BILINGUAL AND BILITERATE?[1]
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF GRADE 8 READING SKILLS IN SETSWANA AND ENGLISH

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In this paper we present findings from a pilot study that examined the reading abilities in Setswana and English of Grade 8 learners, and their literacy practices and attitudes. In the light of these research findings, it is argued that unless learners are provided with meaningful opportunities to develop their reading skills and are exposed to reading materials in both languages on a regular basis from an early age, they will be inadequately prepared to cope with the high literacy demands of the twenty-first century. What is needed is a meaningful school reading programme geared towards exposing learners to books and helping them develop skilful reading strategies so that they can 'read to learn' more effectively.

INTRODUCTION

Following the first democratically elected government in South Africa in 1994, eleven languages in the country were declared official languages. Section 3(4) (M) of the National Education Policy Act, 1996 (Act 27 of 1996) recognizes that our cultural diversity is a valuable national asset and the Department of Education has been tasked with promoting multilingualism. Although primary (home) language instruction in the first four years of formal education is encouraged by the education ministry, the language policy of each school and the choice of language of learning and teaching (LoLT in the new parlance) is left to the governing bodies of schools. The act stipulates that all learners will take at least one approved language as a subject in Grade 1 and 2. From Grade 3 onwards, all learners will take their LoLT and at least one additional approved language as subject.

The new language policy explicitly promotes an additive approach to bilingualism (i.e. developing the home language together with the additional language which is the LoLT). Given that literacy, specifically reading and writing literacy, forms the backbone of academic achievement, it follows that if the education system is tasked to promote bilingualism, then it is equally tasked to promote biliteracy. The basis for this is laid out in the new outcomes-based approach to education, which forms the foundation of the transformed curriculum in South Africa. According to the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS Grades R-9, 2002:4) the home language Assessment Standards are designed to develop competence 'especially with regard to various types of literacy (reading, writing, visual and critical literacies)'. In fact, the home language is supposed to provide 'a strong curriculum to support

the language of learning and teaching' (RNCS Grades R-9, 2002:4). Despite the explicit attention given to the development of literacy in principle, how well do our learners read, and can they read equally well in the languages in which additive bilingualism is being promoted?

A pilot project was undertaken in 2003 to examine issues of biliteracy in the various African languages. In this article we report on exploratory research in which the reading skills of Grade 8 learners were assessed in Setswana and English, and the literacy attitudes and home literacy practices of the learners examined.

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY IN EDUCATION

Thousands of learners in SA do their schooling in a language that is not their primary language. As a result, many find it difficult to perform well academically. In an effort to level the educational playing fields, to provide learners with an opportunity to learn through their primary language and to promote the linguistic diversity of the country, the Department of Education is at present developing material in the African languages from the Foundation Phase upward. The material covers areas such as Geometry, Algebra, Science, History, Geography, Economic and Management Sciences. This is indeed a commendable effort, and long overdue too. However, in order to optimise the success of such an enterprise, it is important to examine more closely some of the assumptions underlying the language in education debate in South Africa. We focus on two such assumptions.

It is commonly argued that the reason why so many learners do poorly in school or at tertiary institutions is that they do not operate as successfully in their LoLT as they do in their primary language. For example, Shembe (2003) describes how university students who wrote their practical Chemistry examination in Zulu performed better than their peers who studied the subject in English. While not contesting that learning is easier in one's primary language than in a second (or third/fourth) language, it is important to note that this position assumes a fairly straightforward relationship between a primary language and success at school. Research indicates that it is a particular kind of (primary) language proficiency that is associated with success in the educational context (e.g. Cummins, 1991, 2000; Corson, 1997; Smyth, 2002), namely Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, commonly known as CALP. This issue will be discussed in more detail below.

It is also commonly argued that the reason that so many learners do not understand the books they have to read in school is that they are not adequately proficient in their LoLT, which is typically the language of their textbooks. The underlying assumption here is that language and reading are basically the same, and that being proficient in a language enables one to read in that language. It is indeed an undisputed fact that language and reading are closely related; if one has little or no proficiency in a language, one can obviously not read with understanding in that language. However, the relationship between language proficiency and reading is asymmetrical: being proficient in a language does not guarantee that one can read in that language. Language ability is necessary for reading but not sufficient; reading is a

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unique ability that must be acquired and practised through extensive exposure to written language. We shall look at the way in which reading develops in more detail below.

Differences between spoken and written language

The differences between written and spoken modes of communication and their consequences for educational success were recognised by Cummins in the late seventies when he first proposed a distinction between two kinds of language proficiency, based on the context in which the language is acquired and the functions that it serves. These two types of proficiency refer to Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1979; 1991; 2000) and are associated with oral and written modes of language use respectively. The former is used in everyday communicative encounters and is more context-embedded, in the sense that oral discourse contains many deictic or indexical items whose meaning can be recovered from the interactional context. Oral discourse also makes much use of prosody (pitch, stress, intonation) and paralinguistic features (gestures, expressions) to convey meaning. Because oral discourse is essentially dialogic, meaning can be negotiated in the course of interaction.

A CALP type of proficiency, on the other hand, involves use of a more context-reduced language associated with written language and with the more formal aspects of classroom and lecture-type discourse typical of the learning context. This is not to say that written language is context-free; rather, that meaning is 'built into' the text to a larger extent than is the case in oral discourse. The differences between oral and written forms of language should be viewed as a continuum of greater or lesser context-embeddedness. Some forms of written language can strongly resemble spoken language, and some forms of spoken language can take on the formal features of written language.

All children have acquired BICS in their primary language by the time they start school. They start acquiring CALP when they learn to read and write and are exposed to written forms of language, first via easy readers and then via a range of increasingly more complex narrative and expository texts. Many learners may acquire high levels of proficiency in a language but if it is mainly BICS proficiency then they are unlikely to succeed in the learning context. The sources of knowledge to which the learners need access are expressed via written forms of language that require CALP. Much of the linguistic proficiency that underpins reading ability is CALP-based, acquired on extensive exposure to written discourse.

Other differences between oral and written discourse – and which are reflected in BICS and CALP modes of language use – are reflected in lexical and grammatical features. Written discourse in English expository texts, for example, has a far greater frequency of grammatical constructions such as relative clauses, passives and nominalisations.

There are also differences in the statistical distribution of content words that occur in oral and written language. Oral discourse contains high frequency words common to our everyday lives, while written discourse contains a much higher degree of lexical density, comprising many low frequency words, specialist technical words and general scientific (academic)

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vocabulary. The acquisition of this type of vocabulary increases from adolescence onwards and is acquired primarily through exposure to written language and to discussions in classrooms of texts containing these words (cf. Corson, 1997).

The textbooks that learners encounter in the learning context, especially in the higher grades, are typically dense, conceptually complex and often present multiple and conflicting viewpoints. Not only do learners have to read, understand and critically evaluate such texts, they also have to integrate information from various sources into coherent knowledge bases on content-related topics. Unless learners are familiar with the language use and conventions of this type of text, they will have difficulty understanding their texts.

The fact that differences exist between oral and written language does not imply that the one is better than the other. Both are equally important and used in different contexts and for different functions. However, in order to succeed in the learning context, learners need to be able to understand the relatively context-reduced nature of written language. Using home languages as LoLT requires that learners develop CALP in their home language. At present, however, it seems that there is too strong a focus on formal linguistic aspects, and not enough opportunity for learners to develop proficiency in interpreting and using written forms of the language (see Smith, 2002). Based on her classroom observations and research into the teaching of Sesotho as home language at primary school, Smyth (2002: 93, 194-5) argues that learners should be given the opportunity to develop academic language proficiency in their home languages in order to provide a sound conceptual and linguistic basis for future learning across all content learning areas.

How do learners cross the bridge from oral language to written language, and what kinds of knowledge and skills help them to learn to read? We shall focus on these issues in the next section.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF READING ABILITY

Reading is both a cognitive-linguistic ability as well as a socially constructed form of human behaviour. From a cognitive-linguistic point of view, reading utilises several component knowledge structures and processes that interact rapidly and simultaneously during reading. There are two main components: decoding and comprehension. *Decoding* refers to the more technical aspects of reading activity whereby written symbols are translated into language. *Comprehension,* on the other hand, involves the overall understanding process whereby meaning is constructed within sentence units, between adjacent sentences, and across larger units of text to the meaning of the text as a whole (Graves, Juel & Graves, 1998).

Skill in decoding establishes the automaticity of lower-level processes that free the mind, so to speak, for comprehension (Walczyk, Marsiglia, Johns & Bryan, 2004). When children start learning to read, the focus is on acquiring decoding skills, and the easy readers used in the early grades are designed to provide maximum practice of decoding skills. Although decoding is necessary, it is not sufficient. Many readers may decode texts quite easily but still

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have difficulty understanding what they have decoded (Daneman, 1991; Yuill & Oakhill, 1991). Through decoding children 'learn to read', while comprehension enables them to 'read to learn'.

In many standardised reading tests in the USA, this decoding-comprehension distinction forms the basis for a further distinction made between three levels of reading ability, appropriate to a specific maturational reading level (cf. McCormick, 1995):

Independent level: The reader reads with 98% decoding accuracy and at least a 95% level of comprehension. These are highly skilled readers who can independently access information from texts and learn from texts appropriate for that specific maturational level.

Instructional level: The reader reads with 95% decoding accuracy and 75% comprehension. These readers do not have major reading problems but benefit from reading instruction.

Frustration level: The reader reads with less than 90% decoding accuracy and 60% or less comprehension. These readers have reading problems, especially with comprehension, and are reading below maturational level. They require intensive reading programmes to raise their reading level.

More than 60 years of research into reading has given us quite a comprehensive picture of how children develop reading skills. Although much of this research has been done on reading in English, research in other languages shows similar developmental patterns. Learners go through different stages of reading as they move up the educational ladder. These stages involve both quantitative and qualitative changes in reading skill as learners move from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn'. During this period the relationship between listening and reading comprehension also changes (Chall, Jacobs & Baldwin, 1990).

Emergent literacy refers to children's early knowledge about reading and writing that develops in the *preschool years*. It includes attitudes, expectations and skills related to written language and an increasing awareness of literacy behaviours. For example, children may learn how to hold a book and turn the pages, they may pretend to read a book, and may be able to tell a story from looking at the pictures. These kinds of activities form the basis of meaning construction from print symbols.

During the *Foundation Phase* (Grades 1-3), children learn the letters of the alphabet and letter-sound relationships. They learn to recognise high frequency words and read simple texts containing language and thought processes within their experiential frame of reference. By the end of Grade 1, learners are estimated to be able to read over 600 words, while they are estimated to understand around 4 000 to 6 000 words in spoken language[2]. At the end of Grade 4, about 3 000 words can be read and understood, and about 9 000 are understood in spoken language. During these years learners are better at listening comprehension than reading comprehension.

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The *senior primary school* phase characterises the 'reading to learn' stage, when texts start going "beyond what the readers already know, linguistically and cognitively" (Chall *et al*., 1990:14). The learners' language, knowledge and vocabulary expand, as does their ability to think more abstractly. Listening comprehension is still more effective than reading comprehension. It is argued that if adequate reading skills are not acquired during this period, then learners have difficulty using reading as an effective tool for learning (Chall *et al*., 1990:14). By the end of this period learners should be reading at about 185-220 words a minute (Manzo & Manzo, 1993).

By *Grades 9-12* learners should be reading from a wide variety of texts with different viewpoints. By this stage readers should achieve holistic integration of information across texts. For successful readers, reading comprehension now becomes better than listening comprehension for complex topics; for poorer readers, listening comprehension is better than reading comprehension.

The *post-school phase* is characterised by reading done for professional, study and personal purposes; this is the kind of reading required at tertiary level. It is estimated that undergraduates require a vocabulary of at least 18 000 words in English to be able to cope effectively with the amount of reading required at university. Reading is rapid and efficient, and skilled English readers read at about 350 words per minute. For highly skilled readers, reading is more efficient than listening as a learning tool, especially for more complex topics.

As we can see from the description above, a developmental perspective on reading shows a progressive pattern in skill development. As learners progress through school, the texts contain longer and more complex sentences and less familiar words not encountered in everyday language. Conceptually the texts become more dense, complex and abstract.

This developmental perspective provides a useful framework within which to view the reading abilities envisioned for the various grades in the new outcomes-based curriculum. For example, according to the RNCS, 2002), the home language assessment standards for reading and viewing for Grade 8 specify, *inter alia*, that learners should read spontaneously and often for pleasure and information, be able to discuss the purpose, audience and context of a text, show understanding of information texts (e.g. main ideas, draw conclusions on the basis of evidence, etc.), demonstrate understanding of the text, respond critically to texts, and be able to reflect on and discuss own skills as a reader (RNCS Setswana – Puo ya Gae: 123-127).

The Grade 8 assessment standards for reading and viewing in English as LoLT include aspects such as the ability to infer meanings, to distinguish main points from supporting details, to read for information, to use reading strategies (e.g. to work out the meaning of words from contextual and other clues), to read for pleasure, and to demonstrate a vocabulary of 5 000 to 6 500 words in English (RNCS 2002:96-101).

Although the reading and viewing assessment standards specify what learners are expected to be able to do in the various grades, the cognitive-linguistic accomplishment of reading is always acquired within a specific sociocultural context. Research has consistently shown (e.g.

Heath, 1983, Wells, 1986; Chall *et al*., 1990; Cummins, 2000) that if children come from homes with few or no books, if they live in communities where reading for pleasure is not highly valued, or if they attend schools where they do not have easy access to books, then their reading skills may not be properly developed and they may even have a negative attitude to reading. Many children may start off learning to read quite easily, but reading problems can start emerging as they make the transition from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn'. If neither their home nor their school contexts provide sufficient practice in reading skills and exposure to books, then learners may find 'reading to learn' difficult.

It is with this developmental framework in mind that we now turn to the assessment of the Grade 8 learners in this study. Because it is assumed that by this age decoding skills have already been acquired, the assessment focussed on comprehension. Since 'reading to learn' from informational, expository texts characterises much of the reading done at high school, the more interpretive aspects of comprehension, that typify the reading of literary texts, were not included here. Because so little work has been done in the area of reading in the African languages, the study was exploratory and the aims were as follows:

i   To assess the learners' reading skills in two languages, viz. their primary language, Sestwana, and their LoLT, English.
ii   To situate their reading abilities within a broader context by probing their attitudes to reading and their perceptions of themselves as readers, and by identifying their home literacy practices.

METHODOLOGY

In this section we sketch the school context in which the study was conducted, and then describe the participants involved in the study, the assessment materials and the procedures.

The School Context

The school has 1 021 high school learners from Grade 8 to Grade 12 and provides primary language instruction in Northern Sotho and Setswana, two languages that are widely spoken in the community. English is the LoLT and is also taught as a subject.

The school is not a high performing school, academically. It serves a mixed socio-economic community. The classrooms in which the tests were administered were quite dark (although the school does have electricity, there were no bulbs in the light fittings on the days the tests were administered) and some of the desks were in a state of disrepair. The typical artifacts of school literacy, such as posters, textbooks, exercise books, manuals, dictionaries, wall charts, chalk, chalkboard dusters, and cupboards and shelves for storing books, were conspicuously absent in the classrooms.

There is a 'library' but it has not functioned as such for several years. Books, most of which are old textbooks, are stacked haphazardly on shelves. The teachers, who have heavy

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teaching loads, complained that it was difficult for them to run the library successfully under the present conditions. Lack of manpower, lack of time allocation for library hours and lack of aids such as computers to catalogue the books were cited as reasons for not having a functioning library.

Participants

All the Grade 8 learners at the school who took Setswana as a first language subject were included in the literacy assessment. In all, there were 88 such learners, with a mean age of 14,5 years. They were all assessed twice, the first time in Setswana and the second time in English.

Assessment Materials

In order to keep some of the variables constant across the reading tests in the two languages to allow for a reliable comparison of reading ability, the same expository text and the same types of assessment items were used for aspects of the English and Setswana tests. These general components are first described, after which the specific features of the English and Setswana tests are dealt with.

Shared components of the reading tests

a)   Reading comprehension

An **expository text** (i.e. informational 'textbook' type of text) was selected for the first part of the assessment because this is the type of reading that high-school learners are required to do when they read to learn from their textbooks. The same text was used for the English and Setswana test. The topic was about how penguins have adapted to their cold climate. Following this were 6 vocabulary questions tapping the learners' knowledge of the meanings of key words used in the passage, and 6 questions relating to the comprehension of the passage. All the questions were in multiple-choice format, with 3 options per question.

Vocabulary questions: Vocabulary questions are included in assessment of reading comprehension because vocabulary knowledge and reading ability are closely related. Learners who read a lot tend to have larger vocabularies than learners who do little reading. However, vocabulary knowledge alone does not guarantee success in reading, since it is essentially the ability to construct meaning while reading that determines reading success (e.g. Daneman, 1991). Testing vocabulary is thus an indirect way of assessing reading ability.

Inference questions: The inclusion of inferential questions is central to the assessment of reading comprehension. The ability to make connections during reading, to relate new information in the text with given information, and to see how different elements in the texts are linked, lies at the core of reading (e.g. Oakhill & Cain 1998). The ability to answer inferential questions rather than literal questions is a reliable indicator of how well a reader understands a text. The six comprehension questions were all inferential questions.

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b)   Cloze passage

Since the 1970s the cloze procedure has been used quite extensively to measure overall language ability in an integrative way. It is also used to measure reading ability. The cloze procedure indicates the extent to which a reader is able to follow the sense of a text. In particular, it assesses a reader's use of language context as a strategy for understanding what is read.

In cloze tests designed for mother tongue users, a strict marking procedure is followed which allows for no grammatical inaccuracies. In such cases, a score of 60% is regarded as reflecting robust reading ability; learners who score 40% or below are regarded as reading below their level (McCormick, 1995). However, in order not to use the cloze test as a measure of grammatical proficiency, thereby compromising the construct validity of the test, a more lenient semantic marking procedure was adopted in the present study, where the semantics of the answer was regarded as acceptable, even if there was an error in grammatical form.

c)   Reading rate

For both expository text passages, an informal measure of the learners' reading rate (i.e. speed) was also taken to determine, more or less, at what speed they were reading in each language. Reading rate is measured in words per minute. Reading rate is always measured together with comprehension, to prevent readers skimming through the text and setting up artificially high reading speeds without understanding.

d)   Literacy attitudes, perceptions and practices

In addition to the two reading tests in each language, the learners also completed a 41-item questionnaire. This questionnaire taps information regarding each student's reading habits and preferences, their perceptions of themselves as readers, as well as information regarding literacy practices within the home environment. The reading score of each learner can thus be situated and assessed within the broader literacy socio-cultural context within which the learner lives.

We now look more closely at the specific components of the Setswana and English reading tests.

Setswana reading test

The Setswana reading test covered two aspects only, i.e. comprehension of expository test and the cloze passage.

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a)   **Section A: Comprehension of expository text**

A Setswana lecturer translated the English expository text about penguins into Setswana, including the six comprehension questions. The six vocabulary questions were modified to focus on Setswana words that might be problematic. The Setswana text comprised 428 words. A team of five Setswana language specialists was invited to examine and edit the translation and to check the accuracy and authenticity of the text.

b)   **Section B: Cloze passage**

The passage was taken from *Setswana sa Borre, Mophato wa III* by A.T. Malepe. The first paragraph was left intact to provide a context. A principle of selective deletion was chosen for the cloze passage where, instead of systematically deleting every nth word, a word was deleted if it proved to be an appropriate item to delete and could be inferred from the rest of the text, e.g.:

> Ga twe mo tshimologong Batswana ba tswa kwa ga Lowe, ba santse ba le setshaba se le sengwe, ba ise ba arogane ka merafe le meratshwana.

> Lowe o dule mo logageng, mme e rile a ise a (1)...................a roma motlhanka wa gagwe wa boikanyo, Matsieng, go ya go bula kgoro ya logaga le go bona gore kwa ntle go (2)...............jang. Matsieng a tsamaya a fitlha a bula (3)..............ya logaga, a tswela kwa (4)..............mme a fitlhela lefatshe le itumedisa (5)..........a motho; le kgabile ka dimela tsa methalethale ka e ne e le nako ya dipula, go bonala botala fela, go utlwala (6)...........o o monate wa dithunya. A bona ditlhare di rwele (7)...........a a neng a lebega a le monate. A utlwa melodi (8)............ dinonyane e kete di itumeletse kgorogo ya moeng wa tsona, yo di neng di simolola go mmona. Tsotlhe (9)............... tsa mo gapa maikutlo.

In order to establish that the level of the test was appropriate, two Grade 8 Setswana learners from another school were given the test to write. Their average mark of 70% suggested that the cloze passage was not problematic.

English test

The English test comprised four sections and was slightly longer than the Setswana test.

a)   **Section A: Comprehension of expository text**

The Penguin passage in English comprised a 368-word expository text. While the vocabulary questions differed from those in Setswana, the inferential comprehension questions remained the same.

b)   Section B: Cloze passage

The cloze passage was taken from one of the Grade 8 English setwork books[3]. A principle of selective deletion was chosen where approximately every 9th word a word was deleted if it proved to be an appropriate item to delete and could be inferred from the rest of the text. There were 20 deleted items in all.

c)   Section C: Anaphoric resolution

This section tested learners' ability to resolve anaphors during reading and consisted of 5 separate paragraphs taken from the two Grade 8 English setwork books. Specific anaphoric items were identified and the learners were required to underline the referents to which they referred and to draw an arrow linking the two items, e.g.

> I feel very sad when I think about Mamsie's life. She does not seem to get much pleasure from it. Life for her is one long slog. <u>She</u> is always tired and her legs have dark blue veins that stick out all over them. <u>They</u> look like swollen bruises except that they are in squiggly lines.

Anaphoric resolution enables the reader to link new, incoming information in the text with already given information. It also enables the reader to keep track of the topic focus and shifts in focus. Skilled readers are usually able to resolve anaphors with complete accuracy (e.g. Dopkins & Nordlie, 1995).

d)   Section D: Vocabulary inferences

This section tested the student's ability to infer the meaning of words when contextual clues were provided in the text. There were only 3 items in this category and all the examples were derived from the Grade 8 setwork books. For example:

> Dadda slept like a log when he had too much to drink. One night he came home <u>sober</u>. He had not had anything to drink. He went to bed early.

> *The word <u>sober</u> means* _____

The ability to make inferences during reading increases a reader's ability to add new words to existing vocabulary knowledge and so to expand his/her conceptual development.

Procedures

The Setswana and English tests were administered separately, with the Setswana test given first and the English test three weeks later, to minimise memory effects. The tests were administered by the researchers and no time limit was imposed for completing the tests. To ensure that the learners knew what penguins were, two large pictures of King penguins were shown to the learners.

The questionnaire was administered on the same day as the English assessment. After a short break, the learners were then given the literacy questionnaire to complete. The researchers went through the questionnaire step-by-step with each group. Although the questionnaire was in English, each item was translated orally into Setswana and discussed with the learners to make sure they understood each item before filling in their response.

The reading tests were marked by the Setswana and English researchers respectively, and the data captured on computer and analysed, using SPSS.

RESULTS

In this section we first report on the results of the reading tests and then on the results of the questionnaire.

Results of Setswana and English Tests

The results of the different components of the Setswana and English reading tests are reflected in Table 1. The given scores reflect mean percentages for the Grade 8 group as a whole.

	Setswana Test (n=88)	English test (n=88)
Vocabulary (Penguin text)	54%	52%
Inferential comprehension (Penguin)	53%	60%
Cloze test	38%	43%
Mean reading assessment score	44,7%	48,2%
Mode	40%	55%
Minimum total reading score	3,3%	7%
Maximum total reading score	93,3%	85,4%
Anaphoric resolution	-	41,6%
Vocabulary inferences from text clues	-	32,1%

Table 1: Results of the Setswana and English reading tests

As can be seen from the table, the learners' performance on all components of the assessment tasks in both languages is at frustration level (i.e. below 60%). Table 2 reflects the reading rates of the learners in the two languages.

	Setswana Test (n=88)	English test (n=88)
Mean reading rate	72 wpm	123 wpm
Minimum reading rate	14 wpm	29 wpm
Maximum reading rate	169 wpm	310 wpm

Table 2: Reading   rates of Grade 8 learners

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There are two main findings that emerge from the data. First of all, the reading levels of the learners are generally low in both languages, far lower than one would expect for their maturational level. In both languages, about 60% of the learners attained below 50% comprehension levels when they read (61% learners in Setswana and 60% learners in English). On the whole, the learners are also reading slowly. According to the guidelines for reading rates in English (e.g. Lipson & Wixson 1997:331) the mean rates characterise about Grade 3 - 4 reading level. Such low reading levels are bound to have a negative impact on their learning, especially when they 'read to learn'.

Secondly, their reading performance in their primary language, Setswana, was not better than it was in English. In fact, they read more slowly in Setswana at 72 wpm. This suggests that these learners are not getting adequate exposure to books to practise their reading skills; knowledge of one's home language is not sufficient for reading skill. A Pearson Product Moment correlation coefficient of $r = ,58$ (p<.000) was obtained between reading scores in Setswana and English, suggesting a relationship between reading skill in the two languages. In other words, learners who were good readers in Setswana tended also to be good readers in English, and weak readers in Setswana were also weak readers in English.

Results of the Questionnaire

The items in the questionnaire probed aspects of the literacy practices in the learners' homes, community and school, as well as the learners' attitudes to reading and perceptions of their reading abilities.

Literacy in the home environment

The questionnaire responses indicated that the learners do not get much literacy support from the home environment. Most of them, from a young age, had very little exposure to books, nor was storybook reading a common childhood experience. In some instances where learners reported having storybooks read to them, it was noticeable that the readers were mothers, grandmothers and siblings; fathers and grandfathers seemed to have taken a back seat with regard to engaging children in home literacy activities. The strong presence of grandmothers as caregivers in many of the learners' lives also emerged from the responses. Table 3 below shows some of the responses relating to home literacy practices.

		Grade 8*
Parents read story to you as a child	*Never*	17
	Seldom	6
	Sometimes	77
	Often	5
Books in home	*More than 100*	1
	About 50	15
	About 20	25
	About 10	54
	None	5

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		Grade 8*
Newspaper bought in home	*Everyday*	36
	Once a week	39
	Sometimes	7
	Never	17
Watch TV	*Don't have TV*	6
	1 hour	24
	2-3 hours	25
	3-4 hours	71

* The scores express percentages of respondents

Table 3: Home literacy practices

Very few learners come from homes in which books are readily available. In fact, 60% of learners had fewer than 20 books in their homes. More than 64% of the learners see a newspaper at home only once a week. Furthermore, the learners seem to spend much of their time in front of television. Judging from some of the adult programmes that the learners said they watched, parental supervision and monitoring of TV programmes and viewing times seems to be uncommon in many households.

Community

There are two libraries in the township that have been upgraded in the past few years but according to the librarians, the libraries are not well patronised by school learners (personal communication). Although all learners can register free of charge with the libraries, library membership is still low in these communities. Only 17% of the learners indicated that they belonged to a local community library.

Literacy in the schools

As indicated earlier, although the school does have a large room originally allocated for library use, it contains very few fiction books and is not operative. When asked whether reading was given a lot of attention at their primary school, 35% of learners indicated that reading was given a strong emphasis in primary school, while 56% they felt that not much reading was done.

Attitudes and perceptions

Questionnaires are notoriously tricky methods for eliciting reliable data since respondents have a tendency to want to 'look good'. One way to counterbalance this is to include several items phrased differently but which tap the same information, and intersperse them through the questionnaire. Thus, although 63% of learners indicated that they were active readers and that they enjoyed reading very much, many of them could not remember the titles and names of authors of books that they claimed to have read. Children who really do read extensively do not have this problem (cf. Pretorius 2002). Typically children who 'like reading' are children who do a lot of extensive reading while children who have opportunities to read but

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don't do so usually don't like to read. The fact that so many of the learners indicated that they liked to read but couldn't actually state what they had read could indicate that they do not have many opportunities to read and that reading is a fairly novel activity for them which holds strong appeal. From an educational perspective, exposure to reading in a literature period once a week does not constitute extensive reading, but for a learner from a home with few literacy practices, it might well. Table 4 shows some of the responses with regard to the learners' perceptions of their reading abilities.

		Grade 8*
Do you like reading?	*Very much*	63
	Quite a lot	19
	A little	14
	Not at all	2
What kinds of reading problems do you have?	*Words not known*	72
	Problems with grammar	14
	I read slowly	2
	No real problems when I read	0
How do you see yourself as a reader?	*I am a fast, skilled reader*	9
	Average - I understand most of what I read	52
	Slow reader but I understand most of what I read	19
	Slow reader and I have problems understanding what I read	12
	I struggle with my reading and don't really understand much	3
What is your attitude to reading, in general?	*I really enjoy reading and I read a lot.*	41
	Reading is OK. I sometime read a book or magazine.	43
	Reading is OK, but I don't really read much. I only read when I have to read for school.	12
	Reading is a problem for me and I don't enjoy reading at all.	0

 * Numbers reflect percentages

Table 4: Learners' perceptions of themselves as readers

With regard to their perceptions of themselves as readers and the problems they encountered, 3% indicated that their problem lay with understanding grammar while reading, 20% indicated that they had problems identifying the main idea of a topic, while 14% said that they forgot most of what they read when they came to the end of a page. However, 67% did not specify any reading problems. In all, 9% judged themselves to be 'good readers' while 52% regarded themselves as 'average readers'. There was clearly a mismatch between the learners' generally optimistic perceptions of their reading abilities and their actual scores in the reading tests. It is a well documented phenomenon in reading research that heightened

metacognitive awareness is associated with strong reading ability; weak readers are not always good at pinpointing where their reading problems lie, nor do they employ effective reading strategies to remedy comprehension problems (Daneman, 1991; Yuill & Oakhill, 1991). The generally low reading scores that contrasted with claims of extensive reading and self-judgments of themselves as 'average' readers ('I understand most of what I read') suggest that the learners are not really immersed in a strong reading culture.

From responses to the questionnaire it seems that, through no fault of their own, the learners are not exposed to varied literacy practices within their home environments. The little exposure that the learners have to books and reading occurs within formal schooling; yet even within these formal parameters, reading does not seem to be given adequate attention.

DISCUSSION

Our education system is tasked, amongst other things, to promote literacy. Two questions were posed at the beginning of this article, namely *How well do our learners read?* and *Can they read equally well in the languages in which their bilingualism is being promoted?* Seen from a developmental perspective, the findings from this pilot study suggest that many of our learners are struggling with their reading, in both their home language and in English. These findings are consonant with research elsewhere in South Africa, which indicates that teachers and learners are struggling, not only with English but also with literacy in general (Jardine, 1986; Taylor & Vinjevold, 1999; Macdonald, 2002; Smyth 2002). The National Systemic Evaluation Report (2002) for the Foundation Phase released by the Department of Education shows that learners' performance in the home language is averaged at 34%. These low levels seem to persist through primary school, for learners are entering high school without the kind of literacy skills that enable them to use reading as a powerful learning tool.

Because so little research has been done on reading development in the African languages, there are no age-related norms to determine satisfactory reading levels. This is an area that obviously requires more research. One needs to be cautious in extrapolating from reading development in other languages to reading in the African languages, especially with regard to reading rates, where agglutination and conjunctive orthography create longer linguistic units to be decoded. However, even bearing this qualification in mind, the learners' reading rate in the Setswana passage was noticeably slow (Setswana has a disjunctive orthography). The slow reading rate is strongly suggestive of lack of familiarity with reading Setswana. The English reading results point to a similar conclusion. The extensive body of developmental reading research in English indicates that by the end of primary school, first language English readers should be able to read at a rate of at least 185 words per minute. Naturally, reading in another language is slower, and it is recommended that readers who are not mother-tongue users of English should read at about 70% of the rate of first-language users (e.g. Anderson, 1999). Even by these recommendations, the Grade 8 learners are reading very slowly, at least 4 years below their maturational level.

The findings in this study support the argument that although reading and language proficiency are related, simply knowing a language does not guarantee that one can read

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effectively in that language. Reading is a specific meaning-construction skill that must be developed on extensive exposure to books. For example, the language used in the Setswana cloze passage was relatively simple and straightforward and did not contain difficult words. Yet the learners found it very difficult to fill in appropriate words in the gaps. Their poor performance in this task indicates that they are not readily engaging with the text and making use of their inferencing skills to perceive links between items of information in order to construct meaning as they read.

The drive by the education department to produce content subject textbooks in the various African languages is commendable. However, switching over to home languages is not automatically going to be a panacea for educational imbalances. The problem that many learners presently have is not simply a language problem; it is essentially a literacy problem. Learners will continue to struggle unless the question of literacy, specifically the development of CALP literacy, is seriously addressed.

All in all, the findings indicate that the Grade 8 learners are not exposed to enough reading. There is not a strong culture of reading in the learners' homes, in the broader community nor in the schools. Past educational and socioeconomic policies created serious imbalances in access to literacy practices and books. The education system cannot change factors such as learners' home backgrounds or parents' socioeconomic status. It can, however, exert a strong influence over literacy expectations, practices and materials within formal school parameters. Schools should be the sites for literacy acquisition and development, especially in disadvantaged communities. Yet, in many schools in South Africa books are scarce and reading is not given much attention. Once learners have learned to read (i.e. decode), they are left very much to their own devices. Many teachers assume that if learners can decode then they are good readers. However, reading is essentially about meaning construction. Many schools do not give learners the support they need to make an effective transition from oral to written language, and from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn'. The situation is exacerbated for learners who also make the cross-over from mother-tongue to English as LoLT, and who have not yet developed appropriate reading skills in their primary language.

Reading skill forms the foundation for success at school. Reading skill develops over time, and it only develops if learners have access to books and if they are given opportunities to practice their reading skills and given the motivation to do so. Is our education system equipping learners with requisite reading skills? If, after seven years of primary schooling, perfectly normal young learners are entering high schools with such low reading literacy skills in both their home language and their LoLT, then it would appear that there is something seriously amiss in the education system.

IMPLICATIONS

Research worldwide consistently shows a strong relationship between academic success and reading ability. This relationship has important ramifications for education and language planning. In the light of the new language in education policy, let us conclude by considering some implications that follow from the present findings.

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- This study was exploratory and set out to establish to what extent Grade 8 learners were biliterate in Setswana and English. The low reading results indicate that there is a large gap between the curriculum and classroom reality. More research is urgently needed in this domain. Above all, there is a need to obtain local data on literacy development and reading abilities in the African languages. Research partnerships between African language departments and education faculties at tertiary level could play an important and leading role in reading research in this country.

- Even though the home language assessment standards are designed to develop literacy competence, the findings in this study indicate that the learners do not read well in either their home language or in English. The poor reading competence in their home language suggest that they are not developing home language CALP skills. Language planners and educators need to recognise that efforts to promote the African languages through additive bilingualism and to develop CALP skills in the learners' home languages will only be properly realised if opportunities are created in classrooms for extensive reading of a variety of texts in the African languages.

- In order to promote and support extensive reading in the African languages, the various language boards should encourage the writing of fiction in the African languages, specifically for children and teenagers. There should also be incentives for publishers to publish storybooks and comics for children and teenagers in the African languages.

- The fact that learners come into high school with poor reading ability strongly suggests that reading is not regarded as a priority skill in primary schools. Schools should pay more attention to the reading levels of their learners and promote a culture of reading. Storybook reading should be an integral part of classroom activities in preschools and primary schools. Primary and junior high schools should introduce a literacy period into their timetables once a week, where learners bring books to read in the classroom and time is set aside for silent reading. This has been introduced in the Western Cape and should be extended to schools in all the provinces.

- As educators who spend much of the day with their learners, teachers have an important role to play in promoting a culture of reading. Teacher education faculties need to build a strong reading component into their programmes to equip teachers with the necessary reading knowledge and skills, so that they in turn can become reading role models, can help learners with their reading problems and motivate them to read.

- Because many learners come from disadvantaged homes where access to print material is not easy, schools should be active sites where learners can participate in literacy practices. Schools should try to establish a library or media centre and build up a collection of books and materials in the languages offered by the school, so that learners have ready access to a wide range of print materials such as reference books, fiction and non fiction, magazines and newspapers.

- Community libraries have the resources and infrastructures to provide access to print-based materials, yet many libraries are not adequately supported by their local communities. Schools that lack reading material should foster partnerships with community libraries to encourage reading for pleasure. Many learners associate reading with effortful learning and are not inclined to read for pleasure. Yet it is through reading for pleasure that learners develop the reading skills that enable them to deal more easily with the more serious task of reading to learn.

Reading and writing are integral components of basic education. The socio-economic challenges and low literacy levels of many people in the black communities should be seen as challenges, not hindrances. Parents, teachers and the broader community must take up the challenge and help empower learners through literacy. If learners have easy access to books in the African languages within their school premises they can be exposed to the world of reading and so develop their academic language competencies.

END NOTES

[1] This article is based on a paper delivered by the first author at the ALASA Conference held at Stellenbosch University, 7-11 July 2003.

[2] These estimates are based on learning to read in English.

[3] The two English setwork books were *The calf of the November Cloud* by H Ruben and *Love, David* by D Case.

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