

# **“The literacy profiles of a sample of UNAM students: Implications for academic reading levels”**

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## **Abstract**

*Academic success at university level is mainly determined by reading ability as most students still read for their courses. L2 university students reading below their maturational levels, can mainly be attributed to their print-impooverished backgrounds, as reading is a skill that develops mainly through practice. The overall aims of this study are to establish the literacy backgrounds of a sample of first- year students at UNAM (University of Namibia) as well as their reading levels. In the process, it is attempted to ascertain the differences between good and poor readers in a developing country like Namibia. Furthermore, the literacy backgrounds of the participants in the study are used in order to determine whether they could have been exposed to additive or subtractive bilingualism. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods are employed.*

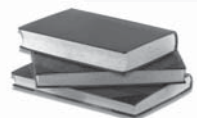
## **Background**

Proficiency in the language of instruction is instrumental to academic achievement (Cummins, 2000), yet many students exposed to bilingual education do not achieve optimum results as a result of not sufficiently understanding the language of instruction. This is reflected in their reading, listening, writing and speaking abilities in academic contexts.

Various researchers (Harlech-Jones 1998; Olivier 2002; Perkins 1991; Pretorius 2002; Rickerts 2000) concur that the majority of English second language (henceforth L2) undergraduate students in South Africa and Namibia find the academic demands of tertiary institutions challenging, mainly because they do not use their home language for learning during the primary, secondary and tertiary phases of education. In addition, they do not receive adequate environmental support in developing their reading, listening, speaking and writing abilities in English, the language that is the medium of instruction (henceforth MOI) at the various educational institutions. Some examples of environmental support are adequate exposure to the target language (in the case of Namibia, English) after school in the form of books, television, radio and opportunities to practice English.

Williams (2000) is of the opinion that “of all skills young children can acquire, reading is the one they will use most” (Williams 2000:1). Similarly, Jardine (1986) views reading as the most important skill required for academic success at a university, since information is, to a large extent, transmitted in print form via textbooks, the internet, study guides and notes from lecturers. This knowledge, acquired through the printed word, is then displayed by students in writing, when they submit assignments and write examinations. Since reading is evidently the vehicle of learning, the implication is that low reading levels can result in low academic performance.

As students progress through the various stages of schooling, more complex academic and linguistic demands are made on them. In other words, in order to excel academically at academic institutions, they are required to have advanced



knowledge of the language of instruction, know the high-frequency words as well as have an extensive academic vocabulary, be able to understand and use complex structures in the target language and have well-developed cognitive abilities. These capabilities are especially essential in the case of reading. For example, students arriving at UNAM are familiar with the genres of narrative texts through their schooling and everyday experiences. However, many are not equipped to read for their academic courses that require a solid understanding of the structure and demands of expository texts. The comprehension of such texts requires students to be able to use various cognitive skills in order to enumerate, perceive time order, compare and contrast, comprehend cause and effect, as well as to solve problems. Moreover, students require a fairly extensive vocabulary in order to carry out all these tasks. As a result, many UNAM students who do not meet these required academic and linguistic demands may experience difficulties when they first enter the University and they may read without any purpose, especially since they do not know how to read in order to have full comprehension of what they read (Rickerts, 2000).

## Literature Review

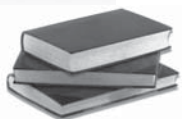
### ***Conversational and academic language proficiency***

Language proficiency refers to the “degree or skill with which a person can use the language, such as how well the person can read, write, speak or understand language” (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992, p. 200). **Academic** language proficiency, on the other hand, is the “language knowledge together with the associated knowledge of the world and the meta-cognitive strategies necessary to function effectively in the discourse domains of the school” (Chapelle 1988 in Cummins 2000, p. 67). L2 students, like L1 students, should not only be proficient in the MOI, but also have well-developed cognitive abilities in order to function at school and tertiary levels as well as in social contexts.

In order to understand the reasons why oral proficiency in an L2 cannot be a reliable indicator of academic proficiency of the L2 in academic contexts, the concepts BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication skills) and CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) were developed to explain the nature of L2 acquisition in academic contexts. According to Cummins (2000), these concepts refer to the extent to which understanding of the language used depends on contextual clues or the absence thereof, hence the terms context-embedded and context-reduced.

The BICS/CALP distinction can be used to explain the academic demands made on L2 children as they progress through schooling. Conversational skills are usually the first to develop in an L2. These skills are context-embedded and are very important as fluency in everyday language is the basis for development of the unfamiliar registers at school that are more context reduced. As learners progress through schooling, the cognitive demands of their courses increase and students should be able to use more abstract and less context-embedded language (CALP) in order to construct meaning, an important result of effective teaching (Cummins, 2000). It should be noted that increased oral language proficiency could lead to an increase in BICS, but not necessarily an increase in CALP (Pretorius, 2002).

The reality for many L2 students, especially in the Namibian context, is that as a result of the type of schooling they were exposed to, they never had opportunities



to develop CALP in their L1 nor in English, their L2. A prerequisite for any of the above to occur is a rich and meaningful teaching environment with extensive exposure to literate activities.

It seems that in L2 learners who have been exposed to submersion and subtractive bilingualism, BICS are better developed than CALP. As a result they are able to perform better in tasks that require lower-order skills but when they are faced with more cognitively challenging tasks their performance is less than satisfactory (Cummins 2000; Olivier 2002). Accordingly, educators should make deliberate efforts to increase CALP development among students in order to increase their academic performances.

Cummins (2000) concluded that “if L2 learners are to catch up with native speakers, they must engage in extensive reading of written text, because academic reading is reliably to be found only in written text” (Cummins, 2000,p.79).

Research has established that there is a strong relationship between academic performance and reading ability. Better readers perform better academically (Pretorius 2002). Poor readers, if not taught how to improve their reading skills, will not overcome the “Matthew effect” in reading. This phenomenon is named after the Bible passage in the New Testament, Matthew 25:29, which states “for unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even which he hath”, in other words the phenomenon that the rich get richer. The Matthew effect was identified by Stanovich (1986), and focuses on the gap between poor and good readers at school. It is argued that if reading ability increases vocabulary acquisition, grammar, background knowledge, knowledge of texts, genre conventions and also the reading skills of students at school, all powerful tools in reading comprehension, then those readers who are good readers will ultimately do better scholastically compared to their peers who are poor readers. As they progress through school, the good readers will read more and increase the abilities mentioned earlier, while the poor readers with inadequate vocabularies will read less and remain behind in their reading abilities and continue to perform worse academically.

### ***What it means to comprehend a text:***

Many readers can decode written symbols in a text, but do not fully understand what these written symbols mean and may therefore create the false impression that they can read. In order to have full comprehension of a text, higher-order reading skills (Kaplan-Dolgoy 1998), comprehending (Pretorius, 2002) or top-down processes (Day & Bamford 1998; Coady 1997; Cook 1989) need to be developed. The reader uses decoding skills as a basis to comprehend, but decoding skills do not necessarily imply comprehension proficiency (Pretorius,2002). Readers who can comprehend are able to interact actively with the text by activating background knowledge, asking questions, making predictions and assumptions about the text, recognising or inferring semantic relations, resolving anaphoric and cataphoric references, guessing the meaning of words in context and making inferences, perceiving the intended meaning of the author, responding critically to a text, and so on (Coady 1997; Cook 1989; Cummins 2000; Day & Bamford 1998; Grabe 1991; Kaplan-Dolgoy 1998; Mbise 1993). All these reading competencies are critical for academic success and involve the cognitive processes required to comprehend the content of academic courses.



The implication is that UNAM students who did not receive adequate environmental support in the acquisition of English as MOI might only be able to decode texts but may not be able to comprehend texts, a condition that can ultimately result in academic failure.

### ***The differences between good and poor readers***

The difference between good and poor readers can also be linked to the distinction that is made between meaningful and non-meaningful or generative and inert modes of learning (Daneman, 1991). Generative readers have the ability to apply different cognitive skills in a flexible manner to assimilate, transfer and assemble new knowledge and schemata from new information. Inert readers, on the other hand, find it difficult to add new knowledge to existing knowledge as they have rigid, compartmentalised knowledge bases (Pretorius, 2002). University students are expected to be generative readers as they acquire new knowledge about their academic courses through reading. The further they progress academically, the more new information they gain through applying various cognitive skills while they are reading and listening to lectures. Likewise, they should be able to use the new knowledge they acquire to solve problems, make decisions and apply their knowledge in different contexts.

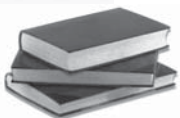
Good readers are also good comprehenders, they generally perform better scholastically and have well developed higher-order cognitive skills such as thinking, remembering, perceiving or classification (Pretorius, 2002). At the same time they need to become critically aware of different perspectives as a result of their newly acquired knowledge by using various levels of comprehension (Pretorius, 2002). Central to all this is an understanding of the vocabulary contained in texts as well as reading at a relatively fast pace.

Based on various studies in developing countries (e.g. Cummins 2000; Devine 1996; Kitao & Kitao 2000) several other differences between good and poor readers are made. These are summarized in table 4 and elaborated on in the section that deals with the discussion and interpretation of the statistics.

### ***Categories of reading***

In many reading tests, distinctions are generally made between the decoding and comprehension abilities of readers. As a result, readers can be categorised in one of the following four categories (McCormick, 1995):

- The independent level: Readers in this group are believed to be highly skilled readers who can read with 98% decoding accuracy and at least 90% comprehension. These readers should be able to access information from a text without any problems and simultaneously be able to learn from it.
- The instructional level: Readers in this group are believed not to have major reading problems as they read with 95% decoding accuracy and at least 75% comprehension. It is generally assumed that readers in this category can benefit from reading instruction.
- The borderline: Readers in this group attain between 90-94% decoding accuracy and 55-74% accuracy in comprehension. They are borderline cases that can also benefit from intensive reading instruction.
- The frustration level: Readers in this group are believed to have major reading problems and read with less than 90% decoding accuracy and 50% or less comprehension. In order for them to overcome their difficulties



in comprehension, they need intensive reading instruction. The categories described above are used to identify students in need of intensive reading instruction at tertiary level, but are not prescriptive and should be regarded as general guidelines.

### **Objectives**

The *objectives* of the study were to:

- find out more about the early literacy experiences and social background of students when they arrive at UNAM.
- establish the reading levels of students when they arrive at UNAM.
- establish if there were any differences between the participants with regards to their reading habits.

### **Research Questions**

Research questions:

- What are the language and literacy profiles of students who participated in the current research?
- What are the reading levels of first-year UNAM students who obtained a C symbol in English on IGCSE level?
- Are there significant differences in the reading attitudes and practices between the competent and weaker readers in the study?

### **Participants**

Participants in the research were a homogenous sample of 108 first year UNAM students who enrolled for the UCE (University Core English) course at the Language Center during the first semester of 2004. These students shared one common characteristic namely that they all obtained a C symbol in English on IGCSE level. According to criteria used at the Language Centre, that is the minimum requirement to enrol for the UCE course (as well as for degree purposes). Students with a higher symbol on IGCSE level or who have passed English on HIGCSE level are exempted from doing it and enrol for UCA (English for Academic Purposes).

### **Research design.**

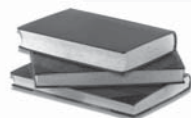
Since it was not possible in this study to randomly assign participants to groups, this research is representative of a quasi-experiment that had one experimental and one control group (Leedy 1993; Nunan 1992).

The following data collection tools were employed:

- Questionnaire
- Reading test

### **Procedures**

A questionnaire and a reading comprehension test were administered during the first week of classes to volunteers. The questionnaire was designed to tap into the general literacy background, the early literacy experiences, attitudes towards reading as well as the reading habits of participants. Thereafter a reading comprehension test was written. It should be noted that the comprehension test that was written was not a standardised test (McCormick, 1995), and students were not classified according to reading levels of both decoding and comprehension, as it was assumed that by the time students arrive at university they would have developed decoding skills already. By tapping into different aspects of reading, it was hoped that the test would reflect the general ability of students to understand



expository texts when they arrive at UNAM. The test included literal, paraphrase, inference questions, anaphoric inferences as well as inferring the meaning of target words from explicit clues in the context.

It should further be noted that as a result of absenteeism, the questionnaire was administered to 108 students, while only 90 wrote the reading test the day thereafter.

**Results:**

The results are presented in the tables that follow:

**Sample Characteristics:**

**(i) Background of learners**

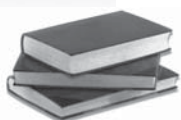
The majority of students (53.7%) who participated in the research, were between 20 and 29 years old, with a large number (42.6%) younger than 20 and only two older than 30. The results further indicated a relatively equal distribution of males and females, with the females slightly more than the males. In addition to this, the majority of students (74%) came from rural areas.

Only 7.1% of the respondents indicated that when they were children, their parents read to them quite often, while 38.8% indicated that their parents never did. Additionally, of the six participants who have children, four sometimes read to their children and the other two never do.

The majority of the respondents (71.3%) are not members of another library other than the UNAM one, and that they have very little exposure to reading material at home. The available literature in their homes are reflected in the table below:

*Table 1 Available literature at home.*

Questions	Response Categories	Students' responses (n=108)	% of responses
How often is a newspaper bought in your home?	Every day	50	46.3
	Once a week	23	21.3
	Occasionally	33	30.6
	Never	2	1.9
How often do you buy a magazine or a journal	Once a week	12	11.1
	Once a month	33	30.6
	Regular Subscriber	2	1.9
	Occasionally	49	45.4
	Never	12	11.1
Number of books in home	More than 100	13	12.0
	More than 50	16	14.8
	More than 20	27	25
	About 10	46	42.6
	None	6	5.6



In response to what kind of books they enjoy reading, most students favoured romance (70.4%) and academic books (59.3%), a few indicated to favour westerns (13.9%) and science fiction (14.8). When asked to list the names of two books they recently read as well as the names of the authors, very few were able to. The majority simply stated “cannot remember”.

**(ii) Attitudes towards reading**

From their responses to the question about how much they enjoy reading, some respondents indicated that they liked reading either very much (33.3%) or quite a lot (46.3%). Furthermore, the majority of respondents (65.7%) viewed themselves as average readers.

Their positive attitudes towards reading is reflected in the following table that sums up their preferred choice of relaxing. Respondents could tick more than one option.

**Table 2: Responses to preferred activities on a free evening**

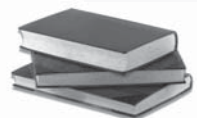
Categories	Students' responses (n=108)	% of responses
Reading	70	64.8
Watching TV	69	63.8
Listening to the radio	57	52.7
Visiting friends / family	48	44.4
Going to a party	21	19.4
Watch a film	13	12.0
Practicing a hobby	13	12.0

**(iii) Problems with reading**

From their responses, most participants felt that they had problems with reading (73,1%). These problems are summed up in the following table

Table 3: Reading problems experienced

Categories	Students' responses (n=108)	% of responses
Unknown words	58	53.7
Grammatical structures	59	54.6
Reading slowly	37	34.3
Keeping track of main ideas	29	26.9
Forgot what was read at end of page	15	13.9
Problems with diagrams, graphs and tables	12	11.1



#### (iv) Factors important for academic success

In response to the question about what factors they regard as being most important for academic success at UNAM, the majority of participants felt that being able to read (75.9%) and write (85.2%) are the two most important skills required for academic success.

#### (v) Reading habits and strategies

From the responses about the reading habits of the participants in the current study, one can conclude that the majority of students read in English for study purposes (88%), for enjoyment (72.2%), but also for work-related (38%) and religious purposes (25%). 5% of respondents indicated that they read a chapter in their course guides or textbooks only once. The rest read through it twice (48%), 3-4 times (43%) and five and more times (11%).

In response to the question of what they do when they come across a word they do not know, 42.6% indicated that they try to guess its meaning, 51.9% relied on dictionaries, 1.9% indicated to simply continue reading and 3.7% to ask someone else for its meaning.

The actions students indicated to take before, while and after reading are summed up in table 4.

#### Reading abilities of students

Based on their reading results, students were assigned to 4 groups, as indicated in the table below:

Table 5 Results of students reading scores

Independent level	Instructional level	Borderline level	Frustration level
0%	4%	41%	55%

#### The differences between good and poor readers at UNAM

Based on their reading results, students were assigned to three groups: competent readers (60% and above), moderate readers (50%-59%) and weak readers (below 50%).

The table below represents a summary of their test results:

Table 6 Results of students reading scores

COMPETENT: 60%- 100% N=23	MODERATE: 50%- 59% N=24	WEAK: 0%- 49% N=43
(80-100% = 1)	(50-55%=8)	(0-29%=1)
(70- 79% = 5)	(56-59%=16)	(30-39%=9)
(60- 69% =17)		(40-49%=33)

The three groups into which students in the current research were categorised according to their reading scores merely indicated that those with marks above

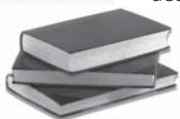
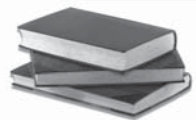


Table 4 Actions taken before, while and after reading course guides and textbooks for study purposes

Categories of actions taken before reading	Students' responses frequencies (n=108)	Percentage (%) of responses
Read a little to see what it is about	90	83.3
Check number of pages to read	58	53.7
Make guesses of what it is about	38	35.2
Check for missing pages	33	30.6
Look up difficult words	28	25.9
Categories of actions taken while reading		
Keep thinking of title and pictures to see relation to text	62	57.4%
Make a lot of guesses about what is going to happen next	61	56.5%
Look up words	59	56.2%
Check to see if predictions are correct	43	39.8%
Read slowly not to miss important parts	37	34.3%
Stop to summarise main points	36	33.3%
Say every word in mind to see if word is known	21	19.4%
Categories of actions taken after reading		
Underline main ideas	69	63.9%
Think about how information may relate to specific situations	67	62.0%
Retell main point to test understanding of text	56	51.9%
Look up all difficult words	51	47.2%



60% were not considered to be as critical as those in the other two groups, as the university generally regards any mark below 50% as a fail.

Of all the responses reported on, the only instance where there was any significant difference between the competent and their less competent reading peers, was in one action taken during the 'while reading' phase of reading. This was that the competent readers indicated that they tend to think more about words to make sure they know the meanings thereof, compared to the readers in the other two groups who do not pay so much attention to this.

Discussion and interpretation of results:

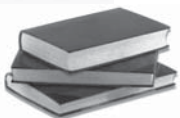
The results in Table 1 confirm that the participants in this research did and still do not have much access to reading material out of school, either in the form of libraries or in their homes. It is worrying that 48.2% participants reported to have less than 10 books at home. This figure includes those who reported not to have **any** books at home. All these factors can negatively affect their reading abilities as reading is developed through having easy access to books to read (Matjila & Pretorius, 2004).

The **positive effects of parents reading to their children** on their children's reading abilities were illustrated through various researchers (Buchorn-Stoll 2002; Elley 1991; Feitelson et al 1990; Kaderavek 2003; Machet 2002; Solarsh 2002; Williams 2000). In this regard, it became apparent that the parents of the respondents to the questionnaire also did not help them much in the acquisition of literacy in either L1 or English. This finding was made as the majority of the respondents indicated that they were never read to when they were children, nor do they read much to their own children. This possibly reflects the low literacy levels of parents, as the question did not relate to reading in English only. The fact that literacy does not feature much in the homes of participants in this research could also reflect cultural differences in attitudes to reading and the values they attach to it. The low access to books in many homes could also be attributed to poverty. However, the fact remains that as a result of a lack of parental involvement and possibly low-literacy levels, many participants in the current study may have started school with disadvantaged positions at the beginning of their school careers and may never manage to catch up with their peers who were exposed to literacy from very young ages.

Although the respondents indicated that they have not had much access to reading sources, there seemed to be a general tendency to like reading, as many stated that they liked reading newspapers, magazines and books (cf. Table 1). This seemed to be contradictory to the fact that most respondents could not remember the title or the name of the author of a book they had recently read. If they were such keen readers, they should have remembered such details.

Another discrepancy is the fact that although so many students indicated that they read novels, magazines and newspapers, the majority did not belong to public libraries and also did not have many books at home. The question as to where they find access to books remains to be answered.

If participants really enjoyed reading so much for pleasure, their reading scores in the test should have reflected this, as extensive reading improves reading abilities. As indicated, of those students who wrote the test 50% read at frustration levels,



25% were borderline readers and only 25% were readers reading at instructional levels.

Additionally, it is apparent from their responses that being able to read well is clearly not only important to them for studying at UNAM, but also for religious and work-related purposes. This indirectly suggests a positive desire to be immersed in English (Harlech-Jones 1998; Swarts 1995), a motivation driven not only by parents, but by the participants themselves (internal motivation).

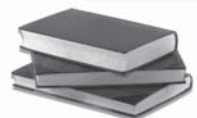
The study has drawn attention to the fact that many students at the Language Centre are in fact very weak readers.

Although participants indicated that they were good readers, their responses to other questions in the questionnaire and observations in class highlighted various discrepancies. For example, pre-reading, a very important stage in reading as this activity activates background knowledge and allows the reader to make predictions based on textual details, for example by using headings and subheadings, is a reading strategy good readers regularly employ when reading. Yet, a meagre 35.2% of the respondents indicated that they make guesses about the content of texts prior to reading, an important pre-reading activity for good readers. Moreover, only 39.8% of them indicated that they continuously monitor what they were reading to see if their predictions were correct, an important activity *while* reading that shows metacognitive awareness. Observations in the UCE class during the semester proved that most students did not know about pre, while and postreading activities prior to telling them about it, read in a linear fashion and did not continuously monitor their comprehension. Furthermore, after this had been explained to them, they had to be reminded during each reading lesson to apply the various steps involved during each phase to facilitate their own comprehension.

Another discrepancy occurred regarding the use of dictionaries. Good readers are generally not too reliant on dictionaries, although they will look up definitions of recurring unknown words. They also do not deem it important to know and to understand every word that appears in a text, as long as the overall understanding of the text is not compromised (Aebersold & Field 1997; Cooper 1999; Devine 1996; Kitao & Kitao 2002; Pretorius 2002; Rickerts 2000). 25,9 % of participants in the current research indicated that they look up the meanings of words before reading, 56,2% while reading and 47,2% after reading. This generally indicates their over-reliance on dictionaries. Dictionaries can be useful tools, but looking up too many words can slow down the reading process, result in not remembering what was read and eventually cause readers to lose interest in reading. They should mainly be used to look up the meanings of words that impede comprehension, something good readers are aware of.

However, class observations indicated that most students never seemed to remember the meanings of the words they have looked up. That was also when they looked up the meaning of unknown words, they did not write the meanings down and seemed to rely on their memories for remembering new definitions. As a result, students rarely remembered new words encountered in texts.

The one significant difference between competent and weak readers highlighted in the current research is the fact that participants in the former group said every



word in their minds to make sure it is understood, compared to participants in the latter group who do not pay much attention to this aspect while reading. While reading slowly can be an indicator of over-reliance on decoding and not enough monitoring of comprehension, something poor readers do. In this case, it could imply that the better readers read more strategically and were more aware of new concepts introduced that needed to be understood for overall comprehension to occur. This difference ( $p=0.051$ ) may indicate greater metacognitive awareness of the competent group. Metacomprehension (Kaplan- Dolgoy, 1998), the control an individual has over his/her cognitive processes in order to construct meaning while reading, ensures achievement of required goals when reading. This aspect relates to an awareness of how cognition occurs and also how to restore it, should a breakdown in cognition occurs. As readers need to know about 90% of all running words in a text, competent readers who have metacognitive awareness will be aware when comprehension breaks down as a result of words not understood. For them, attending to the meaning of unknown words may reflect their desire to restore a breakdown in comprehension. As they are also assumed to have larger vocabularies, they are also more likely to be aware of unknown words in a text.

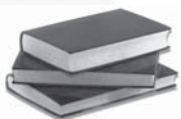
In contrast, weak readers display lower metacognitive awareness and have smaller vocabularies, compared to better readers. They tend to read aimlessly and without fully understanding their texts, as they do not employ various methods to enhance text comprehension. Daneman (1991) contends that weak readers often encounter the same unknown words over and over in texts without attempting anything to remedy the situation. The findings that better readers continuously think about the meanings of words they read, could perhaps reflect that whereas poor readers do little to find out the meanings of unknown words in texts, better readers, on the other hand show metacognitive awareness by being aware of unknown words and attempting to find out what words mean that they encounter frequently.

The fact that most readers in the current study display characteristics of poor readers, correlate with the results of their reading test. That is that most of them are readers who need intensive reading instruction.

### **Conclusion**

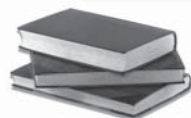
This current research does not attempt to blame parents or students for their poor reading skills, nor does it protest for the change of the language policy. What it does advocate is for more “book flooding” (Elley, 1991, p.401) to occur in Namibian schools and tertiary institutions. Educators need to be alerted to the importance of developing suitable classroom environments to stimulate learners to become comprehending readers. If not, the Matthew effects in reading will prevail.

It has transpired that one of the main reasons for the poor reading levels of our students is not the fact that they receive instruction through the medium of an L2, but mainly due to a lack of exposure to printed texts.



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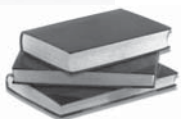
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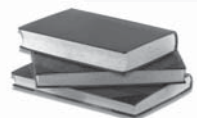
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