A Theoretical Perspective of Reading in English Second Language Classrooms

S. ITHINDI

Abstract

Several language experts have proposed language models that provide a solid foundation for effective second language acquisition. This paper aims to review language theories and explain their relevance to English Second Language (ESL) learning through reading. The goal is to develop theoretical measures whose considerations and implementations could motivate learners to read more to effectively learn ESL, thereby improving academic performance. This paper highlights three theoretical lenses that contribute to the understanding of second language acquisition through reading, namely social constructivism, the input hypothesis, BICS, and CALP theory. The study discovered that reading instruction in ESL should be practiced through a combination of multimodality, social interaction, and comprehensive input. The integration and use of appropriate technologies in ESL classrooms, teachers' awareness of their learners' developmental level, exposure to challenging reading materials, and the development of learners' critical thinking skills are all necessary components of second language acquisition. These components should be executed properly in the reading lessons for the learners to acquire ESL to the degree of proficiency.

Keywords: language acquisition, BICS, and CALP theory, input hypothesis, language theories, language learning, social constructivism

Background of the Study

Reading is one of the most effective ways of acquiring vocabulary that can help with the acquisition of the four basic language skills (Shapaka, 2015). When learners read various English texts, they learn the meanings of the words they come across. Vocabulary can be learned either individually or through class discussions (Simataa & Nyathi, 2016). Tickoo (2003) and Shapaka (2015) postulate that reading extends, consolidates and sustains vocabulary growth. Vocabulary is not learned through a single exposure. Reading allows for multiple encounters with words and phrases in context, allowing for the gradual accumulation of meaning and learning of vocabulary (Nkandi, 2015). As learners are constantly exposed to new words, they will be able to apply these words effectively in their writing, developing their listening, and speaking skills further. Several well-established theories of language acquisition provide justifications for language acquisition through reading in a second language. This paper highlights three theoretical lenses that contribute to the understanding of second language acquisition through reading, namely social constructivism, input hypothesis, and the distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). The three lenses shed light on the dynamics of second language reading acquisition from a broader perspective.

The Aim of the study

Learning ESL has become an everyday concern for nearly all educational stakeholders in Namibia. Scholars have cited a poor reading culture as one of the primary contributors to poor ESL learning (Nkandi, 2015; Shapaka, 2015; Busari, 2014). To improve the learning of English as a second language, reading instruction in ESL classrooms should receive more attention. According to Chipili (2013), different types of reading materials play an important role in language awareness and the development of critical thinking skills. Regarding the enhancement of ESL learning, previous researchers have developed theoretical concepts that provide a better understanding of how to learn

ESL through reading (Vygotsky, 1978; Krashen, 1985; Cummins, 1984). Over the years, these theories have been contextualised and employed by ESL teachers in their reading lessons. In the context of this review, this study attempts to answer the following important question: How do language theories contribute to ESL learning through reading? This study sought to answer this question by explicating the significance of various language theories that ESL teachers could use in their classrooms to promote effective ESL acquisition and learning through reading.

Language Theories and ESL Learning

This section reviews Vygotsky's (1978), Krashen's (1985), and Cummins (1984)'s theoretical works on language acquisition. The three theoretical lenses illuminate the significance of reading in ESL learning, with each lens shedding light from its perspective. Therefore, the discussion of the three theoretical lenses in facilitating ESL learning is the essence of this paper.

Social constructivism theory

According to Vygotsky's theory of language acquisition, the gaining of knowledge, including learning a second language, is a social process (Hay & Nilsson, 2016). Similarly, Nkandi (2015) explains that the social constructivist theory views learning as socially dependent, in the sense that it is through interaction with others that one learns a language. Rahman (2015) avers that involving other individuals in the language learning process is essential, reasoning that language is communication. Pertaining to reading in an ESL classroom, other people can be involved when learners read texts from various authors from all over the world. Through reading written narrations of societal activities, livelihoods, and views, learners are most likely to identify what they have already come to know through socialisation with what they read in their texts (Hay & Nilsson, 2016).

Exposure to interaction with reading texts enhances learners' ability to acquire knowledge, cultivate linguistic consciousness, develop skills of interpretation, and become educated (Babaee & Yahya, 2014). This claim is supported by Vygotsky (1978) who advocates that social interaction promotes learning, and in the case of language, interaction enables acquisition. Consequently, meaningful interactions with reading activities conducted in ESL classrooms not only provide learners with the vital linguistic abilities required for efficient interaction but also with an authentic teaching framework that is not available in a standard classroom environment (Nkandi, 2015). Therefore, learners are anticipated to create their linguistic communicative skills through social interaction and exposure to specific and distinct kinds of textual reading (Rahman, 2015).

By building on their prior knowledge and experiences, learners create their meaning as they accumulate experience through socialisation with elderly members of their societies (Vygotsky, 1978). New ideas and experiences are matched against existing knowledge and the learner constructs new or adapted rules to make sense of the world (Lack, Soleiman & Paraneh, 2017). In addition, Hay and Nilsson (2016) support the opinion that social constructivists consider teaching to be a complicated interplay between teacher and learner, based on their experiences in the classroom. Such interplay links what is done in the classroom to what is previously known by the learners, helping them to draw conclusions, or come to their understanding of concepts. The review focused on two main concepts of Vygotsky's social constructivism theory the Zone of Proximal Development, and scaffolding, which are discussed below.

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

The ZPD refers to "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). Hay and Nilsson (2016) explain the ZPD as the stage of learning that includes cognitive structures in the process of maturation but can only mature under the supervision of others or in cooperation with others. ZPD refers to the gap between what a learner has already acquired and what he or she can achieve when provided with educational support by teachers or fellow learners. Naturally, learners learn from their discoveries and experiences, as well as from others. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning takes place within the ZPD. In the ZPD learners can be assisted by adults or children who are more advanced, to master concepts and ideas that they cannot understand on their own. Vygotsky mentions a whole range of possible interactive interventions to be used for ZPD assessment, which includes asking leading questions, modelling, solving tasks, and asking learners to persevere until they overcome a given hurdle (Rahman, 2015). These interventions strongly support the use of assessment feedback in facilitating the learning process undertaken through reading and developing understanding.

According to Christians, Kudzai, and Josiah (2012), ZPD has two developmental levels:
a. The Actual Development Level (ADL) – is the point that the learner has already reached and can problem-solve independently. At this level, learners can read texts with comprehension and make meaning without teachers' or peers' assistance.
b. The Potential Development Level (PDL) – is the point that the learner is capable of reaching under the guidance of teachers or in collaboration with more advanced peers. At this level, learners can critique texts that they read with the help of teachers and other learners.

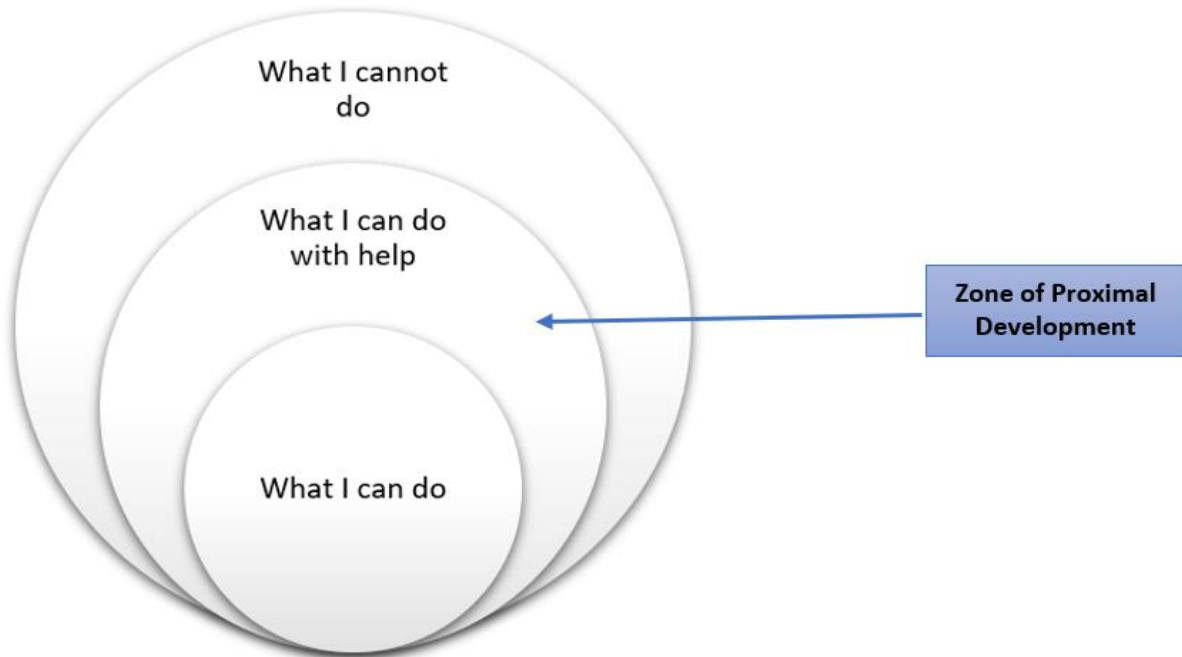Figure 1 below summarises the two developmental stages of ZPD.

Figure 1: The difference between ADL, PDL, and ZPD: adapted from Christians, Kudzai & Josiah (2012, p. 85)

As can be seen in Figure 1 above, ZPD is the learners' region of knowledge that exists between what they can do on their own, and what they cannot do. What a learner can accomplish or figure out on his or her own is the ADL. These are the skills that have already been developed. While the PDL is the level at which the learner can accomplish with some support from their peers, or, put it another way, the abilities that have not yet fully developed. The ZPD serves as a difference between the ADL and the PDL.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding applies to the assistance provided during learning episodes by adults and more experienced peers (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). Dass and Ferguson (2016) explain that scaffolding can occur when learners interact with each other - either during group work or in collaborative efforts to resolve a language-related problem. In reading, scaffolding happens when learners read and critique a text in a group or when learners discuss a text that they have just read (Nkandi, 2015). Scaffolding can also take the form of hints, reminders, or encouragement, dividing the issue into measures, giving examples, or anything else that enables the learner to develop autonomously (Hay & Nilsson, 2016). Thus, learners learn during the experiences within the zone of proximal development because of scaffolding.

In the ESL classroom, teachers can use the concepts of the ZDP and scaffolding, for example, during the introduction of a new novel to be read. When the class is introduced to a new novel, learners can read it in one of different ways, depending on their reading levels. Bhooth, Azman, and Ismail (2014) explain that more advanced learners can read the novel independently. Learners at the middle level can read the novel with a partner, while learners with the lowest level of reading can listen to the story on tape while following their texts. While each learner experiences the story in his or her way, the teacher should move around in the class to interact with the learners, asking learners individual questions and helping to clarify parts of the story that they do not understand (Bhooth et al., 2014). Considering social constructivism theory, the teacher may use practical examples from the events or experiences of learners' daily lives to help them understand what they read.

Social constructivism can be linked to multiliteracies. Sujee (2015) explains that this happens in technologically integrated environments, such as chat rooms where scaffolding is provided. In chat rooms, support is provided through discussions and messages to help complete tasks and support collaborations to comprehend a reading text (Sujee, 2015). By doing so, learners are actively involved in meaning-making with the assistance of the teacher, fellow learners, technicians, and the internet.

Taguchi, Gorsuch, and Rosszel (2016) emphasise that with the understanding of the social constructivist theory, ESL teachers might be able to apply learner-centeredness in their teaching. Teachers would be able to encourage learners to use their own life experiences to understand the given reading texts. For learners to have a better understanding of the texts they read, teachers should select texts that learners can relate to (Tötemeyer et al., 2015). In this way, learners would be able to actively participate in their learning as they construct meaning from the given reading texts, eventually acquiring a better understanding of the texts and the purpose of reading them (Nkandi, 2015). Since Vygotsky (1978) believes that social interaction is the key to learning, it can be concluded that the classroom and the online environment are social contexts for learning, and they allow learners to work

together and share information.

ZPD and reading in ESL

The ZPD is critically important when it comes to reading in ESL. Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (2016) emphasise that ESL teachers ought to use levelled readers if they want learners to benefit from reading. According to Delacruz (2014), levelled readers refer to books that are written with learners' ZPD in mind. He further explains that levelled readers are meant to introduce learners incrementally to new challenges in their reading. When books are chosen based on learners' ZPD, reading becomes an opportunity for a modicum of fun, and a great degree of praise.

Additionally, ESL teachers should motivate learners to read widely. Hay and Nilsson (2016) highlight that motivation plays a role in building confidence in learners as it urges learners to share their knowledge and experiences, for example, in group reading and presentations. It is therefore important for ESL teachers to establish motivational strategies that promote a love of reading in the classroom. ZPD recognises that learners at any given level or age have the potential for development, where, through appropriate and systematic mediation, scaffolding, motivation, and other support from teachers, meaningful language learning can be achieved. Therefore, the ZPD is relevant to reading in ESL since it could contribute to ESL acquisition (Fisher et al., 2016). This owes to the fact that through mediation, motivation, and scaffolding, learners' potential for further development can be enabled.

ESL teachers need to know the learners' level of development to enable them to shape their reading beyond their development (Jordaan, 2011). Fisher et al. (2016) point out that besides providing reading instruments to further the development of the love of reading, the teacher also mediates and scaffolds the reading progress of the learners until they develop an interest in reading, where they can read widely and independently.

Input Hypothesis theory

Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis continues to be a seminal and influential Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory. It suggests that language acquisition occurs when learners receive messages (comprehensible input, for example, reading texts) that they can understand. According to Ahmed and Rajab (2015), the Input Hypothesis states that the input a language learner receives should be comprehensible and should be at a slightly higher level than the learners' current linguistic proficiency. Krashen (1985) calls this level of input "i+1", where "i" is the learner's interlanguage and "+1" is the next stage of language acquisition. Gilbert (2017) clarifies that the input can be understood using context or extra-linguistic expertise that allows the principles to be acquired. The word "comprehensible input" refers to input that is neither too easy (previously acquired) nor too complicated (to be acquired). I + 2/3/4/...will not be helpful for SLA (Chew & Krashen, 2017). This hypothesis highlights the importance of using the target language in the classroom (Gilbert, 2017). By providing as much comprehensible input as possible (verbal-visual scaffolding, collaborative learning, code-switching, multimodality, etc.) the teacher can create a more effective opportunity for language acquisition (Ahmed & Rajab, 2015).

Rygiel (2016) claims that when it comes to reading, input theory is important since it is a foundation that challenges learners to read texts that may require them to do some extra work to fully appreciate

and understand what they read. For this reason, the target level of difficulty should be a challenge to learners, but not on a level that they cannot achieve. It could be argued that ESL teachers in Namibian schools who use literary genres in their lessons expose their learners to challenging texts in the form of the literary genres presented to them. This is because such learners are expected to read, identify aspects of analysis such as poetic devices, and explain their meanings, as well as indicate whether their use is relevant in the contexts in which they are used (Simataa & Nyathi, 2016). Teachers who ignore the use of literary genres, on the other hand, deprive learners of the opportunity to participate in the aforementioned activities. With such activities, learners are motivated not only to understand the texts they read but also to use analytical and critical thinking skills.

Larson (2015) emphasises that input alone is not enough in the SLA process as output is a crucial stage in language acquisition, where the active function of learners (cooperative learning) and their production (e.g., essays) are important elements of learners' achievement. Chew and Krashen (2017) assert that production allows the teacher to assess learners' progress and select and adapt teaching materials properly. Language activities compel learners to re-organise and develop their understanding of the target language and the input and output needed for communication, negotiating significance, and expanding their language understanding (Larson, 2015).

Hautemo and Julius (2016) discussed two separate cognitive functions of language: language acquisition and language learning. Acquisition focuses on language understanding, while learning focuses on grammar rules, through which precise speech is produced. Learners require both features. The acquisition of language input is most efficient when it is natural, exciting, and understandable. Thus, grammar rules are first obtained intuitively through the meaningful use of language and then learned later (Gilbert, 2017). Learners only acquire a second language when they are subjected to understandable input, which can be obtained through the process of listening to or realigning the target language to a degree beyond their present level of expertise (i+1). The provision of comprehensible input to learners promotes the acquisition of their natural language (Chen, 2014; Chew & Krashen, 2017). Furthermore, Chew and Krashen (2017) argue that understanding spoken, and written language input is regarded as the only device that results in the increase of underlying linguistic competence, and language output is not seen as having any effect on learners' ability.

Input Hypothesis and reading in ESL
According to Chew and Krashen (2017), individuals only acquire language in one way – by understanding the messages or gathering comprehensive input that contains structures that are relatively beyond their current level of competence. For example, in an ESL classroom, teachers ought to provide learners with challenging reading texts beyond their current level to challenge them to expand their knowledge and acquire ESL. Such challenging texts should be interesting to the learners so that they are motivated to read. The acquisition is the result of comprehensive input, and not production (Ahmed & Rajab, 2015). This implies that for SLA to take place, learners must be exposed to comprehensible and message-oriented input. Comprehensive methods, such as movie talk and voluntary reading, enable more acquisition than grammar practice (Rygiel, 2016). This means that only speaking the target language (production) does not assist language acquisition sufficiently, instead, learners should be exposed to reading widely (input) in the target language (Hautemo & Julius, 2016).

ESL teachers should, in their meditation, try to use well-formulated reading texts, which they know

their learners will understand (Nkandi, 2015). While doing so, they should provide new challenging texts slightly above the learners' level for advancement and progression to a higher linguistic level. The above provision should not be confused with giving learners difficult texts far above their comprehension level. The latter would be a futile exercise because that might frustrate and demotivate them from reading in the future. It is up to ESL teachers to provide level-appropriate reading materials to ensure that the input remains comprehensive while giving learners enough room to explore and experiment with the language (Chew & Krashen, 2017). This can be done when teachers guide learners to find such level-appropriate reading materials from the internet and other social media platforms.

BICS and CALP theories

This paper further reviews Cummins' (1984) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS refers to the capacity to effectively interact and communicate through social interactions and to showcase linguistic fluency (Caddy, 2015), and is commonly referred to as conversational English. CALP refers to the ability to communicate proficiently in an academic setting for improved academic achievement (Hirose, 2014). Learners acquire proficiency through BICS acquisition, usually in their mother tongue before they enter formal schooling. Conversely, learners acquire proficiency in CALP when they read textbooks, including reading texts, and by speaking and writing fluently (Caddy, 2015). Perera and Kularatne (2014) explain that second language learners typically acquire BICS in two to three years. As a result, learners can communicate and talk about informal, concrete things with their classmates although they are not able to read or write fluently in ESL yet.

Although learning an additional language can be achieved by a person within two years, the emphasis of BICS is on unconscious language acquisition. Cummins (1984) describes that there is a Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) based on mother tongue and second language (L2) growth. The CUP enables individuals to learn the second language in the same manner that they learn their home language (Cummins, 1984). Cummins believes that if one is sufficiently skilled in the first language (L1), it is feasible to transfer such skills to the L2 when there is adequate exposure to L2, either in school or in the child's environment. There must be adequate motivation to learn L2 (Caddy, 2015). This indicates the connection between home language and second language acquisition and shows that home language skills have a beneficial impact on the development of a second language (Makoe, 2014). For the above reason, the CALP of the home language and second language of each learner overlap, and thus, if fundamentally, learners are skilled in their home language, they are highly likely to acquire the second language successfully. To be academically successful, ESL learners need to be experts in CALP. According to Cummins (2009), it takes five to seven years for ESL learners to become masters of CALP. CALP is crucial for learners to be academically successful in school since learners need time and support to reach both L1 and L2 CALP abilities. On the contrary, Nikolov (2009) argues that learners who lack support in mother tongue development may take more years for L2 CALP skills to develop. For this reason, encouraging learners to read more in their mother tongue is imperative for ESL teachers if they want their learners to become effective readers in ESL.

CALP involves more than the understanding of content area vocabulary. It includes the ability to compare, classify, synthesise, evaluate, and infer. Academic language tasks are context-reduced

(Nikolov, 2009). This means that at this stage, learners rely primarily on knowledge of the language, entirely without personally experiencing events in a realistic environment. Hirose (2014) claims that language becomes cognitively more challenging as learners master CALP abilities, because at the same time fresh ideas, concepts, and language are unleashed. The above linkage between BICS and CALP is illustrated in Figure 2 below.
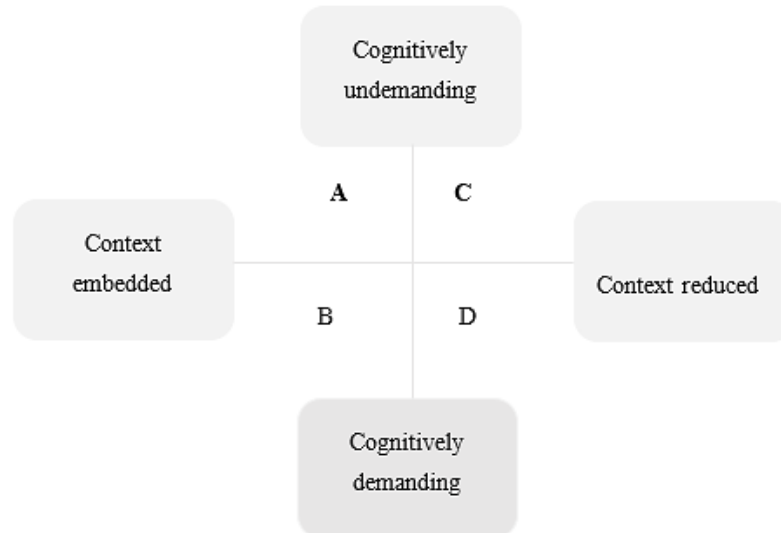

Figure 2: The BICS and CALP quadrants (Cummins, 2009)

As can be seen in Figure 2 above, Cummins created the quadrants to facilitate understanding of what makes a language easy or difficult for ESL learners to learn. Quadrants A and C represent spoken or written tasks that are cognitively undemanding or easy, whether socially or academically. Quadrants B and D represent tasks that are cognitively demanding and that involve academic activities that are difficult to comprehend and require higher levels of thinking and language proficiency. Cummins also evaluated the amount of contextual support engaged in the tasks. Makoe (2014) explains that contextual support offers clues to the meaning of the words. The more spoken and written words are supported or embedded in context, the easier they are to understand. Spoken language is contextually supported through facial expressions, gestures, body language, demonstration, and visual cues from the environment in which a learner finds him or herself (Perera & Kularatne, 2014). Perera and Kularatne (2014) further explain that written language can offer contextual support through pictures, graphs, and other textbook aids. Spoken and written tasks with the above kinds of supports are called context-embedded tasks, while tasks for which learners have only spoken or written words to work with are called context-reduced tasks (Cummins, 2009). From Figure 2, quadrants A and B represent tasks that are highly embedded and contextually supported, while quadrants C and D represent tasks that are context reduced. Namibian ESL learners will generally find tasks in quadrant A easy because they are low in cognitive demand and have more hints to help learners comprehend content information. ESL learners will find tasks in quadrant D extremely difficult to understand because these tasks are academically demanding and lack contextual hints to aid comprehension.

Cummins' theory applies to what is happening in Namibian schools. Although English is the medium of instruction in Namibian schools, most learners fail to obtain the required scores in ESL for university entry. This means that learners do not master the academic and cognitive language. Most learners struggle to understand what they are reading, and have trouble expressing what they understand in

writing, which explains the large number of learners who do not meet university requirements due to English limitations. Many learners can say all the words in a reading passage or can memorise the definitions of vocabulary words, but they still cannot understand the text. Beyond knowing vocabulary and studying academic facts for a test, CALP also requires learners to sharpen their cognitive skills and learn fresh ideas (Hirose, 2014). The above challenge can be ascribed to the reality that English is not the language learners use socially at home, and with their peers around the school during break or while participating in sports activities. Learners instead use their mother tongue at home, as well as when they are socialising with their peers. This simply means that most learners develop BICS and CALP in their home languages and some BICS in ESL through socialisation, but they do not develop CALP in ESL. As mentioned earlier, CALP is needed if learners are to read different reading texts, write, and answer questions.

BICS and CLP in ESL classrooms

Most ESL learners function well in conversational English; however, they lack proficiency in the academic language necessary to succeed in ESL. Hirose (2014) explains that learners need to know what it means to go beyond the BICS if they want to be successful in school because language skills are important across disciplines. Learners are expected to use appropriate language skills in different subject areas. Learners are required to do oral presentations, write reports, develop essays of various forms, and display skills in analysing, synthesising, and evaluating (Makoe, 2014). If learners lack CALP skills, they will not be able to perform the above tasks in different disciplines. Hirose (2014) clarifies that nowadays ESL learners lack CALP because they have shifted towards non-standard, non-academic dialects, and blame this on technology. This occurs, for example, when learners use mobile phones; they use terms like "LOL" (laughing out loud) or "U" (you) and many other non-academic dialects that are not considered formal English when texting one another. As a result, they apply such non-academic language in academic writing, which results in poor performance – particularly in ESL.

Another challenge in ESL classrooms is that learners find it difficult to differentiate between spoken and written language (Perera & Kularatne, 2014). This implies that learners want to write the way they speak. Speaking is supported by body language, while writing is not. It is, therefore, the responsibility of ESL teachers to narrow the gap between spoken and written language. Hirose (2014) urges ESL teachers to use questioning strategies that require learners to use both higher-order thinking skills and lower-order thinking skills to enhance critical thinking. Secondary school ESL learners require language instruction that promotes higher levels of conceptual development and communicative ability. Since the focus at the secondary level has shifted from learning to read to learning, learners at this point are required to think, talk, and write about the content (Namupala, 2015). At the secondary level, learners should be given reading tasks that require them to engage in critical thinking and literary criticism and analysis. It is, therefore, important to train ESL learners to always practice using English without external clues and information if they want to succeed academically in ESL.

Conclusions

This paper reviewed language theories that can enhance ESL learning through reading and that teachers can use in their classes for effective ESL learning, especially in the Namibian context. ESL teachers should understand these theories, which explain how reading can help with ESL learning. Social constructivism provides a psycholinguistic explanation for how interactive pedagogical practices can effectively foster language learning. It emphasises the importance of learning in a sociocultural

context and sees learners as active constructors of their learning environment. When it comes to reading, learners can interact with their teachers, their peers, and even with both texts and authors. Learners will eventually pick up new vocabulary and strengthen their four language skills because of these interactions, which will improve their ESL acquisition.

Furthermore, the Input Hypothesis emphasises that for learners to learn English, teachers should create opportunities for them to be exposed to comprehensible input in English. Language learners who have had more exposure to it are more proficient in it. The analysis gave substantial evidence that second language learners frequently acquire grammar rules that they were never taught, demonstrating that language acquisition can occur without verbal instruction. Similarly, learners can learn a language effectively by reading extensively in that language; in fact, these types of immersion practices have very successful learning outcomes. Such practices do not necessarily teach the language, but learners acquire it through substantial input, demonstrating that substantial learning occurs even in the absence of direct language instruction. According to the Input Hypothesis, the content provided to the learners should not only be comprehensible but also compelling. That is, the learner should find it interesting. The input hypothesis cautions that exposure to understandable input is important. However, if the learner is uninterested in that input, they will ignore it, yet paying attention is an important part of the language learning process.

This review discovered empirical evidence that indicates that learners in Namibian classrooms are proficient in BICS but poor in CALP. When teachers expose learners to compelling comprehensive reading texts, they tend to engage in higher-order skills such as self-questioning, synthesising, evaluating, inferencing, and reasoning. Learners can achieve language success if they are assisted in improving their CALP in this manner, ensuring second language learners' academic success.

Recommendations
This paper reviewed language theories that can be used to improve ESL learning through reading. Teachers must instill a passion for reading in their learners before they can interact with various reading materials. Through such interactions, learners are exposed to a vast array of vocabulary, which helps language acquisition. For better instructional practices in ESL classrooms, teachers must understand the theories that explain language learning through reading. Teachers should therefore provide a language-rich environment and provide stimulation to help learners achieve their self-study goals. For effective ESL learning, ESL teachers should integrate and contextualise the language theories within their lessons for improved quality of output in ESL learning.

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About the Author

Dr Sylvia N Ithindi is a senior lecturer in the department of Communication & Languages, at the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST). She holds a Ph.D. in Humanities Education from the University of Pretoria. Her main research interests include students' reading habits, language teaching approaches, and the usage of multiliteracies pedagogy. E-mail: sithindi@nust.na