these learners could be helped to maximise academic success.

This study examines the extent to which a Secondary School in Kwa-Zulu Natal has responded to the challenges of teaching English Home Language to isiZulu learners, and some of the reasons behind the problems being experienced. The focus is to explore the ways in which learners with limited English proficiency experience education at this English medium secondary school.

The structural and morphological differences between Black languages and English contribute to the lack of fluency and proficiency in English among speakers of Black languages. Learners at this Secondary school perform very poorly in written tasks. The new FET curriculum was introduced in 2008. Matric candidates were required to write three papers for English Home Language. Learners' writing skills were tested in Paper Three. This paper was previously marked and assessed internally at schools. In 2008 it was marked externally under strict examination conditions, as with all other papers. Learners at this Secondary school performed dismally with a failure rate of 36% in English Home Language, for the first time in the history of the school. This further resulted in a drop in the pass rate to 58%, as learners had to pass English to secure a pass in the matric examination. A discussion on reading and writing issues is included next to explore the concept of literacy further.

I have been an educator at this Secondary School since 1995. In this school there is a large enrolment of learners from the townships of Lindelani, Richmond Farm, Westrich and Kwa-Mashu. Many of these learners start learning English effectively in Grades 8, 9 or 10 when they enrol at this English medium school.

The matric academic performance and language performance at this Secondary school from 2006 to 2008 has deteriorated considerably, as indicated by the following statistics.

A. Matric Pass Rate

2006 – 97%

2007 – 91%

2008 – 58%

B. English Pass Rate

2006 – 100%

2007 – 100%

2008 – 64%

The isiZulu learners at this school are keen on studying English as a Home Language as it affords them many opportunities. However, they lack the commitment and dedication to work hard. Their socio-economic backgrounds also impact on their academic performance and language performance.

#### 1.4 The implications for the Secondary School under study

The predominantly Black learners at this Secondary school are from former DET schools. These learners are isiZulu or Xhosa Home Language learners. The Secondary School under study offers English Home Language as the medium of instruction. The community is adamant that English Home Language remains as the medium of instruction for learners as they believe that English is the most important language of opportunity for their children and it has a high international status. In South Africa, the competent use of English confers significant social advantages, and competent speakers of this language have greater opportunities for self-advancement. Proficiency in English

can therefore be regarded as essential to gain access to, and control over, the mechanisms which govern their existence (Mgqwashu 1999:4).

The syllabus for English Home Language is cognitively demanding for these learners. Some of them are learning English effectively for the first time when they enroll at this school. This impacts greatly on their academic performance. The school lacks funding and resources as it cannot command high school fees. The socio-economic backgrounds of these learners do not favour adequate recovery of school fees. As an English educator, I am faced with the challenges of large classes, a non-functional school library, lack of parental involvement, unsafe working conditions (it is dangerous to offer tuition after school), poor management, and poor discipline. As a consequence of these challenges, I have embarked on this research as I find that the new policies introduced in education do not go far enough in transforming the quality of teaching and learning at schools with learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. The linguistic realities of schools such as the one under study are not taken into consideration.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review.**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In his “On becoming literate in English, a during-and-post-apartheid personal story,” Mqgqashu (2009:297) points out that “...it is no small surprise that most people who have little or no competency in English are also poor, black and living in rural or marginalised urban area.” It is within this context that, in this study, language is very much about class and power, and Mqgqashu (2009: 300) reminds us that:

In South Africa, if you cannot access the world of English, you cannot influence the machinery of power around decisions that affect your life. You are also more likely to be excluded from the economy. Language and privilege are still kissing cousins.

The above is evidenced at the school under study, a former HOD school, transformed in its demographics after 1994. The learner population is made up of learners from previously DET schools. The school faces new challenges in terms of academic and language proficiency. In terms of teachers and students, from disadvantaged backgrounds, Mqgqashu (2009:296) points out that: “Students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds are faced with the dilemma of ‘swimming against the tide’, and, unfortunately, most of them sink.”

Learners’ academic and language performance in this school has deteriorated remarkably in the last few years. There is reason for concern as in 2009 the Secondary School under study was identified as an underachieving school, with a matric pass rate of 58%. Desai. Z (June 2009) argue that language plays an important role in our lives. It is much more than the primary medium of human communication. It is a symbol of uniqueness and identity. It is through language that people can have shared social and cultural experiences and that culture is transmitted from one generation to the next. Human beings

are socialised to adapt to a particular social structure through language. Teaching and learning also take place, and learners develop their conceptual understanding of subjects and disciplines through language.

Problems around English as an Additional Language (EAL) arise when attempts involve identifying and describing the needs of the Black learner learning through the medium of English. It is necessary for teachers to examine their cultural biases before they lead students to develop cross-cultural understanding. A learner's proficiency in English influences his or her language development. Perhaps a discussion of language proficiency could clarify this statement.

## 2.2 Language Proficiency

Language proficiency is the ability to use a language accurately and appropriately in its oral and written forms (Cloud et al. 2000:60). The four areas of proficiency include listening, speaking, reading and writing. Academic language proficiency enables some to make complex meanings explicit in oral or written modalities of language. Proficiency can also vary according to the function, purpose and context of communication, Lamberger (in Manyike:2007). According to Cummins (2001:68), language that is used in informal settings may be easier to master than language that is used in formal settings.

Proficiency in reading and writing relies largely on adequate language use which, according to Maitling (2002:284), is the vehicle that is used to move through life. Language proficiency forms the basis of all learning and is closely related to a person's experiences and general knowledge. The situation of learners at the Secondary School under study who do not have the language of learning poses great challenges for both teaching and learning. Van den Berg (2002:23) argues that learners with a strong linguistic intelligence have the ability to perform well in the theoretical and practical usage of language. According to Weidman and Van Rens Berg (2002:36), language

proficiency among young South Africans is low. This is true not only of mother-tongue speakers of English and Afrikaans, but also, and especially, of non-mother-tongue speakers of English, among whom proficiency levels raise serious concerns. Language proficiency is critical at university level because there is a high correlation between language proficiency and academic performance. A decline in language proficiency levels was observed among tertiary level entrant students between 1990 and 2006.

Habte (2001) points out that literature raises proficiency levels in English since it heightens fluency in spoken English which, in turn, is a prerequisite for proficiency in reading and writing the language. He also advocates increased opportunity for interaction among learners and this can be provided by tasks. In South Africa there is interaction among people of different linguistic backgrounds. This has led to cross-culturalisation and acculturation. Drawing on this assertion, it is important to define a native speaker in order to see the influence of the communicative environment.

## 2.3 Native Speaker

According to Scutnabb-Kangas (1998:13), a native speaker is one who thinks, dreams and counts in a language acquired as a child. People who have lived for a time in a new language community can use the language of their adopted community for these functions, even though they may not speak the new language very well.

Mother-tongue, or the language of the “hearth and home,” is used as a convenient reference for determining the origin of a native speaker of a particular language or dialect. It is taken to mean the language a speaker has tacitly heard since early childhood or the language used at home. The problem with native languages is that they ignore the potential for code switching and underestimate the “globalisation” of English as a lingua franca and the effect of cultural diffusion as a result of the mass media .



The native speaker of English has to conform to the set of linguistic and socio-linguistic conventions of a particular speech community. In the South African context, native speakers may have what Bachman (1991:678) calls organisational competence i.e. their cultures influence the manner in which they express themselves. Learners at the Secondary School under study experience teaching and learning in a multicultural and multilingual environment. These learners are IsiZulu Home Language learners, however they are learning through the medium of English and they are studying English Home Language.

If many societies use English and other indigenous languages, at what point does one become a native or non-native speaker of English?" In South Africa we may have bi- or multilingualism, e.g. an Afrikaner growing up in an English-speaking community might end up using English as the L<sub>1</sub> language. This child's first language acquisition is influenced by his environment.

## 2.4 First Language Acquisition (L<sub>1</sub>)

Children acquire their first language by imitating the language that surrounds them, and parents also teach language to their children. According to Brown (2000:16), children are heavily dependent on non-linguistic clues, such as facial expressions, as a form of communication. The stages of L<sub>1</sub> development follow the sequence of cooing, babbling, one word, two words and sentences. Children's first words make reference to objects in their environment and might be monosyllabic to facilitate social interaction. Children's creative utterances like "all gone foodie," are suggestive of the structural properties of language.

A child's communicative competence develops according to socially acceptable rules, i.e. language development is influenced by cultural identities. This social interaction theory is important as the language used in the primary speech community (from birth to school-

going age) is very different from that of the secondary speech community (the school). This has great implications for our multicultural and multilingual classes in South Africa, as a realignment of language use is required.

Piaget (1972:4), a structural linguist, proposed the social interaction approach to language learning, where children are engaged in self-directed learning through social interaction. This theory conceptualises a culturally ideal teacher-child relationship. In multicultural settings of our present climate in teaching and learning, this theory is not workable, as linguistic realities are not fully recognised.

According to Brown (2000:72), children are good imitators, and this is relevant during the early stages of language acquisition. A great deal of surface imitation may be prevalent during this early stage of language acquisition. Brown also postulates that in foreign language classes rote pattern drills often evoke surface imitations. Brown found that the linguistic item in the speech of mothers influenced the order of emergence of those items in the child's speech.

Linguists claim that the role of input is crucial in the child's language acquisition as adult and peer input shape the child's acquisition. A child learns not only how to initiate a conversation but how to respond to another's initiated utterance. Children also learn that utterances have a literal and functional meaning. Many learners at the Secondary School under study are not exposed to English in their homes and their social environment. They acquire their first language at home and learn English at school. What may be noticed here is the distinction between acquiring and learning a language.

## 2.5 Approaches to First Language Development

There is a difference between acquiring and learning a language. A child acquires or picks up a language from birth unconsciously, but learns a language consciously and unconsciously at school.

Behaviourists such as Skinner and his verbal theory of operant conditioning believe that children produce linguistic responses, which are then reinforced. The Nativist approach advocates the natural factor in the acquisition of language; that is people are born with a genetic ability to perceive language. Chomsky (1959:32), however, was critical of the behaviourist and Nativist and he postulated that humans have what he called the Language Acquisition Device. Children have an inborn linguistic competence and they pass through developmental linguistic stages. Communicative competence influenced by the social interaction theory; that is. children's communicative competence, reflects certain cultural identities. There are many theories postulated by different theorists regarding language development. What follows is a discussion of some theorists.

## 2.6 Theorists

Constructivists believe that learners need to construct their own knowledge, and that learners' understanding of concepts will depend primarily on their mental construction of these concepts (Brown 2000:1). Learning is socially constructed, and exposure to less common, more sophisticated vocabulary at home relates to children's vocabulary acquisition. While the promotion of learners' academic language proficiency is seen as important, Cummins suggests that socio-political factors are more crucial (2001:76). According to Brown (2000:29), children from different linguistic backgrounds achieve linguistic competence at roughly the same age, usually six years old. This is in spite of structural differences between languages. It is for this reason that language and culture are inextricably interrelated and consequently influence each other (Mahabeer 2003:23).

Vygotsky (1978:95) argues that: Learning is something that starts outside people, in the society around them and then is transferred inwardly. What happens inside a person first happens between people. Intelligence therefore does not begin in a person, but rather in the relations between a person and the outside world.

He hypothesised that children's cognitive skills first develop through social interaction with more mature members of the society and then become internalised after language practice. Learners at the Secondary School under study do not use English socially or at home. Many learners enter this English medium school having been taught in their mother tongue.

For Piaget (1972), what children know about language is determined by what they already know about the world. Often theorists focused on the relationship of cognitive development to first language acquisition. It is believed that children learn language through their conceptual interpretive abilities. A child's language development is the result of a child's cognitive underpinnings of language.

The most important finding of Piaget's theory of learning is that the child plays an active role in his learning. Language and thought both develop with the child's maturation. Noam Chomsky (1959:32), a structural linguist, sees language as consisting of speakers' or learners' knowledge of language and their use of language in social situations. Related to his theory are the concepts of competence and performance. His theory does not fit comfortably in our present multilingual and multicultural classrooms.

Linguists such as Chomsky (1959:32) presented language theories that had major shortcomings. As Dell Hymes postulates, language has sociocultural features. This has great implications in the South African context. Language competency can be achieved only if socio-cultural issues are considered. Teaching and learning can take place only in communicative contexts in order for learners to achieve competence in a language. The transformational generative linguists' theory of competency being achieved independently from sociocultural considerations is flawed because there are many factors that have a function in the development of language. For learners at the Secondary School under study, sociocultural factors have a considerable influence on their language development.

According to Hymes (1974), a child's acquisition of language is a social construct. His social approach to language acquisition is devoid of the notion of perfect competence; however, society is a determinant in language acquisition. Hymes's linguistic theory makes reference to grammatical utterances; for instance when a toddler says: "Mummy bottle" and ends there. This could have at least three meanings; first, the bottle belongs to mummy; or I'm hungry and I want my milk bottle; or where is my milk bottle? The child's language acquisition here takes place informally.

Halliday (1972) has a social-functional approach to language and he asserts that language has evolved because of its social system that is there is a relationship between language and society. He argues that a child learns how to interact linguistically and in this way uses his communicative skills for socialisation. His theory focuses on language development rather than language acquisition; for instance when a child says "Me toy," this could mean that the toy belongs to him, or that he wants his toy. This shows the child's potential to use language meaningfully. It also illustrates Halliday's theory of language development occurring as a result of social and cultural influences.

Children go through the same stages in language development irrespective of the country they are in. There are different approaches to language learning, which is influenced by various factors.

There are various theoretical approaches to first-language learning as represented by Piaget and Vygotsky. Piaget stresses the importance of cognitive development, whereas Vygotsky stresses social interaction as being important. Krashen believes that there is a difference between language acquisition and language learning. Cummins stresses that there is a difference between communicative language proficiency and academic language proficiency.

As has been mentioned before, a child's language development from birth takes place informally. When he/she starts school, formal learning of a language commences.

## 2.7 Second Language Acquisition (L2)

Second language acquisition takes place in a formal setting, usually the school. Communication can be limited by language differences, and teachers must be sensitive to the abilities and needs of the learners. A child learns language from birth to pre-school years through a process known as language acquisition. Language learning takes place at school. Language is paramount in a child's mental development, making home language a prerequisite for learning. As children mature, they use language with greater fluency.

Cummins (2001:109) refers to research which supports the notion that continued development of academic skills in two or more languages has positive cognitive consequences. He further supports the view that experience with L<sub>1</sub> or L<sub>2</sub> can promote development of proficiency underlying both languages, given adequate motivation and exposure to both, either in school or the wider environment. If children do not use their home language for learning, they are denied the opportunity for linguistic development.

Vygotsky (1978:90) argues that the ability to write is linked to the development of inner speech. Some learners at this Secondary school might be able to speak English; however, they severely lack writing skills in English. In turn, writing enhances a child's intellectual development. Literacy is also a powerful stimulus to language development. Researchers believe that children's L<sub>2</sub> competence is partly built on the level of competence achieved in their L<sub>1</sub>.

Cummins (2001:74) warns that children whose academic proficiency in the language of instruction is weak will tend to fall behind unless the instruction they receive helps them to understand the input and they participate in lessons. There is a high failure rate and drop-out of learners, especially in the senior secondary phase at the Secondary School under study. Cummins (2000:59) further postulates that there is an interdependent relationship between L<sub>1</sub> and L<sub>2</sub> proficiency; that is, a transfer of academic language from the first to second language.

In the present climate of multilingualism, teachers are faced with many challenges, especially when communication is limited by language differences. This statement holds true for teachers and learners at the Secondary School under study as a climate of multiculturalism and multilingualism prevails with learners and teachers of Indian and African decent.

The Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) is an important determinant in a child's language development and its effects on literacy. With maturity, children acquire greater language fluency. Reading and writing are vital to linguistic development in children, as it helps them to gain grammatical patterns. Writing is more difficult than speech as it requires knowledge of grammatical structures. According to Vygotsky (1978:28), a child's intellectual development is enhanced through writing. A child's level of literacy influences his/her language development. The low proficiency levels in English for learners at the Secondary School under study create barriers for academic achievement.

The multicultural and multilingual classes require further research as the majority of children in South Africa do not use their home language as LOLT. This statement holds true for learners at the Secondary School under study. They receive education in this English medium school, and their home language is an African language. This has implications in terms of their second language acquisition.

## 2.8 Factors Influencing Second Language Acquisition

Cummins (2001:76) argues that socio-political factors influence a learner's academic language proficiency. He accuses schools of communicating a sense of shame regarding children's language and culture. Parental involvement and background play an important role. Parents' active and passive role has an influence in their child's education. Some parents, however, might feel that they lack the educational skills to help their child. The majority of learners at the Secondary School under study are orphans, or they live with

relatives, which makes parental interaction a rarity. As an educator at this school, I find the lack of parental interaction frustrating, as there are many issues to contend with.

Another aspect of L<sub>2</sub> achievement is the contact the person has in the community with other L<sub>2</sub> users. This will have an influence on the extent to which a L<sub>2</sub> is learned. However, lingual societies such as the Black population in South Africa can also achieve high levels of proficiency in English.

Motivation also influences how successful one is in learning another language. Language attitudes must be sensitive to the socio-cultural milieu of the learners' environment. Brown (2000:150) found that a number of personality traits played a role in L<sub>2</sub> learning.

Some researchers believe that younger children acquire proficiency in L<sub>2</sub> more easily than adults or older children. Older learners, however, have better cognitive abilities and learning strategies, allowing for a mastery of the language more efficiently.

Krashen (2000:132) believes that the acquisition process is more important than the learning process. Theorists of learning intelligence argue that there are distinct linguistic abilities among individuals and that a learner's performance can be improved by following certain strategies. The new policies introduced in Education after 1994 have transformed the climate of teaching and learning. Perhaps a discussion on the new language policies can shed some insight into the effects it has on the present climate of teaching and learning.

## 2.9 Language Policies on Education in South Africa

The language of instruction plays an important role in the education of a nation. According to Baker (2000:217), where the language of instruction is different from the language of the mass society, those who work in the language of instruction become



culturally removed and alienated from the masses. The major question is: how does the language policy in education impact on the learner's academic achievement?

The main goal of a language policy in South Africa should be to facilitate communication between different language groups. In 1948 the National Party Government advocated segregated education based on racial divide. The education policies implemented meant that education for Black learners was not free and fair. The cognitively undemanding mother-tongue curriculum for Black learners made it difficult for them to cope with English and Afrikaans.

From the 1980s to the 1990s the African National Congress (ANC) developed policies to redress the past injustices suffered by the Black people. The Education Act of 1996 in post-apartheid South Africa saw the creation of language policies considering the needs of the country. This meant the recognition of indigenous languages and a multilingual policy to counterbalance the inequalities of the past.

The new policies ensured the maintenance of home language as well as the promotion of successful L<sub>2</sub> acquisition. Each school's own language policy would determine the medium of instruction according to the needs of the learners. Ngubane (2002:17) believes that English enjoys maximum usage in South African government and all public spheres, and that English has become the lingua franca in public life. Black African language speakers attach high value to English education in South Africa because they are of the opinion that English guarantees a job, or at least better opportunities.

Schooling in South Africa has transformed since the promulgation of the South African Schools Act of 1996. This ensures that education provides equal opportunity for all. This Act also covers the funding, governance and organisation of schools. Despite the policy changes, disparities are still evident in township and rural schools. The Act ensures that every person has the right to basic education and instruction in the language of his or her choice. Cele (2004:1012) blames the national language policy which, in its effect to reduce elitism and redress inequalities in the various educational, political and social

domains, has, she notes, over-simplified and unfairly raised the status of English above that of indigenous languages.

Curriculum 2005 saw the introduction of Outcomes Based Education (OBE). This curriculum is flawed in that it still does not meet the needs of the disadvantaged learner in poorly-resourced schools. Former Black schools are still underperforming, possibly because these learners are not learning through their own home language. The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) of the Department of Education (DOE 2002) has made considerable improvements to the language curriculum at schools. There is still, however, a need for research into multilingual education in South Africa. The new policies in education have affected the nature of teaching and learning in schools, and 'This secondary school' is one such school.

## 2.10 Linguistic Realities in South African Education

Prior to 1994, the education system in South Africa was characterised by advantages for the privileged Whites and disadvantages for the underprivileged non-Whites. After 1994, new policies in education outlawed discrimination in education (Van Zyl 2002:20). The desegregation of schools did not happen comprehensively. The new National Curriculum statements (Suzman 2002:12) were introduced in 1994 partly as an attempt to address the imbalances in education. According to Black (2006:11), maths, literacy and numeracy results at former DET schools were the lowest in the country. Most learners in township and rural schools, as discussed earlier, are not effectively taught, and this results in poor performance. Black (2006:16) also argues that 50% of learners in rural schools dropout before completion. This is certainly the case with many learners at this secondary school who have dropped out of school because they could not cope. This is despite the rhetoric about the virtues of multicultural education that emerged strongly after 1994.

Marrow, W. (2007:175) argues that multicultural education is a type of education that effectively promotes the capacities, talents and virtues which characterise what

constitutes educating a person. The new Further Education and Training (FET) curriculum, for example, aims to address these issues. However, the bar to ensure a pass in English Home Language was raised (in 2008) to 40%.

The standard of English teaching at former White or Model C schools is still better because of good infrastructure, equipped libraries, and highly qualified teachers. This ensures that the life opportunities of their learners are improved. The educators at these schools are usually proficient in English and Afrikaans, and a few are proficient in Black languages. Too few teachers are proficient at Black Languages leading to loss of cultural identities among Black learners who adopt the dominant culture. Cele (2004:1015) blames the national language policy, which in its efforts to reduce elitism and redress inequalities in the various educational, political and social domains, has oversimplified and unfairly raised the status of English above those of indigenous languages.

Black learners at predominantly White schools have adopted the dominant culture and have rejected their racial and cultural identities. Language and culture are inextricably interrelated and consequently influence each other (Mahabeer 2003:23).

Although new policies in education emphasise full integration of public schooling, this is not fully implemented because of social, economic and demographic factors. Few Black educators are employed at desegregated schools, thus leaving room for conflict, misunderstandings and alienation.

Multicultural and multilingual classes pose linguistic barriers for learners as there are language differences between teachers and learners.

In township schools, many teachers lack proficiency in English, resources and teacher training are inadequate, and the classes are too large. This creates barriers to the proper teaching of English as a medium of instruction. English as a medium of instruction in township schools is phased in during the first four years of schooling, using both L<sub>1</sub> and English as the medium of instruction.

Although the number of learners matriculating has increased, only a few Black learners are functionally literate and proficient in numeracy because learners in township schools are often not effectively taught. About 50% of learners at rural schools do not complete school and drop out. English for rural schools is not a L<sub>2</sub> but a foreign language, as it is not often used in the immediate environment of the learner.

The National Qualification Framework (NQF) was introduced in 1996 to provide a single, unified educational approach.

Tjallinks (2004:177) intimates that “multicultural education is about changing the nature of teaching and learning in order to create a suitable learning environment for learners from diverse cultural backgrounds.”

She identifies the cultural factors that could influence learning such as socialisation, communication, learning styles, worldview and social values. Tjallinks’s reminder has implications in terms of the realistic communicative situations for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds such as exist at the Secondary School under study.

## 2.11 Implications of Language Policy and Research

Phillipson (1986) argues that English has in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, become the international language par excellence. English is a dominant language used today by millions, and he states that proficiency in English became the gateway to all social and material benefits. This last statement is an unrealistic expectation for most Black learners in our present state of multilingualism. The effect of multilingualism is discriminatory and poses major problems for Black learners in former DET schools. Indigenous languages are still not popular at most schools. A Human Sciences Research Council study of 2006 in the Western Cape with Grade 8 learners found that the mismatch between home language and language

of instruction is one of the many reasons for the poor performance of South African learners.

Intervient English programmes need to be established to assist learners, as the more privileged minority are advantaged and the marginalised majority are still not functionally literate thus creating barriers for upward mobility. Disadvantaged Black learners certainly need excellent English programmes – and the more privileged schools need greater emphasis on the Black language of their areas.

## 2.12 Barriers to Basic Education

Many learners fail to adequately progress to more advanced reading levels. Barriers to reading contribute to unsuccessful reading practices. A child's adverse home, community and economic environments are key factors. Motivation is important for academic success, and a child that lacks sufficient language stimulation at home and school is almost always less studious. A child with limited intellectual ability and learning disabilities also struggles to progress academically. Anxiety, depression, peer culture and the quality of teaching also affect a child's performance.

In our present climate of multilingualism, difficulties might arise in communication between learners and teachers from different linguistic groups. A learner whose mother-tongue is not English and who receives instruction via the medium of English might struggle to acquire reading and writing skills. Learners at the Secondary School under study experience teaching and learning in a multilingual and multicultural environment. This creates challenges for both teachers and learners at this English medium school.

As Mkgqwashu (2009:1) states: Africans learn best in their own languages, the languages they know from their parents, from home. It is in these languages that they can best create and innovate. The Revised South African National Curriculum Statement (D.O.E. 2002, 10) states that learners should be encouraged and supported “to do wide reading.” Policy,

however, only dictates that reading be taught until learners are perceived to have mastered basic skills, allowing teachers of adolescents to rest on the assumption that the teaching of reading was completed at primary school. Most learners at the Secondary School under study learn English effectively for the first time when they enter this English medium school.

Parents' educational level and the culture and language of the community are also barriers to learning. According to Baloyi (2002:3), language is seen as a barrier for most people in developing countries, and this stunts the progress of those students who are not sufficiently proficient in their L<sub>2</sub>. In Chapter three I explore the conceptual framework of my studies. The purpose is to examine the notion of communicative competence as expressed by Hyme's (1974) when he says that "the competency of users of language entails abilities and judgments relative to, and interdependent with, sociocultural features" (1974:273).

## 2.13 Acquisition and Learning

L<sub>2</sub> researchers argue that language learning is a transitional process that has a distinct and visible end. Human learning is conceived of as an acquisition of rules or sequences of language.

According to Kramsch (2002:41), language use and language acquisition are synchronous: the act of using the language has a way of changing the language or, in the case of learners, their inter-language. The first language or mother tongue is considered normal acquisition; however, in the process of multiple acquisition the languages interact so that the acquisition of each language is different from that of a monolingual.

Acquisition proceeds in tandem with socialisation and the goals are functional, not formal. The ability to make implicit linguistic knowledge in some way explicit is known as metalinguistic knowledge. The nature of metalinguistic knowledge seems to be related

to a person's individual language background and we may imagine it to be produced as a function of acquisition. Language learning is something other than simply a culturally-invented tool. Its acquisition and transmission clearly involve social and cultural interaction. Kramsch (2002) postulates that language is a tool that the acquirer constructs and reconstructs together with something of the environmental culture. Learning is seen in activity theory as being mediated by 'tools'.

Language use in a multilingual situation is a matter of functional integration. The long-term goal of language teaching and learning must be to create a society that values multilingualism and practices multilingualism. Language use is integral to personal and social development, part of the short and long-term developmental processes of both persons and communities (Kramsch, 2002:85). How communities "acquire" additional languages is a prerequisite for better understanding of multiple language development in individuals.

Kramsch (2002) argues that the context in which English is learned affects acquisition, illustrating the complex relationship between acquisition and participation. According to Cummins (1986), many teachers working with non-native speaking immigrant students' report that language and academic development appear to stagnate after basic conversational ability has been acquired. Perhaps a discussion by Chomsky could offer more explanation.

According to Chomsky, knowledge of a particular language grows and matures along a course determined by genetic instructions under the triggering and shaping effects of environmental factors. A child's language acquisition is determined by factors such as reinforcement, casual observation, and natural inquisitiveness. A child "processes information" in a variety of complex ways. Chomsky postulates that within a given speech-community children with varying experience acquire comparable grammars, this grammar being a representation of his "intrinsic competence." During this process of language acquisition, this child also develops "performance systems" for putting this knowledge to use.

There is a critical period for first language acquisition; that is, between the ages of two and twelve, and that language development is dissociated from other cognitive functions.

Both nature – the genetic predisposition to learn and use language – and nurture – the linguistic, social, cultural and emotional input that feeds acquisition – are crucial to learning a first language (Herschensohn, 2007:27).

The babbling sounds that babies use in their first year prepares them to make use of the sounds to create a phonemic system for the words that they will begin to use later. A child's initial word learning is influenced by the emergence of phonology, the development of conceptual abilities and increased memory, while later learning is influenced by syntax, semantics. Babies are born with the ability to begin learning any language in which they are immersed and by one year have focused on its rhythmic structure, morphological features and syntax (Herschensohn, 2007:54). Once children receive ceiling competence in their native tongue, they continue to gain vocabulary and select grammar for the native tongue.

Environmental input as well as a genetic predisposition to linguistic realities is necessary components of acquisition. Human beings are able to learn language at any age. Children do not perfect their native pronunciation for several years, but they establish crucial phonological patterns in the early months that serve them for life (Herschensohn, 2007:29). Studies have shown that young babies (newborns) have crucial perceptual abilities and by one year old they are able to understand the native language.

First-language acquisition is spontaneous in the linguistic environment, whereas the process of second-language acquisition might be affected by factors such as the environment, socio-economic factors, motivation and previous language learning (Herschensohn, 2007:101). Learners' inability to reach the target language in second language acquisition might be owing to fossilisation.



## 2.14 Fossilisation

According to Balfour (2008: 5), fossilisation is the stage at which learners fail to reach the target language. This occurs when inadequate exposure to the learning of the target language internalises rule system which inhibits further acquisition. This results in a state of retarded development of target language and in errors.

A discussion on language interference may perhaps help to clarify further the barriers to language development amongst disadvantaged learners such as those at the Secondary School under study.

## 2.15 First Language Interference

Black South African English differs significantly from mother-tongue varieties of South African English phonetically, phonologically and prosodically (Wade, 1996:83). Wade argues that phonological features of second language varieties can be accounted for in terms of interference from the mother tongue: the phonological system of the second-language variety is viewed as the result of speakers' attempts to map the target variety onto the existing phonological system of their first language. The areas of greatest divergences occur here where the first language and English differ. The greatest challenge to isiZulu learners of English are the vowel systems and the phonotactics of English. The vowel system reflects the influence of spelling considerations on second-language pronunciation.

In South Africa, the linguistic vitality of English is primarily due to its status rather than its demographics. R. D. Wade (1996:116) notes:

The dominant role English plays in many important sectors of South African society, including education (especially at tertiary level), commerce and industry, the media and government has reinforced the widespread perception that competence in English is crucial to attaining desirable employment, accessing goods and services, participating in political debate, and so on.

Socio-economic conditions of marginalised communities contribute to low levels of proficiency in English. This statement holds true for learners at the Secondary School under study, as this school services learners from the lowest economic rung of society. Rural schools remain the most deprived in terms of facilities, staffing and resources. Learners and teachers at these schools have very little exposure to and contact with first-language speakers of English.

The English consonant system can for the most part be mapped onto the Zulu system which is a considerably complex system (Wade, 1996:88). There are, however, substitutions to be made in the speech concerning the voiced and voiceless dental fricatives. These substitutions are lacking by Black speakers of English. The influence of borrowing from English and Afrikaans also affects the speech of Black South African speakers of English. Phonetically, English is more complex than Zulu, and some speakers of Zulu reduce the phonotactic complexity by creating their own consonant clusters. There are differences in the stressing of words in English and Zulu in articulation. The differences in articulation by Zulu speakers contrast with standard South African English. The use of syllable timing can make New English difficult for non-mother-tongue speakers to understand because content words do not seem to 'stand out' sufficiently. Syllable timing may affect the intelligibility of Black South African speakers of English because it interferes with the assignment of utterance prominence (Wade, 1996:93).

The differences in the elocutionary role have significant consequences for communication between first and second language speakers. The existence of a parallel structure in the first language means that the possibility of interference in the second

language should not be overlooked, even if the feature in question is common. It seems likely that these differences would influence the acquisition of English for Zulu speakers.

A large proportion of the Black population in South Africa is of limited education and may use English only occasionally and with severely limited competence. Even the highly educated elite do not necessarily speak English at home and might seldom read it, except in the press and at work. Learners at English medium schools also prefer using their mother tongue socially rather than English. Many learners have an apathy towards reading. As postulated by Swan and Smith, the reading of fiction and biography for pleasure is comparatively rare (1992:193).

Black languages use different markers to indicate the way an action is visualised. This might account for speakers of Black languages using the incorrect tenses. All Black languages have an agglutinating morphological structure. There are also different systems of word stresses in English and Black languages. Black languages stress the penultimate syllable of a word. This can lead to distortions in words such as photo'graphy, ci'garette, etc. There are differences between the grammatical systems of English and Black languages. Another contribution to interference is that there are no definite or indefinite articles in Black languages and that there are radical differences in noun class systems compared to English. A major problem is the failure to distinguish between masculine and feminine forms as in 'She loved his husband'. These are common mistakes in oral and written English among speakers of Black languages.

## 2.16 Academic Literacies

According to research, millions of people cannot read and write adequately, and in South Africa this is a major cause for concern. Illiteracy implies the inability to function in everyday life; to fill in forms, earn a living, etc. Literacy outside of school signifies more than just a skill (Street and Lefstein, 2007:21). The key to improvement in literacy,

especially among the “economically disadvantaged,” includes phonemic awareness, phonic knowledge, word recognition, spelling and vocabulary.

Human language learning is both personal and social, and all human societies, at all times, have used oral language to communicate. Written language is an extension of human language development and is learned a little later in life. Street and Lefstein argue that language is innate in language acquisition and development, not learned but acquired in the language community a child is born into. They also postulate that language learning, through a process of invention, is shaped.

There are various sources of reading difficulties; for example, the deep orthography of English is complicated, and there are socio-economic conditions, biological deficits and cultural differences. Literacy practices are embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices. In multilingual contexts, different languages, language varieties and scripts add other dimensions to the diversity and complexity of literacies (Street and Lefstein, 2007:158). For a child to become academically literate, he or she must be able to read, write and think in an academic way, which includes language and interaction.

Second language is any language that is learned subsequent to the mother tongue and can be the learning of a third or fourth language. Second language acquisition involves different kinds of learning; that is, item learning, where they internalise aspects of language structure and system learning (the acquisition of rules). In the acquisition of language, learners make mistakes and errors. An error is a lack of knowledge or a learner not knowing what is correct. A mistake on the other hand is a slip-up or the learner is unable to perform what he knows. There are errors of omission where learners leave out articles like ‘a’ and ‘the’. Some errors are common only to learners who share the same mother tongue or whose mother tongues manifest the same linguistic properties (Ellis, 1994:19). Overgeneralisation errors occur where learners try to replace words, such as ‘eated’ in place of ‘ate’. Learners try to ‘create’ their own rules, and transfer errors occur where learners try to use their first language knowledge.

During the early stages of L<sub>2</sub> acquisition, some learners go through a silent period where they make no attempts to say anything. Learner language is variable as well as systematic. Learners therefore vary in their use of L<sub>2</sub> according to linguistic, situational and psycholinguistic context.

Schumann (in Ellis 2000) proposes that pidginisation (artificial language used for trade between speakers of different languages) in L<sub>2</sub> acquisition results when learners fail to acculturate to the target language group; that is, when they are unable or unwilling to adapt to a new culture. He says that the main reason for learners failing to acculturate is social distance. Socio-linguists such as Peirce, Giles and Schumann suggest that social conditions determine the extent of learners' contact with the L<sub>2</sub> and their commitment to learning it. This ultimately determines their level of proficiency in the target language. According to Stephen Krashen, L<sub>2</sub> acquisition depends on comprehensible input. Learners can also obtain L<sub>2</sub> acquisition through scaffolding.

A learner's language aptitude or ability and motivation play a role in L<sub>2</sub> acquisition. Learners with a high language aptitude achieve higher levels of L<sub>2</sub> proficiency. There are various kinds of motivation namely instrumental, integrative, resultative and intrinsic. The question arises whether the present climate of teaching is effective, and this brings us to concept of genre pedagogy.

## 2.17 Genre Pedagogy

The Genre theory in language is a new theory in language and literacy. This approach encompasses the social and cultural values of its users and is especially relevant for our present multilingual classes. It allows disadvantaged learners access to social, economic and cultural benefits. Johnson (1994) argues that the Genre approach helps to dispel the challenges faced by the traditional and progressive approaches to language learning and teaching. The traditional and progressive approaches create limitations to the development of writing as they fail to take into account the need to write differently for different purposes (Mgqwashu, 2007:27).

The most important characteristic of the Genre approach is the emphasis on the social and communicative nature of language. It is an interactive process where language development is seen as active construction and not merely passive acquisition where teachers wait for learning to develop. The role of the teacher, as an expert on language teaching, is given prominence as the teacher is actively involved in the teaching of literacy. The teacher assumes an authoritative position in class and teaches functional grammar for social purposes. The whole text is analysed in relation to its social functions. Factual genre empowers learners as argued by Christie and Rothery (in Mgqwashu 2007:32):

Without the capacity to handle the written genre in which information is processed and understood in the contemporary world, people will be truly left out, unable to participate in a world of increasing sophisticated information, construction and exchange.

The Genre approach does not have fixed cultural and linguistic contents. The Genre approach facilitates discourse and encourages cultural and linguistic uniformity, thus paving the way for a more multicultural and multilingual society.

Chapter three focuses on the conceptual framework and the theories of L<sub>1</sub> Acquisition. This chapter conceptualizes English as a second language and as a language of instruction for learners at this secondary school.

### **Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework**

This Chapter discusses the theories of L<sub>1</sub> Acquisition in order to get a clear understanding of what learning a L<sub>2</sub> entails. It draws on language acquisition and learning theories which presents English as a second language of instruction in a social and learning situation.

The work of Vygotsky and Krashen has had a significant impact on contemporary language learning and acquisition. According to Vygotsky, learning takes place only in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). He postulates that this ZPD refers to mental development; that is, intellectual functions that has not yet matured and is in the process of maturation. He further argues that a child's mental development can be determined only by clarifying two levels. These are:

- the actual development level, and
- the Zone of Proximal Development.

The actual development level reflects the child's mental functions that have been established as a result of biological cycles. The Zone of Proximal Development is the potential level of development acquired through problem-solving under adult guidance and with peers. Vygotsky argues that learning is a cognitive function that occurs in a social context. The ZPD theory propounds that good learning is in advance of the child's natural cognitive development that occurs socially. This highlights the notion that society is the determinant in language development. The poor socioeconomic background of the learners at this secondary school does have a great influence on their academic performance. Vygotsky believes that intelligence begins in the social environment and internalises inward, whereas Piaget believes that intelligence matures from the inside and directs itself outwards. Vygotsky refers to teaching as mediation and refers to the adult as a mediator between the child's actual development and the child's ZPD. Given the fact

that this study involves learners from disadvantaged educational backgrounds, a discussion of Krashen's theory of language development will be appropriate.

Krashen (1981) was the first researcher to devise the theoretical model of language acquisition. These hypotheses are not water-tight compartments. There is an overlap and integration with one another. Here follows a brief overview of the five hypotheses that he postulates.

### 3.1 Krashen's Monitor Theory

The monitor is a device for "editing," only after fluency has been established. Knowledge, which has been learned, can be used by second language (L2) learners to monitor, check and correct discrepancies to the output. According to this hypothesis, our formal knowledge of acquired competence, the rules learnt from texts and the classroom, is not responsible for fluency. Cognitive processes are at work when the learner edits, and according to this hypothesis learning has a limited function in second language performance. The utterance produced by the learner is, however, determined by the input provided.

#### 3.1.1 The Input Hypothesis

According to this hypothesis, we acquire language (via hearing or reading) by understanding input language that is a bit beyond our existing level of competence. Put simply, the hypothesis maintains that learners should be exposed to the language so that they can understand it but are still challenged to progress to acquire the language. Meaning is a prerequisite to understanding during the acquisition process.

Krashen argues that speaking should not be taught directly, as speech will develop as the learner gains enough comprehensible input. The classroom presents the ideal



environment for comprehensible input. It is important not to force learners to produce utterances too soon after exposure to comprehensible input as this may create anxiety in the learner, thereby creating interference in language acquisition.

### 3.1.2 The Affective Filter Hypothesis

This process of language acquisition subconsciously screens incoming language based on the effect of the learner's emotional state; that is the anxiety levels. It reflects the inhibitions in situations of second-language use. Where people are inhibited, the filter is high, thus hindering language acquisition. This hypothesis allows for individual differences in the development of language; that is, less successful learners have a higher filter than the more successful ones. Krashen points out that the pedagogical aim for teachers should be the creation of a pedagogical environment that fosters lower filter levels for optimal language acquisition. The question arises whether a learner acquires grammatical structures or whether the learner learns these. The Natural order hypothesis that follows in this discussion offers some explanation.

### 3.1.3 The Natural Order Hypothesis

This hypothesis states that learners acquire the rules of language in a predictable order. Certain structures tend to be acquired early and the others late; that is, the pattern appears to be independent of the order in which rules are taught in language. Utterance production is determined by the nature of the input provided during the learning process.

### 3.1.4 Acquisition Learning Hypothesis

Acquisition and learning represent different ways of language development.

Learners are capable of developing two types of grammatical knowledge: the first one (creative construction) where learning occurs subconsciously, and the second (skill learning) which occurs consciously. The first model would refer to acquisition, the subconscious part of learning, while the second refers to learning that involves conscious involvement. According to this hypothesis, the acquisition of language is not limited to the period preceding puberty, but extends to acquisition by adults as well. Acquisition occurs when language is used for real communication, as this represents the natural way to develop language.

All these hypotheses cannot be regarded as distinct categories, as they mingle and overlap to varying degrees. There is also no specific order of presentation as they may be presented in any order. It is appropriate at this stage to pay close attention to the barriers to language learning and to examine how Vygotsky's and Krashen's theories of language development impacted on language development for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Chapter four focuses on the research design and methodology. The purpose is to develop a better grounded, educational reality for learners at the Secondary School under study.

## **Chapter 4: Research Design and Methodology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter the researcher will discuss the methodological procedures used to acquire the data needed to describe language proficiency and academic achievement level among Grade 8 isiZulu-speaking learners at a KwaZulu-Natal secondary school.

There are two research methods used in this study. They are literature review and empirical research. The literature review presented in Chapter 2 provided a theoretical context for this research. The bibliography is indicative of the range of literature reviewed. The review had a two-fold function, namely: to glean insight into the development of English language proficiency and academic achievement among L<sub>2</sub> learners, and secondly, to establish a theoretical background for the design and evaluation of the empirical research.

### **4.2 Research Methodology**

The research data from this study could be used as part of a developmental effort to improve the educational experiences of the learners. The researcher has worked within the methodological paradigm of qualitative and quantitative research. Qualitative research may include several different research techniques. The data collected has helped to create a hypothesis to examine the variables influencing language proficiency and academic achievement.

Literature review and empirical investigation were used to explore the problem. The literature review comprised journals, books, dissertations and papers delivered at conferences. The focus of the empirical investigation was to determine the level of acquisition of English and academic language proficiency among Grade 8 learners at this

secondary school. Grade 8 learners were selected because Grade 8 represents an important stage in the development of academic language proficiency; it was chosen to determine the learner's ability to cope with the language demands of the curriculum.

Data was gathered by using the following instruments:

- Reading Proficiency Test in English (RPT).
- Writing Proficiency Test in English (WPT).

The tests were used to determine the learner's reading and writing performance within the range of junior secondary level (Grades 7,8 and 9). These tests provided a base to establish the learner's skills, rather than a mere assumption or proof of something.

The reliability and validity of the tests were addressed by the researcher and a colleague who moderated a few selected scripts to ensure that they were effectively marked.

The researcher also embarked on a focus group research to get participants to engage in discussions about their test results and problems they encountered with English at school. Focus groups are considered an important qualitative research technique, extremely effective in generating meaningful information about participants' experiences and attitudes towards a variety of different topics.

### 4.3 Mixed Method

The researcher has worked within the critical interpretive paradigm using both qualitative and quantitative designs. Based on the development of research methodology and perceived legitimacy of both a quantitative and qualitative research, researchers in social and human sciences increasingly adapt the mixed methods approaches which employ strategies to collect and analyse both qualitative and quantitative data (Cresswell, 2008). The mixed methods approach is based on the methodological notion of method

triangulation as a means for seeking convergence across qualitative and quantitative methods . As Denzin (2005) noted, any single method never adequately solves the problem of rival causal factors, and each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality. The mixed method approach is expected to create reliable explanation through triangulation, and is thus useful to capture the best of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. However, the process is not straightforward and often raises challenges for a researcher. The reasons for selecting the mixed approach as the method of research in this study are as follows:

Firstly, the questions steering my evaluation research needed both quantitative and qualitative methods. It was important to approach my research from diverse angles and to integrate diverse explanations resulting from diverse methods.

The qualitative design of my research involved a case study of this secondary school. In a quantitative interview there is direct verbal interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. Quantitative alternate assessment consists of alternative assessments, which are measures of performance that require demonstration of a skill or proficiency. In this dissertation the test results of two proficiency tests were used. The mixed method was feasible for the Secondary School under study because a cumulative study of school records, learners' test results and interviews with learners revealed a more reliable study.

#### 4.3.1 Sampling

Owing to practical restrictions, one-school, non-probabilistic convenience sampling was used. Convenience sampling is carried out in a group of individuals selected on the basis of being accessible. The primary purpose of the research is not to generalise, but rather to better understand relationships that may exist (McMillian and Schumacher, 1997:175).

Ten learners were selected to conduct the research however on the day of the reading proficiency test one learner was absent and two were absent for the writing proficiency

test. These learners were selected because they were grade eight learners that I taught and they had all come to the Secondary School under study for the first time in grade eight. They all had attended IsiZulu medium schools previously and they shared a common background viz. poor socio-economic conditions. They also lacked parental supervision and interaction with regards to homework and schoolwork. These learners comprised five boys and five girls aged thirteen.

#### 4.3.2 Focus Group

Given the fact that it is easier to work with a group of learners to obtain basic information for research, I employed focus group research in the form of an interview. In a group, problem areas can be identified and learners can interact and talk about their problems in a focus group. The learners can work within a class situation so that there is no problem with the time factor. The focus group is a more viable option, as it allows for clarification of meanings and facilitates understanding of issues raised. The group dynamics allow stimulation and generation of discussions to gather more information. This provides a more complete picture for attitudes towards a subject. Broad questions were used as a guide. The focus group also enables all learners to be active. The focus group allowed for interviews or interactions within a group.

Verbal interaction is useful as all learners are accommodated, regardless of the variation in their level of competence in English.

#### 4.3.3 Case Study

Most researchers have supported the case-study as an approach to research that acknowledges the capacity of the individuals to interpret social events and to attribute personal meanings to the world in which they function (Crossley, M and Vulliamy, G, 1984) in Mgqwashu (1999:46).

The Secondary School under study was chosen for the following reasons:

- Accessibility to the researcher.
- Availability of information rich participants.

According to Balfour (2008:23), the focus on pupils' writing development over a period of time requires a case study approach. The case study is characterised by close attention to a phenomenon with the purpose of yielding data which can be used to expand and generalise theories beyond the banded system of case. The researcher was concerned with the quality of the language learning experience, so a quasi-experiment design seemed appropriate since it could accommodate both the need for quantifiable data and an understanding of qualitative elements.

It was for these reasons that the focus of my study was learners from Grade 8. This was because the performance of learners in Grade 8 impacts on their performance in Grade 12.

#### 4.3.4 Data Gathering

Data was gathered by means of language tests, whereby the questions posed, as well as the statement of the research problem of this study, could be answered. The following instruments were used:

- Reading Proficiency Test in English.
- Writing Proficiency Test in English.

Each of these instruments and the rationale for the use of each will be discussed. The use of the Reading Proficiency Test was aimed at determining the learners' reading performance within the range of junior secondary level (Grades 7, 8, 9). These tests 1

serve as an objective, valid and reliable indicator of the learners' reading proficiency. The use of a reading proficiency test is based on the assumption that the learners' abilities to indicate a correct answer from the options given in written form is a valid indication of their reading ability in English (Chamberlain et al. 1992:16).

The aim of the Writing Proficiency Test was to demonstrate English proficiency through receptive skills (reading and listening), as well as productive skills (speaking and writing). The Reading Proficiency Test and the Writing Proficiency Test are instruments that complement each other as they measure the learner's receptive skills and productive skills.

The tests helped in establishing an objective, valid and reliable measurement of Grade 8 learners' general achievement. The June Common test results set by the Newlands Cluster Schools was used. It also allowed for diagnostic analysis and possible weaknesses in the learner's language proficiency. The key question here is: What are the factors that contribute to language proficiency? Data analysis and interpretation followed. School policy documents, principal's annual reports, school magazines to investigate academic achievement, ethos and attitudes, and mark schedules were examined.

The research instruments used were validated, and their reliability was tested by using other teachers of English to moderate the results and to check if there were no mistakes in the manner in which these marks were captured. Academic language proficiency, which is essential for academic success, is best assessed by using both the reading and writing performance tests.

In this study, an attempt was made to determine the learner's academic English language proficiency levels. There was an aim and a selected population from which the data was gathered using various techniques. A qualitative approach was used. In this study, the Achievement Tests for English L<sub>2</sub> in Grade 8 was Reading Proficiency Test in English and Writing Proficiency Test in English. The primary aim of the latter test was to provide an objective, valid and reliable measurement of Grade 8 learners' general achievement in



L<sub>2</sub> by means of varied questions. The second objective was to diagnose possible weaknesses in the learners' language proficiency. Reliability refers to the consistency of sources. Validity refers to the extent to which the test serves its purpose. The Reading Proficiency Test in English determined the learners' reading performance in Grade 8. The following aspects were recognised in the tests:

- Correct meaning of phrases, sentences and passages.
- Correct spelling, punctuation and other writing-related skills. The researcher administered these tests. The duration of these tests was one hour each.

Ethical issues are an integral part of research. The subjects' participation in this study depended on their choice to participate. The subjects' right to privacy, confidentiality and anonymity was considered. Letters were sent out to learners and parents. Permission was sought from their parents and the principal. The data will be confidential. A copy of these letters is included in Appendix 2.

## 4.4 Analysis of Tests

The use of the tests was to establish the learner's present level of proficiency and competence in English. The Reading Proficiency Test (RPT) consisted a comprehension exercise with questions set on it as well as questions based on grammar to measure language skills.

The test was a paper that must be completed by learners within an hour. A typical question asks the learners to read a passage and to answer a set of questions based on the passage. The comprehension test consisted of 10 questions. The second subtest of the RPT consisted of 30 grammar related questions. In this part of the test the learners were required to answer questions in context.

The Writing Proficiency Test (WPT) consisted of two tasks that entailed the writing of a short sentences and the writing of a short structured essay. The test was a paper that must be completed by learners within one hour. Tasks were given to demonstrate general writing proficiency.

The content and the grammar included tasks that fell within the capabilities of English L<sub>2</sub> learners at Grade 8 level. The Writing Performance Test was assessed using the guidelines of the marking grid as set out by the DOE.

## 4.5 Focus Group Research

Focus groups are considered an important qualitative research technique, extremely effective in generating meaningful information about participants' experiences and attitudes towards a variety of different topics. Focus groups are semi-structured interviews, structured to get participants to talk about issues. The researcher was the moderator in the group.

Pseudonyms were used for the participants.

1. Did you attend an English medium primary school?

Mpume: No, most of us were taught in isiZulu until we came to this school.

2. Are you happy being taught all your subjects in English Home Language?

Jabu: Yes, it's good to learn English but sometimes I don't know the big words and it confuses me.

3. What difficulties do you have with English?

Vusi: The questions in the tests and exams are so hard and we don't have enough time to finish the papers. My English is poor and I don't know all the words.

4. Do you speak English at home or socially?

Nkosinathi: No, we like to talk in Zulu. Even at school we talk to our friends in Zulu. All my friends and neighbors talk in Zulu.

5. How often do you read books in English?

Thandeka: I don't go to the library because it's so far and I have to do housework after school. My mother comes home late.

6. What are your views on how teachers teach at this school?

Nompumelelo: Oh, I like it very much. I like to talk English like the teachers. I live with my grandmother and she is so happy I can read and speak English. Sometimes I help with the English because she don't know English.

7. Do you do your homework and study for your exams and tests?

Vuyo: I'm working at Checkout after school. I don't have a parent and my aunt is sick and she doesn't work. When I'm not coming to school or working I have to clean the house and do the washing.

The questions asked of the learners sought to determine the problems experienced by the IsiZulu speakers at this English medium school and the impact the school has on the learners' scholastic performance. The second focus of these questions was to examine the use of English socially and at home by these learners. The third and related focus of these questions was to identify the learners' background and its influence on language development for the learners at the Secondary School under study. All these learners were taught English effectively for the first time when they enrolled at this English medium school. The learners displayed an enthusiasm to learn English however English

Home Language was far too challenging for these learners whose mother tongue is IsiZulu. This inability to be proficient in the language impacts on their overall academic performance. They also do not use English socially or at home and their lack of reading further compounds their problem. Their poor socio-economic backgrounds and the problems it presents impacts on their scholastic performance. The lack of parental support and interaction further exacerbates the language development of these learners.

Chapter five examines the findings of the research study. The purpose is to identify potential and actual problems in order to recommend possible solutions.

## **Chapter 5: Findings**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The main aim of this study was to describe the development of academic English language proficiency and the academic performance of learners at a Secondary School in KwaZulu-Natal.

In this chapter, the results of the empirical investigation are presented.

### **5.2 Findings of Focus Group**

After the researcher had administered the tests for the Grade 8 learners and scored the tests, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the participants. The interview was based on an open interview schedule which the researcher had designed. The aim of the interview was to provide additional background data.

As an educator, I constantly question my practice and seek to find ways in which to enter and understand the worlds of the learners I teach. My aim is to empower learners. However, limitations presented by contextual, socio-economic, cultural and linguistic factors are apparent.

The learners interviewed displayed a complete lack of focus to academic work and poor commitment to learning a L<sub>2</sub>. The socio-economic environment gave ample proof of poor parental support.

This study arose out of the need to respond to the limitations presented by these learners' demographics and the linguistic realities of the multilingual and multicultural education in South Africa. As McKenna (2004:5) points out: "Academic literacies are complex

social practices underpinned by a fusion of linguistic, psychological and social behaviours affected by the social, political and cultural contexts predominating within a society.”

The majority of my learners come from a different cultural context from mine, and many educators like myself lack an understanding of the different nuances emanating from their backgrounds.

Learners from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds are simply expected to ‘fit in’ and cope as best they can, as assimilation policies still prevail. As a teacher in a multilingual school, I find that learners find it difficult to learn what the teacher is trying to teach when the teaching style, communication style, cognitive schemata or background experience of the teacher is different from that of the learners. I believe that the simple amalgamation and blending of diverse cultural groups in schools is largely idealistic and unrealistic. This research also demonstrates the extent to which learners from former DET schools are disadvantaged.

De Kadt et al (2003) intimate that many Black students view English, at best, as a tool. Many regard the language with suspicion and even dislike. Weideman and Van Rensburg (2002) note that low language proficiency is not limited to Second Language English (SLE) speakers, and that there is a high correlation between language proficiency and academic performance.

### 5.3 Reading and Writing Test Proficiency Results

The statistical analysis to determine the learners’ results in the English proficiency levels is indicated in the figure that follows:

Table 5.3.1. Summary of descriptive statistics for all learners in the sub-sections of the tests: English Reading and Writing Proficiency Tests.

There is a difference in the number of learners who wrote test tests because it was written on separate dates and at separate times, and some of the learners were absent when some of the tests were done.

Table 5.3.1 Summary of Reading and Writing Proficiency Tests.

<b>Main Sections</b>	<b>Number who wrote</b>	<b>Mean scores</b>	<b>Minimum Obtained</b>	<b>Maximum Obtained</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Range</b>
<b>English Reading</b>	9	8.1	1	18	29.5	0 - 50
<b>English Writing</b>	8	11.6	0	17	73.01	0 - 25

The first column of table 5.3.1 indicates the sub-sections of the English performance tests. The second column indicates the number of learners who wrote the sub-sections of the test. The third column indicates the mean scores obtained out of the possible maximum score of 50 for reading and 25 for writing. The mean of the test score is calculated by adding up all the scores and dividing by the number of tested learners. The fourth column indicates the minimum scores obtained, and column five indicates the maximum scores obtained. The standard deviation is the square root of the variance, which is in column 6. The standard deviation helps in expressing the reliability of the test. It provides useful information regarding the interpretation of raw scores. The last column indicates the range; namely, the marks for English reading ranged from 0 to 50, and the marks for English writing ranged from 0 to 50.

The total number of learners who wrote the English Reading Proficiency Test was 9. The findings are presented in table 5.3.2 Learners obtained scores ranging from 1 to 18 out of a maximum score of 50, with a mean of 8.1 and a standard deviation of 29.5.

Table 5.3.2 gives the tabulated results in the form of a graph.

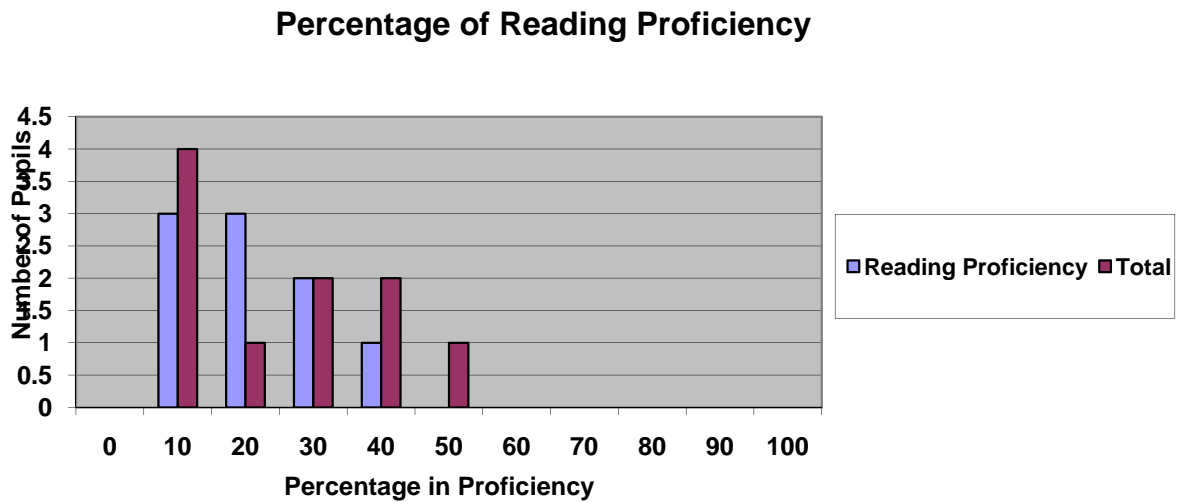


Figure 5.3.2 indicates that 79% of the learners performed below the 40% range.

## 5.4 Writing Proficiency Test Results

Eight children wrote the English Writing Proficiency Test. The score obtained for the test ranged from 0 to 17 out of a maximum score of 25 with a mean of 11.6 and a standard deviation of 37.01.



Table 5.4.1 gives the tabulated results of the English Writing Proficiency Test in the form of a graph.

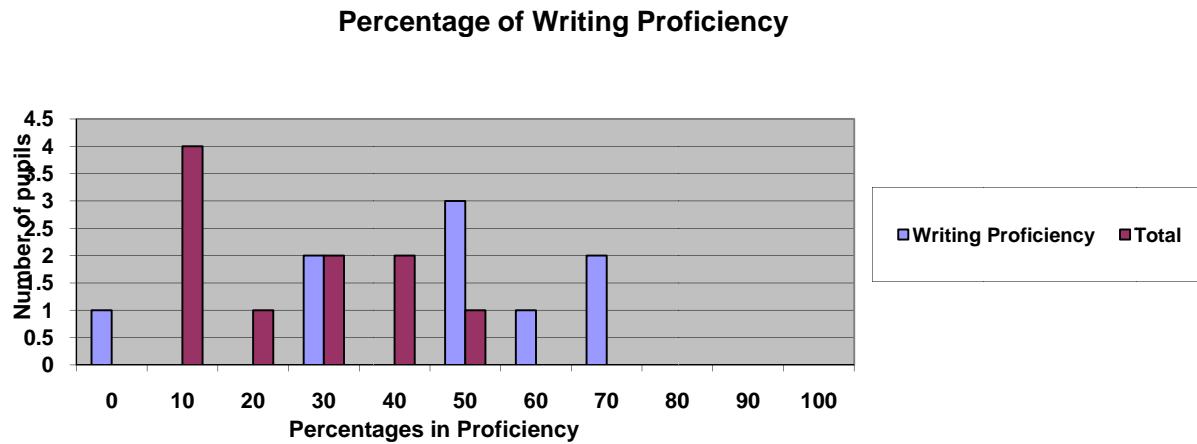
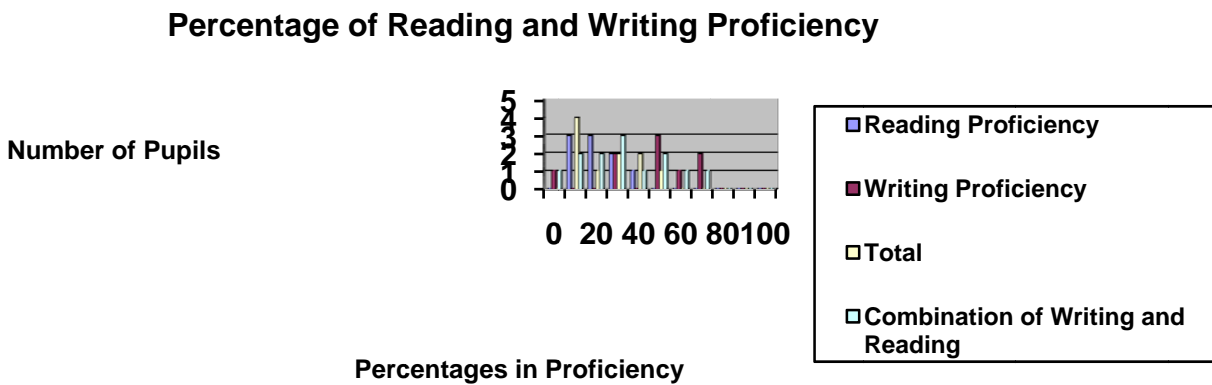


Figure 5.4.1 indicates that 53% of learners performed below the 40% range.

Figure 5.4.2 gives the tabulated results of the English Writing Proficiency Test and English Reading Proficiency Test results combined in the form of a graph.



The last column in Figure 5.4.2 displays the mean of the writing and reading proficiencies.

Figure 5.4.2 indicates the combined results of the tests: 62% of learners scored below 40% for both tests.

## 5.5 General Discussion

The tasks that were assessed in this study were generally simple, and learners are expected to cope with these tasks at Grade 8 level as they were administered to other Grade 8 learners in the neighbouring cluster school group. The learners who participated in the test should have obtained scores close to 100 per cent in order to demonstrate absolute proficiency in English. However, this was certainly not the case.

The results for the English Reading and Writing Proficiency Test are of great concern as it is education policy that learners cannot be promoted to a higher level without first passing English Home Language – the language of instruction. Spelling and grammatical errors were plentiful. These results are very discouraging, as most of the learners are unable to achieve at least 40 per cent. The results of the Grade 12 NSC examination for 2008 indicate a 42 per cent failure rate. The results of the Grade 12 NCS supplementary examination for 2009 indicates a 69 per cent failure rate.

The NCS examination in 2008 saw the introduction of the new FET curriculum. New syllabi and promotion criteria were also introduced for the 2008 NCS examination. This resulted in a failure rate of 36% percentage in English Home Language. As a result, ‘This secondary school’ obtained a 58 per cent matric pass rate for 2008, rendering it an underachieving school in KwaZulu-Natal. Looking at the performance of the learners from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, it is important to examine the context of this study.

## 5.6 Learners’ Socio-economic Environment.

The socio-environmental conditions in which the learners live were described in Chapter 1. Although English is the medium of instruction in this school, 99.5 per cent of the learners are not English home language speakers.

Mattson and Hartley (2003) argue that learners face many challenges to learning. The Secondary School under study is also a school where learners face many challenges: extreme poverty, lack of parental support, high levels of illiteracy, limited resources, high level of HIV and AIDS, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, etc. Despite these problems, it also displays many of the indices of resilience – being able to perform in the face of hardship – despite overwhelming class sizes of +/- 55, high emphasis on the pastoral role of teachers given the contexts of poverty with its huge problem of HIV and AIDS, increasing incidence of school-based violence, and the low morale of many teachers, particularly in the face of policy overload and the difficulty of implementing new policies in under-resourced areas.

The Secondary School under study offers English as the medium of instruction. Most of the teachers are English first-language speakers and are unable to provide mother-tongue support in the classroom if necessary. The school has a 99,5 per cent Black learner population. A major problem, according to the results of the empirical study, is the learners' lack of even average proficiency in English. Learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds not only face general linguistic deprivation in English, but in their mother-tongue also. These are the learners who, as a consequence, grow up without, among other things, a 'reading culture'. The disparity between the home and school therefore diminishes the chance of school success (Mercer and Mercer 2001:5).

Cummins (2001:74) warns that children whose academic proficiency in the language of instruction is weak will tend to fall behind, unless the instruction they receive enables them to comprehend the input (both written and oral) and participate in class. Skutnabb-Kangas (1998:39) argues that it is important to look at both societal aspects, pedagogical, linguistic and socio-cultural functions of language when learners' educational success is under discussion.

The learners at the Secondary School under study are at a disadvantage because general conditions at school and their environment contribute to the learners' poor academic

performance. These learners performed very poorly in the proficiency tests. This finding supports the slow development of language proficiency.

Julie C. (2009) maintains that: for teachers that are teaching in schools primarily situated in low socio-economic status, urban and peri-urban areas. It is in these areas the undesirable consequences of social deprivation are highly visible and these issues do have an impact on the teaching and learning activities at school.

English is not used as a social language in the townships – English is reserved for schools and education. According to Isbell (2002:26), parental involvement in L<sub>2</sub> learners' education improves their ability to learn English and learn by means of English. Van Wyk and Lemmer (2006:18) argue that learners achieve better when parents are involved in education. The parents of L<sub>2</sub> learners have an important role to play in the education of their children and in preparing them for school, as learning about literacy begins very early in life (Du Plessis, 2001:106). In fact, much of the language children learn reflects the language and behaviour of the adult models they interact with and listen to (Isbell, 2002:26).

One of the barriers to language acquisition for these learners is social enclosure. They do not use English socially, and many of the learners at the Secondary School under study do not have parental supervision. This makes it difficult for them to acquire the necessary language skills for academic success. According to Kumaravadivelu (2006:27), any serious attempt to understand L<sub>2</sub> education entails an understanding of social and political contexts in which language use is embedded. Lemmer (1996:334) concurs that the low literacy levels in L<sub>2</sub> among parents in Black communities render them unable to function as effective primary educators to their children.

Educational resources such as libraries, English books and newspapers, are important aids in the development of language proficiency. Learners interviewed in this study did not have exposure to adequate resources to help with their literacy development. This secondary school does not have a functional library and the school has not employed the

services of a librarian. There is no doubt that reading ability, more than any other skill, is a critically important factor in academic success (Weideman and Van Rensburg: 2002).

The learners at the Secondary School under study have poor vocabulary in English and therefore find difficulty in comprehending instructions. The role of African languages in schools is virtually non-existent. Despite new policies in education, mother-tongue instruction is not adequately implemented.

Weideman and Van Rensburg (2009) warn: “In this post-colonial period the lack of initial mother-tongue education in many African countries will eventually result in lower literacy levels, and will have consequences that are nothing short of an educational disaster.” According to Wade (1996) language acquisition sequences are determined in part by linguistic universals or characteristics of the target language, and they are also affected by the native language of the learners. To further support the role of the native language in language acquisition, Krashen (2000:52) states that: “The learner creates a systematic inter-language, which is often characterised by the same systematic errors as the child learning the same language as the first language, as well as others which appear to be based on the learner’s own native language.”

Marginalising an indigenous language is a great disadvantage to a learner. As Burns (2003:22) points out: ‘Literacy is intimately bound up with learners’ lives outside the classroom in numerous and complex cultural, social and personal ways that affect their L<sub>1</sub> and L<sub>2</sub> identities. Literacy in English can be an extension of their identity, both in school and at home.’

## **Chapter 6: Recommendations and Conclusion**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This research was undertaken to prove that many learners in the present multilingual classes are not fully proficient in English. This impacts on their academic performance because the medium of instruction is English. For learners at the Secondary School under study this has resulted in a 32,4 per cent failure rate in English in the 2008 matric exam. The overall failure rate in the 2008 NSC exam was 42 per cent and in the 2009 NSC supplementary exam it was 69 per cent. This has now rendered the Secondary School under study an underperforming one. The aim of the investigation was also to find ways in which the learners could be helped to improve their language proficiency and academic success.

### **6.2 Summary of Findings**

In 1994 new language policies were introduced to give equal status to the 11 official languages. Parents could choose the language of instruction for their children, as schools were open to all racial groups.

The new curriculum changes brought with it problems in its implementations. The new policies are also ineffective in addressing disadvantaged schools as vast barriers still exist in these schools. A white paper in education was introduced to integrate education in South Africa. The National Qualification Framework (NQF) provides guidelines in educational implementation. Early learning has become compulsory, and so is education for all children under the age of 16.

A group of 10 learners were selected to participate in Language Proficiency and Writing Proficiency tests. These tests were the instruments used to collect data. They also

participated in a semi-structured interview. Data was also gathered from the school's academic records.

Learners at the Secondary School under study show low proficiency skills in English. This impoverished proficiency levels may be the result of barriers to teaching and learning. The new policies in education do not effectively recognise African languages in the present multicultural classrooms. Amin and Ramrathan (March 2009) argue that the present state of schooling in South Africa retains some elements of apartheid arrangements and this reflects within and across institutions.

Learners from the townships are eager to learn English as they believe that English will benefit them. This maybe a misconception as Ngubane (2002) maintains that those who hold political power on our continent impose an ineffective language policy, which creates among parents the false image that the high status language, be it English or French, is the lever for upward social mobility for their children.

The implementation of curriculum 2005 has been beset with problems. Learners can cope with the new curriculum only if they are proficient in English. In the past, township learners were subjected to a cognitively impoverished education system. Many of the issues at disadvantaged schools remain unresolved. Many learners, like those at this secondary school, learn English effectively only in Grade 8. Du Toit and Boucher (2009) postulate that the Revised South African National Curriculum Statement (DOE, 2002:10) states that learners should be encouraged and supported "to do wide reading." Policy, however, only dictates that reading be taught until learners are perceived to have mastered basic skills, allowing teachers of adolescents to rest on the assumption that the teaching of reading was completed at primary school.

## 6.3 Recommendations for Improvement

It is recommended that more resources and training be available to allow for an implementation of indigenous languages. The new policies in education have allowed for multicultural and multilingual classes, but this is still not truly represented. Reading programmes, which ought to be implemented, are still lacking at most schools. These need to be enforced so that there is a rich culture of reading and writing amongst learners. Schools must have a functional library and a librarian. Literacy texts must be made available to all schools timeously.

A positive ethos with good discipline and management must be created at schools. Teachers must be workshopped on the latest syllabi and trends in education.

## 6.4 Limitations to the Study

Learners tested have shown limited success with the English Home Language learning programme. The medium of instruction is English, and the use of English Home Language is encouraged in the classroom although the learner's home language is isiZulu. The decreased proficiency seen in these learners may be a result of limitations in the learning environment, such as limited access to textbooks, large numbers of learners in the classroom, the low socio-economic conditions of the learners, and the lack of a functional library at the school.

Improved resourcing at schools can lead to improved learner proficiency levels. The demographics of the school population at the Secondary School under study has also changed over the last few years. This has impacted on the academic performance records at the school. The researcher had to contend with a myriad situational elements during the research process. Methodological difficulties which provide context-bound generalisations for future research may be inherent in the study,.



## 6.5 Conclusion

- Future research needs to be conducted in the following areas:
- The degree of success and/or failure of the present multilingual classes should be determined.
- How can learners become fully functionally literate?
- Has the standard of English dropped and, if so, why?

The major findings of this study are that the IsiZulu speaking learners, who participated in this study, are not proficient in English. The implications are that they are unable to function in an academic context using the English language they were tested on. The use of the test was aimed at establishing the learner's present level of proficiency and competence. The decreased proficiency seen in these learners may be a result of limitations in the learning environment. These learners academic performance in an English medium school confirms the complexity of first language acquisition and the impact on academic performance. Findings of this study and the substantial range of scores seen in the tests confirm that the different levels of proficiency developed in English by the learners were inadequate to ensure academic success.

Academic literacy programmes should aim to socialise learners into academic discourse and the kind of tasks required in this context to focus on the real-world skills needed by the learners. This should be done while simultaneously facilitating Second Language Acquisition (Arllys Van Wyk: 2007).

There is a need to address the imbalances of languages used. There must be more equitable access to and usage of technology so that disadvantaged learners can gain the confidence and competence required to succeed globally.

We become, as Paulo Freire suggests of all oppressed people, self-deprecating. "We mistrust our own knowledge, we become emotionally dependent on the approval of those

who marginalize us and we come to internalize opinions that others hold of us” (Freire 1970:49-51).

In conclusion Philipson (1986:3) aptly sums up the power of English when he says: “...the, use of English in the post-colonial era should be viewed as a step towards constructing ‘a new agenda’ for language development.” This new agenda is to harness English for the empowerment of the disadvantaged so let Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar have the last word: “Education is the guardian genius of democracy. It is the only dictator, free people recognize, and the only ruler free people require.”

# APPENDIX 1

## Permission for Principals to conduct interviews /research

Dear Principal.....

I am a research student working on my dissertation at the University of KwaZulu Natal, Edgewood Campus under the guidance of Dr.E.M.Mgqwashu. My research is concerned with Language and Academic Performance.

I am very keen to interview a focus group of learners from grade 8. I will be highly appreciative if you could kindly afford me the opportunity to conduct my research at your school.I will do my best to conduct my research as efficiently and discreetly possible.

Learners who would like to participate in the focus groups will require their parent's consent first. Please find attached a consent letter to parents.

Thank you, in anticipation of a propitious response.

Mrs A.P.Ramcharan

Principal : .....

Signature : .....

Date : .....

\*\*\*\*\*

## APPENDIX 2

### Consent from Parent/Guardian

I hereby consent to allow my child to participate in the above research analysis. My child's contribution is voluntary and if a decision is made not to participate further, no prejudiced may be inflicted. I also understand that my child may be quoted directly in the text of the final dissertation, and subsequent publications. The name of child and school will remain confidential ,upon request.

I hereby agree to participate in the above research.

Participant : .....

Signature: .....

Date: .....

Principal : .....

Signature : .....

Date : .....

Researcher Mrs A.P.Ramcharan

Signature: .....

Date: .....

Supervisor: Dr E.M. Mgqwashu

Signature: .....

Date: .....

For purposes of analysis, please print information about yourself

NAME: .....

GENDER: .....AGE: .....RACE: .....

ADDRESS:.....

.....

.....

TEL.NO. : .....

DESIGNATION:.....

SIGNATURE: .....

DATE : .....

-----

## APPENDIX 3

### Permission for Parent/Guardian to conduct interviews

Dear Parent /Guardian .....

I am a Research student working on my dissertation at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Edgewood Campus under the guidance of Dr E.M. Mgqwashu. My research topic is Language and Academic Performance .

Your child/ward has been selected to participate in this research analysis. Your child/ward will form part of a select group of learners that will be interviewed by me. My consultation with the learners will be informal and cordial, thus allowing them to express their views without restraint. I will be highly appreciative if you would grant permission for your child/ward to participate in this research analysis. If requested, confidentiality of your child/ward will be afforded. Please find attached a consent letter to be signed by you the parent /guardian.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require any further information For purposes of analysis, please print information about yourself

NAME: .....

GENDER: .....AGE: .....RACE: .....

ADDRESS:.....

.....

.....

TEL.NO. : .....

DESIGNATION:.....

SIGNATURE : .....

DATE : .....

\*\*\*\*\*

## APPENDIX 4

Table 4.1: Content of sub-test: Comprehension.

Skills Tested	Number of items tested	Question Numbers
Recognizing denotative meaning of words	3	1, 5, 6, 8
Understanding the details of the content	3	2, 3, 9
Recognising expanded meanings of summarized text	2	10, 8
Making inferences related to the main idea	2	4, 7

Table 4.1: Content of sub-test: Grammar.

Skills Tested	Number of items tested	Question Numbers
Selecting correct use for parts of speech	14	3
Selecting appropriate language for a situation	3	2
Recognizing expanded meaning of text	5	4
Selecting precise words to describe something in context	8	5

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