

It Starts With a Story! Towards Extensive Reading

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Abstract

Many educationists have noted that learners learn to read by reading — much in the same way as they learn any other skill: by doing it and enjoying what they do. This one-year intrinsic case study of Bulembu Lower & Higher Primary School focused on six intermediate phase pupils (Grades 4 to 6). The paper reports on the use of an enhanced Extensive Reading (ER) project aiming to improve learners' literacy. The study was conducted through resource-auditing, pre-post case study interviews, and providing plenty of opportunities to access reading materials that pupils enjoy reading in a relaxed atmosphere such as fairy tales, folk tales, novels, plays,

poetry and media journals (print, audio & visual). The study generated video recordings, classroom corner libraries, translatability, book reports, continuous assessment, long-term intrinsic motivation for reading, and a comprehensive extensive reading project report. Theoretically, the social constructivist theory, in line with Project-Based Learning (PBL) as a holistic framework, informed the study. The study has already revealed that if English First Additional Language learners (EFAL) read age-appropriate, attractive, contemporary reading material, and follow various strategies, their communication skills and academic reading and writing competence will improve.

Keywords: intrinsic case study, communicative competence, extensive reading, intermediate phase, reading & writing competence, project-based learning, PBL, social constructivist, translatability, South Africa, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement, CAPS, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, PIRLS

It Starts With a Story! Towards Extensive Reading

In this paper, we present a one-year intrinsic case study of Bulembu Lower & Higher Primary School aiming to provide an enhanced design of Extensive Reading (ER) to improve learners' literacy in terms of their reading and writing capabilities. For Stake (1995), an intrinsic case study focuses on a unique phenomenon in which the researcher defines its peculiarity to distinguish it from all others, possibly based on a collection of features or the sequence of events. An *intrinsic* case study, therefore, is selected on its own merits, not as a consequence representative of other cases, but because of its uniqueness, which is of genuine interest to the researcher. It is, for example, the case in this paper in which we aim to improve the pupils' literacy in this school. First, for pupils to be good readers, we believe that they need two kinds of reading practices: that is, intensive reading and extensive reading activities (Kepe, 2017). Below we briefly explain the two terms: extensive and intensive reading; however, the focus will be on extensive reading as the rationale for the study. Davis (1995) proposed a concise definition befitting the study, in which he states the following:

An extensive reading programme is a supplementary class library scheme, attached to an English course, in which pupils are given the time, encouragement, and materials to read pleurably, at their own level, as many books as they can, without the pressures of testing or marks. Thus, pupils are competing only against themselves, and it is up to the teacher to provide motivation and monitoring to ensure that the maximum number of books is being read in the time available. The watchwords are quantity and variety, rather than quality, so that books are selected for their attractiveness and relevance to the pupils' lives, rather than for literary merit. Non-fiction is also included as well as teenage magazines, but fiction predominates as the major reading genre. (p. 329)

Besides, ER is often associated with developing fluency and positive attitudes towards reading — a “love of reading” (Probyn, 2009). Intensive reading, on the other hand, is what we associate with “reading comprehension” exercises. Learners are given a short text with questions that are designed to help them unpack the text in terms of its language, structure and meaning (Probyn, 2009). Intensive reading aims at building learners' analytic skills, which enables them to make sense of the text. These skills could range from fairly low decoding skills to sophisticated skills involving inferencing and critical analysis (Probyn, 2009).

Despite the above view, this paper focuses on the merits of the ER. Davis (1995) shares practical ER teaching activities that work in his context, in the United Kingdom, Singapore and Cameroon; his experience encourages an international perspective in English Language Teaching (ELT). His insights concerning ER help us rationalize what we can translate, adjust and apply in our contexts. Nunn et al. (2016) refer to this as intercultural *translatability*, a helpful phenomenon that is woven into the study. We will come back to this notion later under school social context.

As principal investigator, Dr. Kepe conducted all fieldwork, data generation, data analysis and interpretation. For that reason, all firsthand aspects and narration are presented from his [Dr. Kepe's] perspective. Stake (1995) notes that “the real business of case study is clarifying, not generalization” (p. 8). Therefore, the following description is meant to bring into focus the people, places, and events that inform this paper. The targeted population of the research project at Bulembu L/H Primary School comprised six pupils from the intermediate

phase, which is Grades 4 to 6. The pupils range in age from nine and twelve. They were selected based on advice from the teachers, and permission to participate was granted by their parents. Generally, the teachers reported that the pupils at the school do not study sufficiently; specifically, the intermediate phase lacks vocabulary and above all cannot read aloud or with meaning including the inability to write proficiently. They mentioned that pupils at the intermediate phase appear to enjoy reading by following after the teacher; however, they cannot read on their own. This pedagogic dilemma invoked Krashen (1985), who has claimed that "language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill" (p.2). He claims that pupils need high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, a low level of anxiety, and should feel safe and comfortable in the teaching and learning environment if they are to be successful for second language acquisition; meanwhile, if they experience high levels of stress or anxiety during the learning process, language acquisition can be impeded. Inspired by this notion, when teachers of the school informed me of all the above teaching and learning challenges, I then initiated the ER project, which is an ongoing literacy initiative for this marginalized community that benefits currently 94 pupils from Grades 4 to 6. The sentiments around the location of the school are also tied to my growth and early life at the school: I was a pupil at the school from Grades 1 to 6 in my early formative years.

This ER initiative has less bureaucratic involvement, although the challenge was in securing enough funding to set up its existence, which would comprise organization logistics and paperwork to make it run efficiently and effectively. The Govan Mbeki Research & Development Centre (GMRDC) and the Eastern Cape Sport, Recreation, Arts, & Culture (ECSRAC) fund this research initiative to augment the curriculum, specifically literacy. The project also funds, trains, and mentors professional literacy tutors in the areas of reading, writing, mathematical literacy and technological literacy. The professional literacy tutors as the foot soldiers on-site were armed with facilitation skills and involved in data collection. We conducted the study through resource-auditing as well as pre- and post-case study interviews, and by providing plentiful meaningful opportunities to access reading materials that pupils enjoy reading in a stimulating environment (Krashen, 2004). We modelled reading through utilizing storytelling and reading aloud as a stimulus and as a way to spark interest in reading.

Researchers in Africa and across the globe agree that before the dawn of the written word, cultural heritage and historical events were passed on from one generation to another through utilising emotive and captivating narratives. Edosomwan and Peters (2016) confirm that what began as oral tradition has evolved to include written literature. Isbell et al. (2004) penciled a distinction between storytelling and story reading. Storytelling as a pedagogical tool plays a pivotal role in the shaping of identity, cultural heritage and cognitive development for pupils. According to South Africa's 2012 Department of Basic Education *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)*, children come to school knowing their home language, speaking it fluently and already knowing several thousand words. As a consequence, learning to read and write in Reception Grade (R) & Grade 1 builds on this foundation of oral language. This view is in concert with Krashen (2004), who has claimed that the maximum means for language acquisition is through natural communication.

The Bulembu ER came into being at a time in South Africa when literacy had been persistently dwindling for over a decade. Several studies show consecutive low rankings of literacy nationally and globally. Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) tests (2006, 2011) affirmed the poor performance of South African children in reading, with no statistically significant improvement (Mullis et al., 2012). While the 2014 South African Annual National Assessment (ANA) results pointed to an improvement in the home language, performance results for EFAL remained below 50% across grades (Department of Basic Education, 2014). Spaul (2013) notes that the majority of South African pupils are deprived of the golden opportunity to learn to read with fluency, accuracy, or with the rhythm and intonation and comprehension. He observed that whether children are tested in their home language or in English, the findings are the same, which is that a plethora of South African children cannot read for meaning by the end of Grade 4 — even in their home language — and nearly a third are still functionally illiterate in English by the end of Grade 6. Similarly, in 2017, South Africa was placed last out of all 50 countries who participated in PIRLS. In its report, PIRLS found that 78% of Grade 4 learners were unable to read for meaning, indicating that nearly eight out of ten Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning (Howie et al., 2017). This means that pupils cannot grasp clearly-stated information or make simple inferences about events and reasons for actions. The above reports confirm teaching and learning challenges which face the Bulembu L/H Primary School, where pupils lacked meaningful exposure to English First Additional Language (EFAL) as they could not read for meaning, hence the need for an extensive reading project to reinvigorate literacy.

Bulembu L/H Primary School Social Context

Reminiscing of the culture of the school during the good old days when I was a pupil there, we would warmly receive guests through cultural dance, music, and the booming sounds of the drum majorettes and ululations. This view is depicted in Figures 1 and 2, which portray the front and the back of the Bulembu L/H Primary School structure and the pupils who were performing drum majorettes welcoming guests on the 24th of October 2019 during the launch of the ER.

Figure 1

The Majorettes Practice for the Big Day



Note. The majorettes' society with their arts and culture teacher are practising for the big day of the launch of the ER. Front of Bulembu L/H Primary School. October 24, 2019.

Figure 2

Dancing to the Sounds of the Majorettes



Note. The pupils are dancing to the sounds of the majorettes, portraying the authentic beauty and culture of the school. Back of Bulembu L/H Primary School. October 24, 2019.

The authentic school culture as depicted by the pupils in Figures 1 and 2 is in concert with the literacy development described in this paper. We believe that literacy embraces both reading (decoding) and writing (encoding) words and texts, but also a more complex ability to read not only the word but also the world. Given this view, *literacy* is therefore perceived as a social practice which has manifested in the range of adjectives, such as cultural literacy, critical literacy and audiovisual literacy (Kepe, 2017). Stake (1995) asserts that these types of teaching and learning situations are “intricately related through many coincidental actions and that understanding them requires looking at a wide sweep of contexts: temporal and spatial, historical, political, economic, cultural, social, and personal” (p. 43).

The Bulembu L/H Primary School context mirrors the South African education context in which — despite the curriculum changes following the demise of Apartheid in 1994 — most public schools to date still utilise English or Afrikaans as a language of learning and teaching. Given this situation, the language of learning and teaching at the school from Reception/Grade 1 is Isixhosa (mother language); however, English is introduced as the First Additional Language (EFAL) in Grade 4 to Grade 7, which is the exit point. The afore-mentioned teaching situation appears to be a pedagogical dilemma and a major contributing factor to insufficient studying of pupils at the school leading to literacy challenges raised by the teachers.

The dominance of English language as a medium of instruction in most of the South African public schools leaves much to be desired despite the fact that the School Governing Bodies [SGB] has the authority to determine the language of learning and teaching to be used in schools (*South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996*). However, this still does not justify the hegemony of English or Afrikaans as dominant subjects of learning and teaching. This trajectory where English has been viewed superior to other languages in the learning and teaching discourse across South Africa and around the world tended in many ways to deprive pupils/students of their own agency (Adamson, Coulson, & Fujimoto-Adamson, 2019).

Without overstating the above-mentioned pedagogic dilemma, it is worth mentioning that before the founding of Bulembu L/H Primary School, the children of Bulembu village had to

walk long distances from their village attending school at some of the surroundings: Mamata Primary School at Mamata Location, Mdizeni Primary School at Anders Mission Location. Credit should go to the men and women for the work they did to build a school at Bulembu. Although they were not educated, they had a passion for education.

The following are some of the people our village will always be indebted to, regarded as heroes and held in high esteem even after many years since they have passed on from this world: Mrs. Dlova Danxa, Mr. Maxhala Nkabi, Nkqekeko Mnyamana and Madolo. They were instrumental in the founding of the school, and they had the unwavering support of villagers. Initially, the school was housed at two venues: the house which accommodated subs A, B and Standard 1 was owned by Mrs. Nosefu Toise - the wife of the late Chief Nqabisile Toise, while the local Lutheran Church ministered to by the Rev. Yibe was used as a classroom for Grades 3, 4, 5 and 6. Both these buildings were mud structures. The school started with two teachers, namely Ms. Nontsikelelo Sauka for the lower classes, and Mr. Qengqa, Principal, for the senior classes. Still, learners had to go to the other schools when they passed Grade 6 to do Grades 7 and 8. Mr. Qengqa left and was replaced by Mr. Kolela. Those he taught remember him as a very passionate choir conductor, and schools at the time would visit one another in fundraising concerts.

Bulembu Lower and Higher Primary School, where the ER project is currently conducted, is situated 12 km away west of King Williams Town in Buffalo City Municipality in the Province of the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The school emerged from a disadvantaged community where unemployment is rife, education levels are low, drug and alcohol use proliferate. Over and above this, pupils encounter daily the effects of the social and environmental context in which they exist where there are poor role models and a relative lack of opportunity (Vinson et al., 2009). As a consequence, most of the pupils are overwhelmed and suffer tremendously low self-esteem affecting their academic performance. This situation is exacerbated by a non-existent school library or a classroom corner library at the least. Hendricks (2013) notes that less-affluent Eastern Cape (Bulembu L/H Primary School Province) homes have little for children to read beyond a Bible, and community libraries are rare in rural areas. This suggests that to develop grade-appropriate literacy, pupils virtually are dependent on their schools to provide them with books and to their teachers to use those books effectively. Mncube and Harber (2010) caution that while we usually expect schooling to be of socio-economic and political benefit in all societies, it can similarly help to reproduce existing inequalities (social reproduction) and contribute to immorality in society. They note that children from poor backgrounds go to impoverished schools and then into poorly paid, low-status jobs or unemployment, and that only a small number of children from underprivileged backgrounds succeed. This provides the appearance of a “meritocratic system:” a term coined by the British sociologist Michael Dunlop Young in 1958 to refer to a political system in which economic goods and/or political power are vested in individual people on the basis of talent, effort and achievement, rather than on wealth or social class. Advancement in such a system is based on performance, as measured through examination or demonstrated achievement. For this reason, this study was single-minded in its expedition to provide an enriched design of extensive reading to improve learners’ reading and writing capabilities in order to provide universal primary education for all as witnessed by the second

of the United Nations' (UN) *Millennium Development Goals* (2000) and the major international conferences at Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and Dakar, Senegal in 2000.

Nunn et al. (2016) caution that “no approach can be transferred directly from one local context to another. However, ... we can all find something from an approach designed in one context that is 'translatable' to enhance our own local context” (p.10). Given this view, the ER Bulembu L/H Primary School Project deals with an issue that is rooted in South Africa, but it is eminently translatable beyond borders. In view of this, through the ER, the pupils at the school are supported in their need to acquire the first additional language to translate *conceptually* from their home language (HL) across languages and cultures. We, therefore, view translatability as a useful metaphor in a broader sense, as it may help us understand the complex processes of intercultural communication in second/foreign language acquisition.

Since the beginning of the school to date, the focus has been on drills, chorusing, and memorization of scientific facts and mathematical tables; little had been done to create a stimulating “multimodal” environment to instil a sense of reading for pleasure (Thesen, 2014). Teachers need to reflect on their learners' learning methods — including reading strategies — to recognize and identify them in an attempt to support struggling learners to master the target language (Stake, 1995; Alhuei, Sheikh, & Mansoor, 2015). This view is in line with Stenhouse's (1983) notion of the teacher-as-researcher, like Tremmel, who talks about

the way of teaching demands a long journey that does not have any easily identifiable destination It is a journey that I believe must include a backward step into the self and it is a journey that is its own destination. (1993, p. 456)

In this paper, I reflect on the progress of the six learners identified following the introduction of the ER programme at the school reported. I was assisted by the school's language teacher, Mrs. V. Nqadala, and four peer-literacy tutors. We modelled reading strategies and sometimes recommended books to maintain the learners' interest and motivation. We conducted this practice carefully since at the core of the ER is autonomy and confidence-building towards self-efficacy (Atwell, 2006). Researchers agree that books in the ER are selected for their attractiveness and relevance to the pupils' lives, rather than for literary merit (Kepe, 2017). In line with this view, the Bulembu L/H Primary School pupils were exposed to ER strategies in which reading with joy and free of the “pressures of test” was of double importance (Davis, 1995). As a consequence, pupils appeared comfortable to relate what they were reading to their own experiences. Nunan (2006, 2004) has found a basic distinction between real-world or target tasks and pedagogical tasks. He notes that target tasks, similar to the language debate presented below, refer to uses of language in the world beyond the classroom, while pedagogical tasks are those that occur in the classroom. There was evidence of this situation in the ER project at Bulembu L/H Primary School in the language debate as depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3

The Day of the Great Language Debate



Note. The day of the Great Language Debate. Bulembu L/H Primary School grounds. October 24, 2019.

As said, Figure 3 illustrates a setting of the learners preparing to engage themselves in the Great Language Debate, a topical issue in South Africa. Seated in a double horseshoe arrangement are the debaters and the student audience for an open discussion after the debate. Just behind/standing amidst is Mrs. V Nqadala, a school language teacher. Just adjacent to her standing wearing black T-shirts and red aprons are the literacy tutors who are foot soldiers of the ER on the ground at the site. The debate was sparked by the two books that the pupils have read: Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, and Steve Biko's 1987 selected writings, *I Write What I Like*. During the heated debate, the debater from the opposition, quoting Nelson Mandela, stated that "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language that goes to his heart," while the debater from the proposition quoted Biko (1987): "The blacks are tired of standing at the touchlines to witness a game that they should be playing. They want to do things for themselves and all by themselves" (Amanda Patterson, December 18, 2016).

The debate arising from the two biographies and other storybooks engendered active learning and interaction, which confirms the effectiveness of extensive reading in the school. Learning actively, according to Barns (1992), means working on understanding, attempting to interrelate, to interpret, and to understand new experiences and ideas. The Bulembu L/H Primary School ER project is a case in point where learning has become a "social activity." Parallel to this paper, which seeks to provide an enriched design of ER to improve learners' literacy, Acar (2019) proposed an action-oriented, project-based approach similar to the ER project at Bulembu, with a task-based or communicative approach. From various reading materials, pupils recorded and indicated how many of the books they have read per week to encourage reading. They ticked the text they can read frequently or occasionally, and they were also allowed to select books that are age-appropriate and of interest to them (Day et al., 1998). In line with this paper, Cunningham and Stanovich (2003) suggest that "the amount of print children are exposed to has profound cognitive consequences, and that the act of reading itself serves to increase the achievement differences among children" (p. 1). The study advocated for

extensive reading across subjects in EFAL and vernacular to stimulate a relaxed environment in which the language use was no longer a deficit. Besides, Day and Bamford (1997) promulgated the essential features of a successful ER program:

in [ER] students read large amounts of printed material; they read a variety of materials in terms of topic and genre. The material they read is within their level of comprehension; they choose what they want to read; reading is its own reward; students read for pleasure, information and general understanding; they read their selection at a faster rate than when they did intensive reading; reading is individual (students read on their own); teachers read with their students, thus serving as role models of good readers; teachers guide and keep track of student progress. (p. 8)

Given the above, Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR), as well as a weekly ER period which involved the whole school in reading for twenty minutes each day, usually before the first period, was introduced. ER books were also available for a home loan, and so it was often the case that far more reading would be done at home than at school. We recorded the number of every book a particular pupil was reading so that we could give advice and support when it became necessary. This also helped us to spy on weak readers, inconspicuously assisting, when necessary, during ER periods. We used a variety of icebreakers and motivational strategies to encourage the maximum amount of reading as well. This was important to do as it stimulated interest and meaning and reaction on whatever the pupils were reading. Laufer (1989) and Hu and Nation (2000) maintain that if ER is aimed at language acquisition, then between 95% and 98% of words in text should already be known; if it is aimed at improving reading fluency, between 98% and 100% of vocabulary should be familiar (as cited in Waring & Nation, 2004). Research has shown that “if a text contains too many unknown words, the reader must process the text intensively and slowly which changes the reading into a study activity rather than a fluency building one” (Waring & Nation, 2004, p.13). The paper focused on fluency building and encouraged interaction across genres by means of storybook reports, discussions, narration, role-plays, drama, debates, and several other types. The paper advocates for the extensive reading project stirred by a motivated teacher who does not shun away from asking for book donations as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Sponsorship Photo



Note. Sponsorship photo. Bulembu L/H Primary School grounds. October 24, 2019.

Figure 4 portrays a sponsorship photo during the launch of the ER project on the 24th October 2019. From the far right is Mr. Mgolombane, the principal of the school; in the middle — sandwiched by the ER members — is the Cambridge University Press Consultant who sponsored the project with storybooks; and I am standing on the left (ER initiator). Speaking with the local newspaper on the day of the ER launch, 24 October 2019, I pointed out that if learners have access to age-appropriate and contemporary books from the library — it could be a class, school or public library — they will develop a love for reading, they will increase their exposure to English, and their proficiency in the language will improve.

Social constructivism paradigms, Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Communicative Competence (CC) underpin the study. Social constructivism sees learning as primarily social (Vygotsky, 1987), while PBL bears the benefits of sustained inquiry and authenticity, taking into account pupils' voice and reflection (Nunn & Langille, 2016). Communicative competence, according to Hymes (1972), embraces communication and culture to use the language appropriately in different situations. Hymes' theory of CC was developed by other theorists as well. Two of the best-known sources are Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983). They broadened the concept of CC into four different sub-competencies:

1. Grammatical which involves knowing how to use the grammar, syntax, pronunciation and vocabulary of a language (ability to create grammatically correct utterances).
2. Sociolinguistic knowing how to use and respond to language appropriately, given the setting, the topic, and the relationships among the people communicating. Which words and phrases fit this setting and this topic? How can I express a specific attitude (courtesy, authority, friendliness, respect) when I need to? How do I know what attitude another person is expressing? (ability to produce sociolinguistically appropriate utterances).
3. Discourse competence: knowing how to interpret the larger context and how to construct longer stretches of language so that the parts make up a coherent whole. (ability to produce coherent and cohesive utterances).
4. Strategic which means knowing how to recognize and repair communication breakdowns, how to work around gaps in one's knowledge of the language, and how to learn more about the language and in the context. They observed that strategic competence asks: How do I know when I've misunderstood or when someone has misunderstood me? What do I say then? How can I express my ideas if I don't know the name of something or the right verb form to use? (ability to solve communication problems as they are).

All the above notions were integrated during the ER sessions at Bulembu school with the aim to improve learner literacy.

Methodology

Given the above-mentioned paradigms, it was necessary for the study to utilise an interpretive study based on a qualitative research approach. Interpretivism puts emphasis on the fact that the aim of social sciences is to understand people and not to explain them as assumed by positivism. Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Denzin & Lincoln (2011) offer the following definition of qualitative research:

[It] consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world by turning it into a series of representations, including field

notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.
(p. 3)

I used the qualitative approach to interrogate the scope of the research problem that the teachers at the school reported, which was that the pupils at the school under study; specifically, pupils in the intermediate phase could not study enough, struggled with sentence construction, lacked vocabulary, and were unable to read aloud or for meaning. Hence, ER, in the school, reportedly helped in creating a deeper understanding of pupils as participants through various reading activities relevant to their daily lives. The targeted population of the research comprised six pupils from the intermediate phase that is Grades 4 to 6 at Bulembu Lower & Higher Primary School. The pupils range in age from ten and twelve. The total number of learners reached by the ER project from Grades 4 to 6 is 94. They were selected based on advice from the teachers and permission to participate was granted by their parents.

I collected data from the six pupils that participated in the study, two peer-literacy educators, four members of the staff, and the principal of the school. In any qualitative research, reflexivity is of paramount importance. This is because it will help the researcher to be objective during data collection, data analysis and discussion of the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Therefore, reflexivity should be accountable for the usage of diverse designs for data collection and for triangulation during knowledge generation to ascertain credibility and trustworthiness. The methods used at Bulembu include resource-auditing, pre-post interviews, and media journals (print, audio and visual). I engaged the participants in a two-way conversation, asking them questions for the purpose of collecting data, and to learn their ideas, beliefs, views, opinions and behaviours concerning ER contribution in the school. After the interview sessions, I went back to the participants to afford them an opportunity to check (approve or disapprove) particular aspects of the responses they provided by replaying the tape recorder (Doyle, 2007; Merriam, 1998). The participants had to verify whether or not the interpretation made sense to them by reflecting their intended meanings (Creswell & Maietta, 2002). The interviews took about two months to finish. Resource-auditing helped the study establish the state in which the school was in, in terms of resources. The data was analysed by arranging it in a logical and chronological order using categories. Categories were identified that helped to cluster the data into meaningful groups.

The above view and corresponding ethical considerations are in line with Kvale (1996) who sees interviews as “an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest with the centrality of human interaction for knowledge production, and which emphasizes the social situations of the research data” (p.14; see also Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Maree (2007, p. 83) notes that “If participants trust a researcher, they can be able to give valuable information.”

The ethical protocols were observed as I applied for ethical clearance from the University of Fort Hare, and consent from the principal, teachers, parents and pupils to conduct the study at Bulembu L/H Primary School. All the participants were informed regularly on the nature of the research activities. They were provided with information on the daily programme, and on occasion, the emotional state of the children. Assent was granted by the children as the research

activities unfolded. Assent means gaining children's agreement in concrete situations in which they are directly involved (Cocks, 2006). Care had to be taken to children's both verbal and non-verbal behaviour when seeking assent from them (Ebrahim, 2010). The study generated a colossal volume of data; however, it was practically impossible to present all the data in the limited space of this study.

Results

Data on extensive reading were solicited from three perspectives. The first one was based on resource-auditing that I carried out before the inception of the ER project. The second one was centred on the principal's views pre-post ER, and how the four members of the staff and two peer-literacy tutors conceived individual reading and writing abilities of the pupils' pre-post ER from Grades 4 to 6 at the school. The third was based on the six learners' perspectives and their media journals of reading for pleasure before the launch of ER and post-launch.

The following excerpt arose from the pre-post case study interviews conducted with the principal of the school, based on resource-auditing and his perception of reading and writing capabilities of pupils. It was important to hear the principal's views as the ER project required curriculum time for private reading, which some principals may be reluctant to offer.

Principal:

The school has no library/corner library. Our pupils are from poor backgrounds. Yes, pupils have a problem in English as the medium of instruction. It is difficult to manage the situation. This can be attributed to the fact that our learners are taught in their mother tongue language during the early years of schooling (from Grade R/1 to 3), then somewhere along the way when they enter intermediate phase [at Grade 4], English is introduced. But the main problem here originates from a Peter Morkel Model of distributing educators, which puts us at a disadvantage as ours is 1:35, as per the post provisioning of 2019. ER has exposed them to a variety of teaching techniques, terminology, vocabulary, exposure to library skills, the importance of journal writing, etc. I think they [pupils] will never be the same again. To us as teachers, the project has been a morale booster. You are so dedicated [Dr Kepe]; I am thinking of the volumes of books you collected, books that were so heavy to carry but you did it.

The above comments by the principal of the school are a clear indication of a head of school who understands the literacy complexities that the school faces; however, he heartily acknowledges the role that the ER has played.

The following excerpts are from the pre- and post-case study interviews with teachers, based on resource auditing and their perception of reading and writing capabilities of pupils, pre- and post-ER. Teachers at this school were the ones who raised the reading and writing challenges that the school faces; based on this, their voice was imperative.

Teacher 1:

I am teaching four content subjects including English as the first additional language and Isixhosa as their first language. At Intersen [Grades 4 through 7], we rely on the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)* prescribed books for both languages. By now, we should have 96 books altogether: English and Isixhosa graded readers. At Grade 4, there are 32 learners, at Grade 5, they are 35, and Grade 6, they are 27. They make up a total of 94. Having started this programme, things are not the

same anymore. They [pupils] enjoy reading. Reading has improved their skills: listening, writing, cooperation, responsibility, self-confidence and public speaking. The programme had a great and incredible impact as pupils' confidence is now up, and now I can say we are working on motivating a few that are still remaining behind. As we speak, I have received comments from a few parents who are observing them doing their work, reading, writing, working on their own without the teacher during this Lockdown. One of the parents even said, "phambili [forward] Bulembu." As a confirmation to this, the Term 1 tasks set by the clusters from Grade 4 to 7 were very easy for them to answer, whereas they were struggling before. I can say the project has achieved its objectives.

Teacher 2:

Thanks to the ER project which really has brought about a change to our young ones. They are now reading from a selection of interesting books. I was surprised during the launch ceremony of ER to see the ones that were initially so quiet in class, suddenly speaking.

Teacher 3:

We teach more subjects, our teaching loads are packed, but the introduction of ER has made things easy for us because we are no longer teaching "wheelbarrows;" they are moving. But now, "whew!" Everything has changed. I see them reading in class, during breaks, that is, outside of the classroom and seemed to be enjoying what they are doing.

Teacher 4:

Even though our learner teacher ratio is a problem, the morale in this school is now different. Not only the children that have benefited but also us as teachers, we are spiritually uplifted. There is a vibe, joy and things are happening, Sir. Thank you to you for the ER project. I really do not have words for you, our God knows and sees what is in your heart. Continue to be a blessing to others as well.

Teachers expressed heartfelt gratitude for the ER project, claiming that it has achieved its intended learning outcomes.

The following excerpts are from the pre- and post-case study interviews with literacy tutors, centred on the perception of pupils' reading and writing capabilities, pre- and post- ER. Literacy tutors were the foot soldiers who in the main delivered the ER project at the school as the teachers were complaining about the workload.

Literacy Tutor 1:

We started the ER programme by introducing reading aloud and later silent reading. At first, they were not comfortable reading in front of the class, but with time we let each learner select a book that she/ he likes and were gradually at ease and their self-esteem built up. As a consequence, "bayazizela," they come on their own to select a book on the display table and from the reading box eagerly. Unlike before, no one is pushing them now. They borrow books and come back with book reports in their journals. Both languages have improved in reading and writing. Importantly, they are not only reading English books but also vernacular [Isixhosa].

Literacy Tutor 2:

We exposed them to various reading books and exercise books. They also write through their media journals. Most pupils were unable to read independently, especially reading aloud. When writing they had a lot of grammatical errors; they lacked the vocabulary and spelling. Most of them can now read aloud, report and present in groups. The ER programme has boosted their confidence since they can now face the audience when speaking, unlike before. They are now able to write book reports and tell us about the books they read [narration]. Pupils wrote pen-pals to their favourite character talking about good/bad qualities that they share with the character. Another aspect that added spice to the ER episode was to see them engaging not only verbally through literary discussions, but also in writing through the media journals. We call this free writing in ER, where pupils are encouraged to read books and print media [newspapers & various magazines were the most read] watch different favourite programmes and channels on TV, listen on the radio/video recorders, etc. As they engage with these media journals, they quickly jot down whatever might have captured their interest/attention in their journals. These were brief expressions/adverts/jingles, captivating headlines about their favourite heroes, celebrities, sports cars, sports in general, horrific news on occasion, such as COVID-19, etc.

The literacy tutors observed first-hand the metamorphosis of pupils from *rote learning* (Hoadley, 2018) to what Thesen (2014) referred to as *multimodal pedagogy*.

The following excerpts are from the pre- and post-case study interviews with the focused group of six pupils centred around their perception on reading and writing generally, and on post-ER. It was hugely imperative to listen to the pupils' voices as they were the ones battling with literacy and therefore needed help.

Pupil 1:

Yes, my mom can read and write. Sometimes she does read a storybook for me. My brother also tells me stories about hunting and so on. Since the beginning of the ER programme, I find that reading boosts my imagination. I can now compare fiction with real things that affect my life. If I only listen to a story and not read, I will not know how to read it. I like reading stories for fun because it develops my mind and challenges my brain. I like it very much. It helps when I feel down. Yes, I do read stories at home, which mostly are not for homework purposes. Yes, I can briefly tell a story through book reports from several books that I read in the ER programme. For example, I enjoyed a story by Margaret Ryan titled, *Fergus the Forgetful*. In the story, Fergus Ferguson forgets things, not important things like how asteroids are made or why a cork floats, but unimportant things like wearing matching socks or peeling a banana before eating it.

Pupil 2:

Yes, my father always writes something for the church. No one reads for me. My grandmother tells me funny stories. One thing I love about ER is reading for joy. I love media journals. I think of the one I read and wrote from a cereal box at home just at the beginning of the programme, titled, "How to Stay Healthy."

Pupil 3:

My mother can read, but no one has ever read a story for me. Well, the ER has changed the way we used to think of school as a boring place with lots of rules. Yes. There is one activity that is my highlight, that is, writing a letter to the favourite character of the storybook you have read. We call it a pen pal.

Pupil 4:

My father reads for me sometimes. With the introduction of the ER, my school life has changed for the better. I now read a lot for pleasure, especially at home. The activity I like most is the media journal. One of my favourites is writing episodes that fascinate me during the Soppies, for example, *Scandal* [a local TV show].

Pupil 5:

My mother reads for me sometimes. The language debate is my highlight, where one team argued in favour of the “English Language as a Medium of Instruction” and the opposing side argued in favour of “African Languages.” I was arguing in favour of English. My team based its argument on Schmied (1991) and argued:

the process of nation-building is crucial for African nation-states, as many aspects of public life as possible should contribute towards this aim. The selection of an African language as the medium of instruction would threaten the unity of the nation-states, because only in rare cases (e.g. in Somalia) do all citizens share a common mother tongue. Thus, supporters of this argument maintain that English is the only ethically neutral language.

Pupil 6:

From a video excerpt. I also loved the language debate. Our team, based its view from Nelson Mandela’s book, *Long Walk to Freedom*, who said: “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language that goes to his heart.” I pointed out that given this view from the founding father of the nation, English is only spoken by an educated elite in Africa, and using English in Education provides children from an English-speaking home with an initial advantage, which is unfair to the other pupils, who are disadvantaged anyway.

The pupils’ comments revealed a great feeling of gratitude and bear testimony to the acquisition of vocabulary and improvement in reading and writing proficiency.

Analysis and Discussion

The principal pointed out that extensive reading has exposed the pupils to various teaching techniques: new terminology, to vocabulary, exposure to library skills and the importance of journal writing, among other things. He said, “With the ER, they [pupils] will never be the same again.” This view affirms Probyn’s (2009) assertion that ER is often associated with developing fluency and positive attitudes towards reading – a “love of reading.” It upholds a view that “comprehensible input” contributes a great deal to incidental or unconscious learning of such things as vocabulary (Krashen, 2004). It is where pupils acquire library skill by selecting a book they like. All these views are in line with the rationale of the study, which was to provide an enhanced design of ER to improve learners’ literacy. Teacher 1 mentioned that “initially, we relied heavily on the school-prescribed graded text-books.” When I [the researcher] introduced the ER, it changed the status quo by integrating and utilising exercises (words and phrases) when necessary from the textbooks to fit the ER context. This

invokes Canale and Swain's (1980) and Canale's (1983) *social competence* in which they state that pupils should be able to know how to use and respond to language appropriately, given the setting, the topic, and how it relates to their lives and others they are communicating with. Canale and Swain (1980) concur that sociolinguistic competence asks the following: "Which words and phrases fit this setting and this topic? How can I express a specific attitude (courtesy, authority, friendliness, respect) when I need to? How do I know what attitude another person is expressing?" These propositions were evident in the study as the pupils were progressing from rote learning to a more contextualized teaching and learning situation. The focused group of six pupils progressively acquired new vocabulary; there was an improvement in fluency when reading aloud, in language and in writing, and all have developed a love for reading.

Waring and Nation (2004) maintain that if ER is aiming at language acquisition, between 95% (Laufer, 1989) and 98% (Hu & Nation, 2000) of words in text should already be known; if it is aiming at providing reading fluency, between 98% and 100% of vocabulary should be familiar. All the interviewed teachers thanked the project and expressed surprise to see the pupils that were initially so quiet in class, suddenly speaking. Teacher 1 said, "Pupils are now reading not only at school but also at home, as we speak, I have received comments from a few parents who are observing them doing their work, reading, writing, working on their own without the teacher during this Lockdown." Krashen (2004) claims that extensive rather than intensive reading is one way for second language pupils to obtain comprehensible input, like the ones at Bulembu L/H Primary School, they were exposed to massive amounts of comprehensible input to acquire a second language.

When I interviewed the focus group, they all acknowledged that the ER project has helped them immensely. The school teachers also concurred that through the ER the pupils' academic performance has improved across subjects. The language debate that some of the focus pupils participated in attests to the remarkable growth they have attained through the ER project.

ER reinvigorated the pupils' ability to interact without fear. Pupil 1 said, "I find that reading boosts my imagination. If I only listen to a story and not read, I will not know how to read it. I like reading stories for fun because they develop my mind and challenge my brain." This affirms Krashen (2004), who has claimed that pupils need high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, a low level of anxiety and should feel safe and comfortable in the teaching and learning environment if they are to be successful in second language acquisition; meanwhile, high levels of stress or anxiety during the learning process can impede language acquisition. This resonates with Canale and Swain's (1980) view in which they assert that discourse competence is knowing how to interpret the larger context and how to construct longer stretches of language so that the parts make up a coherent whole, as the pupils demonstrated in the language debate. According to Canale & Swain (1980), discourse competence asks: How are words, phrases and sentences put together to create conversations, presentations, invitations, email messages, reports, and newspaper articles? In a video excerpt, the speaker [Pupil 6] from the opposition notes that "English is only spoken by an educated elite in Africa, using English in Education provides children from an English-speaking home with an initial advantage, which is unfair to the other pupils, who are disadvantaged anyway." On the other hand, the speaker [Pupil 5] from the proposition pointed out that a selection of an

African language as the medium of instruction would threaten the unity of the nation-states, because only in rare cases (e.g. in Somalia) do all citizens share a common mother tongue. Thus, supporters of this argument maintain that English is the only ethically neutral language (Schmied, 1991).

The language debate strands stated above affirm Hymes (1972) communicative competence model which embraces communication and culture to use the language appropriately in different situations. Given the impact that the ER had engendered, other schools are already recommending the Bulembu L/H Primary School as emblematic of best practice. Finally, the ER in the study stimulated the pupils' voice and reflection (Nunn & Langille, 2016) and expanded their knowledge of the world. Cunningham and Stanovich (2003) suggest that "the amount of print children are exposed to has profound cognitive consequences, and that the act of reading itself serves to increase the achievement differences among children" (2003, p. 1). Nunn et al. (2016), note that language use in context is of utmost importance to language teachers as the subject being taught is language use, but at the same time classroom learning is also mediated *through* language. The authors argue that both "learning processes" and "the interaction of teachers and learners" should be included in the method concept like ER since at the school reportedly, all the other subjects are taught using English as a First Additional Language.

Conclusions

In summary, we view the conclusions in this study as context-based and context-dependent confirmation of a constructivist paradigm, suggested through the subjective perspectives of the participants at Bulembu L/H Primary School by their lived experiences. I, Dr. Kepe, started the project after teachers at Bulembu informed me that learners were struggling with reading for meaning and sentence construction. My interest was further driven by the recent *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)* report which revealed that 78% of Grade 4 South African learners were unable to read for meaning. To this end, the case study focused on intermediate phase learners from Grades 4 to 6. At the project site, I was assisted by a language teacher from the school and four literacy tutors. The main objective was to explore the use of the Extensive Reading programme to improve the learners' reading and writing capabilities. It aimed at providing plenty of opportunities to access reading materials that pupils enjoy reading in a relaxed atmosphere.

In line with Day and Bamford (1997), who claimed that for a successful ER project, pupils need to read large amounts of printed material in terms of topic and genre, the paper has advanced an enhanced view Extensive Reading project aiming to improve learners' literacy as exhibited at Bulembu L/H Primary School. The paper has also advocated for the pupils' freedom to select what they want to read. In this way, reading became its own reward where students derived pleasure from reading in the ER. Pupils would read with their teachers, and teachers who read with their pupils serve as role models of good readers (Day & Bamford, 1997). At Bulembu L/H Primary School, we read with pupils and provided plenty of opportunities to access reading materials that they enjoy reading in an environment free of fear. The pupils were exposed to various genres such as fairy tales, folk tales, novels, plays, poetry and media journals (print, audio & visual). The study generated video recordings, classroom corner libraries, translatability, book reports, continuous assessment, long-term intrinsic

motivation for reading, and a comprehensive extensive reading project report. The study is informed by PBL (Nunn et al., 2016), social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) and communicative competence (Hymes, 1972).

As indicated elsewhere and in concert with qualitative research, resource-auditing, pre- and post-case study interviews, and media journals were utilized in the study to collect data. Kvale (1996) sees interviews “as an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest with the centrality of human interaction for knowledge production, and which emphasizes the social situations of the research data” (p. 14). Interviews generated face-to-face conversations, for the purpose of collecting data, and to learn the participants' ideas, beliefs, views, opinions and behaviours concerning the pupils' reading and writing capabilities in the school. The aim was to see the world through the eyes of the participants. In this way, I was able to obtain rich descriptive data that helped to understand the participants' construction of knowledge and social reality. The main thing in interviewing was to make sure that enough grounds for trust was cultivated: “If participants trust a researcher, they can be able to give valuable information” (Maree, 2007 p. 83). I made use of open-ended questions to give participants the liberty to express their opinions. I engaged the participants in a two-way conversation by asking them questions for the purpose of collecting data, and to learn their ideas, beliefs, views, opinions and behaviours concerning their views on the ER. After the interview sessions, I went back to the participants to afford them a chance to check (approve or disapprove) particular aspects of the responses they provided by replaying the tape recorder (Doyle, 2007; Merriam, 1998). This was also a way of finding out whether the data presentation was harmonious with the respondent's experiences (Curtin & Fossey, 2007 p.92). The participants had to verify whether or not the interpretation made sense to them by reflecting their intended meanings (Creswell & Maietta, 2002). The interviews took about two months to finish. Resource-auditing helped the study establish the state of school resources. For example, we learnt that the school relied heavily on *CAPS* English and Isixhosa graded, prescribed readers for both languages. We became aware of the number of those books [96 books altogether]. Through resource-auditing, we were informed of the total number of pupils that the ER project was going to cover: in Grade 4, there were 32 learners; in Grade 5, there were 35, and in Grade 6, there were 27. They made up a total of 94. The study generated book reports, photographs, video recordings, classroom corner libraries, continuous assessment, and long-term intrinsic motivation for reading, as well as a comprehensive ER report.

The study advocated for ER across subjects in EFAL and vernacular to stimulate a relaxed environment in which the language was no longer a deficit. This view invokes Hymes (1972), who embraced communication and culture to use the language appropriately in different situations. The focused group of six pupils progressively acquired new vocabulary; there was an improvement in fluency when reading aloud, language and writing have improved immensely, and participants developed an authentic love for reading.

The principal and teachers generally confirmed that the ER project has put the school on the map and that it has become an example of best practice for the neighbouring schools. As mentioned elsewhere, a plethora of researchers in Africa and the globe concur that before the dawn of the written word, cultural heritage and historical events were passed on from one generation to another through emotive and captivating narratives (storytelling), hence the title

of the project: “It Starts With a Story! Towards Extensive Reading.” This affirms Edosomwan and Peterson (2016) that what began as oral tradition has evolved to include written literature.

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